

*Sensitive, light and lyrical*

## Tomas Lieske

### My Sovereign Love



photo Friso Keuris

**I**N THE HISTORICAL NOVELLA *My Sovereign Love*, Tomas Lieske takes the reader back to the court of Philip II of Spain, halfway through the sixteenth century. Turbulent times, in which wars between Spain, France, and England are settled by strategic marriages. But Lieske's narrator, Marnix de Veer, is not much interested in politics. He is interested in mathematics and instruments of

measurement, in mechanics and in buildings. It is because of his expertise in these areas that Philip takes him into his service. De Veer is 21 at the time, just the same age as his employer. De Veer's account starts fifty years further on. Felipe is lying on his deathbed in the Escorial, the palace that was built under the supervision of his faithful servant. He is suffering hellish pain, which is relieved somewhat by means of ingeniously hinged hoisting systems, conceived and designed by the same faithful servant. No shortage of devotion, you would think. All the more interesting that the first chapter ends with the lamentation: '...How terribly I have hated that man.'

In the chapters that follow we witness the growth and development of a complicated relationship between the master and his servant. A relationship that is by definition based on power and a loyalty that is taken for granted but, because of the effects of time and mutual respect, flowers into friendship bordering on love. The fidelity of the servant is tested, though, when he sees the lady-in-waiting he loves, Isabel Osorio, carried off under his very eyes by his sovereign, who claims her for himself.

*My Sovereign Love* is an engrossing novella that transcends time and historical anecdote as a result of Lieske's directly personal style of narration. We see the king through the eyes of Marnix de Veer, join him in his growing loyalty and at the same time in his rage, so much so that ultimately the question becomes to what extent he is a 'trustworthy' narrator.

Within the framework of a novella, Lieske gracefully and accurately touches on obscure urges and conflicting emotions. The tale his sixteenth-century protagonist tells is crystal clear on the one hand, as complicated as a densely-packed psychological novel on the other. So much so that after reading the book one sees even the title, *My Sovereign Love*, in a profoundly different light. Whom does that sovereign love refer to? And can that love be called sovereign at all? As the narrator summarizes soberly: 'For me he continued to be the man who shared my life, no matter how strange that may sound.'

Tomas Lieske (b. 1943) made his debut at the age of 38 with poetry in the literary journals *Tirade* and *De Revisor*. In 1992 his first prose work, *Oorlogstuinen* (*War Gardens*), gained him the Geert-Jan Lubberhuizen Prize. In 1996 his novel *Nachtkwartier* (*Night Quarters*) was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize, an award he finally received for his novel *Franklin* (2001). Magic, myth, and chance play a central role in Lieske's universe. With the successful novel *Gran Café Boulevard* (2003) he was able to find a prosaic, tempting, and accessible form for expressing the ineffable. In his historical novella *My Sovereign Love*, Lieske hones his baroque narrative style sharper than ever.

*Lieske needs only 107 pages to interweave a historical storyline, a psychological narrative, and a love affair in an expressive and convincing manner. HET PAROOL*

*Tomas Lieske admirably brings a non-historical figure to life. NRC HANDELSBLAD*

*Tomas Lieske tells the story of Marnix de Veer in an elegant and precise style, with great feeling for form. DE VOLKSKRANT*



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## An interview with Tomas Lieske

### 'Wrong-footing the reader'

by Hans Nauta

(17 March 2005, Trouw)

*translated by George Hall*

'Before you know it, the reader finds himself in your fabrication'

In every historical novel there is tension between fact and fiction. Tomas Lieske (*The Hague*, 1943) has written a novel about Philip II of Spain. The author plays with imaginary facts and true events that are occasionally improbable.

It was a small detail that Tomas Lieske read somewhere and which remained stuck in his head. It was a detail referring to the deathbed of the son of Charles V, Philip II (1527-1598): the absolute monarch dies in his own dirt.

'There lay the ruler of an empire in bed, suffering from gout, in his palace at the end of his life. Every movement hurt. He let his faeces go but no one dared to clean him,' says Lieske (1943) in his tidy house in Leiden.

This picture touches on the theme of power to which the author often refers in his work. 'One can be extremely powerful as a person and completely powerless in terms of one's own life, suffering, death.' Lieske opens his recently published novel *Mijn soevereine liefde* (*My Sovereign Love*) with the scene on Philip's putrid bed. The mainspring of the story is a three-cornered relationship, and 'not history, not the personality of Philip II, nor the relationship between Spain and the insurrectionary Netherlands. That is only the decor.'

Lieske constructed a romantic narrative around Philip's visit to The Hague in 1549. 'If you weave the historical facts through the story so that the dividing line becomes invisible, that gives your story an aura of authenticity. Before you know it, the reader finds himself in the middle of your fabrication.'

Accordingly, it becomes plausible that the Dutch mathematician, architect and instrument maker Marnix de Veer meets Philip in The Hague, is taken into his service, and becomes friends with the king. He was the person who supervised, from behind the scenes, the construction of the El Escorial Palace near Madrid. He proposed to Philip that this palace should house the Spanish royal family's dead. Although it might have been the Fleming Jean L'hermite who built a

wheelchair for Phillip at the end of his life, he did so using a design by Marnix de Veer.

At the Spanish court the Dutchman enters a relationship with the beautiful Isabel Osorio, who, in contrast to De Veer, is a genuine historical figure: Willem the Silent of the House of Orange referred to her in a written text. Their happy love affair lasted only twelve days. Then Philip steals her, conceals her elsewhere, and makes her his mistress. So there is a triangular relationship although De Veer is kept out of the picture. His great devotion to the monarch is the only thing that remains.

‘In view of the power relations and rights of ownership in the palace, Philip was within his rights. Isabel was in his service. And there was no official confirmation of the relationship between her and Marnix’. De Veer was full of resentment for the rest of his life, but served the king until the end. In his thoughts, Marnix expands those twelve days into the life that he would have wished. When he meets Osorio years later, and asks her if she would have gone with him had they found one another again, she replies that she does not know. This casts a shadow across his memories. ‘The reality that you suspect is lurking behind his testimony turns out to be completely different.’

