



THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF THE OBVIOUS

Part II: The Orange Blonde Lady in High Heels



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Part II

The Orange Blonde Lady in High Heels

Leo Feyaerts

Dedicated to my father and mother.

The characters and events described in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to existing persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. It was never the author's intention to harm anyone personally.

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*La lune blanche
Luit dans les bois;
De chaque branche
Part une voix
Sous la ramée...*

Ô bien-aimée.

*L'étang reflète,
Profond miroir,
La silhouette
Du saule noir
Où le vent pleure...*

Rêvons, c'est l'heure.

*Un vaste et tendre
Apaisement
Semble descendre
Du firmament
Que l'astre irise...*

C'est l'heure exquise

Paul Verlaine

Anyone who studied in Leuven in the sixties will remember a *kot* like mine, where people would sit bent over their textbooks or suffer from a hangover. Mine was in Kessel-Lo, high above downtown Leuven. Every day, I'd cycle down Blijde Inkomststraat¹ to the Dijle² valley, swore at the traffic lights at the intersection with Maria Theresiastraat when they turned red, and then climbed back out of the valley through Tiensestraat after the last lecture. The result was great physical fitness. A *kot* is a student room. Every Flemish student knows that. It's a bit of a weird term when girls use it, though, especially when they put a possessive pronoun front of it, in a businesslike, confidential or warm way.³ The rent goes down as the distance from the city centre increases. At least there was some action! Downtown, we students ruled the streets!

I could have rented a more expensive room closer to the lecture halls with my parents' permission, but my mother was unwell. She had kidney disease. She had crises that required long stays in hospital and there was no chance of recovery. My father was a cabinet maker. He was highly skilled but unable to make a living from his talent. The big money was increasingly in the mass production of plastics. He knew this, but his pride prevented him from drawing the necessary conclusions. My sisters, both younger than me, studied at the Heilig Graf in Turnhout.⁴ The eldest, Milène, was in the last year of the Greco-Latin classical humanities and Carien was in the second-to-last year of the Modern Humanities course.

Nothing noteworthy ever happened on my street in Kessel-Lo, in that gloomy, draughty ravine with its grey cobbled bottom and weathered red brick walls. My room was a cheap 5-by-2.5 tube on the top floor of a nondescript townhouse. The two rectangular windows looked out over the street and the bedroom windows of Mr and Mrs Schalleman, who, like all the couples and elderly people across the street, carefully closed their curtains at night. Perhaps it was a good thing they did. It was always pretty dark in my room, even on a clear day. So I always left the ceiling lamp lit under its frosted glass shade, which faintly illuminated the pale flowers on the greyish-yellow wallpaper. Luckily, lighting and heating were

¹ *Straat* (Dutch) is street.

² The Dyle is a river in central Belgium, left tributary of the Rupel, a tidal river, right tributary of the Scheldt.

³ In Flemish, *kot* can mean hole.

⁴ The Holy Sepulchre Institute, which was run by the Canonesses Regular of the Holy Sepulchre.

included in the rent.

The linoleum was the colour of freshly vomited bile. To brighten up the rectangle between the door, the washstand and my bed, I had brought a dark brown carpet from home. My bed belonged to the room and stood against the left wall. It was a steel bedstead on white-painted legs with springs and a soft mattress. The flannel sheets, thin blankets and flat pillow were my personal property. I'd slide the pillow under the window at night to get some extra oxygen when I'd spent too much time in the pubs.

People who came into my room could immediately admire their mug in the mirror above the washstand. One and a half metres away from it was a wooden chair, an old desk with my textbooks and notes on it and a round black desk lamp. Next to it, between the desk and the second window, the grey radiator of the central heating hummed all year round. When you concentrated on that, you yawned so hard that you almost dislocated your jaw.

On the left, behind the white-painted door, there was a shelf with two bronze loops and four blunt hooks for my wardrobe and my visitors' coats. Usually they were my eldest sister and one of her friends. There was no furniture, so they could only sit side by side on my bed, which they didn't mind because the landlady made it up very carefully every day.

Overall, it was a normal student room in those years. It offered no more and no less than what you could expect as the son of a small independent tradesman. You even considered yourself lucky when you saw the rooms of some others. In winter, they had to keep warm with a coal stove. When the frost was severe, their windows were covered with ice flowers. Greco had a room like that: a long, drafty outhouse, a former kitchen with a stone sink and a hand pump, and furnished with the same furniture as all the other student rooms: a steel bedstead, a desk and a chair. The Leuven people made money out of everything.

Greco moved from one cheap room to another even cheaper one. His first one, an attic room, was right next to Café Bacchus, our student pub on the Oude Markt, where I spent my evenings with the other members of our club, *Moeder Geelse*⁵. His landlord and landlady were already in their sixties. She was a tall figure with grey hair, he a slightly stout, shy man with glasses. We knew him because he sometimes did the shopping; her we hardly ever saw. Greco said she drank a litre of brandy every day and swallowed handfuls of painkillers, and in the evenings, the couple played cards. Then it was quiet on the other side of the wall, but

⁵ A student club in Leuven is called Mother (*Moeder* in Dutch), followed by a reference to the place or region where the club members come from. In this case, the region around the town of Geel.

sometimes we could hear her shouting, "Bastard! Whoremonger!" She suffered from syphilitic madness.

My landlords used to ask about my mum's health every Monday and about how I was getting on with my studies every Friday. While I was living with them, during my Candidature⁶ in Germanic Philology, I used to eat with them every day. Their food was really rich and heavy, much tastier than the food in the university canteens Alma I and II, and much cheaper than other restaurants. I paid for my board and lodging every first Monday of the month, so I wouldn't get into trouble with my small allowance.

My landlady was a sprightly woman in her thirties who was always busy cleaning, scrubbing, washing up and clearing up the mess her three kids made. She had two sons who were seven and six and a four-year-old girl who tyrannised her and to whom she could never refuse anything.

Her husband was six years older than her and two heads taller. He was a civil servant in one of the ministries and regularly brought home files that he worked on all evening. After dinner, he would sometimes see people in trouble, old couples who had forgotten to fill in their forms properly, or widows in need of money waiting for their pensions.

When he was free, he would tell me jokes he remembered from his office. They were as lame as my Aunt Nun's. I would reward him with a big smile for each of them. It made him feel extra good. He didn't stammer when he was angry, but he did when he was calm. "At the st-st-st-statue of Djus-djus-djus-Djustus Lipsius." It was impossible to look him in the eye after such a salvo.

