

Cinderella

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An extract

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There she stood, cursing her three Jack Russels, that unsettled afternoon my mother and I planned to take over a brothel. Our backer and soon-to-be business partner, a short, skinny and bald bloke who suffered being called Daffy Danny, was about to keep us waiting for the best part of an hour that afternoon. The self-proclaimed madman might have had half a million in his bank account, and my mother and I might have been depending on every single cent of that money for our future enterprise, but bugger it, sponsor or no sponsor, the little fucker better not chance being late at every friggin' turn.

Completely unaware of Danny's tardiness, my mother screamed at Gucci, Prada and Paco Rabanne – yes, that's what the pooches were called – as if her life depended on it. Her ranting concealed the hope that the creatures would cease their incessant haring to and fro of their own accord and submit to being locked up in the pigsty my mother called home in those days, a cheap and festering shack some nameless nutcase had dumped on a permitless plot of land in the remnants of what once went for forest on the outskirts of Sint-Gillis-Waas.

It took her the best part of forty-five minutes. The malicious mutts were now under lock and key, but my mother had forgotten that her cigarettes and her lighter and her mobile and her money were still lying on the coffee table inside. 'Michael,' she carped. 'Michael, all my bits and pieces are still inside. Don't let the dogs out.'

And while she tried to squeeze the flab that had assembled over the years around her buttocks through a gap in the fly-screen door to the porch to the tune of her own bark and bluster, I stood waiting with a spade in my hand should any of the brood dare to slip through her legs.

Too late.

Gucci, the eldest of the three tykes, the mother superior of her own family tree, the rat queen who had let herself be inseminated by her own offspring, generation after generation, was the first to scurry between my mother's legs, making her turn on her heels and almost stumble over the spade I was still holding. The fly-screen flew open and the other little buggers also wormed their way outside.

'Gucci, Gucci! Get back inside this minute!'

Her loudest shriek thus far, enough apparently to startle the patch of forest between my mother's shack and the nearest motorway into a frenzy of rustling and fluttering. In the meantime, the other two dogs were chasing Gucci's tail. They had nowhere in particular to go, no rabbit to harass, no burrow to crawl into, so they raced in their usual circles, tireless and determined.

This was going to take at least another quarter of an hour. I parked myself on a log of firewood and lit a cigarette from my mother's pack. She smoked sixty a day and wouldn't notice.

'Get over here! Just wait till I get my hands on you!

That was to the dogs, of course, and not me. She hasn't dared talk to me like that in years. Good thing too

My mother pirouetted like a handicapped ballet dancer. The way she flailed her arms about could only have pained her joints. She croaked like a soprano with a lingering lump in her throat. Everything about her was constantly under stress; the show that was her life had no beginning and no end. One of the main reasons she gave birth to me was to have me as her audience.

'You should have those mutts put to sleep,' I said.

'Shut your face, Michael, if you don't mind.' She did her best to sound friendly by stretching her words, but it didn't really work.

'The little buggers are rabid and psychotic,' I said.

And indeed, as they raced past, the air seemed to lift their jowls and make them look like crazy cartoon clowns grinning insanely, flanked on either side by slithers of mud and drool. My mother's shrieks intensified. The venom in her voice spread out into the rest of her body. Her movements were frantic, verging on the unnatural.

'Give me a cigarette.'

She refused the first cigarette I offered. I had been sitting on the packet and there was a tear in the paper.

'If you ask me, our Danny's drunk himself into oblivion somewhere,' I said. 'The notary's been waiting for a good hour already.'

'Let him wait. I've been waiting all my life.'

'Any idea what for?'

If her face was anything to go by she had none.

'You got a light?'

'Nope.'

'What d'you mean, nope?'

'I don't have a light.'

'How did you light that cigarette then?'

'Can't remember.'

'I need a light now.'

'I don't have one.'

'I need a light now.'

'I said I don't have one.'

'Go inside then! Go get one!'

'Do it yourself.'

'I need a fucking light this minute!'

And to spare myself her nerves I headed into the garden shed in search of an old lighter. I could have known in advance, of course, that there weren't any lighters in the shed, but let's just say I was never exactly the practical type, certainly not in panic situations like this. Although when my mother was around just about everything was reason for panic and stress. A lighter, what to eat that night, a couple of hundred Euros, it was all the same. The slightest want, the tiniest need that wasn't immediately fulfilled, perpetuated the crisis in which she lived. Her entire existence was an emergency. Every puff of breath she managed to press from her body was an alarm signal.

Fortunately I'd learned in the meantime to put up with the stress.

She needed the adrenaline to keep her upright. Without all the stress she would faint or bleed dry like an internal organ from a gunshot wound. Before long I was in need of another cigarette myself. I snuck out of the shed and returned to the chopping block. She'd apparently been puffing away happily in my absence, and as I looked at her it dawned on me that smoking, in essence, seemed to possess some sort of ritual energy. It helped her escape the course of events for a few seconds, the incessant din of things that go wrong, set her free for a moment from the air that encircled and enclosed her.

'Found one then?' I asked.

'There was a lighter in the pack. You just didn't notice.'

I also lit up.

'I'm happy,' she said. Her emotional air-valve flipped open as she exhaled and a sigh followed. I breathed in, sensed my muscles slowly relaxing, and said nothing. A cautious cheerfulness also started to course through my veins. It was an important day. One of those days on which part of your life shifts into gear, which you later dare to claim was a new beginning.

'So all those years scraping the bottom of the barrel are about to pay off,' said my mother. 'Today things change. I read my cards yesterday. The future doesn't lie. The future can't lie. From now on it can only get better. Farewell stress. I've finally got what I always deserved.'

