

# The Misfortunates

**Dimitri Verhulst**

**An extract**

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## A Good-Looking Kid

My Auntie Rosie's supposed return to Arsendegem came as a pleasant shock in the lives of our completely useless men, whose number I was then on the verge of increasing. The day opened with her name – Rosie! Rosie! – bringing hope. Because someone had come back. Someone who had been born here and had left this place had come again! And it had been Rosie! Her return was interpreted as an Old Testament sign, proof that even Arsendegem had redeeming features and that we too were not as worthless as had been mathematically established.

It is true that my Auntie Rosie was an unusually beautiful woman and having been to bed with her was a source of considerable prestige. At the height of her beauty my grandfather happily accepted round after round from brave young men who hoped to swill their way into his favour (he didn't have an ounce of respect for anyone who couldn't hold his booze) by challenging him to drinking contests with their standing as ideal son-in-law as the stakes. By then the cancer had already metastasised all through his yardstick of a body, more and more often he needed to interrupt his phenomenal drinking sessions to go and spew blood in the toilet, he didn't live to see his much-admired daughter finally wed. Five fathoms – apparently that's also the depth to which they lower drunkards in the merciful earth. Until she wasted away in an old people's home, my grandmother saw it as her widowly duty to buff up his pitch-black marble slab once a week. After the funeral of her father, Our Supreme Drinker, Auntie Rosie gave herself away to a man without history and moved with him to our distant capital, much to the sorrow of our young men, who had to content themselves with making the lives of uglier women a misery. Yet again Arsendegem saw that everything beautiful must leave or be destroyed.

Auntie Rosie wanted less and less to do with her home town; tearing herself away with the help of a man (we weren't even sure of his name, let alone his capacity for drink) must have made as much of an impression on her as a narrow escape from death. During rare telephone conversations, she talked about accumulated wealth, the bustling city, renovating the roof garden and the pleasures of a sauna. The summertime postcards she sent to maintain her contacts with the home front bore unimaginative sunny greetings from remote destinations we refused to look up in the atlas. And during her even less frequent visits, we begged her husband not to park his

enormously expensive car in front of the house. We were poor, always had been, but we bore our poverty with pride. A plush car in front of our house was a humiliation, and the thought that a fellow resident of Arsendegem might notice that a Verhulst had amounted to something financially was a shameful thing.

It's like this: I spent my first years with my parents in the Kantonstraat, on a tiny courtyard with a communal water pump and a communistic toilet: a hole in a plank, directly above the septic tank. Water ran down the inside of the living room walls and we stuffed balls of newspaper into the worm-eaten window frames to keep out the wind. My father always spoke of the inconveniences of our residence with pride – longing for an easy life was a clear sign of inadequate masculinity – and when we finally moved to the Merestraat it was only to be even worse off. Our new toilet was a hole in a plank as well, but this house had the advantage of a roof that leaked. Our kitchen floor was taken up with buckets that caught the drops from the ceiling. We spent pleasant evenings together on the sofa listening to the well-rounded sound of splashing in buckets and trying to guess the xylophone tunes the ruined roof was playing us. We refilled the little bowls of rat poison daily: instead of exterminating the vermin, we felt like we doing a good job of taking care of the little critters. And we cherished the rotten, mushroom-sprouting, deathtrap of a staircase over the cellar as a prime example of proletarian architecture. My father was a socialist and went to great lengths to be recognised as such. For him possessions were nothing more or less than extra dusting. You didn't own you were owned. By your possessions. If a burst of unexpected thrift put us in danger of reaching the end of the month with a financial surplus, he would rush to empty the bank account and drink up his entire pay packet to protect us from the temptations of capitalism. Unfortunately my mother revealed herself more and more as a bourgeois cow: she was too vain for worn out shoes and applied for a divorce after ten years of marriage. When she left, she took everything that wasn't nailed down, thus granting my father ultimate bliss. At last, he owned nothing, neither wife nor other furniture, and moved back in with his elderly mother. But this much is clear, we looked down on family members who parked their fancy cars in front of the house when they showed up in disgustingly expensive clothes to visit us on holidays.

