FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Woman Who Fed The Dogs

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'The sad truth is that most evil is done by people

who never make up their minds to be good or evil.'

HANNAH ARENDT, The Life of the Mind (1978)

The most hated woman in Belgium. That's what they call me. Much more hated than that woman who murdered her five children. Most people have already forgotten her. Not me. Meanwhile other mothers have murdered their children, though not as resolutely as her, not as unerringly. She is and will remain the queen among murderess-mothers, the gold medallist, the Medea of our age.

I don't deserve a medal. I deserve hatred, scorn, poison. People send me letters in which they describe in great detail what they would do to me if they had the chance. A long, slow death under torture is what I deserve. Starvation. They enclose photos of emaciated Jews. 'This is what you've got coming the moment you set foot out of prison!'

Don't read them, says Anouk, and Sister Virginie also urges me not to. Ignore them, especially now. Save your strength for the day when you are released, the day they say is fast approaching, to the rage and frustration of the whole country. I must think of the good things, the good things Anouk wants for me and Sister Virginie also wants for me. Dear, faithful Sister Virginie, who in this hell takes pity on me like a mother, following the example of the Virgin Mary, Refuge of Sinners, Comfortress of the Afflicted. And she also took pity on my Mum – God rest her soul. It was her idea that I should ask Mum to pray at her house every day at eight-thirty in the evening. At the same moment I prayed in my cell, and so we were united in prayer. Poor Mum, who was taken from us far too early. It is always too early, says Sister Virginie, for those we love. How lucky I am to have her, poor orphan, abandoned by everyone, except by her and by God. I do not always feel Him. Forgive me.

And forgive me for reading everything.

M also reads everything that appears about him in the press. So I read in the paper. He cuts it out and puts it in a folder. Like me. He will notice that recently more has been written about me than about him. A lot more. It will make him furious. Seething with rage.

Soon I'll be free and you won't, M.

This time I shan't come and visit you. I shan't sit opposite you. I shan't listen to what you've got to say. The jobs you've got for me, the role you've devised for me. I shan't even think about you.

'You owe everything to me. Without me you'd be nothing.'

And I believed him.

I have a poor self-image, says psychotherapist Anouk. That's why I'm an easy prey for bad men. *Was* an easy prey for bad men.

I don't want to hear another word about him. Other things concern me now, such as the question: why are murderess-mothers not hated?

On that subject I don't want to miss a single word. Unfortunately those words dry up in the blink of an eye. You have to be as quick as lightning, and I'm not as quick as lightning. Never have been. Even the champion Geneviève Lhermitte scarcely gets the ink flowing anymore. At the beginning you couldn't turn on the television without there being a news item about her. In every tree in the country a bird chirped her name: Lhermitte, Lhermitte, Lhermitte. The papers brought out special editions with photos and interviews and plans and details. A fresh load of horror! Was there no end to it? people wondered in desperation. No, there is no end to it. That's why we must pray for redemption.

Now the commotion has died down. She has in fact acquired formidable competition, although for now she need not fear demotion. She is still the tops. And I, the most hated woman in the country, the woman whose name is not and will not be forgotten, think of her. Not a day goes by without a thought of her. Call it an honorary salute.

Does she think of me?

If there is one thing there's no shortage of in a prison, it is time to reflect. Some days that is hell. *All* days.

By which I don't mean it's quiet.

God, my ears!

Rest is for the rest home.

But there too there will be the slamming of doors, and the wheeling of squeaking trolleys down the corridors. 'Soup, lovely soup!' If the old folk refuse to take their pills they are shouted at. Or if they've wet their bed. Shat in it. Those old folk don't make much noise anymore. Their lungs are full of water. Blub blub. And if they do threaten to kick up a fuss, they get a bag over their head. Not a plastic bag, because then they will die and the rest home won't earn anymore from them. But you can pull a pillowslip over their heads. Or a laundry bag. It's the same with parrots. They think it's night.

I always wanted a parrot. A green one that in the mornings would say to me: 'Hi, Odette. Sleep well, Odette? Fancy a cup of coffee, Odette?'

