

Encounter

The teacher walked the twenty feet from his room to the elevator in wonder. Waited at the latticework of the cage. Stuck three fingers through the mesh.

(This is a beginning. In the hallway redolent of belladonna. And just as one has a chance of winning the lottery if one buys all the tickets, there is the chance of an end.)

There was no sound but the rumble of the elevator. No, not the shuffle of floral-patterned, rubber-soled slippers along the wine-red runner leading from the gypsy woman's room to the elevator shaft, expressly, so it seemed, for her tiny, swift, perpetually unwashed feet in those mules with the violets embroidered on them. Not even her breathless laughter. Though she had a visitor, as the teacher heard while passing her door, which despite the owner's repeated admonitions

she had decorated with an India-ink drawing of Pisces. What stood out most was her belladonna scent.

Once he had entered the elevator, he forgot about the gypsy woman. Which was all to the good. Downstairs in the hallway he avoided Bogger, the porter, a lickspittle with light hair who was pretending to sweep behind the glass partition separating the restaurant from the hotel entrance.

What did the teacher look like in the midday sun amidst the holiday makers, balloons, and trams? Hard to say. Full of wonder, most likely. Composed, to be sure. As he had been for the most part during his thirty-seven years. What was the sea like? Booming quite loudly amidst the shouts of children and their parents. Yet one could tell that up close it would flow more smoothly than the noise on the esplanade seemed to indicate. That the ripples down by the sand would be milder than the waves the teacher saw from the esplanade. The teacher squinted into the strong light, having slid his sunglasses – his students must have made fun of them, cheap and unfashionably mica-framed as they were – into his thick hair, which he wore long because his ears stuck out so. “Tacks,” his father had once said. “Stick a few tacks in your ears before going to bed and in a few months you’ll get up one morning to find them looking as they should – small and Greek, smack against your skull.”

Amidst the hostile crowd with their naked thighs and peeling shoulders, their sand-covered knees, eyebrows, and hair; through

their iodine-turbid gestures and voices, their hula-hoops, the grandfathers in tennis shoes, the fathers in green visors, the children gleaming with oil; past one of the twelve ice-cream carts (two nuns and one fisherman licking), he made his way along the esplanade, which was yellow and composed of smooth, neatly jointed hexagons for the girls roller-skating along it. Opposite the beach and the channel of the inlet, which had been turned into a harbor by means of a breakwater that was regularly, every five or six years, destroyed by storms, stood a sandstone ship's captain, the back of his head on a level with the houses' second stories. If one viewed him from the esplanade, one would see his buttocks squeezed together; if one viewed him from the water – from a boat of schoolchildren or tourists, from a two-man canoe – one would soon – no, immediately – notice the innocent smile with which the sandstone Mongoloid head (smooth as an acorn, of course) stood watch over town and sea and the sailors and fishermen, commemorated beneath his feet, who had drowned during the wars of 1914–18 and 1940–45.

In his involuntary perturbation the teacher pictured the beach the previous winter: the hotel façades with their shutters lowered, the abandoned embankment, the pits with the rubble's last remains, the hulking remains of the Hotel Titanic with its two thick-lipped caryatids; he recalled walking through it all (not hurrying through, as he was now) and once or twice, in the cavity of cold the wind blew into his mouth, murmuring, daring to murmur: “Magic. Casements

opening on the foam of perilous seas . . .” then reciting the lines – and getting them hopelessly wrong – a while later in his fourth-year class so that it was the botched lines the bleary-eyed class wrote into their notebooks. The only thing the professor had any success with – he had been used to it for years now – were descriptions of the drowning Shelley, the coughing Keats, the dead broke Michael Reinhold Lenz. “And now listen very carefully, ladies and gentlemen, to how the poet seeks to convey the song of the nightingale in his words . . .” They recognized the sounds: syllables became chirps, warbles. They imitated birds, puffing out sentences to the beat of the teacher’s index finger. This, together with the lectures he gave them on his highly personal technique of English breathing, helped them when they went out dancing in the evening and sang along with American tunes on the jukebox.

