

# Aline

**Heleen Debruyne**

**An extract pp 5-14**

<b>Original title</b>	Aline	<b>Translation</b>	Dutch into English
<b>Publisher</b>	De Bezige Bij, 2025	<b>Translator</b>	Quaid Cey

© Heleen Debruyne/Quaid Cey/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

---

**p 5-14**

I should be afraid of getting killed, I thought, as I watched the man I love spit accusations at me, his eyes wide.

But I wasn't afraid. This big, strong man was angry but ultimately harmless, I knew. And anyways, what gave him the right to lash out at me like that? To tear me down, to always be right about everything, to see only my flaws, to force me again and again into a role that doesn't fit me? To stand there and point at me with that fucking this-is-your-fault finger of his?

Why were we even on the landing? Not the ideal place for a screaming match. Not much room, poorly lit, our voices carried throughout the house. I can't remember how we got there. I regret it now. I could have steered the argument into another room. I could have calmed him down. Could have stayed calm myself. But my anger was ecstasy.

Aline. Keep going, the psychologist says. You were standing on the landing.

Yeah, I snap, it's just hard to explain exactly what happened.

That makes sense, says the psychologist, a man made of understanding, a thin man with a shaggy grey beard and a fondness for linen shirts with Mandarin collars. Furrowed face, fatherly timbre, the tendency to shake his foot while listening.

Stress distorts your memories, he tells me.

I nod, but can't relate. My memories are a series of clear snapshots, all lined up in the right order. I can zero in on every single detail. In the story I'm telling, though, I've mixed up the order, blurred details, left some out, added my own thoughts. Here in the safe, always slightly overheated den of this man full of understanding, I'm losing my grip on the story. If I just close my eyes for a moment and think back to that night, my carefully constructed narrative shatters into meaningless fragments.

Then I'm back there, on the landing, and I see how it really went.

I can tell this is difficult for you, the psychologist says.

I sigh.

And then, crying: He didn't even want to talk about it anymore.

But you, the psychologist says, you still want to talk about it.

I glare at the man.

Well, I say to him, I'm here, aren't I? And I think: I pay you enough. And then I think: When are you going to make me feel better?

Let's try something else, the psychologist says. Let's start from the beginning.

It took a while before I started to show. My boobs were a bit bigger than before but still insubstantial, my belly as flat as always. The child inside me was a secret I shared with those close to me, always with a kind of hushed joy. It was a secret that made me nervous: so many things to think about, so much to sort out. The little studio apartment that we shared would really be too small now, housing prices in the city were ridiculous, what about work and parental leave, what about our entire carefree lifestyle, what about hereditary diseases and potentially lethal food and one glass of alcohol per week, coffee or no coffee, apparently the sauna is dangerous, do pilates "at your own risk", painkillers are a big no-no but supplements are a must, and would he have trouble fucking me now, his dick so close to the entrance of the warm, fleshy burrow of our embryo? My shoulders cramped up from all the over-thinking and Googling. I placed my salvation in the able, kneading hands of my favorite Thai masseuse at the salon on the corner. A place where they didn't need essential oil vaporizers or soothing music to do their job properly.

The masseuse had known my knotted muscles for years, I could lie down on the table without all the wearying chatter. The familiar pain of her kneading was even more welcome than usual. Tears dripped from my eyes.

Are you okay? she asked me.

Yeah, I mumbled. It was difficult to talk with my jaws pressed into the oval hole in the massage table.

It's just that I'm pregnant and everything is so stressful.

I hadn't even told my father yet, and there I was, readily sharing my secret with a woman whose name I didn't even know. But she was so composed and empathetic, knew my body so well, was always ready to help.

The masseuse jerked her hands away from my body with a shriek. A very un-composed shriek.

This is terrible! You should not be here! I could kill the baby!

There was no way that could be true. A Thai superstition, I thought. I pushed myself up, felt a flash of embarrassment for my breasts, which seemed obscene in their nakedness now that the massage was over. I saw the masseuse crying, noiselessly but with a shockingly strong flood of tears.

I'm so sorry, she said over and over again.

In the end, I was the one who did the comforting: I whispered nonsense words to her, rubbed her shoulder, told her everything was fine, that there was no way she could have known. I even lied to her, saying that I could feel the baby was still alive. At that point in my pregnancy, I still hadn't felt it kick.

Back at home, I sat down at the computer. Now not only my shoulder muscles burned, but also those in my lower back and hips. According to Google, masseurs didn't want to massage women in the first trimester because they thought the physical contact would release toxins that might harm the fetus or terminate the pregnancy. No scientific evidence to back them up. If it was so easy to have a miscarriage, I thought, there'd be no need for abortions. It was completely fine, the maternity websites reassured me, to get pregnancy massages in the second and third trimester. A half-hearted rub-down with only the gentlest contact, no salvation. I wasn't allowed to do anything anymore. I had become a vehicle for the embryo.

What's wrong, baby?

He found me in a terrible mood that night. I was still sitting at the computer when he arrived, my eyes red and my jaw sore from rage and powerlessness, trying to shrink statistics on fetuses and risks back down to their real-life proportions.

I wanted to explode, but I let him soothe me instead. He would take care of my shoulders, he said. But first he wanted to show me something.

