

# A Room in Ostend

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## 1

There's nothing more beautiful than the sight of visitors and tourists streaming out of the station and into the city on holidays in Ostend. Equally captivating is the piano music that drifts out of an open window, taking you by surprise as you walk into the city. Light on the breeze, floating, generous. In a hotel, I hear a pianist play a schmaltzy Clayderman tune and then another by a Satie. I'm so touched it's ridiculous.

I think of that photo of James Ensor posing proudly at his piano. Not to play but to show off his paintings, which are piled on and around the piano and hanging all over the walls. He looks softly into the camera. It's as if he's saying: look at me sitting here, look what I've accomplished; I've ended up where I was born.

His piano—a table, a piece of musical furniture, an easel for his art.

What is real, what is wrong or performed? What is beautiful, what is exaggerated? And what is good—good enough to help us weather the storms of life?

The tourists stream, stroll, saunter out of the station, so happy to be here. You can just see them drinking in the smell of the sea. A man carrying a plastic bag hastily buttons his jacket; he manages, but it takes so much fumbling that he almost falls over and looks noticeably embarrassed about it. Lots of women are wearing those giant scarves like the ones all the girls are wearing nowadays. One woman in a calf fur jacket, another one wearing a long pink skirt and dragging a bewildered husband. Two little troublemakers. Three waiters from the hotel school. A man in a puffy pink jacket, already drunk. The Nigerian girl keeps pulling her short skirt down lower. Still, she attracts attention. And all the others, I make up a scenario for every one of them—confessions, judgments.

As for me, I have all the time in the world. I'm not waiting for anything.

A small older man has stopped on the sidewalk. He's wearing an old-fashioned, slightly greasy suit. Thoughtfully, he looks around with a skittish look in his eyes. He seems to be waiting for something. He glances in my direction but doesn't see me, and all of a sudden, in a spastic movement, he shoots his left leg forward, throwing his entire body off balance. Clumsily he pulls up his right leg to meet his left, sending him too far, too fast, too hastily forward. It's a movement between staggering and stepping, like the first steps of a child. Now he has no choice but to throw out his left leg again, otherwise he'll fall. Gradually he breaks into a trot and is forced to keep up his speed on his short difficult legs.

Does he have a serious physical condition? Is he wounded, recovering? Are his legs painfully inflamed? Is he walking on prostheses? He manages to trot about twenty meters farther, like an insect with an uneven number of legs. Every move he makes seems to be more of a stumble. Perhaps these are the ingenious steps of a person with a physical handicap, like a skier elegantly falling off a mountain. Maybe he's infirm, as people used to say without thinking.

I woke up early in my hotel room because I heard music in my sleep. Dramatic music—tragic even. But it wasn't music at all. It turned out to be the scraping of metal and stone; the interior construction of the side wing of the train station is being demolished. A crane gently tugs at the walls with a metal fist, shattering the glass windows in controlled movements. Nothing needs to be saved or spared. The crane feasts on the building's insides. Viciously it grabs the cross-section of the wooden window frames and hurls them into the dumpster. Then the crane operator starts pushing with his metal fingers. He massages the walls and convinces the old building that it's time: "Admit it, you're tired. Admit that your time has come."

This is the ritual that Ostend has never been ashamed of. I like to watch it happening in the demolition yards. Preferably the demolition work takes place in the morning; the rubble is swiftly hauled away. All the lead, zinc and other old metals, the woodwork on the stairs, the windows, the small toxic waste, everything is sorted for the circular economy. This city has a Scandinavian craving for lightness, birch and aluminum, walls in shiny titanium white. Further down Zuidstraat, the hose of the concrete pump is already moving impatiently. By means of internal propulsion, it spits out a heavy jet of concrete with a powerful blow. The violence of the new construction.

Last night I was at a Spilliaert reception. All the artwork on display had come from private collections. Everyone seemed to know everyone. Good friends, very good friends. "It's such a small world," someone said.

The applause for the speech was polite and sincere. I sat on a bench with all the old people, some practically dead. There, in the middle, nestled between them, was me. Gaunt-looking old ladies with deep eyes and hooked noses, so thin you'd think they were gravely ill. I wondered which of them was the richest. Then I saw him: a man in a shining neon-white shirt with an excessively long red tie. He laughed and talked, but all the while his eyes scanned the audience of collectors, friends. Good friends, old friends. Men, gray and smiling like ambassadors, with their exuberant wives blocking the way to the snacks. Someone laid a hand on my shoulder amicably, but he quickly realized he'd made a mistake. He thought I was someone else.

"Oh, sorry."

"Oh, no worries."

There, in that place, it struck me how these were the tall, thin women that Spilliaert always drew, with long hair and strict faces, bulging foreheads. No breasts or hips. With a dark, angry look.

