

The Immaculate

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An extract

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1

Last night I dreamt he was home again. I was standing at the stove in the back kitchen. The lid on the saucepan of potatoes was dancing. The cat had its eye on the bacon on the draining board. My daughters were whining around my legs, mean with hunger.

I heard him at the back door kicking the mud off the soles of his boots, the stamping of a calf testing the strength in its legs.

How long had it been since I had heard that? His unrestrained ways, his youth, which I never tempered, in which I had actually urged him on.

It's impossible, I thought, but he was already standing in the low, narrow hallway between the back kitchen and the rest of the house, with his sturdy body caught between the walls and the ceiling.

'Andrea,' he said when he saw me. 'My sister and my mother.'

I hugged him, kissed him. I tasted earth on his cheeks. In his hair, his stiff blond locks, there were clods of dried mud.

I said, as airily as I could, that the food was almost ready.

He shook his head.

'I want to wash,' he said.

I heated kettles of water and filled the zinc bathtub.

When he stepped out of his clothes, first undoing the laces of his boots, then taking off his socks and finally his trousers, I turned around.

My daughters screamed as he lowered himself into the tub and trailed their fingers in the lukewarm water. He took their hands, soft and plump as pin cushions, between his thumb and forefinger. He kept rubbing their palms.

'The children I've never seen,' he said.

My daughters gawped at him, a man who weighed their soft, supple hands in his own rough fingers, till he let go of them and said: 'Rinse my hair, Andrea. Rinse my hair clean.'

He bent forward, let his chin sink onto his breastbone and waited.

I filled jugs and emptied them over his crown. He grasped the rim of the tube with both hands and braced himself for every gush that poured down on his skull.

'Rinse, rinse, Andrea,' he kept repeating.

It sounded like a prayer for forgiveness or redemption, a call for a cleansing that must go deeper than his skin, the roots of his hair, his pores.

‘Rinse me clean, rinse me clean,’ he said again, and again.

The mud drew rusty brown tear wheals in the folds of his neck, across his shoulder blades, and trickled down into the soapy water, which his legs stuck out of, affording the occasional glimpse of his sex.

He kept repeating that I should wash his hair.

But I had no water left, no hot water.

I kneaded his shoulders, in order to do something at least, to brush the traces of mud off him. His body felt soft. His muscles gave way under my fingers.

‘Don’t do that, Andrea,’ he stammered. ‘Don’t do that. I’m just busy being born.’

‘But what am I supposed to do then, the water’s cold?’

‘I miss him, our father.’

‘Our father, our father? Our father has been dead so long.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. So young.’

The more I kneaded his flesh, the more it disintegrated under my fingers, like lumps of soft cheese or white clay in my fists. My arms sank up to the elbows into the tub and my hands encountered at the bottom nothing but sand, white sand that grated under my fingertips.

My daughters shrieked when they saw my dismay and I started awake.

Outside it was still dark.

The things a person dreams.

All morning long his voice haunts my body. It sends cramps through my stomach. My breakfast of bread, a soft-boiled egg, a dab of butter and a mug of coffee with no sugar sticks in my gullet.

‘Andrea, Andrea.’

He pokes me in the back, between my shoulder blades, as if I am a door at which he knocks powerlessly. But which of us is inside and which is outside? Who can open the lock?

He has inhabited my vertebrae for so long, my sore wrists, my stiff hip, all my weak points.

‘Andrea, my sister and my mother.’

Why, why on earth does he want to inhabit my belly too?

His blond hair grates again and again under my palms, rough with the dried earth, and the heavy material of the uniform greatcoat I took off his shoulders, as if hands have a memory of their own, as if my skin has other thoughts than my head.

In his coat and shirt I smelt his sweat, sharp, sour, a man’s sweat. The perished threads of the shirt parted and revealed his pale back when he tried to pull it over his head, too impatient to free himself from it buttonhole by buttonhole.

