

Confessions of a Son and Heir – Aristide von Bienefeldt

Confessions of a Son and Heir is the story of a young man who is driven by an unlimited sexual hunger to experience the seamy side of life in Paris and London, at the time of the millennium change. He vacillates between life and death, spitting on petty bourgeois morals. In the meantime he fights against the consequences of a nervous breakdown that paralyses his spirit like a diabolical conspiracy. The young man, called Aristide, is the product of the alliance between an aristocratic lineage and a traditional Dutch family of farmers. In less than half a century the noble ancestors dissipated a fortune they had acquired in a highly dubious fashion, while the peasant forefathers tried to ensure themselves a place in paradise, by means of hard labour and multiple copulation blessed by God's own hand. In order to get the most out of his life, Aristide turns every second inside out. In turn *Confessions of a Son and Heir* is highly comic and bitter, sensitive and ironic. In short: a novel generally of love.

Aristide von Bienefeldt (1964) organized, in the Paris of the Eighties, 'soirées masquées'. Themes like 'S&M' and 'Transvestism' attracted more publicity than themes like 'Haute Couture' or 'Disguise yourself as your favourite author'. Today he does street-interviews and works occasionally as an interpreter. He also corresponds with elder B-film actresses and wrongly condemned prisoners from all over the world. Aristide von Bienefeldt commutes between Paris and London. *Confessions of a Son and Heir* is his first novel.

(Meulenhoff, Amsterdam ISBN 90 290 7180 X)

(pages 7 - 28)

Thanks to Michel Borie, Scott Hardie and Richard Wilson

You smile upon your friend to-day,
To-day his ills are over;
You hearken to the lover's say,
And happy is the lover.

'Tis late to hearken, late to smile,
But better late than never;
I shall have lived a little while
Before I die for ever.

A.E. Housman (from: *A Shropshire Lad*)

I am back in Holland. My stay is of a temporary nature: in six weeks at the most I'll have to return to Paris to replenish my stocks of *Eropax* brand antidepressants, prescribed me by my French physician - for one thing because in his opinion they drive away the fog that clouds my head and for another because my Dutch doctor refuses to supply me with them. Simon, who has travelled here with me, uses the same medicine. I keep telling myself that his situation is more serious than mine, but isn't it a tendency all sick people suffer from? I can well imagine that a person afflicted with stomach cancer will laugh up his sleeve if he hears that his neighbour had been laid low by lung cancer. That is what is known as a short time advantage: it does not mean anything, maybe the neighbour will turn out to be one of the few who recover and the malignant cells that are rotting his own stomach will get a grip on his lower intestines and, why not, his oesophagus too. As far as the longer turn goes I better hold my tongue: these days there is not one individual left who is not aware that we are all going to slip through the cracks one fine day.

I do not have a permanent abode. I am like a wandering balladeer from a previous century. I alternate between staying in Paris - in a studio belonging to Simon's gadabout sister Emmanuelle or in my Dutch friend Erika's apartment - in south-western France where a fifty-seven-year-old gentleman puts a free-standing worker's house with terrace and pleasant garden at my disposal, with my friends Sylvain and Franck (who live like hermits in a basement flat in South London), or at a farm in the vicinity of Werkmansgat where my forefathers used to occupy themselves with agricultural work, churchgoing, and an inordinate urge to copulate that rendered up a future farmer or a farmer's wife once a year. The only thing I inherited from my father's side was the inordinate urge to copulate, so I'll only deal indirectly with this branch of the family here. As anyone knows, quality is preferable to quantity: on my father's side there are at least seventy cousins wandering the planet and on my mother's side there's only me. Her two older sisters never had children. Apart from a few subjects of my father's kingdom who have made their fortunes abroad (and who are spoken very highly of by his family - as so in many families, the possession of money is a synonym for intelligence), my cousins all resemble each other so closely that they are interchangeable.

My father died twenty years ago. He was at odds with his brothers and sisters all his life. The only one I ever felt any fondness for was his sister Greta, who never married and who was very much involved with the offspring of her brothers and sisters. She twirled the skipping rope and acted as a horse for the little ones, and she was also open minded enough to take a drag on a joint when the sixties came to the Lowlands - which is where any similarity with the former American president ends, since as far as I know she took no part in the orgies and blow-outs which made those years so surprisingly different. Five years ago my mother and I arranged her funeral.

