Woesten

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Part 1

Wings

I

Was it the wind that made her walk in his direction? Or did fate spur her on? He was standing under a lone tree by the beet field, wrapped in a long coat, a grey hat on his head, his back turned towards her. She hesitated briefly between her mother's sermon - *don't talk to strangers* - and her own curiosity - *maybe he hails from the city*. Only when she had almost reached him and he turned towards her, did she see who he was. Mr Funke. Not a stranger after all. Or was he?

'It's blowing a gale,' Elisabeth spoke. It sounded just that little bit too mature.

'It's coming from the west,' Mr Funke answered. 'A couple more days. Then it'll die down. A warm voice.

She had never heard him speak, but she had seen him with father in the smithy before, bearing balustrade sketches for the front steps to Zulma's house. It was to incorporate a lion with a rose in its jaws. The lion had indeed been manufactured, complete with flower in its jaws, and even though nobody had a clue what it meant, people deemed it beautiful, perfect for such a big house in the high street. Father had spent weeks on it and been paid, like clockwork, in instalments.

'I do like it,' Elisabeth said.

He looked at her, without speaking.

I like this wind,' she went on. 'It clears a person's head.'

He gave a little cough: 'Is your head that full?' A stern, but by no means unfriendly look.

'Brimming,' she said.

‘It must be all the things you learn at school.’ She read curiosity in his eyes.

‘I don’t go to school anymore...’ she hesitated momentarily, ‘... My head’s mainly filled with things I don’t know, I guess.’

He grinned. ‘Things you don’t know are the nicest. They harbour desire.’

She couldn’t tell exactly what those words meant but she did sense that he took her seriously.

Dark clouds threatened rain.

They walked home together. He maintained a brisk pace, which she tried to keep up with by taking cheerful bouncing steps that made her plaits and her dress jump up. He kept silent and she talked. Candidly.

About Sister Imelda, the iron fist at convent school. About rutting stallions, that refused to stand still in the smithy. About the tear in the upholstery on her mother’s prie-dieu. About the stones she collected, had been collecting since childhood, because she was convinced they told age-old stories if you held them to your ear. Provided you were a believer, of course. She also told him in great detail about the day the swallow had died, three years ago. How God-awful it was, because now she would never be an explorer, or an inventor, or an artist or some such thing. Nothing would ever be named after her - a song, an automobile, an island, a violin, a play. Nothing.

‘You’d like that, would you?’ he asked.

‘Who wouldn’t?’ Elisabeth answered. ‘It’s the only way to live on after death.’

A few strands of unruly hair waved playfully in her bare neck.

‘I told you not to stay away so long.’ Mother nervously rubbed both hands over the sleeves of her floral apron.

Mothers are full of worries, Elisabeth thought, but don’t have any.

‘You promised to help met with Friday’s order.’ She sat down by the window and picked up her lacework. The flowers, the vines, the animals, the intricate graceful curves - the meticulous work had ruined her eyes. She was in dire need of spectacles, which she refused to admit.

Blockhead would be paying a visit on Friday, in a smart suit, bent over the kitchen table, scrupulously inspecting the pieces of work for tiny mistakes, his trained eye scanning for dropped stitches and a lucrative deal.

‘I help you every single day of the week, mother. Can’t I have that tiny piece of Sunday to myself?’

‘Nothing will ever be good enough for you, Elisabeth. Never.’ Her upper lip tightened into a fine line. Her eyes were hunting for something in the darkness on the other side of the windowpane, an old regret someone had recently dusted. Elisabeth watched her frail shoulders, her slightly arched back and the hands that lay folded in her lap - the lap in which she had been conceived. She looked for lines, traits, declivities, skin, stains that seemed familiar.

Father, who had heard everything, mumbled something about a broken coal-shovel, and left the room.

'I bumped into Mr Funke, mother, that's all.'

'The stranger?'

'Yes, mum, that...' Elisabeth sighed.

The bigots, whose poisonous comments added chaste footnotes to village life, had found a rewarding subject in Funke. He was a well-mannered man, had been their conclusion. That was the word they'd used. Well-mannered. Nobody could say exactly why, though. He had a frugal way of greeting people, kept himself to himself and had dark, deep-set eyes, which peered at his interlocutors warmly yet sharply, without ever being intrusive.

He had ended up in the village years ago. His age was a well-kept secret. Mr Funke had purchased Zulma's house after she passed away. Notary public Bouttelgier, in front of whom the deed had been drawn up, acted all mysterious about his exact origins.

Mr Funke didn' work either. That had caused some resentment at first, but he had employed village workmen to do up Zulma's derelict house, which had largely made up for his not being gainfully employed. He had even added an extra floor, bringing the façade level with that of the dignitaries.

He liked reading, cycling, walking and he was single. That too had caused consternation, but he ran his own errands and always paid old Thérèse, the village grocer's bills cash.

'He cooks a square meal and isn't tight with money,' Thérèse would say.

No two ways about it: Mr Funke was a well-mannered man.

Which didn't make him less of a stranger.

Elisabeth was sitting on the edge of her bed. Not to ruffle any feathers, she had even scraped the salsify. Her hands were sticky, full of stains. She looked at them. My life has come to a standstill, she thought. Since that day. She vividly remembered the office smell: beeswax and starched skirts.

'We've given you a first-class education, Elisabeth Mazereel. We brought you up to be a pious woman, in all circumstances.'

Sister Imelda had folded her wrinkled hands into her lap and stared at the wall from under the white wimple, as if she would much rather have confided what she had to say to the plasterwork.

'God has endowed you with a brilliant mind, my child.'

It sounded like something from hell. Endowed.

‘You learned how to read and write, and you have an excellent head for mathematics to boot.’

‘Reading is my favourite,’ Elisabeth answered.

The sister gestured that she was to keep quiet.

‘We’ve kept you with us as long as possible, but now the time has come for you to go.’

‘I know,’ Elisabeth blurted out, ‘I’m going to secondary school at the mother convent.’

‘I was just coming to that.’ The sister looked her in the eye, quite emphatically this time. ‘The priest tells me your mother insists you are not to continue your education.’

Elisabeth felt her stomach contract. She tried to place what she had just heard. The words were whirling through her head.

‘You can be of much greater assistance to your mother by staying at home and helping her with her lacework.’

She looked at the sister uncomprehendingly, unable to utter a sound. The room suffocated her. The massive cherry desk, the banner of the patron saint hanging limply down its pole, the wall-to-ceiling bookcase full of missals and bibles, and most of all the school stamp hanging motionlessly in its iron holder.

Tears welled up in her yes. But no one was to see, not there. She pushed the chair back too brusquely, making it fall over and clatter noisily against the parquet floor, and ran out of the office, down the stairs, without actually seeing any of the steps. She dashed home, to her father. He’d understand. Father knew about her urge for what lay beyond.