‘Oh no,’ said my mother, ‘no parrot in my house!’ A dog was OK. After lots of moaning and pleading. She chose the name: Fifi. And she decided which rooms the dog could go into, and from which rooms she was banned. And when Fifi died, she said: ‘That’s that. My house isn’t a zoo. No zoology.’

It was *her* house. She had saved for it, together with my late father, God rest his soul. He was goodness itself, says everyone who knew him. A heart of gold. And how different everything would have been if he had been granted more time on earth.

If I ever have a house of my own, a house I can furnish as I like, and where I can do what I like, and where no one comes and bosses me about or checks up on me, a house that is really my own, I’ll buy a parrot. And I’ll call him Coco. Coco Chanel.

I mustn’t laugh, I mustn’t laugh, I mustn’t laugh.

Next thing it’ll be in every paper: ‘She has no remorse. She’s laughing!’

And my poor Mum, who at the end of her life was in a rest home and was too weak to visit me. *Ma pauvre petite maman chérie*! I would have so liked to look after you, as you looked after me. You never abandoned me, however difficult it was for you. I didn’t want to abandon you either, but I couldn’t visit you, I wasn’t allowed to. Even for your funeral they wouldn’t let me out. That was so awful, Mum, not being able to say goodbye to you. I have known lots of black days here, but that day was jet black. What misery! Dear Mum, what terrible things have happened to us? One catastrophe after the other. Who could have imagined it? Do you remember how happy we were, you and I? Sometimes it was difficult. You were having a difficult time, I was having a difficult time, we both suffered with our nerves, and we missed Dad – oh, how we missed him! – but we had lovely moments too. And they won’t come back. That is so cruel, Mum. I’d so love to be little again. Your little one. But now I have little ones of my own, three little ones, who are no so little anymore. How fast it goes!

Do you remember our delight when my first child was born? How full of hope we were, you and I. You didn’t even have headaches anymore, ‘I’m cured,’ you said. ‘That little mite is my medicine.’

I would so much have liked to make your nerves stronger, Mum. I prayed and prayed. There was no more I could do.

They throw people into prison without thinking that they have a mother whom they have to look after. It’s not easy being a good daughter when you’re in prison. Or a good mother. You have to fight, every day.

I fight. I have gone on fighting. Like a lioness.

Sometimes I thought she was dead. She sat deathly still staring ahead of her. When I shook her gently, she said ‘*Je souffre.* I’m suffering.’

And I said: ‘I’m here, Mum, I’m your little one, your baby. I was in your tummy. If I could, I’d crawl back inside. Then we’d be together forever.’

I said: ‘Shall I put a flannel on your forehead? Shall I get you a glass of milk? Shall I turn out the light, turn on the light, lower the blinds, raise the blinds?’

I'm suffering now too, Mum, I've suffered so much. I didn't know a person could suffer so much, but still our suffering is nothing in comparison to the suffering of Jesus, Son of the Almighty, who is called Jehovah. Amen.

I remember everything, Mum.

Every week our house was cleaned from top to bottom, even when there was no dirt, even when my mother was depressed. Turning the place inside out, my mother called it. 'We'll turn the place inside out. On Saturday mornings after breakfast she and I tied cloths over our hair. They weren't cloths, but worn-out scarves. Or ones that my mother considered worn-out. Ones she could not be seen in in the street without looking ridiculous. I could still manage it, she said, because I was young, and young people were less harshly judged, but that didn't last for ever. Nothing lasted forever, certainly not youth. 'Have no illusions!'

She pulled the scarf off my head, braided my hair, rolled the braid up and fastened it with a hairpin. Now the scarf could go on top. And when was I going to cut all that hair off? It served no purpose, did it, all that hair? Was I planning to sell it? Had I let myself be talked into believing I could sell it? 'My daughter doesn't sell herself, understood?'

'Yes, Mum. Of course, Mum.'

'I wouldn't want...'

'I know, Mum.'

Those words were sufficient to focus our minds on what bound us together forever: my dear Dad, who had loved us both deeply and we him. We lived in his house, and that's why we had to look after it. Mum and Dad had had the house built to be happy in with their daughter Odette, for whom they had had to wait a long time, almost fifteen years, which had made the joy at my birth all the more delirious. Unfortunately their happiness came to an abrupt end. Sweet songs don't last long.

