

Cardboard Boxes

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This is the story of a banal, adolescent love and of its all-consuming power. It took me by surprise in the early Seventies, in the unsightly provincial backwater P. Its object: He, the guy I've only recently been able to think of as an ordinary mortal, the guy who for years, in the deepest secrecy, I christened with every name the world has ever brought forth for all that is unattainable and fiercely cherished, that challenges and lacerates, that is beautiful and half-baked.

His true name was Z.

I met him for the first at the age of ten. I remember it exactly, because our meeting took place on a holiday organised by the mutual health insurance fund. Not that Z and I were incurably ill, or even just a bit tubercular. This was a trip on offer at a giveaway price to all the ten-year-old children of all those parents insured against 'general illness and mutilation'. Officially, because the fund wanted these children to grow up in 'prosperity and radiant health'. In reality, because the fund - the 'Christian Mutual' - was engaged in a bitter recruitment war with that other health insurance fund, the godless 'Socialist Mutual'. This latter was trying to recruit members by promising them not only lifelong cut-price wheelchairs, dentures and spectacle frames, but also health-promoting trips for their children for next to nothing. As a countermove, the Christian Mutual had done exactly the same.

It might have been the other way around of course. The Christians might have been gaining on the godless, and the latter might have had to adopt the Christian recruitment plan. The sources disagree on this. Whatever the case, the consequence remains the same: I met Z for the first time at the age of ten, not in P., but in the south of Belgium, my native land.

Clutching my mum's hand, I was taken to a meeting in the reception hall of our local Christian Mutual branch. A high-ceilinged, angular room, at that time recently built. At the front, a stage; at the back, a bar. No windows. On the ceiling, fluorescent lights flickered in Spartan fittings; the smell of disinfectant, mixed with traces of sweat, beer and cigarette ash rose from the tiled floor. The day before, they had been dancing and partying here, but only in moderation of course, and only in the best of Flemish-Christian traditions. Today there were rows of chairs, like in a church, most of them already occupied by other mums and their ten-year-old offspring. The air was filled with the electric hum of excited children's yells and parental shushing. My mum and I found a seat and waited for what was bound to follow, as inevitable as a law of nature. Silence fell when an

ample, puffy-cheeked man, the Mutual's spokesman, mounted the rostrum. After a theatrical pause, during which he seemed to be trying to gaze into the eyes of each and every child, he bade everyone a very warm welcome, especially the youngsters, in a resonant voice, and then proceeded, in the minutest detail, to sing the praises of our imminent stay in the Ardennes, and of the unsparing efforts the Mutual and its staff would be making to ensure our trip's success. He went on talking and praising until even he became aware of the coughing and shuffling of parents who had better things to do. He closed his exposition with a suitably weighty sentence, wished the ten-year-olds a salubrious stay in the healthiest region of western Europe, thanked all the parents present for their faith in the Christian Mutual, and then at long last, nodded to his female assistants to hand out the cardboard boxes.

Actually, these boxes were not yet boxes. Each child in the Christian Mutual's reception hall was given two sheets of thick, brown cardboard, as big and unwieldy as a half a door, imprinted with numerous folding-lines. One sheet also had black lines and dotted lines printed on one side, like those on the back of a magnified picture postcard. This printed sheet was the lid, and the other sheet the bottom, of what, after a little puzzling and pasting at home, would turn out to be a box the size of a suitcase.

And that's exactly what it was. My first suitcase. My first cardboard box.

2. The Ardennes

It was in the Ardennes that I finally got acquainted with Z. He of whom I would later write: "I never saw lips more red, never a more beautiful body."

I would write that picturing him as a young man. At that time however, in A*****, he bore a greater resemblance to my ten-year-old self. I even believe it's primarily this that attracted me to him. That he could have been my twin. He was just as ludicrously small as I was. His hair was almost as black as mine, albeit with less curls. I wasn't wearing my glasses back then, except in the classroom. He would never wear any. His lips were fuller than mine, even then, but my chin was sharper, and my eyes darker. For the rest, we were just like brothers. He was just as supple and sporty as I was in those days. We could easily have swapped clothes. As a matter of fact, the very first thing that struck me about him was an item of clothing.

On the evening of our first day, a boy laid his cardboard suitcase on the made-up bed next to mine. On our side of the dormitory, there was a long row of single beds; on the other, an equally long row of bunk beds. This boy unpacked his pyjamas and pulled them on. Then he shut his case, shoved it under the bed, turned back his blankets, and sat on the edge of his bed looking at me. I was still busy putting on my pyjamas. 'Hi,' he said. I answered the same. 'I know you,' he said. You live on the corner. In that shop. I have to go past it every day on my bike, when I go to school. Where do you go to school?"

As I was answering, I was staring at his pyjamas as if I'd been drugged. Mine were the old-fashioned sort. Good quality, broad-striped cotton, faded and felty after years of washing. A hand-me-down from brother to brother. His were deep red, with a round collar of blue elastic, echoed on the cuffs of the trouser legs and sleeves. Shining softly, of a supple man-made fibre that smelled as

only brand new material *can* smell. My first reflex was to think: "I want to touch that material." My second, to think: "I want pyjamas like that as well." All I did was to say the name of my school.

'Oh,' the boy replied. I'll be going there too in a couple of years. Perhaps we'll see each other. I nodded, and crept bashfully beneath my blankets. The lights were turned off, the ten-year-olds compelled to silence. The inevitable giggling and murmuring twittered in the darkness, followed by the equally inevitable shushing noises from the dorm leader. The beam of his torch flashed sternly through the dormitory darkness. Then silence fell and fell.

'Psst!' I heard to the left of me. 'What's your name?'

I whispered my name.

'What colour tie did you get?'

'Lilac.'

'Me too.'

'And you,' I asked. 'What's your name? It took a little while before I got an answer.'

'Z. My name is Z.'

'HEY! SHUSH! QUIET OVER THERE!'

And then the torchlight imposed our silence too.

Every other image of that first trip has meanwhile rotted away without a trace in the compost heap of my memory, because of a lack of context or significance. Every other image but one. I dredge it up from the mire of my mind. A little flat pebble, that's what it is. No hard, glittering diamond, no provocative shape that appeals to the imagination, no material that's precious because of its scarcity. Just a simple bearer of words and gestures that I'll never forget as long as I live. I skim it to you, now, reader, across the surface of this page and hope that it can bounce that far.

Picture: the Ardennes. Cartwheel-somersaults, in the meadow beside the forest path. Our day trip had been interrupted for a picnic. I sat with Z and a couple of his friends in the rough meadow grass that pricked our naked legs. We drank full-cream milk from cardboard cups and ate the lunches we had prepared and wrapped for ourselves that morning after breakfast. Doorsteps spread with real butter and filled with salami or gritty speculaas biscuits. A hard-boiled egg. And a wedge of cheese-spread of some unfamiliar make.

We had just finished eating and weren't quite sure how to kill the time until our hike resumed. 'Hey wait a minute,' said Z. 'Take a look at this.' And he wandered off a little way, bending over constantly to pick up pebbles and pinecones from the ankle-high grass of what was about to become his run up. When he felt he had gone far enough, he turned around with a serious look on his face, placed his feet precisely next to each other, pressed his arms stiffly to his side, took a deep breath, and then stood on his toes and raised his still-stretched arms a little as if he were getting ready for take off. He then tilted forward and began a powerful run up. As he reached our group, he swung into a cartwheel, ending with a quarter twist to land perfectly back on his feet for an immediate back flip. He almost fell when he landed, but he managed to keep his balance by

bending his knees and momentarily waving his outstretched arms. His equilibrium restored, he stood to attention like a soldier, upraised chin and everything. And then he relaxed.

‘Learned that in my gym club,’ he grinned at me. The United We Stand Gymnastic Club. Why don’t you join too? It’s only a street from your house. Every Tuesday, Friday and Sunday morning.’

I didn’t answer. The whole exercise, run up included, had taken less than five seconds. But that had been enough. In those five seconds, I had seen more than just a jump. It was as if I had stood in front of a mirror and witnessed a devastating spectacle in which I myself was featuring. Until that moment, I had found it only natural that Z and I were like peas in a pod. But looking in that mirror, I realised our resemblance was pure deception, a masquerade of chance, a *tape-à-l’oeil* of time. He would outgrow me, and I him. The only period in which we were truly each other’s equal had already ended. Here, in this Ardennes meadow, with this back flip, with which Z had sprung through an imaginary mirror and shattered it beyond repair.

3. Ma Lanoye

The third woman was my mum. When she was thirty-five, she was given a choice: a major operation or another child, her fifth.

