

# We and Me

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## We 1980

No one comes to the mountain unannounced. Friends always arrange their visits well beforehand. Always, without exception. It's one of the many unwritten rules of the housing estate on the mountain. Unexpected visitors may very well find themselves staring at a locked door, as we say, forcing them to turn away, their goal unaccomplished. Too bad. The residents of the housing estate all lead busy lives. It is in their spacious villas amidst lakes of green grass, protected by trees and six-foot fences, that they are able to unwind. Normal visits are made by appointment. The appointments are written down weeks in advance in a large ledger with sewn signatures issued by a bank—the deluxe edition for good investors—made in the year 1980. Clandestine meetings are moved to highway motels, distant vacation resorts, or private clubs with passwords.

The very idea of casually dropping in at one of the villas in the richly wooded housing estate, just for fun, is out of the question. Friends would never do such a thing, because friends respect each other. There's no reason for that kind of impertinence, say the housing estate residents. No such thing as a neighbourhood committee here, or a charter with guidelines. The men are busy senior executives who already spend too much time at meetings during the day to fill their free hours with more of the same. These are not common labourers who chair their local bridge club, or petty officials whose idea of a good time is to stand in front of a mirror and practise their monthly treasurer's report for the local marching band. Nor do the women of the housing estate see the point of such committees. They have quite enough to discuss with their own families, and they prefer to spend their free time on themselves. Although there's no formal consultation of any kind among the residents, they're in complete agreement on most matters, remarkably enough. Tacit agreement.

The working people who come to the mountain know exactly when they are expected. Gardeners, cleaning women, and manicurists all have fixed hours. Even the procession of Sunday mendicants—black men from Zaire alternating with Jehovah's Witnesses—abide by the resting community's unshakeable schedules and only come on Sundays between the hours of eleven and twelve. The blacks begin their pitch with a broad smile and milk-white teeth, immediately followed by the friendly warning not to be frightened, and in one breath they sing the praises of their little hand-stencilled books containing ancient stories about the genesis of their African tribes, which they are peddling to finance their university education in theology at some unknown or nonexistent

university in the south of France. Whether it's due to the people's feelings of colonial guilt or to the black men's babbling in a childish kind of French, quite a few books end up being sold. The Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, find themselves staring at a closed door before they've even reached the end of their opening sentence. In the year 1974, when the first villas in the housing estate were erected, a university professor accepted a copy of *The Watchtower* from a Jehovah's Witness. It wasn't long before he and his entire family were conscripted into the sect. Since then, not a single resident has been able to put up with even the opening spiel of a Jehovah's Witness. The door is closed with a vague word of thanks and a resolute nod. No, the front doors here are certainly not flung open wide for every stranger who happens to turn up. What are front door peepholes for, after all?

So it comes as a total surprise to the residents when we make our way along the sunken road to the housing estate on a Tuesday afternoon in April 1980 without anyone on the mountain expecting visitors. We climb the mountain slowly. The road is so narrow here that two oncoming cars cannot pass each other. But there are no cars. Not at this hour of the day. At half past two on a Tuesday afternoon there's no traffic from the housing estate to the real world, or vice versa.

There are only two roads leading to the estate. One of them sets out from the neighbouring backwater as a bumpy patchwork quilt of cobblestones and asphalt, patched countless times. At the end of this road the neighbourhood reveals itself, like the sea to a herd of water buffalo trotting across the Serengeti Plain: home, a final destination, a haven for quenching your thirst. The other way to get there is along the sunken road in the woods. The sunken road is an earthen trench that runs straight through the woods, a former riverbed in which an erratic asphalt road was laid. The road starts in the village and ends up in the paradise among the trees.

Potential buyers of the properties are enticed by the vastness of the lots and the fragrance of pine needles. Building permits are rather lavishly granted here. There's room for large villas with swimming pools and tennis courts at the far end of each back garden. Even horse stables can count on a friendly wink from the mayor.

The families in the lower village still vividly remember how the count sold off the woods and grounds piecemeal to the occupiers up on the mountain. Their clans have been living in the village since time immemorial. Even before the village had an official name their ancestors were here. They were an industrious folk. They set up butcher shops, cafes, and liquor stores that they passed on to their children who in turn passed them on to their children, so the only things that had to be changed on the signs out front were the first names. The villagers speak a colourful local vernacular among themselves, with lush tones and heavy vowels that the people on the mountain can't begin to fathom. There's no direct communication between the two groups. Their only form of contact is gossip and backbiting.

