

# Candy Floss

**Erik Vlamincx**

**An extract pp (43-47; 63-69)**

**Original title** Suikerspin  
**Publisher** Wereldbibliotheek, 2008

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Hester Velmans

© Erik Vlamincx/Hester Velmans/Wereldbibliotheek/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

---

**p 43-47**

## Arthur Van Hooylandt speaks:

Sometimes — not often — I think of just giving up the crummy shit-work at the fair. But I know, just as I know that two and two is four, that I'll never be able to give it up, because then the rug would be pulled out from under my feet. The fun fair is in my blood. It's an inborn urge that I can't seem to get rid of. My father was a carny, my grandfather was a carny. They're the ones that passed it on to me.

My grandfather, Jean-Baptist Van Hooylandt, was the first in the family to work the fair. The people who knew him (my grandmother first and foremost) have always said that I was cut from the exact same cloth as my grandfather. The same open face, the same powerful voice, broad in the shoulders and short of stature like him. "Compact from head to butt." I sometimes wonder if my grandfather was also cut from the same cloth as his grandfather. And if that keeps going on and on back in time. And if maybe you'd have found some spitting image of me wandering about among the Old Belgians or in the age of Jesus Christ. Anything's possible. But so what.

My grandfather, Jean-Baptist, was born a regular burgher, born into a regular family, but with the right personality to be a carny. He happened to pop up in a miserable household, somewhere around Dendermonde, over a hundred years ago. At home he was beaten more often than he was fed, so that in the end he packed up his belongings, it can't have amounted to very much, and ran away. Anyone in his place would have ...

But Jean-Baptist saved and worked his fingers to the bone and then, having seen that with honesty, determination and persistence, a man could make a decent living working at the fair, he scraped together all his hard-earned cash to buy a cabinet of curiosities from someone. At the big fairs in those days, a cabinet of curiosities was always a major draw. Jean-Baptist had big plans from the start. The world is for the doers and the shakers, for the fellow who dares to take a risk.

And even though my grandfather did not have any fond memories of home or of his childhood because his parents had been such a mean lot, he still gave his younger brother a job and got him involved in the business. Gust Van Hooylandt was his name. The way I know is that my grandmother told me so herself and, one — she had no reason to lie, and, two — she was too good a person to lie.

My grandfather played the part of the barker and he gave his pitch on the deck in front of his booth with much arm waving, drum-rolls and trumpets blaring, and inside the tent his brother played the part of a terrifying sea monster.

Uncle Gust sat in a gigantic tub of water with two horns on the sides of his head, two great big tusks shoved into the corners of his mouth, black flippers on his hands and his feet, his entire body shaved and slathered all over with some black, shiny glop, shoe polish most likely.

It must have been quite a spectacle, because that brother of my grandfather's would sit there in his huge tub pulling scary faces and bellowing like a castrated porcupine. Some of the womenfolk would pee in their pants with fright and run outside screaming when Uncle Gust raised his arm in the air. Women sometimes act like that because they want to make themselves interesting and attract the menfolk's attention. Uncle Gust acted like that because it was a way to make a living.

But the business went under because, I'm sorry to say, Gust bollixed it up. Not only was he a skirt-chaser of the worst sort, but on top of that he was a no-good bum who was plastered more often than he was sober. His motto was: "Getting pissed every day is as well-regulated a life as any." After a while he was so shit-faced he didn't know his arse from his elbow anymore. And so he managed to drink the business down the drain because the customers wanted to see a sea monster that sent shivers up the spine, and not a blind-drunk clown slobbering and drooling in his tub.

And even though my grandfather tried everything which way to reason with him, Gust refused to see the error of his ways. He was addicted down to the bottom of his keister and would have chugged down pure petrol if need be. An alcoholic will pickle his brains as well as his liver to death, and in nine cases out of ten, he winds up turning meaner than an old chained-up pit-bull.

In the end my grandfather, at his wits' end, had no choice but to take his brother to the loony bin. Somewhere near the French border. For years, come Easter, he had to come up with a hefty sum for the bum's keep. That was the way it was done in those days. It was lucky the First World War broke out a few years later and the place went up in smoke with every living creature in it. The Germans had dropped a shitload of bombs on it because they thought it was a Belgian army barracks. The Germans, everyone knows, will go the whole hog once they get something in their heads. It's a good thing too, because if they hadn't I might be paying for that old wino Uncle Gust's keep to this day.

The only thing I can tell you for sure — and Gust Van Hooylandt was the living proof of it — is that if you drink too much booze, hitting the bottle every day, it will kill you. Especially if it's liquor or French wine. But now those moralizing tree-huggers from the green party and even some socialists, those so-called champions of the working man, are hell-bent on banning cigarettes as well. Complete hogwash of course, because what they're forgetting is that smoking is a natural human instinct. Smoking is what makes you human. Humans smoke, animals don't. Even Indians that have grown up in the wilderness, deep in the tropical forests, smoke. It was in the newspaper.

