





# Queen of the fleas

by Jan Van Aken

'Kwien of the fleas' (original Dutch title) is embedded in the  
trilogy 'Phossils koffer'.



# Ἀναβάσις



The girl with the blonde hair slid down the last rock and cautiously sought a way to the lagoon. The rock mass had offered no escape. She had to return without success with more painful feet and more tears in her soaked Miss Beauty T-shirt. She sounded the retreat of a battle that she might never have won anyway. It was just the way that counted now. Her bra was comically outlined under the cheap cotton of the organisation. How much prouder would she not have been without, with nipples that tested the elasticity of the textile. They were her undisputed assets in the endless selection rounds.

There were undoubtedly casualties, but no one wanted to say it yet. It couldn't hurt to be impeccably beautiful in all circumstances, even now. Did she have any reason to be worried? The recently taken selfie on Kitty's borrowed I-phone had already more or less reassured her. There were girls who looked worse, some even to the point of bleeding. Fortunately, she had not bumped into anything. And she didn't have any pain, except for a headache, but that was from her ovulation. Since she started taking the pill at the age of thirteen, she could set her clock to it. Brenda Stalkins straightened her back, trained her shoulders to the same height as her backside and climbed like a healthy doe to the other end of the cliff, while her less fortunate companions

screamed in fear to return at the waterline. She had had to identify herself too much with mediocrity in her youth that she began to consciously despise it. Her parents finally refused to recognize their new child, especially when she had stopped her rickety school career from one day to the next for a dubious evening course in catwalking. Before she could strike her financial blow at home, she was disinherited and thrown out of the house. In that order. That alone had been a significant miscalculation, because since her father won an unknown amount with the lottery, she had become accustomed to a certain form of responsible luxury. The rock was her idea because she had once done something similar for a calendar. She had mainly hoped to score with the girls with news of civilization. In the worst case, weak smoke plumes from beach fires from a particularly local fishing village, but the horizon remained endless. She stood all alone on an uninhabited side of the world and wondered in God's name who she would have to convince of her impeccable beauty in the coming days. That's why she spun her invented heroic deed. The plane was still smoking and the damage it had done to the pristine coastal strip could not be replicated by any expensive photo software. She threw her bra irretrievably between the last rock cracks. A calculated sacrifice. The warm sea breeze pulled the soaked T-shirt tight against her breasts as she raised the selfie stick on the slender sky.



At the end of the rocky promontory, the exotic splendour of the landscape truly came to life. Especially with the other finalists paddling in the blue waters, the picture was complete. The sight surpassed all the shoots she had ever done. From afar, it looked like a staged monthly photo from a Maxim year calendar. Reality once again exceeded the hyper-manipulated world of digital photography, which had been embraced so fiercely lately.

It was that unmatched reality that called her back, along with the group of overconcerned screamers, of which at least half were secretly faking it, hoping she'd follow her bra into the sea. On a whim, she tossed Kitty's iPhone into the surf. Partially because she shuddered at the thought of having to return the device. Kitty, a.k.a. Kathleen Vanglabbeek from Waasmunster, deserved no better. Her father enriched himself with bi-monthly business trips to Japan and, upon his return, he always filled his allowed weight with things for his daughter. Her entire wardrobe came from the land of the *lising sun*. One wonders where he managed to find such large sizes.

Hello Kitty had already started crying on the plane, claiming her lip was bleeding and her chin swollen. Once they arrived at the beach, she begged to see if her Japanese gadget could get a signal.

"If mine can't, then it's absolutely hopeless. It can even work via satellite..."

And then she fell silent, either because it got too technical or her tongue hurt too much. Apparently, she had bitten it during the crash. She hoped her father could hear the call of his lisping daughter high in the sky, especially at the end of the rocky area, in the middle of the surf. Where was Japan anyway? Kitty was too distressed to take adventurous steps on the rocks herself. Brenda saw her chance to get her hands on the expensive gadget and to deface her own delicate beauty with a digital self-portrait.

Brenda Stalkins knew no remorse. Regret, yes, but she had experienced too much for remorse. She had left her father's life and the sight of his double-barrelled shotgun behind, with a bang of the front door and a hailstorm above her bright yellow Peugeot convertible. He had faithfully taken the weapon from Blok C in the Antwerp suburb Kiel during their sudden move to the much rural and middle-class Lint. It remained his talisman and deterrent, even in the new quiet Lint. The Antwerp royal yacht club had gained a new and properly paying member, and the male residents of Lint knew right away that those Kielish rats were not to be messed with. Even though they could provide beautiful offspring for even prettier Lintish rats. The flintlock found its familiar place beside the front door in the new townhouse.

