

# Mona in Three Acts

Griet Op de Beeck

An extract

Original title Kom hier dat ik u kus  
Publisher Prometheus, 2014

Translation Dutch into English  
Translator Brian Doyle

© Griet Op de Beeck/Brian Doyle/Prometheus/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.

## 1

**The sun is high. The steering wheel is hot, almost too hot to hold. It's only March and it feels like the height of summer.** I start the car, switch on the a/c and the radio; U2 **singing it's a beautiful day**; I turn the dial to another station. Mozart, silvery music with a sense of foreboding. I try another, nothing grabs me – **it's my fault.** I switch it off.

The road is long and monotonous. The sky is an unreal blue, the fields vast and empty, with the odd cow here and there flicking flies with its tail. All that interrupts the flatness of the landscape is a pair of windmills. They remind me of the windmills when I was young, on the beach, the colour of bubblegum balls, whirling on top of my sandcastle. My father once attached two of them to the handlebars of my bicycle. The faster I cycled the faster they spun. He attached one to his own bike too, for Alexander, up front on the crossbar on his own little saddle. He whooped with delight as we raced into the wind. I remember that.

Finally the exit comes into sight. The hospital is on the outskirts of the city. The large modern wing contrasts sharply with the old building, which is reminiscent of those nineteen sixties local authority edifices. **I can't find parking. It's as if the world wants to help me postpone the inevitable. I drive round the parking lot three times and finally park on the verge where I'm really not allowed. I'm in a hurry, I say out loud,** which is an out and out lie.

**I'm looking for Room 316. I ask the lady at reception where to find it.** She sighs as if she has better things to do than speak to people looking for information at an info desk, especially her info desk. She tells me to follow the yellow line and then take the elevator to the third floor.

**I press the button. Waiting always seems to take an age, even when it's just a moment. The door opens** with a ting and a herd of us shuffles in in unison. Odours mingle: spicy aftershave and sweat and mint chewing gum and new trainers. People succumb to an awkward silence in lifts and try not to look at each other. Two stare at a screen on which the number of each floor appears. One man with cheerless eyes tinkers with a bouquet of flowers. A woman with big hair and deep purple lips stares at the floor, or at her shoes, or at her belly, **it's hard to tell which. A little boy looks at me with a hint of a scowl. I ask myself if it's just coincidence.** When he and his father get out at the second floor he sticks out his tongue at me, **teasingly. His father puts his arm around him; a show of affection, perhaps, or to make sure he doesn't wander off.**

I make my way along the corridor on the third floor. Heavy-heartedness fills the air. I pass a woman in a wheelchair waiting for something or someone. **She's been sitting here a while,** if the look on her face is anything to go by. **I hope they haven't forgotten her. She has flaking red patches on her forehead and hairline and she smacks her elderly lips although she has nothing in her mouth to chew.** A trolley up ahead is piled high with massive pampers, latex gloves, sharp needles in neat containers; a garbage bag hangs from the handle and stinks of shit. Sometimes only the most sordid words suffice; I scurry past.

I've never understood why they leave the doors to hospital rooms wide open, as if that woman with the sapless succulent on the window ledge wants every passing stranger to see her varicose legs; as if that man wants an audience to watch him stare into space, his mouth open, coughing and groaning.

Room 316 is at the far end of the corridor. It says 'Available' but the door is closed. Who knows what's going on in there? I put my ear to the door, hear nothing, knock three times and go inside. I see my father on the bed, asleep. Not exactly the picture of serenity: his face between white and grey, his cheeks sunken, his movements restless, his skinny legs sticking out of the sheets; and his feet, the soles covered in hard skin, the toenails dark yellow, startled every now and then as if someone is tickling him with a feather. I don't feel like sitting with him, not now, not like this.

