

Valerie, not all dreams are illusions

Contents

1. The Whisper Campaign	5
2. Love is sweet at the beginning, but bitter at the end	22
3. The Sunday School Teacher	41
4. The Octopus in Kiev	101
5. The Pillar and the Plompert	148
6. The Butterfly	167
7. A brotherly feud has no winners	183
8. Valerie	210
9. Lycurgus's Mirror	249
10. Permanent Hindrances	273

Foreword

People often ask me whether these stories are true. I can be brief on that point. Most of the events took place. Others could have taken place. And yet others happen every day, without anyone even noticing them. What could be more enjoyable than observing people in their natural habitat?

I'm happy to leave it up to the reader to decide where reality ends and imagination begin. Freedom – especially freedom of thought – is invaluable, even if it turns out to have been an illusion in the end. Be honest: how free are you within the web of social obligations and natural instincts?

Are you the protagonist in your own life, or merely an extra? John Haines, a Vietnam veteran and former mayor of Parramatta (Australia), told me in 1993 that human beings are driven by three things: fear, greed and fear. For many people, the fear of escaping their little cage takes a heavy toll on the possibility of an adventurous life.

Clinging to false certainties, illusions and wishful thinking does not set you free. Others exhibit self-destructive behaviour in the form of all manner of addictions. Are these addictions not all facets of the same crystal: existential emptiness and a way of numbing pain and sorrow?

Life is a film with its ups and downs. Make sure it's a bloody good film! I cast aside the gloomy notion held by many philosophers that life is one long ordeal. That strikes me as utter nonsense. Perhaps the meaning of life is the journey itself. The destination matters less.

Dare to live. Setbacks and sorrow help shape your personality and foster your self-reliance and resilience. You can only appreciate warmth if you know cold. All the good things in life have their opposites. Without these contrasts, you experience nothing, not even justice.

My name is Dik Momus: observer, researcher, biographer, commentator and reporter in the service of the Malebolge. My assignments vary widely, but at their core they always boil down to the same thing: what really happened, and why did people act the way they did?

For me, the pursuit of truth, honesty and justice are the most important virtues and criteria. That does not mean I have a monopoly on wisdom, but it does mean that I try to underpin my conclusions with logical and plausible arguments. Currently, particularly in political arenas, this seems to have become a rare exception.

1. The Whisper Campaign

Assignment for Dik Momus: get to the bottom of this case and shed some light on it. Is Paarelketting entirely innocent, or is there shared blame? Did she bring this misfortune upon herself, and does karma exist? Are those who speak most about integrity not often the very ones with the least integrity? I leave the judgement to the reader.

My name is Dik Momus. I am a reporter at the Fifth Ravine of the Maleboge. That sounds more serious than it is, though I must admit that we are a busy department. The First Chasm deals with tyrants, the Second with bankers, the Third with false prophets, and the Fourth with people who say ‘with all due respect’ on talk shows just before they tear someone to pieces.

The Fifth Chasm is reserved for those who bring others down whilst uttering lofty words. We get a lot of local politics. My boss, a pale man with a face as though he’d objected to his circumstances from the moment he was born, placed a thin file on my desk one morning. “Jenevercity,” he said.

I looked at the cover. “Another local council?” “A special one.” “They all say that.” “This one whispers.” I sighed. “All local councils whisper.” “This one has made it official policy.” That piqued my interest. “What’s it about?” “A mayor. A pair of necklaces.” “Guilty?” “Not quite.” “Innocent?” “Not quite either.”

“So human?” “Exactly. That’s why we’re sending you.” I opened the file. There was hardly any paper in it. Just a list of names: Paarelketting, Stampertje, Blauwe, Rookgordijn, Lange Jaap, Steekel, Teek, Hugo Vlot.

“What am I supposed to do?” “Observe.” “Can I intervene?” My boss looked at me as if I’d suggested suspending gravity. “We never intervene. We take notes. Humans have free will.” “Do you still believe that?” “No. But it looks good in our brochure.” That’s how I ended up in Jenevercity. Every city has its own sound.

In some cities, you can hear the sea. In others, trams, market traders, children, dogs or church bells. In Jenevercity, you mainly heard whispers. They began behind net curtains, over cups of coffee, in the corridors of the town hall, at the baker’s, in waiting rooms, at birthday parties and, when things got serious, on Teek’s local internet forum.

Teek was a former journalist, which in Jenevercity meant that he still wrote, but that nobody paid him anymore. That didn’t make his pen any less sharp, though it did make it more caustic. He had eyebrows that could form an opposition party all on their own and always looked as if he’d just uncovered a crime, even when someone was merely ordering a currant bun.