I have never known him anything but impatient, intemperate. He was three years younger. He was forgiven for charging into the kitchen in clogs or boots and stuffing a chunk of bread into his mouth with his blunt fingers, even though he left a trail of earth and dung behind on the tiles of the kitchen floor.

Mother didn’t protest, he didn’t fear a ticking off from father. He was God’s gift, the long-awaited son who had survived birth and children’s ailments.

And what about me, me?

I was the mistake, the missed chance. The daughter who should have been a son.

‘Andrea,’ said mother regularly, ‘that means “as strong as a man”.’

She said it in the hours of twilight, when things were indistinct.

Every few days she would wake early in the morning. In winter it was still dark, in summer the sunrise hung above the roofs like a promise or an omen. She took me with her to the milk cellar. There the milk rested in tall churns, rinsed by cold water, gathering cream.

‘Milk has to rest,’ she said. ‘That brings the best in it to the top. Hold the bowl straight. Don’t spill any.’

With a wooden spatula she skimmed off the cream. Never more than we needed for ourselves. With each scoop that landed in the bowl she spooned her words of wisdom into me.

‘A woman must be tougher than the thinnest toughest thread, tougher than a man, tougher than a spider.’

Towards the end of summer, the female spiders hung in the heart of their house of threads between the beams of the barn or the cowsheds or in the window-frames. Every night they ate up their old web, while their abdomen released new threads, for new accommodation, to be ready for the males of their species, who would rob them of their virginity. They sucked the life juices out of the moths, flies and mosquitoes that they had caught in the summer months and had wound in threads like mummies and preserved. They needed to put on weight to be able to lay eggs.

When I held a twig to their webs and made them vibrate for just a second, when I sent shudders through that network of threads, they would detach themselves from the heart of their necklaces and look for their food, their fate. They themselves would not survive the winter. Only their children would, as numerous as they were nameless, silk cocoons covered in domes of still more silk, white cushions of sleeping posterity in a corner of the window-frame, like a daydream.

I wrapped him in threads like a mummy.

At the side of the road I waved miniature flags and saw him off. I was a woman, a breeding machine, I planted the larvae of my jealousy in him. He was the straw man, who would snap the chains of my woman’s self.

‘You’re dreaming again, Andrea. I can see. Your arms are going weak. Hold the bowl straight.’

I don’t know why her voice penetrates to me more clearly now, in the twilight, than when I was a child. I don’t know how old we have to become before the very earliest things get through to us again, the very first smells, the very first sounds.

It felt cool, the bowl, and it was too big for my hands, as difficult to grasp as Mother’s belly had been, in which, as she was about to give birth and asked the maids to cover her in wet cloths to cool her down, I felt my brother, long-awaited, move.

I was allowed to lay my hands on her belly, before the maids draped the linen over it.

‘It’s a son,’ she said. ‘I’m sure of it. Daughters aren’t so much trouble. It’s just as if all the life of his dead brothers has passed into him.’

He kicked her in the kidneys, turned round under the taut skin of her mother’s belly as he descended into her pelvis and she pulled a pillow against her back to ease the pain.

Her breasts splashed under her nightdress, over-full and marbled with veins, her nipples as brown as a rotten spot in an over-ripe apple.

She did not shrink away from me. She wasn’t a prude, though she was chaste. We were farmers. In our yard heifers were calved, mares mounted. Rams covered ewes, cats gave birth to their kittens in the same straw into which the piglets squirted out of the sow. Everything that breathed, mooed, brayed or bleated erupted in the urge to mate and bear offspring, grew up and sooner or later was slaughtered.

When he was older, about six, and I was not yet nine, we sometimes played bull and cow, or mare and stallion, in the bleaching field behind the house, where Mother and the maids spread out washed bed linen and underwear.

He said I must crawl through the grass on all fours and creep straight towards me. He grasped my hips, pressed his crotch against my buttocks and let go of me again.

The maids giggled.

