

Hotel Rozenstok

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An extract

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When I decided it was time to write a book again, I first came up with the plan of writing a book about a torturer. He would be called Benny and, together with his wife and two young children, he would make up a lovely family and earn his living by, every day from nine to five, somewhere in the extensive basement of the Ministry of Ethics, torturing the last breath out of people's bodies (on some days, when it was less busy, Benny spent quite some time working on *the bodies* too), as they had been careless enough to establish a public profile for themselves as supporters of the death penalty for multiple sex murderers, serial child molesters whose guilt was beyond question, and other similar criminals. Of course the novel would have to be set not only in Belgium, but also in the future (2018?), as this was an unadulterated *dystopia*, a genre I've always detested.

Another book I didn't write (working title: *Shudders*) had what I felt was a fairly promising opening sentence: "Right from the start, the coming of the new teacher was a cause for great concern in our community." That concern was related not only to the fact that the previous teacher had supposedly committed suicide by retreating into a lavatory with a couple of venomous snakes, locking the door and throwing the key through the crack of the window, but first and foremost to her physical appearance, her dark beauty, and the way, in all of our dreams, at night, when the moon gave the world a satin gleam, she would slowly rise up out of a steaming lake and demonstrate her pleasure by calmly tilting back her head into the bowl that her two hands had formed at her nape, black mud in her armpits, ah, come on, boys, let's not breathe a word.

Another novel was also very sexually oriented and, in my mind, it began as follows: "Before, in his past, he'd constantly walked around with a head full of women. With a mind full of flesh and body. Now there's only Debra." The book was about another civil servant who was married with children, although he wasn't a torturer this time. His name was Bas De Coster, and he was an exceptionally average man with a total of one single hobby: visiting internet sites that demonstrated in detail how damned hypocritical and backward Christian churches, the Catholics and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and the Episcopalians and so on and so forth, by the very nature of their existence, truly were. Ugh, Bas De Coster would think to himself when he'd spent yet another evening reading about missionaries, crusades, speaking in tongues or Galileo, and he'd shake his head, delighting in his own irritation and disbelief, and sigh: "How did all of this ever come about? How's it even possible?"

But one evening would turn out differently, I'd decided. One evening the word "ugh" didn't enter Bas's thoughts...

The story began in 1986, when one Marvin Gorman, a preacher in the United States in the service of the Assemblies of God, was removed from his post after it came to light that, many years earlier, he'd succumbed to adultery and had, in fact, embarked upon a fully-fledged extramarital affair. Gorman could only hang his head in shame and confess his guilt, but he didn't simply leave it at that: "Revenge is mine," saith the Lord, and Gorman nodded and repeated His words and dipped his arrows in the poison of retribution.

One of the men who was responsible for Marvin Gorman's excommunication was called Jimmy Lee Swaggart, also a member of the Assemblies of God and one of the richest, most famous and most successful TV preachers the world has ever known. But Jimmy Lee Swaggart was not quite flawless himself, to put it mildly. One day in October 1987, he met one Debra Murphree in a dingy motel room in New Orleans, Louisiana, a 27-year-old woman who made her living by selling her charms. All of this really happened and the fact that I just used the word "met" might create the false impression that Jimmy Lee and Debra Murphree saw each other or, in other words, became acquainted there for the first time. But, of course, "to meet" also means "to come together by appointment", and that's the meaning that applies here, as the two of them had recently met in Room 7 of the Travel Inn on Airline Highway, more specifically twenty times, which had not gone unnoticed, to such an extent that the aforementioned Marvin Gorman had also come to hear about it. He told his son-in-law and his son Randy, a police officer, to stand guard in front of the motel, armed with a camera and, on that October day in 1987, they not only took a host of incriminating shots of the famous hellfire preacher and user of prostitutes, but also let the air out of one of the tyres of his Cadillac into the bargain.