I head back into the corridor and grab a chair in the waiting area. A nurse marches towards me. Late forties, I guess, but she has her hair in pigtails, as if she'd rather be singing in a teenage girl band than wandering around here all day. I wouldn't blame her. She storms into the room nearest the waiting area without knocking. As if being old and ill weren't enough, she yells at the patient loud enough for everyone in the corridor to hear and in the same breath know exactly what she's doing: 'Potty time. Can you manage by yourself? Yes? Then let me help you out of bed, OK. Wait a minute, my friend, what's this? Is that a pamper? Why are you wearing a pamper? What do you mean you don't know? Then I'd better have a word with someone, eh?'

I try not to look at the man waiting on the bed.

'Hey, Josée, room 312 says he can manage potty on his own. What's he doing in a pamper?' she bellows at a colleague working further down the corridor.

'What?' she bellows back.

'Why the pamper? Is 312 lying or can he really manage potty by himself?'

'Yes, he can manage by himself.'

'Oh, so the pamper's a mistake? OK!'

She thunders back inside. 'That pamper's a mistake. Let me get rid of it, that'll make things easier. Potty here we come? Let me help you up.'

I try not to listen, but it's difficult when humanity is so loud. I mull in the meantime over my own demise, cross my fingers for something with a little dignity: crushed by a television tossed through an upper storey window on a sundrenched Monday in May; or choked on a slice of shortbread, at home in the chair, after reading a mediocre page in a book.

I peek inside to see if dad's still asleep. He's snoring lightly, looks as if he needs it. Waking him isn't an option. The thought comes as something of a relief and that immediately bothers me, a lot.

They told us we'd only know more next week. They steered us onto the corridor, a geriatrician and another sort of specialist who didn't introduce himself. The geriatrician's name is Bibbe, at least that's how he introduced himself: 'Good afternoon, I'm Doctor Bibbe.' He didn't find it funny and he didn't mention a first name. Not important, apparently.

Doctor Bibbe is a lustreless creature, the remains of a head of hair draped untidily over his scalp, tiny eyes, glum lips, grey complexion, as if assimilated to the prevailing atmosphere of ill health.

It was the other doctor who whispered in a studiedly soft tone that we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. It was important to stay optimistic, for the sake of the patient's morale. That already sounded ominous to me. Bibbe couldn't help himself throwing in his tuppenceworth: 'But the man's clearly very weak, don't forget; we shouldn't expect miracles.' He then tugged his lips in the direction of a smile or what passed for a smile, as if he was suddenly reminded of the fact that he was talking about my father.

'He said something about back pain too. Is there anything you can do?'

'People often aren't sure where exactly the pain is coming from. What they perceive to be back pain might be any number of things. We'll just have to be patient until all the results are in.'

'But surely you can give him something for the pain?'

'Rest assured we'll do everything we can to make your father as comfortable as possible.'

They left, without further formalities.

Dad's lying there and I'm not in the mood for the next visitor, not now, not Marie, so I take the stairs and sneak out via the side door. As I'm about to get into the car I bump my knee. Clumsy me, always clumsy. It really hurts, so I sit and rub the pain away and watch a mother pass with her daughter on her arm, deep in conversation about the colour of the cars. I keep watching. Sometimes I'm the strongest wench in the world, other times I'm a quail's egg.

---

## 2

'These are taken,' the woman snaps, looking as if she's ready to fight off a hostile army. She's managed to block seven seats in a row with a massive umbrella, a substantial shopping bag and two children's sweaters.

'I only want this one; this is my brother and his wife,' I point to Alexander and Charlie, and then to a seat with none of her possessions on display. The woman is still suspicious. 'I'm here for my godchild,' I add.

'Oh,' she answers without the slightest hint of apology.

I sit. 'Sorry, Marcus was late for that meeting. I couldn't get here any earlier.'

'No worries, you're on time,' says Charlie.

'So... is Marvin nervous?'

'I guess. They're doing a routine they practiced with the teacher. She did jazz dance or something, before she became a teacher; she didn't make it easy apparently, certainly not for Marvin.' Charlie laughs. She looks nothing like the average mother, examples of which surround us in abundance. Her fashion line has also been doing good business internationally of late. Since then Alexander's been Marvin's primary carer and that seems to work perfectly for them.