‘And she chose the bloody operation,’ that’s what I always say when the subject is raised yet again at a family reunion. ‘And that operation, that abortion, was me. She should have chucked me out.’ Mum’s the only one who doesn’t find this funny. ‘We were overjoyed when you came,’ she says emphatically. And also: ‘Of course, your father and I hadn’t counted on having another child. And granted you were a late arrival. But each of our children got just as much love and care. And if any one of them was ever spoilt, it was you. So what are you complaining about?’ ‘A late arrival,’ I tease, ‘a late arrival! I’m *end of series*, the final lot in the clearance sale, the Lanoye family’s bargain basement.’ ‘You shouldn’t joke about such things,’ she says firmly. ‘Everybody was crazy about you. And it made me feel young again. There’s nothing as cute as a tiny baby,’ says she, who had to give me up to an incubator immediately after my birth because I was blue and scarcely alive. She who demanded me back, when even the incubator proved unable to warm me. She who laid me against her naked body under the blankets and brooded me to life as a chicken would her egg. ‘You were the prettiest baby of the five,’ she says. ‘Go on,’ I say, ‘what will you be telling us next? That I grew to be the ugliest of the five?’ ‘Well that’s true too,’ she continues, deadly serious. ‘But when you were small, you were a handsome little fellow. When I was in the maternity home, there was a heat wave; the sun was beating straight into my room. I lay you naked on a pillow in front of the window, rubbed you all over with suntan lotion, and you turned as brown as a little Italian. All the nurses came to admire your gleaming little botty.’ ‘That’s child abuse,’ I cry. ‘In the United States, people have been lynched for less than that.’ She continues unruffled. ‘When I brought you home, your father and the other four formed a guard of honour at the back door, beneath a cardboard welcome sign that the eldest two had painted: Welcome, Tom! It was still hanging on the attic wall years later; I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away. I’ve always been like that, a bit of a hamster, I never could throw anything out.’ ‘You see,’ I say, ‘I was right about that operation. You should have thrown me out.’ ‘Don’t say such things,’ she says. ‘You shouldn’t say such things.’

She is the firm hand. The helmswoman of the good ship Family. Her beacons: a sense of duty, a love of work, healthy food, and a clean set of underwear every day. Her creed is enshrined in clear

commandments, most of them handed down. 'Never cut off your nose to spite your face'. (My grandmother's all time favourite.) 'A place for everything, and everything in its place'. (She had learned that herself, in French, at a school in Dinant.) 'He who fritters away his money will have nothing left for a rainy day.' (As her father always said.)

Those who ask her help are never turned away. When people are ill, she even telephones them and, willing or not, has them jot down the names of three herbal medicines, as well as the twenty-five essential ingredients of a hearty nutritious broth, guaranteed to cure their ills. She opens her heart to every form of suffering. If she could, she'd make soup for the entire world tomorrow. But then that same world would have to tolerate a little lecture. 'Because it's just not good enough, world. You have to tidy your room. And stop leaving your jacket lying around. And have you got a clean pair of underpants on? What if you're knocked over, and taken to hospital, and the nurses have to take your clothes off? Bang goes your reputation, and mine with it. And what's all this at school? These reports of yours. Here, the Club of Rome, Amnesty International. It's a disgrace. Surely you don't expect me to sign this stuff and nonsense? How on earth do you ever expect to amount to anything now? If I wasn't so sure you could do much better, I'd simply accept it. But you, with your abilities. It keeps me awake at night, ask your father. Yesterday I even had to take a tablet for my blood pressure. Is this the way you thank your poor old mother? You upset me, world, you make me very unhappy. Off you go. No, no, just go. Mummy wants to be alone for a while. No, wait, fetch me a glass of water first. And a hanky or two. Do at least that for your mother. It may be the last thing she ever asks you.'

Some people try to gain control over existence, by staging a coup, by becoming the Dalai Lama or by studying quantum mechanics. My mother needs none of that. She does amateur dramatics and she cooks, and that's enough. She allows me a privileged observer's role in both vocations. Learning her lines for a play is a matter of organisation. She stands there ironing the laundry and I – as soon as I can read well enough – sit on a chair at the opposite end of the table with her script in my hands. Her part is underlined. I play all the other parts. The first few times, I have to prompt her occasionally, but after that it flows along and no matter how modest it may be, the spark of theatrical magic is struck in our living room. An experimental production for two actors and no audience. I throw myself into the texts unreservedly, with wild gestures and with high or low voices depending on the characters. And yet I still get nowhere close to my mother's spot-on intonation and mimicry. She is also playing the piece for all she's worth, but no matter how intense the emotions begin to run, she still keeps ironing. She even incorporates the ironing into her acting. For example, when I, the handsome hero, toss her a giddy compliment, she coos her answer graciously whilst letting her iron flutter across a clammy pillowcase. But when I'm unfaithful with her rival, a little later, she first sprinkles a little extra water on the pillow case, and then crushes her iron spitefully onto the hissing cotton and, wreathed in clouds of steam, engulfs me in a stream of abuse. To add emphasis to her final insult, she even slams her iron down from a great height onto its metal rack. And when that happens, I can count myself lucky that stage heroines never duel, otherwise she'd have cut me down with a thrust of her red-hot weapon.

When the piece is finally performed at the municipal theatre, my feelings are mixed. I am proud of my mother and of my secret part in her achievement. But the piece is somehow alien. Who are all those strange people on stage with her? Their lines sound vaguely familiar. But I was better in their roles. And I miss the iron. The worst thing of all is that I have to sit there powerlessly in the dark, in the middle of a silent audience, and watch my mother let herself be kissed by the hero. Okay, he only kisses her cheek. But he can thank his lucky stars that duelling has gone right out of fashion. Otherwise I'd run him through with my father's largest butcher's knife.

My contribution to her culinary craft is initially more limited. When I can scarcely walk, I'm already allowed to perch myself on the little table next to her stove, in a kitchen barely five times the size of her nylon apron. In her eternal urge to educate, she never lets a single ingredient of her recipes go unnamed. I have to repeat those names until I can pronounce them properly. Sugar. Flour. Salt. The giving of names is creation's finishing touch. Butter. Cinnamon. Saffron. As a reward, she always dips the tip of her ring finger into the newly christened raw ingredient and stamps it onto my stuck-out tongue. Eyes closed, I am initiated into the mysteries of the substance and its myriad flavours. Lemon. Nutmeg. Gooley yeast for her famous waffle batter. As soon as I can read, my complicity is increased. Still perched on the little table, I read aloud from her handwritten cookbooks the recipes she has chosen today to satisfy the family appetite. She slices, she peels, she chops, she stirs pots and slides lids over sizzling delicacies. Finally, she takes her wooden spoon, stirs it through the sauce, tastes it and extends it to me like a peace pipe. 'Mmmm,' we nod to each other. 'Mmmm.' 'Maybe just a little more salt?' she asks me, purely for the sake of form. 'Well, just a little then,' I echo, also for the sake of form. 'You do it,' she says, handing me the Cologne-ware salt pot. With my thumb and index finger, I take a tiny pinch and sprinkle it over her food, more as a finishing touch than to add to the taste. She nods again. And that's how she initiated me into her culinary alchemy: the use of a four-ring gas stove to transmute base vegetables and chunks of raw meat into noble dishes, the golden elixir of a happy existence.

Picture: Our kitchen is on fire. Not so very unusual. In my memory our kitchen is on fire practically every day of my youth. Every time my mother makes 'fillet of beef flambé', the kitchen ventilator invariably goes up like a torch. A newspaper, spread on my little table to catch the spatters of grease, catches fire and snows the inside of the house with delicate inky flakes. The flame jumps to a cooking pan, and then to another and another until the entire stove looks more like an active volcano... The scenarios are infinite.

This time, however, it is a serious fire. I am twelve years old. The chip-pan has stayed on the heat too long and bubbled over. My father, who always takes a little nap after his evening meal, gets up from his armchair and wanders, still groggy with sleep, to the workroom, in the extension at the back of the house where the kitchen also is. Quick as a flash, he's back in the living room, wide-awake. 'The kitchen's on fire!' he yells. 'What a surprise,' we yawn. 'Toss a bucket of water on it, like you did yesterday.' 'But it's the chip-pan!' he shouts, 'I forgot to take the chip-pan off! The whole place is going up in flames!' We rush to the kitchen in panic. Black clouds and the smell of burning paint billow out to greet us. On the stove, the crackling, smoking chip-pan. Flames are licking up to the ceiling. We all start shouting at each other. I feel the first tears of fear welling into my eyes. My father wets a floor cloth and throws it onto the chip-pan. But the floor cloth isn't big enough, and it falls inside the pan. The water in the cloth makes the boiling oil begin to crackle and spit even harder. I hear my mother screaming, she pushes us out of the kitchen, everyone's confused. The ceiling is on fire. We hear the windows crack in the heat. I rush outside, crying. I hammer on the door of the baker's across the street, but nobody answers. 'The fire brigade,' I sob. 'Somebody has to call the fire brigade.' I run back home.

Just as I am about to enter, there she is: my mother, with the burning chip-pan in her hands. The emotions that have overcome me are so intense that it all seems to be taking place in slow motion. 'Out of the way!' she yells, excruciatingly slowly. Lazy but spiteful flames attack her face. Burning droplets spatter slowly in all directions. Oh no! She still has her nylon apron on. She brushes past me. It takes an hour. I see terrible wounds on her arms. Even the oven cloths she's using to hold the pan have started smouldering. Her teeth are clenched together.

Outside, she empties the chip-fat into the street like a bucket of water. She throws the chip-pan after it, the oven cloths too. 'So, that's that,' she says. 'You didn't think I'd let our house burn down because of a stupid chip-pan?' We stand there staring at her. Her face is completely burned. She has no eyelashes or eyebrows anymore. Half of the hair on her head has gone. Holes have been scorched in her apron. Thank God that didn't catch! She looks down at her hands. 'Well,' she says with unnatural calm. 'We'd better call the fire brigade. And an ambulance. You never know.' A couple of hours later, in the hospital, her face is already so swollen she can't see a thing. It will stay like that for the coming week. They are smearing her with a white ointment. Her eyes have been damaged, but not irreparably. They water constantly. She is in a lot of pain.