It was a stiflingly hot summer day. I wore a dark blue suit; my mother was dressed in black. Since the great majority of auntie's relatives live in the eastern part of the country and therefore seldom see the sea, they arrived decked out in very thin, colourful, scanty clothing with a view to visiting the beach later in the day. The gravedigger was a slim young man with a face as white as paper whose coming out had been limited to myself when a month previously I had sucked him off in a little park in Werkmansgat - to his satisfaction as well as to mine. God had supplied him with an extremely well-furnished reproductive organ. It took about ten minutes before my mouth filled with millions of lukewarm spermatozoids. In contrast to my usual habit, I swallowed everything.

He accompanied the coffin containing the bodily remains of auntie, followed by the motley, lurching crowd like a carnival procession without lanterns as they walked to the freshly dug trench in the middle of the graveyard. Before entrusting the blond timber to the earth, the gravedigger cleared his throat. I looked at what he had between his legs: it was completely flattened by his trousers, which were both baggy and close-fitting, and I deeply regretted that he had not been wearing his working uniform when he did slid his member into my mouth four weeks before.

It took him a full three minutes of pleading to secure a single minute of silence for Aunt Greta. In desperation he clapped his hands like a primary school teacher calling her class to order. He wore a tormented expression, in complete contrast to the way he'd looked as he moaned in the bushes while his body secreted a fluid as white as his face. Sixty seconds spent thinking about a dead aunt when you're actually already lying on the beach is certainly a long time, but I have to confess that they managed reasonably well, apart from three elderly ladies who found the hue of a lupin so exceptional

that they weren't about to pass over it lightly. Perhaps they don't have lupins in the east of the country. I reflected on my aunt's life by asking myself whether her lifeless body (in its living manifestation, that is) had ever acquainted itself with bodily love - if so, nice for auntie, if not, then there between those planks lay a lifeless virgin, a dead virgin of eighty-five. Auntie was on the point of taking a momentous secret to the grave with her, and it occurred to me that old greyness standing there lusting after an invigorating dip in the North Sea would shortly die without leaving any mystery behind it at all. And hasn't someone who dies without leaving a mystery behind them rather lived for nothing?

After the usual coffee and cake, which I won't describe because any modern and intelligent thinking person can form their own idea about that sequence, the gravedigger pressed me into a corner and started telling a story which he introduced with a phrase that amounted to saying that I should not take the implications of what he had to say too personally. He took my hand and I asked myself whether he was top or bottom (I know from experience that most married men like to be taken, since they already take so much and so often), and then he put his mouth close to my right ear and whispered that he found my family ill-mannered, undisciplined and (he kept the best for last) damned antisocial. I nodded unreservedly but to no avail. I had been looking forward to sucking off the gravedigger again while my ill-mannered, undisciplined and damned antisocial family was having coffee - whether in his office or on the toilet - but he didn't dare leave the raucous crowd, which was making the most of the funeral delicacies, alone. He mumbled something about vandalism and fireprevention. I have never forgiven my family for the fact that after my aunt's funeral the gravedigger's heavily pulsating penis and the product of his testicles got away from under my very nose.

Giving a gravedigger a blow job makes you feel astonishingly alive.

Simon has expressed his satisfaction with the presents I have bought for Elisabeth and her children: a model of a Parisian RATP bus for her little son Tom, a cream teddy bear for the baby that will very shortly grace us with its presence, and an eight-sided metal box with a rose-scented candle in it for Elisabeth. Admittedly the symbolism of scented roses is that of the cold earth, but sometimes one simply can't think of anything better. Elisabeth is Erika's younger sister. I have known both of them for about fifteen years. Erika is all the rage as an illustrator for international fashion magazines and Elisabeth occupies herself with the acquisition and sales policy of a Dutch public art gallery. I'm in regular contact with Erika. My contact with Elisabeth broke off a year ago when she lost her little daughter Iris to a virulent strain of meningitis in the South of France. French doctors spent twenty-four hours fighting for the two-and-a-half-year-old's life, in vain. Erika told me that she saw hell up close that day and Elisabeth's husband never got over the loss of his child.

