FLANDERS LITERATURE

Return to Neerpelt

Lieve Joris

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My father calls. He has a funereal voice at the best of times, but today he sounds gloomier than ever. My brother Fonny was in an accident—the night before last, on his birthday. He's in a coma in the intensive care unit.

"Do the others know?"

"Sure, sure, except Nicole. And Hilde—she doesn't need to know yet."

On the road from Hasselt to Tongeren, Fonny's car crashed into a tree and rolled over twice. Fonny was under the influence, of course, but my father doesn't mention that. "Here's Ma," he blurts as she snatches the receiver out of his hand.

Fonny was looking so well that morning, she says. But the two of them had argued. When the hospital called, she hoped he was dead, but now she wants him to pull through. If he ends up an invalid, she'll take care of him for the rest of her life. "I'm as strong as an ox," she says, with a catch in her voice. "I'm working, I'm crying, and I'm praying to my God."

Then she's gone again.

"The nurses gave us Fonny's bloodstained shirt," Papa continues, in a slightly secretive tone. "She's in the storeroom, washing it in a bucket. Her tears are dripping into the water—it's like Our Lady of Sorrows."

It wasn't just Mama that Fonny argued with on his birthday, but his girlfriend Annie too. He smashed a window of her apartment, and when he showed up at my parents' house at eleven-thirty p.m., he asked Papa to go pick up his bed from Annie's place. That's right, our pa, a retired tax collector, almost seventy years old.

It's been so hot for days now, here in Amsterdam, that I'm keeping the satin curtains shut in my study. Outside, small boats chug down the canal. I can easily picture it: the scantily clad passengers around their improvised tables, sipping their white wine

and nibbling their snacks, the children in their orange life jackets, their hands in the rippling water. Muted yellow light filters through the curtain into the room. My tabernacle, Marek calls it. They know I've hidden myself away to write; that's probably why they didn't call sooner.

Fonny wasn't looking well at all that morning, my father confesses. He and a friend had driven up to Holland, no doubt to buy drugs. He doesn't know what they scored there, but they were both acting weird when they got back. "It makes you long for the old days," he says, "to see him lying there and to think what a sweet kid he was."

When was the last time I spoke to Fonny? It must have been about four months ago, while I was in Hasselt. Mama dialed his number and handed me the phone. "Here, high time you talked to your brother."

"Hey, Fonny, how's life?"

"Not too bad." His voice came from far away, as if he had sunk deep into a pile of cushions. He was wheezing with asthma. Supposedly he had the flu, or a respiratory infection, but of course he was in withdrawal. I know that now, though I could have guessed it then. Mama sometimes had to bring him cola and food—since he didn't have the strength to get up. I acted oblivious, wished him a speedy recovery, kept the call short, and felt guilty afterwards for avoiding a real conversation.

Did he have to turn up in intensive care half-dead before we would show him any concern? Because now that he's there, everyone's rushing to see him. Our brother Filip, who studied law and is writing his doctoral dissertation, has gone home from Brussels—even though he hasn't been on speaking terms with Fonny for years. One Sunday when Filip was expected in Hasselt, Mama made sure Fonny was there too. Filip gave Mama and Papa a kiss and ignored his eldest brother.

"What about Fonny?" Mama asked.

"I'm not talking to that lowlife."

The word "lowlife" has ricocheted through the house ever since, spoiling every conversation with Papa: Filip has to take it back, he says, if he doesn't take it back he's no longer my son. Filip shows no remorse. "What else could I call him? There's no other way to say it."

But yesterday Papa and Filip went to the hospital together. They talked to doctors and nurses and circled Fonny's bed, examining him from all sides, so that Papa could make a fairly detailed report: there are tubes in his nose and throat, stitches in his chin, and a cast on his right arm. Besides a hole in his head, he also has a triple skull fracture, seven broken ribs, and a burnt left hand. The car had caught fire when, after midnight, a local resident pulled Fonny out of the wreckage.

My father asked the nurse if he should arrange for a priest. Filip thought that was a clever way of finding out how serious Fonny's condition really is. "But that's not why I asked."