A few days after the fire, I am allowed to visit her. I am supposed to make my solemn Communion a fortnight later. She says postponement is out of the question. I must and shall receive the sacrament of Holy Communion in two weeks' time. She is insisting on that. And so she has demanded that I meanwhile come and show her my communion suit, that way we can't trick her by secretly postponing it.

She is lying in a half-darkened room. When I see her, I can't hold back my tears. A chalky-white, still swollen head. Moisture seeping from the creases where her eyes should be. Clumps of straggly hair. Her bandaged hands resting on the sheets. Everything white. Everything dead. 'Is it you?' she asks. 'Let me have a look at you.' Sobbing, I do a little twirl in front of her bed like a fashion model. She can't see a thing, I'm sure of it. 'You mustn't cry', she says. 'I'll be better by the time you make your communion, I promise.' As if that was the reason I was crying. 'Come over here and sit beside your mum for a while,' she says. 'Here on the bed.' Silence. 'Do you miss me?' 'Yes,' I say. Silence. 'And you won't take advantage of my absence to fool around at school? That would upset me.' 'No,' I say. Silence.

Then she drops her voice, as if she doesn't want the nurses outside in the corridor to hear what she's saying. 'You see,' she whispers, 'I was right.' 'What do you mean?' I ask. 'Clean underwear every day,' she whispers, 'you never know what might happen.'

4. Pit Germaine

The fourth woman, the fourth generation: my mother's oldest sister, Germaine. Childless. Christened *Pit Germaine* by my eldest brother, her godson. Pit after *petemoei*, godmother in dialect Dutch.

A handsome, lively woman, my Pit Germaine.

She is the inventor of *le racontage automatique*, a registry of associations, comprising thousands of lives recorded nowhere but in her skimming parlando. A kaleidoscope of tragedies and trivialities from which she moulds a literature doomed to oblivion the moment she finally falls silent. But until that moment, she sings a saga of the petty lives that revolve around and are part of hers. This woman is the origin of all literature: everything she sees and hears she mythologises, and from all these myths she paints her unparalleled fresco. Or as my father often put it: she keeps on telling her stories, even in her sleep. *La chroniqueuse magnifique*.

The people in her stories are never referred to by name alone. As in the oldest of traditions, they are given epithets and honorary titles, designed to colour and clarify the story. John Van Den Hert, of Café Metropole on the corner of Market Square. Jeanne who married the Spiessens' boy, the son of Julien from the sweetshop in Driegaaen. Spieke, who has only got one arm because the other was amputated during the First World War.

She is sitting at the table, opposite my mum, both of them darning socks. Pit Germaine is telling a story. My mum nods, silent except for an occasional little question, to which Pit Germaine immediately responds so thoroughly that her whole story takes off on an entirely different course. 'But no, Josée, it was Lies, the wife of Pol Petrol from that clothes shop on Knaptand Street. I bumped into her yesterday, and you know what she said: Guess who's gone and died? Charel, Tavie's boy, you know Tavie, she was married to that Polish refugee from the housing estate, the one who died of a carbuncle in his nose because that English penicillin wasn't available back then.' I too am sitting at that table. My eyes are reading a comic strip, with my mouth automatically mumbling the onomatopoeias that bring the drawings to life. Vrooom! (A sports car speeds away.) Eeek! (Aunt Sidonia sees a mouse.) Kaboom! (Professor Barabas conducts an experiment.) But my ears are glued to my Pit Germaine. Both stories, the one I'm reading and the one I'm hearing, start to blend. An epic mosaic to the power two.

Screeech! (A car brakes.) 'And then Leen, the daughter of Smetjes, who sells horsemeat in the market, she says to Dries, Stan from the Heethof's boy: You've got to be joking!' Ratatatatat! (Machine gun or typewriter.) 'And of course she knew what she was talking about, poor thing. Her father was a drinker too, Tjen - Maria Van den Durpel from Stekene's husband. He'd go off on one every week, smash the whole place up, and her with it. He broke her nose. And once when the fair was in town, he broke both her arms.' Craaack! (Jethro rips a door from its hinges.) 'So she says: What! Me with one of those morons! You've got to be joking, I'd rather die first. And he says: that's rich, coming from somebody from Sint Niklaas, *Sint Niklaas, where all the men have their brains in their ass*, if you'll excuse my language.' Flash! (The professor's teletime machine).

Picture: I'm no older than four and I've just had a bath. My father wraps me in a towel, throws me over his shoulder and carries me into the living room like a little Egyptian mummy. 'Pigs for sale!' he shouts as he slaps me on the bottom, 'delicious pigs for sale!' Always that same old joke, a joke guaranteed set the four generations of women laughing. They are already waiting at the table, which is now covered with toiletries. Together they unwrap the mummy and make believe they are surprised to find me inside it instead of a pig. And then, while four pairs of hands are drying, combing, talking and dressing me, it's showtime! Because the nuns at my nursery school have taught me to sing: '*Oh, I went with Katie to the butter mart, and she could make whatever she chose, whatever she chose...*' with appropriate little dances and gestures for every character. '*Pay me first, pay me first, said the publican. Pay me first, pay me first, said the publican,*' holding up my right hand and rubbing together my thumb and index finger. '*Gonna get you, gonna get you, said the wicked witch. Gonna get you, gonna get you, said the wicked witch,*' with voice and face distorted as I claw at imaginary children. '*In the church, in the church, said the pious priest. In the church, in the church, said the pious priest,*' closing my eyes devoutly and folding my hands as if in prayer. The four generations are ecstatic. And my greatest hit is yet to come. The baroness. I am wearing my white cotton vest, and nothing else. With one hand, I raise the hem to reveal my quivering little willy; while in the other, with my little finger extended, I hold an imaginary cup of tea. And like this I curtsy to my four-member audience while singing: '*I'm refined, I'm refined, said the baroness. I'm refined, I'm refined, said the baroness.*' I'm rewarded with a thunderous applause. I have to repeat my act again and again. '*I'm refined, I'm refined, said the baroness.*'

My sister looks on, both proud and jealous. Proud, because it's she who takes me on her kick scooter to the school where I learnt it. Jealous, because she has to share me with the other three. My mother sings along, waving her finger in the air and correcting me if I lose the beat or sing out of tune. Wieske smiles conspiratorially, as if she and I are alone, as if I am playing the lead in a film that only she and I are watching. And my Pit Germaine, she's stopped telling stories. She watches in silence, with a warm and loving smile and a look that doesn't miss a thing. She is recording. The only reason important enough to keep her quiet: the registration of new material. She assimilates images, translated into suitable words, which are worthy of being kept for posterity. From now on, I'm no longer simply Tom. I'm: 'Tom, my sister's youngest, who stood there bare-bottomed on the table and sang about the baroness.'

But that's not enough. When I've finished singing, she, who had only been a human camera and tape recorder, suddenly forays into reality. 'What's this?' she asks me startled, pointing to a hard boiled egg she has taken from a dish of food without me noticing and laid behind me on the table. 'An egg,' I answer truthfully. 'You laid it,' she says. 'I saw you. You were standing there singing and out it plopped, lucky it didn't break.' I'm stunned. Aargh! Heavens! Gulp! I lay eggs! And without even knowing it! I stare at my panel of witnesses in bewilderment. Yes, they say with a grinning nod, we saw it, all four of us. The euphoria of my successful performance gives way to panic. I don't want to be the little boy who lays eggs! And then I make the move they've all been waiting for, the one they know I'm bound to make. A reflex. The hand in which I had been holding the imaginary cup of tea moves slowly down towards my bottom, determined to find out if there's another egg there waiting to be laid. Before it gets there, my Pit Germaine has already burst out laughing. 'He believes it,' she chuckles, stroking my head. 'My little darling believes he has laid an egg. That reminds me of Fie Trappeniers from Café De Glattingen Dorpel, who thought her bottle of gin had gotten into her wicker basket on the hat stand all by itself...' and so on and so forth. From that day on, I am never called Tom in her oral *roman-fleuve*. I'm: 'Tom, my youngest sister's youngest, who felt between his legs to see if he could lay an egg, the little darling.'

Picture to the power two: my Pit Germaine's head, swollen by cortisone, half buried in the pillows of a hospital bed. She is eighty-two, and already seven years a widow after five years of marriage. She is sweating; she is suffering, she groans, her side burned by radiotherapy. She doesn't touch the fruit my mother made me bring; the medicines have mangled her insides so badly that all she can manage is a little white bread and tepid water. She still has her hair, but it isn't permed. A sign that the end is near.

She still tells her stories, no matter what the effort. The head nurse is a sister of Madame De Brouwer from the Breestraat, and so on. The surgeon is about to get married to a niece of Pé Van Dessel, and so forth. And then, whispering, after she's beckoned me to lean closer: 'See that woman over there in the next bed? Nothing they can do for her. And she's got four children, the poor soul. The head nurse told me so and she's a sister of Madame De Brouwer from the Breestraat. Not yet fifty. Octaaf the knife-grinder's granddaughter. Cancer. It doesn't bear thinking about.' And so on. And so forth.

She dies on the fourth of January.