He adored his children until they made his hair stand on end. Then he'd suddenly lose it, roaring and raging, even whacking them on the ears and blaming his wife for spoiling the kids. Meanwhile, she'd heroically take the pain of her eldest's latest kick and keep offering the most ridiculous deals to the hysterically crying little brats. Then, in a fit of rage, her husband marched into the living room. He ended up spending the rest of the evening sulking in front of the TV, completely unapproachable.

In that dimly lit room, he'd told me, in a deep voice and with fierce eyes, that he wouldn't tolerate any indecency in his house and that he'd enforce the university's veto on visits by girls. At the time, the KUL actually still forbade you from receiving unaccompanied, unrelated girls in your room. If you got caught with one,

⁶ Nowadays "Baccalaureate".

you'd immediately get the *consilium abeundi* – basically, you'd be expelled. He said that the landlords who were complicit would be blacklisted, and there were a lot in their street who were jealous of them because they couldn't rent rooms themselves. There could always be surprise inspections, and they always came unannounced if someone made a complaint – anyone could make a phone call. His wife repeated that it was not OK and they wouldn't allow visits from girls. She said that if I took the risk, they'd have to tell the university. She was just as clear, but more sympathetic. However narrow-minded they might be, I was proud that they thought I was capable of doing such a thing.

She had a good understanding of human nature, and although she was careful how she expressed it, she was kind and her sense of duty never faltered. That's what made me feel I had to protect her from her aggressive eldest kid whenever he attacked her. I would grab him by the scruff of the neck, pull him away from her and push him to the floor. And there he would lie, sniveling, the tall, sinewy, choleric boy, his fists clenched and his face contorted. I couldn't stand seeing the pain in her eyes, hearing her accuse me, and watching her bravely try to calm him down with kind words. I promised myself I'd never get involved again, but I failed every time. So, whenever there was a new incident, I'd lure him into the garden to play soccer.

She wasn't a commanding person. She'd bribe her kids: if you do this, you get that. "Do as she says" was my standard response when they refused to clean up their messes. The eldest would kick a toy or throw one across the room, daring me to touch him. "You have no authority over me. If you dare touch me, I'll tell Dad." Dad only blamed his children when they rebelled against him, the Authority. Less than five minutes later, the little brat asked me if I wanted to play soccer with him. His mother was delighted, of course. Just as corrupt as she was, I told him he had to do as she told him first. When he finished his little job, I made new demands: he had to do everything she told him to do that day. Furious, he whipped his head back and forth, but gave in.

After each victory, she had one inspiration after another. Do you want to take another bottle of coke upstairs? Or chocolate milk? "Should I get you some biscuits from the shop, chocolate biscuits? Or *Côte d'Or* chocolate bars? Milk chocolate or dark chocolate? Praline filled or milk with nuts?" And in the evening, my favourite meal was on the table: pot roast and chips. I have never eaten so many chips with a roast as I did that year.

I passed my exams in July with a '*cum fructu*'.⁷ Straight afterwards, my mum had a serious crisis and my dad didn't get much work, so he didn't earn enough to pay for her care and my studies and those of my sisters. He said, "Give me a year". I could have cried for disappointment. My eldest sister, Milène, wanted to study medicine and had achieved better grades in secondary school than me. "You could take the exams before the Middle Jury⁸," he said. "That way you won't waste any time. Just enrol for the second year, but without tuition fees. It'll only cost five hundred francs, and the Army won't bother you."

I was legally obliged to enter military service, and the Army would definitely know where to find me if I interrupted my studies. So I enrolled at the university, just to be on the safe side, and at the same time, but in earnest, for the Central Examination Committee's exams. I bought most of the second-year textbooks from someone who had been promoted to the Licentiate Degree⁹, and from the Acco on the Oude Markt the ones he could not provide for me. After that, I'd run out of money. To be on the safe side, I also had to buy the textbooks of the professors from Ghent and Brussels, because they were also examiners of the Middle Jury. Oh well, I thought, I'll get by with what they teach in Leuven. I won't be able to cram the rest into my head in time anyway. I simply don't have the time for that.

And I was right. Less than two weeks after graduating, I found myself working at a Gemeentekrediet Bank branch in a neighbouring municipality, serving customers. It wasn't a difficult job, but it required more punctuality than I was used to. My boss was a burly, celibate guy in his early forties who "combined business with pleasure". So he had a nice, safe fling with many widows and other women.

Apparently, talking about investing, insuring and avoiding inheritance tax got people's hormones going. He was wise enough to keep his experiences in bed out of our conversations, but every time they came to consult him again, those Catholic middle-class ladies dressed in black who were generally characterised as extremely demure, and every time they tripped out with graceful strides, he couldn't resist making mischievous remarks about them. He must have been the best in bed, because sometimes, when I was on my own at the counter, they'd ask with a blank

⁷ That is, with an overall "C+".

⁸ Central Examination Committee.

⁹ Nowadays "Master's Degree". The licentiate was the academic degree below the doctorate. It was also awarded by some other European universities.

face if they could "consult" him again. I'd say "No, sorry" in a cool way. "Is it urgent?" They'd either stare at the hole in the glass for a second or make a nervous gesture, especially if I said to wait a bit longer because he was talking to Mrs X or Y. And those faces when, a little later, he'd escort their rival out of his office and I'd ask if I could help them!

There was also another way to learn more about the human nature in his money shop. You just had to watch the look on people's faces as they counted the notes you put in front of them, and the way they'd grab them from under your nose. But even though I had these heartwarming moments, I was really missing my friends in Leuven and I really hoped that delaying my studies there wouldn't mean they got cancelled.

Mum's health got better in late autumn, but the doctor said it wasn't permanent. She kept death at bay with a humour that made you laugh, but was torture when you were alone.

