

Mr. V.

Second edition

First printing



Mr.V.

Second edition
Translated from the Dutch

To understand Hell, one must open its doors
**Les Mémoires du Roi des Damnés et de ses
Princes des Morts**
Vive ut Vivas

Dedicated to my friend
Andy Dix
1989-2013

Rubèn Cottenjé

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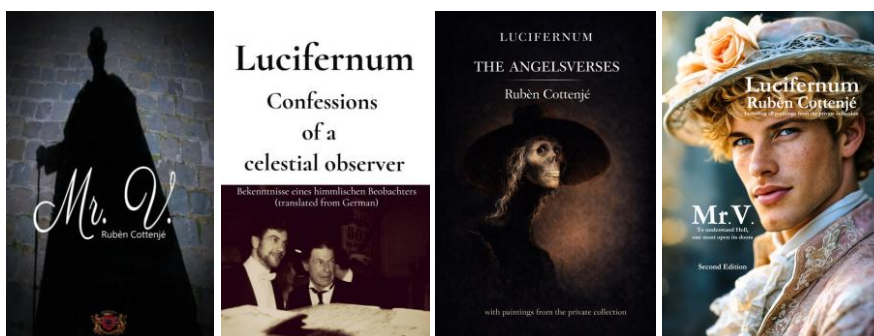
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Warning: This novel contains explicit scenes and depicts adult relationships between persons of the same sex. Intended for mature readers.



Mr. V.



La Comtesse de Cottignies, la Dauphine, et le Singe
The Countess de Cottignies, the Dauphine, and the Monkey

***Le vampire, ce monstre délicat, qui suce la vie
sans donner la mort.****

Rubèn Cottenjé de Dauphin, Mr.V., 2025



L'Aristocrate
The Aristocrat

*The vampire, that delicate monster, who sucks life without granting death.



Doctor Retsin

Prologue: The Undead and Their Nature

Vampires, gentle, yet inescapable. A weight one does not choose, but that settles in. Not as an apparition, but as something that returns. Something that breathes beneath the skin, beneath the light, beneath life itself. For those who wish to understand them must look to what lies underneath. Beneath the sheen of daylight. Beneath the breath of mortals. Beneath the world itself.

There, in the depths where Hades reigns and the three-headed hound Cerberus keeps watch, their story begins. Cerberus allows no one to pass without meaning. In that underworld, Charon ferries the dead across the Styx to the Three Judges, who decide the fate that awaits them. The fortunate walk to the Elysian Fields, the damned fall into the depths of Tartarus, and the many who were neither particularly good nor particularly evil wander the endless Asphodel Meadows, souls without direction.

But there is an exit. A staircase. Steep, perilous, almost never climbed. Those who find it easier to mingle with the living are the undead. Spirits. Vampires.

Rarely is a vampire of low origin.

Their nature demands refinement, *bon ton*, tradition.

Those who move among the living do so with aristocratic inevitability. Their presence is never coarse, always restrained. Their beauty is sharp, like hunger given form. Their eroticism is not an invitation but a memory, of what once was desired, and has never been forgotten. They bear a pale skin that cannot endure sunlight, a face untouched by time, and eyes that see more than mortal gazes could ever suspect.

It is not the exterior that reveals their nature, but what lives within them.

When a vampire wishes to move among the living, he chooses a soul to inhabit. Not later, but at birth. At the proper hour, beneath a constellation favorable to their kind. He does not enter by force. He chooses. He waits. And when the newborn hovers between water and

breath, he places a part of his being, an imprint, not a command, into that warm, new body.

There are beings capable of this. Without fear. Without screaming. Sober. Subtle. Unyielding.

The boy grows up with that presence. He feels something in the silence of his being. Not as a burden, but as depth. Not as a voice, but as direction. Some call it inheritance. Others, coincidence. He does not know. He feels it. That is enough.

Vampires recognize one another easily. By tone, by the way someone enters a room, by how a gaze lingers too long, or not long enough. They see beauty as predators see movement. Some share blood, not out of thirst, but out of recognition. Out of a desire for exclusivity. A tangible form of loyalty that mortals have never understood.

Some undead remain trapped in the youth they once had: the Peter Pan syndrome of those who fear aging as catastrophe. Others mature like fine wine, carrying their bodies as temples, not arrogant armor, but instruments of control. Their influence begins with the body, but reaches beyond touch or language. Their presence sharpens skin, quickens breath, dilates pupils. Not because they demand attention, but because their presence recalls something older than desire.

They do not hunt blood alone. They hunt admiration. Luster. The discovery of an exclusive gaze. Their elegance is never for the masses. Their passion never for many. Their hunger... always specific.

He, the one this story concerns, carries all of this. His silence, his coolness, the way his gaze lingers where others look away, betrays what dwells within him. People feel it. Some are drawn to him; others recoil.

He does not demand attention, yet he receives it. He does not speak of what he carries. But he carries it nonetheless.