When, business concluded, Swaggart noticed he had a flat tyre, did he curse furiously? The records don't say, but what is certain is that Marvin Gorman had by then also arrived at the scene, and that he confronted Swaggart with the recently gathered evidence and attempted to blackmail him. One thing led to another and, when the blackmail didn't work out, Gorman made the juicy details public a few months later, and Swaggart became a worldwide laughing stock for everyone who already detested TV preachers, moral crusaders and religion in general.

Bas De Coster, who at that time had been around sixteen, still had a fairly vivid memory of the whole affair and how horrified he'd been, but what he hadn't known, most definitely not, what he had never heard anything about, was what had happened twenty times in Room 7 of that motel. He had never known, as there's no way he'd ever have forgotten. After all, he thought now, sitting at his computer on an average, ordinary Tuesday evening in May 2014, it was one of the hottest things he'd ever read, heard, maybe even seen. Debra – in his mind, Bas had soon started calling her just Debra, omitting that strange, somehow sick-sounding surname – in all sorts of interviews that she'd given after the events, including one with the nudie mag *Penthouse*, had always emphasized, without ever giving the impression that she was trying to protect Swaggart, that there had never been any sexual intercourse between her and her famous client. All he ever wanted was for her to undress and to assume certain positions while he talked dirty and masturbated. He didn't touch her.

In De Coster's opinion, that was already more than arousing enough, but he went almost crazy with excitement when he later found out that, with regards to the aforementioned "sexual intercourse" between the prostitute and Jimmy Lee Swaggart, "never" was an overstatement, because on one occasion, Debra said, he'd been unable to control himself and had in fact yielded to the temptation

of the even greater sin. He'd ordered Debra to kneel on the bed, with her buttocks towards him, and then, according to Debra, the following had happened: "He pulled his jogging suit down around his ankles and left his T-shirt on... He stuck it in and pumped a couple of times and pulled it out... He was very easy. A few pumps and that was it. He'd just moan."

These were words that, from then on, Bas De Coster would repeat to himself for weeks (day in, day out), involuntarily, helplessly, and for weeks (day in, day out) every syllable would make itself felt in his groin. It was terrible. It was like some kind of sickness. An addiction. The contrast between Debra's clinical formulation ("stuck it in", "a few pumps", "easy", "just moan") and the hot, burning ecstasy, undoubtedly elevated to inhuman levels by the explosive feelings of guilt and fear that Jimmy Lee Swaggart must have experienced in those few seconds (and which in fact did not require reinforcement from the inadequate spectacle of run-of-the-mill sexual theatrics) was all too much for Bas De Coster, and he knew that the rest of his life would be poisoned by a constant sense of restlessness unless he manfully took action. He had no choice. It was do or die. He would have to put that true story into practice once again, almost thirty years after it had taken place for the first time. A story in twenty episodes with himself in the lead role. He wanted, needed, was determined to experience for himself what it felt like to struggle with a forbidden desire that, time and again, gave you satisfaction, by your own hand, to no avail, until it took hold of your inner being and robbed you of any delusions of freedom.

And so, making his way towards the ecstasy that would, however briefly, liberate him from the eternal chains, yes, of his own will, he took his first step and turned his feet towards that part of town where the ladies of pleasure (how inadequate that last word was, and how completely beside the point!) were to be found. He soon located her, this wasn't about her or what she looked like, his main criterion was that she should speak Dutch. To his relief, she showed absolutely no sign that she thought him strange. In fact, she seemed relieved.

"That's great!" she said, sounding almost delighted, when he'd told her he was going to call her "Debra". Probably thought "Debra" was the name of his beloved, dead or otherwise departed; these girls saw a lot.

"I want to look at your tits while I wank myself off. I'll come back again, pretty soon, and then I'll want to see more, but for today it's just your tits."

"That's great!"

"You can dance, a bit. But not too fast. Dance like you're stoned, you get it?"

"Sure! Like this?"

"Show me your tits."

"Great!"

"Debra."