Lieske does not present a surly, unyielding Philip II, as is the current image of him, but rather a king with sympathetic traits. A charming seducer, who did not like war and was interested in architecture and science. ‘A much more humane picture of Philip is gradually forming. The man has been dead for four hundred years, so a kind of rehabilitation is not really necessary. You can also say ‘what do I care?’ If the view of Philip II changes as a result of this book, that is to the credit of Henry Kamen, whose biography was a great source of information. Fiction is important to me: an invented story full of invented facts.’

Invented, certainly, but only after comprehensive research into the facts. Is that necessary? Lieske often places his story within a historical framework. For example, his previous novel *Gran Cafe Boulevard* is situated in the Dutch polder landscape near Roelofarendsveen and in Spain in the fifties. The novel he is currently working on is situated in Turkey in the First World War and in Istanbul in the twenties and thirties. Lieske recently visited Istanbul. ‘One person may maintain that everything should match reality. Another says that you can write what you like as long as it convinces the reader. The interesting question is: should the facts always be correct or can you simply make some things up?’

This is a question that also arises in Lieske’s novel *Franklin* (2001, winner of the Libris Literature Award), where the titular hero, a maladjusted boy, reads out

an essay in the classroom. The essay is about the carpenter's son Josja of Nazareth who wants to do a trick for his mates: he tries to float into the air. This turns out to be easier said than done and the company quickly loses interest and begins to discuss the price of fish. Franklin's teacher states that the alternative bible story is nonsense in terms of history and theology, and gives him a knock on the head. The classmate with whom he written the storey had also reacted in a very surprised manner: that was not the story as presented in the bible. 'That doesn't matter,' said Franklin, 'just write it down.' Franklin dictated the story. 'So, there you have it, in black and white.' This is actually a scene about authorship, remarks Lieske. How far can one go? To answer this question, he worked concurrently on two novels last year, not only on *Mijn soevereine liefde* but also on *De Schaduwen van Verbiest* (The Shadows of Verbiest), which is still in his drawer at home. 'It is an experiment. I wanted to study a story's power of conviction when you invent everything.'

The author Tomas Lieske: 'I would find it amusing if the reader were to accept everything as being true, only to think that the steam car is a lot of nonsense!'

**Sample translation from**

*My Sovereign Love* by Tomas Lieske  
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2005)

**Translated by Michiel Horn**

## 2

My name is Marnix de Veer. My birthplace is The Hague, where a stately mansion on Hoogstraat, close to the main road between Loosduinen and Leiden, belongs to our family. Many of its members have worked as officials at the court. I was raised by the Dominicans at their monastery on the Voorhout in The Hague; they imparted to me a love of mathematics and taught me French and Spanish. I am a mathematician and an architect, but these theoretical professions have not prevented me from learning with great pleasure to become a carpenter and structural engineer. I was born in 1528, the year that Maarten van Rossum from Gelderland razed most of the village of The Hague.

No one's year of birth is random. The century digits of 1528 constitute a triangular number. Ask a child to build a standing triangle with a few bricks and he'll put two at the bottom and one on top. If you ask him to add a layer, he'll put three at the bottom, two in the middle, and the sixth on top. Another layer higher: a base of four, ten bricks in all. Next configuration: a base of five, fifteen bricks. Three, six, ten bricks, fifteen bricks: we call these triangular numbers.

And 28, the digits of the year? Twenty-eight is a Pythagorean perfect number, because all the numbers that can be divided into twenty-eight when added together yield twenty-eight. Thus six is the smallest perfect number, divisible by one, two, and three, which added together yield six. My year of birth is a combination of a triangular number and a perfect number: this has always given me the idea that I would experience a perfect triangular relationship. I am not superstitious. When fire raged in the Grote Kerk, the Great Church, I was ten.

On September 27, 1549, Felipe, then still crown prince, visited Rotterdam, where he must surely have visited the house of the famous Erasmus. The next day the company of Habsburgs were planning to come to The Hague and pause briefly at the Count of Holland's court. It turned into a two-day visit, because Felipe wanted to hunt. The first day we were introduced to our future sovereign: a tall, quiet man with watchful eyes. He moved with great dignity and seemed

prepared to listen attentively to each of us. Not really handsome, but impressive with his massive jaw and his silent pose. Even now at my advanced age it is still not clear to me what led me to address him in Spanish. He halted. Had I learned my greeting by heart or did I really command the Spanish language?

‘They have taught me to speak good Spanish, your Highness.’

Whereupon Felipe began to question me about the importance of this court in The Hague, about how far the forest extended. I tried to inform him as best I could.

I saw that he had the habit of allowing his eyes to wander over the other guests while he formulated his questions. Searchingly, not absently; judging keenly and unquestionably with attention to detail, not self-absorbed. At the moment that the question had been put and the question mark still rang in the air, his eyes and attention returned, and during the answer they were closely focused on the speaker facing him, with so much concentration that practically every speaker became completely flustered. Finally Felipe asked me what I did.

‘I am a carpenter, Highness,’ I said with greater modesty than the facts required.

‘Carpenter?’ he repeated in astonishment, because I was surrounded by an exalted company of important officials and nobles. I explained that I was a mathematician but that I also and with great pleasure designed and built structures. Felipe looked at me for a while, nodded, and went on.

That evening I met him again in the great hall, a feast having been thrown together in all haste because the prince was unexpectedly staying at the court. He greeted me from a distance, which was of course flattering to me, and I heard him speak to the group of his attendants about the ‘Spaniard from The Hague’. There were some dishes with roasted birds, mostly pheasants from the dunes. There were a few dishes with minced beef, peppered and salted as usual, and there was a sufficiency of weak beer. I saw only a few bottles of German and Burgundian wine. Musicians tried to make themselves heard above the din. A few young

Dutch nobles were dancing in an effort to encourage the others. The atmosphere was far from cheerful.

