

The Rumours

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An extract

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Dolf

Dolf Catrijse stands at the window with his back to the dining-room and the person sitting in the wicker chair with floral cushions, which has been Dolf's preserve for years.

That person is family. That person is his son, René, who has turned up out of the blue after an absence of almost three years and who is now occupying the chair by the stove as if he has never known it to be his father's rightful place.

Dolf's back in the blue-grey dustcoat is motionless. It is quiet in the house, and has been for the past half hour. Half an hour since René mumbled something about how hot it was. Unclear whether he meant the warmth of late summer or the humid heat of Africa, from where he has just returned.

Dolf asks himself whether he is being impolite to his son, turning his back on René in the uneasy, awkward silence. But he can't help himself; he can't look René in the eye. Never could, really.

Almost three years.

Last night, towards dawn, there had been a soft tapping sound against one of the shutters at the front of the house. Then a persistent scratching, like that of a hungry cat.

And Alma threw on her dressing gown, all of a flutter.

And from outside came a croaky, almost unrecognizable voice.

'Hey, hey.' (Not: 'Father, Father.')

And Alma wriggled her feet into her slippers and gave a joyful squeal as she shuffled towards the bedroom door, hurriedly as though she had been waiting even as she slept for that furtive noise in the night. 'It's him,' Alma said.

Him? Who?

‘René,’ she said, with that anxiously happy expression of hers which Dolf hadn’t seen for months.

It was him. The René of the old days, a bundle of nerves, a malicious, dangerous lad, and at the same time he was this burnt-out case, this haggard-looking person who had barely glanced at his father before dropping into the wicker chair in which he now sat. He wore a jacket with bulging breast pockets, tennis shoes stained with rust or dried blood. An army backpack stood leaning against his ankles.

He had slept in his clothes last night. He may have been lying on the wooden floor. Dolf had heard creaking and sighing.

Now Dolf sees his son reflected in the windowpane, like an unsharp newspaper photograph. Dolf himself has had his picture in *Het Belang van Waregem*, the local paper. On the front page, sitting next to Alma on their garden bench, with behind them the geraniums, the dahlias, and the back of the house. Both looking directly into the lens. Alma stern, Dolf with a startled grin. The caption said that they were god-fearing, hard-working parents, saddened by the lack of news from their eldest son René, who had last been sighted in the company of three other Belgian deserters on the island of Zanzibar in close proximity to the godless dictator Sheik Karume. And that the Catrijsse family prayed daily to Our Lady of Fatima that he might return unhurt in body and soul.

Dolf and Alma had seen white soldiers in Africa on television a couple of times. They were slinking through the bush, stooped over, when they suddenly came under attack from a hail of spears and arrows. They had shouted to each other in the West-Flemish dialect. One of those voices could have been René’s. The soldiers started running, flailing their arms, but none of them looked like René. Not the last one either, who couldn’t reach the helicopter in time and stayed behind, on his knees, with a dozen arrows sticking out of his back and neck.

The black assailants, who were shouting and dancing and firing their automatic pistols at the helicopter, were fourteen-year-old boys in women’s clothes, with straw-coloured wigs and Belgian kepis. Some of them wore white bras with bloody nipples painted on.

The morning remains dull and grey. Then the picture in the window wavers and blurs. The distorted figure rolls a cigarette, lights it, and a pungent, sweetish smell billows into the room. Dolf takes a last lingering look at his vegetable patch, the football field behind it, and beyond that the chimneystacks of the brewery. As though saying goodbye to a sense of order that is sure to be disrupted now that René is back. He turns to his son.

‘Mother has gone to the supermarket,’ he says. ‘Let’s hope she won’t forget our cigarettes. Because they are putting the prices up next week. The government begrudges us even the smallest of pleasures. That’s what you get with Catholics and Socialists governing in tandem.’

Dolf steps into the familiar dining-room, now filled with the sweetish smell.

Last night René uttered three sentences in total. They came out in short bursts, as though with difficulty. What he said Dolf was unable to make out, as the words were addressed exclusively to Alma, and had broken off into a fit of coughing.