At the beginning of December he sent me an e-mail: 'Please, Aris, send something to cheer us up. Doesn't matter what. The situation is unbearable. Mark.' I sent him a piece saying I did not dare ringing either him or Elisabeth as I did not know what to say and because I was simply a coward, but perhaps a bit less than all the others since at least I was willing to admit it, although you might say that that was a form of cowardice too. He did not answer. A month later, on the 13th of January, I decided to send him a birthday message. He would be forty-four. The planned party had to be cancelled because that afternoon, sitting at his IBM with Outlook Express on the screen, he had a stroke. He died three hours later in the Dijkzigt-hospital. By that time my mind was already so clouded that the announcement of his death did not touch me at all. I simply took note of the fact that he died. I sent Elisabeth a letter in which I dwelt at the length on an evening we'd once spent together in the Marais, during which we went to three gay bars. Mark had insisted on taking me home, because in those days I lived in the same building as Yohji Yamamoto and he took a childish pleasure in touching the Japanese designer's letterbox. He was crazy about his creations. Mark was a bit of a homo too.

Once he told me he wanted to experience everything before closing his eyes for good. He succeeded. He lived with a man for five years, got married, had three children of which the second died at the age of two-and-a-half and another would be born about four months after his death. When Elisabeth returned home from his deathbed the computer was still on. My message filled the screen: 'Mark, I wish you a happy birthday and all the best for the near and the distant future. Aris.' It is a virtual reality that the last thing he saw before going off to touch the letterboxes of famous designers in another place was my message, just as I'm convinced that the last thing the Princess of Wales saw before her lovely body was smashed to pieces in a Paris tunnel was the Eiffel tower. I still find it amazing that no one ever mentions this. Just before you dive into the tunnel you see, life sized and even a bit frightening, the illuminated symbol of the city of light.

The fact that Iris was born on my birthday (the 24th of November) didn't bring her much luck. It is possible that these events sparked the initial impulse that drove my mind into the twilight and eventually into the absolute darkness of an ink black night - you never can tell where a mentally ill person gets his inspiration from unless you go in for psychoanalysis. But my French physician says that the effect of Eropax is just as beneficial as any exhausting and protracted series of visits to a psychiatrist or to a psychologist.

The way things look now, the little one will announce itself around the 20th of May.

If you drive from The Hague to Wassenaar - along the Rijksweg, I think - you'll see to the left and right, largely hidden by foliage and bounded by groups of trees that seem to strongly advise against any form of communication whatsoever, innumerable villas that exude a splendour and grandeur and drives all mortals into deep contemplation. Although none of them resemble each other (it seems there used to be more room in Holland for individual tastes than there is today), they do all have something in common: every single one evokes nostalgia for times gone by. My great-grandparents used to live in one of them.

My grandfather (who was born there, as were his younger sisters Eleonore, Mathilde and Ludovine) had all too vague memories of the house, since he moved out to live with an aunt near Schiedam when he was eight - a lady with neither husband nor children who took on the upbringing of the four Von Bienefeldts. He told about towers where he played hide-and-seek with a teddy bear and a governess of German extraction called Nanja. He could also remember that there were always guests around, that there was dancing and singing in the evenings, that his mother wore impressive garments of glittering fabric and that his father enveloped himself in black, tight-fitting suits. Their faces and expressions were lost to him. The home language was French; only after his parents had placed him and his sisters in the care of Aunt Catherine because they were too busy organising parties and racing off to further parties all over Europe did he learn Dutch.

The slow but sure loss of the family fortune that had rapidly been amassed by my great-grandfather's father (in our family the use of the word 'opium' has been forbidden down to and including my mother's generation) was the real reason the Von Bienefeldt children had to leave the villa in The Hague. Their parents had just enough self-respect left to conceal from their offspring their exuberant expenditure and the expansive impulses that went with it.

