

Aline

Heleen Debruyne

An extract pp 136-137; 142-146; 161-165; 183-184; 221-223

Original title	Aline	Translation	Dutch into English
Publisher	De Bezige Bij, 2025	Translator	Anna Asbury

© Heleen Debruyne/Anna Asbury/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 136-137

Why've you changed your phone PIN? he wanted to know.

I felt my cheeks burn bright red. It happened every time: the mere accusation was enough to make me feel guilty, and look suspicious.

Why are you interrogating me? I asked, agitated. Were you trying to get into my phone? I can't get into your phone can I? I didn't think it was fair, you knowing my PIN and me not knowing yours. It's an imbalance of power!

That's a bit over-the-top, he said. Are you up to something? Are you talking to people I don't know? Are you on an app or something?

That was the last thing I needed – to package myself as attractively as possible on an app. Funny, but not laughable, approachable without being clingy, photos with just the right lighting, a flawless face without overly conspicuous make-up, and so on – exhausting.

Are you out of your mind? How can you ask me that? You have no idea who I am or how I'm feeling! I shouted.

I was just asking a question, he shouted back.

The shouting didn't escalate to a night of yelling – I was too tired to enter the fray with any conviction.

I'm just insecure, he said next morning in bed, between our ox-blood-coloured sheets, my favourite. Everything between us is so hard, it eats away at my self-confidence, surely that's normal? I can't gauge what you're thinking. I don't know...

We stared at each other, his face was so familiar that I looked right through it, my thoughts drifting to the day ahead, the clothes I was going to wear, Glore's tantrums, the new nursery worker, the one with the annoying voice.

But if you go on shouting at me like that, he said, then we're done. Then it'll be broken.

He sobbed, I was startled by the sob.

I don't understand why you're so angry, he squeaked, his face now fully contorted from crying.

Oh my darling, I said, I'm not angry at all, come here.

Gas-lighting, said Lena sternly, later that day on the phone. He hasn't got you under control! Your emotions or your phone!

Nonsense, I said. He was just genuinely insecure.

Also possible, Lena conceded. He's probably doing it subconsciously. Understandably too, given that mother of his.

I wasn't sure if I believed in the fashionable idea of attachment styles as the source of everyone's foibles, but I let Lena say her piece. I wasn't as if I had a better theory of human nature to offer.

We were naked, specially selected music playing, atmospheric but in no way overwhelming, he and Lucie explored one another's bodies, their eagerness still tempered by unease. Oh God, this is it, I thought, we're having a threesome, so that later we can snigger about it with Tom and Lena over dinner.

I should have had more to drink.

I was expected to participate in this scenario, a bit of stroking, a bit of licking, not spending too much time pondering the logistics, but how? Lucie's hand released me from my thoughts, a small hand seeking out my inner thighs. Onwards then.

Her breasts were a tad shapeless, which made them all the softer, her body was compact, sturdy and yet elegant, with full limbs tapering to surprisingly delicate wrists and ankles, her skin flecked ever more intense pink.

And yes, I came, that happens with sufficient rubbing and wriggling, when you're surrounded by lightly perspiring bodies and heavy breathing. The orgasm merely proved that the mechanics of my cunt – circulation, moisture-secreting glands – and my clitoris – erectile tissue, nerve pathways – responded exceptionally well to visual, auditory and tactile stimulation.

He and Lucie lay entangled on the bed, their breathing indicating that they were falling asleep. I lifted a leg, prised myself free from the muddle, went for a shower.

The water just wouldn't warm up. He kept on dithering as to which boiler was best. It occurred to me that my lover was in bed with another woman and I couldn't even be angry because I'd wanted it this way. Or rather, I'd permitted it.

The water wouldn't budge beyond lukewarm. I briefly rinsed off, put on shapeless pyjamas – if they thought I was going to try and act sexy again at this point, they could forget it. Back in the bedroom, they were already asleep, spread out over the entire surface. I withdrew to the guestroom, was the first up, stood making pancakes for Gloria, my child, for whom I had not spared a single thought all night long.

This is Lucie, he said, when they finally wandered into the kitchen, Lucie stayed with us last night. She put on a cute voice, asked if Gloria liked pancakes. I was pleased to see Gloria give an indifferent nod and continue eating.

In the days following the threesome – the word alone was such an intolerable cliché – he was kind and attentive. No comments on my parenting, the counter top clear and more or less clean every day. Such predictability enraged me.

My fury was triggered by dust traps, by a crumpled pullover, real wool, one of his work appointments that ran over so that it was down to me yet again, yet again, yet again! to put Gloria to bed.

What is it with you, he sighed, still irritatingly calm, floating on the pleasure of his fantasy come true.

