

Beginnings

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p 11-13

Here with my back to the grey sea and my feet in the sand, I look at the yellow façade of the hotel in which I bit off my tongue. The suntanned students earning a bit of extra cash are arranging plastic loungers in neat rows; a cart containing striped cushions stands at the ready. The first tourists of the day are already strolling along the promenade, dogs on leads, children gripped by the hand. The last of the revellers are on their way home, having emerged from the few remaining clubs. I spent my entire youth here and never went to one, but they've just danced the night away in them and are headed to bed in cheap B&Bs. Some sleep off their highs on the beach, killing the time between the last beat and the first train. The youth hostel closed down a few years ago, due to 'loss-making'. It is slated for demolition soon, along with the school next door. Still drunk with the night, eyes squinting in the blinding sun, they head towards their homes, the campsite, the coastal tram and to the beach where, in between the loungers and the stripes, parasols are being hammered into the ground.

Children in go-karts weave between the walkers. To them, legs, pollards, dogs and benches are nothing more than obstacles in what seems like a constant race, until the candy-pink carts, rusted underneath, are taken back to the rental place, a parent's ID card is handed over and promises are made to return. Next time we can do this again but let's go get ice-cream now, okay?

In the shadow of the seven-storey hotel, it is cooler because of the sea breeze. There won't be sunshine here until the late afternoon, after hamburgers, freshly-caught sole, 'traditionally-prepared' prawn croquettes, steak or whatever it is with chips. The yellow of the façade will become even richer. The blue metal arches, an attempt to give the three new storeys more cachet, weren't there when my grandparents ran the hotel. They were added after the building was sold to a mutual insurance company. The arches, like the ribs of a powerful maritime mammal, are the ideal lookout for the gulls waiting for scraps, lost chips, a chunk of biscuit, fresh vomit.

p 28-33

I lean forward, the weight of my head bearing down until I feel the warm sand against my forehead. I bend double and like a mole, I drive my head into the ground; it gets darker, cold, I think I can hear a voice, like over an intercom from another room. I use my hands to dig, clearing a path through countless grains, I breathe sand, my lungs fill with shells, I'm a sandbank, I scoop away tonnes and tonnes and I no longer know what is up and what is down, engulfed by the widest beach on this coast. How deep is the widest beach? Where am I swimming to? Where am I gliding to? I hear the rhythmic tap of metal on metal, spluttering and muffled voices. My fingertips touch the dry sand. Though,

sand? The grains are thicker, as though they could be crumbled into small pieces between thumbnail and fingertip. I think: atoms and I hear a voice, clear now, less muffled. I think, I'm no longer under the sand, I'm in a kitchen, I hear my name again and I have to squint because the light is bright, the light is coming from florescent tubes on the ceiling and I want to shade my eyes with my hand and I see my tiny hands, my little boy's hands and I feel the cold tile floor beneath my boy's knees and I see myself sitting there, my hands in a large metal bowl filled with breadcrumbs. I know that these crumbs were once the bread and rolls served at breakfast, sliced and then dried in the residual heat of the oven, and used to make tens, hundreds of croquettes, held by hands like pliers, careful but firm, and dipped in flour and egg and then into the breadcrumbs. The bowl is shaken so that the crust will be strong and won't break. And every week the bubbling of the pans filled with the heads and tails of kilos and kilos of prawns simmering away and the stock thickening with the roux, and then, here too: flour, egg, breadcrumbs.

Come, a voice says and then a hand gripping mine, come, and I get up and follow and I'm led to the sink, the water streams and the voice says careful. I'm given a bar of soap and I roll it back and forth and it foams and I wash my small boy's hands. I follow because come on then and I walk past the stainless steel worktops, the simmering pans on the stove and the dishwashers the size of cars. We go around the corner and I think, I know my way here. There, down those couple of steps, the dark living room where it smells of dust and ashtrays, where the video cassettes are, where even during the day the light level is that of a sunset, where I often rock myself to sleep under the oak coffee table, my hand resting on my belly. Years later I still fall asleep like that but now we turn the other corner, past the empty coke bottles in plastic crates, the bottles of wine, the bin where the coffee grounds from the espresso machine give off a sickly smell, the hum of the fridges restocked daily: water (still or sparkling?) and soft drinks with brightly-coloured labels, beer (regular lager and behind it the special beers) and the bottles of white wine. Turn another corner and my heart skips a beat – look – the wood panelling and the view out of the windows. The tables, the white tablecloths, all lined up; they form one long table in the middle of the room. On it: glasses and plates, bowls containing biscuits, and shiny jugs. Around it: people dressed in black, shirt sleeves rolled up, smoking, talking, drinking. Come, they say in slurred voices and ah, there he is. Yes, he had his hands in the breadcrumbs again. Why's he so obsessed with the breadcrumbs? What's with you and that bowl in the kitchen? What is that, have you washed your hands? I nod and say yes. Someone notices that I'm crying and I sob loudly now, I don't know why.

Now, now, they say, and apparently I'm sad because my grandmother has died and I know now that, at that moment in time, it wasn't the reason. I didn't understand, not the way I do now, what death was and how final it is. I nod, as though to reassure them and I'm handed a biscuit and through the window I see how high the sun is, the sea glittering silvery-grey and the colour of fish scales. I see the people on the beach and above them, the gulls and a kite – a colourful diamond like on a drawing I once made. A man is sitting on the beach, his face is red, his hands buried in the sand and his mouth is open; I can see his eyes between the crumbs on the back of my hand, the crumbs that have stuck to the tears that I have just rubbed away, between the crumbs and tears, I see his eyes: white, without iris or pupil, as though they are looking inside to a deep dark place.