Twenty-five years ago my grandfather told me that he had only seen his parents once after going to Aunt Catherine's. By then they were no longer living in the villa, the estates they had possessed as substantial landowners had been sold off, his mother had aged a great deal, and the cut of his father's dandyish outfit looked dated. He thought they had squandered the very last of their property - à pied-à-terre near the Paris Opera - before the curtain finally fell and they committed suicide together. Five months later, in August 1915, Aunt Catherine got word of their deaths. Because of all kinds of wartime activities going on at that time, the French postal service was not functioning properly. Just like practically all the rest of my great-grandparents' worldly goods, the letter was lost. My grandfather did remember that they had been buried in Vincennes.

I visited three graveyards there without nurturing any real hope of coming across the names of my frivolous forebears. I was not disappointed, however, a very helpful employee at the third burial ground I tried submerged himself in the archives and did indeed come upon the names Von Bienefeldt and De Ségur (my great-grandmother's maiden name). According to the old manuscript they had been buried on the 18th (or 19th) of March in the year 1915. Contrary to my expectations they hadn't had a pauper's burial, since the costs of the coffins, the stone and the unavoidable wages of the then employees were covered by the sale of an apartment - 71, rue de Provence, in the ninth arrondissement of Paris. That was that. My ancestor's last port of call was cleared after the Second World War because new graves were in great demand and no one was maintaining my great-grandparents' headstone.

The deathwatchman from Vincennes added that the latter was purely an assumption on his part, and that to err was human. He lifted his hands heavenwards as if to demonstrate where his inspiration came from. I have never visited the place where my great-grandfather and great-grandmother used to be buried, even though the well-meaning gentleman suggested I do so. Strangely enough the possibility of giving him a blow job, as a kind of homage to two people whose voyage through the here below I would never have existed, did not occur to me. Perhaps I had already satisfied my lust for oral sex elsewhere that day.

The fact that I survived an HIV test eight years ago wholly intact is something I regard as a miracle to this day. I had not taken the test before then because I was convinced I was already in the final stages of the disease.

I kept careful track of the symptoms; as soon as a new one was announced, a mechanism sprang into action and within one day I was blessed with the latest phenomenon: pains in the chest, a tight feeling under the arms, breathing difficulties, excessive sweating at five in the morning after which I was granted no sleep, a debilitating tiredness, and every three weeks a heavy flu that nevertheless failed to result in a lung infection. I neglected my work; my existence dragged tortuously on. In Holland I visited three doctors.

When I put my desire into words, they all pulled glum faces - completely independently of each other, which makes one suggest that all medical faculties teach courses called 'pulling-glum-faces'.

None of them granted my request for a test. The first one did not want to take the responsibility, the second took advantage of the situation as a chance to spout snatches from his extensive stock of old Dutch proverbs ('What you do not know can not hurt you'), while number three was of the opinion that a healthy young man like me shouldn't be such a baby. He showed me to the door with a 'you have to realise that a test like that costs money'. It occurred to me then that it is not really all that surprising GPs receive increasing numbers of threats these days. They ask for it. The busyboding and pedantry old Calvin lumbered our part of the world with is not only unjustified but incomprehensible too. After all (to take one comparison at random) the chance of the pharmacist from whom you order a box of condoms turning around to take the required article off the shelf is still significantly greater than the chance of a more resilient response along the lines of 'Think twice before you act' or, if he suspects adultery, 'No man can serve two masters'. Those old Dutch proverbs aren't so very silly after all...

When it comes to the healing arts of our fatherland the customer is anything but king. I think a more accurate analogy would be an oppressed subject on whom his master experiments to his heart's content with instruments of torture such as the rack and who, should things happen to fall out that way, gets hot lead poured down his throat.

My Parisian doctor recognised the seriousness of the situation immediately. First he prescribed a tranquilliser, so that I could function passably well in society again, next he had me take all kinds of tests - otherwise known, I believe, as a check-up - and when all this produced very encouraging results we threw ourselves in at the deep end together. Before I took myself off to the laboratory on the rue du Chemin-Vert to offer up several millilitres of blood, he wished me strength. The lady who wielded the needle was heavily pregnant. When I asked her why she wasn't wearing gloves made of aluminium or some other kind of impenetrable material she answered energetically: 'Let's not make this any harder than it already is.'