Inimitable the rhythm of the rumour that Rosie – miraculous! miraculous! – had returned to Arsendegem, and I spent those days being constantly buttonholed by reborn men who wanted to know if the town's drunken mouth was speaking the truth. It definitely was: to our astonishment as well, Auntie Rosie had come back with two black eyes and her head bowed, asking if she and her daughter could move in with us for a while.

With us meant with my grandmother. Four of her five sons, my father amongst them, had made a mess of their love life and moved back in with their mother. As my own mother was sick to death not just of my father, but of me as well, my grandmother had taken me under her wing and I passed the listless days together with my father and three uncles. Now we were going to be joined by my Auntie Rosie and my cousin Sylvie, on the run from the man who had tormented them with his adultery and his aggression.

I only saw my Brussels cousin sporadically, usually at funerals or New Year's Day, when we wisely ignored each other because we sensed that we came from different worlds. I think she played the piano and ballet-danced in pink tutus. She was the kind of girl who kept track of how many calories she put away every day and took it for granted that her Father Christmases would

always have fat bank accounts. University was a certainty on her horizon and, since she'd inherited her mother's beauty, she would soon be able to entertain herself by encouraging men to waste time courting her. She was a little younger than me, but gave such a self-assured impression that I didn't dare to pull seniority on her in any field at all. I was not happy about her arrival. Our male bastion had suited me just fine without her getting in the way. We found it hard to cope with Sylvie's respectable upbringing and saw the sorry state we were in reflected in her eyes.

My father always shat with the door wide open. His compost gave off an extraterrestrial stench of farmyard cheddar and he'd often stand in the hall with his clangers hanging free, six feet from the bowl so that I couldn't pretend I hadn't heard him, yelling at me to fetch a fresh bog roll and the other part of the newspaper. He'd done it like that for years and the system worked perfectly: he always got his toilet roll and another section of the paper immediately. But now, with Sylvia watching, it was as if we suddenly needed to apologise for ourselves. We were ashamed of the way we came downstairs in the morning in our Y-fronts with our hand in under the elastic to have a good scratch. We were ashamed of how we sprawled in front of the TV puffing away with our sweaty feet up on the table. We were ashamed of the pounds of raw mince we ate because it was cheap and easy and we were ashamed of the way we stuck our fingers into the mince to grab a handful to stuff into our mouths before washing it down with cold coffee that had been left standing in a mug from yesterday. We were ashamed of the worms we got from the mince and didn't do anything about. We were ashamed of the way we farted like bandmasters, and we were ashamed of the burps we did nothing to restrain. We were ashamed of swearing for no reason, of the pubic hair we moulted over the bog, of the toenails we tore off with our fingers and left lying on the mat for months. We were ashamed of the cigarettes dangling from our mouths when we dozed off in the armchair, our nicotine-stained teeth and the smell of beer we exuded. We were ashamed of the sluts my grandmother met unannounced at breakfast and the way she always had to ask them what their names were. We were ashamed of our drunken singing, our filthy language, our vomit and the ever more frequent visitations of police and bailiffs. We were ashamed, but we didn't do anything about it.

It was three weeks before Auntie Rosie's husband, Uncle Robert, appeared at our door asking, "Is Rosie here?" and we said, "Rosie? No, is Rosie supposed to be here?" and he just broad-shouldered his way into the house, dragged Auntie Rosie out by the hair and kicked her into his car. And my sobbing cousin got into the back seat and disappeared out of my life until the next funeral. We were going to destroy Uncle Robert, there was no doubt of that, preferably extremely slowly and with a knife, and we swore that the next one to hear that he had cancer would take this honourable task upon himself. Because cancer lay in wait for all of us – Our Supreme Drinker had shown the way with style, and we were all agreed that making the age of sixty was the ultimate sign of a petit bourgeois. But if we were honest, we had to admit to relief that my Auntie Rosie and my cousin Sylvie were finally out of the house, their presence had been just a little too confronting.