His loyal informant was Steekel. She, too, was a former journalist, former confidante, former assistant, former girlfriend, former victim and, in fact, a former everything – except former in terms of resentment. In that respect, she was young, agile and tireless. By day, she wandered through the city with a shopping bag.

At night, so malicious tongues claimed, she flew low over the rooftops of the Broersvest in search of new facts. Only in Jenevercity did people quickly call a suspicion a fact, and a fact quickly proof, especially when it could be used against someone.

I checked into a hotel on the quay. The landlord poured me a glass of jenever and looked around as if the lamps might be eavesdropping. “You’ve surely come for her?” “For whom?” He leaned towards me. “The mayor.” “Which mayor?” He turned pale. “Keep your voice down.”

That was my first lesson in Jenevercity: the less one knew, the softer one spoke. The next morning, Paarelketting arrived. She stepped out of a black car, looked at the old town hall and thought order must be restored here. That was her first mistake.

In Jenevercity, people could put up with a lot: neglected maintenance, barren public gardens, leaking roofs, incomprehensible policy documents, councillors who spoke for three quarters of an hour without articulating a single coherent thought. But order? That was going too far.

Paarelketting was energetic, sharp, ambitious and direct. She spoke in sentences that ended with a full stop. She was not forgiven for that. In Jenevercity, an administrator was expected to speak in sentences containing a comma, three reservations, two apologies and a reference to further consultation.

During her first meeting, she said: “This is how we’re going to do it.” There was a silence as if she’d announced a coup. Councillor Blue looked at his papers. Group leader Stampertje tugged at his knitted jumper. Clerk Rookgordijn smiled. Nobody knew why.

That was precisely what was unsettling. Rookgordijn had a face that never quite revealed what he was thinking and eyes that always seemed to be searching for a way out. He had mastered the art of being present without bearing any responsibility.

When something went well, he had always prepared for it. When something went wrong, it turned out he had, by chance, not been present. “Chairman,” said Stampertje slowly, “I would just like to point out that in this city we are accustomed to a careful process.”

“A careful process?” asked Pearl Necklace. “Certainly.” “But nothing has happened for twelve years.” “That is precisely why,” said Stampertje, “we mustn’t rush into anything now.” The council found that an exceptionally wise reply. Paarelketting did not yet realise that stagnation in Jenevercity was not a lack of policy, but a cultural and historical asset.

For the first few months, she worked like a whirlwind. Files vanished from piles. Decisions were made. Civil servants who for years had taken refuge behind phrases such as ‘in principle’, ‘to be considered further’ and ‘within the applicable frameworks’ began to lose sleep. People on the streets noticed a change too.

An entrepreneur finally received a reply. A public garden was refurbished. A derelict building was tackled. To the dismay of some, the city even regained a little of its lustre. “She’s doing too much,” said Stampertje. “She’s doing it too quickly,” said Blue. “She’s doing it without sufficient support,” said Houtwurm.

“She’s doing it,” said Rookgordijn. That made the matter serious. For someone who does something makes enemies amongst those who had done nothing for years and had developed a certain dignity in that inactivity. The senior civil servants of Jenevercity were a peculiar breed.

They wore dark suits, didn't read each other's memos, but praised their quality out of collegial self-preservation. They were masters at writing texts that said nothing. Their greatest talent was formulating conclusions that everyone could agree with because no one understood exactly what was meant.

They often spoke of integrity. They did so mainly in rooms with coffee, biscuits and presentation screens. "Integrity," said Municipal Secretary Redelijk during a training day, "is the foundation of trust." Everyone nodded. That was always the reaction when foundations were mentioned.

Head of HR Hugo Vlot then stood up. He had the cheerful expression of someone who referred to reorganisations as 'development opportunities. 'We strive,' he said, 'for a warm organisational culture in which every employee feels safe to share their feelings.'

"How many staff were made redundant last month?" asked someone at the back. "Forty-three," said Hugo Vlot. "Did they feel safe?" "That's a process." "What process?" "A careful process." That answered the question. Hugo Vlot spoke exclusively in words that left no blood in their wake. Redundancy was called 'mobility'.

Fear was called 'perception'. Resentment was called a 'signal'. Incompetence was called an 'area for development'. Cowardice was called 'administrative sensitivity'. When he showed someone the door, he did so with such empathy that the person concerned almost felt guilty for feeling sad. Paarelketting saw through that sort of language all too quickly.

“Just say what you mean,” she once said to Hugo Vlot. He looked at her as if she’d asked him to walk naked through the canteen. “But Madam Mayor,” he said, “we must safeguard the human dimension.” “Which human?” “The employee.” “Which employee?” “The employee in a general sense.” “That doesn’t exist.”