Her positive approach banished all my fears. Out on the street I ate a banana and headed for a café on the boulevard Beaumarchais where I ordered a double espresso. A young man in a white shirt with no tie produced a light when I asked for one. His laughter was so sincere that I no longer considered it necessary to go and get the results of my test. Within three days all the symptoms had disappeared.

It is a different story today. Gradually my feelings are returning. 'The fog is lifting,' I told my French doctor just before I left for the Netherlands. He is still elegant, young and attractive. I added that the forgetfulness and the tickling sensation as if hundreds of ants were running through my brain was also gradually passing. He said he was extremely pleased things were going so well for me once more. But I will be dependent on the pills for maybe another year yet. Who cares? Even if I have to take them for the rest of my life. The conclusion is: Eropax or death.

Before my French physician wrote out the prescription, I consulted a doctor in Holland as well, just as I had a year earlier when I was still in need of an HIV test. My Parisian physician wins every time, but I prefer not to skate on one night's ice. I am the kind of person who loves second opinions and third opinions too if at all possible. The lady in Werkmansgat who turned out to be a stand-in for a stand-in, met my cry for any kind of help with a casual: 'Psychiatric help would do you good'.

'Give me a name and address,' I said.

With a gesture much more casual even than the first she advised me to consult the Yellow Pages. I have seldom felt more miserable than I did that morning as the door of the Werkmansgat practice closed behind me. The bill I received several months later was for ninety-five guilders because the consultation had lasted more than twenty minutes. Next time I'll take a stopwatch. But there won't be a next time: I have already taken my name off their list. The bill is unpaid.

Back in Paris I wasn't up to anything. Work was absolutely impossible as was reading, remembering simple things like messages and appointments, carrying on telephone conversations (or indeed face-to-face conversations), the ingestion of food, sleep. I was staying in the flat belonging to Simon's sister. When one morning I was standing in front of an open window an irresistible urge to jump came over me, I left the apartment and spent two days and two nights wandering. I have been informed of the things I did in those forty-eight hours. I still can't remember them.

A hallmark of mental illness is that you're tormented by thoughts that are not your own. You ask yourself why a dog you come across is black and not white, you get all agitated about the baker's wife new hairstyle (why a ponytail rather than a bun?), you exchange glances with a man in a supermarket and feel frustrated for days afterwards because you didn't pull his trousers down from behind and suck him off between the vegetables and the *fromage blanc* without worrying about the response such an act might incur from other shoppers. Enough examples.

In any case, the HIV test my French doctor advised me to take didn't help this time. On the contrary, I was so disappointed not to have caught the virus that I had an uncontrollable fit of sobbing, like a child who, because of an incorrect assessment on the part of his grandmother, gets a pair of Adidas trainers instead of the longed for Nikes.

All the other tests I was subjected to (there we have the check-up again) also showed that my body was in perfect order. The fact that I might go on breathing for another fifty years made me even more despondent than I already was. In the autumn of the year 2000 - six months before he prescribed me the Eropax - my Parisian practitioner asked me how my emotional life was going.

And I told him about Wilfred.

After Iris died I lived with Wilfred in Erika's apartment for two months. You could feel death still hanging around the place, just as in every house where someone has died death is almost tangibly present. On their way to Holland, Elisabeth and Mark had spent one night there. After hovering around their daughter's sickbed for twenty-four hours and after all kind of things had needed arranging, their grief finally had time to manifest itself in full. Added to that was the fact that they were on the point of leaving the country in which Iris had died: they were taking their leave for the second time. In the apartment next to the gare du Nord, death trod at my heels for eight weeks like a shadow.

I also believe that the death that carries off a child has a more pitiless face than the death that comes to fetch a hundred-year-old. Whatever we did, death was watching. Although as a matter of principle I don't suck off less than handsomely endowed gentlemen, I sucked Wilfred off until my lips cracked. And although as a matter of principle I prefer not to be penetrated by less than handsomely endowed men (for the simple reason that there is not much of a feeling involved), I had no objection to him fucking me six times a day. The fact that the flat has that same number of rooms (including the kitchen) is not a coincidence. I have great difficulty performing the sexual act with the same partner more than once. Variety was provided by having sex in a different room each time. Call it the hunting instinct. A seamstress doesn't like putting together the same wedding dress more than once either. But because you so often hear that love and sex can be united in one and the same person, and because I am crazy about experimentation, I wanted a chance to see how a thing like that worked. I had a soft spot for Wilfred.