Afterwards Bas realized that it had been by no means unpleasant. Fine, if he hadn't had a plan, if he hadn't been working to build something up, as it were, then he probably wouldn't have deemed it worthy of repeating, all the more so because the risk of discovery was very real and, as a government official with a couple of children, he wasn't exactly rolling in money, but he did have a

plan and his visit did indeed form the basis of an actual project, and anyway his time with “Debra” would have gone very differently if he hadn’t mapped out a joint, twenty-part future with her, because then he certainly wouldn’t have been satisfied by only the sight of her incidentally shapely breasts, but would, right at the outset, have done with her what he had, after all, paid the full price for (no negotiation allowed). He should count himself lucky, and he was already longing to pay her another visit in a week or two, after which, it now appeared, he would be longing even more to pay her another visit in one more week or two (“Just your tits is fine”), after which, if everything went as planned, he’d long even more to pay her another visit in a week or two (“Look at me and watch me looking at you and wanting you while you dance and I take myself in hand”), after which he’d probably decide that a period of two whole weeks was really no longer an option and he’d set the maximum interval to six or seven days, and so on, but not ad infinitum, no, because within a handful of months from now the great event would already be in place, the event that would be the undisputed highlight of his sexual life (and admit it, thought Bas De Coster, is any other life actually worth bothering about?), which, in his mind, he pompously but with absolute sincerity referred to as the “Act of Deliverance”.

But the further adventures of Bas De Coster will never be disclosed, however interesting I still find the material myself. It was, in short, no lack of inspiration or related ailments that prevented me from writing, it was a question of motivation. I was tired of it all.

Over the course of the years, I’d produced ten books, but they had brought me few faithful readers (or readers of any kind), and the worst thing was that I had no complaints about a lack of media attention or awareness of my name in general; the critics had also received my last novel with almost unanimous enthusiasm. Conclusion: the people who didn’t buy my books were making a very conscious and considered decision, and no amount of either increased advertising for my work and/or myself or even better reviews could persuade them to change their minds and buy my books...

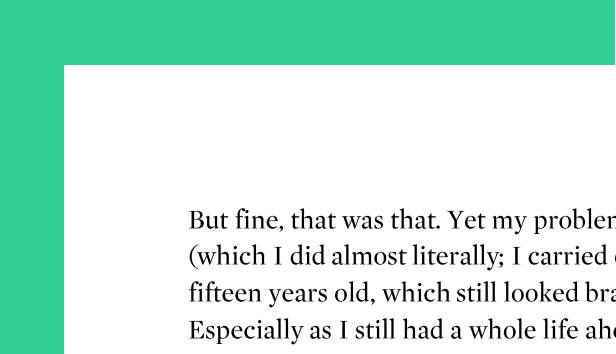
It was the old story of my life, a story that, ironically enough, I’d attempted to move in a new direction by becoming a writer: people and I, we simply had nothing to say to one another, and if we still made the mistake of trying to communicate, then incomprehension and misunderstandings, irritation and bewilderment, often disdain and at best sheer indifference was both their fate and mine. I’d always been surprised, ever since I was a child, by what people said, thought and did, and now I believed the time had finally come to establish, once and for all, with sadness yet resignation, that the reverse was at least equally true. The fact that I’d ever wanted to become and to be a writer, and indeed the sort of writer who attempts through his work to achieve a higher form of communication, one that rises above the level of everyday babble, was the ultimate proof, I thought now, of my truly laughably optimistic disposition – although it could, of course, also attest to my ingrained and incomparable despair...

But there was more, something that proved a key factor in my decision to put down my pen. You can, of course, still draw energy from frustrations; they can admittedly have a paralyzing effect, but that doesn’t have to be the case, and perhaps it’s not too foolish to assert that just about everything humans have accomplished in this world is a direct result of dissatisfaction. My biggest problem, the actual reason for my decision to give up my career in literature, was that I had no purpose, no prospect of improvement. Even in an ideal world – one in which my novels were devoured on a wide scale, and my bin bags out on the street at night wouldn’t be safe from the addicted, desperate fans who’d stop at nothing in their search for a few stray sentences written by my hand, and certainly wouldn’t be put off by orange peel and a few of Wanda’s used tampons – I knew I would not be happy.