Only a couple of minutes to go before the show starts. Chattering children run back and forth as parents and grandparents search for a seat. A man with a curly moustache is filming the audience with a video camera; a little odd if you ask me.

'So, are we optimistic?' asks Charlie.

'About dad? I'm trying to be. But I do feel a little remiss.'

Alexander leans over to hear me better. 'What do you mean?'

'We already talked about it, Charlie... when was it? At that dinner for my thirty-fifth, that dad had lost a lot of weight.'

Charlie nods. 'He said he wanted to get rid of his paunch and that he'd been a lot more active since he retired; hence the weight loss. What's strange about that? Then there's all the walking with that bird manual he bought, something he'd been wanting to do for ages; and don't forget he cleared out the garage *and* the attic *and* the old shed at the back of the garden. He never stops.'

'I know, but still, I never asked any questions. I should have known that you need to ask questions where dad's concerned. We're on the late side, according to the doctors. You realise that.'

'Do you know what mum's saying?' Alexander's face is serious. 'That he did all those chores at a snail's pace because he couldn't go any faster and that the walks were fake. Apparently he took the car and stopped somewhere, waited on a bench.' My brother tells me all this in a dry, matter-of-fact tone. 'He also ate more to cover for the weight loss.'

'What possesses Marie to say this now of all times?'

'I had a chat with her about it, the day before yesterday, and she told me she'd spotted something wasn't right a while back.'

'Why didn't she say?'

'Dad wouldn't let her, apparently. I always thought there was something weird about him handing over his dentist practice to that young bloke. He's only sixty-one for Christ's sake, and he's been a worker all his life.'

'But that's exactly it. His reasons all made sense.'

'You're right, he could always give things a twist, make them sound good, that was his speciality,' says Alexander, his expression halfway between irritated and pitying. 'According to mum, the pressure of work was just too much for him.'

'When did he stop?'

'A good year ago?' Charlie looks at my brother. Alexander nods. 'Typical of your dad; walking around with all those problems and not saying anything; he's always been scared of disease and doctors, not unlike many of his colleagues in the medical profession if you ask me.' Charlie points to the stage. 'Look, Marvin's standing in the wings, d'you see him?' We immediately wave, but he's already gone. I think about dad and how quiet he had been at that party. How he started to say it was time for bed at ten-thirty, and how I laughed at him when he did, out of pure affection, presuming he was just teasing us.

'He looked completely exhausted at that family dinner for my birthday.'

'What was that?' asks Alexander, staring at the stage in the hope of spotting Marvin again in figure.

'Nothing, never mind.' The family of the woman with the besieged seats arrives. The man who takes the one next to me smells of gym dressing rooms. I turn a little more toward Charlie. 'I don't understand why Marie didn't encourage him to see a doctor.'

'Marie encourage Vincent?' Charlie underlines her question with a snigger.

'Mum has nothing to say when it comes to dad, Mona, you know that as well as I do.'

'I don't understand why I missed it; I'm usually much more...'. Then the music explodes from the speakers, Christina Aguilera, if I'm not mistaken. Twenty kids, give or take, run onto the stage one by one and suddenly jump into the same pose. Marvin's in the front row, his face concentration personified. They strike another pose and then start to jump from one foot to the other while doing something rhythmical with their arms. It's not art with a capital A, but it still gives me goose bumps. I wave to Marvin while he's in the middle of his act, a silly and badly timed gesture, awkward pride.

I ask myself if dad ever came to a school party. I'm not certain, but I don't think he did. At least I can't remember him being there.