This evening the tables will be laid and arranged as they usually are. The long table back as separate parts and the people who sat around drinking, eating and smoking will have dispersed. There is room for guests again, new guests, the retirees who will eat the bread rolls for breakfast and their crumbs for dinner, fried sole, stuffed mussels, croquettes. The people who empty the fridges of their drinks, fill the beds and use the breakfast plates. The people who keep this organism of carpets fitted over wooden floors and reinforced concrete healthy, both financially and mentally.

I'm not allowed in the lift or to play with the knife and in the winter there isn't any stale bread so the breadcrumb bowl is empty. I race along the corridors and although I'm urged to be careful, I jump over the roll of new carpet, pant my way up the stairs and along the next floor. The doors to all the rooms are open and I can hear the vacuum cleaner, the piano tuner plunking at the higher notes and I fall, tumbling head first, my tongue between my teeth. Through the impact, my chin hitting the corridor floor, my teeth abruptly crash together and that's where the memory ends.

Except for this: I smell the new carpet, I hear myself scream and gurgle. Blood fills my throat. Someone lifts me up and I want to grab at my mouth, the warm blood streams over my hands and someone is holding them. No, don't, come, hurry and someone shouts: his tongue, his tongue is off and somebody must have found part of my tongue on the new fitted carpet. Now during the big clean inside the reinforced concrete building – the Hotel – people run along the corridor with me. During an earlier winter, I'd banged my head so hard jumping on a bed that I'd needed stitches. The scar on my forehead, between my eyebrows, that looks like it was drawn by a child is a permanent reminder of that day. And now people are rushing me through the corridors again. His tongue! He's bitten it off!

In the same hospital where I was born a few years earlier, they sew my tongue back on. I don't know if I've ever talked to anyone about this myself. I know the story of biting off my tongue from other people's accounts: it was told to me again and again. I remember the worried looks and later the grimaces of those listening to the gory details, told repeatedly by people who were apparently there, but in my memory I was alone in the corridor that day, until my screams managed to drown out the vacuum cleaner and the piano. My sacrifice was claimed by many.

I remember the ice cubes and ice lollies and, although it wasn't the weather for it – sorbet and everything that was cold and liquid, for weeks on end. That hospital no longer has a maternity unit, children from Blankenberg are now born in Brugges or Knokke. You can still die there, but the same goes for anywhere.

... The corridor has been painted black, there's sand on the floor. I think: a black floor in this place, that's not a good idea, you see all the sand, it crunches and scuffs, it gets everywhere, there's no way of getting rid of it. Every time you forget about it, every time you think you've got rid of the last bit, removed the final traces, it turns up again, uninvited and unexpected, like glitter, Christmas tree needles and great loss.

The bass pounds in this submarine, bouncing from the floor to the wall, through my sternum until my heart dances to the beat. The light, first blue, then red.

We, the people who have washed-up here, are dancing. Slowly the water warms up but we don't notice, we'll only notice when it's too late. We should have left earlier, now there's no turning back. I smell us and I know: we are temporary visitors, brief flickers on a wave.

I'm the lobster quadrille. *Would not, could not, would not, could not, could not join the dance.* No one knows how wonderful it'll be to be lifted up and thrown into the sea. Who cares if we go too far, there's always another shore, *you know*, on the other side. Further away from here is much closer to there. Come, join the dance.

I'm sick of sick of sick of chasin' pours from the speakers and I nod along in time. I pretend I belong here and join in. Sweat drips from the ceiling onto our heads, we become a self-sustaining ecosystem, like those plants in glass jars – isolated from the world to make a better version of it. *And can you make it last forever* (can you?). Someone bumps into me, beer all over my arm, and I excuse myself,

out of habit. A hand on my hip swaying along with me and okay okay okay okay okay. We get our revenge on the day here together. We shine here. I see dilated pupils, mouths moving to ears and bellowing orders, glitter on collarbones, drops of sweat like dew on downy moustaches, clingfilm around fresh tattoos, lasting memories of these weeks at the beach and away from the seafront. Okay okay okay okay okay. The flashing lights burn through my eyelids, like sunlight falling to the bottom of the sea, above our heads a constellation of starfish. Okay okay okay okay.

I don't even know if I'm really here or not and yet: a tongue swirls around a straw, hands reach up, I join in, pretending to swim along, clinging to nothingness. One of the young men I saw on the beach a moment ago, dragging cushions and chairs, brings his mouth closer to my ear. I lean towards him instinctively, I see his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, I see his reddened skin and I think: a bit of good advice: sunscreen. I picture myself running my hands from his collarbone to his shoulder blade, the coolness of the cream, the glow of his skin. I smell the words, the sounds on the breeze, the vibrations in the air as the bass roars and so does he and yet I don't understand what he is saying; he puts his hand on my shoulder, I feel the warmth through the fabric. I look at him, he mouths: a light, repeating it insistently, his eyebrows go up: A light! A light? I shrug and shake my head, he smiles, turns back to the other young bodies in the secret society and I feel old and tired and wet. I think of Baz who said that friends come and go and that as you get older, you need more and more of the people you knew when you were young and also that you should be careful with advice because it's a form of nostalgia, a way of fishing the past out of the bin, wiping it off and getting rid of it again.

I've never been here before I say to no one in particular.

Out through the double doors, along the black corridor, towards the exit as the beat behind me pounds duller and duller. I can hear the sea (can you?) I think at this moment, it must be high tide and the waves are splashing against the breakers. A few more steps and my hand is already reaching for the door. I rub my forehead with the back of my hand, feeling the heat of the night, of my body and other people's bodies. I can taste them. The first light is breaking through the cracks, brighter than ever, whiter, hotter, more beneficent. I instinctively close my eyes, I know what's coming as I push open the door.

I am a summer morning.