Hugo Vlot later noted in his diary: the mayor shows a limited sense of organisational psychological nuance. The smear campaign did not begin with a lie. Good smear campaigns never do. It began with a question. “Have you also noticed that Paarelketting is rather domineering?” That was not yet an accusation.

Just one question. Then came a second question. “Do you actually think her style fosters a sense of unity?” Then a third. “Is it normal for a mayor to read so many files?” Within three weeks, people were talking about a management style. Within six weeks, it had become a problem.

Within three months, it had become a culture. And by the time the phrase ‘culture of fear’ was uttered, nobody could remember who had said it, but everyone was certain they’d been feeling it for years. Steekel played a leading role in this. She had the remarkable talent for seeing a pattern in every event.

When Paarelketting didn’t greet a civil servant, it was intimidation. When she did greet him, it was manipulation. When she remained silent, she was icy. When she spoke, she was domineering. When she laughed, she was haughty. When she didn’t laugh, she was cold. “It’s all true,” Steekel said to Teek. “What exactly is true?” asked Teek. “Everything.” That was enough.

That evening, Teek posted an article on his forum entitled: Questions about organisational culture are on the rise. Which questions were on the rise, and amongst whom, was not specified. That added to its credibility. The next day, the baker spoke about it. The butcher knew more about it.

The florist was certain that Paarelketting ordered scentless flowers. A retired teacher claimed she had a dog at home that only understood French. “Why French?” someone asked. “Because it’s elitist,” said the teacher. Nobody thought that was a weak argument.

Ever since the rumour campaign had gathered momentum, caffeine consumption amongst the ladies of Broersvest had risen to alarming levels. The coffee mornings took on a scientific air. By now, every neighbour had at least three anonymous sources, two reliable suspicions and one sister-in-law who was ‘very close to the source’, even though she only worked two afternoons a week in the library.

The ladies were no longer simply chatting; they were investigating. “Did you hear she looked angry yesterday?” “At whom?” “That’s still unclear.” “Then it’s more serious than I thought.” “Exactly.” The local GP was prescribing more sleeping tablets than antibiotics, and the chemist was beginning to wonder why grown-ups could so visibly thrive on other people’s misery.

Their husbands had previously protested against the daily gossip. After a few weeks, they stopped doing so. The ladies, you see, came home remarkably energetic every evening. According to the GP, there was no medical explanation for this. Nor, according to the vicar.

Only the hairdresser believed that malicious gossip was an underestimated aphrodisiac. No one dared to contradict him. Meanwhile, the mood in the council grew more serious. Stampertje sensed his moment had come. He was a man who was never in a hurry, except when someone else fell. Then he could walk remarkably fast.

During a council meeting, he straightened his jumper, put on a face he reserved especially for moral issues, and said: “Chairman, let there be no misunderstanding. We are not making any accusations here. On the contrary. That is precisely why we must get to the bottom of this.” “But what, then?” asked Pearl Chain.

“That,” said Stampertje, “is precisely what needs to be investigated.” The council nodded. It was brilliant reasoning. No one knew what had happened, and that was precisely why an investigation was necessary to discover why people had the feeling that something might have happened.

Smoke Screen slid a folder forward. “There are agencies,” he said, “that specialise in this sort of thing.” “Which agencies?” asked Pearl Necklace. Smoke Screen cleared his throat. “There’s actually only one agency that’s sufficiently independent.” “And that is?” “You ask, and we’ll sort it out.”

Someone should have warned Pearl Necklace. But she was tired. When you’re tired, you sometimes believe that common sense is enough to unmask absurdity. Three days later, Tall Jaap arrived. He was tall, slender and carried a briefcase as if it contained the Last Judgement.

He spoke softly, looked serious and took notes whenever someone coughed. “We love nothing more than investigating the truth,” he said upon entering.

“That’s reassuring,” said Pearl Necklace. “That’s not always the intention,” said Tall Jaap. His method was simple. He listened to anyone who had anything to say about Pearl Necklace, especially if they didn’t like her. He found anonymous witnesses reliable precisely because they were anonymous. He found people who dared to give their names to be remarkably self-assured.

He found exculpatory statements interesting, but not conclusive. He also found incriminating statements interesting, but in a different way. Steekel dropped by twice. The first time with rumours. The second time with the same rumours, but louder.

Lange Jaap made careful notes: “Consistent picture.” Teek provided printouts from his own forum. “This is the talk of the town,” he said. “Who’s writing all this?” asked Lange Jaap. “The town,” said Teek. Lange Jaap nodded. A town as a witness – that made an impression.

Meanwhile, the town hall turned into a beehive without honey. There was whispering everywhere. People who hadn’t spoken to one another for years were now leaning in to each other confidentially. “Have you been heard yet?” “No, have you?” “Yes.” “What did you say?” “That I don’t dare say anything.” “Brave.” “Tall Jaap thought so too.”