The teacher was on his way to school. He did not so much as glance at the dike, now an esplanade for foreigners. Through the park, with families playing miniature golf, to school. Along Franciskus Bree Street, where he had lived during the first year of his marriage – two rooms, no bath, creaking bed, cauliflower stench – to school. Along the inner quay. Past the warship *Antoinette*, where sailors on deck above the rusty plates were doing their exercises, a dull, tame art of war. Past a boat unloading flour or fertilizer. The teacher walked under the crane near the truck where two workers, white with powder, were stacking the sacks. One of them, the younger, said, “Ahoy there, pretty boy!” Bright red, the teacher raced across the street through the traffic,

clutching his briefcase to his ribs. This side of the bridge, beyond which two warty cathedral spires soared, the sails of the Belgian Yacht Club fluttered before him. The Reverend Slosse, Religion, raised a fleshy hand to him as he rode past on his bicycle, revealing a blue-and-gray-checked undershirt in the sleeve of his cassock. “Hello there, Mr. de Rijckel! None too early, I see.” And the calves in wrinkled black stockings beneath the inflated robe pedaled on. Occasionally, when the slope was especially steep – at the Albert Bridge, for example – some pupils would push the Reverend Slosse up the hill to the bystanders’ cheers. Then the Reverend Slosse would take his feet off the pedals and, once on the bridge, give a triumphant wave of farewell. The Reverend Slosse was frequently seen bicycling with his hands behind his back. He was also generous with his marks. And greatly loved. Lucky man. How do we know? The teacher knew. From time to time the Reverend would sit in the teachers’ room between classes, read his newspaper, and smoke his three-franc cigar, holding it upright, twirling it between his thumb, index- and middle-finger and staring at the ash with such undisguised pleasure that it made the teacher uncomfortable. He did not dare ask, “Reverend, what makes you tick? What’s burning inside you? How can you be so provocatively calm, so offensively serene here in the teachers’ room?” The plump, rosy face would, the teacher knew, have replied as gently and compassionately as he would have to an entering pupil: “Trust, friend de Rijckel,” or “Faith, *amice*.”

Once in the playground, a large skating rink, the teacher pulled

himself up and took on the bearing of someone who has been spied upon, ridiculed, and overburdened, and crossed the courtyard and the bleats of the youngest pupils accordingly. There stood Nouda, Latin and Greek, wringing his hands; there came Kurpers, the Nose, Geography, neck forward, looking for his next class. Kurpers, the Nose, Geography, was usually late and would make a beeline for any line of pupils as yet un-shepherded. The teacher had been late three times in the four years he had been working at the school, and three times the principal had, perhaps because the bell had rung twice, sent his pupils off to the classroom. What is more, the teacher had established that when he had no morning classes, as was the case today, the principal never put in an appearance on the playground. As if the only reason for him to turn up were to catch de Rijckel, English-German. As if, when there was no chance for him to humiliate anyone, he preferred remaining in his office, that glass cage emanating from the façade like a cubic wedge. Up there, invulnerable, he kept an eye on everything. Though he was less invulnerable there than he was when he moved among us, up close, all but a teacher himself, with his placid, wrinkle-free face aimed at us, each one of us, at everything.

The teacher went over to the principal, who was standing next to Nouda, Greek-Latin. The two seemed to be sharing a funny little secret.

“De Rijckel,” said the principal.

Nouda, Latin-Greek, who never greeted anyone, asked him whether

he had seen the floods in Denmark on television. The principal shook de Rijckel's hand but kept his glove on, as he did not with the other teachers. Without releasing the principal's hand, the teacher thought, "What's come over me? What's happening to me?" The principal disengaged his hand and headed for the main entrance with a springy step.

The teacher went up to his class and the line fell silent. He turned and heard them following him up the stairs, the boys dragging the soles of their shoes, the girls clacking their heels. They did not mimic him, as they often did Malaise, Chemistry, whose waddle they occasionally carried to such extremes that a band of epileptics climbed the stairs behind him, jerking and moaning and swaying. They never teased him either. That sometimes bothered him. And sometimes he caught himself wanting to ask them what nickname they had devised for him, because no one in the teachers' room seemed to know. He had thought up all sorts of nicknames for himself, crude and offensive names, but for some reason none of them seemed appropriate. Besides, it was not always possible to account for a nickname's origin. Why was Camerlynck, Physical Education, called the Föhn, and Miss Maes, Assistant Principal, the Nose when she had a perfectly ordinary nose? The teacher had been ashamed of what he came up with while engaged in the search: there was something humiliating about seeking a nickname for oneself, about reducing, confining oneself to, defining oneself by a single physical attribute or trait. Moreover, of

all the names he had thought up for himself that evening (he felt a bit like an author seeking a title for his book), the only one that stuck in his mind was the last and, so it seemed, most appropriate, just before he climbed into bed, dead tired, and gave up. Prick. Prick de Rijckel, English-German.

But for Kurpers, Geography, Nose seemed perfectly natural. The man was a drunkard who had once stood fifteen minutes at a classroom door trying to get the key into the keyhole and then sputtered when it went in too far, “I can do it, you little bastards. I can do it.” Later he fell asleep, his head on his elbows, for the duration of the class. One of the pupils reported the incident, but the principal scarcely held it against him.