When I got back from the bank in the evening and Dad was away delivering an order to a client, I often looked after her. Milène was in Leuven and couldn't help. During the day, Aunt José, my mum's eldest sister and my godmother, came to keep her company. She had been widowed for years and all her children were married. In the evening, Carien looked after mum when she had returned from the nuns in Turnhout. She helped her get up or lie on her other side, or go to the toilet or wash. Mum would then ring a bell to alert her. But Carien got a stomach bug and I didn't want to risk infecting her, because it could've been fatal. "Where's Carien?" Mum asked, looking shocked when I came in. Sweat was dripping from her pale, sunken face. I stammered that she was sick, that it was highly contagious and that there was no one else in the house. We were both really embarrassed. I stood in the doorway, frozen to the spot; she was watching me closely. After a few awkward moments, she said gruffly, "Let's get on with it then." I lifted her up, sweat dripping off me and about to burst into tears. She was so light! Later, I nursed her, stiff and awkward, to prevent her from getting bedsores. Seeing and touching her naked was a very strange sensation. She was the first woman I had ever seen almost naked. I washed her shoulders, back, calves and heels, but not her buttocks, which was impossible. After rubbing her dry, I helped her into a clean nightgown, changed the bed and put her back in it. Then I went into the henhouse to cry. She had been so beautiful! That evening, she told my father that I had done very well. The best compliment I ever received.

In the spring of '67, our carpentry business was picking up. That was great news, of course, but it also meant I had to help Dad every evening and Saturday afternoon with loading and unloading our van and delivering orders to customers, just like when I was in secondary school.

Then in early July, he told me that after my Middle Jury exams, I could enrol in Leuven for the first year of my licentiate studies. That was really counting your chickens before they were hatched.

A few weeks later the exams started. Turned out logic wasn't being examined by De Waelhens from Leuven, but by a professor from Ghent. This sourpuss asked me to convert a literary text into symbolic logic. Symbolic logic? I hadn't ever heard of. There'd been no mention of it in De Waelhens' textbook. That was only about Aristotle. I told him so, as he was laughing at me. "That logic of yours, sir," he said, "is as much an edge case of symbolic logic as Newton's system is an edge case of Einstein's."

"Then at least be kind enough to ask me a question about that edge case," I said, straight-faced.

And he did. Straight away, from the other side of the table, I started firing off such a load of arguments about valid deduction at him that he was pretty surprised. He asked a few more questions, much more nicely, and finally said he was sorry he couldn't give me a pass, 8 out of 20 was possible.

After that, not much was allowed to go wrong, but I failed again on the *German Phonetics* exam, which was again examined by someone from Ghent, and I got a nine out of 20. Then, surprisingly, I failed again on the *Comparative Grammar of Germanic Languages* exam. This was really a huge disappointment.

One fail too many, said the chairman of the jury after the deliberation, when I asked him why I had failed. He said that my other marks weren't enough to make up for it.

I got back home feeling pretty down, but I told myself that the Leuven professors I'd done well with would probably remember me by July. Either way, I wouldn't have to spend as much time on their textbooks.

Thankfully, they weren't too bothered about it at home. "We had hoped you'd succeed, of course," Dad said, "but we'd already prepared for failure. Just find another room in Leuven, but remember the price."

"And what about Mum? Carien insists on studying biology and you're too busy. She'll be alone all evening."

"That'll be fine. Aunt José will come and keep her company in the evening. If you all hold back a bit in Leuven, everything will be fine."

I looked across Martelarenplein from the steps of Leuven station at the traffic on the Ring Road. This was where I had stood last year and looked back at the city, beaming with happiness because I had passed. Would the Big Bad Wolf still be around? And Pear Sachs, Simon, Lempereur, Luke, Jeff Bazoom, the White and all the others from the Geelse? There was no point asking about them at the Oude Markt, because the Bacchus was closed until September and the other student pubs were full of unknown, coffee-guzzling swots cramming for their re-exams. So I turned left towards the new footbridge over the railway and marched straight to my old address in Kessel-Lo.

My landlord said that my room would be available again if the current tenant, a first-year student, failed his re-re-re-exams in September, but it would cost fifty francs a month more than before. The poor first-year student was out of luck. So in October I moved back into my familiar pipe on the second floor, opposite the Schalleman house.

The past year had changed me a lot more than I realised. Otherwise, I would probably have found another room. The spoilt children terrorised their mother even more rudely and aggressively than before, and I could no longer play the deaf and blind when they took out their vagaries on her. They were over a year older now – they should see reason! They had to respect her patience and sacrifice! That's what I said to their faces, whether she was standing by or not. The kids looked at me like I was from Mars, just stealing each other's toys or destroying what one of them had just built. Thankfully, the eldest, the one with a temper, still enjoyed playing soccer, but eventually he lost interest in that too. That was my bad. I made it a point to send him flying over the goal line with the ball. After that, only biting sarcasm could reduce him to what he really was: a vicious lapdog whimpering for comfort in his mother's arms.

She didn't take it. After one of my verbal gems, she gave me a piece of her mind. We stood facing each other in her kitchen, she flushed and stamping her right foot, and I was grimly gnashing my teeth. That she could not stand my outburst was one thing, but did I have to stand by and do nothing every time he attacked her?

"Thank God you were silent with them standing by," I said.

"What right have you to interfere in my education? You have no right! If you cannot control yourself, then stay in your room. Then just stay there until we have dinner or until you have to go to class."

"As you wish. If only he keeps his hands to himself."

She looked away to hide the tears. When she looked back at me, her eyes were surprisingly soft. I shouldn't take it too personally, she said quietly. It just wasn't right for me to interfere, even if I meant well.

"OK, I get it. You won't be having any further trouble from me."

"I didn't mean it like that."

She took a deep breath. "I'm actually glad they get a break from you every now and then. They get bored so easily, don't they?"

Damn woman, I thought, don't you see what kind of vandals you're breeding? Dare to stand up to them for once! And to that arrogant pachyderm of yours, that fucking megalomaniac who makes fun of you every time they are standing by.

She paused, and I thought, "Now she's going to harp on him, about how it's all his fault, about how she doesn't get any help from him."

"Don't think I don't appreciate it. I do. I'm glad that every now and then you..."

well... I'm glad you come to my rescue sometimes. But hold back a bit, eh? In general, I think... well... I mean, he's not exactly the easiest person, is he, our Mark?"

The understatement of 1967.

I told her that the last thing I wanted was to cause any problems in their household, and that I'd restrain myself in future. She nodded, the wise older woman. But that same afternoon, there were two more praline-filled chocolate bars on my pillow, and that same evening, we had pot roast and chips again.

Her husband hadn't changed a bit in the past year. As partial as ever when it came to settling the power struggle between her and their children; as condescending as ever when he talked to her or disagreed with her, ostensibly jokingly, but really being unbelievably patronising. Time and again he ridiculed her arguments or silenced her with pedantic advice. The respect I'd had for him for helping the helpless turned to icy contempt.