‘René doesn’t want people knowing he’s here,’ Alma told him in bed afterwards. ‘He was dropped off at the house by a friend of his. I asked if it was anyone I know, if his friend was somebody from around here, but he kept mum. Like a dog before it snaps at you. He looks terrible. Goodness

knows what's wrong with him. The Congo is rife with hundreds of different ticks and worms. And malaria bugs. He stared around his bedroom if he'd never seen it before. Whereas we haven't touched a thing in his room since he left. Whatever I said or asked, he couldn't bring himself to reply. He fell asleep where he stood. What if he's got the sleeping sickness? I said to him: "There have been rumours about white soldiers fighting among themselves, that it's not just the negroes getting killed out there, but that you all get drunk and start shooting at each other. I couldn't sleep a wink when I heard that. And nor could your father, nor your brother Noel!" But he just carried on sleeping on his feet, with his backpack at hand. I told him we'd been to a talk at the municipal school and that Master Arsène had introduced the speaker, who showed us slides and told us all about the Congo and other faraway places, which was how we heard about white soldiers getting drunk to cope with their fear and then shooting at each other. The speaker said the negroes found this behaviour incomprehensible.

'I also told him that you'd dozed off during the talk and that I gave you a poke when the subject turned to cattle-raising in Africa, as I thought you 'd be interested to hear how the negroes cut a small hole in a cow's artery to drain off some blood, which they mix with milk and flour. The hole is closed off with mud.'

After an hour Dolf begins to worry. Not about René mutely staring at the dead television. About Alma. What's keeping her?

The traffic on the road is criminally dangerous. Alma's far too excited about her lost son's homecoming to take proper care, she'll be scooped up by a Swedish lorry, she's dumped in the middle of the road, she rolls over ten times, her shopping basket's flattened by a an oncoming car, and in a rising cloud of flour and caster sugar another car drives across Alma's chest and then over her skull.

Dolf asks René if he wants some fresh coffee. René shakes his head, screwing up his eyes.

He looks wilted, Dolf thinks to himself, that's the word, wilted like a whore who's been on the game for too long. Can that be our young René, the lad who stood in the kitchen and howled for a full half hour when Stan Ockers was fatally injured in that accident on the treacherously slippery cycle track at the Antwerp Sports Palace? Stan Ockers, holder of the world record for endurance . Fifty-seven kilometres an hour average speed, wasn't it? Something like that, anyway.

I'll have one more try. If he doesn't give me an answer he can drop dead for all I care.

'René,' Dolf says.

René grunts. That's a start, at least. Now for something to hold his interest. "Tell me, are those negroes any good with money?"

The boy, deathly pale, is listening to a sound from outside. He seems just about to reply when Alma taps on the kitchen window.

From the kitchen she calls 'Coo-eee!'. This is something she hasn't done for years, not since the wilful child left for his jungle, his desert, his murderous rampages.

'But the boy hasn't even had a coffee yet!' Dolf is taken aback by his wife's cheerful tone.

'I did ask him,' he says. 'Didn't I, René?'

'I bought some bananas,' says Alma as she sets out her purchases on the checked oilcloth - all the things she has splurged on for the sake of her heart's dear one, the bane of her life. Packets of biscuits, bars of chocolate both dark and milk, beer sausages, chewing gum, cigarettes for the whole family, five paper bags bulging with strange-looking fruits whose names Dolf can never remember. (There is even a fruit called Japapas. Or some such.)

'I could barely stop myself from telling everybody in the supermarket. And Nicole - you don't know her, she's only been there for a year, at the meat counter - well, Nicole looks at me and says: "Alma, nice to see you smiling." I say: "Me? When?" She says: "Right now, at my cash desk. Got yourself an admirer, have you?" I was bursting to tell her the news. Especially because one of her brothers has an office job at Kilambo. Or was it the telephone company?'