They were used to some commotion in the area during the season, but such an unexpected salvo through the otherwise tranquil village centre was quite unusual. The weekly bingo afternoon at the parish centre was interrupted by it. Tokens were taken away as they left. The incident had an aftermath because the lead couldn't have fallen in a worse spot than on the bakery's skylight, making everyone aware of Brenda's final departure and her missed share of the lottery jackpot, which captured everyone's imagination, including poor Brenda's.

Luckily, she still had her car, otherwise, she would have never escaped from the paradisiacal Lint and her father's shooting range. Miss Belgium's rejection had once caused her to miss the grand prize. "You'll always be our Miss Belgium!" her mother comforted, to which Brenda replied that she should also get such a car. Father quickly regretted the impulsive purchase his diabetic wife had imposed from the sofa. He had seen his beloved daughter change before his eyes, transformed by an enemy he couldn't fight with weapons. In his powerlessness, he accused himself of perhaps having welcomed that shallow materialism with open arms. His wife was too ill to be bothered by it. Six crosses change a life.

Brenda's mother's whole embarrassing sofa existence had fueled her desire even more to escape and pave her own exclusive path. Her obsession with a crown had gone to her head to the point where father thought it best to eventually kick her out, especially after she casually dropped out of school, turning her back on the child support that she considered demeaning. Just the name alone. The loss of that monthly allowance was the final straw of ingratitude. He had lost his innocent darling. The pillars on which his hopeful existence was built crumbled away into the upgraded clay pit

of her Tomorrowland. He was gradually losing his paternal credibility.

After her departure, the poor man suddenly had nothing left, as what could he mean to the community without his hot-blooded daughter and a shooting license? After his wife's expensive, protracted illness, he barely returned to his hometown Kiel. With his last pennies, he bought an entire floor of the red Braem Block for himself and drank himself into damnation.

Since the day of her sensational departure, it had been ruthlessly surviving for her. Brenda exuded self-importance every time a new sash was draped over her head. She saw it as confirmation of the chosen escape route. She barely bowed her head, despite her 6ft 2in height, while the portly chairman of the jury, in turn, pretended to be embarrassed but inevitably fondled his chest. Her hate group called it arrogance, she called it professionalism. At least it meant that people bothered to be annoyed by her. It was cheap publicity in every sense of the word. In short, she got used to being targeted.

The next Hello Kitty device was surely already rolling off the counter, tucked away in Dad's empty briefcase. Why gossip? Her estimation, as usual, was wrong. Kitty went wild upon her return and lived up to her name dishonourably. There was almost a murder committed. If the others hadn't been there, Brenda Stalkins would have ended up with new injuries alongside Kitty's s-Phone, under the same raging waves that expertly silenced the screams and shouts of the girls.

Obviously, it had been a foolish act. Brenda Stalkins had understood that long ago. The comfort of the selfie was short-lived. How long could she go without a mirror in her life,

anyway? Even now, she doubted the reliability of the technology once again. She had to take the photo quickly, probably with poor lighting. And she couldn't look at it for long either. Honestly, she had felt the blunder even before letting go, but the desire for revenge had been too strong. She wanted to hit Kitty, like a voodoo doll. Right in the pink dress. Because life was unfair. The opportunity was handed to her on a platter at the rocks. However, the impulsive act, as always, would backfire on her.

The sympathy and credit she had gained from her daring heroic act were undone by the personal vendetta. Clearly, the sea showed no compassion. That would become apparent when they all realized that only that same water held them together relentlessly.

The series of reproaches seemed endless until Fiorentina Usignolo alarmedly called out from the doorway of the wreck that Sergio had closed his eyes. Fiorentina was named after an Italian football team because her Limburg father had conceived her in the euphoria of promotion to the first division. The disappointment of having a daughter was richly compensated for by extraordinary Mediterranean beauty. There were no traces of Flemish roots on her mother's side, except for the blue eyes that made an exceptional combination with her Southern appearance. Her grandfather had worked in the mines with Rocco Granata's father. They had a signed single of Marina at home, which gave the family the financial confidence of a mafia leader. Fiorentina's father eventually did everything for his daughter and demanded the same from others, just as he would have done for a son. He even reduced his work hours to launch her into the Limburg fashion world from the sidelines. It proved more difficult for a labourer than he had thought. The poor miner dug himself into

debts deeper than his family tree had ever been physically. The Marina single remained as collateral justifying his actions.

