

I remembered how to get there, the streets I should follow, using the iron tower to keep my bearings. On the inside of the shop door with her name on it – repeated a thousand times in my head and murmured on my lips – hung a sign with the word open. She was open. And I was closed. Again it felt as if something made me open the door and pushed me inside, some power or energy, as if the nerve to revisit her shop came from outside. I never had the nerve to do or undertake anything, lacking initiative and indecisive as I had become in submissive obedience to the rule, which I was now breaking, pure and simple, relocating to a different stratosphere.

She emerged from the back room, glasses on, and her face lit up when she saw me. I knew it, she said. Coffee's ready, socks are still on the table, just so. I didn't have to saying anything, and hadn't opened my mouth. Take a seat, she said and she touched me. She touched me. Her hand brushed my shoulder as I sat and I saw that she had shortcake with a chocolate base on a plate and she took a warm towel from the rack by the open hearth for me to dry my feet and then I put on her husband's socks.

I just wanted to see you again.

Yes, she said.

We smiled without a sound, she with tiny specks on her glasses, which she removed and placed on the table. Me sitting there looking at her in her cable sweater and cotton skirt, which she was now wearing instead of the trousers now hanging on the rack to dry... that wasn't allowed. The green in her sweater matched her eyes and reddish blond hair, concealing modest curves. My eyes skimming over her as before, like routed foxes from the Bible scurrying through the green sheaves... that wasn't allowed. I shouldn't have been there, sinning against every vow. What are vows? Patricia asked. She turned down the radio, a light orchestra of sleek violinists. The hand with which she did so then came to rest on mine, gently but so unexpectedly that it made me sit upright. She squeezed slightly.

Wake up, fuddy-duddy. Are you still there?

Yes. On the street I still felt dead, but here I was completely present. Her hand. Warm hand... frail beautiful soft hand. Firm. Mummy hold little boy tight. Mummy's voice.

And answer me this, she said, shaking my fingers. Why are you still hanging around that haunted house of a monastery like a ghostly brown shadow? You don't belong there. I saw it when I looked at you, right away when you appeared for the first time in that waiting room. You're not content and those clothes are too tight, although you could fit in them twice over. A *pleasant gentleman* by the look of him, I thought, but neglected, like hanging ivy much in need of TLC.

I can't leave the place, I begin to stammer.

Patricia: Do you want to leave?

I couldn't leave, even if I wanted to, I say. Picture me. I'd be like a monkey set free from his cage after years in captivity. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. Where would he go? What would he do? Discarding the habit and walking out of the monastery doesn't happen, it's not done.

Why not? She lit a Miss Blanche. Swan Vesta matches. Smoke from her mouth and between her fingers, coiling upwards to the fringes above the table. She crumpled the box.

Those who wear a habit, I say, are bound to the conventual life, just like people are bound to one another through marriage. Divorce doesn't happen either. It's a mortal sin, divorce. You're such an angel, says Patricia.

Maarten Luther left his order, I argue. Three centuries ago. Luther was a heretic and the pope expelled him from the church.

At this point she bursts out laughing. Cheerless ninny!

What would a monkey or a giraffe like me do with himself outside the zoo, I continue. I'd have no identity. My name and everything that carried it, passport, certificates, would be gone.

Nonsense. She held out the hand with the cigarette. Fancy a puff? It's my last, we'll have to share. No need, I say. She stubbed the burning tip of the half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray and carefully rested what was left in the little groove.

I continued: I don't even know what my face looks like anymore or the last time I appeared in a photo. There are no mirrors in the monastery. We mirror ourselves in virtue, I say, emphatically cynical.

She: Smacking little boys with canes and playing with little boys' willies and a lot more, and a lot worse, is that virtue?

Only a couple of us get up that sort of thing, I mitigate. You shouldn't think...

She: Right. Those two abuse their power over kids like that, it's scandalous, and you don't say a word, just like the rest of them. The power those superiors in skirts get to abuse extends to the whole sanctimonious lot of you. Bunch of spineless namby-pamby apes. You're an accomplice, don't you realise that?

I try to be there for those boys, I say, defending myself. They're also imprisoned, destined to be drilled like circus animals. I'm nice to them. I don't use a cane or a lash. I don't throw steaming hot soup over their heads.

Mmm, said Patricia. You've been drilled your whole life and it's twisted you completely. The place is a prison for you too. The jailer and the jailed are both behind bars.