Mother said, neither angrily nor disapprovingly, but soberly: 'Andrea, my child, there'll be plenty of time for that later.'

She went on with her work. In the blue-green grass she pulled the corners of sheets and pillowslips straight, and the legs of my father's long underwear, in which the curve of his thighs and calves remained in spite of every wash.

'My daughter will have to bear plenty more in her life,' she said.

The maids fell silent, or held back their laughter. They were women, like me, but I still had to be initiated into womanhood.

Meanwhile the long-awaited one danced through the grass pollen, pulled himself up on the branches of the alders by the ditch and burst out laughing.

Why wasn't he given a talking to?

All she called was: 'Marcel, don't forget your clogs. Don't chase after your latest thoughts like a mad dog.'

But he was youth, a blank sheet of vellum. Sons are laden with expectations, daughters with original sin.

His clogs lay lost in the grass at my feet, empty and gaping, as if they were stretching out and yawning in the afternoon sun. They have probably lain rotting in a hayloft somewhere, or been thrown into a stove, and of all the linen I have only the napkins in the finest cotton in which Mother, with needle and satin thread, spent weeks intertwining her initials with those of father, after they had become engaged. The 'E' of Emilia winds itself round the 'T' of Théophile, more or less in the way she admitted him to her bed and body: first reluctantly, then with passion.

Her father said: 'Let him wait, we'll see if he can stand it.'

My own father, who still had to become my father, hung around by the gate on Sundays, his moustache trimmed and oiled, his cap in his hands, back and forth, past the hedge and the gate under the lime trees, from which the smell of nectar leaked from a thousand blossoms that buzzed with bees and fecundity.

'And I made him wait,' said Mother. 'Till we were exploding with impatience and even my father could no longer bear to watch.'

It must have been the summer of 1911. As my father said: 'The world was still the world then.'

He seems so young now for that moustache, which has landed on his top lip like a moth and spreads its wings, in their wedding portrait, which hung above her bed till her death. They stand there like two columns of dark salt. Father holds his arm up, Mother lays her hand on his lower arm. The other clutches a modest bouquet of opening jasmine blossom. She has put her hair up, and her locks cover her skull like a helmet. Under her chin her long neck is completely hidden by the collar of blouse, which is so keen on prudishness that it would have preferred to cover Mother's cheeks too, her ear-lobes, her whole face, as if that blouse is not hand-made, but is a form of growth.

Only her necklace, which glides across the slope of her tightly-bound breasts and can hang freely above her waist, presents an illusion of confidence – and her fingers too, in the angle of father's elbow, informally, intimately, in contrast to his almost clenched fist. 'He has force and strength in his arms,' those fingers say. 'But I carry in me the patience of toughness.'

'Yes, he saved for ages, for that moustache,' she said sometimes when we looked at that photo together.

She said it with a little laugh that just for a second revealed something of an inner life.

They don't look into each other's eyes in that portrait. No waterfalls of lilies, roses or chubby cherubs descend behind their backs. They knew their place. Farming folk is what we were. The nobility of the earth, who took from the fields and meadows the meat and vegetables on which everyone fed.

‘The soil,’ said Mother, ‘is us. Hold the bowl straight. Don’t spill anything.’ The animals have done their best. They have made milk from grass and clover. I don’t know how, but they do it. And so do we. We eat, we digest, we swell up and bring children into the world, alive or dead, as pleases Our Dear Lord.’

Sometimes I would creep from under the sheets and go to the milk cellar to see the milk sleeping in the churns, shrouds, christening clothes, not breathing yet alive, in the grey light of the summer nights which knew neither darkness nor light.

The night maid said: ‘What are you doing here, Andrea love?’

And I said: ‘I want to see the milk sleeping.’

‘It’s sleeping, can’t you see? It’s lying still. You must do that too. Lie still and sleep. Come on, off to bed again.’