My mother: 'I feel like I've lost my mother for the second time.' And: 'She waited, until the holidays were over. So she wouldn't spoil things for us. On New Year's Eve she said: I don't feel like eating anymore, I don't want to drink anymore. And then she just stopped talking. Three days later, she was dead.' Me: 'Who told you that?' My mother: 'The head nurse. Madame De Brouwer from the Breestraat's sister.'

And so on. And so forth.

5. Mussolini

In our senior year we got Dutch from Mussolini. Mussolini taught Dutch to all the seniors. It was his only subject, no religious education, no aesthetics. He was a school monument. A short, stocky man of almost sixty. Despite his nickname, he wasn't at all aggressive or authoritarian. He never raised his voice, spoke without gesticulating and smoked the little cigarillos he produced from his battered cigarillo case with sparing puffs. The only really Roman thing about him was his massive head, but even the severity of that was completely neutralised by his melancholy eyes.

He was one of our greatest living poets, with as many poems to his name as Guido Gezelle. He also wrote the all the major speeches and new song texts for the IJzer Pilgrimage, an annual gathering of Flemish Nationalists in the west of the country. The lion's share of the tens of thousands of pilgrims were amiable middle-class people, with children called Wouter or Nele. Their greatest ambition was to live in a converted farmhouse called "Huize Isengrim" or "Den Blauwvoet", that latter after the fulmar petrel, the bird that symbolised the Flemish people's struggle for emancipation. They were pacifistic, easily offended, and they liked to sing. When the Flemish past was called glorious, they got a lump in their throat. When it was said to be a scandal, because of the centuries-long suppression of the Flemish people, they were equally moved to tears.

To their children, they passed on the stories they themselves had been told by their parents. That the queen of France was paying a visit to the prosperous city of Bruges, and that she spied the richly adorned matrons from her horse and cried: 'Parbleu! I thought I was the queen, but here I see a couple of hundred!' And that a motley little army of Flemish peasants and weavers, butchers and clog makers defeated the might of the French army in 1302, with the help of God and the mud and the driving rain, not to forget the force of gravity, which caused the French knights, with their armour and their gilded spurs and the whole caboodle, to come crashing down from their stumbling horses, after they had first ridden down their own foot soldiers out of arrogant pride, the bastards. And that the French, not long after that, had taken their revenge and again subjected the Flemings. And that after the Frogs, a whole succession of other foreigners had come to our Flanders boss us around, from Spaniards to Austrians to Englishmen to Dutchmen to Germans, and so on, up to and including the Belgian State. The only ones missing in the series were the goddamned Eskimos and Zulus! And that they all did the same, plundering and robbing and murdering, like the Vikings had done before them. And that our people learned to survive by shutting up and working, and minding their own business. And that because of that our fair Flanders had only earned itself a single nickname, more's the pity. The goddamned doormat of Europe! And that the first poisonous gas in the history of warfare was tried out here in our beloved Flanders, during the World War One, *La Grande Guerre*, in the Ypres salient, so that even today there's still a type of mustard gas called Yperite. And that the Flemish soldiers in that same war were simple, homespun country boys, who couldn't understand their officers' orders, because those officers all spoke French. War was already barbaric, senseless and shameful, but now on top of that Flemish lads were being slaughtered simply because they misunderstood their orders. When *Attaquez!* was shouted, they stayed where they were; and when *Sauvez-vous!* was yelled, they stormed forward and were mown down like so many ears of corn, and surely that was twice as barbaric, senseless and shameful? And if anyone dared to protest, he was stood against a wall and shot by his own army, and what do you think about that, some sort of joke perhaps? And that there weren't enough gasmasks for the common soldier,

so if there was a gas alarm - which the soldiers could see from the canaries, rats and mice they kept in a cage on the ground, because gas is heavier than air, and when those little buggers begin to squeak and lie on their backs then that was a damned good sign - well, when that happened those who had no gasmasks pissed on their handkerchiefs and tied them over their faces, and they did that in the mines too and it was better than nothing. But that gasmasks or no, thousands and thousands of our lads just lay on their backs in the trenches, next to the rats and canaries, and threw their guts up, and that their skin became covered in blisters, even after they were already dead. And that the whole of North-west Flanders was bombed to rubble, by mortars from the ground and by zeppelins and biplanes from the air, until there was hardly a stone left standing. That's the way it was, I'm telling you. And that famine reigned, and typhoid and tuberculosis, and scurvy among the children and hate amongst the rest. And that on this dung heap, some forgotten English soldier wrote the most beautiful poem in English literature, about poppies in *Flanders Fields*, about wishy-washy flowers that only bloom for a single day, thank you very much, and he wrote about that just before he went up the spout himself, that lad, together with thousands of other simple, homespun Englishmen who had also only come to the salient to die like dogs, together with all the other simple, homespun lads from the Commonwealth: Indians and Scots and Canadians and a whole variety of darkies, not to mention the French and not to forget the Germans, because after all they're people too, just like you and me, aren't they now? And that in Ypres, even today, *The Last Post* is sounded on a couple of bugles for the allied dead every evening, under a stone arch as high as a basilica, in which the names of the tens of thousands of victims are carved, and that the hairs on your arms stand on end when you hear that sound, and that you have to turn away your head because you are ashamed to be alive, and I'm telling you: All those who can keep a dry eye, standing there under that arch with all those names, listening to those two bugles, they'd do better to boil their hearts and throw them in pieces to the dogs, that way at least they'd be of use to somebody. And that there were also Flemish soldiers at the front who were not simple, homespun country boys, but young Flemish intellectuals with a goatee and a pince-nez and a drinking problem and everything, and that they came together in the lulls between offensives and said to each other: 'Whatever the case, it can't go on like this.' And that they began to spread leaflets condemning the injustice, and that they were suspected by the army high command and hunted down as spies and collaborators and shot if they were caught. And that because of this new injustice the movement became even bigger, and that somebody designed a cross for the graves of his fallen comrades, a cross with a fulmar petrel and a Christian motto. And that everyone found that good and just, and that those poor miserable beggars even found it a source of consolation as they lay there in the mud under barrage, thinking about their sweethearts and their mothers, and about butter-rolls on Sunday mornings, and about pig's trotters with cauliflower in white sauce and mashed potatoes in the evenings, instead of always cabbage soup and hardtack every day. But that immediately after the war, a couple of bastards from the Belgian army drove a bulldozer to a Flemish cemetery and simply - smash! - flattened five hundred of those fulmar petrel crosses and crushed them, headstone and all, into gravel to harden a railway track, and that photos were even made of that section of the railway, photos that appeared in the paper, *The Railway of Shame*. And that the good little Flemings now finally lost their tempers, and boy did they lose their tempers, they were so pissed off that they held collections all over Flanders, and with that money they constructed a tower in the form of that cross - but much bigger, of course - and that they said: 'There, let them come with their bulldozer now, that'll make them think twice.' But that after the Second World War, the good little Flemings were the dupe again. How is it possible? you ask, but that's how it was. Some of them had thought they had a better chance of getting satisfaction from Hitler and his racial laws than they did from the Belgian state, and it would take until the end of the war before it dawned on them that they had been buggered about by the Hun even more than they had been by Brussels before, but meanwhile they had burned their fingers really badly and were up to their ears in shit, and a good little Fleming is so pig-headed that he'll never ever admit that.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, immediately after that war, the second that is, that fulmar petrel tower was dynamited one fine night, not to make a railway, no, not at all, simply for the hell of it - boom! - blown to bits, and everyone knew perfectly well who had done it, but nobody could prove it, and there wasn't even an official Belgian investigation, oh no, the ones who had to carry out the investigation were the ones who had blown it up. And that the good little Flemings had then said: 'We are done with being so good! We won't take this sort of shit anymore!' And that they then began collecting like crazy again and had built a new tower, much higher than the first, and that they began to hold protest meetings and to demonstrate and to go on strike, whenever and wherever they could, until they'd got what they wanted, plus a constitution in their own language, plus education in their own language, plus an army where the orders were no longer given in French, plus ministers who had to be bilingual, plus their own laws and their own government and perhaps maybe someday, their own parliament, and so on and so forth.

Those were the stories those amiable middle-class pilgrims told to their children called Pieter or Machteld. And they added that each of those two World Wars had provided its own never-to-be-forgotten lesson for ever Fleming. One: *No More War, whatever happens*. Two: *Stand Ready For The Flemish Struggle*. They believed in the former devoutly, and so did their children called Albrecht or Goedele. And they believed in the latter even more devoutly, and so did their children, even when the Flemish Struggle had long since been striven. Because Flanders had now become independent and look, before you could say 'Long Live Flanders' it had become bloated with prosperity and swollen with self-importance, and it had been raped by uncontrolled urbanisation and delivered up to cement barons and covered with buildings, with lots of wheeling and dealing and under-the-carpet-sweeping, so in other words, still completely *à la Belge tiens*, and it was crammed with motorways and factories and illicit rubbish dumps and poxy fermette-style cottages called 'Huize Canteclaer' (Chanticleer House), or 'Het Ros Beiaard' (The Battle Charger Bayard). And whereas the meadow, which was the assembly point for the Pilgrimage, had previously been packed with good little Flemings every year, it was now black with swaggerers and parvenus who jostled around stepping on each other's toes and biting their nails until the whole affair was finally over and they could jump in their new Mercedes with the whole family and to drive to some new restaurant to sample its new gastronomic menu: steamed fillets of sole on a bed of mange-tout, and tenderloin with puréed Brussels sprouts and oyster mushrooms with grape pips. And the only time they still protested was if the snails were referred to as *escargots*. They had been underdogs so long they had become stuck in the role, and so to help themselves believe in this masquerade they all gathered once a year to flaunt their bombastic words and worn-out banners. And their lads and their lasses called Gerolf and Godelieve, leapt to the front of the platform and evoked, in wooden ballets, the Battle of the Golden Spurs (seven hundred years ago), the Peasants' War (two hundred years ago) and *La Grande Guerre* (seventy-five years ago), and everyone sang the Flemish National Anthem with tears in their eyes, and also those of other peoples, claimed to be our blood brothers, the Dutch and the South African Boers. Yes, even the latter. Okay, it was a little problematic, given all the problems down there with the blacks, but after all there had been a lot of changes recently, and besides: what can we Flemings do about it? And anyway, if the whites weren't there, they'd be at each other's throats in the blink of an eye, there'd be civil war, and is that so much better? And so on, and so forth.