She played the game and let out childish cries of fear, excitement or delight at every opportunity, depending on what she thought he needed. If only he'd protested against her behaviour once. But no, he was perfectly pleased with all that childlike adoration and affection and all that self-abasement she displayed, which he, as a man, could only despise and which she, as a woman, must have found unbearable.

My last shred of respect for him died when he called Brel's songs filthy. He didn't want to hear that filth in his house, he said grimly. I'd played him '*Ces gens-là*' on his record player, a song about a tangle of petty bourgeoisie seen through the eyes of a boy in love with the daughter of the house but excluded by the rest of the family. *D'abord, d'abord il y a l'aîné... First, there's the eldest, who looks like a melon with a huge nose, drinks sour wine at night but kneels before the altar in the morning, upright like a pinnacle, pale as an Easter candle, stuttering and squinting. To be honest, sir, such a man doesn't think, he prays...*

I should have thought twice myself, because my landlord was a pious stutterer who squinted behind his glasses.

Like Father Devriendt, my confessor when I was twelve. His breath smelt every time he stooped to hear my sins or give me absolution, and when, white as an Easter candle, he began to stammer afterwards, his hand under my chin, that he cared much for me, very much, as I would know. "You felt it, didn't you, dear boy?" I had felt them, his lips, his hands and everything else. He changed colour like a chameleon.

In the Sixth¹⁰, his lovemaking had been limited to some cuddling and an occasional kiss on my mouth. I hadn't dared to push him away. Yet his fidgeting had not visibly affected my grades at the end of the year. After the summer holidays, he just took me to his room and told me he loved me, in a long and confusing way, and then knelt before me, like he was before the monstrance in the chapel. He took off my underwear with the same respect he would have taken off a white cloth from the Holy Chalice. "Good Lord, you're beautiful!" He took off his glasses and kissed me, just like he was kissing the Chalice: "*Take all this and eat, for this is my body.*" At the altar, the same lips spoke the holy words of the consecration; the same mouth received the bread and the wine, God's body and blood: *Take all of this and drink, for this is the cup of my blood, of the new and everlasting covenant.* Our covenant.

And you look at this tall guy in his black robe, nodding, heavy, round skull with the tonsure and the thick brown curls, and at the black arches above his piously closed eyes, as his hand and his clean-shaven jaws slide your member in and out of his mouth. Even if you brush your teeth two or three times, even if you rinse your mouth ten times, that slime remains. One soul, one body, no one to help. It sticks under your tongue and deep in the creases between your lips and your gums, also when you later, your head buzzing, look up at the blackboard at the teacher of maths or Greek, and try desperately to hold on to the numbers or letters that shimmer through your tears: soon all over again!

Did my mouth smell more delicate when the father brightened it with his kisses, with the pearls of his poetry? He was a great teacher; I never heard Gezelle¹¹ recite more beautifully. He was also a tender and faithful lover: "My only one, my chosen one!" That was how he comforted me when I lay against him after our lovemaking, as he stroked my hair and kissed my forehead.

I'd often leave him, crying on the inside, "Never again, never again!" Then he'd send for me through a classmate, shake his head sadly, close the door and hold out his hand... Until I took it. His eyes were big and round behind his glasses as I stood before him in my checked shirt, buttoned up to the neck, and my short grey woollen trousers, which my mother had magically made from her old skirt after

¹⁰ The secondary studies in the Humanities covered 6 years in Belgium at that time. The first year was "the Sixth" (of the Latin or Modern Humanities), the second year the Fifth and so on.

¹¹ Guido Pieter Theodorus Josephus Gezelle (1 May 1830 – 27 November 1899) was an influential writer and poet and a Roman Catholic priest from Flanders, Belgium. He is famous for the use of the West Flemish dialect, but he also wrote in other languages like Dutch, English, French, German, Latin and Greek.

much measuring and me trying them on.

Sometimes he said I was an angel who had opened up paradise for him, who had brought him closer to God. If there is a God, he was right.

An adult, a priest who needed me... That little bit of comfort brought me to my knees. Then he gave me a similar pleasure to make me keep quiet about it. When my classmates came up to me, I turned my face away, afraid they would recognise the smell of my breath.

As the school year went on, he got more and more concerned about my health and more and more afraid of being found out. In the end, he panicked and urged me desperately to eat. "My beautiful boy, you must be happy, you must live!" The more he insisted, the less I could eat. The starving had a power: the satisfaction that he was suffering.

I longed for my parents and hated them and longed for them again. I cried bitterly at night in my little cubicle over their exhortations to be good and obedient to the "good fathers" and to work hard and pray. To whom? The God who forbade unchastity and was worshipped by his representative who urged unchastity in the name of that same God?

When I came home for Christmas, Mum tried to embrace me. I pushed her away. I didn't tolerate being touched by anyone else either. Puberty, they thought, it would pass. It only got worse. By July, my grades had plummeted. I was gaunt, didn't eat and wanted to die.

So, on the first day of the summer holidays, my sisters went to Blankenberge¹² with an aunt and uncle and their kids. I said I'd rather die than go with them.

Everyone was pretty shocked, of course, and made promises, begged and pleaded. But in the end, I just shook my head, clenched my teeth and got my way, because the situation was becoming too painful for everyone.

After they'd gone, Mum asked me the same questions that I'd ignored since I got back home. Was Greek, French and maths really so hard? Was it really beyond me? Was that it? Was it just that? I didn't have anything to be ashamed of and I didn't need to be afraid of her or Dad. If the Latin-Greek humanities were too difficult, I should just switch to Modern Languages with German and English.

"Yeah, that's right. I'm too stupid. It's unbearable."

"But it can't be," Dad said. "His last year grades were far too good. And his last year's class teacher said to me... And some of his teachers are still the same as last year, including Father Devriendt, the Dutch teacher. He got good marks for it. I'll

¹² A seaside city and a municipality in the province of West Flanders.

have a word with him."

I burst into tears. They looked at each other. "We'd better leave him alone for a while," he said. "It's still too fresh. Let's give him a break."

"Milène," he said a little later, "told me that Jefke Engelen was just asking about you, how you were getting on at boarding school. Why don't you go to him? And to your other friends from back then, Mark and that hairdresser's son, what's his name again?"

I nodded and legged it to the garden. Mum was still watching me from the kitchen. With my back to her, I leaned against the wire around the chicken coop and watched the stupid birds scurry about. Just like old times.

After a while, I went to the shed, scooped a tin of grain out of the burlap sack and scattered it around. The crazies kept pecking away. I sat on the 'bench', which was a horizontal log against the wall of concrete slabs, and stared at the spectacle for a while before heading out into the fields.