I wanted to know if it turned in its sleep, the milk, like me and also if it dreamt, if it sought out cool spots in the summer nights, like me in my bed. I wondered whether the cream of the sleep of the milk was the dream.

The night maid said I had some funny ideas. I can still feel how her hands pushed me back upstairs. She had to ensure that the night covered the churns with its cool vapour, so that the cream could ripen, not too sweet and not too sour. It must never get too cold or too warm under the vaults. The window shutters must be closed in good time, or on the contrary opened again in good time.

It was women’s work and it was women’s hands that after dawn, when the hour of the fox had passed, opened the chicken runs. Then handfuls of grain were strewn around from baskets and everything that had feathers, laid eggs and was fattening, cackled and scratched around and squabbled over the grains.

In the kitchen the sandwiches for the hands and maid were already made. The spout of the coffee pot foamed every morning anew when it was exposed to the flames, a pyre that it had not deserved.

‘A woman sometimes needs eight hands,’ Mother was wont to say when in the warmth of the afternoon she sank into her chair, in fine weather against the front wall of the house in the afternoon sun, or else in the back kitchen where she and the maids drank coffee and sipped from the steaming bowls in order to make every stolen minute last as long as possible.

She was the heart of a web of women that spread out imperceptibly across the farmyard and kneaded dough, churned butter, beat the dirt out of clothes and floor mats, and every week slid the loaves into the blazing oven until they reappeared with cracked crusts – oh, the taste of freshly baked bread, that has preserved some of the moisture and yeast in it and, rich and fibrous, sticks my tongue and palate together.

Everything was white in her world. She had an aversion to plunging her hands in the buckets of pig’s blood when slaughtering time came round. She said that a woman had to dirty herself in enough other ways.

‘I’ve had enough blood on my hands, I’ve bled enough. I’ve pressed enough from my body and buried it again.’

Everything she lowered her hands into had an essence of chastity. Milk, cream, bread dough, or the linen in the washtub and the suds in which he, the long-awaited one, dissolves in my dream and from which he wells up again, in search of my belly, my bones, as if I could recreate him from my skeleton.

The shirt that he pulls over his shoulders looks as dark as his skin appears pale as it emerges from it. He, who of course never truly knew a woman, never felt other women’s hands glide over his body than those of mother and the maids and mine when we washed him, wrapped him in towels and rubbed his hair dry.

He squealed like a sow having its throat cut when soap seeped into his eyes.

I laughed at him.

He blushed, with shame or rage, or both. Mother said that he must act like a man.

He acted like a man.

She herself was no longer there when he went to meet his fate, whistling. She did not know my daughters either, nor did he, nor did father. She could not suspect that I too would have to lower them into the earth, that years after her own death I would become the keeper of graves, the bearer of absences.

She lowers her arms into the washtub and asks me to hold the clothes, the pillowslips, tablecloths tight, everything with which a human being wraps, covers, surrounds themselves in order not to be an animal without fur. While she wrings out the linen in her reddened hands, while she squeezes the whey out of the curds when we make cheese from skimmed milk, she asks: 'Andrea. Who gave you that name?'

'Father,' I say.

She nods, throws a wrung-out version of him into the wash-basket, his long underwear, and says: 'I would prefer to have christened you Maria. Immaculata.'

7

(...)

10-10-1943

Dear Sister and Brother,

Yesterday your letter of 14 September reached me in good order, and it gave me a lot of pleasure, since it was 9 August last that I got your previous one, so that I have only just received your third letter.

It may be a long time too since you have heard from me, since I wrote my fifth and last letter on 25 August.

There is plenty of news from here, but first I shall answer your letter.

Lieve must be a strapping girl by now. In a bit I'll write something for her. She probably won't recognise me anymore, but I'm pleased to hear she can already walk well. How old is she now? I'm not sure of her exact birthday. And when will she have a brother or sister?