A miserable existence doesn't need to be complicated. Sylvie saw my father and uncles appear at the breakfast table in the afternoon where, after ritually smoking their first cigarettes, they would dig into the mince and tinned anchovies to dispel the hangover from the night before. The greasy oil that the anchovies had been floating in would run down their chins until they wiped it off with the sleeve of an unravelling jumper, if they could find the energy. Then they disappeared from the house until returning drunk many hours later. Some people might call it a spiral, we saw it as a

cycle. To avoid her father, Sylvie stayed away from school for the whole three weeks, watching me spinelessly study and write lines on the grimy kitchen table. Meanwhile she read books that made her smarter and more eloquent and would eventually open an even bigger rift between her and the rest of the family. In bed I could feel what she was thinking as she lay beside me wide-awake and staring at the ceiling while listening to the snoring issuing from my father, who was sleeping it off with his mouth agape and his stinking socks on his feet. Either that or she'd listen to Uncle Potrel grind his teeth. How could she feel anything but disgust for our clothes, which lay in a pile on the floor until my grandmother threw them in the wash? I don't know what she found worse, the brown butts in the ashtray next to the bed, the sweat patches in the sheets, or my father's socks. She didn't say a word. I would have preferred her to call me to account for our lifestyle, to sit me down for a cousin-to-cousin talk. She didn't say a word and looked down on us.

"Dimi, lad, can't you take our Sylvie out for a bit? The girl's gone all wan sitting inside the whole time."

Where was I supposed to take her? She wouldn't talk to me and she'd looked at me with contempt when I used the end of my biro to scrape a lump of earwax out of my skull. Maybe they used cotton buds in Brussels, but so what? If you asked me, she could have shown a little gratitude for the hospitality. Anyway, there was nothing in our town to entertain a spoilt brat like her. She could have basked in the attention my friends would have given her in between hotting up their stolen mopeds, but Auntie Rosie would not have been amused. My friends were perverts and although lending them my cousin would have given me grounds to blackmail them with, I was just a little too honourable. The moment I stepped out of the door with this taciturn and haughty girl, I would be proud of her, I would look out for her. People had better think twice before risking a snide remark about her priggish little ways. But what was I supposed to do with her? Go for a walk? So that we could ask each other while strolling along what we hoped to achieve in life? What kind of hobbies we had? How school was going?

Taking Sylvie to the pub was my father's suggestion and it did not meet with the approval of Auntie Rosie. But she too could see that her daughter's complexion was growing more and more cadaverous.

"Which pub you going to?" she demanded.

"The Nook. Or The Community. Whatever."

"Will André be there?"

"How am I supposed to know if André's going to be there? You seen me use a crystal ball lately?"

"You'll be careful? And not too late?"

"What do you say, Sylvie? Would you like to come out you're your Uncle Pierre for a change?"

It annoyed me that we all suddenly tried to talk respectable the moment we spoke to the girl. I did it too. There was something about the look of her that brought it out in you.

Sylvie nodded and put on her coat. Our Lad, that was me, was going too.

“Rosie, why don’t you come with us? I know a few who’ll be glad to see you again. It’ll do you good, a bit of fresh air.”

But Auntie Rosie didn’t feel like it. “What about you, Potrel? You coming?”

“Isaac Newton!” said Potrel.

“What?”

“Isaac fucking Newton, I tell you.”

Potrel was lying back with his legs up, watching a quiz show.

*“I’m sorry to disabuse you, Mrs Peters, but the correct answer to this question was Isaac Newton.”*

“Holy moly, you’re not half as daft as you look.”

“It’s a repeat, stupid. Wait up, I’m coming too.”