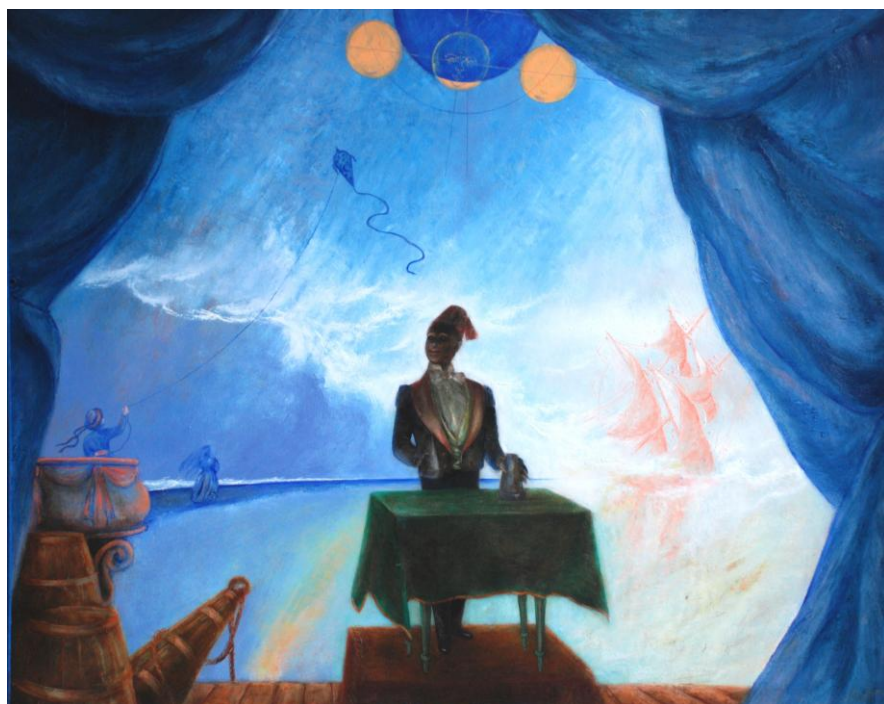
For vampires do not descend from heaven; they rise from shadow, bearing in their gaze the reflected light of the Archangel Lucifer,

Lightbearer, Prince of Darkness, fallen from heaven, yet never from the light. Not as a name, but as a memory. They live differently. They move differently. No dogma. No armor. Only direction, weighing, and seduction unfolding in delay.

They do not belong to their time. They belong to a line, a line that travels farther back than birth, perhaps farther than existence itself. Many in whom a vampire dwells live in finesse. Not because they must, but because it is their nature. An insatiable drive toward beauty. Toward perfection. Toward that single gaze in which they recognize themselves.

This story exists for precisely that reason.

Open this book as one opens a door to the underworld: gently, too late, and with the certainty that what you encounter here has long desired you as well. Some meet their maker not at the end, but at the beginning.



L'Homme qui adressait ses mots au Ciel
The Man Who Spoke His Words to the Heavens



Mortis Risus
The Laughter of Death

1. The Encounter.

The barber radiates cheer. A man in his early fifties, a Lebanese who has lived in Bruges for years and runs his small hair studio there. He is jovial, upbeat. His assistant, a full-figured South Asian woman, gracefully invites me to take a seat at the washbasin.

- *"Such a stylish gentleman,"* she says.

I return her a friendly smile. As she drapes towels around my shoulders, my thoughts drift for a moment. Does she truly find me stylish? Perhaps she does. I am wearing classic grey trousers, a white shirt and waistcoat, a blue bow tie with a matching pocket square, and a wide scarf in grey and black stripes.

- *"Is the water not too cold?"* she asks in broken Dutch.

I need a moment to sort the sounds before I grasp her question.

- *"No, not at all. Perfect."*

Last time it was too warm. Now it is just right. I take my place in the chair on the left. The barber takes a sip of "coffee" in his salon, something I immediately recognize by the smell as nothing more than a cigarette. He reappears, straightens his trousers, and lays out his tools. I greet him.

- *"Nice and short at the back, and for the rest I trust your barber's skills."*

- *"I'll make a handsome gentleman of you, as always."*

- *"Yes, last time was excellent. A satisfied customer..."*

He laughs and winks at me through the mirror. The clippers buzz behind my head. He works quickly, skillfully, with the kind of pleasure only people feel who truly love their craft. It fascinates me: that one can look forward to one's work every single day. I once had that too. Long ago, in a life that now seems almost unreal.

At architecture school I produced the most beautiful designs with pen, ink, and watercolor. I consistently delivered twice the work the assignment required. Now everything is drawn in AutoCAD, and hours of drawing produce neither art nor a penny more. Times change.

- *"Have a look, sir!"*

He swings a mirror behind my head.

- *"You make people happy," I say.*

He smiles, perhaps for a brief moment quietly proud of his skill. I drape my scarf, take my walking stick, or rather, my cane, and follow him to the register. He doesn't mention a price. I pay.

- *"Keep the change."*

- *"Thank you very much, sir."*

- *"See you soon. Same time next month."*

I nod to the assistant, she nods back graciously. Outside, I am set for another month. Should I buy a pack of cigarettes? No. I'm quitting. Even though I know there's still one hidden somewhere at home.

In the reflection of the shop windows on Vlamingstraat I glance briefly at myself. Handsome fellow, I think. But I look so much like Adrian. My dear, beautiful Adrian.

I swallow, feel a chill run through me, and walk home. Life is more than visiting the barber.

On Facebook I see a photo from May seventeenth last year appear in my feed. An acquaintance my age, not particularly handsome, is sitting on a bench with a young guy. They're drinking wine, taking a selfie. The boy has something in his eyes that immediately catches my attention. A hint of Kurt Cobain in his glory years. His T-shirt, with its overly wide neckline, slips halfway off his bare right shoulder, giving him something provocative. I like that. I move my mouse over the tag: Milan Van Eyck.

I don't need to screw up my courage to send him a message.