Alma has the same pale, cold eyes as René. Her other son Noel - my other son - has my eyes. My character too, worse luck. We're too good for our own good, Noel and me. They shit all over us and yet we say: much obliged. Take René. What he's put me and his mother through, it beggars belief. And yet, seeing him again looking such a miserable mess - it pains me. Whereas he's sitting there all grim-faced like in the old days, thinking about how he's going to twist my balls all over again. Because we'll be in for some trouble now with him back, and no mistake. Even if only because of that illegal stuff he smokes. All we need is for one of the neighbours to come into the shop and smell it and go straight to Officer Blaute and before you know it we'll have a police car coming round and there we'll be, with steel handcuffs clapped round our wrists, and back on the front page of *Het Belang van Waregem*.

'What shall we do about Julia?' asks Alma. Dolf can't tell who she's asking. René knows who Julia is, but he doesn't respond, aside from a faint frown appearing in the smooth forehead.

'We'll ask Noel when he brings the newspaper this evening.' Noting the frown, she hurries on, suffused by that stubborn maternal love of hers. 'Because we get the paper from Mijnheer Bijtteboer when he's done with it. Sometimes it hasn't even been unfolded.'

René's reply is a coughing fit.

'Do you think things look different here? The man from the brewery says we ought install strip lighting in the shop. It saves money over time, apparently...'

Over time. What Alma called the shop used to be their parlour. Dolf and Alma had cleared out the parlour in a fit of dumb, excited giggling. They had been married five years when they decided to open a shop selling drink. The sideboard was sold, the velvet drapes made into jackets for René and Noel, the cosy corner dragged up to the attic. Then up went the racks and everything was painted beige; a counter was supplied by the brewery. How many bottles of genever had they displayed on their glossy shelves in the first week? Five? Six? Half a dozen, probably. How many bottles of red wine? Alma had sought advice from the Right Reverend Lamantijn, who went to France every year in person to replenish his wine cellar. Bought an awful lot of *Sauvignolles* in those first couple of years. Only then did it start to sink in that most of the locals resented them. Even the villagers who liked them went to the small supermarket.

The *Sauvignolles* turned sour.

‘Tonight we’re having lamb and cauliflower in white sauce,’ Alma says. ‘Because you mustn’t think I’m going to cook rice or manioc. Unless you say: “Mother, I have this huge craving for the African food I got used to out there.” No? You know you only have to open your mouth, René, and I’ll get whatever you want. Just say.’

Over time, the shelves filled up again, the bell tinkled more often, the villagers lingered in the shop to gossip and Alma managed to find her way around the rules, instructions, regulations, taxes, and deductions. But she remained fearful of unannounced visits from the two dark-suited gentlemen from Customs and Excise with the law on their side, an elastic, unpredictable, incomprehensible law that could suddenly reinstate some idiotic rule dating from the far and distant past, whereby a customer could be stopped on leaving the premises and the shopkeeper heavily fined if the said customer had purchased fewer than two bottles of genever.

‘Believe it or not’, says Alma, ‘as I went past Café De Kroon I saw Master Arsène sitting there. I was dying to step inside and join him at his table and say: “Master Arsène, your brilliant pupil – no need to rack your brains as to who I mean – has come home, he’s back with us. Just shows how much he missed his parents.” It was on the tip of my tongue. But I stopped myself. As usual.

‘By the way, we had a visit from two gents, first I thought they were the Customs and Excise people, but they turned out to be plain-clothes policemen. They wanted to know your address. I said: “He’s abroad.” They said: “Oh yeah? Abroad you say, but where abroad?” They didn’t believe me when I said I didn’t know. “Has he gone to America? Asia? Australia? Or is he just in Europe?” I said: “I think he’s in the continent you haven’t mentioned yet.” “Madam Catrijsse,” one of them said, the one with the moustache, “you can’t fool us.” I said: “I’m sorry, but that’s all I know.” And I just stood there with my cheeks ablaze, a mother who doesn’t know where her child is, a child that won’t even give his mother his address or phone number.’