She had often enthused to him over what she had seen on her rambles through neighbouring hamlets. The boats on the canal, as they slowly but surely glided towards other waters. The windmill’s

vanes, pushed by winds from far-off regions, that came down after each rotation. The geese which, as autumn dwindled, flocked to places not a soul in the village had heard of before. Father had laughed while stoking up the fires, his eyes glistening. He didn’t say much, not with words anyway.

But he was nowhere to be seen. The smithy was empty. That’s when she heard the dry thud. A swallow had flown against the windowpane, smashing its tiny body against it. In full flight, convinced of its own skill. Swallows have unpredictable flight routes. As if they keep changing their minds. She hesitantly approached the spot, under the forsythia, where she heard anxious warbling. She carefully picked up the tiny animal. It lay shaking in the palm of her hand, blood from its open beak, tiny eyes full of water, wing broken, its little heart beating mutely. She used simple words to comfort it. Of course it understood her. Birds and twelve-year-old girls are cast from the same soul. She sat down on the small wooden bench in front of the house and held it until it no longer did anything.

She marched all the way up to the elm by the canal, holding the bloody bird in her hands – her very own tree, under which, years ago, ignoring all advice, she had taken shelter during a

terrible storm. Not under, but inside it. It had been eaten away by vermin, so it was easy to hide inside. The tree enveloped her like an old coat. It was surrounded by a wild elderberry bush - a perfect spot for being by yourself. She often went there. She buried the dead bird with her bare hands and covered it with grey stones. That's when tears came to her eyes, under the old elm tree, a stone in her hand.

Swallows are messengers though.

Friday afternoon. She had just delivered a scythe father had repaired. A window in the high street was opened. Mr Funke's head appeared and he called her, waving.

'Elisabeth, I've got something for you!'

Her heart started racing. She skipped up the three front steps and stopped by a big oak door. Its knocker was also a lion, but she didn't get round to using it for Mr Funke promptly opened the door.

'Come in. I'll fetch it.'

She stepped inside a corridor with lots of rooms off it and a wide stairway with a green runner leading to the first floor. A chandelier on the ceiling with milky-white glass lilies cast a feeble light on the paintings on the wall. Mr Funke went into one of the rooms and left the door open. A library. That's all she could see.

He came back holding a book, smiling knowingly.

'You may find it a bit difficult, but I'm sure it contains lots of things you'll find interesting.' The skin on that fine hand was pale. His nails were perfectly manicured. Their eyes locked briefly, after which she took it. *Stones and their Life*, calligraphed golden letters on a red cloth cover said.

'I'll return it tomorrow,' she spoke hastily.

'No rush. I've no immediate need for it.'

She hesitated, not sure what to say now. He was wearing pointy black shoes. They were so beautifully polished that they reflected the lilies. She eventually did turn around and ran out the door.

'Thank you so much,' she said as she jumped down the steps, hoping he would hear.

On her way home she pressed the book against her, under her coat. Only when she had reached her bedroom did she take it out again. She kneeled on her bed, put the book in front of her and carefully turned the first page. It had a handwritten scrawl on it, which she had no problems reading. *Für den Liebsten*. It struck a chord she didn't even know existed.

The book was too scientific for her, but it did contain exquisite drawings of rock massifs and cross-sections of mountains. At the back there was a scale with difficult names that were new to her, listing the hardness of minerals.

The very word was like a melody. Minerals. Their hardness. Some could scratch others yet could not be scratched by them. At the top of the scale there was talcum. Soft, almost malleable. That was her mineral, she decided. She was top of the list. Mr Funke was all the way down, she fantasized, the hardest of all known natural substances. Diamond. Will only scratch itself. She hid the book under a loose floorboard in her room.

Blockhead grinned. He took off his jacket, hung it over the chair and spread out the patterns on the table. It was an order for a well-off lady who wanted doilies for her godchild's engagement party. He had huge sweat rings under his shirt armpits. His bald pate shone.

'I thought you wouldn't mind a bit of a challenge, now that you have an extra pair of diligent and graceful hands in the house.' His pig eyes settled on Elisabeth as he threw her a lewd smile. She was standing by the mantelpiece, a safe distance away. The smell of his expensive perfume, which filled the room, made her queasy.

'Your beautiful daughter is very dexterous, you do realize that, don't you?'

'The sisters did a great job,' mother said. She smiled sheepishly.

He took a handkerchief, dabbed his forehead and ostentatiously sniffed through his nose.

'I can smell talent a mile away,' he said.

And money, Elisabeth thought. She took a quick look at the intricate paper patterns and nodded almost invisibly in her mother's direction. Some sort of conspiracy had developed between them. A first?

'Yes,' Mother said to Blockhead. 'All right then.'

'I need it by August 20th; at the latest.'

'That's a very tight time limit for such a painstaking task,' mother retorted.

'You can work long hours. It doesn't get dark until late. Plus I'll give you 30 centimes extra.'

'Hardly a fortune,' mother sighed.

'Take it or leave it.'

'Forty centimes,' Elisabeth spoke calmly. 'Unless you'd care to take your patterns back home with you?'

A brief silence. Blockhead looked at her.

‘You’ve got a plucky daughter.’ He walked right up to her, his gaze resting on her breasts. ‘Fair enough. Since you’re asking so nicely.’ His wink was even dirtier than his smile.

A week later she stopped by his place again, on her way to market. The lion’s head produced a metallic, harsh sound. She waited a while, looked around. Not a soul, apart from the absolute certainty that she was being watched from behind a number of curtains. In armchairs, posted strategically by windows, bigots were craning their necks, their fine paws gently stirring net curtains to provide an unobstructed view of what was happening on the other side of the high street, on the steps leading to the well-mannered man’s house. Yet nothing happened. The door remained shut.

Elisabeth walked down the high street and turned the corner. All you had to do was walk across the wobbly bridge to the brewery to reach a small dirt road that gave onto the back of the high street plots. Mr Funke’s garden was walled, but the brickwork had a tiny gate that was big enough for a bicycle or a wheelbarrow. She hesitated briefly as she loosened the rusty bolt. She was overstepping the mark, but curiosity won from reason and decorum. She went inside and found herself in a well-tended garden. The lawn was nicely trimmed; there was a wooden bench under a walnut tree that partially sheltered a bed of hostas and hydrangeas from the sunlight. A bit further, towards the back of the house, she spotted a beautifully kept kitchen garden. The house had a conservatory, with a glass roof and glass walls, supported by a rusty, hand-forged construction. It only held a few plants. An old settee with blue velvet armrests and a painter’s easel caught her eye. There were brushes on a table, alongside pots of oil paint. The easel held a wood-framed canvas. She edged her way to the side of the conservatory to take a closer look. It was a sketch, that’s all - in pencil or charcoal.