Mum and I put on rubber gloves and plastic aprons, armed ourselves with vacuum cleaner, buckets, mops and cleaning products, and went upstairs. In the bathroom Mum filled the buckets with hot water. She added a dash of Flash – with lemon! – and soaked the mop in it. 'Vacuuming isn't enough,' she said. 'People think they can solve everything with a vacuum cleaner, but that's not true.' Meanwhile I turned on the vacuum cleaner and went to work. God help me if I left any dust! There must be no fluff on the mop in a little while. Every bit of fluff was one too many. One that should have wound up in the vacuum cleaner.

'Is there still plenty of suction, Odette? Don't we need a new bag?'

'There's suction, Mum.'

Three and a half hours later we pulled the front door open to scrub the threshold and the step. And then we scrubbed the threshold of the back door.

Every other week we cleaned the windows and needed an extra hour. But even then we didn't take a break. There was time for a break when we'd finished. And there was time for a bath too then. And for clean clothes. Exhausted, Mum slumped into her chair, turned on the television and stared into space. Not a drop of energy was left. When I took her a cup of coffee, she sometimes did not

have the strength to raise the cup to her lips. And if the TV guide slipped off her lap, she had to call me to pick it up for her.

She could not breathe in a house where there was dirt. Or where she thought there was dirt. But it took a lot out of her. Too much. It wrecked her health.

'Odette is very good at cleaning,' M would say about me to his mates, in that special tone of his. Only a trained ear could hear the danger. Anyone who didn't know him didn't smell a rat. They called him friendly. Charming. In the mountains dogs start howling long before a human ear has picked up the first rumble of an avalanche. I was a dog like that. M had turned me into a dog. Not a St Bernard or an Alsatian like my faithful Brutus and Nero, but a Jack Russell, like Fifi: small but brave. And especially tireless. The way I worked for that man! Worked my fingers to the bone. And it was never enough.

'Odette, show us how well you can clean.' He kicked the waste bin over. 'Sorry. Accident.' Or he would pour milk on the ground, step into the puddle and leave a trail of milk all over the house.

'Thank you, M.' And then I mustn't forget to pull my mouth into a smile.

'Odette wasn't made to sit on her arse,' he said.

And why was that, M?

He himself had never had a mop in his hands. No one in that family had ever held a mop. His father hadn't, his mother hadn't, his brothers hadn't, his sister hadn't, and M definitely hadn't. He was even too lazy to wash himself. His parents had been in the Congo, at the very end, just before they chucked out all the whites. But they had been there long enough to learn how you could get others to do the dirty work for very little money. You had to pick young people and have them live in. That cost virtually nothing. At table they ate together with the whole gang. Now and then you stuck some pocket money in their hands and voilà, the housework was done for a song.

You could fuck them too. Those black women liked nothing better. 'Come here!' you had to say to them. You pointed to them and said: 'Come here.' And they would come. Those Congolese women fucked like we breathe. They could go on calmly working while they were being fucked. When nine months later a child rolled out of them they still went on working. They picked the child up, licked it clean, tied it onto their back, bent over their plot again and went on hoeing. Or they submerged their mop in a bucket, rinsed it, wrung it out thoroughly and went back to work. And a baby was never murdered by its mother. Never! White women could take a leaf out of their book.

It was there that M saw how cheap people are. And how easily new ones can be made.

He called me his '*pute*'. It was meant as a term of affection. Or perhaps even a compliment. But I was less than his *pute*. I was a prostitute he didn't have to pay. His free *pute*.

His brothers should have stood up for themselves. They let themselves be treated as his servants. Unpaid servants. They had to carry his satchel. He stuffed it full of comic strip books, but that was no problem, as he had porters. Those lads were no good for anything else, he said. 'Why do you think they've become postmen? They should be grateful to me, I trained them.'

Hahaha.

When his father told him to do the weeding, he called in his brothers. In life the art was to delegate. And to fool the naïve souls who wanted to be fooled.

He rented out the comic books at school at one franc a day. And from the proceeds he bought sweets, which he did not share with anyone.