Quite recently several honoured guests had been treated to enormous meals with stuffed marsh sheep, wild boars, Hanover pigs, and water birds from swans to snipes, but Felipe seemed too refined for that kind of feast. Other earlier guests had first been treated to beer and liquor, and late in the evening had been entertained by a group of naked women, who were carried in on colossal platters of pastries and fruits, where they served as border decorations and centre pieces. The men had eaten the contents of the platters with spitting, loud laughter, and a lot of amorous wrestling, but Felipe did not seem to be the kind to be interested in a feast like *that* either. German rulers had sent messages about a taciturn young man, philosophical rather than passionate, contemplative, not decisive, one who thought, listened, tried to be considerate and to show respect, and who seemed to have a deep-seated dislike of noisy laughter, heavy drinking, and fondling women in public. In short, a man ‘*ohne Lust und Liebe*’, without appetites and passions. So, at any rate, stated the reports that had come our way.

The stewards had become unsure of themselves, and during the brief period of preparation available to them had opted neither for an overabundance of food nor for hiring a group of hot-blooded women, with the consequence that everything was mean and meagre. As if the servants were ashamed of them, the platters were placed in the corners, where they were furtively plundered; the women in attendance looked sour and old almost without exception, and muttered behind their playing cards, commenting on these untrustworthy Spanish fellows. The Spaniards were astonished by the style of feasting in the northern Netherlands. One of them had seen Felipe address me, and he asked whether this absence of enthusiasm was customary. I offered excuses on behalf of the count’s entire court and served up a feeble story that the preparation time had been very short, that we had not known the Spanish entourage were going to stay.

What happened next was so startling that I forget all about the embarrassed mood in the hall. One of Felipe’s Spanish attendants was suddenly at my side,

martial and threatening in his ruffled collar. He announced that the prince, His Highness Felipe, wished to speak with me. He seized me by the arm and propelled me towards the spot from which the core of the Spanish company were contemplating the dying embers of the so-called feast. Of course I felt uncertain. Standing face-to-face with Felipe, I realized how great was the difference between him and a commander like Maarten van Rossum. The latter a hooligan, a roughneck who doesn't give his opponent a second look but knocks him down, simply to reach the objective he set for himself and have his own way; Felipe a young man who studies every gesture of whoever is facing him, who reads every facial expression, who hears and sees everything, including what the other would rather keep hidden. He had the ability to make clear at once that he looked right through you, into your very soul. He who had known so many servants, had listened to so many courtiers, who had stayed with German rulers and had formed friendships with some of them, even though they adhered to Luther's theses, who had seen courtiers, bowing and scraping, utter so much flattery that it nauseated him, this contemporary of mine, this man who had been both father and widower since his nineteenth year, gauged my willingness, my uncertainty, my trustworthiness, and my seriousness with his gaze and with that silence that was so typical of him.

Would I be willing to travel to Madrid with him and enter his service?

I must have stared at him open-mouthed, which earned me a dig in the ribs from the noble who had extracted me from the group of Hollanders. What I seem to recall about that moment, which proved so decisive for my life, has of course long since been coloured by many stories, other feasts, and thousands of meetings and conversations with Felipe. I do know for certain that I was bothered at that moment by a physical problem that had caused a gland right below my left ear to swell to the size of a small orange. It gave me a remarkable appearance. A surgeon was going to cut into it as soon as the infection was ripe. It is my settled opinion that the crooked, disfigured face I had in those days was what caught the prince's attention.

What services could I possibly offer that His Majesty would find useful?  
(Majesty, I said, which was quite wrong.)

I was an architect, was I not? Felipe took a great interest in northern architecture and he wanted to have skilled practitioners available in Madrid. Later I understood that highly favourable reports had been made of my professional skill and my mathematical calculations. He offered me rooms in a palace, a salary I would never attain in The Hague, and every freedom to do my work. If I were to accept his invitation I had to be ready to leave with the Spaniards at the end of the month of October when, their journey through the northern Netherlands completed, they would travel back to Brussels. I had to convey my decision the next day. A noble would meet me at the gate.

I stammered something, performed a few clumsy bows and asked permission to leave. Outside it was gorgeous September weather. All the scents of a summer day lingered, but the heat was gone. I walked across the outer garden of the court, where a Spanish military unit stood waiting, and then across the Market Square in the direction of the Grote Kerk. As I walked along the church wall, running my fingertips along those dark, moist stones, and I realized how quiet it was here, how far removed from the hubbub, I wondered how attached I was to The Hague, how much I would miss the court and the small town. It was peaceful here, you could roam around for months without being robbed. Madrid was supposed to be extremely dangerous at night, with streets you were well advised to avoid, with women who clutched at you, their confusing proposals coming down to this: they wanted to rob you of your purse, and if you bluntly rejected their proffered intimacies, they sought to cut out your liver. But my decision had already been taken. I did not easily become homesick. Our family's stately mansion was largely occupied by my brother's family. I lived with them. I was twenty-one, and my life suddenly took a totally unanticipated course.

## 3

Isabel Osorio. How am I supposed to talk about her, when even writing her name in this notebook stirs up a wave of pain and longing? I understand that I must adopt a calm tone. I must not allow myself to be overpowered by sentiments that offend against and violate every argument, every calculation. It is dangerous to reawaken in myself all that has happened. I must not tear up and throw away these notes, which can illuminate a lot, simply because I can't stand going through everything again, sickened by myself, desperate and bleating with sorrow for everything I have missed. Isabel Osorio. Suppose I say: every time I repeat her name I hear a soft melody, poignant and painful, sound out for a moment and then die away in the distance. That is a lie. I hear nothing. So much the worse. The only music is the sound of her own name. O-sounds with a sombre echo. Isabel Osorio, lady-in-waiting.