The start of something. A beginning. But highly revealing. She recognized herself. The pureness of the few, simple strokes unveiled something about herself she hadn’t been aware of, which both upset and thrilled her. She quickly put the book under a reversed zinc bucket on the garden bench. And then she ran away from her likeness.

It was a hot summer. The sort that had people opting for the coolness of their homes and which had farmers on their fields – work waits for no man – sighing and moaning while ridging beet and harvesting hay. A summer which - well into the night, when the temperature was somewhat more bearable - reverberates in the chirping of the crickets and the heated conversations in pubs. That summer Elisabeth swept the smithy daily, weeded the kitchen garden and spent hours on a chair by her mother’s side, the lace pillow across her legs. Unspeaking, joyless. A humdrum existence.

And yet. On Sunday afternoons– she had hardly any unoccupied hours these days– she did get to go out. Her mother and the neighbour were at Benediction.

Lost in thought, almost aimlessly, she ambled to her tree. She crawled between the elderberry bushes and sat down. She soon realized: the stack of rocks had changed. It had grown taller, wider, and most of all: there was a new layer of white stones on top, which she had definitely not put there. She crouched by the heap of stones. She carefully removed the top stone, looked at it and put it aside. She did the same with the next one, until she had stacked all the white stones. That’s when she saw the box.

She looked around, making sure she was alone. The box was beautifully decorated with inlaid wood, quirky symbols in fine designs. It jammed a little as she tried to open it. There was a book inside, wrapped in a piece of leather. *The World's Highest Mountains*. A note had been slipped in the front: *For Elisabeth. This may pique your interest. Sincere wishes. E.F.* She sat there, dazed.

Why leave the book there? How had he found out about this place? Why was he doing this? This was an older man; she was a young girl, fifteen summers, not even a woman yet. She put the book by her side, closed the box, placed it back on top of the bird grave and replaced the stones. She left the elderberry bush by the sick elm tree, the book tucked under her arm. She checked carefully if the secret path was duly hidden from view, also to make sure nobody was watching her after all. But the fields were empty, not a soul in sight by the banks of the canal. She made a beeline for home. The summer suddenly took on another hue. The heat weighed less heavy.

II

Father came home late that night. He'd been to a rehearsal, and put his tuba down by the hat stand.

'I forgot to take my tobacco,' he sighed. 'A fresh new packet. Damn.'

'No need to swear, Arthur,' mother retorted.

'I'll fetch it for you,' Elisabeth suggested.

I must have left it at the Pump and Tap. On the front table by the window, where I had a last one for the road.'

'More than one, by the sound of it,' mother added.

'Hurry, before someone else takes it.'

'It's getting dark. Are you sure it's a good idea to send her out?' mother worried.

'She's a big girl. Surely she can manage?' He slumped in his armchair and rested his feet on the coal scuttle.

'I'm on my way,' Elisabeth shouted.

A few band members had come outside and were keeping a worried eye on the open bar doors. The vermin were inside: the knife fighters from Red Cent Corner.

Elisabeth knew their neighbourhood, on the edge of the woods, far away from the village centre. It was home to unskilled workers and down-and-outs, a few beggars too, as well as folk peddling stolen wares. They lived in houses made of wood and mud, dirty and unsanitary, where the stench of urine and excrement reigned. The poverty-stricken hamlet was known as *Red Cent Corner*. Its inhabitants barely showed themselves and tended to wallow in their own squalor. She had passed through it a few times on her many rambles. It was dotted with brown pools covered with duckweed that teemed with salamanders and sticklebacks. She had befriended a few of the local boys, much to her mother's dismay.

Elisabeth wormed her way in and made a beeline for the table where her father had been sitting. The tobacco packet was lying exactly where he'd said. Just as she was about to grab it, she heard someone whistle behind her.

'Hey, Elisabeth, you're a sight for sore eyes!' It was Hendrik, Scabby Meg' s son. He was the youngest of three brothers and one of the boys with whom Elisabeth had scoured the pond for hours, looking for orange-bellied salamanders. They were the nicest looking - the kings of the pond, she called them. They had caught some and put them in a jar Elisabeth had brought along. When one of her shoes got stuck in the reeds he had rescued her and got all mucky in the process. Not that it made much difference, but still. He had accompanied her home afterwards, holding the jar upright so as to stop the water and the tiny creatures from splashing out. Elisabeth's mother had welcomed him with a scornful look.

Last summer they had played together a few times, but she'd lost sight of the boy after he started working at the factory with his elder brothers.

He had grown tall – and handsome. But his shirt was filthy and his trousers were much too short.

'I like what I'm seeing,' one of them chortled. It was Hendrik's brother Tist, a badly rolled cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

'With all the right bits in all the right places.' He walked right up to Elisabeth, oozing booze and vomit, traces of which were still visible on his torn shirt.

'Anybody fondled those boobs yet, Gorgeous?' The ashes of his cigarette fell and landed amongst his chest hair.

'Leave her alone, Tist. She's a good, kind-hearted girl. Hendrik looked at her while saying this.

'Since when has kind-heartedness stopped a man from checking out the goods on display?'

'Juicy pair of peaches in that blouse.' It was Omer, the densest of the three brothers. He had posted his cretinous, lame-duck body next to that of his brothers. He took his hands out of his trouser pockets and tried to touch one of Elisabeth's breasts with his crooked fingers – the result of child rheumatism.

'Don't touch me!' she shouted.

'Let her go of her. She's done nothing wrong. Hendrik stepped closer.

‘Done nothing wrong? That’s the least of our worries,’ Tist said. ‘Look who’s gone all gooey all of a sudden!’ He turned towards his brother. He was taller by a head and twice as broad. ‘You know her, do you?’

‘No. I just want you to leave her alone.’

‘Ho, our Hendrik’s smitten. Need I remind you that we share everything at home?’ Tist grabbed Elisabeth by the arm and pulled her towards him. She felt his filthy chest press against hers as he lifted her dress with his free hand.

‘Leave it, Tist!’

‘We share everything, Hendrik, so I...’

‘ So I suggest you let go of her.’ A calm yet strong voice boomed out of nowhere. It startled Elisabeth, who turned around to see. Mr Funke was standing right behind her. He was brandishing a walking stick with an owl-shaped silver knob.

‘I suggest you leave right now, young man. I’ll be accompanying the lady home.’ The noise died down. Tist let go of Elisabeth and rolled up his sleeves. But Omer tapped on his shoulders and pointed towards rural constable Daems, who was coming in, sporting a truncheon. Tist scarpered, with cripple-kneed Omer hopping behind him. Only Hendrik stayed put and observed Elisabeth and Mr Funke. After a while, he about-turned and stepped to the other side of the counter.