He never shared anything with anyone. Ever.

His brothers should have demanded their fair share. They should have thrown his satchel on the ground. Carry your own rubbish!

The comic books were theirs too, but he acted as if they were his.

'The oldest son is the only one who counts. He is conceived with strong seed. The best of the father *and* the mother goes to him. His brothers and sisters have to make do with the remnants. In the Middle Ages the oldest son inherited *everything*: the estate, the house, and the serfs. Those who came after him had to go into a monastery. Or on a crusade. Or they must contrive to marry a rich daughter. One with a dowry.'

Yes, M. Of course, M.

'I'm the crown prince. Do you realise that?'

He didn't seem to realise that I was also the oldest. I was the oldest *and* the youngest. But I was a daughter, of course. An only daughter. *Une fille unique.*

'There are masters and there are servants, leaders and followers.' And he said he hadn't chosen to be a leader. A leader sacrifices himself. Day and night he works for the followers, even if the followers are too stupid to realise. In exchange the leader is entitled to respect. For example his satchel is carried for him. The tastiest food is for him. And the most fertile women. Where did I get the nerve to thrust a mop in his hands? What was the next step? An apron? Rubber gloves? He wasn't going to be turned into a girl. He wasn't the boy.

I was the boy. The she-boy.

A she-boy whom you could put through her paces at the fair.

They could exhibit Geneviève Lhermitte at the fair too. Five in a row. What mother could contend with her?

Suppose M's mother had done it. She needn't have killed all five. She could have stopped after M. She could have spared the future postmen, so that they could start delivering letters. Couldn't she have killed a single one? Was that asking too much?

She did not care about her children. Certainly not about M. Some women have children, but that doesn't make them mothers. M's mother could have had a hundred children, and she still wouldn't have become a mother. Never a good word for M, never. Nor for the others, but definitely not for M. He'd taken her youth, she said. It was his fault that she had been denied the carefree enjoyment of her young years. Her best years. As if he had asked her to get pregnant! The other four she could

manipulate. Not him. Bitching from morning till night. She wasn't embarrassed about me. A normal woman wants to make a good impression on a new daughter-in-law, but she...

She certainly liked being pregnant. Why else would she have child after child, without concerning herself about them? Children didn't interest her. And their father didn't interest her either. Sex interested her, yes, but she could have taken precautions.

With each child the father wondered if he was the father. And then they're surprised when M...

She liked them young too, didn't she? In the Congo she was caught with one of her pupils. By her own husband. The boy was under age. If it had happened here, she would never have been allowed to teach again. But as it was the Congo, everything was possible. Those whites protected each other. If ever there was networking, it was there.

The father wasn't any better. Now he says that she started it, but who believes that? To begin with he was out there alone. M was safely in Mummy's tummy. They both thought it better if M made his entrance in Belgium. Cooey, here I am.

What does a man alone do in the Congo? He says he set up a chess club. Everywhere he went he set up chess clubs. If they'd sent him to the moon, he would have set up a chess club there. But no one plays chess twenty-four hours a day.

And supposing that she started it, even then he didn't have to follow her example. Have I ever followed M's example?

After all those years he still couldn't stop talking about his African princesses, not even to me. What father-in-law does that? And you had to say 'kuyuku' to them. Then they would come. And you could fondle their breasts. They were as hard as wood. He maintained.

As if those things interested me.

I had said to M that we should invite his father over. Gilles should get to know his grandfather. I felt. I also knew that my father-in-law would not be organising any Santa Claus parties for his grandchildren, or taking them to theme parks like de Efteling and Walibi, but there had to be someone to whom Gilles could say 'Granddad'. The first thing he announced when he came in was that he didn't wished to be called 'Granddad', or 'Pappy' or 'Pop'. The grandchildren should call him by his first name. Why? No explanation. And then he started talking about the mulatto women he had had. And about their ebony breasts.

M liked white women. The whiter the better. That's why he went to Eastern Europe so often. To the Caucasus, where the white race has its roots. The Caucasian race. M did not want any black women. Or women with hard breasts. What normal man wants a woman with hard breasts?

All those men who went to the Congo had only a single aim. But they were never punished. No, no. They were heroes.