Over time, thinks Dolf, we’ll stop feeling ashamed for our son. Over time Alma will stop fetching and carrying for him over there, he who looks exactly like her, the person with the flashing eyes, the unwashed hair sticking out, the snooty silences.

Alma

Alma is irritated by Dolf. Not that he is to blame. I’m not myself, she thinks. Our Alma’s gone off her milk, as my mother would say in her Roeselare dialect. Alma is irritated by the cap on top of Dolf’s weatherbeaten head. The cap presses down on his ears so they seem folded over, it looks silly, how many times hasn’t she asked him to take his cap off indoors.

Alma is irritated by her own irritation. Why can’t she let herself be carried away by the joy she felt last night when she led her exhausted boy to his own old bedroom and his own made-up bed?

I got this from my mother. My mother and I don’t want to be consoled.

Why can’t I enjoy my time on this earth? I know the answer. I just never let it rise to the surface.

Shall I phone my mother? René was her favourite. He sat on her lap when the three of us went to Aunt Virginie’s eightieth birthday party. A tipsy man with goggle eyes sat facing us in the train. He never took his eyes off my mother while she looked out of the window as the allotments rushed by,

people's back gardens, railway platforms, factories plonked in the middle of the fields. The man wore a three-piece striped suit and a shiny gold wristwatch; just as we were approaching Dendermonde he laid two fingers on Mother's thigh.

'Madam,' he said, 'I have the honour of being acquainted with you.'

Mother went on staring out of the window. The train slowed down.

'And you, too,' the man said to me. 'You were a nurse during the war, if I am not mistaken. The Phoenix rubber factory. In Eschwege.' He rose to his feet, holding a small cardboard suitcase. 'You're quite right,' he said, 'to want to forget about all that. Hard times, they were.'

'Sir,' said Mother, without raising her eyes. 'Why don't you mind your own business.'

'Madam,' said the man after a pause. 'I have seen a thing or two in my time, but never a face as stuck-up as yours.'

'Sir,' Mother drawled.

'Yes, Madam, what is it?'

Mother dandled wide-eyed little René on her knee. 'Your face, sir, deserves to be shat on.'

The man nodded. He went on nodding. The station of Dendermonde slid into view.

'It's strange,' said the man, 'but someone told me that once before.'

My haughty, resentful mother is now a bag of bones, clattering dentures, dead skin. Cancer of the throat.

I'll give her a call later.

And René has eaten two slices of bread with boiled bacon; wolfed them down. Next he lights a crumpled, half-smoked roll-up which gives off a spicy smell.

'You should change your shirt,' Alma says. 'Give it to me and it can go in the wash. You can wear one of your father's for now.'

'No,' says René.

'Or one of Noel's.'

'No.'

'Have it your own way. But this thing could do with a wash and iron, surely.' Alma grabs a slip of the gaudy silk kerchief round his neck. René slaps her hand. The kerchief has shifted. Alma points to a purply-blue bruise on René's throat, a pansy outlined with ochre yellow.

'Have you been in a fight? Some café full of riffraff?'

'So long as it isn't about politics,' Dolf says. 'Politics drive people round the bend these days. Especially now, with that fat-boy Paul Henri Spaak in charge of Foreign Affairs.'

René adjusts his kerchief. He goes off to the kitchen, from there to the veranda and then down the gravel path leading to the vegetable patch.

The neighbours can't see him, unless one of the Agneessen boys is spying through the skylight. Dolf notes René's uncertain gait. The gait of a stranger.

Time was when Dolf first set eyes on the wrinkly, amber-yellow little head of this stranger in a hospital ward. Alma was sitting up in bed, propped up by six or seven pillows. She gave Dolf a sleepy smile.

'Well, what do you think?'

'Takes a bit of getting used to,' Dolf said. 'He's all yellow.'

'That'll pass.'

'Let's hope so.'

'He's ever so handsome, don't you think?'

'Yes, very handsome,' Dolf said. 'I can't believe he's mine.'

'He isn't.'