The truth was that I'd come to hate success. I'd seen what it did to people, I'd had ample opportunity to see it; just about everyone with whom I'd made my debut as a writer at around the turn of the century – not to mention the overambitious motley crew who'd written a first book in the years after that – had since won at least one Major Award and/or had a bestseller to their name. I'd seen it, and what I'd seen didn't make me happy, increasingly filling me with the fear that what I, like every author, strove for – and, by that, I mean commercial success – might actually happen to me one day. Success was for losers.

Usually it began as soon as one of their books found its way onto the so-called shortlist of a Major Award, even though at that particular stage a lot still depended, of course, on the potential winner's background, character, and environment, and to observe such things properly, a trained eye was generally a prerequisite. That all turned around completely, though, as soon as the writer actually won the Major Award and consequently could instantly be described as rich, famous, popular and successful: by the end of the evening's celebrations, even a child could see that a radical and violent transformation in the Winner's behaviour and self-image had taken place. The Winner – or by extension the Best-selling Author – was an entirely different person. He now exhibited an exceedingly affected kind of self-confidence, most painful to watch. The men adopted a brisk and bouncy step, reminiscent of the gait of a not very gifted door-to-door salesman, the women wrapped themselves in horribly hysterical clothes that neatly exposed their ostentatiously displayed false modesty, and all of them began, from one day to the next, to do sport – fanatically, in their own opinions – with inexplicable pleasure, gleaming with a strange, eerie kind of pride, they allowed themselves to be photographed on the edge of a public swimming pool, in multi-coloured running gear, or on the tatami. Without exception, they radiated gracious aloofness; mentally they seemed to be made of steel; when you stood there, pissing over their shoes, you could see them daydreaming about the statue that – they were convinced, there was no doubt about it – one day, no, soon, would be made of them. In interviews they invariably alerted the public to the prospect of two, three, sometimes as many as four new books that already were “all planned out” in their minds, they only had to be transferred onto paper. They managed – it was truly astounding, I just couldn't understand it and yet still it made me feel a certain degree of respect – to talk about Nabokov (always Nabokov) as if he were not only a god, elevated above everything and everyone, with whom no other writer could compete, but also a kind of relative of theirs, someone with whom they used to love spending the weekend, a person who had so much in common with them. Even the previously friendly, calm, sweet, funny, nice, clever, stylish, talented, lively, pleasant, beautiful, affable, most engaging, interesting writers who were tormented but more or less mentally stable, gifted with irony and self-deprecation, not afflicted by megalomania, and capable of not taking themselves too seriously – in short, the good ones – were unable to avoid it and, to make matters worse, when push came to shove, they didn't even appear to make any effort to do so: as of the fourth reprint of their novel they willingly allowed themselves to be seduced by insipid vanity, unambiguous egocentrism and blind faith in their own greatness.

Though, often enough, the quality of their prose had been nothing to write home about anyway, from that point on, their language lost all nuance, all shine and all individuality: they rewarded the readers who “had made them what they were” by keeping the illusion alive and even actively encouraging the notion that the sterile and thoroughly unliterary, bite-sized little stories that the writers wrote and the readers read constituted high-class literature. It was a glorious interplay, a magnificent specimen of transferrable self-deception, which left both parties perfectly satisfied. When I thought about it (because sometimes it was stronger than me), I would walk around for days with a sick, frightened feeling in my stomach.



But fine, that was that. Yet my problems did not simply disappear after I broke my pen in half (which I did almost literally; I carried out the symbolic act on a perfectly innocent pencil, ten, fifteen years old, which still looked brand new). In a sense, my problems were just beginning. Especially as I still had a whole life ahead of me.