I don't want to put fear into their heads, I continued. I want to give them a sense of commitment, trust, security, to the best of my ability. That's the task I give myself when I'm charged with their responsibility. In any case, they're not afraid of me. Suppose I was to leave the place. I'd be walking out on them, leaving them to their fate. Bye boys, bugger the lot of you, Brother Bonaventura is out of here because Brother Bonaventura can't take it any longer.

Patricia: Right. Generous of you. Sooner or later those lads will leave school and they'll survive with the traumas they take with them. But there's no real later for you, is there, so long as you keep shuffling around the corridors just to be sure those young customers keep their hands above their desks and above their blankets. What do you care? Are you really sure you want to keep that up for the rest of your days? What've you done with your life? You can walk away if you want to. They've thrown nets over you and suffocated you in their fascist system. That's where all the frustrated sexuality comes from and its horrendous consequences. It's part of the system.

I didn't know the word.

Sexuality, she repeated. With an x.

I must have stared at her as if a bomb had gone off.

Downstairs, at the front, you know. The things people do with it. Am I talking to a three-year-old?

Unbelievable.

The thing we cover with swimming trunks when we go swimming flashed through my head.

That rabble of brothers are venting their frustrated desires on those little boys, she continued. That abuse of power, that loudmouth thuggery, that rummaging around in little boys' trousers, that unlimited self-indulgence. That – and here came the word again – is sexuality, and it can't find a normal way to express itself. Celibacy, she gagged. There's one in the parish here. Father Glaudemans. Lets the altar boys visit the presbytery for a cigarette, a mug of hot chocolate, and then some dirty games. A little squirt from a couple of doors down told his mother and the headmaster too, so everybody knows. There's been talk about it here in the shop, hand over mouth of course, and now I'm telling you. He messes with girls too, eleven, twelve, thirteen and probably older. He's into everything. Keep a good eye out for Father Glaudemans, and be sure not to talk about it because Father Glaudemans has got all his powerful fingers, including the one without a nail between his legs, in every possible pie. Father Glaudemans wields power from heaven to hell and back. Nuns know how to handle that kind of thing, let me tell you, how to deal with that finger of yours with no knuckles. A bit of fancy handwork, eh? Tell me, do those kids get your juices running?

I answered as if I was examining my conscience: No. There might be a couple of cherubs among them. I'm not blind. Sometimes I give them nicknames in my head without really thinking about it.

That's where it all starts, she judges. So long as you keep your hands to yourself. Pick a handsome confrere instead.

I pictured my canary confreres in my mind's eye for a moment and bit my tongue. I couldn't get that x out of my head. Like the monogram for Christ, an X with a P through it. We listened to the news. Panic reports. Storm surge, spring tide, wind force. Everything's under water, but Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Prince Consort are already on their way to the

disaster area. She relit her cigarette and smoked it down to her fingernails. As she stubbed out the butt she sighed: It'll have to wait until next month. No money left for cigarettes; everything's rationed and the Canadians have gone home. They tossed whole cartons at us, remember?

First we had the Hunger Winter. My stepfather smoked dog-ends in those days, I said.

She came back to the subject. What do you mean you'd lose your identity? Take off that sack and you'll be Eldert Haman again. You can do it right now. Phone from the shop. Call the institute and tell that ruffraff you're not coming back, gluck auf and greetings. You don't even need to phone. They'll notice all by themselves that you've done a bunk.

Impossible, impossible, I say, my voice subdued, not quite a whisper, and I sense a shiver running from my shoulders to the soles of my feet, as if my back had turned into the same slipperiness as outside and someone had slipped on it.

And then you send a card with a naked woman and write: Help, there's a fire in my crotch. That's what Rogier always said.

A despondency descended on me, deep into the deepest mineshafts. We looked at each other, at length, searched each other's eyes, and I loved her, but that was impossible because of my conventional status. Or did I dare.

I, eh...

Yes. She rested her hand on mine like before, my restless hand fidgeting on the table. I know, she said. Our fingers intertwined.

I, eh... Now I finished my sentence: I really have to get back. I took off the socks and placed them in front of her. Thank you.

In the shop, I look past the magazines to the jotters and writing paper and things they use for writing called ballpoints, which schoolchildren aren't allowed to use. I have to write down everything I told her, everything I confessed, I think aloud. Just for the sake of writing. Just for myself.

Make a start, said Patricia.

I repeated: Impossible.

She: You tire me out. You're such a stupendous... She didn't say what, but I understood without the predicate. A vulgarity worthy of confession, no doubt.

I opened the door, the sign with closed on it swaying in front of my face. She closed the door behind me. Take care not to slip, mister holy man, she said and disappeared.