The girls called her Tina. Who knew anything about football, let alone Italian football? Milan was known, of course. And Rome too, because of the Pope. But that was about it.

Tina stayed with the photographer on the plane. It was an open secret that the two were having an affair, although Madame Germaine had strongly advised against it. Especially not with photographers or designers. She said it more out of personal resentment than conviction, as she too had had a weakness for handsome boys, but competition and life had been unfair once again. In fact, the girls also thought it inappropriate that Mr. Bird could muster more time and patience for his Tina than for the others. Madame Germaine had to watch it with a heavy heart because the contract was signed and exclusivity lay in his hands. They bet their hair tips that the relationship would be blown up before the finale. A colour bonus for those who could guess by whom.

Endless compassion had drowned envy and sarcasm. Superficial melodrama took centre stage. Paper handkerchiefs were offered to soothe his wounds and her tears. Few could bear the scene. They left the moaning within the confines of the wreck for what it was, and most sought futile relief outside the aircraft, with Kitty's s-phone as collateral.

The return to the aircraft and a second look at the chaos inside made the girls realize for the first time how lucky they had all been and that the catch-party on the little beach hadn't deserved any attention and energy at all. Kitty burst into tears again and shortly after started experiencing a form of mild hyperventilation. One of the twins reached for a stack of vomit bags that had fallen on the floor to help her, while the other

was too late and ended up vomiting the light in-flight meal onto her sister's hand due to the nauseating smell of blood.

Oxygen masks hung unused above the perfectly aligned rows of empty seats in the colours of the unpronounceable airline. It gave the whole scene an eerie appearance. If you kept looking, you would notice the bodies jammed between the leg spaces. Madame Germaine was one of the few who remained on her seat. Her imposing pearl necklace still untouched around her neck. She proclaimed the story that she had received it from a hyper-romantic Caribbean pearl diver during one of her many world travels. He had crafted it himself as a souvenir of an unforgettable tryst on the white beach. And she kept laughing.

If she hadn't been lying there so unnaturally, you would have thought she was sleeping, as she usually did on flights. She had a fear of flying but consistently denied it. The mysterious hot flashes in airports provided enough evidence of her disrupted hormone levels, so most people avoided her during those stressful moments.

Lately, she had been taking a strong remedy at check-in to normalize her condition during take-off. Once, they had to carry her off the plane when an unexpected problem was detected, and the passengers were accommodated in a cheap hotel. She had woken up the next morning in an unfamiliar bed, and the girls had pretended they had already arrived at their destination. It caused a lot of laughter among the ladies, but not today.

Sergio was trying to be as comfortable as possible in a business class seat with Tina by his side as the newly appointed stewardess. She felt guilty and responsible for Sergio's fate. He should have been seated next to her. She insisted on it,

even though his original ticket didn't allow it. Chantale Ankermans was the chosen one. Even though she wore glasses, she had those magical eyes that could melt any man's heart. She had protested loudly against Tina's exaggerated request, which added salt to the wound of her own recently broken relationship. Fortunately, Nora had intervened, otherwise they would have still been arguing. And maybe that would have been better in hindsight.

As luck would have it, Sergio's fold-out tray table got stuck and couldn't be lowered anymore. And it was that cheap piece of plastic that gave him the fatal jab between the ribs. The irony continued as Nora's table remained untouched. She had, of course, declined the kindly offered meal, even though it was a fish-free sushi with bean sprouts and rice. Nora Schellings was categorical when it came to food - if she couldn't trace the kitchen, the chef, or the origin of the food, she wouldn't eat it. The stewardess kept smiling as stated in the brochure.

Gerda Smolders and Beyoncé Hellemans had delved into their neglected knowledge of the human body from the dark depths of their abandoned nursing training and panic-strickenly pieced together the forgotten course material. If there was any chance to save Sergio, it would be through them. The fragile hope of recovery lay in their hands. They were the only moving beings on the aircraft with some sort of practical medical background. But what should be done then? The contents of the first aid kit were in stark contrast to the crammed candy trolley that had been catapulted, cargo and all, against the cockpit door. The Malaysian airline had clearly made unhealthy choices.



Tina screamed out of helplessness. If only because they had done nothing when it was still possible. They had stared at his bleeding ears with empty eyes and squatted down with the metal box, debating which bandage to use. After elimination, Beyoncé had to give up, defeated. She then took care of the beautiful, vomiting twin sister. But the twins had always been able to take care of themselves, so her helplessness became painfully evident. The other suddenly had the full responsibility thrust upon her shoulders but collapsed on the spot, so all hope waned, and panic took over. In the absence of an alternative, Gerda struggled to open the box of plasters, but Tina already knew what time it was.