During dinner, I pushed my plate away. Straight away, they started again, asking if I had any friends and if I was being bullied.

"I have many friends. I feel sick for a long time."

"Don't they have a doctor there?"

"Yes, they do. But he couldn't find anything."

They followed my every move. I downed several spoonfuls of creamy chervil soup with vermicelli, gagged and put the spoon down.

"It's not normal," Mum said. "It's his favourite soup. He's never been like this. We must call the doctor. He'd better examine him properly."

"You're not in trouble, are you? They didn't beat you, did they?"

"Come on Stafke¹³, just say something. We won't be angry, I won't be and Dad won't be either. Please, Stafke, say something!"

Tears ran down her cheeks! Then it came out whimpering, head on the table, "You with your dirty fathers!"

There was a terrible silence.

"I couldn't help it! I couldn't help it! I was afraid of him!"

Dad sobbed, his face in his hands; Mom with shrieking blasts. Their trust in the Church, which they had held in such high esteem, was dealt a fatal blow. Mom's trust in God, however, remained unshaken. She could separate the two; I could not and Dad could never again. They removed me from the school and threatened the Order and the Diocese with scandal. The man was transferred to a monastery that

¹³ Flemish diminutive and hypocoristic form of *Staf* (Gustave).

didn't deal with children. Dad checked every year to see if he was still there. I ended up going to a much less prestigious college in our village.¹⁴

Milène and Carien were twelve and eleven when I confessed everything. After their holidays in Blankenberge, Dad and Mom explained to them about the sexual stuff between men and women and the perversion I had fallen victim to.

I often found myself sitting on a chair not knowing what to do with myself, or I'd fly into a rage over something stupid and then stare ahead, feeling ashamed and resentful. And then there they were, shuffling one foot after another, stuttering in half-sentences about how I was a good brother and telling me that everything would automatically work out. They became adults very early because of me.

But it was Mum who made me a normal person again, a boy who could control his aggression. Her embraces gave me my body back, not as something pleasurable, but also not as the repulsive object it had become. Either way, I never forgot her warmth.

During my childhood, she and Dad encouraged me in all my activities and praised all my achievements. Now they encouraged me by repeating how happy they had been when I was born. Dad had been present at my birth, which was pretty unusual back then. They told me how much they'd wanted me and even remembered the position they were in when I was conceived. Their words made me feel really good. So I was worth being a human being! I was worth being a man!

This gave me the courage to speak honestly about what had happened, which made it hurt less. Their endless patience made me unlearn to enjoy their shocked faces, to exploit their concern by bending them to my will, and to wallow in self-pity as an excuse for lazy parasitism. They hammered away at the fact that it was not my fault and that I was not condemned to Hell or homosexuality. I doubted the latter for a long time, but I didn't become shy. I saw men and women. I saw the way some of them looked at me. They said I was a beautiful boy. Even my blue-stockings aunts annoyed me by constantly asking if I already had a girlfriend. "Such a beautiful boy with such nice curls." Yeah, unattractive prudes, whatever. But I can't possibly forget what he and I did, I thought.

From the age of twelve, Milène went to the Holy Sepulchre in Turnhout, the top girls' secondary school in the region and where the daughters of the wealthy went. Yet she won over many of the staff with her diligence and intelligence, which was quite an achievement. Usually it was only the glow of gold that commanded their

¹⁴ In Flanders, a college is a secondary school that provides general education.

adoration, and certainly that of their superior, the Reverend Mother. Their boarding school was a far too expensive lodging for my sisters. "So much the better," said our tram-loving girl, who had a great time riding the 41 tram twice a day, the electric tram that ran between Antwerp and Turnhout, stopping at the villages in between.

She played her cards close to her chest, my sister. She'd nod "yes, Sister; no, Sister" like she was supposed to, always doing what they told her to do – or at least pretending to do so – and always giving them polite, friendly answers. The silly vain geese! She just twisted them around her little finger.

In a school photo, she's standing with her back to the blackboard, which is full of Greek words. She's a cute little figure with long blonde braids down to her breasts, one hand fiddling with her chin and the other resting on her stomach. She's in uniform, of course, with a loose, snow-white collar buttoned neatly over her long-sleeved twinset, a dark blue jersey with the school crest in the shape of a shield, a grey skirt with fine pleats, white socks and black shoes. You would have forgiven her without even asking, the worldly scoundrel who couldn't help but look amused under her air of "Look, Sister, how attentively I stand here listening to your explanations and corrections".

Yeah, those nuns... They should have seen their perfect Milène as she and her friends heard the school gates close behind them after the last class. Then their collars flew open and out. Then her friends pulled the obligatory white headband from their long hair. Milène undid her braids – the only other hairstyle they were allowed – and shook her head until her shiny hair fell down to her waist. Then the three of them grabbed the waistbands of their grey pleated skirts, turned it up around itself a few times, and roaring with laughter, walked into the town, thighs bare.

One evening, when we were alone – I was fifteen and she was fourteen – she suddenly asked me, "Have you ever really enjoyed it?" Whether I'd ever really enjoyed Father Devriendt!

"Sometimes. In a flash. That was all."

At the moment when I could no longer control my semen and my despair cried out inside.

She bit her lower lip. "Don't tell Mom and Dad. I have a boyfriend. For a few months now. He's from Turnhout, his name's André Dierckx, and he's the son of a chemist."

Five years older than her, studying economics in Antwerp.

She blushed all over. "Girls like that too." Then she ran away. Grey pleated skirt and white socks... With a pang of envy, I watched her go.

Girls... They were beautiful. In my dreams, I undressed them, tenderly or roughly. But whenever I made them lie down, they always turned into Father Devriendt. So, without initiative and without too much regret, I let a young love pass, ignored all subsequent attempts at rapprochement and remained wary of my friends.

I sang Brel to lynch the phantom who ruined my dreams. My landlord was not best pleased, of course, by the squint-eyed stutterer in the chanson. But did he recognise the younger brother with the empty wallet? Did he see the empty-headed mother slurping cold soup with her full troupe under the portrait of the fallen father? Did he see the vicious gang preying on the legacy of the grandmother whom everyone had neglected? Did he see the people I was most scared of? The family I never wanted to end up with? Was I not allowed to sympathise with the singer's despair for Frida, who pretended to be moved when she promised to leave her family for him, but proved always to be too cowardly to keep her word? "*Parce que chez ces gens là on s'en va pas, monsieur, on s'en va pas. Mais il est tard, monsieur, il faut que je rentre chez moi.*"¹⁵

"Pornography."

