FLANDERS LITERATURE

Kaddish for a C*nt

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p 7-12

Wherever, whenever – you always turned up for your appointments early, never on time, but for Gianna's funeral you were late.

You don't know what exactly it was, this objectionable habit of yours of needing to arrive early to things like parties, the few you were invited to, but still – when the on-duty kitchen princesses were still hard at work on the cake and setting the table, and the bathroom had been transformed into a war zone where mothers and daughters fought over combs and mirrors, you were already there, sitting with a pot of flowers or some other unimaginative gift on your lap and the consolation of a hurried "we're-not-ready-yet-but-that-doesn't-matter-just-make-yourself-comfortable-in-the-armchair-while-I-quickly-get-changed", overcome with guilt in an empty living room, solemnly promising yourself that you would never again, but then really, never, ever arrive somewhere else too early.

You've suffered terrible cold in your life, and been drenched to the skin as well, of course, waiting for someone who wasn't due to appear at the rendezvous point for another half an hour.

There are the verbs "to have" and "to be", essential if you want to discuss existence, but you couldn't get by without the verb "to wait" either. Child psychologists can undoubtedly explain it, the typical reflex of someone who has suffered multiple rejection, blah-blah-blah, and maybe they had even come up with a scientific term for it, referring to a famous literary outcast, preferably from a children's book, the Oliver Complex, the Red Bird Flu, why not? You are convinced that you lost out on several jobs by arriving more than forty minutes too early for the interview and have almost come round to the opinion that you would have made a better impression on the interviewers and consultants by simply turning up late. You got on their nerves by appearing prematurely, you caused them extra work, morally obliged as they were to set you up in some waiting room or other and offer you a cup of coffee-machine coffee. Someone who's late is at least able to enjoy the narrative pleasures of fabricating an alibi; there are simply no excuses for being early, at least none that aren't completely ridiculous.

Miraculously enough, you paid more than adequate compensation for this trait later in life by living with women who never got ready on time and were still interrogating you about the colour of their nail polish long after you should have been sitting in the car.

"Do I look better in jeans or a skirt?" You said jeans. But as she was already wearing jeans, she was sure your choice was motivated by a need for speed and not by aesthetic considerations, whereupon she changed her habiliments again and you were obliged to pass judgement on a parade of skirts.

But for Gianna's funeral you arrived late and that was something you couldn't explain at all. You knew the way to the church of Slattern like the back of your hand, plus exactly how long it took to ride your bike there: twenty-four minutes; twenty minutes if you were willing to break a sweat; and half an hour max when an autumn wind was asserting itself in an unfavourable direction. But it wasn't even close to autumn. No hint of a breeze; a warm and sunny, beautiful June day. Ideal for playing Gustav Mahler at a funeral, *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n.* Or, perhaps an even more natural choice, Schubert, *Death and the Maiden*, the slow passage. It wouldn't be either, of course; children from homes don't get lowered into their last hole to the music of Mahler or Schubert. In any case, you couldn't resort to indecision regarding your choice of clothing as an excuse for arriving too late at a funeral for the simple reason that you hardly owned any. Convenient, really. And you had, with admirable foresight, hung the few appropriate clothes you did have over the back of a chair the day before. *The* chair, I should say, as you only had one. When visitors dropped by, you had to use the bed for seating purposes, which generated an intimacy that was sometimes advantageous and sometimes not. Anyway, your clothes. Black, naturally. The tradition of wearing black to funerals was already in decline, but you clung to the sombre shades of grief; weirdly enough, considering your general tendency to kick against all cultural certitudes. Your shoes were questionable. They were ordinary trainers. Though black. What's more you were excused because at the time an accident had turned you into an orthopaedic plodder who could hardly tolerate any other kind of footwear.

The crowning glory, of course, was your long raven coat, second-hand and one or two sizes too large. Much too thick for June, but that in itself was an expression of your sense of grief. So you thought. You probably still think so. You loved that coat so much you planned to wear it to all the funerals you would unavoidably experience if you slotted into the statistics for an average life expectancy. You were even going to wear it to your own funeral. God knows where that coat has got to now. Maybe where Gianna's got to too.