"Sergio is allergic to adhesive!" Tina frustratedly knocked the first aid kit out of Gerda's lap and chased the two culprits into the corridor. The twins fell flat on the floor and smeared themselves with what they had tried so hard to keep away. Meanwhile, Nora had fled because she couldn't bear the smell and sight. She bumped into the other girls who had timidly followed in the passage, if only not to stay alone on the beach. The noisy outburst at the front was enough to trigger a panic reaction among the group. Nobody knew why, but everyone screamed and jumped out of the aircraft just as they had done a few hours before.

It didn't take much to relive the catastrophe with full force. They walked unrestricted and half-naked on an island that wasn't theirs but would gradually become theirs as the days passed.

## II

The cosmopolitan Svetlana Berkow was the first to manage to face reality somewhat soberly and thus became the most memorable action of the day. She was born to East German parents who had successfully tested the waning stability of the Wall without hesitation in the late '80s. They had also succeeded in bringing one of the first daughters of unified Germany into the world. Since their departure, father and mother had continued to travel in turns, with the exception of the first few years after her birth in a rented apartment in Eupen. The leftover marks had grown substantially on a Swiss family account, making working for Dad more of a formality. After much insistence, Svetlana obtained Belgian nationality. Eventually, the rental flat from her youth was purchased for her, and her world travels could begin.

Miss Berkow had the slimmest limbs, the longest hair, and the sharpest cheekbones. The girls called her Lana for convenience because no one could pronounce the first syllable correctly, she believed. Not even that polyglot Monika, with whom she had become more than friends throughout the pre-selections. The two possessed a more potent intellect than the entire final group combined. However, it was not just intelligence that kept them together. Lately, a physical depth had also developed between them. And that caught the imagination when observing their respective backsides.

She definitely inherited the long arms from her father. It was unimaginable how she could effortlessly obtain tickets and travel visas. From world cup football finals to boxes at La Scala in Milan. Apparently, the disbanded KGB was still active. It was clear that the girls had more confidence in Dad than in Kitty's oscillating yuppie. Svetlana's cool-headed character probably played a role too, as Kitty had been helpless, hungry, and

drunk, staring at the sky with bloodshot eyes at nightfall and had not uttered a single coherent word the next morning, let alone done anything impressive.

It seemed as if Svetlana hadn't slept. Suitcases and cases were lined up in a row under the piano so the girls could just take their luggage. She must have worked all morning, starting before sunrise. It commanded respect, especially after that dreadful and all too short night. Lana's way of dealing with jet lag had become legendary. The extensive traveling had made her immune to time zones and stuffy, uncomfortable airplane seats. Her pronounced Slavic features seemed resilient against nocturnal wear and tear. They attributed it to her cheekbones. The bigger the cheekbones, the smaller the beauty case! An unwritten rule in the world of models. She truly came from a different world. She possessed slopes of a different category, as they say in cycling terms. From the beginning, she was their unspoken favourite and thus a formidable competitor. Everyone would have benefited if one of her notorious cheekbones had collided with a folding table, but instead, she carried suitcases, preserving her impeccable life and well-being. They damn well should be grateful to her. And it rankled.

Most of them had fallen asleep late on the first night. The lack of luxury and the fear of the unknown had brought the group literally closer together. The unfamiliar natural sounds and jungle cries of invisible vermin or other untamed creatures were overwhelming. These new experiences were a far cry from their perfectly lit world of studios and sets.

Wiske Janssens had managed to light a campfire with difficulty. She could no longer keep her experience as a scout leader a secret from the group, even though she would have preferred not to disclose that past. But when the need is

great, the scout duty is near. The amazement could be seen on the made-up faces when she emerged from the jamboree chest, but she didn't care much at that moment. Lives had been lost, and surely more would fall out of other closets if she didn't offer her services.

Her experiences in the youth movement were in stark contrast to this cursed competition. Due to her unexpected selection, she had to step down from her leadership role with the Cubs, much to the chagrin of the entire group, especially the boys. But it had been their own fault. The year before, those same comrades had convinced her around the campfire to participate in the pre-selections. Unfortunately, the specific page from *Dag allemaal* with the registration form survived the campfire and became the inspiration for a truth or dare game. She knew she possessed a natural beauty but never saw herself thriving in the unnatural world of fashion. Her close scout friends knew this too, of course. There had always been male interest, even in the non-coed sections during her teenage years. And since she started leading and her breast growth had mostly completed, the unsuccessful advances had only increased. The disappointments at the 23rd were too numerous to count. But they would remain close friends, as true scouts tended to do.