Who were the court staff? The core consisted of faithful servants who had been assigned to Felipe when he was still a youth and, aged seventeen, had married Maria of Portugal. There was his secretary Pérez, an aged and sagacious gentleman; there were his amanuensis and his physician. There were bearers; there were kitchen staff; a chaplain; valets. As well as these, there were about seventy young people around and about, the children of aristocrats. Altogether Felipe had more than a hundred people available to serve him in one way or another. Later this changed. But as long as his father ruled he had to be satisfied with these hundred. His father's household was much, much larger; compared to its costs, the 32,000 ducats Felipe spent were not an important item. Aside from those hundred personal servants, each palace had a permanent staff that stayed behind in Madrid, or Valladolid, or Toledo, when Felipe left the palace and went on his travels.

Isabel Osorio did not belong to Felipe's personal staff but was attached to the palace in Valladolid. Not as part of the household or kitchen staff, of course. She was one of that relatively large group of young-adult children of aristocrats and

other courtiers whose task was to populate the place even when Felipe was absent. Their occupation could be described in two words: be ready. In case the ruler wanted company. Or wanted to hold a discussion during dinner. Or wanted to play chess. Or felt a need to hear music. Or wanted to organize a hunting party. And so on. They lived in the palace and added to the ruler's lustre. If I calculate back correctly, I was twenty-three when I first saw her. She must have been eighteen at the time.

That afternoon I passed heedlessly through a door that until then had been closed to me, but not because curiosity or any thirst for sensation led me into territory where I did not belong or required permission to enter. I was fully convinced that I could get to the library that way. What I did not realize at that moment and became aware of only much later was now frequently, as I wandered through the palace, I happened to come upon scenes that were not meant for me, that I was not supposed to see, and that nevertheless began to influence my life to a greater or lesser extent. These scenes were not infrequently of a sensuous nature.

Now it is generally known that mysteriously erotic patterns were woven in the palaces and that secret encounters were arranged in the chambers and cellars. How great was the chance that someone wandering through the palace would disturb one of these questionable meetings? Could it be calculated? And could I, if I had added up the occasions that I had such a surprising meeting myself, calculate how often love was made in hidden corners?

It became clear to me that I had taken a wrong turn as soon as I diagonally crossed a room that was quite empty except for an old iron suit of armour, no longer in use, of course, but no doubt displayed there at Felipe's request because it had been worn by Ferdinand the Catholic or one of the legendary kings such as Henry the Impotent or Alfonso the Magnanimous. On the wall I saw a dark fresco: figures huddled together, above them in a niche a blind-folded woman. An allegorical representation whose significance escaped me at that moment. Fate; justice; impartial judgment. Who else would wear a blindfold in that sort of

depiction? In the same wall I saw an opening on the right. By going that way I might perhaps find chambers that I knew. Should I lose my way in the maze, it would be easy to find this room with the suit of armour and the fresco again.

A bit farther on I heard women talking and laughing. I tried to muffle the sound of my shoes, fitted with metal toe- and heel pieces. I had no wish to hear the hysterical shrieking that would start up anew each time I tried to offer an explanation or excuse. Almost soundlessly I approached a curtain that covered a door opening. One side of the curtain was half raised and held up by a cord. I cast a swift look into the room and immediately withdrew behind the curtain.

Can the first time you see a well-shaped young woman arouse a feeling of infatuation? A first flush of infatuation that dissolves a moment later in confusion or disappointment when the young woman speaks with ugly, coarse sounds, or utters stupid, wrongly chosen fashionable phrases, or turns out to comport herself inelegantly, or is missing an incisor, or squints, or has dull and lifeless hair, or a hair colour that in sunlight tends to a nasty, piss-coloured variety of blond? That strange tarot game of infatuation, all the enigmatic cards in your own hand, all the unknown face cards and trumps in the other's. I stood behind the heavy curtain for ten, twenty seconds. I didn't dare move. I knew very well what I had seen in there.

In the middle of the room stood a young woman. From her hips to her calves hung a rough white undergarment that was twisted together about her middle. She stood sturdily on one leg, the other elegantly advanced a bit to the side. Her upper body was bare. She had crossed her arms and pushed her elbows against her body with her hands. Her firm breasts were the most beautiful I had ever seen. Another woman stood partly behind her, on top of a table, scooping water from a barrel. I had discerned the splashing sound just before looking into the room, but only the vague notion of some kitchen activity had entered my consciousness. The woman on the table was engaged in washing the other woman's black hair. It hung down soaking wet and straight, dripping above those breathtaking breasts. It hung down on both sides of her face and over her forehead, where it formed a thick curtain.

A helmet of heavy black hair above the naked, full, and yet vulnerable body. It could be a counterpart of the metal suit of armour full of iron hinges farther on, whose helmet with visor had almost the same form, close to the head.

What should I do? I could keep on walking. Up ahead was the next room. The two women would remain oblivious to my presence. But did I want to keep on walking? I stood behind the part of the curtain that hung straight down, moving very slightly because the windows were open. The place where it was always lifted and bound up with a loop showed worn spots, and I saw that a few slits in the cloth offered an unobstructed view to a surreptitious observer. I crouched down and looked again into the room.

The young woman stood there precisely as when I first saw her. The other woman was drying her back and shoulders. The half-naked woman scarcely reacted to all the questions and remarks of the older one. She kept her mouth closed, she let the flakes of foam on her face slide slowly down. Her eyes were half closed, her glance was directed diagonally downward, as when someone can't look back but is paying attention to something that is happening behind or beside her. Above the full breasts the shoulders looked almost fragile. The collar bones stood out clearly and joined each other, together with the neck muscles, above the breastbone, in a manner that moved me profoundly. I don't know a better way of putting into words the sudden desire to protect her, to entrust her with my most intimate life, and above all to touch every part of her. I watched the foam sliding slowly down the neck muscles.