When Daffy Danny finally drove up in his Mercedes e220, the dogs were back inside. All it took was one and a half cigarettes and a bit of patience. The fun and games is over for the little buggers when you stop shouting at them. Gucci, Prada and Paco Rabanne made their way back inside spontaneously, with cushions galore to piss on and chairs to shit in.

Daffy Danny had donned his Sunday best for the occasion. During the week he preferred tracksuits of the type worn by Moroccan street footballers in Antwerp's Borgerhout neighbourhood. The gaudy gold watch hanging round his left wrist must have cost a small fortune.

'Aren't we a little late?' I asked.

'I called the guy. He'll wait until dark if he has to.'

Daffy Danny had only been back in the country for six months. He earned the half million in his bank account on the recent sale of a hotel he had been running for years on the Costa del Sol. The day after a local cop laid into a Romanian lady companion with a shard of glass from a mirror he'd accidentally trampled into a thousand pieces moments earlier while dancing at the end of a five-day VIP arrangement in the selfsame hotel, Daffy Danny called his lawyer in search of a construction that would allow him to declare the hotel officially bankrupt and return to the land of his birth.

'How's your mother?'

It was my mother who was asking.

'Don't ask. Last time I visited the hospital she pretended she was in a coma the whole time. In front of all the doctors! All that just to make a bollocks of me.'

'Don't let it get to you. Give that woman some paper and colouring pencils next time and let her get on with her drawing. Then she'll return to normal.'

Before her very own son beat her up one unfortunate morning, Daffy Danny's mother had spend most of her time painting and modelling children and the occasional flower or animal. The few people who knew her were sometimes heard to say: 'Grandma? An artist if ever there was one.'

Daffy Danny heaved a deep sigh, lit a cigarette and started the engine.

'Michael, take good care of your old lady. I mean it. She's the most important woman in your life. Your mother's more than just where you came from; she's also your destination. I hope my old lady will stop hating me one day and not spend the rest of her life hiding behind pots of paint.'

Notary Nouwkens was digging in to a bag of fries while leaning against the bonnet of his Porsche. It was raining. Without realising it, he'd shed a blob of mayonnaise onto his left leg and the rain had helped it spread all over his trousers.

'I thought you said you'd wait inside,' said Daffy Danny.

‘You agreed to bring the keys, Mr. Deddens.’

Daffy started to root around in his pockets.

‘Come on,’ said my mother. ‘Let’s see if there’s a way in through the kitchen at the back. Daffy Danny followed her, much relieved.

I stayed with the notary and looked around. A neon sign above the door that was supposed to represent a champagne bottle with cocktail glasses had clearly seen better days. The manufacturers had done their level best to incorporate a few popping bubbles into their neon creation, but the sign, alas, hadn’t been switched on for the best part of year, and the name underneath was so covered with grime it was more or less unreadable. The Cinderella was right in the middle of a crossroads between two main highways – by sheer coincidence Cemetery Street and Newborn Boulevard – both defiled by dull and unbroken rows of houses. With a bit of effort, you could just make out the jet black remains of a church tower behind the chip shop on the other side of the street. Within a twenty kilometre radius we were surrounded by countless housing estates, similar crossroads neighbourhoods, small businesses and their bigger brothers, ranging from night stores to sandwich bars to garages to construction companies.

I drew notary Nouwkens’ attention to the mayonnaise on his trousers. Without saying a word he made his way to the rear of the property. I then watched him clamber awkwardly over the gate my mother and Daffy Danny had just negotiated. I realised I was in urgent need of a pee. But I waited nonetheless until the door opened. Given the absence of virtues in this part of the world, my patience was in the first instance a survival instinct. Someone had to keep the calm.

‘Go on, Iris,’ – Iris was indeed the name of the woman who bore me – ‘time to crack open a bottle of cava. Don’t we deserve it for Christ’s sake, after all the *misère* and *colère* we’ve been through?’ The strength of Daffy Danny’s vocal cords didn’t match the pride in his words.

Iris Vandamme flicked all the light switches to the left of the bar and by accident pressed a couple of buttons that set the music system in gear. A copy of a copy of a house record blared through the bar and took notary Nouwkens so by surprise that the trouser leg that had been spared the mayonnaise was now drenched in cava.

Daffy Danny and notary Nouwkens were sitting around a bronze mermaid that had been forced for eternity to endure a plate of glass on her breasts and to serve as a coffee table. I rummaged in one of the cupboards for a bottle of whiskey and let my eyes get used to the dark. The Cinderella was the size of a postage stamp; the only source of light in the room was a couple of dimmed spotlights and there wasn’t a single surface in the place that reflected light. Even the mirrors behind the strippers’ pole were struggling and without much success

‘So what do we have to do?’ asked Daffy Danny.

‘Just sign here on the dotted line.’

‘Michael, come and check it’s all kosher.’

She was standing in the doorway that connected the business with the kitchen dishing up special fried rice from a plastic container she’d popped in the microwave no more than half a minute

earlier. Human beings are made of food and love. The quality of the former was hopefully no guarantee of the quality of the latter.

The documents notary Nouwkens had brought with him were scribbled and confused, but didn't appear to contain any hidden stipulations, not at first sight. I read the contract a second time through and nodded. After Daffy Danny had signed the document, we all lit up in unison. The official take-over price for the brothel was stated in the contract as 55,000 Euros. But each of the three envelopes Daffy Danny fished from his inside pocket contained 25,000 Euros. We knew that because the notary took the time and the effort to count the piles of under the counter cash twice out loud and with visible pleasure.

'The rest is for him,' Danny whispered.

'Who's 'him?'' I asked.

'The former owner.'

'Isn't he in the can?' asked my mother.

'I hope so,' said notary Nouwkens, and he stood up and left.