---

### 3

The gastroenterologist, a new doctor, has the floor. His voice is subdued, as if words are less cutting when they're spoken in a more gentle tone. He's put on the most neutral face he can muster for the occasion. It wouldn't surprise me if he practised it in the mirror as a student; not a frown to be seen, the corners of his mouth neither up nor down, the eyes more or less expressionless; it's an art in itself. Not that I expect doctors to share the misery of every sad diagnosis and crawl over the floor in the process, but something that might be confused with compassion wouldn't be out of place. While his colleague is speaking, Bibbe lowers his eyes, sniffs, coughs, clicks his ballpoint pen to write mode and back again three or four times, runs his fingers through his scraggy hair, straightens his shoulders as if he has back pain.

Marie has a different perception of these gentlemen than I do. She's the daughter of a cardiologist and the message she wants to get across is: I know my way in your world. She uses slightly less obvious medical terms that aren't necessarily useful in the present context: carcinoma

for tumour, sedative for tranquilizer, rubella for measles, a paediatric disease she mentions off the cuff in a series of conditions she's already had to deal with, all to demonstrate that when it comes to pain and suffering she's a hands-on expert. She devises questions that allow her to show off her knowledge and aren't intended to be answered. She bends over backwards to compliment the doctors on their skill and knowledge, something they haven't yet demonstrated if you ask me, not by a long chalk. Alexander does his best to use every pause for breath Marie takes to ask for information on dad's condition.

And I look on, from a chair I pulled up myself. It bothers me that dad isn't here in person, because Marie didn't want it. I'm surprised the doctors went along with it, but it's not the only thing that surprises me round here. I'm not of a mind to listen. A couple of words are enough: that it'll probably be a palliative operation; that the tumour in his intestines is probably quite large; that there's a real chance of adhesion to other organs, but they'll only know for sure when they open him up; that a colostomy will probably be necessary in a worst case scenario, at least a provisional one. Certainty after certainty is excluded with every sentence. It's only at the very end of the discussion that the gastroenterologist tells us there's a good chance we can win some time, all going well. He doesn't want to tie himself to numbers, of course, but somewhere between two and five years is conceivable, all going well.

Then Bibbe suddenly awakes from his minor coma: 'All going well,' he repeats for the third time.

If you know you have five years at the most to live, does that mean you're dying? Can you say farewell to someone for five years on the trot? The doctors shake hands with us, wish us the obligatory courage and send us out onto the corridor. And there we are, the three of us, and time spins for a moment. We say nothing, we don't look at each other, no one makes a first move. Coming to grips takes time.

We're still standing there when Bibbe leaves the consultation room. Marie reacts as if she's been caught on the hop. 'Let's go,' she says, and she marches in the direction of the cafeteria, reminding us on the way of all the goodies it has to offer, as if we didn't know already.

'I've no idea why they call this apricot tart.' Marie pops a chunk into her mouth with a sigh. She rarely eats sweet things in public, but she manages to demolish this sizeable slice of fruit tart – I couldn't help thinking hospitals offer comfort portions when I saw them, cumbrous to say the least – in no time at all. Alexander drinks his coffee and looks at me as if I'm the one who should start the conversation. I turn away from him.

The cafeteria is in the hospital's new wing. They've tried to make it more cheerful: an old rose wall next to a pale green wall, the rest in sprightly shades of white, wood-effect tables and dark grey chairs with aluminium legs, shiny tiled floor, and cutesy lamps in the same creamy white as the ceiling.

Marie and Alexander agree and they want me to agree too. That's how we do it in this family because we love each other. And we have to keep proving that we love each other by lining up in unison behind one particular vision, for example. Mostly Marie's vision, because we don't want her to be unhappy. Her happiness has always been extremely important, probably because the effects of its absence can be so pointed and pervasive. A woman who does so much for you, and you're not even her own child. I look at her, I see clearly how she's suffering; the face behind the tart isn't prone to ambiguity. But what they want of me leaves me in a quandary.

'Dad is an intelligent, adult man. Surely he has a right to know what's going on with him.'

Marie's eyes turn cold.