"The wood is far too damp! You'll have to find better next time."

"Next time, you can do it yourself!"

The fashion dolls had condescendingly doubted her professionalism within the modest warmth of the fire circle. She loathed their prejudice. It would have all gone much smoother if they had stepped out of their narrow-minded little world. Even the flames could be bigger. The smoke offered no

advantage either, as it had turned dark by then, and the mosquitoes hadn't bothered to show up during the day. They could all drop dead for all she cared.

Hungry, Ilse Demeulenaere had re-entered the plane to retrieve the snacks around the toppled trolley. She had barely persuaded Tina to accompany her back, using the trivial excuse that she couldn't carry the candy alone. After much insistence, Tina finally looked up and nodded. She walked to the bar and gathered as many bottles of spirits as she could carry. Nora wasn't thrilled with the choice, but she was just glad that Tina had responded and, in the end, followed her somewhat passively. Sergio was still lying there with a vacant stare, looking at the fallen first aid kit and the stray bandage in the aisle. Nora dreaded the thought of spending the night with her among the corpses. Who knows, she might start freaking out in the early hours, and who would go get her and calm her down?

The rest was predictable. The group feasted on the sweets as the fire crackled, and the sea, in all its darkness, had lost its significance. No one considered rationing. They were too tired, too exhausted, too sad, and too scared to be reasonable. Darkness had fallen faster than at home, and that had made everyone as meek as lambs, if the alcohol hadn't done so already. Coats and blankets were shared, and people were glad to have someone close to them, even if they had to tolerate the smell of pickles, Chinese biscuits, and overly sweet alcohol.

As mentioned earlier, it was the first valuable idea since the crash to salvage as many useful items from the wreck and display them, but Lana didn't immediately receive the expected support when the early risers woke up feeling sick from the nightmare they had hoped to have dreamed. With

headaches and an enormous sense of guilt for what they had consumed, they understood, one by one, what had unfortunately happened, but all of this much later in the day than was reasonable under the circumstances.

Since everyone had woken up at different times, the earliest birds took advantage and claimed suitcases that weren't theirs. Even though they didn't know the combination, let alone have the courage to retrieve the suitcase key from one of the stiffened trousers on the plane. It took Lana a while to realize the looting herself. It wasn't until the presumed-dead Juliette pulled her suitcase away from someone else and was told it was a harmless mistake.

Lana's luggage had also been moved, but apparently, they had recognized it in time to be hers. People were afraid of Svetlana. She was someone who could lose her temper. The biting incident with a maid in Ecuador had left an impression on everyone. Another girl had simply given up the contents of her hotel safe and then emotionally collapsed, but she had attacked her aggressor with cold-blooded determination, heedless of the drawn knife and the friendly waiter waiting below the balcony. Afterwards, the story circulated that she had even thrown the assailant's right earlobe at him, and he and his girlfriend ran off screaming. Injustice made Lana bloodthirsty, like an endangered Siberian tiger.

Outdoor stuff was always unpredictable. Ground remained ground, wherever you were. The personal baggage was thrown on top of the stolen goods to make sure no sand would get into their own cargo space. Toiletry bags were expertly opened, and before Svetlana could articulate her frustration, the half-awake majority was examining their regurgitated likeness in a travel mirror on a spread-out towel. Kitty was once again complaining about the new colours on her chin and even

expressed her hope aloud that they wouldn't be rescued too quickly.

Svetlana had always detested selfishness and felt that a sermon or, in the worst case, a discussion was more than necessary. The situation was more serious than most had indicated the night before with their excessive alcohol consumption. Did they really think their Coca-Cola men would suddenly emerge from the sea? That the finale could still continue without interruption? That this accident was just one of the many morbid elimination rounds? How else could she interpret it when some skilfully applied factor 30 sunscreen and shifted their bikini lines further to the centre to tan the last trimmed millimetres in the privacy of the ocean? The binge eating from the previous day was excluded from consideration.

Few were physically capable of the hauling that Svetlana had started herself. It was usually quite a hassle to get the beauty bags to the rooms upon arrival. The hotel boy was typically claimed by auction. Other hotel guests were not spared either. And the bizarre thing was that refusals were hardly ever heard.