When M's mother's nerves got bad, she started hitting out. She hit people straight in the face. M was also hit by her. M! He didn't hit back. Ever. 'I ignored it,' he said. 'Surely you don't think she's ever hurt me?'

But she *could* have hurt him. The woman could floor anyone. She had a black belt. Fortunately I did not know that the first time I saw her. I wouldn't have dared to shake hands with her! She started in the Congo. There was a judo club there. It turned out that she had talent. My father also tried, but couldn't do it. She could. Mama M had not been idle in the Congo. She used her time as a colonial well.

If only they had stayed in the Congo! M could have been Mr Big there. With ten women on each finger.

She gave judo lessons at home. Special mats were put down, said M, but the whole house shook when yet another person was thrown to the floor. Wham!

'And why didn't you learn judo?' I asked him.

'I don't need it,' he replied.

The woman was always out and about. And her husband too. Evening after evening the children were left alone. He went to play chess and she went to judo class. They had no time to read their children a story and they had no time to go to the parents' evenings, but for the chess club and the judo club they had all the time in the world. And then they're amazed when things turn out badly. They had nothing to give their children. Nothing at all.

The two of them lived as if they had no children. She didn't have to murder her children. Why would she have murdered them?

Is it possible that that murderess-mothers murder their children because they love them? Love them too much? If that is true, then maybe it's too dangerous to love your children a whole lot, then it's better... No, you can never love your children enough. Those mothers don't love their children. They think they love them, but it's not love, it's... I don't know what it is, but it isn't love, it isn't love, it isn't love.

M could sometimes respond so feebly when I was loving with him. As if he didn't understand. Actually he didn't respond at all. He wasn't angry and he wasn't happy. He was nothing.

When we were first together I used to buy him presents, but he did not seem to know what to do with them. I had to unwrap them myself. Otherwise they would have stayed where I put them down, wrapped and with the ribbon round them. My first present to him was a deodorant, because well, I felt his personal hygiene could do with improvement. 'Why are you giving me that?' he said. I thought I had insulted him. I apologised and said that I certainly didn't want to suggest that he didn't smell nice. He smelled nice, but he didn't wash enough and went round for too long in the same clothes. Men paid less attention to that. Because in addition he did physical work, he sweated and so I thought that deodorant might help, although there was nothing wrong with his sweat as such. The smell of sweat could even be a turn-on sometimes. In the middle of my explanation he turned round and left. I stood there with my deodorant. I didn't know what to do with it. It was a deodorant for men. I wasn't going to use it. I put it on the draining board in the kitchen. A little later it had gone. He must have taken it, because I didn't touch it and there were no goblins in our house.

I bought a belt for him, a dark-blue one in supple leather and a nice copper-coloured buckle. Made in Italy. Again the same reaction: 'Why are you giving me that?' I thought he felt the buckle was too

flashy, or that blue wasn't masculine enough. I'll give the belt to my cousin, I thought. He'll like it. That evening I saw him wearing the belt. 'Ah,' I said, 'you do like it after all.' He didn't react. 'The belt,' I said. No reaction. 'That blue suits you.' Still nothing. It was as if he didn't want to admit that I had given him the belt. He was pretending that he had always had it. He wore it for years. When he changed trousers, he pulled it out of one pair and passed it through the loops of the other. It was slightly too wide, and it was always a bit of a squeeze, but eventually he got very good at it. There were days when I was afraid that he would hit me with the belt, but that never happened. M didn't need a belt for that.

The last present I gave him was a tool box I had seen in in the DIY store. I had actually gone to look for a barbecue on wheels. When I got there all the barbecues had gone, but they had a whole wall of tool boxes. They were piled up to the ceiling. That's just the thing for M, I thought. He had lots of tools, but they were a clutter of things he had collected over the years. He was always complaining because he was messing around with useless tools. Many of them he had stolen. If you haven't paid for it you've no right to complain. I think. But he complained anyway. In the store they assured me that my husband would be happy with it. It wasn't top quality, that was impossible at that price, but it was sturdy and could be used every day. I took the box home as pleased as Punch. I had had it wrapped in shiny paper. He couldn't miss it. I put the shiny package on the television. Two days later it was still there. 'Don't you want to know what's in it?' I asked He didn't even answer.