‘I’ll walk you home, if you want. It’s up to you.’

Elisabeth hesitated and briefly considered taking him up on his offer.

‘That’s very kind of you, thank you, but I’ll find my own way home.’ She snatched the tobacco pouch from the table and just as she was about to leave, Mr Funke’s walking stick stopped her in her tracks. His black gloves enveloped the silver knob - fine, velvet gloves.

‘Enjoying the book?’

‘I am,’ Elisabeth whispered.

He’s been, he’s not been. He’s been, he’s not been. She was pulling the petals from a daisy, freshly picked from the ditch. He’s been, he’s not been.

She had finished *The World’s Highest Mountains* a week after the incident at the Pump and Tap and taken it back to Mr Funke. Everything had gone exactly like the first time, but without fear or hesitation now. She no longer saw herself as an intruder. On the contrary, she’d felt elated.

She was walking alongside the canal again. He’s been, he’s not been, he’s been, he’s not been. The elm kept peaceful watch, the way it had been doing for almost a hundred years. One look at the pile of stones had sufficed. He’d been! He’d crawled under the bushes one more time, in his beautiful coat, his black shoes glistening in the sunlight, and with his silver-knobbed walking stick.

She snatched the box from under the stones and hit upon the book, heart pounding. She was a young girl who had stolen this moment to sit under a secret tree. What was this? What, in the name of Heaven, was this? She was baffled by her own behaviour.

Major Frans – no richly encrusted cover, no gold letters, no drawings. A well-thumbed novella, sleeve stained, published in Amsterdam. Once again, there was a notelet. *Read and reflect.* It was an order, quite unfriendly in fact. Yet it lifted her spirits. She would read it. Of course she would. For him. She felt jubilant. She was having a twilit conversation with Mr Funke, between his garden and her tree.

An afternoon off. Elisabeth's mother had gone for coffee at her aunt Zoë's. Her father needed new tools and had been given a lift into town in notary public Bouttelgier's carriage, who was himself paying his weekly visit to the posh Belle Vue bar, where he drank champagne, smoked pipes and made money doing paperwork which, according to Elisabeth's father, didn't really qualify as work, but he knew better than to tell the notary. Arthur Mazereel and notary Bouttelgier were hardly soul mates, but it was a short ride - twenty minutes maximum - and the smith's taciturnity and the notary's renowned talkativeness cancelled each other out. The notary and his wife were the subject of wild rumours. Betrand Bouttelgier was a small, scrawny man, who had married *une dame lunatique* who drank too much port. The second he crossed the conjugal threshold the man swapped the authority he commanded elsewhere for almost ironic servility. His wife ordered him to do the strangest things. It was no secret, for example, that regardless of the time of day, she demanded that he sit by her side at the piano to turn her music pages while she belted out romantic songs. He then had to carry her to bed in his arms. She would put on her ancient wedding dress for the occasion, which barely fitted her anymore, and he had to lay her down, lift the white veil and kiss her on the forehead, nothing more. After that, he was kindly requested to leave the room. He also had to read out the weekly obituary pages to her, which she listened to from her chaise longue, sipping her favourite tipple. She had him start from the top several times whenever his tone lacked pathos. Their maid was only too willing to share those juicy titbits. *Madame le Notaire* knew exactly what village deaths had occurred and who had been widowed as a consequence. She also had a reasonable idea what inheritances the widows and widowers would be coming into – she did have a key to her husband's office after all. The result of such detailed knowledge combined with an insatiable hunger for Mills and Boon romances was that - out loud or in silence – she kept scouring her social world for potential fruitful liaisons. Distraught individuals would call upon her, asking her to turn her attention to the dead-end darkness of their lonely existences. She happily obliged, in return for a few bottles of port, of course. She occasionally also brought people together and acted as matchmaker.

Father wasn't expected home until late that night, when the notary had finished his financial brainwork. Elisabeth had the house to herself. Seizing the opportunity, she installed herself in the sun on a bench behind the shed and read *Major Frans.* She was oblivious to the passing of time.

'You don't hear a thing when you've got your nose in your books, do you?' It was Hendrik.

'What brings you here?' Elisabeth snapped the book to.

'I've come to apologize.'

'Your brother's the one who should be doing that,' she said, screwing up her eyes. He looked so different. His blonde hair had been combed up and seemed to catch the sunlight. This was no longer the young boy who'd led the way holding a salamander.

Less of a stripling, more of a man.

'Not in a million years. That's why I've decided to do it for him.' He was drawing circles in the sand with the tip of his shoe, anti-clockwise.

'That's very sweet,' Elisabeth said. 'Is that the only reason you're here?'

'It's my main reason.'

'The word *main* struck her. He'd hesitated momentarily.

'Can I offer you a drink?'

'I'm fine.'

'It's hot. Shall I get you something?'

'Don't bother.'

'Water's no bother.' She got up from the bench and went inside the house to fetch a crock. She walked to the pump and he followed. She continued to pump until the water was cool and handed him a full bowl.

'Thanks,' he said.

'Come and sit with me for a bit.'

He obliged.

'How are you?' She cursed herself for asking such an inane question.

'Not too bad,' he answered.

'Do you still go to the pits a lot?'

'Not since I've been at my new job.' He lit a cigarette.

'I had this feeling.'

'I leave for work early in the morning. It's quite a trek to the sawmill.' He blew out the smoke.

'Is that where you work?'

‘Yes. Seven days a week.’

‘Not today?’

‘My boss gave me the day off to take my mother to the doctor’s. She’s got this nasty cough, with brown phlegm.’ He pulled hard on his cigarette and drew in the smoke with relish.

‘Will she be all right?’

‘I think so. She’s tough.’

‘She must be, with you lot.’

‘There’s worse. Our Tist is a real mischief-maker, especially when he hits the bottle too much.’

‘He did give me a fright.’ She looked at him. She saw the veins, bulging in his neck.

‘The swine hadn’t been home for two days. He was drunk as a newt. He can’t keep his hands to himself then.’

‘Stop fretting.’

‘I was furious.’

‘It’s long forgotten. Water under the bridge.’

‘He didn’t have a clue. When he woke up the following afternoon, he didn’t even remember.’

‘Probably for the best - less time spent bowing in shame.’

There was a brief silence.

‘Who is he?’ he asked after a while, hesitant again.

‘Who?’

‘The man with the walking stick who came to your rescue. Who is he?’

‘Mr Funke.’ It was Elisabeth’s turn to hesitate. Saying his name out loud embarrassed her.

‘A relative?’

‘No, just Mr Funke. He lives in the high street. In old Zulma’s house.’

‘Ah, him.’

‘Yes, do you know him?’

‘Hardly. Only on hearsay.’

‘What do people say?’

‘Nothing special. This and that.’ He threw the stub in a bed of withered onion stalks.