Alexander takes off his watch and puts it on the table, as if he wants to time how long it will take for me to change my mind with a stopwatch. 'Mona, you know as well as the rest of us that dad can't handle this kind of thing. He was so afraid of cancer that he managed to ignore the pain for ages. The very idea that there's no basic solution will crush him. Tormenting him with the facts

would be close to egoism on our part. And don't forget, it's better for him in medical terms that he stays optimistic, isn't it? It increases his chances of a speedy recovery and gives him a few more years of health to look forward to. That's how you should look at it.'

That's how I should look at it. Alexander means well, I know that. Marie's scraping the last from crumbs of tart from her plate. She looks at me. I want to argue the case for authenticity and honesty, for taking people seriously even if they're afraid, for confronting brute reality face to face, because that's the most beautiful thing to do although it might not be the easiest. But I, the certified weasel that I am, say: 'It's my guess Charlie would side with me.'

'Charlie isn't family,' says Marie. Alexander looks at her. 'You know what I mean, not real family.'

I finally relent. As we get up to go, Alexander gives me a hug. He never gives me a hug. Then Marie makes it a group hug and I can feel her bony frame next to mine. She smells of unwashed hair and coconut flavoured lip balm.

'I wouldn't know where to start without my children. I love you both, you know that don't you?'

'Of course, mum,' says Alexander.

'In times like this we have to be there for each other. We'll get through this, we'll pull each other through.'

Marie goes to dad's room and I join Alexander outside. He puffs nervously at a cigarette and looks at me as if he wants me to ask him something or say something.

'Are you OK?'

'I'm so happy I never became a doctor.' He flicks his burning cigarette butt to the ground and leaves it to smoulder. I stamp it out and smile at him, but he doesn't notice. My brother's face hardens, turns cold. I know I should press the point, here and now, because I'm certain there's something behind it.

'Isn't it high time we contacted Anne-Sophie?' Asking a new question is easier than reacting, sometimes.

'We should tell mum and dad first, don't you think? Let's wait until after the operation, when we have a clearer picture of what to expect. No?'

---

## 4

'Oh, by the way, you said something about me going with you to see your dad tomorrow but it's not going to work. I'm in the middle of a crucial chapter and need to keep writing,' says Louis indifferently as he breaks a sugar cube in two and tosses one half in his coffee.

'That's sweet of you.'

'Spare me the sarcasm.'

'My last grain of sarcasm dates back to the Punic Wars. I lost interest in nagging you about that kind of thing ages ago.'

'What kind of thing?'

'Er... um, your egocentrism, your lack of empathy, the way you interact with people: everyone in the freezer if you're busy with something and that's where they stay until you're done. That kind of thing.'

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that.'

'Suit yourself.'

'You haven't got a clue. Only writers understand.'

'Fine. I told you I'd lost interest in nagging.' I return to my book.

'Come on, sweet-pea, I'm totally with you on this, but you've known me long enough to realise how important it is for me to keep working when things get critical?'

'And last week it was important for you to participate in that event in the library, and two days ago you simply had to attend that reception, as if the fate of literature would be sealed in your absence.'

'You knew I was a writer when you chose me.'

'And Arlette really needed you last week, and last Thursday you didn't feel 100%, although there wasn't much evidence of it the following day.'

'I finished a box of Kleenex. What if I gave your father another infection to add to the misery?'

'Even if you didn't have a real excuse, you'd still invent something just to avoid coming with me.'

'As if your father can't wait to see me.'

'I don't expect you to join me every time, but now and then, that would make all the difference.'

'You know well enough that it brings back horrible memories: my brother's death, my godmother three years ago. It's all such a struggle for me.'

'And where was I when your godmother was dying?'

'OK, I'll give you that; you often came with me and I'm grateful. You're stronger than me.'

'That's easy for you to say. It wasn't exactly a walk in the park for me either, but I did it for you.'

'As if I never did anything for you.'

'Name three. You can go back as long as you like.'

'Two weeks ago: I took you to that gourmet restaurant you always wanted to visit.'