From then on, when he was in the middle of a rebuke, my eyes were on his wife's side. Like the time, flushed with jealousy, he rebuked her for washing the windows upstairs in a knee-length skirt and nylons. "And even in the skirt you're wearing now!"

The short, tight black and grey checked one she usually wore for housework.

"You sound as if I'd stand in the cold for fun."

It didn't help. Then she began to qualify, but in too much detail.

"Madame Schalleman and all the women in the neighbourhood clean their windows like that. It's the fashion. Above the knee. There's nothing I can do about that. And the nylons help against the cold. We all wear the same things, and it doesn't matter if we're in a window or on a ladder. Or does it?"

"Madame Schalleman always wears a longer dress, and so does Dieltjes' wife. They never wear nylon stockings, it's like you do it on purpose."

"You've been very observant... Come on, Gerard, I'm not baiting them. You know that perfectly well. If you want to. Madame Verhaegen always wears a skirt that's even shorter than mine, but you do take that from her, eh? With or without nylons! Besides, there was nobody in the street. I checked first."

"You didn't check at all. I saw. Two men walked by and you kept cleaning as if there was nothing wrong. You should have seen the way they were looking at you!"

¹⁵ Because those people, sir, they don't leave, they don't leave. But it's getting late, sir, I need to go back home.

"I'll put on one of your trousers if you like."

"Do that. Then at least you won't look scandalous."

"Oh, don't be silly. Someone has to wash the windows. You don't want to do it. You don't have the time, that's true, but do you really have to make such a fuss about something like that?"

Finally he shut up because I sat there.

Every woman worth of the name wore nylons, even in summer. My sisters did too, especially when they hadn't tanned enough. And the fuss they made about their outfits! "Always that mess," Milène said to Carien. "Those clips that always pinch your thighs when you sit down. And the tricks you have to do to get them back onto the side of your thighs, especially with those short skirts these days. And when they're stretched, the stockings hang in a curve up there. And those rubber discs! It only takes one scratch and they scratch and pinch your skin all day."

I'd never thought about my landlady's body before. She was married, a mother and in her thirties. It was her husband who made me notice it. I could have screamed, so much the sensation struck me. Despite the constant fuss she made about the minutiae of her household, her outrageous way of raising her children and her constant capitulation to them, I longed for her! And I despised the home tyrant for the ridiculous incidents he caused.

"You're a child and you always will be."

He rubbed his chest with both hands. "You got nothing here."

She cringed. "Not true," she laughed pitifully. "I've got something here, I've got beautiful breasts, small is beautiful!"

She looked at me teary-eyed. The bras hanging to dry on the clothesline could hold quite more than a child's hand, but it wasn't my place to make a judgement on them aloud. The lithe, brown-haired, curly-headed woman with the flushed face, the dark eyes and the delicate lips was much smaller than me. Despite having three kids, her hips weren't wide, and she had a nice, tight bottom. Her slender legs shone beautifully when she wasn't wearing nylons. But the thought of her cheating on her husband with me shocked me.

Her friend, the plump Madame Schalleman, lived opposite. I've forgotten her maiden name. She was an annoying nag with a face full of dark freckles who was married to a handsome wag. My landlord was friends with him, and one evening, not long after the incident with my landlady washing the windows, Madame Schatteman was sitting in the lounge in the grey light of the black and white

television, sniffling about yet another adultery by "*Alleman*"¹⁶, as she called him. She was terribly embarrassed because I had walked in unsuspectingly. She quickly wiped away her tears and looked away. I apologised and hurried away.

"She should know by now that she can't rely on him," my landlord said afterwards. My landlady, however, did worry about her future. Madame Schalleman came for coffee almost every day, dressed much brighter than before, with much shorter skirts and much more colourful blouses over her big breasts. She let her brown, bushy hair grow and had it marcelled.

One fine evening in May, I came out of the library about nine o'clock. The end of the academic year was on the horizon – lectures would be over in two weeks, and then I'd be heading home to hit the books for the exams. The women were chatting happily at the living room table, sipping their drinks. Thankfully, the kids were already in bed. Schalleman had a meeting with the board of some association, and my landlord was out visiting someone he needed for his career – they'd both be out of action for a while. My plate was in the middle of the table's long side along the wall, so I slid across the bench to my usual place. My landlady was sitting in a chair diagonally opposite me, a little closer to her friend than I was. She emptied her glass and went into the kitchen to prepare my meal. It was paid for, so it was on the table: that was the way she was.

Madame Schalleman was sitting to my left at the short end of the table, making playful allusions to the lives of us students, but her stammered joviality betrayed what she was getting at. I felt sorry for her, partly because she was deeply ashamed of her pathetic coquetry. I said to put an end to it, "Oh, it's not that bad." But no, she immediately resumed her usual demeanour of a dignified, worldly lady who owed it to her life experience to lecture an unbalanced sub-adult: "Yeah... Today's youth..." I looked her straight in the eye and said that that youth showed no different tendencies to those of the past, that if they had, humanity would have died out long ago. Her voice trembled as she began to speak of something else. If only she had stayed at home! Then my landlady and I would have been alone!

She served the meal, her pink blouse tight across her pert breasts. The steak, cauliflower, potatoes and meat sauce tasted delicious. The radio was playing soft pop music from the central station. She sat down across from me again and refilled their glasses. A moment later they were cooing over the ingenuity of their female friends. Where was the child-woman now?

¹⁶ Everybody.

"Cecily is playing with fire," she whispered, almost indignantly. "She goes shopping every Thursday afternoon. She always has an appointment with her lover at the races in Sterrebeek. Afterwards, they go to a hotel in Hoeilaart."

Her nylons were swishing!

Madame Schalleman sighed. "What nerve! I sometimes think... He doesn't care about me at all... He wouldn't mind anyway."

Their eyes flashed in my direction. I felt my cheeks flush and looked down at my plate. My landlady refilled our glasses. "Pfft... You only live once... In your situation..."

She took another sip. "Has it never occurred to you, the thought, about that," asked Madame Schalleman. "If you were really in love with someone... would you dare?" She blushed, her big dark eyes looking at me. My landlady was leaning on the table with her right arm, her chin resting in her hand. Her left arm was casually draped over the back of her chair and her breasts were sticking out, probably encased in the white lace cups of her stylish new white bra adorned with the elegant little bow at the centre front. I started to sweat and looked down at the table. Fortunately, they only had eyes for each other.