We read a little about the bombing. Yes, probably it's bad, but revenge will be sweet and won't be far off. The People and State newspaper is also full of the bandit gangs and it might be necessary for Storm Brigade Langemarck to be deployed in Flanders for a while. Things would improve fast in that case, as I think that a few people would soon be shot. We have become as hard here as real SS-men. Yes, those gangs operate in the same way as here in the Ukraine. We know little about the international news. We scarcely see daily papers and we don't hear the radio.

You may have already heard what happened with Maria. Yes, I've broken off with her. I want to stay free. All respect for her, but I couldn't go on. Two different characters can never be joined together.

And now the news from here!

We have been back for just eight days from deployment and are ready to go, waiting for our transfer to Prague, with the Storm Brigade. We can be off at any moment. Never have I seen morale so high as now, with our Flemings. Every day we do work duty here and are very close together. If we are punished, we take it as a joke and we can sing like no other group. There is plenty of pleasure too. In a word: deployment has done us a great deal of good.

Of course, much has been said back and forth about deployment. Sadly enough, we didn't encounter any partisans, though we ourselves experienced a lot, such as a Russian harvest festival, a market, a funeral, etc... too much to tell you about. It would turn into a whole newspaper otherwise, but when I'm on leave I'll tell you everything.

I'm a barrack steward now, which isn't a rank but involves great responsibility and is very onerous, seeing that they couldn't give a damn here. We are really no longer raw recruits, all the Romanians and Croats were frightened of us.

The Flemings are well-known everywhere, for their cheerful character and their constant smiles. Führers and Unterführers can't be angry with us, and they can't make us angry, we take everything as a game and with a smile.

So it couldn't be better. The filthiest work is done by the Flemings, and they say: 'Kiss my a...se,' but still it gets done. And here, as everywhere, the words 'Bloody damn bastard' and 'Kiss my a...se', big and small, are the badge of the Flemings.

We are pretty cheeky too, but when we organise a song evening in our barrack, songs like 'Flanders' by Renaat Veremans can make us as gentle as lambs. Soldierly virtues have also increased somewhat among our comrades.

In Prague our training will continue, together with our other comrades, and we'll be recruits again. It will be strange, but we'll get through.

If you can spare some letter paper and envelopes, they will be welcome, as I've been out of them for some time, and have to rely on what I'm given. Fortunately, Cyriel was on leave in Flanders and brought back a few sheets, so I can write some letters again.

In conclusion I send you all a firm handshake and a powerful Hurrah!

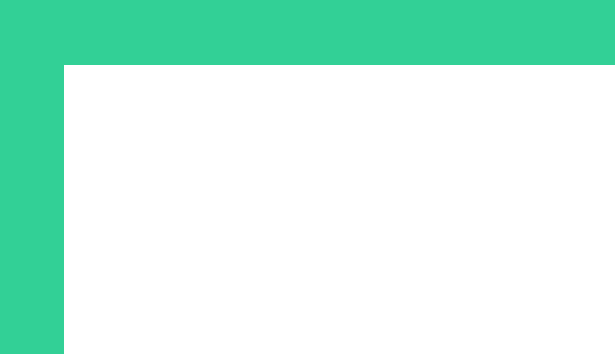
Your brother Marcel,
Loyal to Flanders.

NB We are also winning over many souls to the ideal of the Flemish National Alliance (VNV), the most passionate supporters of the German-Flemish Work Community are now becoming the most passionate VNVers.

And now something for little Lieve!

My dear little Lieve!

From your little letter that Mummy wrote for you, I understand that you are not too well-behaved and eat very little. If it goes on like this, your godfather will have to bring a stick with him to smack you on the bottom when he comes home on leave, instead of having something in store for you. First eat up and then Santa Claus will come to Godfather and bring lots for Lieveke. You must be a good girl and not bang mother's arm too much when she is writing letters to your godfather, or knock the inkwell over, otherwise Lieve won't be able to write anymore.



Bye-e and lots of kisses from your godfather,

Marcel