‘He’s a well-mannered man,’ Elisabeth retorted.

Hendrik ignored her remark. ‘Would you mind if I called again?’

‘I’d like that very much. But I don’t always have time.’

‘The annual fair’s soon. Will you go with me?’ He was looking straight at her now.

‘I’m not sure my mother will approve.’

‘I’ll ask her, if you want.’

‘I’m not sure that would be a good idea.’

‘I have the nerve.’

‘I don’t doubt that, but please don’t. We’ll see. I’ll find a way.’

He beamed.

‘You’re beautiful, Elisabeth. My brother’s right.’ He put the empty bowl down. She felt his arm brush past hers.

‘See you in three Sundays,’ he added, and left without looking back.

‘I’m glad you’re coming along,’ aunt Zoë said. ‘You’re a good little worker. You deserve to live it up occasionally.’

‘Without you, they’d never have let me.’

‘I know, Sweetie. Your mother’s a worrier.’ They were walking along the road to Roesbrugge, arms linked. ‘Instead of being proud of you.’

‘She is.’

‘Yes, but she doesn’t show it.’

The fair was drawing a huge crowd. A tent had been pitched in front of the church, and members of the local brass band were playing their hearts out. It was party time and people were having fun, singing and dancing and laughing with or at each other. Street-tradesman praised their wares to

high heaven, fortune-tellers circled round young lovers - their future a cinch to predict - and circus artists performed their usual tricks. Balls and rings were being juggled, pirouettes made heads spin, there was dancing on tightropes, throwing of knives and eating of flames. In the midst of this hubbub, aunt Zoë and Elisabeth bumped into Médard, a seasonal worker, who treated them to cherry pie with fresh cream and coffee.

'Médard's an odd character; always has been.' Aunt Zoë was piling a third piece of cherry pie onto her plate.

'You know each other well, do you?' Elisabeth asked.

'Like the inside of my corset.' She winked. There were traces of cherry juice on her chin.

'When it comes to unbuttoning your corset for me, you're faster than a whippet' Médard whooped from the other side of the table. He was drinking from a bottle of wine he had brought along from the French farm where he worked.

Médard spent more time across the border than he did in his native village. Christmas, Easter and the annual fair were the three dates he reserved for returning home.

'He's a dreadful fibber, and a do-nothing to boot.'

'I'd volunteer to do *some*-thing with you any day, Zoë Dear!' He was drumming his hands on the table to the rhythm of the waltz the orchestra had just struck up. 'Why don't you teach that beautiful niece of yours to spin across the floor? You being such a good teacher and all...'

'He drives me mad with his yarns. Come on, Girl.'

'Not just with my yarns,' he grinned. Aunt Zoë threw him an arch look and guided Elisabeth to the middle of the dance floor.

'Were you mad about him when you were young, Auntie?' There was no need to shout, since their heads almost touched.

'Besotted.'

'And today?'

'Some cock-pigeons can't stay on their nest, Love.'

'You're happy every time he returns home, is that it?'

'Yes, but I'm equally happy when he flies away again. It soothes the itch inside.'

They went on dancing – whirligigs on a full dance floor.

She spotted him in the crowd. He had come without his brothers and was clearly looking for her. When their eyes met, it was as if all ambient sound died away. Elisabeth did still register the

shouting street-traders around her, the orchestra playing, the chattering, moving crowd, as well as a little boy a few steps ahead who was kicking and screaming because his scolding mother was pulling him along, but she didn't hear a thing. Her ears had become immune to the teeming and bustling. She was completely impervious to sound and simply looked, and observed, and continued to observe, feeling something she had never felt before. He was wearing a white shirt with puffed sleeves, a crimson waistcoat over clean brown cord trousers. His shoes had been polished. Nothing about him betrayed the fact that he hailed from Red Cent Corner. The wind was mussing up his blonde hair. It reminded Elisabeth of a drawing that hung in the convent, of Moses on a rock. In a bottom corner, at Moses' left foot, stood a young man, expectantly looking at the truth chiseled in two tables. She had this indefinable sensation in her underbelly. A bit further down, aunt Zoë and Médard were all over each other again.

'Found you,' he said, suddenly facing her. She heard sounds again.

'Hello Hendrik,' she said. Nothing more. She saw aunt Zoë whisper something in Médard's ear and walk towards them.

'I see you've got company,' she said. 'You know your way, don't you?' She linked arms with Médard. 'My corset's feeling a bit tight,' she chortled. 'See you in a few hours? Just check the time on the church clock.' She leaned towards Elisabeth before moving on. 'Not just the church clock; that's asking for trouble.'

She was strolling around the fairground with Hendrik. Side by side. Floating. Or so it seemed. Images in slow motion, extremely detailed: a man buying two goats was being ripped off by a stubbly chap; three cackling women were flaunting small, perfectly superfluous parasols which they had brought along to stand out from the crowd in colour and style and rank. Packed beerhouses, people out in the streets holding full or half full glasses. A cross-legged beggar in oversized woollen trousers, one leg strangely contorted to give the false impression it had been amputated. The colours of the booths, the shadows of the church, the flags, the wispy clouds that were slowly but surely closing in around the sun. But the sharpest image of all was that of him, talking about things that sounded like music to her ears.

They passed a fat lady with a motley scarf who stared into a bowl of water and told people what illnesses their body harboured. They had to laugh at her diagnosis: Hendrik's blood flowed too fast and Elisabeth 's feet and legs would swell. They laughed and meandered past woodcutters, sheep shearers and barbers, another lot of barbers who – to mark the occasion– were lancing boils and spooning out warts with instruments which they held in the flames of burning candles first. Dozens of people were thronging to get a glimpse, but she didn't mind because her back was leaning against his chest. She smelled his shaving soap. She felt his hand rest on her waist. And stay there. Motionless. But warm.

She thought of Mr Funke. Surely he would understand? Surely he wouldn't mind? Her back against this manly chest. Surely he would own a book describing this particular sense? This as yet unnamed sense that creeps inside people's bodies and does as it pleases. She left the hand where it was and drove her doubts about Mr Funke and his books to a far corner.

Night fell. They forgot about the church, about time and her aunt. Hendrik talked as if there was no tomorrow. She could tell he was trying hard not to swear, or use dirty words. He stopped at a fine-

fabrics booth and bought her a fine burgundy scarf, which she refused at first. She couldn't possibly accept. He should use his money more wisely. But he planted the sole of his foot straight into her heart when he replied without the slightest hesitation that he couldn't imagine anything or anyone, not in the whole damn world, on which he could spend his money more wisely. She stood stock-still, arms hanging limply by her waist, head slanted upwards, and looked straight into his eyes, his warm blue eyes, while his coarse and chapped hands from all the factory work tied the scarf around her neck. The setting sun's light gleamed irresistibly beautifully on them; her neck swanlike, naked and defenceless. If he truly was the animal people made him out to be, a knife fighter from Red Cent Corner, he would have dug his sharp teeth into her pale skin and devoured her, there and then. His claws would have seized hold of her, pulled her towards him and partaken of her with brutal violence, grunting. But he did none of that. He carefully tied the scarf, arranged it neatly on her blouse and gave her his arm.