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arrival

in the pale

morning

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Shall we talk about the arrival in the pale morning on that pale square, where for now the pigeons were still quietly sleeping, though they would soon flock off again, harried by the first buses with the first people for the day's first commuter trains...? The few birds that were already awake on the gleaming cobblestones drove their beaks into yesterday's rain-sodden chips; the prostitutes within spitting distance on the Brussels road were bored and knitting at their windows. The railway station bars were still full of the smell of beer and piss, the brown-slobbered maggots in the ashtrays had time to stink a little longer, because somewhere a cleaning lady was still in bed, giving herself over to a dream as to a prayer, a dream in which she wasn't a cleaning

lady but in which she was finally the one who got to drop her cigarette butt on the floor and squash it flat with the toe of her shoe, in which she was the one who missed the urinal and sang as only the unhappy can sing when the first daylight starts to force its way through the morning mists and factory smoke. In which it was someone else who cleaned up her *filth.*

SARAH:

Funny that it starts off about cleaning ladies. You know, I did a test to be a cleaning lady once, because nowadays you have to do a test for everything. And my husband had already bought a frame for the diploma, on credit, so we could hang it up in the living room and dust it off when we were expecting visitors. But I flunked it. I was baffled. Come on, what's so hard about wringing out a mop? In the report on the house inspection, the one they read out in court, it said our house was a real pigsty. The house gave a neglected impression, that's how they put it: a neglected impression. I told the judge, I said, look, people who don't pass their driving test aren't allowed to drive a car, and now you come here demanding that I take a rag and buff up our flat, even though I didn't even get my diploma to be a cleaning lady. First the government department decided I was too thick to clean, and now this.

Sarah Smeekens. A newspaper that did not yet include her name blew across the pale square that pale and cursed morning like a paper bird that spread its wings but would never get any further than the gutter, where it would stay, drizzled wet, until it was picked up one last time, by a street sweeper. The stench from the nearby starch factory ignored the clock; it was the first thing the two of them smelled when they opened the doors of their Opel Corsa. The inconspicuous, far from spectacular start of a great event. Because they were going to do something in their lives, achieve something, and it would be discussed: an end, a grand finale that would long reverberate in the minds of the residents of this doomed town, and maybe even far beyond it.

That was why they sucked in the stench like a hostess gratefully burying her nose in a bunch of flowers. It was the smell in which they had been born, her in the year of the pig, him, a couple of years earlier, in the year of the rooster. But the stench in which they were born had been the same: a stench they must have already smelled in the womb, because it permeated everything. They'd smelled the starch factory when he pushed his fingers into her for the first time, eight years ago, on the Bolleweg, five streets from the pale square, and they were filthy, those streets. They were on the wrong side of the wrong river, where the black water of the dead Dender seeped into the cellars, and rats cleared the crumbs from the tables. People from the Bolleweg, that was them.

SARAH:

Sometimes I still feel them inside me, those first fingers. It was two at once and I thought, look at me now, I've got a bloody metalworker's finger shears inside of me. And then he said he didn't have a job at the moment and I was relieved. Because workers always have filth under their fingernails and I got enough inflammations as it was. A shame though that he was always biting bits off his nails. There were sharp edges on them that cut into me. But I was in love and the burrs on his fingernails were part of him. When he was finished I thought we should write our names in the grime that's stuck to all of the buses round here with our fingers, with a plus sign in the middle. Sarah, he asked, how do you spell that?

Exactly. Maybe she felt like a shining light that filthy morning, when the wind plucked at her hair and she could finally stretch her legs. They'd been driving around in the Opel Corsa all night, wandering from petrol station to petrol station, where they'd poured energy drinks down their gullets.

SARAH:

What I've heard about those energy drinks is they're made from caffeine and bull's sperm. That can't be healthy.

They'd read the names on the tarpaulins of the lorries, those ships of the concrete and the macadam: Houtnatie, Eurospedition, Vos Logistics, Thomassen Transport, on the road with your load, the poetry of transit, their transit. All roads lead to all roads, but that night they had to admit they were converging on that one point, that ashen square in front of the train station with its red chippie and its bus stops, the town where they had both spent and wasted part of their childhood, and the hotel where they rang the doorbell at half four when the sky still hadn't taken on the colour of a half-wrung mop.

SARAH:

Bull's sperm, my god.

We know that we originated in water. Has man remained a salmon? Designed to return to where he was spawned, to die where it all began? To mate in the ponds of his infancy? Anadromous, to put a fancy label on it.