We had no particular reason for choosing The Nook that night; the pubs in our town were interchangeable. The chairs and tables were cheap and plain because they would only get smashed during arguments that started with something everyone forgot about immediately and were over again before the combatants had time to sober up. All the pubs had a jukebox with records that invariably brought tears to our eyes, even though no one would dream of playing them anywhere else. Roy Orbison was the greatest musician of all time: not just of the past and present, but of the future as well, a future that could not possibly have anything good in store for us. There was nothing more beautiful than sobbing into your last beer while the landlady swept the broken glass into her dustpan and the jukebox played Roy Orbison. And then to beg the landlady for one more beer, the last one, really the last one, and then we’d go home and leave her in peace to close her doors, which we would be the first to open again the next day. The difference between the pubs was a matter of very small details, and the choice between them was most often determined by the number of outstanding tabs we had with some of the landlords, who we didn’t dare face until we had scrimped and saved enough to settle our drinking debts. Of the lot of us, my father was the only one with a regular job, at the post office, but he too could be up to a couple of months’ worth of wages in the red with the breweries.

The Nook was run by a woman who had borne twin dwarfs whose father disappeared soon after their birth and hadn’t been heard from since. A woman alone with two identical, deformed daughters and a mortgage to pay on the pub she had poured so much money into. People drank enough in her bar, that income at least was secure. And when the dwarfs had to go to school and began making serious inroads into that money, she provided herself with a little extra by the means that women always have at their disposal. Unfortunately this seriously tarnished the reputation of her pub and wives began making unpleasant scenes whenever their husbands came staggering back from The Nook. The twins grew up in the bar. They played with their dolls under the billiard table, set up a shop selling beer mats and plastic fruit on the pinball machine and hocked their toys to their mother’s amiable customers. They adopted the rough language of the men who spent all their

nights there, and by the age of ten they were filthy-mouthed slags with an endless repertoire of dirty jokes they recited to the amusement of all. By the age of twelve – they had already stopped growing – they had an alcohol problem because of their habit of drinking the dregs out of the glasses, initially to relieve their mother of the washing up.

In those days there was a popular pub called The Goat in a neighbouring village. The landlord owned an old billy goat which – for a hefty fee and to the great delight of the clientele, who almost died laughing – he would fetch in from the stable and feed extra strong beer until it was so pissed that it stumbled and knocked over chairs trying to get back to the soft straw to sleep it off. It is quite plausible that this is what inspired the landlady of The Nook. Either way, at some stage, the two dwarfs began trying to drink each other under the table, and phenomenal amounts were bet on which one would stay upright the longest.

Long before we took Sylvie to The Nook, the twin dwarfs had discovered that, since their birth, they had suffered from a disease with a difficult name they found impossible to remember, and that it was extremely unlikely that either of them would make it past the age of twenty. Totally unbalanced by this tight deadline and determined to make up for lost time, they began boozing even more than before. On several occasions they had been known to leap completely shit-faced onto one of the many, sticky tables, where they would lift their skirts for a grateful audience that stared goggle-eyed at their dwarf cunts with a mixture of disgust and fascination. I wondered whether it was my duty to prepare Sylvie for such scenes. Because something was definitely going to be dished up for our entertainment. There *were* certainties in our lives, that was our sole luxury.

When we stepped in through the doors the atmosphere was as dead as ever. You could stake your life that the guys at the bar had been crapping on the whole time about disgruntled wives, divorce and alimony, subjects that were as usual here as the weather anywhere else. Two men were playing billiards, but without any ambition to actually win; at the card table four old geezers were carefully studying the fate they were holding in their trembling hands; and the rest of those present were patiently drinking themselves down to the level where it gets hard to tell the difference between happiness and unhappiness.

“The first round’s on me!”