He scanned her young, shining features for a hint of fun and mischief. He saw the dark nipples through the damp nightdress. He knew he should play along with her; it was a side of her that would forever be strange to him.

'So whose is he then?' he managed to say

'Take a good look.'

'That nose.'

'Dolf, my father's got a nose like that. Go on, take another look.'

'The dimple in his chin.'

'Arsène the schoolmaster's got one of those.'

'Oh no, Alma, no, not Arsène, please.'

She laughed out loud.

'Come here,' she said, and flung her warm sleek arms around his neck, whispering something unintelligible. Then she said: 'You will never know,' and hooted shrilly in his ear. He cried out.

'Silly young folk,' the midwife said.

'Silly man,' Alma said. 'Just look at the baby's toes. He got those toes from you, and nobody else but you.'

René comes back into the room. I can't say I'm glad he's back, thinks Dolf. He scares me even more now than that time he did a runner and the national and local police force - for once in fraternal accord - went chasing after him.

'You haven't asked how your brother Noel is, not once,' Alma says. 'You used to get on all right. You'll hardly recognize him when you see him.'

'He's got a job now,' Dolf says. 'At the Bijttebier firm. Loading and unloading. He likes the work. He's outdoors a lot. Does him good. Now and then he helps out in the Right Reverend's garden, or drives him around when he's too tired to take the wheel himself.'

'Your father and I think he's courting. You'll never guess who.'

'Julia Rombouts,' says Dolf. 'She's coming round to pick him up to go to the cinema, or to a disco. She's taught him to dance.'

'I take a rather dim view of it all. It won't last, and then he'll be left high and dry. Which may not be a bad thing.'

Alma sniffs. Nobody is good enough for her two sons, good-natured Noel and wilful René. Like if Queen Juliana of Holland came into the shop and went down on bended knee with a cheque for five million Belgian francs in her bejewelled hand and begged us to allow René or Noel to marry one of her princesses, Alma would wrinkle her nose, thrust out her lower lip, and reply 'Your Majesty, I shall have to sleep on it. Because at first sight I'm not too keen on the idea.'

René clears his throat, pats his kerchief, presses two careful fingers to the bruise. He says: 'What sort of car does our Noel drive?'

Our Noel.

'The Right Reverend's car.'

'A Daf 55?'

'With one of those smart gear boxes?'

'Think so,' Dolf says.

René

My mother's wasting away, thinks René. She's shrunk, she who used to be so stately and upright. She has trouble swallowing, too.

For the fourth time she asks me if I'm glad to be back. How cramped their shop is! Four paces long, three paces wide.

They drink table beer.

The taste of my father's home-grown tobacco is sharp; sharper than I remembered when I lay thinking of it under the pitch-black sky of Bamako.

My mother wants to apply a poultice to my neck. I refuse yet again. She gives me a reproachful look. Which lasts four whole minutes; I know because I'm looking at my watch.

She is busy topping and tailing snow peas.

'Here, taste one. You didn't get those in the army, did you? Fresh snow peas? Did you? Tinned, maybe. Not fresh.'

The snow peas are fresh, young, juicy.

The night here is a quivery grey-black. Another twenty nights or so. Thirty. Thirty more daybreaks.

'Go on, scram,' hisses my mother. I'm too slow to react, so she grabs me by the sleeve and hauls me into the scullery

A dog, coughing, hesitating between coughing and yapping, jumps up against the counter and then against the scullery door.

'To heel, Georges! Heel, boy,' someone says. I recognize the voice, it belongs to Félicien, who must be at the entrance. I am crouching down behind the door.

'Well hello, Félicien,' my father says, adding a jovial, oily laugh. My father bows and scrapes to everyone, no distinction. It's all he has ever known.

'How are you, Félicien?'

'Can't complain.' The voice is insincere. There is the squeak of rubber boots.

'Well Félicien, how can I help you?' My mother, unbearably cheery.