And the idea that smoking is bad for our lungs, that too is complete bull. Rik Van Steenbergen was three times world road cycling champion, no less, and that fellow smoked like a Turk and a steam engine. Filter cigarettes, Tigra Lights, of course, but still. And in spite of the fact that he liked to smoke, and did so with gusto, he was far and away the fastest rider of his time. The others usually were way out of the picture when he sailed across the finish line. And he kept riding until he was in his forties. Enough said.

The air we breathe, whether we like it or not, is crawling with filth from the pollution the factory stacks spew out and that's what is changing the environmental conditions and that's why folks are getting those varicose veins, cancers and skin rashes. But the factory bosses don't want that to be known, because if they can't make any money, the factory bosses will be the ones getting those varicose veins, cancers and skin rashes, and so all the world's problems are blamed on the cigarette and the working man. I'm telling it as it is and I won't kowtow to anyone. And I never have.

---

p 63-69

## A new beginning

### 1980

"Goddamn it, Jean-Baptist, those bitches, stuck together the way they are, are too wide to fit in the undercarriage."

"Then we'll just have to put them inside the wagon instead of underneath. On a pile of rags or on a bale of straw."

"That ain't going to be easy. They can't get up the steps by themselves. They can barely move or stand if we don't help them."

"Still, that way they can't run away, either, like that dick of a dwarf and his old bag of a mother."

"Oh, I hadn't looked at it that way."

"I'm content you're beginning to see the plus side."

"Still and all, mark my words, it's a purchase we're going to regret some day. I've said it from the very start: that merchandise is going to give us a pain in the arse. A load of dead weight."

Joséphine thinks it's strange that the two men always talk about her and Anastasia without ever looking at them. She doesn't always understand them either; they talk fast, indistinctly, and in a strange dialect. The taller of the two, the one with the warm hands, came in a rickety wagon in the middle of the night to fetch them from the hotel in Ghent where they spent almost three months after Papa and Maman left for Panama.

"You're going to be living in a real hotel for a little while. Until things are all settled, you'll be staying at the Hotel du Prince." That was what Maman had told them.

"Are there any princes living there?"

"I don't think so. Maybe a prince stayed there once long ago and that's why they gave it that name."

“Can’t we go back to St. Barbara’s, to Sister Marie-Françoise?” Joséphine had asked.

Maman had not replied but Joséphine could tell from her expression that returning to St. Barbara’s was out of the question. And to go live in a real hotel for a while, the Hotel du Prince no less, had seemed quite an exciting prospect at the time. It wasn’t so far-fetched, after all, to think that a prince might come and stay there some fine day. Besides, Joséphine had just read a book about a wealthy noblewoman who traveled round all the major cities of Europe and who stayed in the fanciest hotels everywhere and was visited in her boudoir — Joséphine didn’t know what that word meant — by opera singers and orchestra conductors and even bishops. So living in a hotel could wind up being quite enjoyable.

But unfortunately it had turned out quite differently in the end, there in that hotel next to St. Peters railway station in the town of Ghent. The accommodations were not that princely after all. At first they had had a relatively nice room with tightly drawn drapes. But then they had been tied down with heavy ropes, onto a board, a tabletop someone said, and had been hoisted up the stairwell to the top floor, where they were housed in a little room right under the roof, with paint flaking off the walls and ceiling. There were no curtains, and it was smelly and sweltering and noisy. No opera singers came to visit them either, nor orchestra conductors nor bishops. For the first few days the only one they ever saw was a timid woman who handed food to them from a safe distance. Porridge, invariably, or soup. She seemed to be afraid of them, that woman. She didn’t want to help them up onto a chair either or to let them move closer to the window. And because of that, because they’d had to remain flat on their backs, Joséphine now had a terribly aching neck and sores on her heels. And she had an abrasion under her armpit caused by the chafing of the rope with which they had been tied to that tabletop.

“On the days when the wagon is fully laden, they’ll just have to sleep in your bunk.”

“Shit, why in mine?”

“Because we’re no longer equal partners. I’m the boss now, and you, Richard De Klever, are my lackey.”

“You can kiss my ass.”

“Then you shouldn’t have pissed away all your money on booze.”

“Well, I hope that if they really have to sleep with me, they won’t stink up the place.”

“Don’t worry about that. They’re clean and proper. It was one of the first things I asked about. You’ll laugh, but they use a flower vase to do their business in.”

“Hypolite Vandenbroucke knows how to sell a bill of goods, I know that one. He’ll flog you his doddering mother-in-law for a bundle of money and tell you with a straight face that it’s a Negro from the Congo.”

“If they aren’t clean and proper, I can return them. I learned my lesson when I had that sea monster who crapped up the whole place.”