An employee who’d never been afraid began to wonder whether he might have suppressed that fear. Another suddenly recalled that, three years earlier, Paarelketting had said ‘good morning’ in a tone that, in hindsight, had been too forceful.

Even the plants in the boardroom wing looked nervous. Hugo Vlot immediately organised a meeting on social safety. “We must take feelings seriously,” he said. “Even if they’re not right?” asked Pearl Necklace. “Feelings are always right.” “Then we won’t need to investigate anything anymore.”

“That’s too simplistic.” “And if someone feels that you’re incompetent?” Hugo Vlot smiled awkwardly. “Then we need to look at the context of that perception.” “Exactly,” said Paarelketting. This was later interpreted as an intimidating intervention.

Meanwhile, the senior civil servants were busy with their favourite pastime: covering their backs. Memos began to circulate. Not about what was true. But about who could be held responsible for what, should it later transpire that someone should have done something they hadn’t, because in principle someone else could have prepared for it.

Redelijk, the municipal secretary, drafted a memo entitled: Responsibility in relation to process-based perception within administrative dynamics. Nobody read it. Everyone praised it. “An excellent memo,” said Rookgordijn. “Very balanced,” said Hugo Vlot. “What does it say?” asked Paarelketting.

There was a silence. “It’s mainly about the direction,” said Redelijk. “Which direction?” “Forwards.” “Where to?” “That’s something we need to explore together.” I have often wondered whether hell really needs fire. Perhaps a meeting room with a suspended ceiling, lukewarm coffee and people who say “explore together” is enough.

Meanwhile, Pearl Necklace was growing increasingly impatient. “This is madness,” she said to Smoke Curtain. “That’s your perception,” said Smoke Curtain.

“My perception? You know full well yourself that this is based on rumours, don’t you?” “Rumours can be signals.” “And signals can be rumours.” “That distinction,” said Smoke Screen, “is precisely the subject of the investigation.” There was no arguing with that, because there was nothing to it.

The power of bureaucratic language lies in its ability to dress up a void until it resembles a thought. By the time the report was published, the city had already finished reading it before anyone had even opened it. The conclusion, after all, was known in advance.

That is the advantage of a well-prepared investigation. Tall Jaap presented his findings in the council chamber. He spoke of patterns, signs, management style, perceived pressure, contextual tensions and a widely felt sense of insecurity. “How widely felt?” someone asked. “Widely enough,” said Tall Jaap.

“By how many people?” “That’s confidential.” “But is it true?” Lange Jaap looked as though he’d been asked an inappropriate question. “Truth,” he said, “is a multi-layered concept in processes of this sort.” Stampertje closed his eyes for a moment. He was savouring the moment. Blauwe looked grave.

Houtwurm jotted down something he couldn’t read himself later. Rookgordijn sat motionless, like a man who’d known where the doors were for a long time. Paarelketting listened and felt something tighten in her chest. Not because she considered herself entirely innocent. She wasn’t. She’d been sharp. Sometimes too sharp.

She had hurt people without always realising it. She had thought that good intentions exempted her from the need for tact. She had made enemies and then underestimated them. But what was happening here was something else. Here, weaknesses were being recast as crimes.

Here, style was elevated to a sin. Here, annoyance was disguised as morality. And the worst thing was: the disguise was convincing. “May I respond?” she asked. “Of course,” said Stampertje. “We attach great importance to hearing both sides of the story.” “Then I would like to say that this report is one-sided.” Lange Jaap jotted something down.

“What are you writing down now?” asked Pearl Necklace. “That you do not recognise the findings.” “But that’s true, isn’t it?” “Certainly,” said Tall Jaap. “It confirms the picture.” “What picture?” “That you have difficulty dealing with criticism.” At that moment, Pearl Necklace realised she wasn’t in a meeting, but in a hall of mirrors where every move she made was used against her.

If she remained silent, she was cold. If she spoke, she was domineering. If she defended herself, she was in denial. If she conceded, she was confessing. There are trials in which one can only lose because defeat is the only permissible outcome. The next morning, the city was ablaze. Not literally.

Jenevercity was too damp for that. But morally, it was ablaze. Hundreds of posts appeared on Teek’s forum. “Justice at last!” “We’ve known this for years!” “My neighbour felt this too!” “An acquaintance of my brother-in-law once heard something!” “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire!”

That last comment was posted by someone who'd been stirring things up for months themselves. The national media turned up. The residents found that both dreadful and marvellous. They decried the damage to the city's image and then gave three interviews each.

