Wonder

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Encounter

The teacher walked the twenty feet from his room to the elevator in wonder. Waited at the latticework of the cage. Stuck three fingers through the mesh.

(This is a beginning. In the hallway redolent of belladonna. And just as one has a chance of winning the lottery if one buys all the

tickets, there is the chance of an end.)

There was no sound but the rumble of the elevator. No, not the shuffle of floral-patterned, rubber-soled slippers along the wine-red runner leading from the gypsy woman's room to the elevator shaft, expressly, so it seemed, for her tiny, swift, perpetually unwashed feet in those mules with the violets embroidered on them. Not even her breathless laughter. Though she had a visitor, as the teacher heard while passing her door, which despite the owner's repeated admonitions she had decorated with an India-ink drawing of Pisces. What stood out most was her belladonna scent.

Once he had entered the elevator, he forgot about the gypsy woman. Which was all to the good. Downstairs in the hallway he avoided Bogger, the porter, a lickspittle with light hair who was pretending to sweep behind the glass partition separating the restaurant from the hotel entrance.

What did the teacher look like in the midday sun amidst the holiday makers, balloons, and trams? Hard to say. Full of wonder, most likely. Composed, to be sure. As he had been for the most part during his thirty-seven years. What was the sea like? Booming quite loudly amidst the shouts of children and their parents. Yet one could tell that up close it would flow more smoothly than the noise on the esplanade seemed to indicate. That the ripples down by the sand would be milder than the waves the teacher saw from the esplanade. The teacher squinted into the strong light, having slid his sunglasses – his students must have made fun of them, cheap and unfashionably mica-framed as they were – into his thick hair, which he wore long because his ears stuck out so. "Tacks," his father had once said. "Stick a few tacks in your ears before going to bed and in a few months you'll get up one morning to find them looking as they should – small and Greek, smack against your skull."

Amidst the hostile crowd with their naked thighs and peeling shoulders, their sand-covered knees, eyebrows, and hair; through their iodine-turbid gestures and voices, their hula-hoops, the grandfathers in tennis shoes, the fathers in green visors, the children gleaming with oil; past one of the twelve ice-cream carts (two nuns and one fisherman licking), he made his way along the esplanade, which was yellow and composed of smooth, neatly jointed hexagons for the girls roller-skating along it. Opposite the beach and the channel of the inlet, which had been turned into a harbor by means of a breakwater that was regularly, every five or six years, destroyed by storms, stood a sandstone ship's captain, the back of his head on a level with the houses' second stories. If one viewed him from the esplanade, one would see his buttocks squeezed together; if one viewed him from the water – from a boat of schoolchildren or tourists, from a two-man canoe – one would soon – no, immediately – notice the innocent smile with which the sandstone Mongoloid head (smooth as an acorn, of course) stood watch over town and sea and the sailors and fishermen, commemorated beneath his feet, who had drowned during the wars of 1914–18 and 1940–45.

In his involuntary perturbation the teacher pictured the beach the previous winter: the hotel façades with their shutters lowered, the

abandoned embankment, the pits with the rubble's last remains, the hulking remains of the Hotel Titanic with its two thick-lipped caryatids; he recalled walking through it all (not hurrying through, as he was now) and once or twice, in the cavity of cold the wind blew into his mouth, murmuring, daring to murmur: "Magic. Casements opening on the foam of perilous seas . . ." then reciting the lines – and getting them hopelessly wrong – a while later in his fourth-year class so that it was the botched lines the bleary-eyed class wrote into their notebooks. The only thing the professor had any success with – he had been used to it for years now – were descriptions of the drowning Shelley, the coughing Keats, the dead broke Michael Reinhold Lenz. "And now listen very carefully, ladies and gentlemen, to how the poet seeks to convey the song of the nightingale in his words . . ." They recognized the sounds: syllables became chirps, warbles. They imitated birds, puffing out sentences to the beat of the teacher's index finger. This, together with the lectures he gave them on his highly personal technique of English breathing, helped them when they went out dancing in the evening and sang along with American tunes on the jukebox.

