

# Speechless

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**An extract pp (7-18)**

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**p 7-18**

And this is the story of a stroke, devastating as an internal lightning bolt, and of the agonizingly slow decline that over the next two years afflicted a five-fold mother and first-class amateur actress. Her life had always been dedicated to the spoken word, hard work, healthy food for all the family, economical indulgence and affordable hygiene from head to toe. And yet she of all people was repaid by life, which she had always honoured—employing limited means and unbridled ambition, proud stubbornness and stubborn pride—with ingratitude and blunt cruelty.

She lost first her speech, then her dignity, then her heartbeat.

Everyone who knew her had always expected that things would turn out differently. That her heart, fragile and wonky as she always called it herself, would not wait for two years. It would stop beating as soon as that mouth of hers could no longer speak, no longer scold, praise, taste, snigger and declaim— and I'm still omitting arguing and puffing frugally on her filter cigarettes, lighter and lighter as the years went on, and I'm still overlooking the contemptuous pursing of her thin lips when she didn't like something. I shan't even mention the mocking raising of one corner of her mouth and the opposite eyebrow when she wished to indicate that no one need try to tell her anything about her trade, her methods of upbringing, her cookery books, her view of excellent theatre or the rest of human existence.

And I'd like to warn you, reader. If you don't like works that are largely based on truth and simply supply the missing parts from imagination; if you're put off by a novel which according to many people cannot be called a novel, because it lacks a proper head, a beautiful curly tail and an orderly middle section, let alone contains a respectable coherent story by way of intestines; if texts that are at the same time a lament, a tribute and a resounding curse make you ill, because they are about life itself and at the same time present only one dear relation of the author—then the moment has already come for you to shut this book.

Replace it on the pile in the shop where you are standing, push it back among the other books on the shelf in your club, your rest home, your public library, your friends' drawing room or the property you have forced your way into.

Buy something else, borrow something else, steal something else.

And miss my mother's story.

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## he (or: the story of the story)

To everyone else: just take a look at that photo on the front cover. It's definitely her. Beauty is not necessarily passed down from mother to son.

Even in her own family, the Verbekes—an old dynasty of architects, builders and stonemasons, in which the men were mostly big but always bony, the women mostly tall but always with rather angular faces—even in her own family, then, it was not clear where so much beauty and elegance had sprung from. She was the youngest girl in a family of twelve. There should have been fourteen, but one brother died nameless at his birth, and another, having been properly baptized, died in his cot.

There were enough brothers left not really to feel the loss.

She, the smallest and daintiest of the dozen, was the only one allowed, at the tender age of sixteen, to study in French, in Dinant, for a whole school year, and afterwards even in English for a few months, in Northampton. Something to do with Domestic Science, Bookkeeping, Etiquette and Putting the Finishing Touch to All That. Something to do with strict regulations, exciting changes of scene and a few friendships made for life.

We are talking about just before the Second World War, the declining years of an unthreatened and seemingly endless interwar period, in which little Belgium, *la petite Belgique*, flourished as never before. For the first time since the ravages of the Great War, the worldwide conflagration of 1914–18, its franc was again called the European dollar, for the first time too its handguns and its regional beers became famous all over the planet. Its vast Congo—a world within a world, unfathomable in its customs and murderous in its climate—vomited an endless stream of colonial goods over the motherland, which with the aid of a ruler and a shoehorn would have fitted about eighty times into its colony. Out of that wild tropical empire everything continued to well up that could serve as a foundation and adornment of prosperity—from rubber to ivory, from copper to cobalt, a high plateau of zinc and tin, a cascade of diamonds, a sea of palm oil and cocoa, oceans of petrol, without forgetting the gold, and the uranium and the works of art in crude bronze and ebony. The little motherland capitalized on all this, handsomely in fact, thanks to its age-old trump card: its position at the core of Europe, right on the intersecting lines from London to Berlin and from Paris to Rotterdam.