Steekel strode across the market like a general after a victorious battle. "The people have spoken," she said. "Which people?" I asked. "The people who are right." "Is that always the same people?" She looked at me suspiciously. "You're asking dangerous questions." "All questions are dangerous to those who already know the answer."

"Are you sure you're on her side?" "My dear lady," I said, "I'm hardly even on my own side." She didn't find that reassuring. Pearl Necklace resigned before the ink on the report had even dried properly. That seemed sensible. It was disastrous.

For whoever leaves confirms, in the eyes of the public, that there is something to confirm. "I told you so," said the baker. "I told you so," said the butcher. "I told you so," said the florist. No one said exactly what they had seen. Nor was that necessary. The words "I told you so" are among the most powerful weapons of human civilisation.

They prove nothing, but they shut everything down. In the days that followed, the key figures walked about with the grave expressions of people who had caused a disaster and were now concerned about the victims. Stampertje declared that nobody had wanted this.

Blue said it was a sad day. Houtwurm called for reflection. Rookgordijn suggested learning from the experience. Hugo Vlot announced a cultural programme. Lange Jaap sent an invoice. The town breathed a sigh of relief.

Not because justice had been done, but because the story had reached an ending that people could understand. A fall. A culprit. A report. A new mayor. That is all the average community needs to carry on with its old ways. And yet something lingered. A smell. An aftertaste.

Even in Jenevercity, where people were used to a lot, some began to wonder whether they hadn't gone along with it a little too eagerly. The landlord of my hotel said one evening: "She might not have been easy." "No," I said. "But that's not a crime." "No."

"And perhaps we weren't easy either." I looked at him. He was startled by his own honesty and quickly poured two jenever. "Forget what I said." "The town will do just that," I said. On my last evening, I strolled along the Schie. The mist lay low over the water. The streetlamps glimmered like weary stars.

In the distance, the church clock struck nine, the hour at which Jenevercity usually turned in for the night so it could carry on whispering fresh and lively the next day. I saw Steekel one last time. She was standing on a bridge, looking towards the town hall. "Are you leaving?" she asked. "Tomorrow." "Then you'll miss us."

"Undoubtedly." "You'll write honestly, won't you?" "I'll try." "Then write that we only wanted the truth." I remained silent. "Why aren't you saying anything?" she asked. "Because everyone says that." She turned away and vanished into the mist.

A moment later I heard a strange whistling sound above the rooftops. Perhaps it was the wind. Perhaps a broom. Perhaps just the imagination of a weary reporter. The next

morning, I left Jenevercity. On the train I thought of Pearl Necklace.

Not as a saint. Not as a martyr. Not as a monster. But as a human being. And that is precisely the hardest image to hold on to. People don't love people. They love roles. Hero. Villain. Victim. Perpetrator. Witch. Saviour. Once someone has been assigned a role, there's no need to look any further.

All that's left to do is repeat it. That's why whisper campaigns are so powerful. They require no courage. No evidence. No thought. Just a mouth. My boss read the last page, took off his glasses and looked at me. "Well?" "No one was entirely to blame." "As always."

"No one was entirely innocent." "As always." "One was vain. Another was spiteful. The third was cowardly. The fourth was stupid. The fifth was professional." "Professional?" "Yes. That's sometimes the most dangerous thing." My boss nodded. "And the mayor?" "A human being."

"She won't be forgiven for that." "No." He closed the file. "Where's the next assignment?" I asked. He smiled. "To Kyiv; apparently even the birds are corrupt there." I sighed. "So, the same lot again?" "Just bigger buildings." Almost everyone has one of those.

Back in the Fifth Gorge of the Malebolge, I handed in my report. My next assignment was already waiting for me. I had to investigate the persistent rumour that even the birds in Kyiv were corrupt. This investigation took me years – far more time than I'd expected.

Without a doubt, this also became the most wonderful assignment of my life, and boy, did I enjoy it and laugh at the picture our political elites and journalists painted of

Ukraine. This picture could not have been further from reality.

But the public is very susceptible to such things. In 2022, yellow and blue flags hung in virtually every street in the Netherlands. Not anymore. It always takes some time for the actual situation to sink in with the public. Political elites and mainstream media journalists who had unconditionally committed themselves to the false narrative could no longer backtrack, and the stories became increasingly implausible and fantastical.

No one is to blame. No one admits they were wrong. Key political figures vanished from the scene. New heavyweights took their place. Support remained unconditional and unchecked, right down to the last Ukrainian. We called that ‘help’, but with friends like that, who needs enemies?

I’ll come back to this in a future story. ‘Absurd theatre’ is still the best way to describe it. Years later, I heard that Jenevercity still existed. The same streets. The same quay. The same council chamber. Different administrators. New issues. New reports. New words for old grudges.