Mussolini wrote the song texts for this proud pilgrimage. But the elegiac tone of his poetry, and the simplicity that so graced his person were both completely lacking there. They were sloganesque hymns with a wealth of capital letters and a booming, imperative rhythm. They thundered of their own accord and, moreover, they were roared into echoing microphones by speakers who bellowed as if electric amplifiers had yet to be invented. It brought Mussolini little money and much esteem. He was one of the Movement's figureheads.

At school, he commanded even more respect by never referring in any way to his awe-inspiring status. He'd stroll into our classroom as if he were entering a living room, greet us with a sober nod of the head, and begin to talk about literature in apologetic tones. Rather than overwhelm us with arguments and data, he'd let us form our own opinion of a text. He'd simply delve some volume of poetry from his overflowing briefcase and read it aloud. He had been dealt an ugly voice by nature. High, rasping and faltering. He even lisped a little, and was more inclined to speak too softly than too loudly. Everything was stacked against him enthraling his audience, but within a minute we were all completely spellbound. For the first time, a text was more than simply a succession of words. It was a conflagration that sucked you in. And it scorched you wondrously. Rasping, faltering or lisping, that was all beside the point. This little man, this elderly man in a black suit, with his Marlon-Brando-of-the-Waasland voice, with his cigarillos and his speech impediment, this Demosthenes of Flemish Literature was a disarming envoy. He embodied the desire to capture the world so perfectly in words that it transcended itself. Incarnation and the origin of all writing.

6. Masturbo

In the evening, in bed, it was a ritual: a glorious voyage of discovery to my mind's most mysterious waterfalls. In the daytime it was a sport. I could do it in any position and at any moment. And that's exactly what I did. With a well-nigh clinical urge to experiment, I sounded out the limits of the orgasm.

Quantity: My day's record was eight orgasms; my week's record, thirty-four. At the end of this, my tulip hung exhausted, as if it had wilted. Moreover, it burned as if I'd scorched it. Taking hold of it with just two fingers to take a leak was enough to bring tears to my eyes. The bags that had formed under those selfsame eyes during the course of the week, caused my mother so much concern that she brewed up an extra-nourishing oxtail and marrowbone broth and also added horse steak with spinach and tomato to the menu, followed by cinnamon rice pudding with brown sugar. This only served to heighten my potency. Immediately after I'd achieved the record, the pain was so intense I didn't even dare to sit on my bicycle saddle. So I rode to school and back again standing on the pedals - that's *à la danseuse* in cycling terms. And even then I groaned as I pushed the pedals, because, in accordance with the reigning fashion, the waist and the crotch of my jeans were moulded to me like a second skin. The legs, on the other hand, were so wide you had to bunch them up at the ankles with elastic bands to stop them flapping into the bicycle chain, because this - especially *à la danseuse* - could lead to you taking the most painful fall you could ever take with a bike: you smacked down onto the crossbar with open legs and then flew over the handlebars. The day after I achieved my record I was especially afraid of the former. So first I scrunched my baggy trouser legs together into the top of my socks. I then stretched an elastic band around each ankle to secure it and rode to school bow legged. Anyone who saw me cycling must have almost rubbed his eyes out.

Quality: On Sundays, when the butcher's shop was closed and everyone had left the house, I could devote myself to building up the mega-orgasm. You slowly massage your velvety villain, preferably with a little music in the background, until the tension mounts and mounts. But just before ejaculation, you loosen your grip and focus your thoughts intently on run-over birds, on blood sausage frying with onions, or on the gunge left in the filter over the plug hole after the washing-up water has drained away. The mood is instantly shattered, the orgasm slips away. You wait about ten seconds, and then you start again from the very beginning. After about five times, your whole lower

abdomen is on fire. But don't give in! Carry on! When the sobering effect of the flattened birds begins to lose its power, you simply replace them with skinned rabbits. Persevere! You'll see. The moments when you have to loosen your grip to be able to endure the pleasure come quicker and quicker. Eventually, you don't even need to wank. Just tensing your buttock muscles or pressing your thighs together is enough to make the orgasmic contractions begin to resurface. Just as it's also enough to relax your muscles again to achieve yet another delay. You also repeat this a number of times, until the ordeal becomes truly unbearable. And then you finally open yourself up to the grand finale. You consent to it, just as a ruler would consent to the unveiling of a statue in his honour. A simple tensing of every muscle in your body suffices. AAAAaaaaagggghh! Banzaaaaiiii! But don't forget to bite on a piece of wood instead of screaming, or at least to shut the windows before you start. I forgot to do that the first time and within moments white-faced neighbours were ringing at the doorbell. Had somebody caught his hand in the mincing machine? And should they call an ambulance?

Speed: After a week of abstinence, I took the thermometer of my libido in my right hand and a stopwatch in my left. I pressed the button and started sprinting like crazy. I crossed the line in one minute, two seconds and six tenths. Just in time. I was starting to get cramp in my arm. And besides, those six tenths shouldn't really count. You can't focus on having an orgasm when you're also thinking about pressing a stopwatch. For that sort of trial, you need an impartial umpire.

Variety: A) *Position:* Standing; walking; balancing on one leg; doing the splits; lotus position; lying upside down on the stairs.

 B) *In the bath.* B1: In cold water - almost impossible. B2: In hot water - it hurts. B3: Whether hot or cold, you always splash some water over the side and have to mop it up afterwards.

 C) *In front of the mirror.* Hard not to burst out laughing. That such an absurd exercise can generate such enormous bliss.

 D) *Technical.* D1) You can enjoy a wealth of variations by manipulating the foreskin, that supple petal around your tulip: in a ring formed by your thumb and index finger (sophisticated); in a clenched fist (macho); with two fists simultaneously (for show-offs). D2) The variations are no less numerous without the foreskin, in other words, directly on the pistil of the tulip: a wet'n (lubricated with saliva); a dry'n (with talcum powder); a clean'n (with shampoo). Employ these techniques sparingly to avoid the formation of calluses.

 E) *Perverse.* Collect your ejaculate in the palm of your left hand, stir it with your right index finger, smell it, taste it, turn up your nose. Hold it under the tap; watch how it disappears into the whirlpool above the glimmering mouth of the waste pipe.

Amusement: Staying in your room on the first floor until around dinner time, supposedly to study. Building up the tension with your right hand. Waiting until your sister calls your name impatiently from the bottom of the stairs, and then calling back truthfully: I'm coming!

Dangerous: Soaping the neck of a milk bottle, but still getting stuck. Never smash it! Just imagine strolling into a hospital with a bottle on your cock and your cock will come free of its own accord: either from laughing, or because of the panic.

Dirty: Taking two slices of calf's liver from the cold-storage room when nobody is home. Waiting until they reach room temperature, then laying them on top of each other and raping them. Then

afterwards, wondering whether to rinse them off and put them back, so they can still be sold. Finally deciding that's not really on. Rinsing them, frying them and eating them.

7. Night of Love I (the dialogue)

... The only two high points: the free hours in the afternoon and the free hours in the evening. In the afternoon, we occupied the beach. In the evening, we combed the town, off in search of drink, adventure and vice. The first was easy to find, in the bustling tourist bars we all preferred to avoid, because we wanted to get to know the Greek underworld in all its glory.

After a three-hour search, we found a virtually bankrupt discotheque on the outskirts of town, which seemed louche enough to appeal to our collective imagination. The proprietor welcomed us with open arms, and drummed up all his nephews on the telephone to help give the place a less deserted look. We were feted like an army that has just liberated a beleaguered city. We were allowed to drink our fill at knockdown prices, were served up more dried fish and olives than we could possibly manage and were invited to choose our own music from the disco's four LPs and five cassettes, the one half of which were full of monotonous, antiquated disco tunes, to which we danced, the other half with equally monotonous sirtaki, which sent the boss and his nephews into a frenzy. They danced with each other. Well... I say danced: one held a hanky in his fist, while another held onto it, sank painfully to a crouch, and turned puffing and panting circles in time to the music. If dancing is some sort of mating ritual, it was immediately apparent why there are never any women to be seen in any Greek discotheques. That being the case here too, the nephews tried to get us involved in their crane-like ballet. Only Z obliged. He would do, of course. Never too lazy to play the sports freak. At such moments, I could have strangled him. He grasped the handkerchief, squatted on his heels, and after a couple of attempts was turning smoother, more fluent circles than his predecessor. The nephews threw their arms in the air, laughing, the boss smashed his three remaining plates. Z was slapped on the shoulders, pinched wonderingly in the biceps and patted on the belly muscles. In two words of English and three of German, they asked him the question he had been hoping they'd ask: Was he perhaps an athlete, *ein Gymnast*? To show them they had guessed correctly, Z did a handstand and a backflip. The Greeks whistled and applauded. I couldn't take anymore. I deliberately knocked over my glass of retsina, it smashed on the dance floor, and I fled outside.