You can't have a much better position in Europe, except when war breaks out.

But despite its nascent civil aviation industry—operating in white and blue, since its national colours were too similar to those of Germany—and despite its dense railway network with sturdy Belgian-made engines, and despite the breakthrough of a home-grown super-limousine, the Minerva, 'the Rolls Royce of the Continent', despite all that and much more, the interwar period in Belgium outside the capital—'*Bruxelles? Petit Paris!*'—and, come on, outside Antwerp and Liège of course, and on you go, outside Ghent and Mons too, and naturally also outside Charleroi—finally, to sum up: in the provinces and the depths of the countryside the interwar years in Belgium were somewhat reminiscent of the late nineteenth century. But without the carriages and the horse trams, and with more comfortable clothes in which, above the belt at least, a button might occasionally be left undone.

Also a woman who smoked in the street was still considered scandalous, also the dance halls that were popping up everywhere were intended for the working classes and the rabble; also the teacher-priests stood at the entrance of the increasingly popular cinemas, noting the names of pupils attending, who the following day inexorably became ex-pupils. And also it was not obvious that a well-brought-up young lady from Waasland should start travelling the world though she did not even want to become a missionary nun, but simply went on a course, to give it all the Finishing Touch at that, far across the Channel.

That could rightly be called curious, however bright the girl herself might be, however articulate, in three languages no less. But even the matter of those three languages? She had wanted that from an early age and had pleaded her case with everyone who needed to give their permission and with lots of others who had absolutely no say in the matter. As long as she could plead her case. 'Most of all,' she would say emphatically all her life, usually from behind her butcher's counter, and always with a tinge of regret, 'most of all I would like to have been a lawyer and gone to the Bar. But I wanted children. That came first. A person has to learn to make choices in their life.'

Well, who knows? Perhaps one day she had also chosen of her own free will to become attractive and elegant? And it subsequently happened?

It wouldn't have surprised many people. 'When our Josée gets an idea in her head?' You could hear her eleven brothers and sisters bring it up on more than one occasion, frequently with a sigh, at New Year's parties and wedding receptions, just before or long after the eruption of yet another family quarrel that could drag on for years. Though it should be said that the Verbekees never showed themselves to be petty or smallminded at such striking family moments. They never failed to come back on parade, reluctantly or, on the contrary, in newly restored harmony, despite everything: here they sat again, reunited cheek by jowl, in their usual cacophony of harsh architects' voices, grating builders' jokes and foul-mouthed cardplayers' jargon. As the hours went by, singing actually rang out ('On the banks of the Scheldt now / Well hidden in the reeds...'), interspersed with the loudly proclaimed opinions of the bourgeois who knows he has been a success in life.

And that's what they were. Successful and forthright. Yes, just look around, from one to the other: here they sit, the assembled Verbekees, glued to a festive table like bees to a honeycomb. Most are accompanied by their offspring. In their hands they hold a cigar or a glass of Elixir d'Anvers, one is sucking a Leonidas chocolate and the other is nibbling an almond biscuit from Jules Destrooper. But they all have faces that speak volumes, as only the faces of older relations can speak volumes the moment the conversation turns to one of the youngest and most turbulent fledglings of the collective nest.

'If our Josée gets something into her head? Best keep out of the way.'

But don't be fooled. I'm now talking again, jumping from one thing to another, sorry, about that photo on the front cover. It's not because that hat suits my mother—[she] 'All my life it's been like that, give me a hat and I look good in it, whether it's a flower pot or a flying saucer'—that in daily life she was often discovered wearing headgear. Certainly not such a striking specimen.

She preferred a simple hairband when she was sweaty and, well into old age, was unashamedly at work in a swimming costume in the vegetable garden of her allotment. Our summer house, which we had built ourselves, called 'the bungalow', or else 'our bungalow', was located a stone's throw

from the centre of her and my birthplace, which was once promoted from an insignificant commune to a proper town by none other than Napoleon. He was already emperor at the time.