The teacher walked up and down the aisles giving a dictation. The group – mere names, voices, homework, and marks to him – wrote it down. Why this class and the others thought of him as an exception was a riddle to him. He would never know. He was perspiring. Wondering why, he wiped the sweat away. Weighing his good points against his weaknesses, comparing them with those of the other teachers and with those of people outside the school – his few acquaintances, his ex-wife, for instance – was of no help. Nobody told you a thing about it. And you could hardly ask. He was strict. Yes. But Camerlynck, Physical Education, was strict too, and that didn’t stop the pupils from behaving normally with him, stroking his sleeve, flattering him, telling on others, which never happened to him, Prick

de Rijckel, English-German. He was an exception. A disagreeable, brutal word. No, he was no exception. He had noticed a similar situation before, a few years, two years earlier, when Tienpondt had come as a substitute teacher. Tienpondt, Mathematics. He played on the municipal soccer team, which in principle should have made him popular, beloved, respected. He had even tried to cash in on his glory by devoting the first fifteen minutes of the class to a technical commentary on the previous Sunday's match, but it hadn't worked, and – perhaps out of sympathy for someone in the same boat – he had told de Rijckel about the inexplicable indifference on the part of the pupils. “I feel no resistance,” he had said, adopting a term used in connection with gauging a team's defense capabilities. The teacher had forgotten his response at the time in the reading room. Probably something about independent coexistence . . . perhaps something about marriage as an analogous phenomenon . . . in terms of which . . .

The dictation was over. He went to the board and wrote a text for the class to translate. On the roof of the gymnasium some workmen were dragging a cable through the sky, the melody of a march wafting up from below.

The teacher floated through the day, vowels elongating, classes taking him from fifth-form science to third-form classical, the hordes in front of him docile, stammering out answers, at home in the conventions of their customary enemy camp. He had wiped the board for the umpteenth time with a clammy, ill-smelling rag, then rubbed

his hands dry, and tossed the little balls of gray grit into the wastepaper basket when, a few minutes before the bell was due to ring, the principal came into the room with a newly lit cigarette in his mouth. The teacher watched him tweak Verlinde's fat cheek and move to the back of the room, where he waited motionless, without a nod, sign, or word. Would it have been too much trouble for him to go up to the podium? Yes. But because the teacher had frozen, the principal finally nodded: Yes, yes, you fool, you can dismiss the class before the bell. Just get it over with and come over here. Chop-chop! The avid, clean-shaven face bit into a piece of toffee.

At a signal from the teacher the pupils shut their desks with less noise than usual, stood up more calmly, and trooped out, whispering, into the corridor. While the teacher closed a window in the empty classroom, the principal said that there was a meeting this evening and that the speaker (he himself! the principal! the guest speaker!) needed to be introduced. The professor replied that he had to oversee the study period from six to seven. You'll have plenty of time, said the principal, aware that the teacher was divorced and ate quick dinners in cheap restaurants.

The study hall was lower than the playground, a glass-walled basement room cut off from the vast, endless field by a brick border. The teacher, motionless on the podium, did the newspaper crossword puzzle and watched the sun go down over the school rooftops. The lights went on, turning the harmless room into a poison-green aquarium. Pens scratching, paper rustling, sweaty air, chalk dust, heads bent—

the teacher would have liked nothing more than to stay there until it was totally dark. He felt like going to the kitchen to ask for a cup of coffee, but they were always ready to suspect you of trying to save a penny at the expense of the local or state government, and he asked himself, "What's the matter with me?" After a long interval three unruly rhetoric pupils made it clear to him in the obvious nonchalance with which they stood and began talking that it was now seven. Another teacher would have made a biting, arrogant remark like "You leave your seats, gentlemen, when I say so and not a minute sooner," and the principal would have said nothing but "Gentlemen," but the example of the gangly older boys was followed by the entire class before the teacher knew what was happening, so he simply rolled up his newspaper and dropped it into the wastepaper basket. He thought of tossing a lighted match down the hole in the center, but the metal cylinder had pinched the paper too tightly and there were too many orange peels in it to allow the fire to catch; besides, it was on a cement floor. Pushing his way through the pupils, whom he easily dispersed with an unambiguous growl, he moved towards the cool fresh air.

Rid of the shoulderless horde, he headed for the hotel, listless, bent, like a man ten years his senior. I'm going on forty already. He met no one he could nod to on the way. He gave the women a scruffy eye and bought cigarettes at an Albertdijk tobacconist's. The man behind the counter informed him there would be a crowd at the Pavilion that evening and into the night and, nibbling on something with his front teeth, pointed out it was a good time to have rooms to rent, because