'Alma my dear, I'll have half a litre of the Balegem genever. Because that French genever burns up my stomach. And you know we all have weak stomachs in my family. The least spicy food or the least aggravation is enough to make our gut shout for help. And I'm expecting company on Sunday, ten people or more, for the annual memorial service for our beloved late mother.'

'Will half a bottle be enough then, Félicien?'

'If they have any sense, Dolf, they'll bring their own drink. Georges! To heel! Heel I say!'

Georges the dog has pushed open the door, which was ajar. He coughs, slips into the scullery and sees me crouching down. Georges is a pasty-white Collie; he growls. I crawl out from behind the door, grab him by the scruff of the neck and squeeze his jaws shut with my left hand. He whines. I

squeeze harder and bring his head up close to my chin. I blow into his face. He whimpers like a hoarse child, shakes his wet nose, his wet teeth. I let him go and he scurries to the door.

‘Heel, Georges, heel.’

‘Well then Félicien, thank you again and much obliged. Have a nice day. Thanks.’

‘To each his own nice day.’

I can feel the sweat trickling down my back and between my thighs. I step into the living room.

‘Did you kick the dog?’ she asks.

‘That dog’s been mangy for years,’ my father says.

My mother puts her hands on her neck. She pushes her head down, all the way to her knees. She used to be a nurse, and made it to volley-ball champion of South-West Flanders. I can’t recall when that was, nor the category she was in.

When she’s done with her exercises my father brings her a glass of pale ale. To fortify her. So she will die after me.

I’ve kissed the mouths of foul-smelling strangers, but as for her over there with foam on her upper lip, I’ve never touched her, let alone stroked her, never kissed the amber-coloured cheekbones, nor the clammy neck with the moist wisps of curly black hair. Not the web of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes either.

‘How do you like our television?’ asks my father. ‘We got it at a discount from Jantje Verdin. Best reception is Brussels French. Next best is Holland. But Dutch tv is all talk and little else. Or they show cripples or mongols. Or it’s about the war the whole evening. Twenty years ago and still they go on about the war.’

The photo hanging above the television is the one that used to be kept on the mantelpiece. Black-and-white, with the shaky cracks and pale flecks of an enlargement. A soldier lost in a snowstorm. His helmet pulled down over his forehead, the top half of his face in shadow, the rest of the oval a vague, muddy-grey. His grey coat reaches down to his ankles. He waves a gun, his target remaining invisible, beyond the frame. A whirl of snowflakes. In the background, at a guess, a forest of birch trees.

‘How do you mean?’ I asked my mother. ‘Who’s guessing? The soldier can’t see the trees, he’s blinded by the snow.’

It was winter. My mother sat with her bare feet resting on the glossy nickel fender around the glowing Mechelen stove. I had to do my homework. I wished she would put her clammy, amber feet on my knees.

‘It’s us, looking at the picture, we’re the ones guessing it’s a birch forest.’

‘Alma, let that boy get on with his homework,’ said my father.

She took no notice.

‘That soldier’s doomed,’ she said. ‘He can’t see the birch wood because of the snowstorm. If he could see it he would’ve known where he was and would’ve found his way back to his lager, because the trees were marked with black swastikas and arrows. But he’s doomed.’

‘Alma, stop bothering the boy with all those stories from the past.’

Later, when I was fifteen, Arsène the schoolmaster commented on the enlarged photograph when he saw it. ‘His gun looks like a Garand M. It can’t have been his standard issue gun, because that was the Mauser forty-two. Ergo, he must have taken that Garand off a dead American.’

The only times in my young years that I saw my mother more or less happy or content, was when Noel was not there and she was telling me about the photo, often with me sitting on her knee.

‘What else can you see in the snowstorm, René?’

‘White bears.’

‘Yes. Good. Very good. And what else?’

I reflected on this. I remember my thoughts being scattered by Farmer Félicien’s tractor. When the tractor drove off I said: ‘Snow beasts.’

She whispered the words after me. ‘Snow beasts.’ She smiled, as though she loved me and had only just discovered that it was so. As though she would never forget it.