Since then Sint-Niklaas has acquired the greatest number of secondary schools in the whole area, the highest suicide rate in the country, and the largest market square—if you like, the largest empty space—in the whole of Europe.

In order to make up for everything, the emptiness as well as the suicidal thoughts, there rises once a year on that huge, empty market square, in commemoration of the Liberation—a term that awakens in the inhabitants increasingly new meanings and desires—a squadron of gaudy balloons, filled with helium or freshly baked hot air.

The latter, the modern hot-air balloons, are first rolled out on the ground by three or four balloonists at a time. An unrecognizable jumble that looks like a granny knot tied by giants is expertly disentangled and unfolded into a plastic puddle, capricious and crinkled, in which nevertheless the contours are discernible of the weird balloon shape that is about to astonish us. Or will it be another of those humdrum ones? One of those pears hanging upside down, as multicoloured as a beach ball with delusions of grandeur?

With lots of hissing and roaring a jet of flame shoots out of a burner which, together with a large fan, is incorporated in a frame that in turn is mounted on top of the balloon basket. For now that basket is lying pathetically on its side. The fan, sideways and rather lazily, directs the jet plus a first stream of hot air into the opening of the balloon. It has to be held open by the balloonist and his helpers. They stand on tiptoe, arms high above their heads, grabbing hold of the slippery edge of the opening with both hands and making sure that that they themselves don't get caught in the stream of hot air, on pain of having at least their eyelashes and eyebrows singed off, and usually also every hair on their head. One has to make sacrifices for one's hobby.

Behind their backs a colossus gradually takes shape, then stands up jerkily, as if after a barbaric open-air childbirth. It raises first its head, then its back, then its upper body. Slowly and majestically it seems to sprout from the ground itself, yes, it springs from our market square in slow motion, surrounded solely by brothers, as if it were one of the countless earth-born warriors which rose from the field that Jason had sown with dragon's teeth and which he would have to defeat in order to capture the Golden Fleece. In exactly the same way, overpowering and threatening, the modern supermen swell into view, ever fuller, ever higher, until they have clambered completely upright, pulling the basket straight beneath them, their first triumph. Their jets of flame sing louder and more love-struck the more powerful and mightier they become, and look, there they stand finally fully grown, waving the plumes of their helmets, in a neat row: our gentle mastodons, swaying in our inevitable autumn breeze, trembling with expectation as is appropriate after a birth, for the time being still restrained by cables like Gulliver by the Lilliputians, but ready to make an irresistible leap up to the heavens. A contemporary army consisting mainly of figs hanging upside down—they don't always have to be pears—in all the gaudiest colours of the rainbow. There are also some in the shape of a gingerbread house or a Smurf. There is even a crate of beer of a well-known brand which is also the sponsor of the feather-light monster, since someone has to pay the bills, even those for hot air.

A little later they climb into the sky magnificently and to loud applause. The scarce helium balloons, caught in fishnets with too large a mesh, just as a female buttock can be squeezed into a saucy stocking, quickly jettison some ballast—bags of river sand, bags of loam. That is: the contents of the bags are scattered to the four winds with exaggerated gestures, in a ritual reminiscent of the

ancient sower who still adorns the cover of our school exercise books, although paradoxically no grain is sown, just sand. Sand on stone, sand on emptiness, sand on people, sand on sand.

It dissipates immediately, to the relief of the upward-looking spectators, since in extreme emergencies, for example to avoid a pylon, it is permitted to offload the sand with bag and all, at the risk of hitting a back-up car or an unsuspecting bovine or occasionally an unfortunate walker, and one disastrous year even, in order to avoid the sharp rake of a television aerial, a pram, thank God empty—the little passenger had just been taken out to peer, holding Daddy's hand, at the Smurf floating above them, and the next instant, right next to them: splat! A sandbag, slap in the middle of the pram, whose wheels flew off at the impact.