Look, he said, grinning, this is what we could get for our budget in another city, er, you know, a town, but on the coast. On the coast! Imagine!

He showed me photos of the kind of home I didn't dare to dream of: a stepped gable, red bricks, stone around the window frames, an original, elaborately crafted wood front door.

Needs a bit of work, he said, but look.

I saw it: four bedrooms, an attic above.

And a school just a few streets away, he told me.

While he sent an email to a realtor requesting a viewing, I gave the massage salon a bad review online – anonymously.

What did you call yourself, a vehicle for the embryo? the psychologist asks. That's heavy.

Got an opinion you want to share? I ask him, feeling attacked.

It's not my job to have an opinion. How did that feel, being a vehicle?

You wouldn't get it, you're a man, I tell him, lifting my chin a bit, cautiously challenging him.

The psychologist doesn't bite. He's heard this accusation before.

You're right. But you can try to explain it to me.

I'm desperate. All this gentle understanding has to be a professional façade.

Feeling listless, I lay on the couch and stared out the window through our new, overpriced bamboo blinds. My eyes on the house across the street, with its peeling paint. Rotting window frames, pale yellow curtains with grey stains of indeterminate origin, a shadow behind the window every now and then. Cigarette butts in the always full ashtray on the windowsill. We could renovate until we were broke, but that view wasn't going anywhere.

I tried to ignore the grating sound of Gloria's educationally sanctioned cartoon and get some work done, laptop in my lap. He was sitting next to me, using a grimy rag to clean his little old pocketknife, a treasured heirloom. A folding knife with an ivory handle. His grandfather got it from a British soldier on Liberation Day. Or at least that's what they tell each other in his family – I always thought it was a suspiciously generic knife, the kind anyone could have bought at a knife shop in the forties.

Hey, be careful with that dirty rag, would you? I asked him. He didn't reply, just kept cleaning. Touching, I have to admit, all that affection for such an insignificant object.

What's wrong? I asked.

Gloria gets sick a lot... He gave me a meaningful look.

Don't all toddlers?

Now and then, sure... But like this?

He had a point: it was the third time in three weeks that Gloria was lying in her playpen, a pale, weak, miserable little thing. Gurgling softly, this time, with fiery red cheeks and lips. Too tired to pay her toys any mind. I wanted to touch her, give her a kiss, but she pushed me aside every time. She gladly accepted all her father's cuddles.

You think I shouldn't have stopped breastfeeding her, I said.

That's not what I'm saying at all.

Now he's all worked up.

It wasn't up to me. Your body, your choice. All I said was: it's been proven that it's good for kids. Really good. For their immune system.

I knew that, we'd looked it up together when I was still pregnant and full of hope. Amazing, we said more than once, how well the human body works. Breast milk isn't just food, it's a way to pump the intestines of vulnerable infants full of prebiotics, so that the microbiome in the baby's mouth and digestive system flourishes. Mother and child are so perfectly aligned that nipple and saliva communicate with each other at the molecular level: if a baby is sick, it gets a different kind of milk. In the process, mother and child develop a special bond. I was proud of my body even before giving birth: the fact that it was capable of something so complicated was a miracle in itself.

After Gloria was born, the miracle unfolded flawlessly. The gynaecologist called my breasts "extremely glandular." They were overflowing fountains, all Gloria had to do was gurgle and they started leaking. The little suckling latched on like she'd never done anything else. There was always exactly the right amount of milk, the midwife was shocked at how fast she grew. Not everyone has it this easy, she said with a sigh.

A dream, my female friends told me when they came to visit. (Men never said anything, just looked away with a smirk whenever I freed my boob from that awful nursing bra. Except for him. When I was feeding, I often saw him stare at the entanglement of mother and baby, beaming with pride, maybe even a little jealous. He never looked at me like that when there was no infant hanging from my chest.)

I couldn't stand it.

I hated it.

That rhythmic, smacking, sucking sound, it went on and on, I was shackled to my child for hours on end. Whenever I finally had a moment between feeding sessions to sit down, read a book, or just take a quick shower, my breasts promptly started leaking. Those glands mocked me, reminding me of my true nature: mother, mammal. No point reading then, just throw another load of laundry in the washer.

The worst of all: while Gloria sucked and sucked to her heart's content, I couldn't pry my eyes from her fontanel. What if something fell on it? Or worse, what if I accidentally scraped it with my fingernail in a momentary lapse, exposing her little brain to the world? All that defenselessness, it was unbearable. And it was too hot for her to wear a hat.

Equally unbearable: him, with his fake understanding, when I sat on the cold bathroom tiles at night, crying as I pumped out milk. Yet another miracle was unfolding, a dream: a two-month-old that slept seven hours straight. But my boobs had missed the memo.

I don't want to do this anymore, I told him then, sobbing on the bathroom floor.

I understand, he said, but quiet down, Gloria's sleeping. And are you sure? It's going so well. It's so healthy. Think about it again tomorrow, when you've calmed down. You're tired now. You're emotional. Come on.

I could think whatever I wanted, but I couldn't go on like that. We bought the most expensive, environmentally friendly baby formula on the market. Goat's milk. Stank of animal, of sebum. I watched apprehensively as he warmed up the first bottle. Gloria slurped and sucked as if human nipples had never existed.

Relieved? he asked, looking proudly at the baby in his arms.

I smiled. Traitors.