"I don't know... It's a difficult question... You don't have children... I am content... If I were you... Yes, then I would probably... Yes, if I were in your situation and got such an opportunity..."

She put her hand over her mouth. "Cecily is also happily married."

"The one from the Sterrebeek races?"

"Yes. A cousin on my mother's side. She has everything she could dream of, a good husband, a nice villa, a nice car. But then she meets another one and is helplessly lost. It just goes to show that you can never be sure."

"I don't think I would," she continued thoughtfully. "I've never really looked for another one. I've never set my mind to it. But then again, you never know, do you? If you meet the right man... And if he loves you."

She looked away nervously. We looked at each other. A question!? My head was spinning. Her curls were shaking, her feet were moving. Madame Schalleman's eyes were jumping from one to the other. My landlady sighed and started talking about something else. I cleared the table, trying to look calm, said goodnight to the women and went to my room. In the morning, she would come and make my bed. I didn't have any lessons. As usual, I would sit at my desk to study. She'd be bending down right behind me! But what if she refused? What if I couldn't get a hard-on? I had a restless night.

"Good morning. Slept well?"

She shook the mattress and the pillow.

"Yes," I said, angry at my stupidity. Then: "I slept badly."

"Did you? And why?"

She straightened the bottom sheet.

"I don't know."

You simpleton!

She made the bed. "You don't have a sweetheart yet, do you? But you've had a sweetheart, haven't you?"

A married woman with three children. We were three at home too... The wide spout of her tight green skirt was floating high above her knees. She quickly tucked the blankets under the mattress and straightened her back. "I'm ready."

"Are you happy?"

"What gave you that idea!? Of course I'm happy."

Once again, she was the half-despised, half-sympathetic homebody, eagerly filling her life with trivialities and feeling at home in them, not quite satisfied, but enough to remain loyal to the boss/breadwinner. Deeply disappointed, I was left alone.

A few days later, the two of us sat alone in her living room. I told her that next year I wanted to be closer to the city centre, closer to the library, to have more time for my dissertation. She said she was sorry and that I was always welcome.

As in my first year, I passed in July with a "*Cum fructu*". Relieved, I shook hands with the other happy students and ran to the Bacchus to phone home. There I first had to shake hands with Tineke and Julien, the publican and his mistress, and a few locals. My fellow students' grades had already been discussed by the professors.

Those of the Germanic and Romance Candidatures always came last.

I couldn't come home yet, I told Dad, because I had to move tomorrow, and the little room I had my eye on had already been rented, a tiny one in the Frans Vermeylenstraat, recommended by an older Romance student, quickly heated and ventilated in winter, with plenty of daylight, and as cheap as the one in the Kessel-Lo. It was late, so I first had to visit the landlord and his wife to get to know them and get the room by written agreement. If they weren't at home, it couldn't be done until tomorrow morning.

My landlady was a real help the next day, packing and moving stuff for me. Wow, she looked beautiful! What a gorgeous white blouse and yellow-brown¹⁷ skirt she

¹⁷ Later I asked Milène the exact name of that colour. "Mango. Why?" "Oh, I'm writing a story and I need to dress a woman."

had on, and that beautiful black buckle! Mmm! And her light perfume! Did she always look like that on weekends when I was home? She didn't have any nylons on, probably too hot to wear in this weather. She grabbed a black handbag from her wardrobe. Was she off to visit some important people after dropping me off in Frans Vermeylenstraat?

We put my travel bags, book bag and black desk lamp on the brown back seat of her car, and she put her handbag next to it before getting behind the wheel. At the busy intersection of Martelarenlaan and Tiensesteenweg¹⁸, she drove in the middle lane to turn left, which I didn't understand as Leuven was on the right.

"I have to go somewhere first."

She wasn't from Kessel-Lo, but from the province of Limburg, and didn't know many people in our street apart from her neighbours. She usually did her shopping on the other side of the commune, at Becker Remyplein.¹⁹ In Korbeek-Lo, she turned off again, this time to the right.

"Just like that. You'll see."

We drove down the narrow, slightly sloping concrete road to Bierbeek. Two years ago, we'd driven there in Simon's old Mercedes to take the edge off the tension of the upcoming exams by having a game of billiards in a village pub. Did she know anyone here? In this farm town? Did she need eggs or cheap veg? There wasn't a living soul in sight, just like two years ago. Further on, a few stray chickens scurried about. A kid on a tricycle was called inside by his mum. We passed the village pub where we'd played pool, went through the rest of the village and drove past the church and the last farms on a slow curve. She turned right at a T-junction and drove onto another old concrete road... A small hamlet... She turned right onto a cart track... Just fields and meadows? Surely, yonder far, a farm before the forest on the ridge! So, did we really have to drive there, bumping over potholes full of broken stones!?

We were in a wide, slightly uphill bend to the left between meadows, wheat, sugar beets and barley, then a rising hollow road... Another open field with a beautiful view: the church tower in the distance... A curve to the left... Hey, not to that farm! Maybe to another one? A steep cart track overgrown with weeds... A faint turn uphill...

Barbed wire! Behind it, the forest! Surely not for that horse...? Surely we didn't come here to look at that horse? But we can't get in, the barbed wire can't open on

¹⁸ If used in street names *laan* (Dutch) means avenue or boulevard. *Steenweg* (Dutch) once meant causeway. In street names today, it simply means road.

¹⁹ Becker Remy Square.

this side! And no one can see us here: thick bushes everywhere! Even behind us in the bend! And behind the meadow, a thick wall of brambles! It can't be true! It can't be true that we came here for that!

The engine idled. She switched it off, pulled the handbrake and put her hands on the steering wheel. My heart was pounding in my throat. She took her feet off the pedals and opened the window beside her. Birds chirped, the smell of warm grain and sour weeds poured in. She sighed deeply. "It's beautiful here, isn't it? Have you ever been here before?"

"No."

"It's stupid. Things were better the way they were."

"What should I have done?"

"I don't know. In our own house... He would never have known."

"I've never made love before."

"Unbelievable!"

She wiped away a tear. "Poor boy."

"Yeah."

She wanted to kiss me.... "Is something wrong?"

"No."

I feigned the passion she needed. Luckily, she stayed passive as I fiddled with her blouse, her belt, her bra, her knickers, Father Devriendt and my triumph over her husband. My first woman! I looked at her with a kind of tender reluctance. Outside it was boiling. With her breasts exposed and her skirt up to her waist, she let me have my way with her. I stroked her haphazardly, shocked by her shamelessness, the width of her vagina and the profusion of her secretions.