Joséphine feels her cheeks go hot. Shame. Because it's true, what those men are saying. They do relieve themselves into a flower vase.

"Could you please help us? We need to go potty." She had asked it politely when they'd only just arrived in the Hotel du Prince. The woman who brought them their food had promptly gone bright blotchy red in the face and had rushed out of the room as if the devil were at her heels. So Joséphine had just used an empty vase next to her on the nightstand, which she was luckily able to reach. Otherwise she'd have soiled the whole bed. It's a good thing that she can make the decisions about peeing and pooping on her own: Anastasia has no say in the matter.

"Well, then you had better go out and buy a flower vase somewhere."

"No, I got their vase into the bargain as well. It's real crystal. From Val-Saint-Lambert."

"But the question you have to ask yourself is: which was the bargain, that vase that you got for free, or was it that stuck-together pair?"

"Say what you like. Lots of folks are going to come to see our new attraction. I think we can definitely sign ourselves up for the Big Fair next season. Two grown-together women, as far as I know that hasn't been shown anywhere the past few years. If it ever has..."

"Still, in my opinion you were talked into buying a zebra."

"What do you mean?"

"A zebra is only special because of its stripes."

"So, isn't that enough?"

"For the rest, the animal can't be tamed and it isn't good to eat either."

"You just can't stand it that those twins are my property, and that you have nothing to say about it."

The first days in the Hotel du Prince that timid woman was the only one that ever came into their room, and they never heard her say a single word. But afterwards there had been a constant stream of visitors coming and going. The visitors were all men. Some would just hover in the doorway, staring at them wide-eyed. Others came inside the room and right up to their bed. Joséphine would gaze at them with frightened eyes and not say a word. Sometimes Anastasia would yell something, but then the man who always came in with the visitors would place his hand over her mouth.

And some of those men had touched and pinched them with their rough hands. Even in places that weren't decent.

The shorter of the two men who are now standing above them talking about them had also come to the hotel. She recognizes the pungent smell he brought with him. Tobacco and pickled herring. And she remembers his raspy voice, a voice to give you the shivers. He had pinched them hard in the shoulders. And palpated their backs. He seemed to be trying to confirm if they really were grown together. He had placed his hands on their legs, too. Way above her knees. Anastasia doesn't know. Anastasia can't feel a thing down there, what happens to the legs.

Ice cold they were, those hands kneading down there. And the middle finger of that one hand oddly bent, straight up in the air.

"The one on the left is mean, she scratches and bites. The one on the right is gentle, she even says the rosary. Vandenbroucke told me so himself."

"Where did Vandenbroucke get them from?"

"I asked him the same thing myself, but I never did find out. Vandebroucke doesn't like to show his hand. Would you, in his place? He told me they've come straight from France and that one of the doctors told him that they were conjoined because of all the absinthe their parents drank. Absinthe is dangerous stuff, you know. In France it's been a real epidemic."

"I'll have our address sent on as soon as we're settled out there in Panama, I promise." That was the last thing Maman said to her. She was sitting on a cabin trunk in the hall. She was wearing a new coat with a fur collar and her face was white as chalk. Papa was pacing up and down grumbling because their taxi, a motorcar, was taking too long and he thought they wouldn't make it to the boat at Antwerp in time.

And when that motorcar finally got there, Maman had given each of them a little pinch in the cheek and said, "They'll be coming for you shortly. It's all arranged." Papa had not given them another look.

And now Joséphine is left wondering if it's still going to be possible to have that address sent on. For does Maman even know where they are? Does Maman know they're with two men who are talking about having them sleep in a wagon on a pile of rags or a bundle of straw? And who say that they're like a zebra that can't be tamed and is no good for eating?

"We'll have to think of a name — we should give it some thought."

"We'll just give them the name that's on their French papers."

"Isn't that risky, to just blatantly come out with it?"

"Not at all, they've got different papers now, and if anyone comes round asking questions, we'll just show them those. And foreign-sounding names, that looks good on the façade out front. Don't we always give ourselves exotic names too?"

“What’s that called, anyway, two bitches stuck together?”

“A derodyme. Vandenbroucke told me. He spelled it out for me on a piece of cardboard so that we can have it painted on the façade.”

“I’ve heard it can also happen to calves — that they grow stuck together.”

“I know. I saw it, once, at the Brussels fair, in August. In ‘02.”

“I never heard of a cow drinking absinthe, though.”

They were Siamese twins, Sister Marie-Françoise had told them that. And that Siamese twins are unique creations from the hand of God himself, she’d told them that, too. And that Siam is a word in the bible. They’d been sitting by the big picture window in St. Barbara’s when Sister Marie-Françoise told them that. Squirrels quick as eels darted through the hazel bushes and purple fruits dangled from the plum trees. It must have been August.