How long did I remain in that painfully bent stance? The hair was dried, combed, towelled again, combed again. And like a soft, irritating buzz sounded the constant chattering of the witch, who was busy with towels and water, accompanying all her actions with the almost rhythmical summing up of her earlier labours, delivered in a curious dialect: 'I scrub the stone floor; I clean the bird; I pluck the chicken; I wash the greens; I pump the water.' Commonplace actions in endless repetition. Melodious streaks of spoken sound, which, like an encapsulating prayer, were supposed to protect this gorgeous young woman from

unauthorized observation. I straightened my back and walked quickly past the door. In the deathly silence that fell then, as if the streaks of spoken sound were blown away and the two of them noticed, shivering, that all the windows were open, I disappeared into the next room.

I met her again two days later. Isabel Osorio. She had not been in service as a lady-in-waiting for long.

At that time I worked in the library during the day. I was going over working plans by the architects Juan Bautista and Juan de Herrera in order to write an essay for Felipe in which I would meticulously compare the work of these Spaniards with that of the architects of the northern Netherlands. Commissioned by the Royal Council, I was assessing several new mathematical books, published in Narbonne and Albi, an encyclopaedia from Heidelberg, and a method of commercial arithmetic from Montserrat. I gained the impression that I was being tested. Many envied the friendly way in which Felipe and I dealt with each other. What had started during the happy days in Brussels had simply continued here in Spain. That open-heartedness earned me countless enemies, because many saw with jaundiced eyes that the prince allowed a Hollander into his company easily while keeping untold numbers of Spaniards at a distance. I hardly needed to introduce myself to Isabel Osorio. She mispronounced my name, but she was well aware of my nationality and function, and told me cheerfully that I had forced myself into Spanish circles.

I had to laugh because of the face she pulled as she described my behaviour in this undiplomatically direct manner.

‘My name is not De Bera, but De Veer. Marnix de Veer. And what do you mean by “forced myself”?’

‘Everybody says so. Isn’t it true?’

‘If everybody says so, it’s bound to be true. But then how did I manage it? Can you tell me that?’

‘You are friendly with the Prince.’

‘That’s true. Felipe always chooses his friends himself. Right? Then you agree with that. In my case it must have happened differently. But in that case how did I make his acquaintance in the Netherlands? How did I force myself on him? He hates flatterers, so I can’t have done it with flattery.’

‘Perhaps the same way as now with me.’

‘Then perhaps we’ll become friends too. I should really appreciate that.’

She had to laugh, and she proposed that we start the conversation afresh. She began to ask with interest about my place of birth and the situation in the Netherlands. While I was talking to her, there in a crowded ballroom with courtiers suspiciously eyeing each other’s behaviour, I suddenly saw in my mind’s eye the image of her naked upper body and her head turned sideways, the way I had seen her for the first time. There was such a shameful difference between the remembered nakedness and this young woman with her modest, though richly decorated, high-necked gown that for a moment I wondered whether it had not been an apparition that I had observed in the room behind those half-closed curtains, comparable to the insubstantial women with whom the devil sought to tempt St Anthony. At least two Temptations hung here in the palace of Valladolid, in full detail.

That night I dreamed of Isabel Osorio. A landscape of the kind I had seen in Germany along the Mosel River. I was sitting on a high rock and around me stood three young women. The middle one was Isabel Osorio, and she offered me an apple. As she reached towards me, I saw her breasts move under her dress. The faces of the other two women made me take fright. After that I felt tugging at my clothes. When I looked round, I saw a small monkey, clearly with Felipe’s face, but wrinkled and shrivelled up like an old man’s.

I woke up sweating, and it took a while before I lost the anxious feeling that had been called forth by the deathly pale faces of the young women and the threatening clouds from which fire crackled. I resolutely put aside the ridiculous idea that anything devilish lurked in Isabel Osorio. Less than a week later I experienced my greatest triumph.

Felipe had arrived at Valladolid that day. Because of all the horses and the wagons that were being unloaded, the palace quadrangles seemed to have been transformed into marketplaces. Everybody was yelling at everybody else. In the kitchens you heard new voices giving orders, unknown animals shrieking in the throes of death. A second group of people had been added to the palace, the fires were bigger, the sentries were stricter, the smells of roasting meat more luscious. I had little to do that day. I had to wait for the moment that he would call me into his presence. No longer do I have a precise image of the first half of that day. A vague memory of getting in everyone's way, looking out of a window in a half-bored way at all the activity in the quadrangles. Even in the library there was hustle and bustle, because there, too, books and trunks were being carried in.

Later that day I encountered Isabel Osorio for the third time, in a hallway somewhere, in a room, I no longer know. I inhaled the fragrance that hung about her and swirled behind her. Most women at the court smell bad. They seldom bathe, and their clothes are never hung outside to air, so that they exude an odour that even if improved with rose petals or dried fruit nevertheless smells of bird droppings, or places where dogs go to pee, or old coins. Perhaps the thought of her hair being washed played a role; in any case, when she passed by (a shy nod, a twinkling eye, a light blush that could signal all sorts of feelings and that I had no direct need to interpret as positive towards me) I smelled the pleasurable fragrance that I knew from the dunes near my birthplace in springtime. The warmish, onshore wind; the gorse, the common barberry, and the thistles; the sea nearby with that tingling smell of brine; the warm, restless sand. What in passing she evoked in me, or rather, what the fragrance that hung around her evoked in me, made me slow my step and briefly close my eyes. For a moment I was at home and saw the Jacob Tower between the dunes and heard the Scheveningen seagulls. I stopped walking to let a slight dizzy spell pass. I was moved by the keen memory of those dunes and rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand. Evidently she had seen or heard me take a deep breath.

‘Do you think it smells bad here?’

She, too, had halted; she, too, had turned around.

‘On the contrary. You walked by and then I thought of the most delightful fragrance I know.’ (Cunning courtier, I thought to myself.)

‘Which one is that?’