These were the words with which my father always entered a bar. The dwarfs wrote down the order and passed it to their mother, who was busy letting my Uncle Potrel knead her backside by way of hello. I saw the doubtful look on Sylvie’s face as she watched her own flesh and blood grope the landlady and, at long last, a little red appeared in her cheeks. She was drinking lemonade light. “Sugar-free,” she called it. As I was already in training to become the kind of man who props up the bar of pubs like The Nook, my father ordered me a diesel, the name we give to a mixture of beer and Coke. He thought I was still a little young for straight beer, but a boy my age who only drank soft drink would have been too much of a disappointment.

“I see you’ve brought a nice piece of fluff with you, fellers, but if the police find out how old she is, there’ll be hell to pay.”

That was André, and he was looking at Sylvie with disproportionate interest.

“It’s family, André. This piece of fluff is our Sylvie.”



"Sylvie? You don't mean your Rosie's daughter?"

"The same."

"Christ, that's a good-looking kid!" and André slid off his bar stool to shake my cousin's hand, which he did with exceptional courtesy. He kissed the back of her hand, gave her a captivating smile that laid bare his black, crumbling teeth, and then turned to me, "Dimi, lad, I feel sorry for you, it must be fucking difficult for you to keep your hands off your cousin." His breath was foul, but that was no surprise, and I had steeled myself against the putrid fumes wafting out of his mouth. People laughed. Despite the inanity of the remark, I felt that they were expecting me to provide André with an answer. I kept silent and drained my diesel.

"Ah, lad, in our younger days we all pawed our cousins now and then." And when I still didn't respond, he added, "You're right not to speak." And then it was time for the next round. Auntie Rosie was the unavoidable second topic of discussion, everyone had heard that she had been spotted back in Arsendegem and now that we were sitting here with her daughter it was hard to believe the rumours weren't true. The other customers grilled us for details but we kept our lips sealed. We listened with some enjoyment to the various theories, each wackier than the next, but showing more and more clearly that the mere fact of Aunty Rosie's having returned to Arsendegem had been enough to blow life into feelings that had been given up for dead in our town. Since they weren't getting a sensible word out of us on the issue, the attention returned to Sylvie, with André announcing every other minute that she was a good-looking kid and a budding goddess, while everyone else searched her perfect face for features she had inherited from her mother. What surprised me was that being the centre of attention for all these coarse men didn't seem to make her uncomfortable. On the contrary, she seemed to feel a natural sympathy for them and kept laughing at all the remarks of an increasingly drunken André, who had begun drinking and buying rounds at a pace that eventually only my father and uncles could match.

"Let me show you how I shit these days!" André announced to Sylvie in particular, pulling up a tatty shirt to display a hairy, lumpy, scar-covered torso. His intestines were riddled with cancer and to relieve himself he had a shitbag, which to his great astonishment he had discovered one day after coming to on an operating table. He'd never have to sit on a toilet again, it all just percolated straight into the bag dangling off his beer gut. "Look!" And we looked. We watched the shit dribble into the bag. Sluggishly, as if the muck was in a tube somewhere deep inside and someone had just put his foot on it. Wet, sloppy shit with froth on top. My cousin stared at the brown ooze in André's shitbag as if she had a front-row seat at a demonstration of an engrossing scientific experiment. And her interest was only fitting, because the number was being performed just for her. Everyone knew that André wouldn't last until the next annual fair and we all admired the ease with which he hawked up his gobs and spat them in the face of death. He would die in style, partying up to his death rattle.

"That's it," he said, "my shitting days are over. Now I just need to flush." He poured a full glass of beer down his throat. "You have no idea how much I save a month on toilet paper." It was gallows humour that tickled Sylvie, and she paid top dollar with a flash of white teeth, the like of which we had never seen around here before.

"Drinks all round!"