- *"What a handsome sight!"*

- *"Thx mister. You've got nothing to complain about yourself."*

- *"Mon Dieu, you have an exceptionally sweet presence."*

- *"Thank you, that's very kind. But who are you, actually?"*

The conversation has begun. Milan. An ordinary name: gentle, gracious, kind. His parents chose it, he didn't steal it. Suddenly I think of a remark by a good friend of mine, never shy of a sharp observation.

- *"Your name tells where your cradle stood, doesn't it? Kimberly Verkest, for example. She'll never write a book!"*
- *"True," I said. "You get your genes and your name, and that already determines a lot. Though there are always exceptions."*

The conversation with Milan continues:

- *"Haha, de rien. I'm Jean-Baptiste, from Bruges."*
- *"Ohhh, from Bruges no less."*
- *"Yes, you know what that is?"*
- *"Every Belgian knows Bruges."*
- *"Voilà, I live in the historic city."*
- *"Nice."*
- *"If you ever come by again, let me know."*
- *"Heh, just drove past last week."*

He sounds fresh and optimistic. A contact, but I remain sober. Maaseik, 170 kilometers away. How would that end? I browse further through his Facebook. Mutual friends appear, not the monogamous couch heroes, but guys with whom I share certain adventures. That gives me courage. I shift into a higher gear.

- *"We have a whole bunch of mutual friends."*
- *"And is that a good thing?"*
- *"That's a good thing."*
- *"Oh yes, I see the wilder types."*
- *"We like that!"*
- *"Heh."*
- *"And how do you know them?"*
- *"Some have been to my place. Wim, Stefaan, Jonathan."*
- *"Just found you on PlanetRomeo as well."*

PlanetRomeo, a world unto itself. An international dating site for men by men. You shouldn't think about the hours you lose on such a site, but well, everyone does it. In or out of the closet, honest or incognito. It's fun to look at other users' pictures. You can also mark favorites up to the limit of your free account, and then...

- *"Oof, but I behave nicely there too, just looking at the photos!"*
Milan says.
- *"A bit sexier, yes."*

- *"I have a standard profile and can't add any more favorites for now. Haha, I throw out the losers. There! One out, you in."*
- *"Hey, sweet thing, I need to grab something. Back in a bit."*

Something tells me this feels right. We exchange phone numbers and switch to WhatsApp. Modern nonsense, but sometimes a gift.

- *"What do you think? Should I drive to you? Can you host me?"*

I am determined.

- *"No! I can't host you. My neighborhood is Muslim and they don't tolerate that. I've already had a confrontation. Besides, there's nothing to do here."*
- *"We could already link each other as partners on PlanetRomeo. Let's be crazy!"*
- *"Yes, why not? Haven't met yet, but already nicely crazy!"*

It makes me happy that he dares. Still, I push for a meeting, until he himself comes up with a proposal.

- *"Next week in Brussels there's the monthly high mass of Europe's vampires, at l'Opéra. If we meet there, it's halfway for both of us."*
- *"Yes... given the circumstances, that seems the best option,"* I say, slightly disappointed but understanding.
- *"Great, then there."*
- *"What outfit?"*

He answers without hesitation, in that deep, sensual, gravelly voice that sends a warm shiver through me:

- *"I want the red pants."*
- *"The red pants?"*

He repeats it, slower, lower, as if uttering an incantation:

- *"I want... the red pants."*

Heat shoots from my chest to my throat. His voice has the cadence of a drum before a battlefield. Playful, brutal, unmistakably seductive.

But those red pants... aren't they too much for a first meeting? The photo I sent him shows me in those small, red, shiny pants. Everything in its place: a washboard of abs above, firm buttocks behind. It is

provocative, without a doubt. But l'Opéra is anarchic enough: anyone who walks around there loses both honor and shame.

If I can entice Milan with them, why should I hold back? So, despite the hellish journey to Brussels, through those grim neighborhoods where you'd rather not walk sober, I decide: this contact propels me forward. I'm going. In *the red pants*.

Over them I first pull on shorts, a T-shirt, and loose track pants. I look like a clochard, but practically speaking it has to be this way. No one will recognize me in Brussels-South, and a taxi to l'Opéra is the safest choice. That way I avoid unwanted situations.

How do I always manage to tumble from one extreme to the other? I really do live in extremes.

It's in me, I suspect: the ability to experience the world as I choose. To pursue all my desires, as long as my strength allows. Perhaps deep down I am still that neatly raised boy, but at the same time there lives something mischievous, something sensual, something dark within me. Milan draws it out effortlessly. I have never met him, and yet... everything I have seen and heard of him so far touches me directly. I wouldn't travel to Brussels for just anyone. But for him? Without hesitation.

I park my vintage Mercedes in the garage at Bruges station. The price is reasonable, and at least my car stays dry. A drizzle falls. A somber day, with grand prospects.

At the station I buy a weekend ticket, valid until after Pentecost Monday. That's all I need.

On the train I message Milan on WhatsApp that I'm on my way. Outside I watch Bruges's golden crown slowly disappear: the Belfry, St. Salvator's Cathedral, and the Church of Our Lady, three medieval sentinels, shrinking in perspective.

The journey has begun. What adventure awaits?

I think of Adrian. Will these dark days finally come to an end? Will the mystery ever be solved?

Evening falls. In the window I catch my own reflection. *Hmm, you look good*, I think. I give myself a wink. Ha, Milan won't be able to resist me. And if he can, then he's wrong, and there are hundreds of other candidates roaming l'Opéra. The high mass of the night. I sigh. *C'est la vie*.