Because cities rarely learn. People even less so. Only the whispers change their name. And somewhere, of that I am almost certain, Teek was once again sitting behind his screen, Steekel was smoothing out her old coat, Stampertje was poring over a new, anxious turn of phrase, Hugo Vlot was speaking about safety, Lange Jaap was noting down a suspicious cough, and Rookgordijn was smiling in the manner of someone who knew that every mist comes in handy again sooner or later.

As for Paarelketting: she disappeared from the town, but not from the story. She went bankrupt. The local builder (and best friend of the former mayor Scheerjeweg, whom she had denied a royal honour) with whom she had fallen out over a sky-high additional bill for the renovation of her oversized villa attached a tracking device to her car, was caught, pursued and, just like in the 8th circle of hell, set his own feet alight.

There were no winners. Only losers. Even the town itself, which was still taken seriously by few outsiders. Teek suffered a cardiac arrest just as he was about to post yet another nasty comment about the umpteenth court case involving Paarelketting, and Steekel tripped over a loose paving stone in Zwart Nazareth.

Karma exists. Sometimes that is the only justice that remains. Not that one wins. Not that one is proved right. But that someone, even if it is years later, writes down once more that the truth rarely shouts. It whispers. Only much more softly than the lie.

Comment by Dik Momus: Integrity is a crucial virtue, but in a political context it can also be used to eliminate your opponents. People who harp on most about integrity – the so-called ‘morality police’ – are often the least honest themselves. They impose standards and core values on others which they themselves often fail to uphold. Furthermore, overconfidence and arrogance are dangerous character traits. Paarelketting fancied herself untouchable and came across to her opponents as arrogant and headstrong. This provided opportunities to eliminate her through a smear campaign. The vox populi rarely knows the facts and context.

2. Love is sweet at the start, but bitter at the end

Assignment from Dik Momus: does true love actually exist, or is it an illusion? And if it does exist, why is it so rare? Isn't the romantic relationship – which has been gaining popularity since the Romantic era – built on shifting sands, and isn't a marriage based on practical considerations more stable?

Florence, where the Arno saw everything

My name is Dik Momus. I am a reporter at the Fifth Chasm of Maleboge, a department that usually deals with tyrants, traitors, bankers, courtiers, jealous lovers, failed saints and other creatures that have needlessly complicated humanity since its inception.

One morning – if one can speak of mornings up there – my boss summoned me to his office. He was sitting behind his desk, which seemed to be made of petrified remorse. Before him lay not a thick file, nor a stack of parchments full of wars and conspiracies, but just a single thin folder.

“Florence,” he said. “Murder?” I asked.

“Of course.” “Treason?” “That too.” “Money?” “Always.”

“So it’s just another ordinary case, then.” “No,” he said.

“This is about love.” I fell silent. In our department, that word always caused unease. One could report on murder in an orderly fashion. There were standard formats for coups d’état. For corruption, we even had standard sections. But love?

Love was a haphazard force. It didn't adhere to procedures, deadlines or reasonable expectations. "What am I supposed to investigate?" I asked. "Whether true love exists." "That strikes me as a subject for poets." "That's precisely why we're sending you. Poets exaggerate. Philosophers get lost.

Theologians make it too complicated. You just observe.' 'And if I find nothing?' 'Then you write that down.' 'And if I do find something?' My boss looked at the folder. 'Then we'll keep it safe. That rarely happens.'

That is how I ended up in Florence, in an age when men carried daggers, women harboured secrets, priests had hidden agendas, and princes had faces so smooth that even their sins slipped off them. Even then, Florence was no longer a city, but a work of art inhabited by people who considered themselves more important than the city that sustained them.

By day, the palaces glistened in the sun. By night, the stones turned red, as if they remembered the murders that had been plotted in their shadows. The Arno flowed quietly through it all, like an ancient witness who had long since learnt that people come and go, but water never takes sides.

I walked along the river and thought of Heraclitus. *Panta Rhei*. Everything flows. Only man tries to stem the river with titles, contracts, possessions, marriages, vows and wills. He says: my house, my name, my wife, my child, my body, my fame. Time merely smiles. It knows that everything will one day be reclaimed.

In Florence, people perhaps knew this better than anywhere else, but they did not act accordingly. On the contrary. It was precisely there, amongst churches, frescoes, bankers' mansions, secret passageways and fragrant gardens, that they sought to clad the transitory in gold. The Medici were masters at this.

They amassed power as others collect shells by the sea: with apparent ease, but never without desire. They bought artists, bishops, marriages, enemies and, now and then, a conscience. Yet it would be unfair to describe them merely as predators.

That is the tricky thing about people: they are rarely simple enough to be purely evil. They bestowed beauty upon the world. But beauty is often financed by fear. In that city, where the devil was sometimes better dressed than the angels, Bianca Capello appeared.

