

Cardboard Boxes

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p 80-85

When someone collects cardboard boxes, it's because of what's in them. Never about the box itself. My second cardboard box is such a one. Judging from the illustrations on the outside, it was made to contain a pair of ladies' shoes. The name of a Milanese manufacturer is printed on the stiff cardboard lid. I seem to recall that Wieske had bought them.¹ Crocodile-leather footwear with a fantasy buckle and high heels. In the best-case scenario they are now sitting in a thrift store, waiting to be thrown away. More likely, they no longer even exist. Their packaging, contrary to the nature of packaging, has outlived them.

Go on, reader, remove the lid from this second box. What did you expect to find? The silky crepe paper that was once wrapped around the shoes? A trace, faint as it might be, of the scent of Italian leather? Not a chance. You'll find an imitation cowbell, which smells of nothing at all. It lays atop a jumble of pocket maps, tacky postcards, and photos, all covered in dust and lint. The sides of the box are matted and are warped inwards.

We were given the bell on the last day of summer camp. The Christian Mutuality² saw it as a fitting souvenir. A flat tin bell, whose clapper came loose in no time at all, is attached to a beige leatherette belt embossed with a cross, the Mutuality's logo.

We were given it just before boarding the train home. By the time we arrived, half our coterie had already lost their bell. Not me. I thought it an absurd trinket but I saved it, even if just as an example of absurdity. I always find an excuse to save things. I'm incapable of throwing things away.

Take those maps. What good is it to me now that I'd be able to find my way from our Swiss summer camp to a chocolate factory that surely went bust long ago, not least because their most successful marketing campaign consisted of inviting vacationing Belgian youths for a group tour, followed by free praline-tasting? We stuffed ourselves with pralines and they weren't even very good. After our visit I never heard of that brand or factory again. And with this ordnance map in hand, you would never get lost if you strayed from your group on a tramp in the woods. The map

¹ Wieske is a family friend introduced in an earlier chapter.

² As the name says, this was a church-run association, in direct competition with the non-religious Socialist Mutuality. Each group offered, among other things, summer youth camps. In order to 'even out' the social standing among the participants, children were required to use a standard-issue rectangular cardboard suitcase and not (if there even was one) the family's leather luggage. This was the first of a series of cardboard boxes, some real and some virtual, described in the book.

showed the various hiking routes, the station, and which path brought you straight back to the camp.

The postcards depict our cabins in vividly realistic colors. Human-proportioned cuckoo clocks, squat but spruce. Window boxes under the sills. The background decor of a tormentingly blue sky and snow-capped mountains. That I survived two full weeks there is borne out by the sendoff photo, and also that there were a lot of us, and that, judging from the smiling faces in black-and-white, we even enjoyed ourselves. Other photos prove beyond a doubt that I laughed at breakfast, that I made faces while marching, that I took part in snowball fights when we'd hiked high enough to reach a meadow covered in a layer of wet, brown snow. There are even photos of the farewell party in the cabin that served as the canteen. The talent show's closing act was a rock group using a soup kettle as a drum, an empty washing-powder bin with broomstick as a bass, a badminton racket as lead guitar, and as lead singer a gangly kid who looked seventeen and who had spent the week rehearsing so frantically that by showtime he was too hoarse to squeeze out any sound at all. Yet still could sing, apparently, and to wild applause at that, judging from the blurry spectators.

But it's not these pictures I'm saving, not this cowbell. This second box, reader, is the schizophrenic, conflicted one. A double-walled cardboard safe in which the visible and the invisible are shuffled together. False sentiment alongside genuine. When I lift the lid, on every raddled old map I see at once the shadows of Z. and me: sitting side by side in the canteen, me behind him on nature walks, the two of us invariably on the same soccer team. In my hands, the colorful postcards transmute into their own photographic negative, and there we are again, Z. and I, black with significance. I stalk him from cabin to cabin, desperate and cowardly. For fourteen days I provoke him into carrying on with the kissing game, which for me is no longer a game. I don't dare touch his lips anymore, certainly not with my mouth. I settle for his cheeks, his forehead, and just once, the side of his neck, low, where it curves toward his shoulder. He answers with kisses on my neck, my cheeks, my temples, the top of my head. Our fake retching noises after incurring a kiss become shorter and subdued, and eventually stop altogether. All that counts is that after each victory you refrain from a new assault until the other has had his turn. And that, after a few days, he plays this game with no one but me.