That's how they returned home. She walking by his side, he walking next to her, arms linked. Enveloped in dusk. About half way they stood still, leaned against one another. He had run out of words. Her skin was burning. Their hands wandered. Only the sound of the crickets could still be heard.

'It's a disgrace, an absolute disgrace. Everybody saw you. Did you, even for a minute, think about the dangers that lurk in the paws of their grimy sort? Boozers and fighters, the lot of them. Conscienceless carousers that will stop at nothing and no-one - screwing around and belching, ungodly lot. You, of all people, my little Elisabeth, my only daughter, you want to ruin your reputation like that? Surely you're not that dull-witted? Did none of the stories doing the rounds about that riff-raff reach your ears? How in God's name is it possible? That you should ignore the will, the wish, the explicit wish of your own mother and consort with that scum? I forbid you to see him ever again or you'll be grounded.' Mother slammed Elisabeth's bedroom door and thumped down the stairs, shouting something in father's direction on her way down.

Hendrik had walked her home at half past midnight and tried to wish a good night to the black-skirted woman who, before they even set foot on the threshold, opened the door and shouted: 'Take your filthy paws off my daughter and never ever show your face here again.' She had pulled Elisabeth inside and raged on: 'Upstairs, you. You haven't heard the last of me yet. Neither has aunt Zoë. She should never have left you to your own devices.'

Elisabeth was sitting on her bed, knees drawn up, wrapped in the comforter. She slid the scarf through her fingers. Its softness was slowly draining away. Here at home everything seemed so distant. Distant, the lovely stories he had told her about a huge boat, the *Belgenland*, that sailed to America, a country he intended to go to one day, when he had enough money, without anybody knowing. Apart from her. She could keep a secret, couldn't she? Of course she could. She wanted nothing more than to keep secrets and to know. Know where America was. What you could see there. How the local people spoke. How long the voyage took. When he was planning on going. She had insisted on being told every detail and he had drawn her into the tangle of questions and answered as best he could. Eventually promising she could join him, if she wanted.

She had circled round his story like a tiny swallow. It all seemed unfairly distant now.

With autumn came the rain, washing away the dust and unruffling feathers. Elisabeth's house arrest wore away piecemeal, until one day she was allowed to go shopping again. She mapped it out in such a way she could easily commute between the elm and Mr Funke's garden. Their conversation had survived the few weeks' discontinuance.

Books were travelling back and forth again. He piqued her interest with occasionally enigmatic turns of phrase, which he would jot on a card and slip inside the books. They provided her with clues, which she took a while to fathom, but as she worked her way through the manuscripts the hidden messages became clear. *Find it in the high street. Visit your aunt. Why not try it yourself? Pray and contemplate.* Those were but a few of his catchphrases. Initially, she racked her brains over them but by the time she'd finished she did grasp the books' full meaning. By doing exactly as he ordered, she acquired an increasingly clear insight into what made the people around her tick and what consequently steered their deeds. She understood whom exactly inhabited aunt Zoë's corpulent body and what the words that came clattering out of her mouth really meant. She suddenly realized why the façade of the Mayor's house was *so* whitewashed that it dazzled the sun itself. She also understood the bigots and took pity on their ossified consciences. She was grateful to Mr Funke. Empty head. Full head. He knew her well.

But she also felt her heart beating for the young man who had drawn her against him at the fair and put his hand on her waist. She was filled with this dormant longing which, occasionally, and when she least expected it, reared its head. While washing in the tin bath in the scullery and soaping her legs all the way up her thighs. Or when she woke up at night and the moonlight cast a blue shimmer on the downy hair on her arm.

However many times Elisabeth left the house, however often she looked around and hoped against hope, there was no sign of Hendrik. Nothing. For months. Until the day the starlings murmured and swarmed through the sky, not daring to perch on the black Italian poplars' branches.

III

It was the spring she turned sixteen. The spring during which she lost her joie de vivre.

Her father was going to the sawmill because an uprooted tree had landed on the smithy roof and it needed repairing. He had mentioned it over breakfast in the kitchen that morning and she was suddenly wide-awake.

'Can I come along?' she asked. 'They've got this new steam powered machine.'

'Since when are you interested in steam engines?' mother enquired. She crossed the bottom of the loaf with her knife and started slicing.

'They're so powerful; so tall and powerful. I've been watching the boats on the canal too.'

'I don't mind,' father said, spreading lard on his slice of bread.

'Is that tablecloth finished? The one for Brussels?' mother asked.

'Yes, *and* wrapped. Ready for Blockhead to take.'

'Do stop calling him that. His name is Mr De Roovere. The man pays us. You could at least show a little respect.'

'It's an apt moniker,' father mumbled with his mouth full.

Mother threw him a severe look. Elisabeth giggled.

'All right then,' mother said, 'why not lend your father a helping hand? But watch out with those contraptions. I don't want you to come to grief.'

The sawmill lay on the other side of the baron's woods, also bordering the canal, but more to the south, closer to the big city. White smoke wafted up from the square brick chimney. Huge tree trunks lay stacked by the roadside. Several carts were queuing, some to shed their load, others to load up. The din was deafening. She went up a few steps to a tiny office with her father. The wall facing the shop floor had a window in it, so the old boss could follow what was going on from his chair. Or not going on. He walked father to the back of the building, where labourers would prepare his order.

Elisabeth stayed behind in the grubby office, with only a clerk in a nice suit for company. He sat bowed over his desk and was drawing some peculiar construction. He did take the occasional furtive peep at Elisabeth, but whenever he feared their eyes might meet, he bowed forward again and resumed his drawing, or at least pretended to. There were lots of people working downstairs - all of them men, as well as a few children. The steam powered machine looked brand-new. Two men were scooping coal into a huge, gaping mouth of fire, which they immediately blocked off again by pushing a heavy flap shut.

A young woman appeared. She looked about twenty-five, but her exact age was hard to tell. The tiny office window was grimy and on her luxuriant red hair she wore a fancy hat that hid most of her face. She was wearing a long off-white dress, tied with black silk ribbon that circled her slender waist a few times. The frock fanned out towards the bottom, where parallel black panels, prettified with textile roses had been sewn on. It had short puff sleeves and her arms and hands were swathed in shiny long gloves. A frilly velvet collar, also black, enveloped her neck - which further corkscrewed her appearance. She stood out like a sore thumb.