The teacher was on his way to school. He did not so much as glance at the dike, now an esplanade for foreigners. Through the park, with families playing miniature golf, to school. Along Franciskus Bree Street, where he had lived during the first year of his marriage – two rooms, no bath, creaking bed, cauliflower stench – to school. Along the inner quay. Past the warship Antoinette, where sailors on deck above the rusty plates were doing their exercises, a dull, tame art of war. Past a boat unloading flour or fertilizer. The teacher walked under the crane near the truck where two workers, white with powder, were stacking the sacks. One of them, the younger, said, "Ahoy there, pretty boy!" Bright red, the teacher raced across the street through the traffic, clutching his briefcase to his ribs. This side of the bridge, beyond which two warty cathedral spires soared, the sails of the Belgian Yacht Club fluttered before him. The Reverend Slosse, Religion, raised a fleshy hand to him as he rode past on his bicycle, revealing a blue-and-gray-checked undershirt in the sleeve of his cassock. "Hello there, Mr. de Rijckel! None too early, I see." And the calves in wrinkled black stockings beneath the inflated robe pedaled on. Occasionally, when the slope was especially steep – at the Albert Bridge, for example – some pupils would push the Reverend Slosse up the hill to the bystanders' cheers. Then the Reverend Slosse would take his feet off the pedals and, once on the bridge, give a triumphant wave of farewell. The Reverend Slosse was frequently seen bicycling with his hands behind his back. He was also generous with his marks. And greatly loved. Lucky man. How do we know? The teacher knew. From time to time the Reverend would sit in the teachers' room between classes, read his newspaper, and smoke his three-franc cigar, holding it

upright, twirling it between his thumb, index- and middle-finger and staring at the ash with such undisguised pleasure that it made the teacher uncomfortable. He did not dare ask, “Reverend, what makes you tick? What’s burning inside you? How can you be so provocatively calm, so offensively serene here in the teachers’ room?” The plump, rosy face would, the teacher knew, have replied as gently and compassionately as he would have to an entering pupil: “Trust, friend de Rijckel,” or “Faith, amice.”

Once in the playground, a large skating rink, the teacher pulled himself up and took on the bearing of someone who has been spied upon, ridiculed, and overburdened, and crossed the courtyard and the bleats of the youngest pupils accordingly. There stood Nouda, Latin and Greek, wringing his hands; there came Kurpers, the Nose, Geography, neck forward, looking for his next class. Kurpers, the Nose, Geography, was usually late and would make a beeline for any line of pupils as yet un-shepherded. The teacher had been late three times in the four years he had been working at the school, and three times the principal had, perhaps because the bell had rung twice, sent his pupils off to the classroom. What is more, the teacher had established that when he had no morning classes, as was the case today, the principal never put in an appearance on the playground. As if the only reason for him to turn up were to catch de Rijckel, English-German. As if, when there was no chance for him to humiliate anyone, he preferred remaining in his office, that glass cage emanating from the façade like a cubic wedge. Up there, invulnerable, he kept an eye on everything. Though he was less invulnerable there than he was when he moved among us, up close, all but a teacher himself, with his placid, wrinkle-free face aimed at us, each one of us, at everything.

The teacher went over to the principal, who was standing next to Nouda, Greek-Latin. The two seemed to be sharing a funny little secret.

“De Rijckel,” said the principal.

Nouda, Latin-Greek, who never greeted anyone, asked him whether he had seen the floods in Denmark on television. The principal shook de Rijckel’s hand but kept his glove on, as he did not with the other teachers. Without releasing the principal’s hand, the teacher thought, “What’s come over me? What’s happening to me?” The principal disengaged his hand and headed for the main entrance with a springy step.

The teacher went up to his class and the line fell silent. He turned and heard them following him up the stairs, the boys dragging the soles of their shoes, the girls clacking their heels. They did not mimic him, as they often did Malaise, Chemistry, whose waddle they occasionally carried to such extremes that a band of epileptics climbed the stairs behind him, jerking and moaning and swaying. They never teased him either. That sometimes bothered him. And sometimes he caught himself wanting to ask them what nickname they had devised for him, because no one in the teachers’ room seemed to know. He had thought up all sorts of nicknames for himself, crude and offensive names, but for some reason none of them seemed appropriate. Besides, it was not always possible to account for a nickname’s origin. Why was Camerlynck, Physical Education, called the Föhn, and Miss Maes, Assistant Principal, the Nose when she had a perfectly ordinary nose? The teacher had been ashamed of what he came up with while engaged in the search: there was something humiliating about seeking a nickname for oneself, about reducing, confining oneself to, defining oneself by a single physical attribute or trait. Moreover, of all the names he had thought up for himself that evening (he felt a bit like an author seeking a title for his book), the only one that stuck in his mind was the last and, so it seemed, most appropriate, just before he climbed into bed, dead tired, and gave up. Prick. Prick de Rijckel, English-German.

But for Kurpers, Geography, Nose seemed perfectly natural. The man was a drunkard who had once stood fifteen minutes at a classroom door trying to get the key into the keyhole and then sputtered when it went in too far, “I can do it, you little bastards. I can do it.” Later he fell asleep, his head on his elbows, for the duration of the class. One of the pupils reported the incident, but the principal scarcely held it against him.