He didn't trust those presents. He saw them as a trap. He was afraid I would take them from him again and throw them away. Or destroy them. Or that I would give them to someone else, as his father had done with the carpentry set that he had been given by his Granny and Granddad. In his first year at school M came home at Christmas with a brilliant report. He had got top marks in virtually everything. That isn't that difficult in your first year, but he managed it. His parents didn't say a word about it, either positive or negative, nothing. They scarcely looked at the report. But his Granny and Granddad wanted to reward him. They gave him a case with a hammer, a saw, a chisel and a file. M was so happy and proud! He never played with it. His parents gave it away to another child. That tool box from the DIY store was of course the most stupid possible present. When I finally took off the gift wrapping myself, his face froze. Just like a mask. A few days later his brother dropped by. I thought: I'll give him the box. He then told me about the case full of carpentry tools that his parents had given away. If his brother had not told me the sad story, I would never have known. M kept those things to himself. He was too proud to talk about them.

His brother didn't want the box. Finally I put it in the van with all the other tools. Nothing was ever said about it. But he did use it. From then on I always did it in that way. When I had bought something for him, I put it in his cupboard or in the place where he would use it, but I didn't make a present of it. The memories were too painful. For him. I went on buying stuff for him. When I saw something I thought he needed, I bought it. If I had the money. At the beginning it was easier, before he started checking my outgoings. I didn't have much leeway, because M couldn't stand me spending money frivolously. Not that I've ever done that. Mum had taught me the value of money. She had been through the war. And Dad too.

More than once I thought: oh, if only I could have given you some love from the moment you were born!

Love didn't interest him. Sex did, but love didn't. Because he had never known it. He didn't know what it was. He couldn't recognise it, he couldn't give it, he couldn't receive it.

The worst thing was that he realised that. Sometimes.

There were moments when he realised. Then he knew very well why he was the person he was and what he was like.

I tried to straighten out what had grown crooked, but it was too late.

It was as if love could gain no hold on him. It slid off him.

At school we had had to read *Le petit prince*. I knew the book well, because I did an exam on it and later even gave a teaching-practice lesson on it. I loved it, especially the passage about the fox who asks the little prince to make him tame and explains to him how to do it, with superhuman patience. First the little prince must keep his distance and mustn't say anything, but gradually he is allowed to come a little closer each day. The fox needed time to get used to the prince.

I thought it would be the same with M. I had hoped to tame him step by step, the way the little prince tames the fox. With love and patience.

I thought: I'll prove to him that he can trust me, that I won't drop him. I shall prove that love exists, unconditional love, real love. I shall give him the love that he had to do without. And that love will cure him.

I really thought that.

I saw him as a man with a gaping hole where his heart should be. *Un homme avec un trou*. I wanted to fill that hole. I felt pain in his place. I felt pain because it didn't cause him pain. Or because he *thought* that it didn't cause him pain.

When I think of it, it still causes me pain.

In his first year, his parents sent him to school on the train. He wasn't yet six. They didn't take him to the station, no, no. He walked over a kilometre to the station by himself, took the train and got off at the next station. Then it was another quarter of an hour through the town to the school. At four o'clock he had to do the same journey, but in the opposite direction. And he had to make sure he got the right train. Only the slow train stopped in his village. He couldn't mistake it. But of course other trains stopped at the station near his school. How could a child make that distinction? At the beginning he couldn't yet read, could he? But God help him if he made a mistake.

The following year they sent his brother with him. Two little boys alone in the train. They could have been abducted! And that while there was a school in the village where they lived. But they didn't consider it good enough. His parents were both primary schoolteachers. They looked after other children at yet another school. They could have taken their sons with them to that school. But no. The father was at loggerheads with all his colleagues. He didn't trust them.

At first I refused to believe it. I thought M was pulling the wool over my eyes, but his father started talking about it. He thought it was perfectly normal. That's what happened in the Congo. There, children were sent to the spring to fetch water. Children were given responsibility from a very early age. A child of five carried his brother or sister, who couldn't yet walk, on his back. And a can of water on his head. Or firewood. That strengthened their backbone, literally and figuratively.