The photos, pinned under the cowbell as though under a paperweight, are no longer black-and-white. They sizzle with unimaginable colors. Photography is a process by which light is captured and chemically registered. These photos, however, are themselves self-illuminating. They light up in the darkness, containing, as they do, images that were registered only by the shutter speed of my fourteen-year-old heart.

One: the classic shower room. One of the cabins houses the communal showers. Everyone wears his swimsuit. Everyone except for Z. Nonsense, he says. He's used to it, he says. He is a member of the Samen Sterk gymnastics club, and after tournaments they always shower together naked.

I curse him with every fiber in my body. Again that stupid goddamn 'Strong Together' club. I find a spot as far away from him as possible. My swimsuit itches and sticks to my body. Exposing himself to the gaze of all the others like that—I could punch him. I hate him for the power he has over me. I want to keep my eyes off him, but I can't. I see him from behind, among the swimsuited bodies of the other boys. Framed by the kitsch of the steam, he tips back his head and lets the water rain over him. His skin glows like polished wood. I follow the golden line between his shoulder blades down to where it curves outward. An image still absent in my collection until now. Zoom, frame, click. The staggering whiteness of his buttocks, the dizzying shadow between them. Those magical dimples on either side of the cheeks: the impression left by the thumb and index finger of a giant who held his bottom as though it were a bonbon.

I must flee. Now. Strategic retreat. Ignoble defeat. A painful erection. He couldn't have injured me any worse than this. But just before I leave the shower room, I see the one kid standing next to him, the dopiest of them all, punish him for his exhibitionism. With a swing that almost makes him slip and fall on the slick floor, he gives Z. a kick on his magical ass and razzes him. In the dressing room I dry off, deeply grateful to Dopey, and go into the toilet stall to put on clean clothes. I sit there on the pot bawling indignantly for a good fifteen minutes. My porcelain throne of self-pity. My two-square-meter exile and a roll of paper to cry into.

What's wrong?, Z. asks that evening in the canteen. It's taken until dessert for him to dare ask. You look so pale, you're so quiet, why don't you eat your dessert? It's the mountain air, I say, not looking at him. Way too healthy. I can't take it. And I give him my dessert before he can ask for it himself.

Two: how the kissing game ended. At first it just seemed to happen. When we got home, at the station even, Z. simply stopped. It was his turn, but he did nothing. I thought: well, that's that, then. How on earth am I supposed to revive it?

Much later, I went to his house to play soccer in the backyard, and we ended up together in the basement. It was one of the last days of summer. Sunlight sliced in through the arched, barred windows. The smell of apples and anthracite hung between the walls like washing. Wine bottles slept under dust, mason jars glowed with their sliced beans and butter-yellow fruit.

In this cellar's dusk he took me by surprise. From behind. A wet kiss in my neck. I stood there quivering. I thought of his mouth, of the curve of his back. He was so close. Listen, I squeaked, isn't it time we knock it off with this kid's stuff? You're right, he said, we'll stop. And he left me there in his parents' basement.

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The main thing I experienced and the knowledge I gleaned in those three years of high school³ was not The Kraut's Latin lexicon, nor The Jap's artistic databank, nor even Mussolini's literary richness.⁴ What I learned first-hand were the symptoms of the most exquisite illness on this earth. I suffered as intensely as I did willingly, gratefully succumbing to the psychosomatic malady of maladies, the supreme sovereign of diseases: love.