As I had hoped, Z rushed our after me. I was standing just around the corner, leaning against the wall melodramatically, pretending I wasn't waiting for him. He came and stood in front of me. It was the evening of the first night we would spend together. 'What is the matter?' he asked. 'I don't know,' I said, 'I don't feel so good.' 'Do you feel sick?' he asked. Not anymore, I thought, but I said: 'No, no, a bit of a headache, that's all, drunk too much, but it's over now.' He looked at me, a little concerned. That did me a power of good. 'Shall we go to the hotel?' he asked. Don't reply too quickly, I thought, don't show any emotions, nothing. And I said: 'Maybe that's not such a bad idea.'

Our single beds stood with their heads against the wall, separated by a little table with a bedside lamp. The lamp cast an apathetic glow on the garish wallpaper. The whole hotel smelled of lavatory cleaner. Z went off to brush his teeth in the bathroom. And then I went. When I returned, Z had only just begun to get undressed. He was standing with his back to me, and without sitting down on his bed, he pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside. The anaemic light lit up his golden back. I could see the brushstroke of his backbone. The rippling of his shoulder blades took my breath away. I

heard the click as he unbuckled his belt, followed by the angry rasp of a zip being opened. He stepped out of his jeans, folded them loosely and threw them on top of his shirt. He was wearing high-waisted white cotton briefs, which were stretched so tightly across his buttocks that they were semi-transparent. Inadvertently enticing. Virile lingerie. He hooked his thumbs under the broad, elastic waistband and peeled them downwards. The bedside lamp continued to light him up unmercifully. You could see the line where his blue swimming trunks had been when he was sunbathing. By this time, I was absolutely certain I wouldn't be sleeping a wink that night.

Stark naked now, he bent over to take his pyjamas from the leatherette case, which was standing open on a chair in front of him. First he pulled on the top of his pyjamas, a yellow ochre, lightweight sweater. And only afterwards the trousers, dark brown, but of the same soft, stretchy material. He then shut the case and dived between the sheets.

I suddenly realised I had simply been standing there, staring at him, and turned away embarrassed, just in time to avoid his gaze. I also started to get undressed. Whether I wanted to or not, I had to do get undressed exactly the same way he had done. Following his example, I stood with my back to him, without sitting down. Shirt, jeans, underpants. I could feel his gaze burning into my naked skin. I felt more imperfect and more excited than I had ever done before. My hands were trembling so much I had difficulty opening the locks of my case. My pyjamas were at the top, the same material as Z's, but orange and brown. First I pulled the jacket on. And only when I had also pulled the trousers on, did I turn around, bending over deeply, in the hope of camouflaging my passion's wigwam. And that was how I slid between the sheets and was finally able to switch off that blasted lamp. Since we had arrived in the room, neither Z nor I had uttered a word.

The silence continued in the darkness. To my left, there was no audible evidence of movement or breathing. After five minutes, I heaved a sigh. Five minutes later, my sigh was answered: 'Sweet dreams,' whispered Z. What can he mean by that? I wondered despairingly. Another five minutes later, I answered with: 'Goodnight.' By which I meant something completely different. Minutes passed, which lasted longer than three thousand years of civilisation. 'Jeezus,' whispered Z, 'I seem to have drunk too much as well. My head is going round like a windmill.' His voice sounded very close. He had to be lying on his side, facing me, just as I was facing him. 'Christ,' I replied, after another pause. You ought to feel my head then.' His only reaction was a deep sigh, once again five minutes later.

Conversation: the opposite of Communication. Between Z and I a dialogue ensued that was not a dialogue. The silences said more than the words. Answers took so long to arrive that they weren't answers anymore, every question travelled kilometres. It was as if we were at opposite ends of the earth, in contact via a clapped-out radio. And yet we were only a metre apart. Our words were like comic-strip text balloons. We blew them up in turn. They floated up and drifted across to the other, above whom they exploded silently and rained down tender meanings.

Z.: You know what we ought to do now?

Me: *(on fire)* What?

Z.: Invite some girls up to our room. That'd be great.

Me: *(almost in tears)* Yeah, that'd be fantastic.

Z.: And have a good snog. Amazin'.

Me: Yeah, amazin'.

Z.: Have you already petted?

Me: *(lying)* Yeah, of course.

Z.: And? What's it like?

Me: Mmmmbwaah... Fantastic, amazing.

Z.: Jeezus. I wish... I only have to think about it. Now. At this moment, and I...

Me: *(dying)* Me too.

Z.: Is it true? When you're petting... that some of them unbutton your shirt? And start to stroke you?

Me: *(in death agonies)* Yeah, some of them do.

Z.: And some of them go even further?

Me: *(death rattle)* Right.

Z.: Much further?

Me: *(clinically dead)* Much further.

Z.: You're a lucky bastard.

Me: You're telling me.

Z.: The furthest I've ever gone... French kissing... That's all.

Me: That's enough for some.

Z.: Not for me.

Me: Me neither.

Z.: But you know what my problem is?

Me: No.

Z.: You mustn't tell anyone.

Me: Okay.

Z.: You have to promise.

Me: I promise.

Z.: *(takes a deep breath)* Sometimes... in my dreams... it's not only girls I kiss.

Me: *(after fifteen minutes silence - during which a black out and a panic attack have to be coped with, plus the tremendous urge to hurl myself on Z like a wild animal)* Really?

Z.: Only sometimes.

Me: Of course, of course.

Z.: But I don't know what to do about it.

Me: Well... Er...

Z.: I mean, sometimes the urge is really strong.

Me: *(paralysed with cowardice)* Oh. It's just a passing phase, during puberty. I read that in a book by Sigmund Freud. *(cursing myself)*

Z.: You think so?

Me: *(feeling so miserable I almost started giggling)* I'm certain.

Z.: Well, if it's only a passing phase, during puberty, do you have it too?

Me: Mmmmbwaah...

Z.: Can I ask you something?

Me: Depends what.

Z.: I won't tell anyone.

Me: Okay then.

Z.: Do you wank a lot?

Me: *(glad I'm lying down)* Mmmmbwaah. As much as everyone else, I suppose.

Z.: Me too... But... Sometimes I get so incredibly horny *(chuckles)*... and then... You mustn't tell anyone... Then I get undressed... In the bathroom... And then I look at myself... And I rub myself against everything... Sometimes for an hour or so... Have you read about that in your book by Freud?

Me: *(practically fainting)* No. But I think it's probably normal.

Z.: Shall I tell you something else?

Me: What?

Z.: You won't be shocked?

Me: No.

Z.: You'll never guess.

Me: What?

Z.: (*quieter than before*) I've got a hard-on this very moment.

Me: (*swallowing*) What about me then?

Z.: (*after a half an hour*) A good shag. That'd be fantastic.

Me: (*idem*) You're telling me.

Z.: (*idem*) Oh well. Sweet dreams.

Me: (*sobbing silently*) Goodnight.

Z.: (*after another half an hour*) See you tomorrow.

Me: (*idem*) Yup.

8. Night of Love II (the ferry)

None of the sights we saw the following day made the slightest impression on me. I was jittery from lack of sleep, dizzy with disappointment, drugged with false hope. I was suffering from the jet lag of the night of love that never was. To make matters worse, I had a hangover from the cheap wine at The Styx Discotheque. As far as I was concerned, they could all disappear from the face of the earth. Z included, and Greece along with him. My only refuge was the usually detested bus, where, despite all the bumps and jolts, I could cast myself forlornly into the arms of Hypnos, for a not-even-refreshing sleep. The same questions kept on winging up out of my confused infatuation. Why am I such a coward? Why didn't I just slip into bed beside him? What he said was surely an open invitation? Or had I misunderstood him? Were his words distorted by my thirst for his sacred loins? When would I see his cock? And what would I do in the same situation the day after tomorrow, during my second and final night beside him?

What I didn't know yet, as I was bumped and jolted along the mountain roads of the Greek interior, was that the second night would not be my final night. I would be granted an unexpected extra night. An interim night at sea. Third time lucky. And that night would come not by the grace of Nux, mother of Death, daughter of Chaos, but through the petty miserliness of the school management.

After that exhausting bus trip, we boarded the ferry for Crete as evening was falling. The crossing would take us hours. For the sake of economy, no sleeping berths had been reserved. We did however each have our own seat, exactly like the seats in an aeroplane or a motor-coach. They stood in rows of four, on the enclosed first deck, Tourist Class C, in a room the size of a classroom. To the left, a blind wall with the sleeping berths behind it. To the right, a wall with little windows,

which looked out upon a cloudless sky and a choppy sea, over which the setting sun was pouring its final bucket of blood. The ship cast off exactly on time. This was the night in which the journey within the journey began, the trip to the power two. Over there, beyond the horizon, lay the realm of the Minotaur, half man, half bull. We were sailing at thirteen knots towards his labyrinth, on what the tourist brochures called "The Isle of Flowers", the history books "a junction of the three ancient continents", and the travel books, written by people who ought to know, "an elongated heap of rocks, not worth the bother of visiting".