‘The soft air in the dunes near my birthplace: burnet rose, warm sand, balmy sea breeze.’ As I uttered this description (and I needed but to name what I suddenly saw crystal-clear before me), I felt my eyes become moist and my face working, so that I had to inhale deeply through trembling lips. Right afterwards I looked as severe as possible, but there was no doubt that she had noticed the changes in my face. She had also seen that my answer was honest.

She lowered her eyes and looked down to the side, just as she had when I saw her for the first time.

‘Do you know where my chambers are?’ I had already asked this question in my thoughts, but now that the words suddenly flew out and I could not take them back, I almost panicked. I stretched out my hand to her so that, should she look at me in an offended or suspicious way, I could defend myself at once with whatever arguments came to mind. To my joy I saw that her gaze remained fixed on the ground and that she even began to smile. I felt still more joy when she said softly that she knew where my chambers were.

‘Will you come?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said simply, and she walked on, not even looking back at me.

I couldn’t get to my rooms quickly enough in order to wait there for Isabel Osorio.

\* \* \*

That night turned out to be the night I will always remember and that makes me feel that I haven’t lived for nothing. Just that one night has made my life worthwhile. This time I did not experience the guilt, the self-hatred. Until then, I had always wanted to distance myself and lock myself in after making love.

Every adventure with a woman had ended in a quarrelsome mood, nastiness, and the deliberate infliction of psychological and physical wounds. It was not that I invariably sought out bitches or common tarts, but that I was put together the wrong way myself. As soon as we were both physically satisfied, the environment began to oppress me: the unfamiliar house, the stuffy alcove, the reeking bed, and above all the suspicion that there were chamber pots close by, that other men and women were sleeping nearby, older, uglier, smelly, stewing away. Growing distaste if the woman sought to arouse me anew, so that, morose and vexed, I twisted my body into strange curves in order to retrieve my breeches from the floor, which did not at all please the beloved beauty beside me. And parenthetically: I always encountered women who, no matter how noisily they had climaxed, without fail wanted to start another round within five minutes. Often I made sure that my elbow or knee made painful contact with her body or face, so that she protested, giving me the chance to make my angry escape. Every plan for arson and theft and vandalism that has come into my mind I have devised and hatched at such moments. Carried out never. Except on one occasion, when I whacked a drunken night watchman more or less successfully on the head before throwing him into the pond adjoining the courtyard.

This sad and inexplicable sense of loathing after the fact, invariably accompanied by an unbearable kind of nausea and an uncontrollable desire to wreck everything, was absent in Isabel Osorio's case. A feeling of happiness opened my soul as wide as the red, glowing landscape we looked at from the edge of the roof the following morning. Why my mind was so calm is to this day a mystery to me. Perhaps it had something to do with meeting her in my own environment, in my own rooms. That is possible, but it doesn't explain everything.

She came quite late that evening. I had killed the time by copying the multiplication tables from zero to nine on strips of paper. I used different colours of ink for the tens and the units. Because I had realized that these tables would be

used over and over again during calculations, I was looking for a method of eliminating the division by means of shifting columns, thereby limiting everything to addition. Meanwhile I had put out a carafe of Burgundy and had drunk a bit of it, no more than two small glasses.

My rooms were spacious and well-furnished. I even had a window, and when I opened the shutters I looked out on a little clock tower and right over the rooftops and the Pisuerga to the landscape of the Castilian Plateau, the Meseta. The storks, eagles, peregrine falcons, finches and warblers were a bonus. In the same room stood the flat chests and tables on which lay my documents. The chests contained deep drawers, so that my mathematical sketches and drawings remained pristine. When the shutters were open, the tops of the chests reflected the curious light, the clock tower, and something of the landscape outside. A door in the small hall outside my rooms gave access to a roof terrace. A small section between the massive ramparts and the towers was reserved for me, and I could spend the evenings here, undisturbed and unobserved.

I heard her footsteps and almost simultaneously her tentative knock on the door. You will be surprised to hear that I led her into the room with dance steps. I, who so rarely danced, who at the court in The Hague always belonged to the group who observed and criticised the foolishness from a distance, who despised the mathematical vagueness of the stupid patterns, I took her by the hand and at that moment a melody began to sound in my head, a carefully rhythmic pattern, a silver melody that unfolded itself measure after measure and burst out in tumbling words that were not Spanish but German: *so groß, so wunderbar, so groß, so wunderbar*, so great, so wonderful. I danced with her into my rooms. She laughed and seemed to me to be blissfully happy.

It had begun to grow dark outside, the most glorious summer day of 1551 was approaching an unforgettable end, and the evening and night would go on for a long time. The room sparkled with life; everything reflected light. She stood on the exact spot from which you could see the roofs, the clock tower, and the moist tops of the two olive trees, and in that enchanting evening light, still pink from

the last of the sun and not yet grey from the cool moonlight, she took my hand and kissed me. With my fingertips I caressed her eyelids, her nose, her lips and cheeks and then slipped to her neck and by way of her collar bone to her shoulder.

She was almost as tall as I. We were made for each other. Again I smelled the summery evening dunes of my town of birth, and with a stream of Dutch words that welled up like tears from my innermost being almost by themselves, I began to avow my love. She understood not a single word and yet she understood everything. She did not laugh at my choice of language, but now and then sang back to me in a strange Spanish dialect. I saw her body stretch and bend. I saw how she made herself available to me. The dune landscape of my youth grew dim. Despite being wholly focused on her body and her reactions, at the same time I took in what could be seen in my room and even outside. My eyes saw the serene landscape of Castile and my brain combined that view with what my hands were doing. Everything was in harmony. I saw the light fade into a deeper grey. This time, I knew, I would not be surprised by the kind of face that all too often showed up between the alcove doors or in the barnyard door after I had made love, the aggrieved face of a stranger, a furious householder, a wounded soldier, a bloated drinker, or some grotesquely mutilated idiot. No smirking visage here, slowly appearing above the windowsill and making my blood turn cold, only peace and happiness and a large long-eared owl, gliding above the far hills in search for late mice or small foraging animals that never believe themselves to be safe. For a brief moment I was a small furry animal or rodent, rummaging among the roots and fallen twigs in the woods. But this time it cost me no effort to return to the reality of the dark room from the kind of distraction that during other bouts of love-making had often taken me far from the scene and sometimes helped to bring about my outbreaks of anger afterwards. Dark and fragrant and full of life and soft curves that the moonlight played on. Actually, my spirit's one escape to the free nocturnal fields outside was almost essential to give me a breather, a

brief moment to swallow down a life-sized share of joy before relishing new tokens of love, new vistas.