At first glance, no man had survived the crash. Sergio had been their last hope in that sense. The rest were dead. Even the pushy transvestites in economy, whom Madame Germaine had expertly kept at a distance.

The cockpit had not been inspected yet, but the buried nose of the aircraft did not bode well. The wreckage of the trolley had been a feeble excuse not to look behind the door. Even Svetlana had to admit her own cowardice here. Nevertheless, she had always dreamed of marrying a pilot. Not so much because of the uniform but mainly because of their courage.

How many times had she flown, and each time her fascination had been directed towards the determined guys in the golf cart. Her life was in their hands, and preferably much more. She couldn't bear the thought that one of them could have been saved by her, that he had been lying there dying behind a mountain of chocolate bars and cheap aluminium that night. What did Sergio have that the two or three decent souls from the cockpit didn't have? How many people did it take to fly an aircraft anyway?

"We need to know who is still alive and who didn't make it. We need to know how many of us there are and write down who is dead."

No one looked up. The spot on the edge of the lagoon was strewn with colourful textiles and glistening girls who, in their own way, suppressed the disaster by doing what they were good at. Yet they had heard Svetlana. Her voice was reminiscent of her father's.

"We just wait until they get here. The first helicopters will come soon, and then we'll be off. I wouldn't know what to do with a half-dead queer. Who knows, I might even catch AIDS without realizing it."

"Yes," said Beyoncé, "I was already getting the creeps during the flight. And you could accidentally slice someone's veins open. No, let's wait patiently until they arrive. Emergencies rhymes with urgencies for some reason."

"This isn't an earthquake, fool! This is a plane crash. And an obscure one from an equally obscure airline! We should consider ourselves lucky if they already miss us."



"Even the sweets are past their expiration date!" said Ilse Demeulenaere, still feeling nauseous from the sugar tsunami in her intestines.

"And the worst part is that back home they firmly believe that I'm lying by the pool with a cocktail right at this moment. Our dad is the last person who would start asking questions. No news is good news. That's how it always is with us. They remain silent. So jealous because I rake in more money than they do."

Ilse Demeulenaere cried. The crash had stirred up more than she had bargained for. Everyone understood that it wasn't about the dead, but about the sobering thought that they could simply be missed at home. Everyone had financially surpassed their parents, except for Kitty and Svetlana. And they had each manifested their acquired independence in their own way, with the necessary flair and pubescent assertiveness.

"I showed them what's what!" Brenda always retorted cleverly when she returned home with haute couture from an assignment, resulting in a hailstorm.

They also couldn't seek solace from the families of the transvestites. It would be a miracle if one of them were allowed to come for tea with their close Muslim family after the Friday prayer, even if they still prayed for their souls. The crash was undoubtedly their deserved fate. The looks at the airport had spoken volumes. The Belgian girls they had boarded the plane with might have given them false hope of a blasphemous martyrdom, although the term virgins could no longer be applied.

"You know how Madame Germaine organized our trips," Ilse continued, sobbing. "With five sets of accounts and just as

many lists of participants. The darker the transactions, the more she loved it. Our only hope lies with the flight crew."

It had been a local flight, from Jakarta, to an egg-shaped island that sounded as remote as the reliability of the airline. Yet, the name flowed smoothly and with a certain familiarity from the mouth of Monika Moermans, Lana's best friend. She was the blondest of the group but managed to defy all the flat prejudices about the flaxen race on her own. She sat much further away from the others on the beach, which, by Western standards, was not really a beach because too many roots protruded from the sand.

"We're in an archipelago as big as Europe. And the trip was definitely not booked through a European agency."

She had noticed it from the cheap tickets and the surprisingly high price the transvestites had to pay for them.

"Don't kid yourselves. They've never heard of Belgium here."

Everyone still remembered the wrong beach in Johannesburg. At first, they hadn't realized it. The waterline looks equally inviting everywhere when the sun shines, but the beach atmosphere could certainly be better! White bodies amidst seasoned wannabes, you couldn't think of a more dangerous cocktail. The hostility came mainly from the female habitués who saw their position threatened by so many white chicks. But the biggest threat came from the sea when a boatload of smugglers suddenly demanded payment for their cargo in white slaves. Fortunately, the beach boys quickly assessed the new goods as more valuable than the smuggled ones, causing a dispute and shots were fired in no time. All the women, black and white, pulled together and resolutely chose to flee. One black woman had jumped on the bus with them and later sought asylum in Belgium. Madame Germaine had managed to