

Shelley and Victor Cox

“I started at the top and worked my way down,” declared Orson Welles once in an interview. You could say the same thing about my marriage. And my life.

With these words, Victor Cox starts the account, which he has typed on Luyckx’s computer, sitting flanked by two officers, on the night of 8–9th June 1998. It’s six-thirty a.m. and so quiet that you can hear the horns of the ships coming into the harbour in the distance. While Cox, exhausted, lies asleep on a bench in a cell, Luyckx is sitting reading at his desk, stirring a glass of Alka-Seltzer. He lingered until five in the morning in the Blue Note, where Sax played on top form to a half-empty room, and he’s now fighting a splitting headache.

I met Shelley on 11th June 1979 at a fancy-dress student ball at the Drama Institute, where I had been teaching for four years. In homage to John Wayne, who had died that morning in Los Angeles, I was wearing the very same blue uniform worn by the Duke in John Ford’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Including a sword. She had come with one of my students, Tony Blanckaert, who was studying film direction and now works as a plumber in the

Antwerp zoo. With her stiff black wig, her light-green eyes, her broad laugh and her dazzling white teeth, and above all her Indian costume – a short dress of imitation deerskin with fringes – she reminded me instantly of Jennifer Jones in King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*. Considering we were the only ones who looked as if we had stepped right out of a Western, it was not difficult to strike up a conversation. She was twenty-one years old and her name was Shelley Verdijck. She worked as an usherette in the Berchem Palace, that long-gone neighbourhood cinema in the Grote Steenweg. Through her job, waiting in the semi-darkness at the back of the hall for latecomers, she had seen a good deal of films, some so often that she knew the dialogue by heart. She sounded happy, smelt of patchouli, and in my eyes was the equal on the dance floor of Cyd Charisse. I was just emerging from a pretty chaotic relationship with a woman who preferred travel to film. I was ready for anything. My only fear was that she would quickly dismiss me as an old buffer as she was eleven years younger than I was. But the difference in our ages did not seem to bother her that evening. And when, pressed tight against one another, we were dancing to Harry Nilsson’s *Without You*, and she whispered in my ear, paraphrasing Mae West, “Is that your sword I can feel or are you just happy to see me?” I was completely bowled over. “Both,” I replied and asked her then and there to marry me – and felt the floor melt away under my cowboy boots.

We had both drunk quite a bit, so I cannot remember exactly what happened after the dance. But when I woke up the next morning she was lying naked beside me – and she was a blonde. Fortunately I did not have any classes on Tuesday. I carefully pulled back the sheets and sat down on the sofa opposite the bed. That morning I gazed with the eyes of a beggar at that warm, young creature that had landed like an undeserved gift between my sheets, and,