When it was completely dark we looked out the window for a while. Small lights on the slopes that went out but then flared up some distance over or higher up inspired us to silly tales about the inhabitants of lonely farms, about travellers stranded for the night, about angels who had made camp out there before entering Sodom and Gomorrah. The moon and stars shed sufficient light on the hills to allow us to distinguish the softly breathing trees and infer the existence of a herd of sheep sleeping in the distance. The delightful coolness that played over our naked bodies rekindled our desire for each other, and as I held Isabel Osorio in such a way that she could keep looking out over the silver-grey nocturnal landscape, I began once more to caress her and arouse her, and to implant another new tail in her, the way the pilgrims to Canterbury are wont to do. This time she could not control herself and although her cries were not loud enough to wake the entire palace, her sighs and shouts did resound over the roofs to the hills beyond. The owl flew by silently as a reminder that you don't catch prey in the middle of the night by uttering cries of triumph. Who is the prey here, I recall thinking, while I penetrated my lover as deeply as I could and hung on there, covering her back, moaning.

The next morning I awoke at first light. We had not slept on my narrow bed; instead I had fetched a couple of blankets and spread them on the floor between the flat chests. As I awoke, I felt a moment of panic and shame, but then I saw Isabel Osorio and every semblance of oppression and loathing vanished. She had rolled herself snugly into a blanket and was still fast asleep. I knelt beside her and contemplated her in the pink-coloured daylight that streamed in unhindered because we had left the shutters open.

I knew nothing about this woman. I knew only her exterior. Yet I felt not a moment of disappointment. This woman was meant for me. I tried to kiss her as carefully as possible, but in spite of the softness of my touch, in spite of the kiss

that approached the gentleness of a hedge sparrow, she awoke amazingly quickly. She tumbled from deep sleep into a state of complete clarity. She did not want to keep on lying there. She got up. I thought I noticed that the night on the hard floor had left her stiff, but she claimed to have slept very well. She picked up a blanket and wrapped it around her naked body.

Where was the roof with that beautiful view, she asked, and I indicated the door through which she could step on top of the world. When she stood there, looking out over the widest and most beautiful landscape in the world, knowing how well she was protected by the heavy ramparts, she stretched out her arms, unwrapped the blanket and as she let it fall to the floor she made clear to me that she would really like to eat something, that she wished to have it served on this roof by a Hollander, and would I just take care of it? It was our roof, our palace, our Valladolid, and our Meseta Plateau that we were going to take possession of, that we were going to consecrate. I ran to the kitchens and had the kitchen staff prepare specially for us *tortas de alma*, pastries with a core of pumpkin and honey and sugar. And tapas with salted anchovy fillets.

## 4

The joyous time with Isabel Osorio lasted exactly twelve days. The reason Felipe took her from me, aside of course from her stunning appearance, had to do with concepts like fidelity and infidelity. If Isabel and I had married during those twelve days, if she had been, before God and before Spain, my lawfully wedded wife, Felipe would have treated her with charm and a great deal of respect and would not have laid a single finger on her. But the relationship we had, an illicit love affair, was recognized by no one and did not really exist. So Isabel Osorio was merely one of the ladies-in-waiting, and she had to await Felipe's wishes and desires. I have tried at least a thousand times to make sense of all his complicated idiosyncrasies and character traits, at the same time so obvious and so contradictory.

In time I came to understand how compulsive Felipe's amorous relations were. His father was always travelling. When I saw Felipe for the first time in the Netherlands, he, who had just turned twenty-one, had not seen his father for six years. His mother died when he was twelve. Tutors to whom he became attached were removed when the results of the lessons were disappointing. And Felipe, although far from stupid, was definitely not a retentive scholar. These separations were always accompanied by anxieties and even physical distress. As a child he must have sustained a good many emotional scars. The result might have been complete isolation. People who grow up that way often become increasingly reluctant to attach themselves to others. They learn to watch out. With Felipe matters took a different turn. In increasing measure he tried to make others emotionally dependent on him. I learned in person how strong those bonds could be. We became like two brothers. Only later did I clearly understand how much my life has been driven forward by fidelity to Felipe, by an almost inexplicably strong need to be faithful to him.

He had acquired a behaviour pattern whereby he gave empathy, friendship and love, not in the first instance out of any sense of altruism, but mainly because he

could thereafter demand attention, obedience, and love in return. This had become his customary manner of establishing contact with another. Power for him meant possessing the possibility of establishing contact with millions of subjects. That is why he always listened, that is why he tried to understand the other as closely as possible, that is why, when the other was a young woman, he wanted to go to bed with her. It also had something to do with his fervent wish to be a good king. Perhaps he may have wanted to share his bed with all those millions of subjects. Next came always the moment that he, having listened to, sought to understand, loved, spent the night with the other, asked something from him or her in return. That was the essential point: the other must love *him*, and he sought understanding for his counsel, his wish, his command, his God, and his religion. At the end he asked for obedience. He was ‘Philippus Rex’, as was inscribed on all the cannons of his kingdom and of the Armada. After all, *he* had the power.