Elisabeth was not the only one looking at her. The labourers one floor below were also giving her the once-over, albeit stealthily, from behind a machine or a stack of planks. The clerk must have noticed how the sudden appearance of this woman of note had thrown Elisabeth off-balance. He put down his pencil and said: 'She's the boss' daughter.'

'She's wearing fine garments,' Elisabeth said. 'She should be careful not to get them dirty.'

'She hardly ever visits, the clerk sniffed. 'She's been dropping by more often these last few weeks, though. Now that she's romantically involved with one of the young labourers. She's going to suck him dry. She has quite a reputation. The mind boggles – a posh lady like that with a chap of such lowly origins.'

'One of your labourers, is he?' Elisabeth enquired.

'One of our planers, out back. An excellent one too, does a great job.'

'Isn't that the main thing?'

'His hands should caress the planks, not the ladies. He's going to get burned. She's evil. And when her father finds out, sparks will fly.' He ducked even deeper while saying this.

'He may never find out.'

'I give him a month, if that, the lad from Red Cent Corner.'

Elisabeth turned around and looked at him. His eyes were riveted on his drawing again.

'Did you say Red Cent Corner?'

'Yes, between Woesten and Vleteren.'

'Do you by any chance know his name?'

'Hendricus De Maere. I filed his papers only yesterday. Do you know him?'

'No,' Elisabeth lied, and turned around again. The smug young lady strode out of the factory, bolt upright. Elisabeth's stomach churned.

Neither of them spoke a word on the way back. Father because the price of the wood had come as a huge blow, Elisabeth because the image of the dress with black flowers just wouldn't dissolve in her mind.

She refused to believe it. She refused. For weeks. Until, one day, rural constable Daems filled her father in on every single detail of a story that made her gasp for breath and froze the blood in her veins. She heard Hendrik's name mentioned. He had been involved in a fight in town and had stabbed the sawmill's boss' nephew - over a woman. The boy had not survived. With much bravado, Daems piled on the details about how he had ventured – all alone - to Red Cent Corner in the middle of the night and plucked up enough courage to knock on Scabby Meg's door. He had not put up any resistance: Hendrik De Maere, twenty-one years old, workman at the sawmill, the biggest rogue for miles. He'd been handcuffed, head bowed. 'I'll get my own back!' he had shouted at his mother, but Meg, who was standing in the doorway, hadn't uttered a word and patiently taken the umpteenth blow to her offspring.

Elisabeth stayed put until the officer of the law had left the courtyard.

'Things happen for a reason,' her father said as he checked the sundial the constable had left with him to be repaired. Something snapped inside Elisabeth as well. Time stood still.

And still the spring wasn't done with her. One Friday afternoon she found a book under her elm written by a lady called Loveling. But it was mainly what it said on Mr Funke's card that made her go green at the gills. *It might not be a bad idea to contemplate the notion of parting. I am leaving. See you.* She read it. Reread it. Countless times, hoping that between the quickly scribbled characters she might discern something other than the crystal-clear wording. She rushed to his house. She ran into his garden. Everything was in its usual place. But all the furniture had been covered with white sheets. She knocked on the conservatory's panes. She shouted his name but it was silent as thought, by the walnut.

The next few weeks she went to the elm every day, hoping it had all been one big joke, one huge mistake. But each time she was greeted by an empty box under the tree.

Mr Funke's sudden departure was now also on all the bigots' lips. How dare he throw decorum to the winds like that?

At first you barely noticed. She'd simply grown more taciturn.

'It's not uncommon in adolescent girls,' a lady next door said.

Then came the months of moodiness, of sullen answers. She snapped and barked back at people.

'She'll grow out of it,' another lady next door spoke.

But then came the time she barely ate and visibly lost weight. Her dresses hung cheerlessly over her much too skinny limbs and her hair, which she no longer brushed every day, fell over her once proud slender neck and beautiful collarbone. She made a habit of retiring to her room almost immediately after supper, where she stared at the ceiling, counted knots in the wood or tried to distinguish shapes in the quirky line pattern of the growth rings. She occasionally recognized Hendrik or Mr Funke, but they withdrew back into the grain just as quickly as they had appeared.

‘It’ll blow over,’ she heard her mother speak downstairs.

‘She’s sad, it’s plain to see.’ It was aunt Zoë visiting.

‘We all have our moments.’

‘Elisabeth needs to see a doctor. She’s not well.’

Mother’s only comment was: ‘All sorrow fades, even the most unbearable.’

Rosalie was at the door. She was still in her pinafore and wiggling nervously on the threshold. The letter in her hand had been written in turquoise ink. *To Mr and Mrs Mazereel, and their daughter Elisabeth*, it said.

‘Is your mother in?’ the notary public’s maid enquired.

‘No,’ Elisabeth said.

‘Could you please hand her this invitation?’

‘It shall be done,’ Elisabeth said. She nonchalantly accepted the envelope and threw it on the shoe rack in the corridor.

The maid hesitated a moment. ‘It’s for you too. *Madame Le Notaire* is worried about you. She’s no stranger to heartache herself. She wants to help. There’ll be other guests too.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘Your mother called in yesterday. She said you were really poorly.’

‘Thank you Rosalie. You may go.’

The door fell to.

‘What you need is a change of scenery. That’s all.’

‘You’re peddling your own daughter’s soul, door to door.’

‘That’s not true,’ mother said.

‘The two of you are laying plans, but I never get a say in anything.’

‘You do – in written form even. You’ve been invited to a dinner party with us. At *Monsieur* and *Madame Le Notaire*’s.

‘Who says I want to go?’

‘You don’t have a choice. Your father says so too.’

She looked towards the drawing room, where he sat reading the paper.

'Don't you, Arthur? Say something, will you?'

The paper came down. Audible sighs.

'It'll do you good,' he said.

'See? From the horse's mouth. I could use your help taking out that blue dress, come to think of it. The one that doesn't fit me anymore.'

Two weeks later they stood in front of the bombastic oak door to the notary's house. Mother coming apart at the seams, father mute, Elisabeth clearly reluctant. The doorbell rang shrilly and it took a while before Rosalie answered the door. She welcomed them warmly and accompanied them to *Monsieur et Madame's* drawing room.

'There you are. *Madame Le Notaire* sprang up from her armchair and shook hands. She whispered something to Elisabeth's mother.

Elisabeth herself took in the room and was impressed by its interior. The black dressers full of china plates in the drawing room made an even greater impression on her than the chairs with their leather upholstery and the glistening keys on the propped open grand piano. Father immediately sat down next to the notary.

Half an hour later the other guests arrived. Madame Duponselle and her son, Guillaume; a haughty, badly perfumed lady who, as it turned out, was *Madame Le Notaire's* cousin by marriage. She was a widow and had taken up residence on one of Brussels' smarter boulevards.