You don't see me, I yelled. Gloria was with us in the living room, humming as she busied herself with a mountain of cuddly toys. I didn't give a fuck.

You don't see me, I yelled again, then swept out of the room leaving him behind without a chance to respond, with the echo of a slammed door and Gloria crying.

And the intimate piece of your relationship?

Piece, piece, cut it out with that piece of yours, I think, a piece is a word for cake or pizza, not intimacy. What's more, I don't feel like it, I don't want to talk about sex, it's not relevant.

So would you describe yourself as bisexual? the psychologist asks. In my closed posture he's actually read encouragement. A resistance, he calls it, I feel a resistance, and that's precisely where he likes to dive in. Or is that not the only reason he seems so interested in this theme? He's leaning toward me, his expression open, expectant. Was I in fact mistaken in reading his light-blue suede loafers, the scent of his perfume and his hand gestures as indicating a preference for men?

A triangle situation like this, I'd imagined it would dominate my thoughts.

Almost all cultures impose a taboo on sex with multiple people, simultaneously or otherwise. It's a big deal. Probably, I suspect, because men are horrified at the thought of raising another man's child. The ultimate humiliation. And humiliation, men can't deal with that. Humiliation breeds shame, and pent-up shame breeds violence, manslaughter, murder. By doing it with two women, he was sparing himself the possibility of such humiliation – from an anthropological perspective a threesome of that variety, a man and two women, is a tad less broad-minded than it seems.

But I simply didn't have time to ponder it for long.

Less than a week after that night filled with moist flesh and the fug of insecurity, I stood in my long-unwashed dressing gown on our doorstep. I was too hot, it hadn't even cooled down for the night. The faint flicker of a string of forgotten Christmas lights in a window across the street was joined by a blue flashing light. In front of Pris and Ian's house a plump police officer was cradling a tiny bundle of blankets, and Bono the little dog lay trembling in my arms – Pris had just handed me the tiny creature.

Pris's face was wet – was it snot? Tears? Fiery red patches appeared at her throat. I suspected the beginnings of a black eye, blood in the corner of her mouth. She was talking to a female officer – was this the same one who had talked to the neighbour opposite? Did this little town by the sea have only one specialist in domestic violence?

I heard a dispassionate story, about how Ian had grabbed her phone, been drinking again, kicked, hit and strangled her, or rather, attempted to strangle her, and that she was primarily glad that her toddler happened to be staying with her mother tonight. Only then did I realise that the tiny bundle, the plump officer was now cooing at it, was Baby Emma. The officer had sweet eyes, I noted with relief. Further along, next to the estate car with the blue lights, I saw Ian's silhouette.

He's certainly going to prison, Madame. This is attempted homicide, I heard the officer say. We'll take you to hospital now. We need a doctor to document evidence from your injuries. And to take care of you, of course, Madame.

Could Emma come too? Pris asked.

The officer tried to catch her plump colleague's eye.

I'll come with you, he said. With you, eh, Pipsqueak!

Would you look after Bono? Pris asked before allowing herself to be led away.

Of course, I said, of course! What does it eat, actually, an animal like that? Sorry, never mind, I'll sort it.

With tears in my eyes I watched the police car set off for hospital with Pris and Emma.

If I hadn't been home early that day, I would have missed the scene.

In the hallway I took off my shoes, shoved my laptop bag under the coat stand and opened the old wooden door to the kitchen. The afternoon sun lit the old ceramic tiles, the plant motif in dirty green, ochre and sea-blue coloured the entire kitchen. In this light even the despised kitchen island took on a certain cachet. 'Sugar Man' by Sixto Rodriguez gave the fairy-tale light a sepia edge, sounding out in perfect harmony with the bubbling of the coffee machine. He was the one who'd championed the old-fashioned appliance – the flavour of filter coffee was superior to that of pods, which also contribute to the global waste mountain. In principle I was in agreement, though I did miss the brown layer of foam.

Gloria sat in her highchair, rocking along to Rodriguez, in a short linen dress I didn't recognise – ochre with pale green stripes, perfectly complementing the tiles. He stood at the counter, a tea towel over one shoulder, slicing an enormous water melon with a long knife.

A magnificent scene, it resembled an advert for meal kits, coffee or a furniture giant. A photo from the weekend supplement of a broadsheet newspaper, a post by a mumfluencer showing off her committed spouse. But what I didn't recognise in it was my family. I clashed with the picture, my crumpled clothes, sweaty armpits, my awkward body, my suppressed rage.