Every antagonist whom he first heard at length, offering him every opportunity to state his case, to give his opinion, to formulate his judgement, thereafter had to abide unrelentingly by the decision that Felipe took. Every woman he loved, whom he worshipped for a night, whom he was able to lift above the peaks of sensuousness (convincing evidence existed to prove that Felipe was a most exciting, entrancing, and tenacious lover), was sent away in the morning with the unstated assignment: to love *him* for the rest of his life and to adore his kingship. There are only two exceptions and one questionable case. In these cases, two-and-a-half to be exact, Felipe succeeded in entering into a love relationship of equals, a relationship in which no dismissal took place, one that was not quickly ended with unstated commands. The one half, the questionable case, was his third marriage. I am not sure of it, but it is possible that he and Elisabeth of Valois were a match for each other, however young she was at first. The two cases in which one could speak of deep mutual affection, in which Felipe, lifting himself out of his kingship, was able to offer real love, were Anne of Austria, his fourth wife, and, God forgive us all, my own Isabel Osorio.

Thus did Felipe, at a time when these passions of his were still at an early stage and in the greatest possible disorder, appropriate Isabel Osorio and compel her to belong to him, ‘*Yo, el Rey*’, completely, until her death, although it looks as though that it will be until *his* death. And he has done exactly the same with me. I can do nothing but belong to him until his death. His death will be agonizing. The time when Isabel Osorio was taken from me was just as agonizing. I am sorry to have to say that I do consider this to be a sort of justice.

\* \* \*

I must recount how everything took its course, how that happy period ended after just twelve days.

After his return Felipe had begun a reorganization of the court. He had indicated rooms and halls that had to be rearranged for administrative work and correspondence. Relations with France were plainly bad. I was very well informed about most of what was happening, of course, but diplomacy and the foreign service did not hold my interest. I did not trouble myself about them. Politics was too unstable. It had too few fixed rules and laws, I thought. Too much depended on accident. Not calculable. If I think about it later, I shall give you a splendid example. Felipe never asked me for advice about anything political, not even when war broke out between Alba and the Low Countries, a question that surely affected me deeply because of my birth. But at that time Hopperus became his advisor on foreign policy. My assignments concerned the library, specifically, as I said before, the departments of mathematics, bookkeeping, and architecture. Beyond that I was responsible for the collection of relics and for the purchase of books about the occult. Later, after the major work on the Escorial, I looked after all the apparatus needed for his transportation, his daily care and nursing. That was the work I did for him. With great love for my profession, but sometimes with great reluctance, when I begrudged him the advantage he gained from my labours.

Two or three days after his arrival, Felipe had called me into his presence. I received a list of books and objects he was interested in, to be found in various places in a large area that included Milan, Genoa, and a number of German principalities. Would I make inquiries? Next he asked me in a very friendly way how things were with me and announced that he wanted to travel to Brussels soon. I am firmly convinced that he was being honest when he complained that he missed Brussels and the Low Countries a lot. I doubt that he missed The Hague as well.

How was it with me personally and had I succeeded in passing the days pleasantly and usefully? I answered him in detail but avoided any reference to Isabel Osorio. The manner in which he regarded me I ascribed to his customary, keen attention to others. Later I realized that even then he was aware of everything.

Isabel and I had known each other for twelve days and twelve nights. We had been together every night, and during the daytime we had tried to meet as often as possible as we wandered through the palace. That last evening we had been looking out of the window at the shimmering landscape and because our clothes had got in the way as we kissed and caressed each other's backs, we had half undressed each other and were standing there with naked upper bodies. I was just engaged in loosening her skirts when I heard footsteps. No one ever came here, and if one of the courtiers had lost his way, as I had when I saw Isabel for the first time, it was clear that he would have to turn back at the door of my apartment.

The next moment the door of my study was thrown open and a servant entered, accompanied by an important member of the Royal Council. They immediately stepped aside for Felipe. There was no possibility of hiding. Our intentions were plain. I must confess that I behaved somewhat strangely at that moment, because I picked my doublet off the floor and instead of offering this garment to Isabel to cover her breasts, I calmly put my own arms into the sleeves. Felipe looked at me, remained silent for a moment and then said: 'I came to talk about a membership in the Royal Council, but I see the moment is inopportune.'

He bowed for a moment, more to Isabel than to me, and then observed her closely. Because I had reached for my doublet I stood diagonally in front of her, but I was certain that she had assumed the same position as the one in which I had first encountered her: arms over each other, elbows pressed into her body, breasts displayed like ornaments, and glance directed sideways at the floor. How long did Felipe observe and assess her? Four seconds? Six? To me it felt like an eternity. Finally he turned round and asked the servant whether the lady was connected to the court. Isabel herself answered.

‘Would you care to get dressed, milady?’

In deathly silence, with everyone watching her, my beloved got dressed. I knew that something irreparable was about to happen. I found it impossible to react. I said nothing. I did not extend a hand to help her. I stood there with a loose doublet, my chest bare, my sleeves swinging loosely around my wrists so that my arms had a helpless aspect, as though I were a child that could not do up its own clothes. When Isabel had put her clothes back on, Felipe asked if she would follow him. Merely a soft voice, no command full of meaning or one expressing anger or injured pride. He needed her for a moment. That is how it sounded. Isabel nodded. The company turned and went out of the door. Isabel did not look back at me, and the door was politely closed behind her, probably by Felipe himself.

I stood there, feeling like a tomcat that has been interrupted while making love. At the same time all desire, all aggrieved and indignant anger, rushed into my innermost self and shrunk to a small lump that would rot there for the rest of my life. What could I do? Jump at the walls? Leap out of the window into the nocturnal landscape? Follow the small procession and loftily demand that Felipe return what was mine? In what way mine? Properly considered, he had more right to her than I. I tried to reassure myself with assertions, spoken aloud, that he needed her for something innocent and that she would return, possibly even this same night. I knew that I was deluding myself. I had seen his look, I was acquainted with his Brussels amatory arts, I knew that he took whatever pleased

him. At best I would get her back, but permanently damaged, marked with an inner brand to prove that she was *his* and owed *him* love and obedience. That was the price she, like all the others, would have to pay because for just one night he had given her his love. The other possibility was that I would never see her again. This, just then, I did not yet dare to contemplate.