The teacher walked up and down the aisles giving a dictation. The group – mere names, voices, homework, and marks to him – wrote it down. Why this class and the others thought of him as an exception was a riddle to him. He would never know. He was perspiring. Wondering why, he wiped the sweat away. Weighing his good points against his weaknesses, comparing them with those of the other teachers and with those of people outside the school – his few acquaintances, his ex-wife, for instance – was of no help. Nobody told you a thing about it. And you could hardly ask. He was strict. Yes. But Camerlynck, Physical Education, was strict too, and that didn’t stop the pupils from behaving normally with him, stroking his sleeve,

flattering him, telling on others, which never happened to him, Prick de Rijckel, English-German. He was an exception. A disagreeable, brutal word. No, he was no exception. He had noticed a similar situation before, a few years, two years earlier, when Tienpondt had come as a substitute teacher. Tienpondt, Mathematics. He played on the municipal soccer team, which in principle should have made him popular, beloved, respected. He had even tried to cash in on his glory by devoting the first fifteen minutes of the class to a technical commentary on the previous Sunday’s match, but it hadn’t worked, and – perhaps out of sympathy for someone in the same boat – he had told de Rijckel about the inexplicable indifference on the part of the pupils. “I feel no resistance,” he had said, adopting a term used in connection with gauging a team’s defense capabilities. The teacher had forgotten his response at the time in the reading room. Probably something about independent coexistence . . . perhaps something about marriage as an analogous phenomenon . . . in terms of which . . .

The dictation was over. He went to the board and wrote a text for the class to translate. On the roof of the gymnasium some workmen were dragging a cable through the sky, the melody of a march wafting up from below.

The teacher floated through the day, vowels elongating, classes taking him from fifth-form science to third-form classical, the hordes in front of him docile, stammering out answers, at home in the conventions of their customary enemy camp. He had wiped the board for the umpteenth time with a clammy, ill-smelling rag, then rubbed his hands dry, and tossed the little balls of gray grit into the waste-paper basket when, a few minutes before the bell was due to ring, the principal came into the room with a newly lit cigarette in his mouth. The teacher watched him tweak Verlinde’s fat cheek and move to the back of the room, where he waited motionless, without a nod, sign, or word. Would it have been too much trouble for him to go up to the podium? Yes. But because the teacher had frozen, the principal finally nodded: Yes, yes, you fool, you can dismiss the class before the bell. Just get it over with and come over here. Chop-chop! The avid, clean-shaven face bit into a piece of toffee.

At a signal from the teacher the pupils shut their desks with less noise than usual, stood up more calmly, and trooped out, whispering, into the corridor. While the teacher closed a window in the empty classroom, the principal said that there was a meeting this evening and that the speaker (he himself! the principal! the guest speaker!) needed to be introduced. The professor replied that he had to oversee the study period from six to seven. You’ll have plenty of time, said the principal, aware that the teacher was divorced and ate quick dinners in cheap restaurants.

The study hall was lower than the playground, a glass-walled basement room cut off from the vast, endless field by a brick border. The teacher, motionless on the podium, did the newspaper crossword

puzzle and watched the sun go down over the school rooftops. The lights went on, turning the harmless room into a poison-green aquarium. Pens scratching, paper rustling, sweaty air, chalk dust, heads bent – the teacher would have liked nothing more than to stay there until it was totally dark. He felt like going to the kitchen to ask for a cup of coffee, but they were always ready to suspect you of trying to save a penny at the expense of the local or state government, and he asked himself, "What's the matter with me?" After a long interval three unruly rhetoric pupils made it clear to him in the obvious nonchalance with which they stood and began talking that it was now seven. Another teacher would have made a biting, arrogant remark like "You leave your seats, gentlemen, when I say so and not a minute sooner," and the principal would have said nothing but "Gentlemen," but the example of the gangly older boys was followed by the entire class before the teacher knew what was happening, so he simply rolled up his newspaper and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. He thought of tossing a lighted match down the hole in the center, but the metal cylinder had pinched the paper too tightly and there were too many orange peels in it to allow the fire to catch; besides, it was on a cement floor. Pushing his way through the pupils, whom he easily dispersed with an unambiguous growl, he moved towards the cool fresh air.

Rid of the shoulderless horde, he headed for the hotel, listless, bent, like a man ten years his senior. I'm going on forty already. He met no one he could nod to on the way. He gave the women a scruffy eye and bought cigarettes at an Albertdijk tobacconist's. The man behind the counter informed him there would be a crowd at the Pavilion that evening and into the night and, nibbling on something with his front teeth, pointed out it was a good time to have rooms to rent, because there would be men changing their clothes and their women three times before dawn. Then in an unprecedented gesture he made the teacher a present of two boxes of matches.