I can hear Mama's voice from the storeroom.

"I'll go check up on Ma," my father says. There's something else he'd like to say, but he hesitates. Then he comes out and asks, "Say, Lieve, Our Lady of Sorrows—what do you think of that image?"

One thing I'm certain of: I mustn't go to Hasselt now. I'll be sucked into a whirlpool of emotions, and then I can forget about writing. But the phone keeps ringing, and when it's silent, I reach for the receiver myself, in search of the latest news.

All the projects Fonny came up with! He would race down the Flemish roads without stopping from his farm-in-constant-renovation in Vliermaalroot by way of Maastricht to Annie's apartment near Café De Munt in Hasselt. Meanwhile, he kept popping up at my parents' house to tell Ma and Pa the tales of his adventures. He was the very first of us to leave home, but he didn't like it out there, and at the age of forty-two, he's still attached to his parents with a rubber band.

"And now I'm going home to my sweet Mama," he said that night to his friends at De Munt. He also smashed some things in his own house, Mama saw when she went to inspect it. When the nurse asked if Fonny uses drugs, she said no. Does she really believe it herself? She doesn't want to know. She always turns off TV shows on the subject. Everyone at the hospital knows the score, of course. Papa says they're giving Fonny methadone because on top of all his injuries, he's also detoxifying. Wies tells me about a drug dealer in Hasselt who has AIDS. "They should test Fonny's blood right away. He'll never let them do it once he's awake."

Rik, who sometimes helps Papa with insurance paperwork, tells me the cows in the nearby pasture stampeded when Fonny's auto slammed into the tree. That led to the death of one pregnant

cow, and the farmer is pressing charges. "Shall Pa and I go spill oil on the road?" he jokes. "Then we can say the car skidded, and maybe Fonny can file an insurance claim."

Mama and Papa are probably at the hospital when I call that evening, because I hear Filip's solemn voice saying, "Hello, this is the answering machine of Mr. and Mrs. Joris. We're not home right now, but you can..." I never knew they had one of those things. Later I learn Filip picked it up on sale for them.

In the middle of all this, Wies announces that she's bought an Olivier Strelli suit for a wedding she's been invited to. A lovely shade of orange. And that she's treated herself to a really good facial massage.

When I lie down in bed, silence surrounds me for the first time today. In my mind, I am driving along the road from Hasselt to Tongeren, and out of the half-darkness the car emerges. There's *good old Fonny*, wedged between the wheel and the seat, unconscious, drugged to the gills, his hand in the boiling coolant from the radiator. So his hand was lying there *stewing*—like the pale chicken feet I saw at the Chinese restaurant the other day. The thought makes my chest so tight that I decide to get up.

I perch on the windowsill in my study for a while, watching the cars cruising past the glowing windows of the red-light district across the canal. I always do this when I can't sleep; the mysterious nocturnal activity somehow calms me.

"What was all that squealing about?" Marek asks the next morning.

"What do you mean?"

He does an impression—he's very good at that. It's like the way the moorhens outside my window squeal when they're in distress.

That afternoon, as I run upstairs to report on the latest of my phone conversations, Marek says, "If I were you, I would write it all down."

"What?"

"What they say. Soon you'll have forgotten it all."

This catches me by surprise. Marek is not usually a fan of my family dramas, and especially not of the blind obsession with which I throw myself into them. "Why would I want to remember?"

"You never know what you might use it for. Just do it—or you'll regret it later."

So with some hesitation, I create a document on my computer called "Fonny" and start taking notes—not only about what happens in the days that follow, but also, gradually, about things that took place in the past.

Guess who showed up at Fonny's bedside? His girlfriend Annie, the one he'd had an argument with that evening. She had bought a cross on a silver chain for his birthday. She hadn't given it to him because of the argument, but now she's taken it to the hospital and hung it over his bed.

My family can't stop talking about her.

"Say, um, that Annie, what kind of person is she?"

"I think she must be retarded."

"He met her at the Center for Alcohol and other Drug problems. That says it all. She left her husband and four children for him."