I'm early. Without queuing I reach the cloakroom, strip off my tracksuit, shorts, and T-shirt, and stuff everything into my backpack. Money in my shoes. Cigarettes in my red football socks. A lighter? I'll borrow one later from another night wanderer.

Next to me a guy my age is openly staring.

- *"Nice abs! Love it, hunk!"*

- *"I know,"* I reply dryly but kindly.

I head down to the lower hall. It's only eleven o'clock. Too early, too cool to walk around half-naked. But the crowd is pouring in; within an hour it will be packed.

I order a beer. It's been almost a year since I was last here, also at Pentecost. Back then, the disciples of Jesus received the Holy Spirit and spoke in strange tongues, a beautiful thought at the beginning of a new story.

Last year Victor said:

- *"Come on! You need to get out, out of Bruges! We're going to l'Opéra!"*

He was right. By then I had already lived for a year like a hermit, safely behind Bruges's gates, supported by my friends. I hadn't particularly enjoyed myself that evening, but for Victor it was an adventure, for me a distraction. Victor, twenty-three and still a fledgling, crossing the threshold of this temple of freedom and unrestrained desire for the first time.



La Vénitienne, Dame des Canaux
The Venetian Woman, Lady of the Canals

I did not feel in love with Victor, though I knew he had fallen for me. I was honest about that. My heart was not free. Adrian still haunted me too strongly. And yet we each enjoyed it in our own way.

- *"What time is it?"*

- *"Twelve thirty."*

- *"Thank you."*

The techno basses pound. Boom, boom, boom. It reminds me of Dr.Jasper Verguts from UZ Leuven: he once wrote that when the womb's shape comes close to the golden ratio, it is most fertile, and that the rhythm of the maternal heartbeat draws young people to music. They remain suspended in that fetal stage, he said. Not such a bad theory.

But anyway. Here I am. Ready to be reborn beneath the fiery tongues of Pentecostal technology.

L'Opéra fills up. Bare male bodies everywhere, muscular, slender, lean, with soft bellies, hairy, smooth, in shorts, swim briefs, jockstraps, jeans. The market is open, the goods on display. Anyone wearing a T-shirt here has something to hide. Rejected!

I have an appointment at one o'clock. On the second floor, near the dark rooms. That's where it happens. Dance, pop, and a DJ who looks as though he has lived in the wrong body for twenty years, but who is, undeniably, an artist.

No sign of Milan. My phone is at the cloakroom. Waiting is the only option. I make eye contact with a handsome young man: Parisian face, sharp cheekbones, about twenty-two. I smile; he smiles back. His gaze follows me. I walk up to him.

- *"Where are you from?"*
- *"Paris."*
- *"Nice. What do you do there?"*
- *"I'm a model. I walk the catwalk."*
- *"Impressive. And now here?"*
- *"For the first time. And you?"*
- *"I'm waiting for someone."*

Enough of a click. But then he starts complaining about the sexual atmosphere, odd, since we're almost standing in the doorway of the dark rooms. Why isn't he downstairs? Why is he talking to *me* at all if such supposed purity bothers him? But anyway. Maybe he just likes sultry music.

Where is Milan?

By now it's half past one.

I decide: Milan will come. But first, a cigarette. I ask the Parisian to come downstairs with me. He follows. On the stairs I see a group of guys waiting. In the corner someone stands with a small bottle and a straw. Thinner than expected. Emaciated. Almost too much. Blonder. Dyed. Sharper tattoos. Dangerously sexy.

But that's him. Milan. In knee-high socks, shoes, and a jockstrap. Tousled hair, a sweet look, a touch of awkwardness, and precisely because of that, irresistibly sexy.

Once downstairs, he still hasn't seen me. I slip my arm around his waist, kiss his cheek. He looks surprised; I wink and walk on to the smoking room.

The Parisian stays outside waiting. He's handsome, but a whiner. A hypocrite. I take the back exit. Let him find his own way.

Milan draws attention. Milan is upstairs. An hour late! Good points. I go to greet him. He's the reason I came. There he stands. Not a six-pack but a ten-pack, the result of lean elegance.

- *"You're Milan."*

He nods, sipping his drink.

- *"And you're Jean-Baptiste. Was that you earlier, the one who kissed me and then disappeared with that handsome guy?"*

- *"That's right. A Parisian I'd just met. A whiner, don't worry about him."*

He kisses me. He introduces me to friends whose names I immediately forget and will never remember. We dance. Deep conversation is impossible here.

- *"Do you want something to drink?"*

- *"A beer."*

- *"A beer? I expected something more chic,"* he teases.

I laugh.

- *"What are you drinking?"*

- *"A soft drink. I'll take something later, alcohol doesn't go with it. Want one too?"*

- *"Yes, why not? The night is young!"*

His friends pour something from a vial into our drinks. We suck it down together. After twenty minutes I feel light-headed. Milan kisses me passionately, as if he's known me for years. I see boys moving in and out of the dark rooms. Everyone is gone. No one sober. But I'm enjoying myself. The high feast of l'Opéra.

Some people vaguely recognize me. Compliments, fleeting remarks. Nothing more.

- *"Milan! New boyfriend?"* asks a drugged-up boy.

- *"For tonight, yes," Milan says, winking at me. "Right?"*

A kiss is my answer. He beams. Milan pulls me into the dark rooms as if leading me to a sanctuary of forbidden rites.