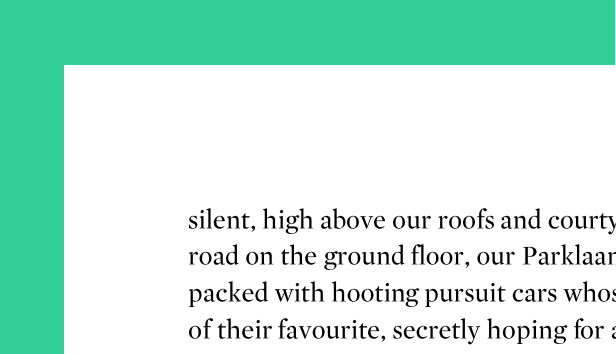
The hot-air balloons on the other hand, fizzing angrily, suck in an extra-long burner flame through their clearly visible arseholes. A reverse fart that, even more in reverse, gives them an upward jerk, toward the wide firmament. In this way our helium globes and our hot-air giants rise in brotherly fashion above our two central church towers, one of which bears a gigantic gilded statue of the Virgin Mary instead of—as would be fitting, in accordance with our legendary Flemish national character, which bursts with modesty—a discreet weathervane or a sluggish dragon, one of those scaly monsters that enjoys being routed by the archangel Michael.

However, the people of Sint-Niklaas are not known for their discretion or modesty. As a result their Mary does not look as if she will ever permit herself to be routed, and certainly not with enjoyment, not even by an archangel. She is as high as two houses, our Mary, wears a crown on her head and carries a child on her arm. Our Holy Mary as a fertile empress armoured from head to toe in shiny gold leaf. Consequently she is popularly known as Gilt Mary. When there is sufficient mist, despite all the gold leaf, to remove her from sight, the popular sneer is that Gilt Mary is on her travels again, and that she can well afford it, with all that precious metal and all her spare time, because only one child? You can hardly call that a time-consuming task, hardly even a family. One is none.

Today there is no mist, far from it, there is a slight rain of fine sand, but apart from that it is a brilliant Sunday in September, and the colours are as unruly and shiny as in a Breughel painting, the ordinary people cheer and drink and eat hamburgers with fried onion rings and fresh tomato sauce, while—above the festive stalls and the chewing chops—a squadron of airships takes to the sky. They rise above our chimneys and slates, above our fashionable roof terraces and densely populated balconies packed with waving local celebrities. They brush past many gables belonging to cafés with names like De Graanmaat and Hemelrijck, of shops with names like Weduwe Goethals & Dochters, where they sell crystal glasses and cutlery boxes lined with blue silk, and of a chip shop called Putifar, after the circus donkey in a children's book.

They shoot upward, past the front of our relatively recent town hall, upward past the façade of our ancient jail—a former prison which in your childhood served as, what symbolism, a library, and which they shortly plan, what a sign of the times, to convert into lofts, just as they want to convert everything into lofts nowadays, even former libraries where you were once able to wreck your eyesight reading books, without a moment's regret, and where at a certain moment there wasn't one book left, according to your age category, for you to read, and where the librarian—may his memory be honoured, his name praised, his bloodline blessed—then gave you permission to start on the books of the next category, on condition that you talked to no one about it, and that was what happened.

They brush past that significant gable, failing by a whisker to pull off the gutter, plus some tiles from the year dot. Then they finally make for the open sky, the boundless heavens, majestic and



silent, high above our roofs and courtyards and yet floating away precisely over the great access road on the ground floor, our Parklaan, which, surprise surprise, passes a park and is already jam-packed with hooting pursuit cars whose passengers wish to follow with their own eyes the Calvary of their favourite, secretly hoping for a cautious accident—the year before one landed in a castle moat, three got caught in barbed wire, and two crashed in the Westakkers military zone, almost resulting in an international emergency, since we are talking about the heyday of the Cold War.