Just as the perpetrator of a crime of passion may sometimes unwittingly recognize the place where he will later lay hands on his unwilling fiancée, so Victor-Denijs de Rijckel, teacher, walked past the Pavilion that evening. There were posters in all the windows. The French and Belgian flags were flying over the dome. A gigantic white rabbit with two human eyes (bought from an optician? with a practice specializing in one-eyed patients?) was dangling on shiny nylon wires from the neo-gothic arch of the entrance. Their irises reflected the light perfectly; the white was reminiscent of milk, skimmed milk, with blue highlights. The rabbit also had whiskers under its nose – these too of nylon but gilded – and a tail tipped with an electric light. The rabbit was moving even though there was no wind in the city. It had probably just been hung up and given a poke by a playful worker. The rabbit laughed. While the teacher was admiring the animal's fur – in the orange neon light the hair seemed modeled out of clay – he suddenly imagined for some reason that its inside had been made true to nature as well, that it contained a soft, bubbly mass, and that it could easily slip from the wires, or the wires from the arch, fall with a thud, a heavy, wet, warm cushion meeting its skull and the pulp dripping out over its ears and the angel-hair of the nylon wire in its eyes. Then the teacher left the entrance behind. In The White Sea he all but gulped down the special of the day. The waitress, as usual, regaled him with stories about her husband, who belonged in a monastery: What can you do with a man who does nothing but dream of sailing to Iceland, of spending whole months there? Throwing away his marriage for a couple of herrings. At break-neck speed – as if in a silent film: since leaving the school, no, since he had seen the white rabbit swaying over his head, he had felt an overwhelming need to hurry – he skimmed the newspaper; too fast; the words ran into one another.

When he got back to his room – whom might he catch in what act? whom might he punish? – the sea, though visible all those floors down only by its whitecaps, was rustling audibly; tourists were calling to one another; sloops were coming in. He made a cup of Nescafé with the lukewarm water from the tap and sipped it on the bed. There was a rattling coming from the gypsy woman's room. He stared down at his briefcase, a gift from his wife when he was starting out as a substitute teacher. The grainy coffee stuck to his palate and lodged between his teeth. He walked to the door in his socks, then to the gypsy woman's door, where he knocked on the belly of a fish carrying its fins high like a cock its crest. He could hear furniture being moved

about inside.

"Oh," she said, and came out with a cry of joy that struck the teacher as perfectly misguided. "I just knew you'd come."

"Today?" he asked.

"Today or tomorrow," she said.

Was this a bad time?

"Well . . ." She was still standing at the door.

Or was he inside by then? I was inside by then. I'm sure of it.

The teacher said he wasn't feeling well. She said no wonder: Jupiter and Saturn were in the way.

"Saturn, my foot!" said a sailor, unasked, sitting on the bed pillow, his back against the wall. He was playing with his long, white feet and wiggling his toes.

"Why not?" said the teacher, still near the door, fearing the gypsy woman would get out her charts and star maps while that sailor was still there energetically scratching his toes.

"Just a second," she said, and did in fact head for the cabinet, but at this heated, difficult, unholy moment he mumbled, "Why don't I come back some other time."

Her belladonna eyes, her delicately painted, wax-like face said, "Yes, some other time. Right . . ."

"Some other time, my foot!" cried the sailor. "Here, take a seat, pal!"

"He's my nephew," said the gypsy woman. She touched her two-hundred-and-eighty-times-colored-and-decolored hair, which had taken its definitive form in the twenties, and said, with lips made up – no, lacquered – into a forty-year-old heart shape, that he was in for a difficult time as a Ram now that Saturn . . . "Watch out for Scorpio," she said, her Prussian blue eyelids with their prickly lashes covering her eyes, "though the Moon today . . ."

"My mother," thought the teacher.

A duly warned man was now walking the streets, though how much did he know? The path to the premises of Our House – where the Association for Flemish Culture was to hear the well known lecturer, pedagogue, and head of the Friends of Music, the principal of our secondary school, Dr.