I knew perfectly well that the images that shot through my mind were fake, produced to stimulate the economy. Yet I felt imprisoned in those superficial choices granted to me as a consumer – just enough choice to feel like a unique, interesting individual. An individual who adorns herself conspicuously in all those highly individual choices, to attract the like-minded. The smokescreen of capitalism. Blow away that smoke, and you see people squandering their time, brains and bodies in order to be allowed to participate. People who believe they're doing it all out of free will. The attractive force of the image, the intoxicating effect of the illusion, prevents them from ever breaking free of the system. (At that point I was deep into a new book: Capitalism is Sexism.)

Nevertheless it felt like it was my free will that was screaming, I want to be part of this beautiful image. I couldn't imagine anything I wanted more dearly – but the picture had already been coloured in. Against the counter leaned Lucie. She was using the blender, head to toe femininity in a pale green dress of translucent cotton. Towards me she acts like a feminist, I thought, but the second I turn my back, she's playing the perfect little woman.

Mama! cried Gloria. Mama's home!

Lucie looked round, and I could have sworn her face contorted for a second with guilt and jealousy before she managed a surprised, welcoming smile.

I'm only staying a moment, said Lucie, shame-faced. I happened to be in the neighbourhood and I thought...

Cement dust turns out to damage the lungs, I read, certainly in the case of delicate little toddler lungs. The cement dust swirled off the walls in our ruin, gathered on the cellar floor, spread in visible (and, more scarily, invisible) clouds throughout the entire atmosphere of the house, the atmosphere my child should be able to breathe safely.

You're exaggerating, was his view, there's not that much exposed cement, it takes a load more dust to cause silicosis, I'm pretty sure.

So I was on the stairs vacuuming, as I did every day, the vacuum cleaner spreading an odour of rotting fruit. Had he yet again omitted to change the bag? With every drop of sweat from my temples, my displeasure grew.

Suddenly a shot of pain like an electrocution: my ankle banged against a step. Swearing, crying, and, yes, I know, it's not pretty: I chucked the rod of the vacuum cleaner down. It clattered louder than I'd expected. He was alarmed, preached about Gloria and her mental health, how I was damaging our child, with my shouting and throwing things, the way I stormed about the house, my cleaning regimens and complaining. Had I totally lost it? Why was I playing the martyr? Did I really only think of myself and my aches and pains? Et cetera.

I wasn't listening, I was thinking of the women from our street, Pris, the woman from across the road, her beautiful daughter, and I looked at him, how he stood frantically gesticulating, stupefied by his conviction that he was right, and I thought: I understand those women, I understand how lonely they are.

A persistent headache had driven me to the guest bed, a rectangular block of white chipboard that I'd brought with me from my student days. The black sheets also dated back to that era – at the time they struck me as chic, now they had faded to grey, evoking images of seedy hotels and mediocre massage salons.

The rough feel of the sheets and the slightly yellowing chipboard evoked all the hapless, drunken attempts at sex that had taken place on the bed, the odour of condoms, the way the rubber would tear painfully inside me after a while of half-hearted sex, of how dry my cunt always became from too much alcohol, without which I would never have come to be lying in the shoddily assembled bed with whoever it was. I thought of the professor of philosophy who was studying empathy but fucked as if I was a rubber doll, of the virtuoso dancer who lost his sense of rhythm in bed, the German about whom I've forgotten everything except the coins and lighters I found all over the bed the next morning.

Nostalgia for that time and the procession of men was quite absent. I thought of myself in those situations, naked, giggly, coquettish, of how I twisted my body to give them the optimal view of my bum, and I wished I'd demanded money for all the times I'd posed like that.

Recently I've been thinking a lot about that night on the landing, I say.

We've been dancing around that night for weeks now, my psychologist and I, we move through my stories and anecdotes, which he drags out of me with a slight nod or targeted question, each time I respond with a certain satisfaction, anyone would blossom before such a willing audience, but after each session I realise once again: all this talk hasn't lightened anything.

Now at last I want to tell him about that night, about how it went, what really happened, how monstrous I'd become that night, I've been longing for the surrender of a confession, the certainty of absolution. But would this man grant me that? Can the truth be paired with forgiveness?

I'm reminded of the word regret, says the psychologist, suddenly inspired.

I look up, terrified. How does he know what I'm thinking?

Why are you talking about regret? I ask, turning my ring nervously.

Oh, after all our conversations here I think that's a theme for you, a common thread. Regret and guilt. But why would you load all of it onto yourself?

Yes, why do I do that?

Men, I hate them. Men, I hate them. In the fortnight that he was away I mumbled it more frequently than was healthy, perhaps I even said it out loud, audibly, I no longer cared.

Why don't you get out of the way, twat, when you see me approaching, with the push chair? And a heavy bag? In the rain? On these filthy slippery cobblestones? On this boiling hot day? Out of the way, dickhead. See how you take it for granted that you can take up the space I daren't fill? Don't you see it? Don't you see me limping along with these boxes full of shopping, full of ingredients you don't even recognise because no way do you ever cook, let alone top up the supplies? Help me then, dickhead. Help me!