This the time and the place, reader, to discuss with you the doodle as symbolism and funhouse mirror. Allow me to scribble some again, here and now, with words this time, not pen strokes. And let me, in sketching their smirks, depict above all the *cause* of their smirking: gloating with schadenfreude, they gaze from the margins of the page upon the grating and grinding of a love-machine. They were travelers on a paper swing that swayed from me to Z. and back again. With each pass, their number swelled and their derision augmented at the unspoken desire from

³ He's now a teenager and attends a Catholic school with entrenched ideas on education, discipline, and sexuality—a losing battle for an 1970s institution. And yet the headmaster does his best to ward off all pedagogic innovation and social openness.

⁴ Nicknames for their teachers. 'De Mo' (The Kraut, not a German but with the features and behavior of an SS officer minus the uniform), who taught Latin, Greek, religion, history and esthetics; 'De Jap' (likewise not actually Japanese, just with certain physical characteristics that boys might associate with Asians), who taught Dutch, German, esthetics and history; 'Mussolini' (in no way Italian, but a staunch Flemish nationalist and renowned poet), who taught Dutch to final-year students.

the one and obstinate naïveté from the other. Allow me to list and name them, just as everything deserves a name, even a bunch of brazenly sniggering scribbles.

Adoration: by the end of that last year, Z. had developed into a barbarous beauty whose apparent ignorance of his handsomeness made him even more beautiful. His nostrils quivered gentlemanly, his forehead was perfect, his glance, at any given moment, unwittingly inviting. He was now a head taller than me. Never had I seen redder lips. Never a more stunning body. Athletically chiseled, sharp as an axe. His gestures were nonchalantly elegant, like those of a dancer on holiday. And yet his wrists were square and strong from years of gymnastics. He could do a hundred push-ups; his shoulders were as broad as Dopey's. But ask him to do a split, and he would, and just as well. Every muscle was toned. That he did not flaunt it—on the contrary, he quickly changed clothes in the dressing room like a seasoned sportsman, so that I could only get the briefest glimpse of him—only exacerbated my heartsickness. He trod with a Greek foot: sculpted Achilles tendon, powerful ankle, burnished instep, his second toe longer than the first, the big toe. His thighs were still hairless, as was his chest. Only along his shins and forearms was there a hint of dark down. He already shaved twice a week. If I happened to notice that he had wounded himself in the process—a tiny cut on cheek or chin, a drop of clotted blood—it made me want to cry. Isn't this how love works?

Tremulation: another machination of love. Where my body had previously misused my soul as the storeroom and copy machine of visual stimuli, now my soul struck back with a terrible vengeance. It waited until Z. happened to enter my field of vision; it received, via my abetting eyes, images of him and spread them, as if with a convex mirror, to the least reliable parts of my body, where they would cause a short circuit. Regardless of present company, if I beheld Z. unawares my lungs would contract like clenched fists, causing the sigh of the tormented to roll across my lips. My mouth became as dry as dust in the sun, or just the opposite, I'd drool as if ice cubes were melting under my tongue. Speech in any form became a hazard: either I stood gasping like a fish on dry land or I sputtered spittle in all directions, preferably at my companion. My heart rattled like a roulette wheel, my temples throbbed like a tanker in trouble. A haze of mist or darkness fell over my eyes, depending on whether they were about to fill with emotion, or to cease seeing altogether, the first sign of a total blackout. I had to grab hold of something: door frames, parked cars, shopping carts, old ladies in the park. I had to sit down to relieve my knocking knees, I had to stand up from the seasickness of sitting stock-still. The one thing I could have done to alleviate my agony was to look away. But that, I did not do.

Mystification: if my soul received no images, it invented them, as behooves a modern dictator. It then montaged these forgeries into passion propaganda films, which were thereafter be shown during every daydream or catnap. Movie house The Waterworks. *Cinéma Pathétique*.