During the day I'd kept myself to myself, avoiding the group, but by evening my resistance was broken. I wasn't strong enough to go it alone. When we left the bus, I had allowed myself to be carried along with flow, onto the boat. And I had found myself a seat in one of the central rows, in the middle of the pack. Z was sitting next to me. Which of us had taken the initiative to sit beside the other was unclear. {.....} He had already closed his eyes and was breathing regularly. The best thing I could do was to follow his example. That way I'd appear at the rendezvous tomorrow in good form for the crucial battle.

I adjusted the back of my seat to the sleeping position and closed my eyes, hoping against hope for a deep and speedy sleep. The ship actually did its best to help me. It dimmed the lights in our makeshift bedroom and rocked like a giant cradle. All the talking soon died away. {.....} African music was playing on the deck below us. It filtered up metallically from the innermost parts of the boat. Subdued hilarity arose a couple of seats in front of us. From the giggling and whispering, I gathered that one of our group had placed his ear against the blind wall. The people on the other side were fucking. It didn't shock me, it didn't move me. I imagined the two of them, going at it in their cabin in the stench and heat, separated from the pack of young dogs that we were by nothing but a steel partition, which wasn't soundproof in either direction. Half of our group stumbled over to the wall, to press their ears against it and give a sniggering commentary. Occasionally, someone cupped his hands against the wall like a funnel, and used that to relay his impression of the typical groaning and squealing no sensible person would ever make voluntarily, but of which sex seems to hold the patent. I turned away grumpily. And ended up with my head resting on Z's shoulder.

This came as rather a shock to me. But I didn't dare pull away. What if, despite his closed eyes, Z was as wide awake as I was? He'd certainly have noticed me laying my head on his shoulder. But he'd notice even more if I pulled it away immediately. He might conclude all sorts of things. No, the best course was to leave my head where it was for the moment. Z had not reacted. And why should he? It was perfectly possible that, overcome by innocent sleep, I had laid my head in a place I'd never have laid it if I had been awake. Besides, perhaps Z was asleep after all. In that case, it wouldn't matter to him one way or the other. In that case, I could safely leave my head exactly where it was for another quarter of an hour. He was lying there quite comfortably. It wasn't really a breach of our amorous daytime truce. At the most, it was a brief and friendly skirmish.

My desire for peace was sorely tested, however, when I noticed that Z was now snuggling his head against my head. The intensity and the passion with which he was doing this shattered every ceasefire. This was way beyond the realms of a friendly skirmish. This could be the run-up to a full-scale battle. But the positions weren't yet clear. I was still awake, that was certain. But what about Z? Was he asleep, yes or no? Was his gesture the unconscious move of a dreamer? Or was he responding consciously? And the question that bothered me most: If Z was awake, what did he expect of me? What was he hoping? That I was awake, or that I was sleeping? Did he know the truth, or was he as unsure of me as I was of him? Whatever the case, it had now become totally impossible for me to pull my head away. It was wedged between his head and his shoulder like a violin. Suppose I wormed it free? If he was asleep, he'd probably wake up, wonder what I'd been up

to and be annoyed. If he wasn't asleep, he might well be hurt by my supposed rejection. So in either case, I had every reason to leave my head exactly where it was. Besides, it felt wonderful. I was the willing victim of a sensual kidnap. If I had any objection, it was that my imprisonment did not go far enough. But what if I did something to change all that? I had nothing to lose. I could always play it safe by carrying on breathing deeply. If it went wrong, I could simply claim I had spent the whole time in dreamland and hadn't been aware of my boldness.

And so, sighing like someone who was sleeping off a night on the town, I also edged my leg towards Z. I felt the resistance of his knee. I pressed my own knee squarely against it. His answer came immediately. He pressed back. His breathing, however, remained unchanged, as regular and powerful as the breaking of waves. I moved my knee slowly back and forth, barely a centimetre, just enough to stroke the knee of he-who-held-my-head-in-a-headlock. When I stopped stroking, he took over the movement, without changing so much as a gasp of his breathing. I now knew what I wanted to know. And he knew it too. But what I didn't know was how I should use that knowledge. And so I did nothing, but continue to lie there and enjoy my unholy wedding night.

For hours on end I caressed my consort with infinitesimal touches, invisible to the eye of the outsider, using only the crown of my head, my knee and my elbow. Since then, I have made love in much more elegant ways, but never again as publicly as I did that night, under the half-dimmed lights of the ferryboat to Crete, in a classroom filled with aeroplane seats, surrounded by dozens of Nosey-Parker friends who thought that love was only being made on the opposite side of the steel partition. I was helped in this by the fact that my jeans, as was the fashion of the day, were as tight around the crotch as a second skin. This gave the wigwam of my passion no chance to erect itself, which didn't prevent the local pressure from building up considerably. Ejaculation, that less than immaculate miracle, was this time accomplished solely through the power of the spirit, through the magic of lust. No direct contact, no rubbing. No squealing or groaning. No movement, except for the barely perceptible stroking of non-erogenous limbs. No sound, except for the steady breathing of a double pseudo-slumber. And yet the climax gathered and broke, without even raising an eyebrow. "Though he sailed the ocean, his seed was dashed on the rocks." I felt my satisfaction's *seal of approval* spread across my groin. And I succumbed to a jubilant sleep.

9. Love-Intermezzo

The following day my joy was boundless. Crete was my empire. I was feted with gold dishes, costly buckles and bronze weapons in its museums. My praises were sung in its predominantly white and sky-blue frescos, in which my stylised pageboys rushed at the raging bull and somersaulted over him uninjured. Enamelled ladies-in-waiting in open-fronted bodices, cheered me from their glass display cases, waving vipers as if they were palm fronds. I returned their greeting graciously and let myself and my court be carried on to Knossos, where I took up residence in the red-pillared palace I had inherited from King Minos. Fifty kilometres farther, my retinue and I were bundled in and out of a festal museum, after which we paid yet another state visit to yet another glorious ruin. My *compagnie protocolaire* groaned under the overfull schedule. I adored it. For me, the night couldn't be long enough in coming. All my earlier doubts had dissolved in euphoria. I now knew what the coming dusk would bring. The visions of Z I had cherished for years had now been swept away at sea by his shirt-and-jeans-clad flesh and blood. I longed more than ever to touch him, but I wanted to postpone the consummation of that desire for as long as possible. Desire had become an integral part of the pleasure. It was not yet noon and our foreplay had already begun.

Z and I didn't talk to each other, except with our looks. Apart from that, the most exceptional thing about this exceptional day was that it passed like any other. After the tour, we were herded into our hotel's dining room. We fished out what was edible from our evening meal, consumed it, and were then given leave to throw ourselves into the local night life. A slight deviation from the usual pattern was that two of the members of our group returned to the hotel much earlier than the rest.

10. Night of love III (Crete)

Thanks to the standardised bad taste of the international hotel industry, we could count upon a decor that differed in little from that of two nights before. The same narrow beds, the same little table and bedside lamp, wallpaper chosen from the same psychedelic pattern book. To make it even more inviting, the open windows were curtainless; the hotel was tall enough to make snooping impossible.

This time, I was the first to start undressing. I took my time. When I was finished, I slid between my sheets and looked at Z. He had just turned away. He stood there displaying the rear of what lay in store for me, covered it with his pyjamas, then turned around, bending over deeply, slid between his sheets and switched off the light. The first part of the ritual was now complete. The second part was the conversation that wasn't a conversation. It played out again, in similar words and with similar pauses, like an incantation muttered by trolls, a prayer murmured just before the start of single combat. The connotations were also the same. But now there was also a new significance: that we both remembered the words of a couple of nights before and were ready to repeat them. Any doubt was thus swept away. The final empty frame was filled with blind caressability.

But the end of the prayer had now changed. After Z's statement: "I've got a hard-on this very moment", I used the ensuing silence to hang my hand overboard. It was one of those complicated gestures, meant to express nonchalance. I turned over onto my belly, lay my head on my arm and stretched my other arm, apparently casually, in Z's direction, thereby bridging more than half the distance between the two beds. Only then did I utter the words: "What about me then?" In the pause that followed, I felt a hand cautiously entwine itself in mine. I gave a little squeeze of acknowledgement. The next moment Z was lying on top of me.

I was rolled over onto my back. Two hands gripped my head so powerfully that I moaned in pain. A mouth pressed itself against my mouth. He tasted as spicy as an oyster and sweet as almond milk and he set about me like a wild man. Our teeth clashed, I tasted blood from a cut in my lip. I have never been so epically French kissed as I was that night. But I gave as good as I got. I counterattacked with an even more passionate kiss. I had to restrain myself or I would have bitten off the tip of his tongue in my ecstasy. 'Wait,' said Z, just in time. He shifted to his knees, tore off his pyjama jacket and threw it aside, as a cowboy would his hat. He then grabbed the bottom of my pyjama jacket and pulled it over my head in a single brusque movement. Luckily, I wasn't wearing my glasses; it might have been rather hard to find them. Z tossed my pyjama jacket behind him, like a matador would a cape, and threw himself back on top of me. Half-naked flesh on half-naked flesh. The creaking and groaning could begin.