"It doesn't work that way. It's not easy that way."

The gear lever was on the steering wheel, the handbrake under the dashboard.

What was she up to?

"I will sit in your seat."

I stepped out. With her blouse open and her bra down to below her breasts, she walked in front of the car. "First, see if anyone is approaching."

There was no one in sight, from front to back, left to right.

"That's what I thought. No one ever comes here. We got lost here once because we thought we would get to the forest faster that way. Then we just picnicked here for a while."

She took off her blouse, bra and skirt. She was wearing a bright white lace knickers! They were made of satin, white satin with flowers! Dad had reupholstered a chair with that very same fabric! She carefully laid her clothes on

the driver's seat. Then she sat down in the passenger seat, took off her shoes and underwear and placed them on top of her other clothes. She slid the seat back, lowered the backrest until it was horizontal, and then spread her legs and raised her knees, ready to go! I was almost dead of fright and desire. With shaky hands, I took my hard-on out of my pants, got on my knees between her legs, and tried to put it into her vagina. Luckily, her fingers saved the day. And there I was, inside her! I was inside a woman! The rapture was so intense that I came immediately! I looked at her, mortified.

"Don't leave, don't leave! I'm not angry!"

It felt good to be inside her. I took her with slow, deep thrusts. She was enjoying it! Finally, I could take no more, pressed myself upright dripping with sweat and laid myself against her with a hand on one of her breasts. She closed her eyes and satisfied herself! Suddenly, she grabbed my index and middle fingers and drove them up and down between her sticky lips. She let out a little moan! She stretched out! So that's how it went! That's how female juices flowed and smelt! Everything was different from how it had been with the Father!

So beautiful were her eyes! Filled with grateful endearment, I caressed her face. She hugged me and kissed me intimately! Finally, she sat up straight, looked at the floor and burst into tears! "I had been in love for a long time. I didn't know it would be so hard."

We stayed lying against each other until her eyes and face were a bit less red. She asked if I would take her handbag. I handed it to her and got out of the car. She straightened the backrest and took from the bag a small white handkerchief with a light purple²⁰ border. She got out too, bent down, cleaned her lips from front to back and rubbed the light brown fake leather of the chair she had been lying on dry. She put the cloth in a clear plastic bag and placed it on the dashboard. It was a jewel! A few hair-thin green leaves and light purple flowers connected by black squiggly lines! She took a second one from her handbag, one with a yellow border and yellow flowers. She unfolded that one and put it next to the other. She grabbed her knickers from the driver's seat, stepped into them and pulled them up to halfway her thighs. Bending forward and with her knees bent, she tucked the handkerchief into her knickers, like a sanitary towel. Slowly, she pulled them up until they were tight around her stomach, pulled the waistband up a little higher at the front and back, then back up again at the front, and slid both hands down the leg openings to check that the knickers fit snugly around her crotch. She took her

²⁰ Milène said that colour was called lilac.

bra, fastened it under her breasts, pushed the clasp backwards and placed her breasts one by one in the cups. She bent over for a moment so that they were perfectly positioned in them. No doubt most of what she did was just routine for her, but each of her gestures was so natural that they moved me by their perfect intimacy.

She took her blouse and pretty skirt off the driver's seat and walked a few steps with them to the side. On one of the paths that the tyres of the car had cut through the weeds, she buttoned her blouse and stepped into her skirt, buckled the black belt and smoothed the fabric. We embraced and kissed each other tenderly.

Back at the wheel, she put the handkerchief with the pale purple flowers in her handbag, sighed deeply and shook her head, looking at the wedding ring on her hand lying on her outstretched legs. Then she stared at the meadow and forest for a long time.

Suddenly she chuckled, grabbed the rear-view mirror and turned it towards her. She wiped away the mascara, put on some new lipstick, powdered her nose and cheeks, and smoothed her curls. "Is it very obvious that I've been crying?"

"No, you look fine."

"Was it good to be with me?"

"Yes, it was very warm."

"Oh man, don't say that! Then I'll get the itch again!"

On Frans Vermeylenstraat, she stayed in the car. After I put my luggage on the kerb, she shook my hand firmly. "Good luck with your studies... And with love."

Carlo Verbiest joined the Geelse in October. He was a frail young man with brown hair and dark eyes. He came from Schilde and was in his "third year of pharmacy". His hometown was far from the region where the *Seniorenkonvent*²¹ wanted us to recruit our first-year members, but we didn't mind. Half of our club was made up of 'foreigners' anyway. Four of us came from different suburbs of Antwerp: Simon, The Squinter, Freddy Peeters and Ludo Lempereur ("the Emperor of China"). Luke De Brabander came from the outskirts of Brussels. Ludo Luyckx, a Limburger, was from Lommel and the East Flemish Pee Vlaeminck from Eeklo. Jeff Bazoom came from Turnhout. Finally, Pear Sachs von DKW (aka Rudy Von Pear) and I were from Westmalle. According to the SK, Jeff, Rudy and I should have become members of the Mastentop, and some members of that club pointed this out to us, but we didn't care. For our taste, the Mastentop took themselves far too seriously. Besides, they could afford to be picky because they had plenty of potential members every year, but if the Geelse were to survive, they had to welcome every articulate wanderer who came to try his luck.

At the end of that first week in October, one of us asked our newest member if he could ride with him in his MG to Mechelen.

"I'm staying here for the weekend," Carlo replied kindly.

"Do you usually do that?"

"No, but I'm not going home anyway."

We hinted at a romantic affair, but he snorted contemptuously. Then Cois Dekeuckeleer, the thick-skinned member, asked if he had a conflict at home.

"*Little, little toddler*²²," sang Carlo in a dazzling baritone, "*what are you doing in my garden? You're picking all the flowers, you're making it way too rough*".

We were speechless, then applause broke out.

He knew European history like the back of his hand, but he lacked any national feeling. Our fight against the hegemony of the Francophones didn't affect him in the least. "You have to feel like punching someone in the face just because they speak a different language".

It was not that simple. The dominance of the francophones dated back centuries

²¹ *Seniorenkonvent* (abbreviated to SK; in English Seniors' Convention). The umbrella organisation of the regional student associations in Leuven.

²² *Klein, klein kleutertje* (Little, little toddler) is a traditional, anonymously handed down Flemish children's song.