She came from Venice, a city that itself resembled a woman: seductive, reflective, dangerous, magnificent and always slowly sinking into the water. Bianca was young, of good stock and blessed with the sort of beauty that resides not only in one's features.

There are women who are beautiful as long as they remain silent. There are women who become more beautiful the moment they speak. Bianca belonged to the latter sort. She possessed grace without affectation, gentleness without weakness, and a playful intelligence that first put men at ease and then disarmed them.

When she smiled, she did not seem to light up the room, but rather to remind the people in that room that they, too, had once possessed light. In Venice, she had met Piero Bonaventuri. Piero was no prince. No cardinal.

No general. Not a man on whom history usually wastes its finest ink. He was a bank clerk, which in those days meant he was close enough to money to be corrupted by it, but not high enough to be truly protected by it. Bianca and Piero fell in love. Hopelessly, as they say. That word is well chosen.

Much budding love is sweet because it knows nothing yet of tomorrow. It feeds on the honey and forgets the bee. It sees the door and not the lock. It hears the music and not the silence that follows. Bianca's parents would never have approved of Piero.

He was of too low a standing. In the world of families, coats of arms and dowries, love is only acceptable if it does not upset the balance of the accounts. So, they fled. That is what lovers like to do in old stories. They think they can escape the world by moving to another city.

But the world travels light. It fits into a suitcase, a letter, a memory, a name. Bianca and Piero went to Florence and married in secret. For Piero, that could have meant death. For Bianca, a convent. The law is rarely as strict as when young people do something that older people themselves secretly envy.

They lived in hiding, close to San Marco, in rooms where love soon became smaller than the bed, narrower than the door and more stifling than the street where they could not walk freely. It must have been sweet at first. Two young people. A shared fear. A secret. A hand searching for the other in the dark.

But even the most ardent love is put to the test by damp walls, closed shutters and the constant threat that every footstep on the stairs might be the last. Piero, who had risked his life to possess her, presumably realised all too soon that possession is a pitiful form of love.

Anyone who locks a woman away out of love, even if it is together with himself, sooner or later turns the beloved into a mirror of his own shortcomings. Bianca did not wither away. She was too alive for that. But she found herself looking out of the window increasingly often. Not to escape. Not yet.

But to remind herself that a world existed outside the room. And then Francesco de' Medici saw her. There are moments that do not behave like moments. They are brief in time, but long-lasting in their consequences. They may last three seconds but cast a shadow over decades.

Francesco was already bound by a marriage that others deemed sensible. That is often the saddest sort of marriage. His wife, Johanna of Habsburg, was of imperial descent, proper in her bearing and cold in her demeanour. She had everything a dynasty could wish for and little that could warm a man's heart.

Francesco was no mere romantic. He was a Medici. He knew power, calculation, rank and danger. He knew that a glance could be misinterpreted, that a smile could set a court in motion, and that love at court never remained merely love. At court, even a sigh became political. Yet he was lost the moment he saw Bianca.

Not because she was merely beautiful. Beauty alone is rarely enough. Florence had as many beautiful women as churches have candles. But Bianca possessed something else: a vivacity that could not be tamed. She was not boisterous, not bold, not theatrical.

Rather, she had the rare gift of being present without imposing herself. Francesco looked at her and presumably felt something that no court master, confessor, wife, brother or minister could arrange for him. I stood at some distance. Reporters from the Fifth Ravine are rarely noticed.

That is an advantage in love and a disadvantage at dinners. Francesco barely spoke to her that first time. He bowed, said something courteous and then looked away with the diligent pretence of self-control of a man who does not want to show that his inner fortress has just been taken without a fight.

Bianca replied politely. But she did not look away straight away. That was enough. Anyone who thinks love begins with words has understood little of love. Words come later, once the soul has already betrayed itself. That evening I walked along the Arno. The city smelled of wet stone, horses, candle wax and orange peel. In an alleyway, a woman was laughing.

On a balcony, someone was playing softly on a lute. Arguments could be heard from a palace, for even in marble dwell unhappy people. I thought of Orpheus. Not because Francesco was making music, but because every great love, sooner or later, encounters its underworld.

Orpheus did not lose Eurydice because he did not love her, but because he wanted to keep her too much. He looked back. Not out of infidelity, but out of fear. That is perhaps the oldest tragedy of love. The fear of losing often destroys what love itself could have preserved.

Francesco did not realise at the time that he had already entered his underworld. Neither did Bianca. New love is sweet. It never thinks of the price to be paid. When two gazes met. There are encounters that, in hindsight, are called coincidences, because the word 'fate' seems to carry too much responsibility. I don't really believe in that.