He had everything I didn't: a considerable capital in shares, two children, a grandchild, a 1960's Vauxhall sports car, and a tjalk of Dutch origin that was moored on an arm of the Seine and on which he lived when he was not carrying out some kind of odd job for an old lady or giving English lessons to French economics students. Wilfred had come to France to find happiness in a freshly acquired identity, the identity of an easygoing homosexual who wanted to forget that he had ever been married and once held a top position in an international computer company. During our life together on the rue de Dunkerque his grandson was born.

In the four days he spent playing grandfather in Leicester, I arranged for Godfrey to come over, an Australian living in the British capital whom I had met at some time or another in the Arène where he screwed me for fifty minutes in a sling under the intent gaze of the entire clientele of that establishment on the banks of the Seine. Their trains must have crossed somewhere just short of the Eurotunnel (on the French side). Erika's apartment may be large and have all the amenities, but it was impossible for me to spend even a minute alone there.

Between Wilfred's departure and Godfrey's arrival I went to the Depot where a cheery Lebanese with big jowls and grey circles under his eyes gave me an inward massage that was so effective that I came from behind as well in front - without moving my penis. He wanted to fuck me at home. Just which home he meant (his or mine) I don't know, since I had to rush off to the gare du Nord to pick up Godfrey. My anus had produced so much moisture that the tip-up seat in the metro felt clammy. I did not worry about the stain on my jeans.

And it certainly did not bother Godfrey. He thought it was great that someone had got in before him. 'Thank God! You haven't washed!' he bellowed as he slid his swollen member - of a very respectable circumference - into me.

I first met Wilfred in the Arène. His first sentence was 'I live on a boat on the Seine'. My first question was whether he spent his evenings reading extracts from Shakespeare. His first answer was 'I am totally illiterate' and my first observation 'Nobody's perfect'.

For a while I thought that without Wilfred my life would be pointless. The fear of something happening to him was almost as tangible as the death that wandered like a ghost through the apartment on the rue de Dunkerque. When he wasn't there I longed for him, and when he was lying next to me I felt like kicking him out of bed. From time to time we went to Wolf's, a bar opposite the gare de l'Est where an artist performed every night and where Wilfred too sometimes picked up a guitar. He would sing *The Longest Time* or *You Do Something to Me*, his eyes fixed on me like the barrels of a medieval cannon. I watched over him like a caring housewife.

I think there must have been something growing rampant somewhere in my head even then, but just as a drop of wine in a glass of water takes time to dissipate, it took months before the chill started to affect every corner of my brain. I like taking care of other people, I gladly welcome guests and as far as I know no one has ever complained about my efforts at hospitality. But caring for someone you're also having sex with was something new. In fact it occurs to me now that Wilfred was a guinea pig. In other words, to some extent I was using him to persuade myself that I am just not cut out to live with a lover, although I don't feel the least bit guilty since he was all too willing to let himself be used.

When I look back on those days in the rue de Dunkerque it strikes me that the going was a lot easier for him than for me.

Wilfred, like so many people, is unable to enjoy a given situation if he can't be sure that things will be exactly the same a year later. The first month we were together I must sometimes have hinted that I wished our cohabitation could have an eternal quality, but when he came back from Leicester I began to express my doubts. From then on he could no longer concentrate on happiness for fear that at some point it could come to an end. For me it was precisely the other way around: I enjoyed our intercourse all the more for knowing that it would all be over in the not too far future. Things are that simple.

For the sake of completeness I would add that it wasn't the first time I'd tried living with someone.

I've rarely got along with anyone so well as I did with Gary. But things only went smoothly as long as there was no sexual activity involved. Sometimes we didn't have sex for a whole year, but between the moment I decided to leave him and my actual departure I became insatiable. I wanted to be fucked at least three times a day. Not exactly easy for him, since by then he'd already found someone else (and quite right too) - I was not informed but I suspected as much because I'd once detected a taste of shit in my mouth while I was sucking him off. And that shit wasn't mine, you can tell a thing like that.

