

# The Ascent

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Can you see the animal running, always in the same way?  
Alessandro Baricco, *The Barbarians*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli

It was in the first year of the new millennium that a book came into my hands from which I learned that for twenty years I had lived in the house of a former SS man. Not that I hadn't received any signals; even the estate agent, the day I visited the house with him, had mentioned the previous occupants in passing, but at the time my thoughts were elsewhere. And maybe I repressed the knowledge, saturated as I had been for years with the painful poems of Paul Celan, the testimonies of Primo Levi, the countless books and documentaries that leave you speechless, the inability of a whole generation to describe the unthinkable. Now I saw my intimate memories invaded by a reality I could scarcely imagine but could push away no longer. It was as if phantoms came looming up in the rooms I'd known so well; I had questions to ask them, but they walked straight through me. There was nothing I was so loath to do as write about the kind of person who now began wandering the corridors of my life like a ghost.

I could still see the day I had noticed the house for the first time. It must have been in the late summer of 1979. I was walking through a dusty city park bordered by a row of old houses; through the gaps between the fence posts I glimpsed the back gardens. Winding through the rusty rails of one of these fences were the thick, near-black branches of a wisteria. A few late clusters of flowers hung low, sprinkled with dust, but their fragrance touched a deep place, taking me back to the overgrown garden of my childhood; curious, I stopped for a better look through the fence. What I saw was a small, neglected urban garden where a slender maple shot up among nondescript clutter; a coal shed with leftover firewood under a layer of black dust; some five metres further away, the broken window of the run-down annex; and next to that a veranda with a high arched window offering a view of the interior, all the way to the other side. I stares straight through the dark, empty rooms. The front windows gleamed with vague light from afar.

A strange excitement ran through me; I walked out of the park and made a U-turn into a small, dark street in an old part of town. There I found it: a large townhouse with a pockmarked front, into which moisture had eaten its way over the years. With its high windows and flaking front door, the building had known better days; it was obvious it had been vacant for some years. In one of the windows hung a sign, FOR SALE, wrinkled from the damp. It began to drizzle as it can only drizzle in old cities; the copper flap of the letterbox gave a brief, gloomy rattle in a gust of wind.

The district is called Patershol, named after the narrow canal that gave access to the monastery in the Middle Ages, through which the *paters*, the monks, would bring in stocks of food and, as the story goes, smuggle whores inside. The area once belonged to the Counts of Flanders; this historic part of the city is next to a twelfth-century fortress and was for centuries the home of the city's leading dynasties and the *haute bourgeoisie*. With the rise of the proletariat in the nineteenth century, many stately buildings were replaced with working-class housing. Poverty set in, and over the years the district developed a bad

reputation. The narrow alleyways and cul-de-sacs fell into decay until the student revolt of the late 1960s, when bohemian artists settled there. The house I was looking at was on the northeastern edge of the district in a side street called Drongenhof, not far from where the Leie River flows past the musty old houses, slow and dark.

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The crucial decisions in my life have rarely been calculated. Time after time, I found myself in a kind of dream state in which I felt as if an invisible hand was prodding me forward, or as if I'd become the pure fool of legend, strolling forth to meet my fate like a headless chicken. I pulled a notepad out of my worn peacoat and jotted down the telephone number. That same day I called the estate agent. Two days later I visited the building, which was owned by a French-speaking family, the De Potters. They were eager to get several buildings off their hands as soon as possible, before a planned revaluation that would increase their property taxes.

During my viewing of the house, I noticed the mildew and damp, the stale water in the flooded cellars, and here and there a mouldering piece of furniture, but also the high stairwell, the beautiful brown and pink marble of the fireplace in the parlour, the lustrous black Ardennes stone fringed with grey-veined Carrara in the long corridor, the spacious upstairs rooms with their broad floorboards... the powerful pull of an unknown life.

We went from cellar to attic, an ascent that took more than two hours because the estate agent for the De Potters had to draw up a detailed report on the state of the building, in my presence and subject to my approval. In the attic, I saw a length of rope dangling from a dusty beam; a few tiles were missing from the high peaked roof. You could see the grey city sky; somewhere I heard the flapping of pigeons' wings. I have always had a weakness for the smell of damp and decay in old houses. As a child, born not long after the war, I must have walked hand in hand with my mother past houses damaged in bombings, so maybe to me the smell of wet stone and mildew is something like Proust's famous madeleine. When you're a child and still free of memory, even the smell of decay is a source of happiness.

I bought the property on impulse, for a sum that would not even buy me a midsize car today. Since I was not wealthy, I borrowed the money interest-free from my father, promising to repay him in monthly instalments as soon as I could. In those days, many property buyers still paid cash; I can still see my father's spotless hands counting out his carefully saved bills onto the estate agent's calfskin desk blotter.

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The book is entitled *Zoon van een »foute« Vlaming*, 'Son of a "Bad" Fleming'. Everyone knew what 'bad' meant in this context; he had sided with the German occupiers in the war. The first time I saw the solemn cover, I was struck by the unconventional 'German' quotation marks. The author, Adriaan Verhulst, was a former history professor – in fact, I'd been one of his students myself. He'd earned a dazzling academic reputation, chaired the boards of cultural organizations and the public broadcasting company, written countless scholarly articles, and become well known both for his broad-mindedness and for his strict, stubborn personality. Towards the end of his life, he published his difficult confession. When I came to the passage where he savoured a memory of the house where he'd spent his childhood and mentioned that I was the current resident, I stared incredulously at the book in my hands. I had just sold the house in the working-class district of Ghent. I decided to go and see Verhulst, but before we could arrange a meeting, he died. I ran up against riddles and silence.