Much has been written and plenty has been said about the character of dwarfs and it's a debate I'd rather stay out of, but that night the behaviour of The Nook's diminutive twins went beyond rude. They couldn't cope with a complete stranger reaping all the attention and being praised for her preternatural beauty. Of course, things aren't distributed fairly, they were monstrous and destined to die young. No one gets to choose their body. My cousin couldn't do anything about that. But the dwarfs were enraged by jealousy and lashed out under the belt by pointing out to everyone that the girly with the cute face might be laughing at our jokes and acting like she liked us, but in her heart she despised us. If you looked into her eyes you could see the way she looked down on us, you only had to look at her top and wonder how much it cost. Or hadn't we noticed that she was guzzling tight-arsed lemonade, lemonade bloody light of all things, sugar bloody free? Could anything be more asocial and standoffish? This good-looking kid – and this was so obvious you could smell it – was trying hard to put herself above her own family and doing everything in her power *not* to be a Verhulst.

You don't smack dwarfs, we knew that all too well, no one in our town would have raised a finger to those girls, not even my Uncle Potrel. But this time they were abusing our ethical code and our hands started itching. We might sometimes beat the shit out of each other, but when it came down to it, Verhulsts stood up for each other. Always. Everywhere.

An unpleasant silence fell and everyone in the pub knew that it was up to my cousin to do something. To prove that she was a Verhulst, that she belonged to our clan, that she embraced our customs, that she was part of the tribe. And that she wasn't here for a cheap, voyeuristic thrill, because if there was one thing we didn't like around here, it was peeping toms.

And that made our entire table a target, those pygmies were playing on Sylvie's family honour, knowing full well that it was true that she hardly had anything to do with us. What's more, my cousin bore her father's name, so strictly speaking she wasn't a Verhulst at all.

"Uncle Pierre, can I have a beer?"

My father would probably have found it easier if Sylvie had asked her Uncle Potrel. The burden was on his shoulders and, at the same time, he was the one who had promised Auntie Rosie to deliver her daughter back home in an orderly state.

"Don't let them get to you, Sylvie, just ignore them."

But that wasn't an answer to her question, she had asked whether or not she could have a beer.

She got her beer. The first of her life. She didn't have a clue what the piss-coloured substance could possibly taste like, but given the stench in our bedroom, her expectations couldn't have been all too high. She straightened her back, assumed a theatrical and provocative pose with one hand on her hip (something she'd copied from my father, he always drank standing with one hand on his hip because that made it easier for him to throw his head back and open his throat), and drained the glass in one go. When she put the glass back down on the table with a manly bang, copied this time from my Uncle Potrel, there were big fat tears in her eyes and the twist of her mouth made her



look like she'd just gobbled down a whole bag of lemon drops. After the first sip of beer almost no one can believe that they will one day consume gallons of the stuff and I am almost certain that Sylvie was suddenly convinced that we were complete lunatics for pouring such vast quantities of filth down our throats every day.

André was over the moon, his night was already made, but Sylvie felt that she had been challenged and had evidently decided to accept that challenge in its entirety, because she immediately said, "I'll have another!" No one touched a drop of Coke or lemonade for the rest of the night, Sylvie didn't and neither did I. The twins were bad losers and huffed off to their room, where they undoubtedly couldn't sleep a wink. André decided to turn my cousin into "the real thing" and taught her one of the songs we used to sing. Some of them were fifteen verses long and I now wonder whether there's anyone left who can remember a complete verse. They were crammed with the filthy words that filled our ABC right up to zed, and the sight of my seriously underage cousin standing drunken on the billiard table singing songs that were full of sexual innuendo, and doing it in a dialect that didn't suit her at all, filled us with such simple joy that we immediately got in another round to celebrate. And we all sang all the verses of every perverted song Andre struck up.

That night too came to an end. During the long walk home I supported my cousin, and my father and Uncle Potrel supported each other. We kept on singing because we couldn't accept that yet another party was in the past, and we swore at the wives and mothers who hung out of bedroom windows to ask us if we knew what time it was. Behind us we left a trail of barking dogs and knocked over rubbish bins. And urine, skilfully directed into a flower tub by my Uncle Potrel. In Arsendegem there was zero chance of a spruce surviving for more than two years on an access route to a good pub because all our men would piss on it. Spruce trees can't cope with that.