His kiss no longer confined itself to my mouth. He licked my eyelids, my ears, my neck. I fought back as best I could. But only when I threw my lips at my opponent's nipple did he crumple and

lower his guard. Now it was my turn. I threw my arms around his chest and bit his shoulder. His skin was outrageously soft, the muscles beneath it quivered with strength. His sweat had the taste of the sea and I smelt the bitter honey of his still almost hairless armpits. I kissed them. The tickling brought him back to his senses. He wriggled himself free of my grip, grabbed me by the hair, pulled me deliciously on to my back, and rubbed his lips across my chest. The downy stubble of his beard scratched my skin. I just lay there panting and enjoying it. Half human, half calf. Until I couldn't bear anymore. I grabbed at him and struck gold. My hand found the crotch of his pyjama trousers. And although my grip was as light as a spring-morning breeze, my opponent moaned as if I had mortally wounded him. He sprang to his feet, pulling me upright with him. And so we stood there, with our foreheads rubbing together, in the strip of no man's land between our two beds. Gasping, gauging each other with our eyes. Cloaked in the imperial blue of a Cretan night, in which the tambourine moon sang, as port of Heraklion wafted its scent of cooling asphalt and the last of its street noises through the windows. Z pushed me away from him and hooked his thumbs under his pyjama trouser waistband.

The incredible manoeuvres in which lovers get tangled up. The fumbling, the stumbling. Shoelaces that turn out to be tied in a Gordian knot, tie-pins that break, contact lenses that fall out, the hasty leg that catches in the underpants and forces a forward dive. And not to be forgotten: the elastic cuffs at the end of pyjama trouser legs, which at the critical moment turn out to be too narrow to let a foot pass through. Z was sitting cursing on the edge of the bed, his trousers already pulled down inside out, but both of his feet caught fast in the gentle shackles. He tore at them wildly. When he had freed his feet, he pushed me backwards onto the bed and preserved me from similar bungling by giving me a hand to pull off my trousers. A musky smell, reminiscent of nutmeg and caviar, fresh shellfish, and urine on young grass arose between us. Z tossed my pyjama trousers next to his and hurled himself on top of me. His dagger ricocheted between my legs, I went blind with pleasure. While kissing me again, he rolled onto his side and gripped my quivering sceptre. And I began to groom his unicorn, which could only be described as as hard and supple as birch wood, clothed in the softest satin, pearled at the top with the hottest dew and wreathed at the base with a tuft of the noblest fur. I was in a frenzy. An overpowering urge tore me free of his kiss and bent me towards his uncircumcised virginity. Fellatio: the sheathing with the lips of the male member (usually someone else's). I French-kissed his loins, while my hand counted the delicate pair of chestnuts in his wonderfully tautened shepherd's purse. But while I was doing that, I felt his body stiffen and his member soften. I stopped immediately. But to no avail. The empire had already fallen. And it didn't look as if it would soon be re-established.

Z released his grip on me and turned away. He lay on his side, but now with his back to me. Whatever I asked, he didn't answer. When I ran my fingers across his buttocks in desperation, he pushed me away, searched for his pyjama trousers, pulled them on, and went back to lie on his own bed without saying a word. After a while, I heard him tossing and turning, like someone in a restless sleep. And the night became immeasurably long.

11. Conclusion

After our school days, what didn't I do to keep in touch with him... Telephone calls, dropping by at his parents' house in the hope of seeing him, attending the same university. What I almost did, but didn't do, was to choose the same degree course. What I did do was something he had once asked me to do long before: become a member of the United We Stand Gymnastic Club. After all, the

clubhouse was right on the corner of our street. And it only cost me my entire Tuesday and Friday evenings every week, plus the whole of my Sunday morning, not to mention the extra training when there was a competition or a demonstration. That's not an excessive price for an impossible love, is it ?

'United we Stand' was the oldest gym club in the unsightly, provincial backwater P. Its gym was in a parish hall, above the now disused reception rooms. To get changed, the gymnasts had to stumble up steep wooden stairs to a small landing, which led to a dreary little attic changing room, with a series of identical cubicles on either side, closed off with a grubby little curtain. None of us used it. Prudery was something for the ladies' section. Against the wall there was a man-sized mirror, crowned with the maxim: "A Virtuous Nation is a Great Nation". For someone of one metre sixty-six, like me, an unmistakeable dig. The gym itself was also less tall than usual. Two sets of rings hung down from the ceiling, as did the uprights of the fixed horizontal bars. For safety's sake, these were also anchored into the wall. The tall, old-fashioned windows were partially hidden by the wall bars. The rest of the equipment was touchingly farcical; the landing mats had all but turned to stone. Over the years that I was a gymnast, it was all replaced bit by bit with more modern stuff, purchased with money raised by waffle-bake-sales and tombolas. The gym itself was also given a facelift. A paint manufacturer, a former member, gave us his surplus samples. There was just enough white for the walls and ceiling and, as luck would have it, also exactly enough brown for the woodwork. But the life-sized plaster image of Christ, which had been crucified high-up on the wall, had to be repainted in the only remaining colour: frog green. The maxim below it read: "A Healthy Mind In A Healthy Body". This cast a rather dubious light on the suffering of our now sickly green Messiah.

During the renovations we got verbal support from the gym club veterans. Elderly, shrivelled men in worn-out tracksuits. They were also there every Sunday morning at training, expressing nostalgia for their youth by criticising all the youngsters. No matter how high your vault over the horse, no matter how successful your somersault dive from the parallel bars, they had always known someone who had done it much better. Usually a friend who was hanging framed on the wall in one of the many black and white photos. Together, these photos were like a fading picture book, in which the history of the gym club could still just be read. But each photo was also a story in itself, and all those stories were retold by the survivors every Sunday morning. Here, Gaston Roerloos with his *Competition Gymnast First Class* medal. Champion of both the Flanders. He could do a hundred press-ups with an anvil on his back. Good old Gaston, who went to the wrestling tent at the fair and hurled the wrestler on duty right out over the ropes, but *still* had to cause a scene to get his money. Good old Gaston who tried to hold back the retreating Hun all on his own in '44, went down to keep watch at the viaduct, with an air rifle and a belly full of beer, and when a German tank rolled up, out he jumped and yelled "Halt!", but the bastards kept on going. Good old Gaston. Dead as a doornail. And so on, and so forth. And here, old Briek. Came straight in here from Paris, been off on a binge, came straight in here and said "I'm not feeling any too good". But then he leapt on that horse and blow me down if he didn't start doing double leg circles and scissors swings! We couldn't keep count. And what's more, he still had his ordinary clothes on, and heavy hiking boots, two kilos. Good old Briek, goddamnit. And so on and so forth. And as if their stories hadn't belittled your vault enough, they added insult to injury by doing a bird's nest hang from the rings, seventy-five summers old and flushed with pride, or the start of heart attack.

They weren't wasted years, my years as a gymnast...

But eventually I had to break with Z. It was driving me crazy. He was so close. I had to watch him sweating after the warm-up, my heart skipped a beat with every grand circle he turned on the

horizontal bar, I trembled when he supported the small of my back as I learned to do a back flip on the long mat. And afterwards, in yet another new pair of swimming trunks, he used to parade right through the changing room to the sink with the one tap, which comprised the entire sanitary facilities. When I heard that, now the gym was finished, the changing room was also to be given a facelift, that a shower room would be installed, where he would then be parading around without his swimming trunks, I took my decision. I had to put him behind me. Out of self-preservation.

It was on a Friday evening, during training. He had made all his preparations for a session on the horizontal bar, his favourite apparatus. I knew he would be totally occupied for the coming half hour. All I needed was a couple of minutes. With a pounding heart, I left the gym on a shameful pilgrimage to the changing room. It was deathly quiet in there. I sneaked into his cubicle. There were his shoes, with his socks stuffed into them. I caressed them. There was his shirt, there were his jeans. I fondled them, for the first and final time. And there, hanging from a chromium-plated hook, was the crown jewel. His white cotton underpants, which became semi-transparent when he wore them. I hesitated, but then I did it anyway. With my closed eyes in simultaneous shame and ecstasy, I buried my face in his snowy underpants. I had hoped for the stamp of his most secret sweat, a reminder of the smell of fresh shellfish and urine on young grass. But all I could smell was fabric softener. Despite my misery, I had to smile. Of course. Him too. Clean underwear every day. You never know what might happen.

12. Epilogue

And you, reader? What will you do with this, my fourth cardboard box? Give it a place in your battery of books? Forget it? Use it to prop up a wobbly table leg? Make it into papier-mâché? Go ahead. The choice is yours. But... let's suppose I could ask you something. Because you felt a personal connection. Because you recognised something of yourself in my battle with the demon. In that case I'd like to suggest the following. You must also have dark and secret shadows, spectres looming up at you out of your youth. You have no proof of them, no photos, no drawings. They have never been captured, except by the shutter of your tender young heart. Have you thought of a place to keep them? No? Then keep them in this box. Side by side, your shadows and mine. That would make me very happy.

Think here and now about things that are long since past, but are nevertheless still precious to you. Attach them to what I have written, slowly close my cardboard box and slide it into your bookcase.

If you do that, reader, know that I will be truly grateful to you. And that I admire you. For your collaboration and patience. For your willingness to read. Gulp! For your presence in the foliage of my creation. Kaboom! Lectori salutem. And so on. Screech! And so forth.