As soon as we enter, it is as if another world opens up: warm, sweaty, pulsing a space not inhabited by people, but by bodies behaving like nocturnal creatures with their own instinct, their own rhythm, their own hunger.

The red safety light flickers like the last breath of a star. It reveals just enough to know that flesh is everywhere: shoulders, jaws, backs, buttocks, thighs. Everything moves, slides, searches. Milan grips my hand more tightly than before, as if afraid I might dissolve into this sea of flesh. His skin is warm, almost cool at the fingertips, the paradox of a body that burns and shivers at once.

We glide through bodies. Unknown hands touch me: chest, stomach, hip, groin. Sometimes a nail, sometimes a tongue that slides along my shoulder like a razor-sharp, moist blade. There is nothing human about the moment, flesh has no names here.

Milan senses my shiver and smiles with a mischievous sharpness that reminds me of a predator smelling pleasure. He pushes me against a wall, a damp shadow-wall, a wall that lives. His face is close to mine. His breath smells of mint, temptation... and danger. In him, a hunger that betrays something deeper than mere lust.

He kisses me suddenly, fiercely, almost a bite, a claim on my mouth. It is a kiss that cuts pain and pleasure together. He kisses with a heartbeat, as if all his tattoos are being released from the depths from which they were born. His hands slide under my red pants, gripping my buttocks as if he wants to mark my body. He is lean, yes, but lean like wolves are lean: etched, tense, ready to spring. Ready to attack. Ready to tear his prey apart. Around us there is moaning, thrusting, panting, as if everyone in this room is searching for what no human ever truly gets: a saturation that lasts.

Milan releases my lip and looks at me for a long moment. In his pupils something seems to happen, an expansion, a depth, a gleam, as if he sees more than skin and bone.

- *"Come,"* he says. His voice is low, rough, dark in my ear.
- *"Deeper."*

He takes my hand again and guides it into his jockstrap. I feel his hardness, warm and alive like a throbbing wound. He closes his eyes, stretches his neck, tilts his head back, and for a moment it seems as though I can see his throat visibly pulsing beneath skin so pale that the light seems to pass through it.

- *"You know it,"* he pants, like an incantation.

Hands continue to grope for us around us, but Milan slaps them away with animal sharpness.

- *"Stay away from us. Find your own partner!"*

He doesn't say it as a joke. He says it like someone taking possession. For a fraction of a second I see him in the red light: the shadows fall so that his cheekbones sharpen, his eyes darken, his neck lengthens, his body tightens... as if in this darkness he finds his true form. He presses himself against me, hard, rhythmic, almost like an animal that knows what it wants and wants it now. His hands hold my face as if he wants to drink from it. His words are warm against my lips:

- *"I want all of you. Now!"*
- *"Everything..."*

Suddenly he starts laughing and pulls me back outside.

- *"Did you really think I wanted to spend a first night in such a filthy place? But, you didn't lie!"* he drawls in a sultry, gravelly, lightly panting voice.
- *"I never try to,"* I reply, while now knowing for certain that he is completely unhinged. Stark raving mad. Exactly what we're looking for.

After Milan and I had given ourselves fully to one another in those stifling rooms, encountering no obstacle whatsoever, we returned to his friends.

- *"You look deliciously sweaty,"* one of them remarks.

- *"Yes, you would be too, with a beast like that beside you,"* Milan says, almost proudly.
- *"More stuff?"* another asks.
- *"We don't say no,"* Milan answers for both of us.

We become high and horny. The party thunders on, like a fever with no brakes left. Milan suddenly talks nonstop, in that deep voice and with his idiosyncratic way of telling things. He repeats words he wants to emphasize, always two, three times, and I have to admit: I love it.

Wim passes by with his new boyfriend from Amsterdam.

- *"Hey Jean-Baptiste, all good? You're looking delicious again. And who's that youngster next to you?"*
- *"That's Milan. Handsome, right? Who knows, there might be a future in this wild night."*
- *"Yes, indeed. You always know how to pick them. Do you know anything more yet about what happened to Adrian?"*
- *"No... still no breakthrough."*

The Amsterdammer looks at Milan with unmistakable interest.

- *"Who's that sultry boy standing next to your friend?"* he asks.
- *"Oh, I don't know him. That's Wim's boyfriend."*
- *"Come on, let's follow them into the dark rooms."*

We go back inside. Wim and his friend are already kissing a few other boys. In Wim I discover something I thought I knew only in myself: a child of the Moon. Milan blends in effortlessly, he takes care of the Amsterdammer with complete abandon. Meanwhile, someone else turns his attention to me. I let it happen, the extract has dissolved my resistance like sugar in hot tea.

Later my good friend Herman resurfaces in my thoughts, that decent mortal, anchored to wife and children, who once said:

- *"But what you do there, that's beyond all dignity, isn't it? I can't imagine I'd ever do something like that. Disgusting."*

At the time I had offered him a simple image:

- *"Imagine a club with three thousand topless women, all young, all beautiful, all eager for sex. You're the only man there, no other*

men around. Rooms full of possibilities: everything allowed, nothing required. What would you do?"

His eyes had shone then. He answered exactly as I knew he would.

- *"Yes... I understand. I'd do it."*

What for him seems a wild fantasy is for me bitter reality.

It's eight in the morning when Milan and I stand at the cloakroom. He gives me a kiss. I decide I've had enough: we've danced, fucked, wandered among bodies. Time to return to Bruges.