After observing people for thousands of years, I have become cautious with words like 'coincidence' and 'free will'. Perhaps they are like two travellers who constantly take turns without ever really saying goodbye to one another. Sometimes I thought of a trolleybus.

The driver held the steering wheel firmly, looked intently ahead and believed he was choosing every bend himself. Yet the overhead wires had long since determined the direction. Perhaps it is no different with human beings. They choose their words, their friends and their loved ones, whilst rarely suspecting how many threads had already been spun before their birth.

Yet one question continued to occupy my mind. If the route is largely fixed, why do two people behave so differently when they walk the same path? I had seen brothers raised by the same mother. One became a gentle soul who would rather lose than hurt another.

The other turned into a predator who did not even trust his own reflection. Ever since then, I have believed less in upbringing than most philosophers.

Character is a strange guest. It doesn't knock. It's already inside before we learn to speak. Perhaps man is less the architect of his character than its gardener. He does not choose the soil. He merely chooses how to tend it. Francesco possessed a character that was in constant conflict with itself.

He loved science, astronomy, rare plants, minerals, art, and the silence of laboratories. He could easily have become a scholar. But he was born a Medici. That was not a profession. It was a destiny. His family expected power. His people expected leadership.

His father expected obedience. History expected a Grand Duke. No one ever asked what Francesco himself desired. Perhaps that was true of few rulers. A crown is like a golden birdcage. From the outside, it sparkles. From the inside, it remains a cage.

When Francesco met Bianca again, this time in the Boboli Gardens, it was spring. Florence was shrouded in a soft green haze. The orange trees were in bloom. Fountains whispered to statues that had been pretending not to hear for centuries.

Bianca strolled slowly along a marble balustrade. Not because she was in a hurry. But because people who are truly elegant are rarely in a hurry. Francesco stopped. He said nothing. Neither did she. Some silences last longer than conversations. "You love flowers," Francesco said at last.

Bianca smiled. "No." He looked surprised. "I love people who know how to appreciate flowers." That answer haunted him for the rest of his life. He laughed. Not loudly. More like someone who smiles upon unexpectedly discovering a door they didn't know existed.

From that moment on, their relationship changed. Not suddenly. Love usually grows like a river takes shape. Drop by drop. Spring after spring. Until no one can remember where the water began. They met more often. Always by chance. At least, that is what the court called those encounters.

A court is the least coincidental place in the world. Every glance is observed. Every smile remembered. Every stroll recorded. And every silence interpreted. The courtiers were a marvellous breed. They did not live on bread. Nor on wine. But on suspicions.

When two people met three times, within a week the court was certain they were lovers. When they truly loved one another, the court often knew even sooner. Not because courtiers are perceptive. But because jealousy is exceptionally keen-eyed. I have always been amazed by jealousy.

It is the only emotion that experiences even the happiness of others as a personal loss. Perhaps that is why it is so insatiable. One evening, Bianca asked: "Do you believe in fate?" Francesco looked out at the Arno. "I believe we make choices." "Always?" He fell silent. "Not always." "When not, then?"

"When the heart decides faster than the mind." Bianca looked at the water. "Then perhaps we aren't making a choice at all." Francesco smiled. "That sounds dangerous." "That's what love usually is." I heard their words.

And I thought of an ancient text from India. It said that nothing is truly ours. Not our wealth. Not our health. Not our loved ones. Not even our bodies. Everything is

entrusted to us only temporarily. Perhaps jealousy arises precisely now when love seeks to become possession.

Anyone who says, 'You are mine,' has already forgotten that no one ever truly possesses another. Perhaps that is precisely why love is so fragile. It demands complete surrender. Yet it refuses possession. That is a contradiction over which most people stumble their whole lives.

Francesco began to curse the evenings on which Bianca did not appear with increasing frequency. He worked. Received envoys. Drafted decrees. Signed treaties. But his thoughts wandered elsewhere. I saw how, during meetings, he would gaze absently out of the window.

Ministers spoke of taxes. He saw only the Boboli Gardens. Generals spoke of fortifications. He heard only her voice. A bishop delivered a long speech on the responsibilities of a monarch. Francesco absent-mindedly jotted down a single word in the margin of his papers.

Bianca.

Some courtiers noticed. That was enough. A court thrives on two things: ambition and boredom. When ambition slumbers for a moment, boredom immediately takes the floor. Within a few weeks, people were whispering. Within a few months, they were certain. Within a year, everyone claimed to have been there when love began.

No one had been there. Only the Arno. And rivers do not speak. I thought back to Orpheus. Not to his descent. But to his first encounter with Eurydice. He, too, probably thought the world had become more beautiful. Perhaps it had. Only, beauty never lasts long enough for those who wish to hold on to it.