The worst thing was that it was against the law. A child of five is not allowed to take the train unaccompanied. That's why it stopped after two years, because the railway authorities finally realised that that little chap and his brother were on the train alone every day.

It took them a long time to realise.

The father was particularly afraid that the children would be spoilt. Spoiling children – *that* was the great danger that must be avoided. Leaving children to their fate, that was OK. Neglecting them: fine. Spoiling yourself, there was nothing wrong with that. Stuffing yourself in front of the children with the sweets you had confiscated from them: great. Because sweets were bad for their teeth. But not for yours.

Had he seen that in Congo too?

And of course M took after him. And I kept trying to give a different example. And hoped the children would follow my example.

Il faut partager.

You must share.

Try teaching that to a child when its own father keeps everything for himself.

The mother would have done better to murder M. She could have said it was an accident. Accidents happen all the time. Most accidents happen at home. Fatal accidents too. Especially those. People are careful everywhere except in their own home. They think they are safe there. They let themselves go. Even M. let himself go at home sometimes. Sometimes.

There is no such thing as safety. Anywhere. She must have known that. Why else did she want to learn judo? A normal woman doesn't learn judo. Certainly not when she has five children. She stays at home and looks after her children. Period. Perhaps she takes cookery classes. Or sewing lessons. Or yoga. But judo? No.

She could have finished him off with a judo hold and afterwards she could have said that he had had a fall. She could have laid him at the bottom of the stairs, as if he had fallen down them. She always maintained that he was no good, that she had always known. She should have been consistent and taken responsibility. It would have been a trifle for her.

Lhermitte did not know judo. Neither did her rival. Those women began something without realising what they had begun. They were not prepared. And so they could not see it through. According to plan Lhermitte should have killed herself too. And her rival should have killed all her five children. But after the third child she faltered, like an engine that sputters because the fuel tank springs a leak. Caused by whom, by what? Don't ask questions, Odette. There's a leak, OK?

Sometimes things go your way, sometimes they go against you.

Man proposes, fate disposes.

A panic attack, writes one.

An epileptic fit, maintains the other.

I say: an epileptic fit caused by panic.

If I have learned one thing from M, it is not to give in to panic. He did not know what panic was. He didn't know what love was and he didn't know what panic was either. That sometimes makes life easy, you know, not knowing what feelings are. Feelings get in the way. Not always, but often. And of course M had feelings. He felt pain, rage and indignation. They are feelings too.

Perhaps panic is more of a reaction than a feeling. But that is no excuse. You must learn to control reactions too. When they arrested me in front of my children, when they led me away in handcuffs, when they took me away in a wailing police car... I didn't feel a moment's panic. I knew that panic wouldn't help me. On the contrary.

Cool head, cool head, cool head. Make the best of a bad job.

Now too. Definitely now.

Anyone who lets themselves be carried away by panic, is giving up, said M. And humiliating themselves. He had seen that often enough in the girls he dragged into his van. They wet themselves. He found that embarrassing for them. Extremely embarrassing.

M never gave up. Not even when he had lost.

If you ask me he still hasn't given up.

If she had not had that panic-epileptic attack, she could have beaten Lhermitte: murdering five children and herself too.

Lhermitte wouldn't have liked that. No more gold medal for Geneviève Lhermitte!

Now her rival didn't have a chance. She collapsed like the twin towers in New York. She lay there like a sack of potatoes. The two children she had not yet murdered rushed to her aid. 'Mummy, mummy what's wrong?' They wanted to help their Mummy. Their dear Mummy. They rang for an ambulance. And they fetched the woman from next door. She came as soon as she could and also brought her little son with her. What chance did that woman have with all those people in her house?

M. would say that the plan was no good, but even he could not always foresee everything. If he had foreseen everything I wouldn't be in here now. And he wouldn't be in there. The two most hated inmates, each in their own prison. Mirror, mirror in the wall, who's the most hated one of all, him or me?

They've thrown Lhermitte in jail, but where has her rival been dumped: prison, hospital or madhouse?