"She's a chain smoker. Her mouth stinks like an ashtray." That's Filip, who has abandoned his dissertation for the second time to head off to Hasselt. "All she ever talks about is herself. *Good thing I wasn't in that car, or I'd have been a goner for sure*—that kind of thing." He has pointed out to her, delicately, that Fonny probably wouldn't have crashed the car if she'd been there with him. "But she doesn't listen, just goes on with her endless blabbing—like a laundromat lady."

"Then why didn't she do his laundry?" asks Wies, who lives nearby and drops in every evening on her way home from work. "Ma found piles of dirty clothes in his house. She's already done seven loads. The clothesline is always full—all designer labels. Good thing it's sunny out."

And as Mama does Fonny's laundry, she is gradually opening her eyes to the fact that Fonny's an addict, and she's the mother of an addict.

Papa blames Fonny's old friend who helped him get his hands on the hard stuff. As if Fonny needed his friend's help for that. In fact, Fonny also introduced other boys to drugs. Should their parents blame him? But I don't say any of this. If I did, my father would slam down the receiver. He's intelligent, he took Greek and Latin at school, he watches the news, loves the Flemish writer Willem Elsschot and the songs of Jacques Brel, and knows all about the First and Second World Wars, but when it comes to drugs and his eldest son's condition, he's no genius.

He moans that Fonny should never have left his previous girlfriend, Christiane. She was strong and, when they were together, Fonny wasn't such a weight on my father's mind. But after a raging argument, Fonny sent Christiane packing and even threw a frying pan at her as she left. Luckily, he has no neighbors in Vliermaalroot. Otherwise someone would surely have called in the police.

My father's secret hope is that this accident will rekindle the flame between Fonny and Christiane. After all, he says, they have a child together. "Fonny's regretted that incident for a long time," he says. "Especially the frying pan." He's conveniently forgotten that Christiane is pregnant by her new partner.

Annie has poured her heart out to Rik. Fonny was shooting speed on his birthday. She showed Rik a whole box of needles. Fonny often brought other addicts to her place and made her drive them to Maastricht, where she would wobble in high heels around a dark shed full of junkies, trying not to step on the needles. They would beat her because they wanted her money, but she would hide it in her shoe and refuse to give it to them. Then she couldn't buy food, because she'd told them she was broke. "Fonny burned through everything he had," she said. "He was doing so much speed and got so tired sometimes that I had to feed him with a spoon."

Does Annie know so little about Fonny, or does she think he'll never wake up? She seems to be completely guileless, delighted to have found a listening ear and finally have the chance to tell her story. I dread the moment when Fonny discovers she's been spilling all his secrets.

"If I'm ever in an accident, you have to take photos of the car," Fonny once told Annie. So she's been to the garage where they towed the wreck to take pictures from all sides. But she forgot to remove the lens cap, so her mission failed.

She's gone to light a candle at the Franciscan church in Hasselt. Now everything will be all right, she thinks.

"They weren't married or even registered as partners," Papa says, "so that candle doesn't count."

And Fonny just lies there. He's never kept quiet this long before. In the meantime not only Annie, but also the others are talking a blue streak, trying to mend what's been broken. Papa is angry that Wies said the word "drugs" to the doctor: she shouldn't drag our family's good name through the mud. If that ends up in his dossier, it could prevent him from finding a position. Yes, you heard him right: a position.

"A position, absolutely," says Aline's husband, who works as an engineer for an American company. "Working in an office from nine to five. That would be good for Fonny."

"Fonny needs a complete purge of his social milieu," says Rik, who's a human resources manager and, when times are hard, likes to reach for the ten-dollar words.

"What do you mean by that, Rik?"

"The drug users in Hasselt who got him all screwed up should be locked away."

"And who's going to do that?"

"The police, of course."

"Hmm..."

"I'll do it myself if I have to."

"You?"

"Yeah, me. I'll murder them."