STEFAAN:

Funny that you start off about that driving licence. The chairman of the jury couldn't let up about that either. Was the Opel Corsa registered? he asked. No, I said. Was it insured? No, I said, cause you'd have to be real dense to insure a car that's not registered. Did you have a driving license? No, I said, but I know people who do and I know for a fact it's no proof they know how to drive. Has the car been paid off? No, I said. I was starting to get the feeling I was there for a traffic offence. I didn't understand what the guy's problem was. If I wasn't planning on getting into a crash, why would I need to insure it? I mean, insuring a car for a car crash, surely that's premeditation?

Stefaan Cools is the name and he was right, he wasn't in the dock for a traffic offence. They called him Bolly. Bolly from the Bolleweg.

The hotel manager leant out of her bedroom window, a head of chiselled curls above a dressing gown, and saw them there. A man and a woman, a three-month-old baby, and a boy who was a little bit older and trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes with limp wrists. A bubble of pistachio-green snot had formed under his nose.

STEFAAN:

Good morning, I said, because I've always had a gift for explaining things. Good morning. There's four of us here. My wife and I and our two little kids. Do you have a room for us perhaps? It's for a couple of days. Our heating's broken at home.

The Gate Hotel was not yet open. The first train to Brussels was already thumping in the station, but the hotel was keeping its doors shut for a while yet.

STEFAAN:

Come back at six, you say? But we've got two little children here. It's freezing cold, we're tired and we're hungry...

Fine, OK, I understand. We'll come back at six. We'll drive around a little, it's warmer in the car.

It was January. In the Carnival City the same as anywhere else. The melancholy of Christmas and New Year's was still heavy in everyone's limbs. Once again the reviews of the dead and buried year had done nobody any good, and everybody had let their invariably serious resolutions dwindle away, although you couldn't say that of Stefaan Cools and Sarah Smeekens, who returned to the hotel at six o'clock to carry out their resolution for that year and all others, namely: to kill their children first and then, possibly, themselves.

Gwendoline Cools, the three-month-old daughter, weighing more or less five kilos, would leave the hotel in a body bag the size of a potato bag. Her mother had suffocated her by putting a pillow on her little face and then sitting on it with her full weight with the TV on. That was Wednesday, always a day of hope, nicely located as it is smack bang in the middle of the week. Saturday, Dominique Cools, the son and a little over seven precarious winters old, would be carried out of that same hotel room with livor mortis of just a few hours. He had been finished off with a pair of scissors, which his father had buried in his back while the boy sought the safety of his mother's embrace, lying on her belly and squeezing her hands and bottom and squeezing and squeezing until there was nothing left to squeeze.

SARAH:

If you think about it, dear Bolly, then it does have a certain degree of logic to it. What with me having done dressmaking and you being a metalworker until your eighteenth. In that sense nobody should be surprised about us finishing off our Dominique with steel scissors. Our lives came together in those scissors. A little bit of both of us.

STEFAAN:

It's a bit like Jesus, isn't it? He was nailed to a wooden cross. As a carpenter's son.

SARAH:

Spot on, there.

Spot on?

STEFAAN:

We wanted to get rid of our problems and thought the best way would be to wipe out our family. But it's not fair. There are people who make babies to save their marriage. Nobody objects to that. It's allowed. You can make babies for any reason you like. But somebody who does their babies in to finally escape their misery gets taken to court. Everyone's got it in for us.

At six o'clock on the dot the hotel manager copied Stefaan and Sarah's passport details into her guest register and, as she later stated to the police, failed to read anything disturbing in their faces. She was a great reader, not of books, but of faces. Every day complete novels passed by in the hotel breakfast room and very occasionally – in the form of a good-looking young guy in a tie who had come to the city of stench for work – a poem, or a novella, something along those lines. But something disturbing in the faces of those two? No, sir, unfortunately she didn't read anything of the kind. Of course, they were tired, but so was everyone, some from life and some from their job, and it was still early, the morning was still wallowing in its own gloom. She'd given them the largest room, because of the little ones. The room temperature was twenty-one degrees

Celsius. Baby Gwendoline would still have a body temperature of twenty-four degrees when she was carried out of the room three days later.

SARAH:

I know people who would pay good money to live somewhere where it was always twenty-four degrees.