The men I cursed like this – the neighbour from over the road with the dreadlocks, Ian, random passers-by – picked up on my boiling rage, timidly they cast their eyes down when their gaze met mine. Even my gait had changed, I walked with my legs set wider, straighter, with less of a hip wiggle. Crazy, why had I ever taught myself to wiggle my hips like that, to be unnecessarily unsteady on my feet? As if I wanted to act in my own romantic comedy, having to hop around like a helpless little bird until an attractive, competent man leapt from the wings.

Yes you, I said to myself, when I passed the neighbour on the pavement, I particularly hate you, with your filthy dreadlocks and your shapeless body and your gaze emanating contempt, if you can feel contempt, so can I. He looked at the pavement, crossed the street. I felt pleasantly connected with all women who had ever been burnt at the stake.

In the toilet bowl the inevitable was unfolding: a slow but steady rise of brown water with swirling white flakes. This, I realised, was going over the edge. I rushed to the cleaning cupboard, grabbed two cloths to drape preventatively around the bowl.

Since he'd stopped living there, the house was constantly convulsing. For everything he was no longer able to finish, I'd had to pay professional tradesmen outlandish sums. First the boiler gave up, then the cellar flooded, the pipes started gurgling, a heater fell from the wall, patches of crumbly fibres formed in the plasterwork, rainwater leaked in through the new dormer windows, the kitchen that Lena and I had cobbled together wasn't level. Then there was the toilet, which regularly offered up the contents of our bowels, a mystery for which plumbers, in exchange for a handsome price, could find no explanation. Sometimes I almost believed I could have done better myself.

I hadn't quite managed to drape the second cloth correctly when the doorbell rang. Shit. Gloria was being dropped off from her weekend with him and Thingummy – that's what Lena and I called his new lover. Thingummy was young and blond and short and slim but not titless and, crucially, a good sport. A little fairy, the wet dream of any guy wanting to start over, a cliché, described, filmed, fucked and fantasised to death. The patriarchy's wet dream. A cliché capable of further exceeding my expectations, because Thingummy was pregnant. Already pregnant. They hadn't even known each other a year.

There they stood, on my doorstep. My moody child, and the cliché at whom, despite everything, I could not be angry. Thingummy had fallen in love, just like any human being. Thingummy had no idea what she'd got herself into. What's more, Gloria took an immediate liking to Thingummy, her wardrobe, her little brown poodle, the sugar-free vegan cakes she baked – I didn't want to spoil that childish delight with adult jealousy and frustration.

On an impulse I asked if she'd like to come in for a bit, for a coffee, or, if she wasn't drinking coffee at the moment, a tea?

Thingummy hadn't expected that, I noticed. She hesitated, I saw a muscle in the corner of her eye twitch. Gloria flapped her hands squealing, 'Yes, yes, yes,' and Thingummy, blessed Thingummy, said yes.

She was exceptionally beautiful pregnant. All the weight at the front, even her waist still intact. My lower belly clenched, a feeling which to my surprise I recognised as sexual desire. The intense stab of longing for Thingummy made me feel connected with him.

Did I have red wine, Thingummy asked. That's what she really needed right now.

She didn't even make excuses about her offspring, didn't cite studies on pregnancy and the effects of a very occasional glass of alcohol.

Slut, thinks the patriarchy. And to be fair, so did I.

Halfway through her glass of wine she asked about those weird paintings, well, prints, the ones of the naked little women in the moonlight, hanging in his study. Did he have them before? He's so secretive about them.

Well, I said, that's the way he is.

I didn't feel like getting into the story about dead Molleman and the Delvauxs. I preferred to steer the conversation towards his minor quirks and foibles. Thingummy was in need of that, it turned out.

The conversation ended up with the two of us in fits of giggles, and in the end we sat opposite one another, tears in our eyes, my hand on her belly. The offspring was wriggling intensively.

We looked at one another. I saw the other woman, that vague unfamiliar figure, her breathing accelerated, I saw how she felt awkward, wanted to look away, but did not. Her already prominent nipples hardened. My labia pulsed between my legs. Wet patches appeared under Thingummy's armpits.

I'll take a chance, I thought, and I laid a hand on one of those gorgeous tits. Thingummy left the hand where it was. Her moist mouth fell slightly open. Beneath my hand the offspring began to move more vigorously.

Muuummmyyyy!

Gloria.

Mummyyy! The tablet needs charging!

Shit, I said. And, before standing up to fulfil my motherly duty: this is the most beautiful pregnant belly I've ever seen.

Precisely what he so often used to say to me.