Fine, I thought, then I won't tell the story of an SS man; there are plenty of those already. I'll tell the story of a house and the people who lived there. But even so, it took me years to piece together the story that follows. The few surviving eyewitnesses, who are very old now, recounted their memories to me in detail, as

far as they were able. Later, after I had trawled through all my documents and notes, I understood that, oddly enough, the meticulous historian Adriaan Verhulst had never asked to view the records of his father's trial. Nothing was stopping him from facing up to the truth, but he chose not to. If he'd decided otherwise, his portrait of his father might have been less forgiving.

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## I

And that led me to put off asking questions.  
Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III

On 19 July 1898, Adriaan's father Willem Verhulst was born in Berchem, a stone's throw from Antwerp, the city where after many wanderings he died in 1975 – barely four years before I bought the house in Ghent where he'd lived for decades.

In a peculiar autobiographical fragment entitled 'Will's Youth', probably written in prison, he described it as an omen that he almost came into the world on 11 July, when the Flemish commemorate the Battle of the Golden Spurs. In that clash, which took place in 1302 and has been elevated by Flemish nationalists into a foundational myth, a few Flemish militias – aided, please note, by French-speaking Walloon soldiers – defeated the army of the French king Philip IV on the banks of the Groeningekouter, a stream near Kortrijk.

Willem grew up in a large family with nine children: four boys and five girls. He was the youngest and, from birth, his mother's favourite. His father had a diamond-cutting business in Boomgaardstraat, between Berchem and the old Antwerp military hospital, not far from Albertpark. Now, a century after Willem was born, it is an ordinary street with some fairly young trees where a few men, dressed in the Orthodox Jewish manner, are unloading a large lorry at the entrance to an underground warehouse. Not many houses have depots in back; who knows, I think as I walk down the street, maybe this is the house where the diamond cutter once lived. I ask one of the men next to the lorry if this was once a warehouse for Kosher food; the man asks me why I want to know. I could tell him I'm looking for the childhood home of an SS man, but decide it's better to keep my mouth shut.

'Boomgaardstraat' means 'Orchard Street', and I pass a nursing home for the elderly, whose name (Ten Gaarde, 'In the Garden') also harks back to that Arcadian past. The inn where Willem's father often had one too many is still here. A coachman must have lived in this neighbourhood; the smell of horse droppings must have lingered in the streets. I've seen an old etching of a romantic farmhouse here: pollard willows and snow, a thick thatched roof, fields – a scene from a bygone age. These days, slow, neverending processions of cars shuffle by, as drab as the souls in Dante's hell.

In the annex behind the house, Willem's sister Caroline, known as Carlo, ran a 'dance school for salon dancing'. On the table next to the gramophone, the shellac records lay waiting in their thin brown sleeves, each stamped with an image in blue ink. It was all very modern for those days. Sometimes all you could hear was the shuffle of feet across the sand-strewn pine of the floorboards and the young woman's rhythmic exhortations; towards the end of the lesson, once the music had played for the last time, the children fluttered in and ran back and forth between the couples in black.

One of them was young Willem.

It must have been on one of those spring evenings that the four-year-old boy collapsed to the ground. He groaned, rolled his eyes, and made sharp gestures that turned into violent convulsions. He foamed at the mouth; his sisters screamed and called out to their mother, who ran over, saw the boy writhing, tried to cushion his head, which was banging against the floor, and stuck a finger in his mouth so he wouldn't bite off his tongue. Willem was retching and hiccuping, and his eyes seemed to be bulging out of their sockets. His mother, who knew about febrile convulsions, sent one of the girls to fetch a cloth soaked in cold water and kept the boy in her grip until the spasms subsided. He slowly returned to his senses, babbling and whimpering. His mother picked him up and carried him into the house, where she laid him on the sofa. He fell into a deep sleep; when he awoke, hours later, he was given warm milk and bread with plum jam. He tried to drink but spilled half and started crying again. Another half an hour later, he wanted to use the toilet but walked into the door frame. More crying, and then the words: "I can't see anymore." His mother ran over, examined him carefully, and saw that his eyes were staring into nothing. She murmured a quick prayer, helped him up onto the wooden board of the latrine in the back garden, and placed her hand on his leg while he was peeing there. Everything will be fine, my sweet little Wimpje, she told him. Then she carried him to the sofa again, where he fell back to sleep until dusk. By then his father was home; he waved his hand in front of his son's eyes when the boy woke up. One eye followed; the other did not. Maybe that other eye will recover by tomorrow, his father said. He can see out of his right eye, anyway.

But the other eye did not recover. In the months that followed the boy walked into everything; his head was constantly covered with bumps and scratches, and his knees were often scraped. When he hurried, he fell down the stairs; he misjudged distances and tripped over curbs and thresholds; and he walked into a large crate of potatoes with a protruding nail that tore open the flesh of his left thigh. Neighbour children teased him by walking a step or two ahead and trying to confuse him, while chanting in chorus, 'Here comes little Willem, his blind eye will kill him.'

'In any case,' he later wrote with brazen irony, 'what I should have seen, I did not see; but I also saw many things I'd have been better off not seeing, and pretending I hadn't seen a thing often came in handy, even in later life – the habit was difficult to break.'

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