"I have to do a wee too."

We never did wees. We pissed.

"Sylvie, lass, can't you hold on until we're home again?"

She had to go. It wasn't that we were worried about her having to lower her jeans on the street, this late at night anyone who would even comment on something like had been asleep for hours. The problem was that Sylvie had lost all control over her body and had been hanging off my shoulder like a bag of sand for at least the last mile. She fell over the moment she stood on her own two feet, we would have to help her if we didn't want her to get her shoes and legs wet. My father swore, Uncle Potrel couldn't stop laughing and staggered back against the front of a house.

"Just fucking look at us at work here. The Verhulst family hits the town."

"Come on, lad, help your cousin now, son!"

She was able to pull her own jeans down, she just needed my help to get the button undone. I gripped her firmly under the arms while she squatted, letting me take her full weight. While we listened with relief to the splashing and splattering on the cobblestones, I thought back to André's farewell from my cousin. He had asked permission to give her a kiss, on the cheek, and

she had consented. Being allowed to meet her was a gift from heaven, he'd had a fabulous evening with her and he told her that he would now die in peace. It was the booze talking, but beautifully.

Sylvie fell asleep in midstream, it seemed like the flow would never stop, and my father started to get nervous thinking about how he was going to explain the terrible state her daughter was in to Auntie Rosie. The closer we got to home, the quieter we became. We were almost there, but the prospect didn't cheer us.

Auntie Rosie was waiting in her dressing gown, with puffy red eyes.

"Where the hell have you been all this time? And didn't it occur to you that I'd be back here worried sick?"

We were sorry. We were sorry about everything. Our whole lives. That was us.

"And you, Sylvie, you must be proud of yourself as well."

"The age of wonders lives on yet," said Sylvie.

"What?"

"The age of wonders lives on yet, the weather's dry and my cherry's wet."

That was from one of the dirtiest songs she had learnt that night, the then extremely popular Cherry Picking Song, twelve verses long. And her well-brought-up daughter shocked Auntie Rosie so much that her hand shot out and left its print on the cheek of my cousin, who was too sloshed to burst into tears. Uncle Potrel carried her upstairs and put her to bed, clothes and all.

"Come on now, Rosie, why hit the poor girl? There's nothing wrong with the Cherry Picking Song, is there? She learnt the first five verses off André."

"André? Did you see André?"

We didn't say a word.

"I asked you a question!"

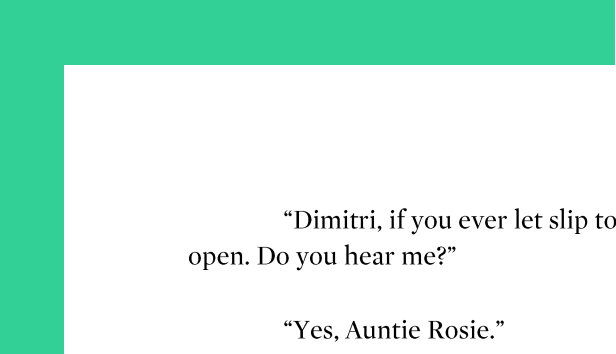
We definitely didn't say a word.

"Does she know that André's her father?"

"No!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure. Rosie, Sylvie doesn't have the slightest suspicion that André's her father, and if we told her she probably wouldn't believe us."



“Dimitri, if you ever let slip to your cousin Sylvie what you just heard, I’ll scratch your face open. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Auntie Rosie.”

We were all filled with pity later when Uncle Robert booted his wife into the car and sat his so-called daughter down on the back seat. But we didn’t believe in poking our noses into other people’s lives and we left things to take their course, with our hands itching. The next funeral at which I would see my distant cousin again would be my father’s. Five fathoms and a Friday.