'That was a late birthday present with a bit of style thrown in because you gave me nothing the year before... and you enjoyed it too, if I'm not mistaken.'

'When you were troubled about the decision to withhold part of the diagnosis from your dad... I gave you all the time you needed to talk about it.'

'You delivered a monologue on how you saw the situation, and all it did was leave me thinking I shouldn't stand up for myself or my opinion and that troubled too, later.'

'Come on, that was a good conversation.'

'Your opinion. But let's take it as example one. Two to go.'

'...'

'That's what I mean.'

'You put me under so much pressure I can't think anymore. But you know how much I love you.'

'Easier said than done.'

'No one will ever love you more than me, you know that don't you. This is just some perverse game, trying to catch me out.'

'I ask you a simple question, and you're stuck for an answer.'

'Madam Manipulator strikes again.'

'And I thought that was your number one talent.'

'Here we go. OK, I'm good with words. Wasn't that one of the things you fell for?'

'True.'

'Sweet of you to say it. You're really a good girl, you know, with a good heart.'

'Listen to yourself. You'd think I was the one at fault here!'

'You keep me from my work and make a scene, just because I have to write. And I'm in the wrong? It's all a question of perception if you ask me?'

'Listen to yourself! I said right away that I didn't want to argue. When it comes to the crunch, I always give in to what you want, every single time.'

'Exactly, when it comes to the crunch. But not without hours of nagging.'

'You don't know how often I bite my tongue. It's just... I feel let down so much, and now, with all this crap going on...'

'If life with me sucks so bad then maybe you should look for someone else. Someone boring with a sad job who sits next to you every night on the sofa and talks about his day and yours and all your cares a woe.'

'Don't be an idiot. But you're the opposite extreme. And now with dad's illness I'm feeling it more than ever. Do I need your permission? I'm only human you know.'

'Mona is only human, that's a new one.'

'Maybe I have good reason to say it now and again!'

'If I make you unhappy then I'll leave you. Then you'll be free and everything will be better.'

'Sigh.'

'Sigh nothing. Let me say something for once: I've had it up to here with that egoist stuff. It's time you woke up: this is an individualist world we're living in, everyone is preoccupied with himself, priority number one! And you're no better if all you want is to claim me for yourself while my head can't cope with it. That's not what I expect of a relationship. I expect support, understanding and...'

'And you don't get that from me?'

'Sometimes, OK, but not always. You don't know what it does to me to be told I fall short all the time. I really don't think I can keep this up forever. There are times when I think seriously about...'

My stomach tightens when I hear him speak. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just... I feel... and...' I fall silent.

'And? What else?' He wields his words like a knife to cut my skin.

'And I miss you. I love you. I don't want to be angry with you. It makes me unhappy too.'

'Muffin, You don't need to be unhappy. I'm here. There's no need to miss me.'

I sit beside him and he embraces me. Every thought disappears at that moment. The restored harmony is all that matters, and these arms around me. I really can't stand it when people are angry with me.

---

## 5

This one's a little older, her hair black with a hint of blue; she dyes it herself with shampoo from the supermarket. She has green eyes, an amiable double chin and remarkably narrow lips. She's wearing orthopaedic slippers, well placed in the top three of the favourite footwear of the ladies who work here. She grins from ear to ear as she enters the room and treats those present to a jubilant 'good afternoon'; as if she's on Prozac but hasn't quite found the right dose.

'Time for lunch,' she cackles. She whizzes round the room, presses the buttons on my father's bed until it's transformed into a sort of armchair and he's sitting bolt upright. She props cushions behind his back and neck. 'Couldn't be more comfy, now, could we?' She ties a bib round his neck, pulls his nightstand on wheels closer to the bed and puts down his tray. 'So, my boy, you take this little pill in this little pot with your lunch. Don't forget, OK? Enjoy!' And she storms out of the room with the same energy as she came in.

Dad looks at today's menu, a little bewildered.

---