Verbaere, speak on the function of classical music in our society – would have taken the teacher through the park, but that was not the path he took. He forced himself to walk slowly, stopping at every shop window, every café, stopping and gaping. At one point (it was twelve past eight) he found himself walking with one foot in the gutter and the other on the sidewalk. What was the matter with him? Even as he clutched the two matchboxes he had been given by a tobacconist for the first time in his life, he asked a passerby in German for a light, then scurried up the spiral of dusty sandstone steps, rounded at the corners, to the lobby of the Pavilion. A man was standing behind a partition made of fir, holding a roll of tickets in his open hand, ready for the discus throw, and said sleepily that it was much too early, nobody came before ten. "If that early." His serious head, under a paper party hat with "Be sociable. Have a Pepsi!" written on it in English, was cocked at a slight angle. "I've never known anyone to come to the White Rabbit Ball before ten. The idea!"

The teacher moved on past three guards wearing the same party headgear and talking over Almeida's chances in the trotters' Grand Prix, past Coronation Hall, past the Hall of the Spanish Court. The ball was evidently an important affair: servants, workers, maids, and waiters were hard at work. Supplementary lighting was being installed in Renunciation Hall, and a group of angrily muttering technicians was putting up a stand for television cameras. The teacher hesitated, turned back. Then, having sunk into one of the dark green couches in the reading room – the artificial leather made his trousers stick to his skin – he leafed through a local newspaper and fell asleep. He did not wake up until a little girl in a Tyrolean skirt sat down next to him and bit into an apple.

Up. Out. Into the street. There the smell of the sea was much more penetrating than in town. The dance halls were nearly empty. In every room in every street people were trying on party clothes. "It's too late," the teacher said out loud, and thought, "I'm starting to talk to myself out loud." "No one," he said, "can change his outfit, his hairdo, or his face any longer; the ball is about to begin; the die is cast. And the art lovers' meeting is underway; there is no way out; they have long since stopped looking for the man who was supposed to introduce the speaker. And yet . . ." Up. Onward. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," said the teacher, hugging the façades of the buildings as he passed. "Before I introduce this evening's honored speaker, I should like to point out several facets of his moral make-up. For morality plays an important role in his make-up. Not only is he stingy, sleazy, difficult, dishonest, and spineless but also and nonetheless, consequently in fact, even manifestly, I dare say . . ."

A woman answered. She was wearing a fur. In this season. Yes. She claimed her dog had run away, a small yellowish bitch, chamois-

colored actually, a light tobacco-brown, you might say, wearing a

collar with little bells. "Sorry," said the teacher.

He joined the woman, calling "Mitsuko!" When Mitsuko failed to come, he gave up and sat on a stone bench in the park next to two fishermen and a maniac in glasses tapping a rolled up map of the city on his knee. The rays of the lighthouse reached both the last tourists and the first arrivals to the ball, while tangos filled the darkness of the park. Eight identical grass-green vans rode past, swerving gracefully as a virginal, discreet young woman's voice sounding right next to him yet coming from the first of them recited:

Tonight at the White Rabbit Ball

Drink the wine that has all in its thrall.

Saint George Wine from the south

Plants a kiss on your mouth

Pure and warm like the sunshine in fall.

The teacher wished more than anything that a few or even just one of his pupils would happen past, saunter along the other side of the street, for instance, running an index finger along the ribbed window sills. Then that day's feud could not help but come out into the open. And he'd tell him a thing or two! "Is that what you call an analysis of the second chapter of *Das Leben eines Taugenichts*, young man? Well then, we'll just have to return to it tomorrow morning (the blood vengeance would once more be postponed). Wir sprechen uns noch!" But he didn't get the chance to tell him off.

The trams ran less frequently now. Then, ladies and gentlemen of the Friends of Music currently listening to your guide and speaker, then the teacher stepped into a shop that usually sold souvenirs –

ashtrays with the cathedral in tin, seashells with the Dover Packet painted on them, embroidered depictions of fishing sloops – and there, from a jumble of giant bumpy heads, Ku Klux Klan hoods, pointed hats, balloons, and Chinese lanterns, he bought a velvet domino. The salesgirl put the thing on him, and he glanced at himself in the mirror, took a step towards the stranger, went even closer, not recognizing the strange red eyes, those cold, aloof mussels between their slits, eyes that belong to nobody, no one. He quickly pushed the mask onto his forehead. His face had changed. He stared at it. In the light from the ceiling neon fixtures and the electric bulbs shining in some of the masks he suddenly discovered never-before-noticed nicks of shadows in his face, thick notches even, as in a print made too dark. A teacher of the dark arts. He bared his teeth, and the notches wrinkled. The salesgirl was used to the solitary game and never disturbed her customers while they were at it. The wonder they felt was her daily bread. He made a rabbit face and nibbled, screwed up his face into a grimace of fear so extreme that the black velvet membrane slipped back down from his forehead and prevented him from seeing. Outside he kept an eye out for the little yellow dog, Mitsuko, but no bells tinkled anywhere. The calm, dolphin-like sloops were still sailing in from time to time, their snouts grazed by the skittish lighthouse lamp. It was now hours since the principal had launched into his talk.