In love, engaged, married. In love, engaged, prison. In love, engaged, madhouse. In love, engaged, hospital. They've probably put her in a madhouse. A madhouse specialising in epilepsy.

Whenever the moon is full and round in the sky, it crackles in their heads. They fall to the ground like lumps. White foaming saliva leaks from their mouths. They jolt like a bad actor faking an orgasm. 'They can choke,' said my mother. 'Sometimes they swallow they own tongue and they choke.' She had once seen one, in the tram. She was on her way to the parents of my father, to whom she had just got engaged. 'Leave the tram!' ordered the conductor sternly, but no one wanted to miss the spectacle, and neither did my mother, a young bride-to-be. Imagine: a German officer in uniform whose trembling body is filling the aisle. The arms were flailing, the legs were stamping. Urine was streaming from him.

My mother had wanted to throw herself on the epileptic. She had kicked off her shoes and had slid to the edge of the seat. She placed her hands to the left and right of her thighs, ready to push off for the leap. Her body would calm his, like a blanket thrown on the flames. The realisation that she would become part of the spectacle stopped her at the last moment.

Nothing would have stopped me.

When the conductor had finally thrown the passengers off his tram, my mother realised that urine had leaked from her too. Not as much as from the German officer, but enough to feel it. Was there a stain on her dress? On her coat? Oh, the shame, the shame! And now there was also a ladder in her new stockings. What on earth was happening? She had bought the stockings especially for the visit to her future parents-in-law, although it was wartime. Stockings cost a fortune, but her mama had said: 'If you're serious about that man, you must wear stockings.'

The other stranded passengers had carried her along with them to a bar. She had tried in vain to drink the Dutch gin a fellow passenger had offered her. Her teeth were chattering against the rim of the glass. Someone said that she must eat, but she couldn't swallow a thing. The ambulance siren drove them all back out into the street. They saw the epileptic being taken away on a stretcher and disappearing into the belly of the ambulance. The tram continued on its way, but my mother could not bring herself to get on. She felt exhausted and soiled as if she had had sex with the pissing, foaming man in the aisle in full view of all the passengers. She would have liked nothing better than to break off the engagement.

At home she took off her clothes and threw them away, not into the laundry basket, but into the rubbish bin. War or no war, she did not want to wear them anymore, she could not wear them any more.

First she soaked in the bath, then she scrubbed herself clean at the washbasin. But the gagging man still clung to her. He never disappeared from her head or from her body.

'That day evil was planted in my womb,' she often said.

Because she and my father were respectable people. *Des gens convenables.* And so were their parents. I couldn't have got it from them.

If I was fathered by that sick SS officer on that Sunday afternoon, it was a pregnancy of over sixteen years. Long enough for a Devil's child.

But I was not fathered in that tram.

Sometimes they turn into wolves.

That isn't true.

M could turn into a wolf, a wolf that stands on its hind legs so that everyone can see its penis. His wolf's penis. It was a test. He wanted to see whether I would get into a panic. I forced myself to stay calm. I folded my hands and prayed. In my mind I folded my hands. If I had really done it, he would have torn me to pieces with his wolf's teeth. His wolf's claws.

Wolves are less dangerous than people think. They attack when they have no other choice. Actually they are frightened of people.

Don't force me, M often said.

I didn't force him. I tried not to force him.

Sometimes I forced him without realising. Or I realised too late. With that story of my mother's about the epileptic, for example. I thought it would amuse him, and it did seem to amuse him. I could have sworn that he giggled when I told him how my mother, with wet knickers, was ready to jump on the poor man in the midst of a full tram. It made me reckless. I made up details to extend my moment of triumph. And laid it on thick. Pathetic, I know. And unforgivable. I heard myself rattling on, though I knew perfectly well that people rattling on drove M nuts. He let me tell the story. He didn't interrupt me. And then suddenly there was his hand over my mouth and four grim words: my brother has epilepsy.

Which brother? I didn't dare ask. He had so many.

'Forgive me,' I said. 'Please tell me you forgive me.'

'There's no point,' he said. 'I can forgive you and you'll do it again tomorrow.'

He didn't hit me that time. I wasn't even worth the effort.