Film short. I cycle, in Technicolor© and larger than life, past Z.'s house and just as I reach his front door am hit head-on by a truck. My bones all broken, I lie dying photogenically on his stoop. Z. comes running out. No, he wails, no, cruel world! Do you what you will, but don't let him die! Tearfully he bends over and takes me in his arms. I am expiring in ecstasy. Coughing up blood, I choke out my last words. You know, I've always loved you, I moan. Golly! he bawls. And I you, my darling, and I you. But why do you only say so now, when it's too late? Ach, I groan. I try to shrug my shoulders, and scream with pain. Then I get ready for my final sigh: It doesn't really matter, I just needed to say it. My eyes go glassy, my head droops to one side. Z. lets out a heart-rending cry and embraces my corpse. His life is in ruins. Sirens swell in the distance. The End.

Feature film. Z. cycles down my street to the accompaniment of menacing music. Right in front of our shop door he is mown down by a city bus. All his bones are shattered. He lies there gorgeously in agony on the black asphalt. I'm in my room, I hear the thud and know immediately what has happened. No, I cry, say it's not true! Woe is me! I storm down the stairs and out onto the street, fall to my knees and rest his injured head on my arm. Be calm, I say, stroking his bloodied cheek with the back of my hand, jeezzes, how could this happen? Y'know, he moans, I was riding

by and I kept looking up at your window. Course I didn't see the bus. Ach, I gulp, these things happen, and anyway those bus drivers are animals, maniacs. No, no, he says, it's got nothing to do with bus drivers, it's all about you. You see, I love you, I've loved you from the moment I set eyes on you. I know, I console him, trembling, hush now, I love you, too. Right, he smiles, that's why I feel so bad for you now. I love you, you love me, and look at me lying here like this, isn't it terrible? Mmwahh, I say bravely. Promise me, he smiles again, promise me you'll be happy, even without me, then I can die in peace. I choke back my tears and nod yes. He keeps his word and gives up the ghost. Harps and violins. I close his eyes and am about to stand up with dignity, but as soon as I hear the swell of a siren, I have a seizure. I collapse onto the asphalt. Next to Z. My head sinks in slow motion against his bloodied shoulder. The End.

Amputation, transpiration, constipation, hyperventilation, hallucination, degeneration, emigration: since the beginning of time, the dreaded secondary symptoms of the Syndrome of Amor. Hair loss, fever blisters, epilepsy, gluttony, anorexia, and double-suicide are also arrows in Cupid's quiver.

Temporary medication: masturbation.

Masturbation: see previous chapter.

Imitation: a servant emulates his master, a dog grows to resemble its owner. Why, then, would a person in love not imitate his beloved? The goal of a lover is not so much to unite himself with his beloved as to *become* him. Cease to exist by being absorbed by the higher life form he worships.

I tried to do just that, by learning to flip a ruler in the air with one hand and catch it without letting it fall. It took hours of practice, but I managed. I also started steeling my stomach muscles with sit-ups, and my arm muscles with push-ups. The first day I could hardly do ten, but a month later: forty. Not without results. If I stood at a mirror and flexed my muscles, I could make out a vague copy of that higher life form. Especially if I took off my glasses. I even started following Olympic gymnastics on television to acquaint myself with my idol's idols, so I could surprise him with my knowledge. It worked. He was euphoric, and launched into a discussion of modern training methods, using jargon of which I'd not the foggiest idea. I responded to everything he said with Yes and Amen so as not to get caught out—which I was anyway, when I was supposed to have said No. I bought his brand of jeans, his brand of sneakers, I learned to crack my knuckles the way he did. And then once we went to the municipal swimming pool. He wore a new bathing suit. Dark blue, glossy, with a breathtakingly low waistband. I hardly dared look at him. His belly was hairless until way under his navel, his tanned back tapered into the white cleavage of his buttocks. I said—truthfully—that I didn't feel well and took refuge in the changing booth where I dejectedly sat cursing that piece of satiny fabric. But the next day I bought the exact same bathing suit. The horniness that came over me as I tried it on in front of the mirror was intoxicating. It would have been exceeded only by the horniness that had scorched me had it not been a copy, but his own bathing suit, still warm from his crotch, still clammy with his sweat.