She immediately cut in and did not hand over during the entire visit. It made life a lot easier for the other guests. No need to find topics of conversation, since she provided them in abundance; and even though Elisabeth and her mother knew very little about any of the covered subjects, they did shine a fascinating, sparkling light on Madame's exquisite world. Mother listened, lost in wonder at the stories about life in the capital. To Elisabeth, the widow's observations about the *cinématographe*, the *Galeries du Roi*, *Boulevard Anspach* and *the Palais de Justice* opened an entirely new playground of words and concepts. It sounded alluring, all that French.

Was it the French or was it the port? Either way, as the evening progressed, Elisabeth felt lighter of heart and mind and started paying closer attention to the young man sitting next to her. At the beginning of the meal – hardly surprising, with such a mother – he had barely spoken a word, but gradually, after the two older gentlemen had retired to the drawing room for a smoke, and the hostess had had the port topped up for the umpteenth time, he became more talkative. He was dressed up to the nines in his crisply starched white shirt, his grey suit, hairs brilliantined back, and with his tiny moustache. Despite this outer stiffness, he did manage to reconcile two seemingly incompatible notions. 'I graduated cum laude as a medical doctor and have never laid eyes on such a beautiful woman.' It was as if he was making two informal remarks - managerially aloof almost. She smiled. He lacked the manliness that excited her so in Hendrik, with his rascally blue eyes. He most certainly didn't have Mr Funke's wise personality. In no respect did he resemble either of the two men.

While the widow went to get her parasol in the drawing room and summoned everyone thither to ooh and ah over a painting she had just spotted, by a Brussels painter no less, an acquaintance of hers in fact – do notice the patterning of light on the horizon, it's his signature mark -, Elisabeth and Guillaume stopped in the hallway, by the front door.

'Do excuse my mother...' he sighed.

She briefly touched his forearm. 'Not to worry, nobody's perfect.'

'I'll call for you next Sunday,' he spoke boldly. 'If that's all right with you.'

Elisabeth had no time to reply since the others were coming back from the adjacent room, *madame du monde* in front.

'His work's prohibitively expensive these days, I should know,' she cackled. Elisabeth gave a quick nod.

'A *coup de foudre*,' he said a week later in a tiny boat. He was rowing, she was all ears. He told her about his student days in Leuven, where he had boarded with Madame Brouckère, who adored him and fed him cherry pie and apple fritters. He talked about Brussels and Liège, where he had trained with famous doctors. He told her what an ingenious thing the human body was, and how the latest research methods and instruments would change the world of medicine forever. That he intended to be part of this pioneering work - because he loved people, more particularly the ones with hunches and pustules, lumps and phlegm. Healing people was the highest good in the world. She found his velvety words slightly confusing. A smithy in a Flemish backwater was her habitat. The glow of the fire, the heat of the iron, her father's sweaty torso, the puffing bellows, her mother taking him the occasional jug of fresh water and some bread, and her eternal anxiety. Parental love between hammer and anvil. That there was a world outside of her own, she had grasped from Funke's books and learned from Hendrik's naval stories. It slowly dawned on her that she was sitting in a boat with one such different world. Something told her to seize this opportunity. Fate had let too many things slip through her fingers.

He spent a whole year commuting between the capital and his *fiancée's* village. She loathed the word. But every Sunday morning she awaited him, in her best frock, hair washed and wearing the perfumes he bought her. They walked across fields and laughed at nesting blackbirds or stopped by a row of pollard willows. She was reminded of a sonnet she'd once read as he rambled on about rising sap and photosynthesis.

They got mother's blessing because her daughter was regaining her appetite. He was welcomed inside, in the front room, where he read to her from his study books. Because of all the Latin half of what he said eluded her, but she enjoyed how the erudition fill the room. That way, he gradually filled the void left by Mr Funke.

She was his first love. His academic respect for the human body resulted in a slow but skillful initial mutual exploration. It excited her when he softly ran his fingers over her nipples while listing the muscles of the chest, when he whispered unpronounceable names of bones while

caressing the inside of her thighs, when he gave a full account of the myriad invisible creatures living in saliva and then sought her tongue behind her wet lips. She drew on the fire that was blazing up inside her to tear into his scientific seriousness. That way, he gradually filled the void left by Hendrik.

Mother waxed lyrical about Guillaume and father tolerated him. The two gents didn't quarrel. Neither did they ever have a proper conversation, apart from the odd polite exchange. Mutual greetings. Passing the bread. That's how deep their discussions went. The sound of hot metal is very different from that of ailing lungs.

The village bigots were having a field day. 'The smith's daughter's reeled in a doctor.' Heads leaned closer. 'He has impeccable, sophisticated manners.' They whispered. 'As well as a mother of means.' They mused in silence. 'My daughter should be so lucky.' It was soon clear: the bigots approved of Guillaume. Even more so after the Hunchback had knocked on his door, complaining of a terrible backache.

'All he did was lay me down on a table, on my stomach,' the Hunchback said. 'I had to strip down to my waist and he kept feeling for my vertebrae. He prodded and squeezed as if kneading dough. All of a sudden my torso cracked and I was cured. I still have my hump, of course, but I can assure you the pain is gone. I'm able to sleep again, it's a true blessing.' Four village alehouses further the doctor had worked miracles.

The Hunchback was the first in a row of remarkable feats. Like beer merchant Nest Vandaele passing a kidney stone behind the church wall one Sunday morning, after visiting Guillaume the day before, complaining of agonizing cramps, and being given a kill-or-cure remedy against the pain, alongside a brew that would probably help expel the stone. And expel it he did, behind the church wall, during eleven o'clock mass, just before the Lamb of God. The entire congregation heard Nest shrieking outside the church. They were mumbling Give us Peace when he entered, holding a kidney stone the size of a pigeon's egg in the palm of his hand - or so the story goes; even though shedding a whopper that size through your member is utterly inconceivable. But people sometimes see more with their eyes than their hands can measure - certainly in church.

Then came the miraculous healings of Alfons Verweyden's sawed off finger, Eleonore's temporary blindness and most of all – the case had been on everybody's lips – Gusta Stevens' obstipation, six weeks, or was it six months, in a village you never know.

Either way, Guillaume was soon idolized by almost the entire village. He was incredibly clever and good with his hands. That much was clear. The bigots loved to know him near.

Elisabeth's mind was made up. She had no intention of worrying whether or not he was Mr Right. She was intent on erasing the open-mindedness she'd experienced reading Mr Funke's books. She no longer wished to know how exactly an unexpected, warm chest at a fairground attraction felt. She wanted only one thing: to leave Woesten. And Guillaume – she realized all too well – was her only way out. After a while, the caged bird forgets how to fly.