Naturally I didn't let my suspicions slip out, since the last thing I felt like was an argument and what's more I was far too afraid that he wouldn't want to fuck me any longer. Now that thanks to the intervention of my Paris practitioner I am functioning properly again and even practising the art of writing once more, I want to make a point of saying that I am eternally grateful to Gary: we were together in the years when the AIDS virus first made its appearance in the city of light like a sniper. The condom campaigns hadn't yet got going, there was little in the way of public health information and a gruesome *je m'en foutisme* dominated the gay world of Paris.

If I hadn't been living with a partner I'd be reduced to a patch in a quilt by now, a patch I wouldn't have been able to choose for myself and which might therefore have turned out extremely unaesthetic.

I have never thought all that highly of quilting anyhow.

'Wilfred is in a certain sense a stand-in for Raphael,' I said in October of the year 2000 to my French physician, who around that time had started to bug me about a brain scan. Raphael C*** is thirty-three (what's in an age?), his sign is Leo, he is the best dressed young man I have ever met, the most elegant, the least effeminate, and he has a sense of humour that is a match for mine. I met him in the Quetzal on the 1st of January of the year 2000. I'd set aside the whole evening to read one of Emmanuelle's books - *L'accompagnatrice* by Nina Berberova - except that Angelo rang me three times because he wanted to go to the Quetzal and he didn't dare go to the Quetzal on his own. After his fourth call I caved in.

In the Quetzal a young man with a decent appearance and a melancholy look immediately caught my eye. He was wearing a donkey jacket, a white shirt, a Levi's jacket, a close-fitting pair of beige corduroy trousers and black Doc Martins. I didn't pay him any attention since I didn't regard myself as interesting enough to find favour with him. I lost sight of Angelo and took a seat in a dark corner of the bar. Suddenly two hands laid siege to me. One came down on my left shoulder and the other closed my eyes the way you close off the sight of a dead person forever. Then my mouth was pulled wide open - which made me think of a horse at a horse market - and a tongue slid in. He fed me Marlboro's and Heinekens and insisted on drinking from my glass every time I took a sip, because he wanted to inhale some of the air I'd breathed out. Showing me his passport seemed superfluous at the time. Now I am glad I did - I know his date of birth, the 17th of August 19**.

We took a taxi to Emmanuelle's flat. I put *Je t'aime moi non plus* on endless repeat and we talked about Nina Berberova. He'd just finished the book I'd been meaning to read. We slept hand in hand, without touching our respective sexual organs. To my way of thinking that's an accurate definition of love - the cultivation of a certain degree of indifference regarding the length and thickness of the other's part. They used to print soppy little drawings in *The Telegraph* of two little dolls doing something trivial (changing their offspring's nappy or cleaning the car) with a captain asserting that that's what love is. Loving someone has nothing to do with sharing little chores. Perhaps that's why I could never really get along with *The Telegraph*. Loving someone is sleeping hand in hand all night with *Je t'aime moi non plus* on the repeat setting without worrying whether the sun will come up or not. Love is a desire to clean the car together or change nappies together (I'll admit that much), but if you turn that desire into reality, love is soon over. That's something Wilfred never understood. I've been asking myself ever since the first of January of the year 2000 why the 2nd of January had to arrive. Why wasn't there a gas explosion in Emmanuelle's building that night; why didn't a plane crash on us, fusing Raphael and myself together for good? 'The original nature of human beings was not like their present nature,' says the comic poet Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. 'They all had four arms, four legs and two faces. Man had a great deal of power, but he became reckless and challenged the gods. As a punishment he was cut in two. Eros appeared on the scene and man began to long for his absent other half.' I had found my other half but daylight came. And dawn is the worst thing that can happen to anyone who has found his other half.

While we were drinking coffee, two pigeons flew past the window in the space of five minutes. 'When another pigeon comes past,' said Raphael, 'I'll go.'

If that third pigeon had never arrived, I almost certainly wouldn't be telling this story today.

(English translation by Liz Waters, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam)