A woman strangling a small man in the light of the full moon.

A satyr with a pan flute leading goats to dance at the edge of the forest. One goat is already dancing, enchanted.

After the reception, I walked back to the hotel. I read from a novel by Jacqueline Harpman, *The Beach of Ostend*.

At two o'clock I woke up in a sweat and needed to cool down. I got up to write for a bit. What I wrote was confused, embarrassing. I didn't recognize myself, it seemed like something was going to happen.

It's still morning. After my visit to the demolition yard, I head towards the dike for some fresh air. I walk along the sea on the hard sand. Oh, how I love this city with its silvery mornings. A door opens; a dog barks from inside the house. A young mother bikes by talking to the child in the seat behind her. I eat my butter biscuits as I walk. I admire the orchids in a window, displayed like cheap trophies. All the names on the wooden letterboxes: who in the world are all these people?

## 2

You're coming. Yes, I saw you. Nothing out of the ordinary, there are others like you who come here. Walking along the dike, sunbathing on the beach, eating shrimp croquettes and the famous Liège waffles. Dancing in the Lafayette on Langestraat. Swimming naked at Sun Beach in Mariakerke, no, swimming naked after dark is not allowed.

But will you first come look at me?

Come take a look at me. Look at the other people looking, they're all doing the same thing. It's okay if you can't stay long, but first come see how all these people come here to look at me, to photograph me. I am the sea. I am what everyone is looking at.

I see you looking now too.

Someone wrote something on the beach with a stick. Can you read it, what exactly are they saying about me?

You're wondering how many people have been washed ashore in trains and cars, how many houses in Ostend have little sailboats in the windows? And pianos, so the music ascends out of their open windows. You count the city's four, five, six pastel colors. Why do they call that bridge the Tettenbrug? Sometimes you don't know what you're looking at here.

What did you come here to do actually?

I have a room ready for you. I don't know how long you'll be staying this time, but when you leave, I'll already know you'll be back. Because here's what you've determined: you don't know what you're doing here, and you don't know who you are here. You'll have to go back, you've only just arrived, and already you have to go back. You came here to see who you are in all your impatience—did you know that? No, we're not there yet.

No, you're not there yet. If you leave now, I can't promise that I'll miss you...

I said: I can't promise that I'll miss you but...

...I am the sea. I need you as you need me. I am a giant mirror. I confuse you with a photo that I have made of myself, sitting on my bed, on that wrinkled duvet, in my light white nightgown with only the skirt visible and my bare feet floating above the planks of the parquet floor.

The plaice swim within me. I multiply the fish. I am the sea. I am your mirror, your little mirror. Speak in the diminutive, we do that in Ostend, we find it congenial. Now that you've got a hotel room close to me, make yourself at home.

What do you do in your room, by the way? What is it you're writing at night?

Let me read it. Grab hold of me. I need that. I'll miss you later.

Are you having trouble catching me? I'm not something that can be caught.

It's not that I love you, but...

...no, it's not that I love you, but...

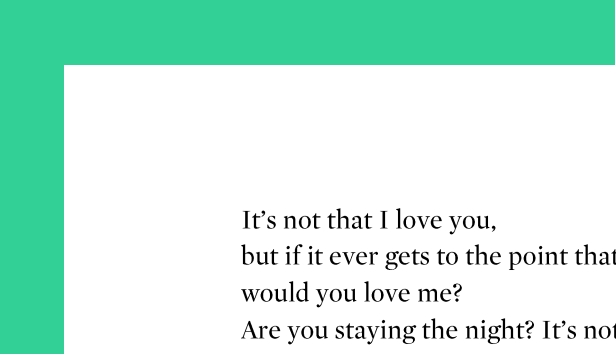
...what do I have to do to get on your good side?

I am the sea, the big mirror, and if you can't see yourself, it's because of the fog, that silvery haze above the water. I don't know exactly what that is, where it starts and where it ends. I didn't create myself, I'm not sure who did, and you don't even know who you are. What does that make me?

You can grab hold of me and interrogate me. You can look at me. Go ahead, look, leave the light on. Come and lie down close to me, you little writer you—*wait, hold on*, for a second I thought you were a painter. Come now, go to sleep. I'm that glimpse of what you saw for a moment. Though I'm deep and wide, I'm that room you're longing for.

What's up, how's it going,  
how are things?

What do I have to do to get on your good side?



It's not that I love you,  
but if it ever gets to the point that I do love you,  
would you love me?  
Are you staying the night? It's not that I'm waiting for you,  
...but since you're here, how long are staying? See how wonderful it is that you came. In Ostend  
you see it better. Do you see it, now that you see me?