But while we wait, Milan starts talking to a guy next to us.

- *"Coming to an afterparty?"* he asks.

- *"Where?"*

- *"At Amaury's, here in Brussels. I've been there before. Everything's ready, and there are lots of Black guys, my favorites. Come on!"*

- *"How do we get there?"*

- *"Taxi. Those guys next to us are going too. We'll split the cost."*

Honestly, I've had enough. But I think: I'm here anyway. Tomorrow morning I can rest. If I don't like it there, I'll just leave. Milan is going. And I want to know who he is.

We pick up our backpacks, get dressed, and wait for the others. The guys aren't my type, Dutch, a bit pale, a bit chubby. Next to Milan, everyone looks chubby.

We give the doormen a euro, take a taxi, and drive to Amaury's. The host opens the door. A man in his fifties, 'old' in these circles.

- *"Milan, what a fine specimen you've brought along."*

- *"Yes, this is Jean-Baptiste. He's an aristocrat too."*

I nod, standing there, under normal circumstances I would look ridiculous, in my tracksuit. The host, also in shorts and football socks, reassures me more than enough. He says something to Milan, opens a drawer, and mutters conspiratorially to me:

- *"There's pure, clean coke here, just for us. Take whatever you want. The rest help themselves elsewhere."* He winks.

In the apartment, Black men, South Americans, and a few pale boys wander around. I recognize some of them. It's a small dovecote of sultry misery.

Milan throws himself into the game, literally and figuratively. I stay on the sofa and observe the scene. Daylight streams in and strips everything of its magic.

The boys look tired, drained, sallow. They fidget with one another while talking the night away. Then the door opens. A handsome man in his forties enters, skinny jeans, light sweater. Milan knows him. Shortly after, they're fooling around together on the bed, next to another couple. Milan takes more of the extract, too much this time. His pupils empty. His knees buckle. His nails scrape across my back.

I catch him. He weighs nothing. I lay him on the bed. I lie down beside him and wait. He's breathing, thankfully.

He sleeps like a child.

I study his face.

That nose, that mouth, that jawline.

Even his stubble seems symmetrical.

I stroke his hair.

He exhales softly toward me.

Milan is gone. In a haze.

Almost a coma.

Adrian... could you take over this soul?

Is this the moment?

Will he finally speak the sentence?

Dangerous.

Dangerously early.

Four hours later he comes around. Someone else is lying on his other side, touching him. Milan swats the hand away and grabs mine.

- *"Where am I? Oh right... You're still here too?"*

He staggers to the toilet; I go with him. In the bathroom I dry myself with a towel.

- *"No! Not that one. Someone else used it. Take a fresh one. You never know what bacteria people have."*

He stands next to me in front of the mirror.

- *"Look at my hair. I look terrible. Bags under my eyes. My gums are receding from that stuff. Is that a crack? Yes, I need to have that fixed. Look here, this wound won't heal. The surgeon already injected cortisone."*

I see nothing. Still, I nod. We return to the others. Milan leans on my shoulder.

- *"You're a handsome guy," he babbles, lightly biting my ear.*

- *"Anyone want a sandwich?"* the host asks.

- *"Yes, me,"* Milan says.

- *"Meat spread?"*

- *"No, I'm vegetarian. My mother too. We love animals."*

- *"Cheese?"*

- *"No, that makes you fat. Do you have chocolate spread?"*

- *"Yes."*

- *"Great, but I'll need to brush my teeth afterward."*

The door opens. The "two sweet boys from Aalst" come in: a fat man in his fifties with a worn-out toyboy of thirty-five. Here I reach my limit before my guts turn inside out.

- *"I've seen it all now. I'm going back to Bruges."*

Milan looks at me challengingly.

- *"You haven't performed yet, handsome,"* he says in a low voice, syrupy, warm with lust and chemicals.

- *"Okay. Whatever you want,"* I say. He laughs slowly, dangerous, provocative.

- *"With that stuff, nobody can perform."*

- *"I can."*

His gaze shoots into mine, black, deeper than the darkened room. His eyes: hunger, desire, something inhuman living in the shadows. I climb

onto the bed and sit astride him. His body feels hot and light beneath mine, like a fire source about to burst.

His hands immediately slide to my thighs, his fingers pressing into my muscles as if he's afraid I might dissolve into smoke. Milan tilts his head slightly back; his neck stretches long, a pale, soft line that almost glows in the dim light, a neck that invites, that offers itself. He breathes faster. I feel it against my chest, rhythmic, pumping, like a heartbeat breaking out of its cage.

The most selfish moment of a man explodes across his face. He looks sated. Literally. *Prestatio perfecta*. I stand up, pull on my ridiculous tracksuit, thank the host. No contribution owed, he says.

Outside I walk toward Brussels-South. Thirteen minutes on foot, I calculate. It's five in the afternoon. A soft spring sun. Milan... what an adventure. A boy who drinks his daily smoothies from a rainbow glass and at the same time stuffs himself with extracts and bodies.

He is beautiful. But so delicate, so feminine, so contradictory. Adrian, what have I done? Luckily, for me this is only an adventure.

I put the ball in his court. If I don't call again, that's that. If he wants more, he'll find me.

My phone vibrates:

- Milan: "Do you believe in love at first sight?"
- Me: "No, normally not."
- Milan: "Neither do I. But now that I've seen you, I do."
- Me: "That's something."
- Milan: "So curt."