Oh, Rik! He's decided that once Fonny's milieu has been purged, he can open an antique shop. You see, Fonny knows a few things about antiques, ever since he started selling furniture at the early Sunday morning market in Tongeren. He's an unbeatable salesman with a silver tongue. Rik is willing to lend him some money to get started. "A woodworking studio's not a bad idea either," he muses. "My attic needs some fixing up. Maybe that could be his first project."

I try to keep my mind on my writing, but more and more, I catch myself roaming the landscape of my childhood, that sprawling property in Neerpelt along the Campine canal where we were all together. Papa had a chalet built on the lawn between our big white house and our *bomma*'s cottage. Fonny rehearsed there with The Reborns until all the windows were fogged up, and from behind those windows came such a racket that the chalet seemed likely to rise from the boggy grass and shoot up into the sky like a misty space shuttle.

Wies was walking home one evening and saw through the beech hedging that a crowd had gathered on the lawn. She thought something terrible had happened—until she heard the pounding beat from the chalet. She stayed there, peeping through the hedge, astonished by the audience that Fonny and his band had attracted.

When Fonny wasn't rehearsing, we were allowed to use the chalet too. There was a jukebox that took five-franc coins: as the record was lifted from the stack, the coin fell into the return slot, where it remained until the next time someone needed it.

The Reborns performed in bars and dance clubs on both sides of the border, dressed in white shirts with black-trimmed ruffles. Fonny was sixteen and wore his hair in a quiff and tucked behind his protruding ears. I was at boarding school during the week and wandered around the house singing on weekends, in the hope that Fonny would notice me and invite me to a rehearsal at the chalet.

Then without warning he had left the Reborns and was spending weeks practicing on his own for a song competition. Half the family went with him one Sunday afternoon to the dim community center, where it smelled like stale beer. The judges were seated at a table covered with a white damask cloth, which became increasingly damp during the competition from the beads of condensation that dripped from the beer glasses. Couples shuffled sluggishly over the dance floor. Fonny sang *Crying Time* by Ray Charles, a performance of such heart-wrenching beauty that I could hardly hold back my tears. He was the best; we all knew that, especially my father. The judges' expressions were stern and revealed nothing.

He did not win that afternoon, not even the consolation prize.

That was the end of the rehearsals in the chalet. We dropped the five-franc coin in the jukebox many more times, and we even slept there once or twice, excited to think that the whole village was asleep, all in their own beds, while we could hear the branches of the trees brushing against the corrugated metal roof and smell the

fresh-mown grass through the open window, bathed in the mysterious light of the jukebox all night long.

Then we too lost interest in the chalet. Someone told us about the Zero Point Zero, which had fishnets hanging from the ceiling. Fonny led the expedition there. He had already found his way to the White Horse in Eindhoven, where they sold red and yellow Leb, and he gave me a sniff of his "good shit" wrapped in silver paper. I tried to fix the odor in my mind; most Monday mornings at boarding school it smelled like manure.

At the entrance to the Zero Point Zero, Fonny said, "If there's trouble, you know where to find me: I'll be at the bar." In the murky interior, I could make out worn car seats, low tables with half-

melted candles, and an American sled, sawn in two, upright against the wall. On one of those car seats, I was kissed for the first time.

We explored Dommelhof Park with our new friends, discovering Matty's Club and a disco called Iris. On our way home, we would stop for fries at Piet's, or at Marianne's stand opposite the church, where we'd place our order and wait to hear Marianne drawling, "Mayon-aaaaaaise?"

That was the summer the orderly world I'd known from first to full communion was torn open, never to be mended; from then on, the cracks would always show. The chalet became a storage place for old junk. The side door wouldn't close anymore; stray cats bore their litters in the beds where we had slept not long before, leaving freakish patterns of light red blood on the sheets; the stench of damp and piss rolled out of it whenever we returned home, our heads reeling from the beer.

"Fonny should never have stopped making music," Papa said. "He was off to such a great start." We know very well who the guilty parties are: the mustached judges at their damask-covered table in that shadowy community center, who were blind to his talent.