The teacher drank two glasses of beer in the company of some men discussing the Tour de France: Belgium had entered thirteen potential world champions. There was also talk about an Antwerp man who had been washed up on the beach, having disappeared the week before and drowned since then. He fingered the shriveled corpse of the mask in his pocket and stroked the velvet against the grain, then twisted an index finger in his eye. The wife of the café owner asked about her son's conduct in school. Franciskus Doelman, age twelve.

The teacher reassured her that with a bit more energy Franciskus Doelman, age twelve, would go far. Did that mean her only son was lazy? No, no. Though is laziness an illness or a vice, Mrs. Doelman? She said, while putting on nail polish, that Franciskus Doelman was good at gymnastics: they sometimes exercised together, in the morning, following along with the radio.

The teacher, who rarely drank, felt the place where the mask had rubbed against his face growing warm. Drinking his fourth glass of beer, he studied a mermaid on the wall. She was about to slip off her rock in an attempt to grab a bottle of cherry-red liquid that was one and a half times her size; there was a nondescript white bump between her thighs and scales, and a farmer was plowing his lava-rocky land in the mist beyond the hills. The café owner's wife blew on her nails while glancing pensively at the teacher. It was an exciting moment: the teacher was all worked up, burning, all atingle, feverish. What was going on? Just like that, on a Friday in mid-August.

Three seagulls paused in mid-flight and swooped down before the threshold of the café. That must have held a significance begging to be revealed. Three seagulls – fat, white, waddling. I don't even need to draw them on my door, he thought; I can just nail them up, the sign of the Seagull. The hotel owner can't object to that. What he accepts in a gypsy woman he can't deny me, an English-German teacher with an advanced degree in Germanic languages, thirty-seven, divorced, clean police record.

Though a real seagull with entrails and blood hanging on my door would never be as attractive as the two Pisces chasing each other on hers, bound together, gill to gill, and the ribbon decorated with Hebrew letters. The fish ribbon is not unlike the tube used to refuel bombers in mid-air. When will they take off? The alarm can sound at any time over there in Cottesmore, and in the two minutes allotted the three elements – pilot, plane, and nuclear warhead – will come together and they'll make the forty-five-minute flight to a pre-determined

destination, eggs ready to drop, and if no command is radioed to them, back they'll go, fat, white, docile gulls, and swoop down near the village with its clay farms and straw roofs and children walking to school in Cottesmore.

The teacher ordered a sixth glass of beer, this time a Brussels geuze.

"De Snip?" asked the café owner.

"De Snip?"

"De Snip. The best brewery for geuze."

"Fine," said the teacher. "Give me a Betelgeuze."

"Betelgeuze? What's that?"

"It's Arabic," said the teacher. "For 'shoulders of Orion.' "

"Who are you trying to kid?"

The teacher was ashamed of himself.

At five to eleven, after studying himself with approval in the window of a furrier's, the teacher bought an entrance ticket (elegantly torn from the discus that the cocked-headed ticket-taker was still brandishing) and waded through the bead portière that gave access to the White Rabbit Ball. Chaos reigned, an ordered chaos, according to plan, yet here, there, and everywhere – chaos. Five rooms, five orchestras. Five doors opened onto the round hall, and exotic flowers in the form of a letter surrounding a light flashing scarlet topped each doorframe, the five letters over the five

doors making up the word geluk, luck. During a feverish Viennese waltz in room L the teacher took in the fact that he was not the only one wearing ordinary street clothes, though most of the people who were pursuing one another in a complex but decipherable ballroom exercise in desire and escape had procured the necessary accoutrements and respected the prescribed ritual. He went back to the main hall, where five different styles of music were crisscrossing and the crowd was the thickest. It was as if man-in-disguise felt more at ease where no clear (loud, demanding, offensive) rhythm could be discerned.