On the train back to Bruges I sort everything out in my head. Maybe I'll message him tonight. Maybe I won't. From this moment on, I no longer know whether I am following Milan, or whether something in me is being drawn toward him.

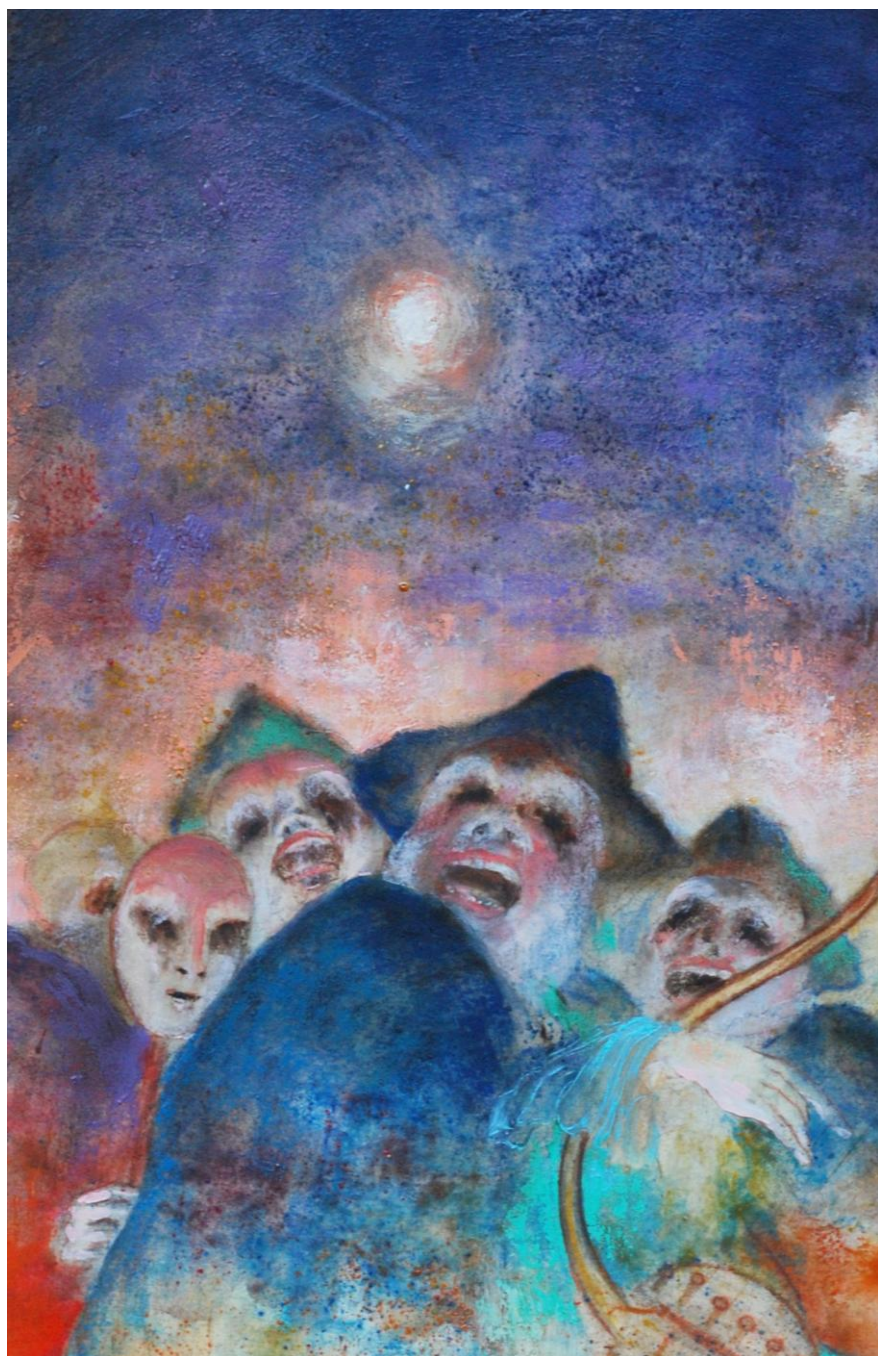
Adrian... what do you say?

***De profundis! rang the prayer,
De profundis! sighed the house,
The house, and all who knelt within it,
In a devout, resounding chorus.***

*From Graveyard Flowers (Kerkhofblommen),
Guido Gezelle, 1858*



La Lyre des Spectres
The Lyre of the Spectres



La Lyre des Spectres, detail

2. The Distance Is Bridged.

Milan and I kept messaging each other after that first dizzying night in Brussels. There was a lightness in his words that charmed me, but beneath that lightness lay a deep hunger, a longing for attention, for warmth, for affirmation... perhaps even for rescue.

Milan: *"Shall we meet next weekend?"*

Me: *"No, unfortunately. My nephew's First Communion. But the weekend after works perfectly."*

Milan: *"I really want to get to know you better. I don't believe in long-distance things, but with you, I do. We'll see where we end up."*

There was something in his words I didn't understand, but I felt it.

There was that typical reckless honesty of boys who speak as much with their hearts as with their lust, unfiltered, warm, impetuous, as if every word springs from an instinct that has not yet learned how to lie.

He wanted to. I wanted to. But before desire can take hold, duties demand their due, duties understood only by those raised in a world where traditions still truly carry weight, where rituals are not ignored but honored.