Sublimation: diverted energy of white-hot desire. There are those who take up painting, there are those who overeat, there are those who run marathons. I read like crazy, went to countless movies, and worked myself to death waiting tables weekends and vacations. Anything for distraction, not a moment's rest. This way I had a ready excuse not to confront Z. with my white-hot desire: I was 'too busy'. I would do it 'later'. You had to 'take your time' with something like this.

Stimulation: any advances on my part, I was convinced, would be met with scorn and rejection—so lofty was my admiration for Z. and so low my estimation of myself. If I were in Z.'s shoes I would not squander even a second on my insignificant self. So, I determined on his behalf, I had to count myself lucky that I was at least his friend. But on my own behalf, it was more difficult to be satisfied with that. Of course Z. and I were pals. But I wanted more. I was more. I dared not show it, however, afraid of losing what little attention I got. On the other hand, restricting myself to comradeship and abandoning love—I couldn't do that either. It was just as unthinkable as

voluntarily breathing with just one lung. So I had no choice but to resort to the strategy of the school administration, employing the tactic with which the headmaster deflected every pedagogic innovation: silent sabotage. My love's survival depended on being flexible. It had to bend, not break. It had to take cover in the bunkers of friendship and, thus sheltered, ward off its assailants from there.

No sooner said than done. Rather than abdicate my throne of love, I turned it into a throne that existed only in the safe haven of my mind. Adoration seeks ruse! Signed: me, the little love-commandant. The Napoleon of passion, the Machiavelli of emotions.

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Dear Z.,

I'm 32 now, just like you—a year older than my brother was when he drove his Honda Civic into a tree, broken neck, dead before he knew it. I live and work in Antwerp, my weekly masturbation record hasn't stood at eight for some time now, let alone my daily record, and I've been unofficially married for three years already to R., let's call him my blond husband, with whom I am so content that sometimes it's embarrassing, both for us and for the outside world. For the rest, too, I am thriving. My work isn't going at all badly, I've gained six kilos, and there are days when I ask myself: why am I still writing at all? Well-being is a curse. It makes you so lazy. If you're not careful you'll even start loving life. Sometimes I think: maybe I should finally give R., my rock and my fortress, the boot. Or he me. Then I can wallow in blissful misery and get back to writing hermetical poetry. Or go to every theater production of the season and hang around at the bar afterward, churning out cynical drivel. And if anyone dares say my cynicism is the armor of a tender but injured soul, I'll bash their face in.

Would you believe that in the past three years I've thought up only two decent jokes? Let's see if you still laugh as heartily as you used to. one. Man goes to the psychiatrist. Doctor, he says, I have the same dream every night. My neighbor takes off her clothes, I jump her and fuck the bejesus out of her. What could this dream mean? The shrink says: it means that you're naked on a big white horse, trying to gallop through an ever-narrowing tunnel with an electric drill in your hands. two. What's the epitome of hypocrisy? Faking an orgasm while masturbating.

No, you were a better muse, by far. Even though you never knew it. What all didn't I write for you. . . Well, not really for you. But still, always with the idea at the back of my mind: what would Z. think of this if he read it? And what all didn't I do to keep track of you after we left school. . . Phone calls. Dropping in at your parents' house. Going to the same university as you. I drew the line at choosing the same field of study. What I did do was something you long ago asked me to do: join the 'Samen Sterk' gymnastics club. After all, the clubhouse was just around the corner from us. And it only took up a full Tuesday and Friday evening every week, plus my whole Sunday morning, not to mention the extra training sessions for an upcoming tournament or demonstration event. Not such a high price to pay for unattainable love, was it?