The teacher hopped his way through the mazes of the calypsos and cha-chas of room G, the waltzes of room L, the Dixieland of room E, the highly viscous tangos of the room with the horseshoe, whose lamp had broken, and on through the fox-trots of room K and the shouting, the babbling, the running, the whining, the stomping, the sweat and the leaps, the squealing and howling of the entire province plus assorted visitors from the capital, grazing women's backs and backsides and heading – suddenly free from the constraints of his daily hotel-school-hotel geography – towards the regular dull pounding of a wooden hammer on something. Beyond the last room, near the toilets, he found a small man surrounded by four guards and, standing on a ladder supported by two bellboys, hammering boards together to form, as he put it, a parapet to enable a TV cameraman to shoot the ball from an unusual angle. The guards kept at the man to get on with the work and cut the gabbing. Women in Louis XV, Egyptian, and Mexican costumes crowded together giggling at the door of the ladies' room. Everyone, everything had to be upbeat on a night like this! It occurred to the teacher that Fontainas, History, would have his work cut out for him. He would surely have discharged an endless, indignant stream of nasal commentary on the costumed dancers, pointing out the guesswork, errors, and gaps in the historical get-ups of those shameless amateurs who just like that, all feeling, no research, tried to make their dreams come true. Seven Marie Antoinettes, the teacher counted, three Charles the Fifths, several Neros. Yet Fontainas, History, as overwhelmed as the teacher, would more likely than not have forsaken his professorial pretensions before long and peeled off his official status as he would the wrapper from a sweet and (more sprightly than the teacher could ever be) danced like a schoolboy with the most anachronistically accoutred floosies!

Tarantella, tella, tella. Line dances filled the hall. The waiting, swaying ladies by the ladies' door were snatched up by foreigners and disappeared into the oscillating rows. The mask the teacher bought was too small for him: the cardboard chafed his temples; his eyes teared. But since everyone kept his mask on, so did he, and thought: is the whole lot of them crying or had they carefully tried them on weeks ago? And all at once he was absolutely certain: Fontainas, History, would show up in one of the few historically accurate costumes because he approached his appearance as a competition whose outcome (for pupils and teachers) led from level to level all the way to honors. Fontainas, History, would not give him – Rijckel, English and German – the time of day here. He would abandon, betray him. An unbearable thought.

A dragon ambled past, its six legs wrapped in black wool beneath a copper-colored cardboard belly, its head bobbing. And here and there amidst the mobile image-park, in the heart of the horde's painted rags, the teacher hopped his step, a cross between folk dance and quadrille, bumping into classical waltzers and mud-hipped jitterbuggers alike. He thought, this frantic teacher on this Friday night, that he should do this more often, and downed three whiskeys for three times the price of a private lesson for the little ones, three times the price of a grammar session with fat Hendrik Martens.

He had a conversation with a dwarf in a panther skin about the attendance this year as opposed to last. There were no really beautiful women, the dwarf opined, in contrast to last year, when –

remember? – a woman came with forget-me-nots pasted all over her body, and nothing underneath. The Pavilion boomed and seethed. The swirling cloaks of dancers of both sexes made a raging sea. The teacher collapsed onto a couch in a niche transformed into a gazebo, smoked three cigarettes, and rubbed a finger between the mask and his clammy forehead and wet eyebrows. There were streamers among the paper vine leaves and plastic tendrils, and each time an indomitable couple bumped into the gazebo's fence a flurry of motley confetti snow fluttered down on them. Perfectly happy – like a hero who, at the very moment the gods have settled upon his downfall, reaches the apogee of pride and presumption – he lay back and placed his two feet on the wrought-iron garden table in front of him. Two figures in costume came up to him. One was shouting. The woman. And everything was so clear, seen, heard, experienced from so close (as if the teacher were in an intimate theater designed for a one-man audience with a private speaker aimed specially at his ears that toned down the tumult of the five rooms of geluk) that he lay motionless on his couch, in his murky bell-jar, invisible, cut off. The man was a portly, graying Venetian courtier with a silver mask ornamented by a triangle of gems at the bridge of his nose, a mons veneris of quartz. He was wearing a dark-red cloak with a black moiré lining. Knee socks. When he fell down next to her – what was she dressed as? – he was breathing heavily, his Adam's apple bobbing, his ring-bedecked fingers seeking support on the sofa back as he tried to make himself comfortable. Hemorrhoids or a weak heart. A bird for the cat. And the cat howling. About payment. About a price. And to make her demand more forceful, she did something the teacher would never have believed possible, not even here in the darkest, most intimate nook of the House of the White Rabbit, because midnight, the hour of nudity on command, was still a long way off: she removed her mask and held it in her hand. The courtier knew her, because he showed neither surprise nor alarm; he simply listened to her raging. Which went on and on. Granted, a price had been set, she said, but she was under no obligation to abide by it, she screamed.

The teacher in his cloud of invisibility dust watched the woman's one-man-show, her one-man gazebo theater. What was she dressed as? What part was she playing? What character? It was a nineteenth-century costume, authentic, accurately copied from documents, perfect and with such an abundance of detail that it was too precise, too lifelike, of a different order from a masquerade costume, with the result that it made a far more masked, more disguised impression than the dancers' wildest inventions.