So I had to present myself to Señora Retsin. We say *Señora*, not *Madame*: a deliberate nod to her Spanish bloodline, one of flamenco and incense, which she preserves with pride. A small gesture of courtesy, a great gesture of charm. Delightful, isn't it?

Señora Retsin received me in her garden room, my *Hameau de Madame*. A space that smelled of flowers, of Spanish coffee, of warmth. She spoke French, always French, with a deliciously rolling *r* that hovered somewhere between flamenco and liturgy.

- *"Monsieur Jean-Baptiste, are you ready for Isabella's First Communion?"*

- *"Yes, madame."*

- *"And afterward? Will you dine at her godfather's château?"*

- *"I would love to... but I'm expecting a guest I don't wish to leave alone for long."*

The sparkle in her dark eyes, it was as though she had unraveled a secret I had not yet spoken.

- *"Oooh? A romance, perhaps? Let me see him."*

I showed her a photo of Milan. She let out that typically Spanish sigh, suspended somewhere between drama and delight.

- *"He is magnificent! A mayfly, or are you thinking of more?"*

Before I could answer, she thundered through the house:

- *"Madame Hortensiaaaa! Come and see whom Monsieur Jean-Baptiste has met!"*

Madame Hortensia emerged from the kitchen, smiling as always, looked at the screen, and brightened completely.

- *"What a handsome boy! Is he coming to the Communion? We'll set an extra place!"*

The women were won over. I smiled, because in silence I felt the same.

The following weekend Milan arrived by train. Bruges was bursting with tourists, strollers, day-trippers, Germans in sandals, and then he appeared: checked shirt, short gray trousers, a tattoo flashing beneath the hem, hair wild as if he'd walked through a storm.

- *"My hair's a mess. The train was full of children. I'm exhausted."*

- *"I'm glad you're here."*

I kissed him, and he relaxed, as if someone had been waiting for him for the first time in a long while. We drove to Zeebrugge, the ugliest seaside town in Europe, but Milan looked at it as if it were Saint-Tropez. That was his gift: he illuminated everything his gaze fell upon.

We settled on a terrace.

- *"Two lemonades and two banana splits, please,"* I ordered.

- *"Lemonade with a straw,"* Milan added. *"Sugar is bad for the teeth. And my teeth are my trademark."*

He laughed, that half-innocent, half-bragging laugh that made him irresistible.

The coast breathes desolation and decay. Concrete where dreams once stood: apartment blocks like tombs, garish and worthless consumption architecture, wind flinging sand like pins into your face. A place where beauty once lived, then was banished in favor of socialist yield. Iodine, lots of iodine.

Milan listened to my tirade about lost grandeur, his gaze drifting away, as if trying to reconstruct the remnants of that past within himself.

Back in Bruges, he admired my house with the wonder of a child in a museum.

- *"Do you live here alone? It's... unusual. But beautiful."*

- *"Thank you."*

His eyes fell on Adrian's painting.

- *"Is that... a self-portrait from earlier?"*

- *"No. That is Adrian."*

A shadow crossed his face, or perhaps I imagined it. We showered, explored the rooms, laughed, dressed for Sunday.

He sighed nervously:

- *"You look so official... I only have a black shirt and a black jacket."*

"You're beautiful as you are. But one tip: always leave the bottom button open."

- *"No," he said stubbornly. "I think it looks nicer when they're all closed."*

A small, obstinate resistance, the only thing he seemed unwilling to surrender.

In church, Señora Retsin and Madame Hortensia had reserved a place for us, as if we were the godparents ourselves. Milan cautiously took my hand. A fraction too public. I felt the eyes of old women resting on us. It bothered me, but not enough to let go. The thurible passed by. He frowned at the smell.

- *"It stinks," he muttered. Something in me withdrew.*

I let go of his hand.

After Mass there was a reception in the schoolyard. And then he appeared: Dr. Retsin.

My éminence grise. My field marshal of common sense. A man who wore elegance, tradition, and argument as others wear a cloak over their shoulders. His family history, half aristocratic, half myth, he told with the seriousness of someone who wanted to believe it himself.

There was always a subtle shift in a room when he arrived, not because he sought to impress, but because people instinctively grew quieter in his presence. He did not radiate authority, but something beneath it: a composed, ancient calm once found among clergy or old nobility.

He greeted Milan with a nod that was at once inquisitive and approving.

A nod that said: *I see you, boy. I understand more than you show.* He usually torpedoed administrators, charlatans, and mediocrities with that same precise gaze. With Milan, it did not soften, yet there was something in his eyes, an attention that was rare. As if, in a single glance, he recognized an energy he had not encountered in a long time.

It was a beginning.

I looked at them both, the old master and the young angel, and suddenly understood that I stood between two worlds: the world of tradition, reason, order, and genealogy, and the world of impulse, hunger, youth, and risky beauty. Light played in Milan's blond hair. He winked at me, very subtly. Perhaps in that moment he truly was an angel, an angel not from Heaven, but from the underbelly of Brussels. And yet... he shone.

Dr. Retsin adjusted his glasses slightly, took a breath, and began, as always, his inimitable monologue, his encyclopedic storytelling, his archaic turns of phrase. He spoke as only he could: a master narrator, with a fine French *r* and just enough theater, captivating people with tales from his life, from art, poetry, and music. He spoke as those speak who have once held time in their hands, rather than been carried by it.

As expected, Dr. Retsin arrived a little later. He first walked stately down the central aisle to the front of the church. His illustrious presence and aristocratic profile radiated self-assurance. He wore a