Jennifer called in tears to ask if her father was dead. Her mother Christiane brought her to the hospital, and Christiane's new partner

came with them. Filip stood sentry by the door so that the two adults wouldn't slip inside with Jennifer, "because prying eyes have no place there."

When Filip pointed her to the waiting room, Christiane gave him an appraising look. "You're not like Fonny, are you?" Filip put his arm around Jennifer and persuaded her to come with him. "Don't be shocked when you see him," he warned. She tagged along meekly, stealing glances at him. "Your name's Filip, right?"

Mama and Annie were there too. Jennifer stared in silence at her battered father and asked no one in particular, "Did he wreck the car?" Then she started to cry and, to Filip's astonishment, wailed, "Now we don't have a car anymore!" Through her tears, she also said that Fonny owed her money.

"We won't be needing any more visits from her," Annie hissed after Jennifer left the room. Papa tells me Annie has no say in that decision.

In the corridor, Christiane shouted at Mama—something about drugs—and her partner added that the accident was Fonny's own fault. It turned into a screaming argument in the middle of the ICU. Mama stalked off, so she doesn't know how Fonny's doing—the nurse hadn't told her yet.

To calm down, Mama drove to Vliermaalroot, bringing a pan with pieces of chicken in congealed fat to Fonny's dog Queen. "Who would have imagined," Papa says. "All of a sudden she's a dog lover." Filip says it's a big dirty Bouvier herding dog, but he's bought two cans of food for it himself.

Nicole, in Spain, has now been told the news. "Maybe this accident will be the start of a whole new life for Fonny," she says. You'd have to be in Spain, I think to myself, to believe that.

While giving an exam in Brussels, Filip paused to listen to his answering machine. "Hello, Filip, bad news," he heard Papa say. His heart skipped a beat; he thought the time had come. But all Papa said was that Fonny had woken up and pulled out all the tubes. That

made his blood pressure plummet and put his life in danger, so a priest was brought in to perform the last rites. Fonny called out Annie's name, very loud. According to the doctor, he was reliving the accident and thought he was back in the car.

"I hope he makes it," says Filip, "if only because it would cause Mama and Papa so much heartache otherwise."

Fonny's condition is still critical, but he moves his lips when he hears sounds near his bed, and he's sometimes awake now. He winked at Wies—or did she imagine it? First one eye, then the

other. His broken ribs press on his lungs, making him feel like he has asthma. He worked hard to get that across to Annie this afternoon.

Annie sits on his bed like a master of ceremonies, answers the phone, informs everyone of the latest developments, and coordinates incoming and outgoing visitors. She has made herself at home in the hospital: she rolls the cart of dirty sheets from the unit to the laundry room and goes for strolls with the elderly patients.

My sister Aline has visited Fonny now too. The sight made her burst into tears. "His mouth sags on one side. It looks so pathetic," she says. When he kicked his feet against the mattress, Annie started rubbing them. "I used to have to do that for him when he was in recovery," she recalled. Fonny's lips moved, stiffly. "Oh, check it out, he must be trying to say something," Annie squealed. Aline thinks he was trying to explain that Annie should shut her mouth.

After Aline's visit, she had such severe heart palpitations that she didn't dare drive back to Antwerp. She's spending the night at my parents' house and calls me, secretly, from Papa's office. Her husband disapproves of our whole family sitting around Fonny's bed. Meanwhile, Papa says we've never paid any attention to Fonny, and that's why he ended up in the hospital.

Rik invited Annie to stay at his place, because he's worried that Fonny's drug buddies will come after her if they find out what she's said about them. When Filip heard that, he laughed: that Rik of ours, with his detective stories.

"What do you think?" I ask Marek. "Isn't it time we went to Hasselt?"

"Maybe so."

"Are you coming with me?"

"As long as I can stick close to you and kick you in the shins when you start to misbehave."

He knows me well. Before I realize it, I'll have confronted Papa with something he doesn't want to hear, and I'll be flying around the house on my broomstick. He's seen it happen often enough; we've all been guilty of it. Yes, that includes me. I may have left, but I didn't walk off the battlefield unscathed.