She sat with her back to him and underscored each reproach with a flick of the mask. She wore a corset pulled tight over her ribs, a thick leather belt not unlike the straps motocross racers use to support their backs, a starched pink dress that reached just below the knee, and black boots made of weather-beaten leather and iron heels like the pens children write with in village schools. Her back was bare and decorated with six painted beauty spots. She had pearl-tipped hairpins in her chestnut-brown hair. A dark, austere, subdued figure. An overwhelming, coarse, common voice. George Sand? The Countess Potocka? She had someone in mind, that was clear, and now she was letting go of the performance like an actress when the curtain falls, vacillating between the role and the dressing room. The courtier was talking to her. He was barely human in the eyes of this actress, but he stood his ground. What did he say in the direction of the teacher, of the far-off, dancing-distant public? That he didn't understand her. That he'd done everything for her, spoiled his whole evening for her, ditched his friends – and they were having a ball now (the way he said "ball" it sounded like a sometime contagious disease), that she had no right, a deal was a deal and couldn't be changed. The woman's scent was: vanilla. The courtier got ready to pounce, got all excited, mouthed angry words, brushed away smoke clouds. And only then did the teacher notice there had been a mirror opposite him the whole time and he was sitting in it, a young philistine wearing a suit off the rack (black flannel, bought with Elizabeth the first year we were married, she was proud of it, I looked English, she said, the dimwit!) and a stupid black mask. He said out loud he hoped they

would excuse him, he hadn't meant to eavesdrop, he was just catching his breath, it was his heart, he had a dilated aorta. They did not hear him. Next to him, the merrymaker, he saw her, with her broad shoulders, her long neck and clearly outlined jugular vein, her painted face, white as chalk but with coal-black eyes, the lasciviously puckered lips that said to the courtier that she was sorry, that he should go back to his friends now to have that "ball." Whereupon she turned away from her attacker. She put her right boot with its cracked instep up on the garden table, and the skirt parted willingly, falling open near the chalk-white thigh, the shiny knee-cap, and the calf, which ended in

the moleskin border around the boot. Her black leather glove stroked the knee; three fingers of her hand touched the inner thigh.

The courtier yawned.

"Jew-boy!" said the woman, jumping up and running out of the gazebo. The courtier wiped the sweat from above his mask and dried his hand on his poorly fitting wig, revealing gray hair along the ears and neck. He nodded to the teacher, who stood and followed him They wended their way through Tyrolean circle dancers, creatures blowing into cardboard trumpets, and hundreds of Ku Klux Klansmen and Nefertitis.

Then, taking a side entrance the courtier seemed familiar with, they went out into the evening air. There they stood, like brothers, awaiting inspiration. Apaches, Napoleons, and monks bumped along on the platform of an otherwise deserted tram. The courtier pointed: the woman in the 1870s get-up was on her way to the esplanade, inviting pursuit. Her bare back, a wedge in her dress, was whiter than the white façades of the houses.

"She forgot her fur jacket," said the courtier in a hoarse voice. "Wait a second. Too bad!"

Under the hotel balconies, under the dimly lit sky she went her way until like a game animal awaiting a hunter's steps in a thicket she stopped in front of a tobacconist's. She turned. Stood legs apart. A man's voice called out to her from a window one flight up. She started off again. Slowed down. "Come on up!"

The courtier had a Persian lamb coat over his arm. They headed towards a Buick together. The motor started up as soon as the teacher had slipped clumsily into the front seat. The radio was on, the side windows rolled down. The courtier prattled a bit until they drew up to the woman, who quickened her step the moment she became aware of their proximity, the metal of her heels clicking against the stone sidewalk. The car's dance music accompanied her steps down the street and along the hexagonal-tiled esplanade and calm sea. A breeze from the water ruffled her hair, parted her skirt. And when she suddenly crossed the embankment and took hold of the railing with one black hand the car braked. The courtier pulled his mask down to below his chin, where it sat like a jewel-studded collar. He cursed. The woman looked straight at them, then walked down the steps from the esplanade to the beach. The two men in their streamlined coffin on springs watched the woman hurry under a thin moon over the wet sand to the breakwater, awkwardly, legs wide. She held down her hair with one hand; the other, though invisible, seemed from the way she hunched her shoulders to be resting on her stomach. The breakwater, a flash of lightning topped by wave crests, was now under her feet. She jumped up and down and waved her arms as if chasing away mosquitoes. The courtier shook and shuddered behind the wheel, his knees rubbing against the bumpy, curly folds of the shiny fur.