If a professor from the housing estate should come down to buy something he accidentally overlooked on his shopping list for the big supermarket, the villagers close ranks. When he's just within earshot they tell each other what for him is unintelligible slander, distilled from stories from the cleaning women and gardeners who work on the mountain off the books, fertilizing lawns and hanging bird houses on tree trunks at precarious heights. The mountain resident quickly purchases a loaf of salt-free, four-grain bread or a grilled chicken, jumps into his car, and returns to his family on the mountain as fast as he can.

Proceeding down the tongue of asphalt that rolls out of the sunken road, we turn onto the first street of the housing estate. All we see is one living soul, standing at the only bus stop in the entire

housing estate, a pole with a minuscule timetable screwed onto it. A golden retriever lying in an impeccable front garden glances up for a moment. The smell of pine needles and horse manure hangs in the air. Somewhere in the belly of one of the villas a radio emits a news report on the death of the great master of film, Alfred Hitchcock.

On this calm Tuesday afternoon the housewives creep even more deeply into their cocoons of calm, drowsy boredom. At number 6 Nightingale Lane, Evi Vanende-Boelens, in an advanced state of pregnancy, leafs through an interior design magazine. Ulrike Vanoverpelt-Schmidt, who lives a couple of houses farther on, takes the ironing board from the storeroom and tackles the enormous pile of laundry generated each week by her husband and three children. The men still have hours of work ahead of them. The children have a little more than one hour at their school desks before the bell rings. Most of the residents started producing children a couple of years ago. The oldest children from the housing estate are now in their first year of school. Their mothers are waiting at home for a report of their day. Evi hopes to give birth soon so she can go back to filling her afternoons with visits to the boutiques.

All the residents of the housing estate are at about the same stage in their lives. They're bringing a new generation into the world, in this paradise that they themselves discovered and developed. They live a respectable distance from each other because they respect each other's privacy. No one can see into their neighbour's bathroom, living room, or conservatory. Only the plentiful magpies see everything.

The dog follows us with his eyes but doesn't bother to jump to his feet. He just lies there in front of his kennel, chained up, his head resting on his front paws. The fresh spring air is dry and every sound carries. It hasn't rained in weeks. A pair of woodland birds break off their song. This is where we come to a halt.

We see the villa on the other side of the road, number 7 Nightingale Lane. There's no avoiding it. The villa is a gigantic, rustic edifice in dark red brick with glazed, blue-black tiles on the weathertight roof and an enormous chimney. It must have taken a great deal of time and an impressive building plan to raise this construction successfully. The house attempts to exude an air of timelessness, there in the middle of a bright green lawn full of tree stumps, oak trees, and daffodils in full bloom. This picture is exactly what Stefaan had led us to expect.

We cross the lane and approach the villa. The hallways in the house must be streets in their own right, the rooms all ballrooms. We plant our finger on the round doorbell. Somewhere deep in the house, metal strikes a gong and we hear the loud reverberation.

It takes a long time. A very long time. This, too, we expected. We know this milieu; we're aware of the time of day. In a neighbourhood like this one it's not unusual for postmen or firemen making the rounds for their annual collection to think they've encountered an empty house. But they're being watched from behind closed curtains and from indoor landings by kneeling cleaning women who are dusting the tubular limbs of the radiators, or by the lady of the house, clad in bathrobe and slippers, as she shuffles her way from the bathroom to the dressing room and looks down through the little window on the landing. The callers know it will be a long time before the locks of the fortified citadels are opened, one by one, and they stand face to face with a human being.

But now it's been a very long time. We ring the doorbell once again. The sound is loud indeed. We've come all this way to congratulate Stefaan. The Vandersandens propagating themselves: that is a happy event that we, too, want to celebrate. Apparently we're too late, or too early. After a third

ring and a long wait, when there's still no sign of life, we take a step back and search the front of the house for any movement behind one of the many windows. Nothing.

As unannounced visitors we now commit a double violation. We step away from the path to the front door and walk across the grass, past the windows. You see, there is someone home, isn't there? Sitting in a dark red chesterfield armchair is a squat figure in a flowered robe. It's unusual for someone in the housing estate to sit at the window in an armchair. The street is so far away that you can hardly see anything from the window. And gazing out at the street is the sort of thing old working-class women do. Those kinds of women don't live on the mountain.

You would expect her to be startled by the loud tap on the glass, but the woman in the chair doesn't stir. It's difficult to tell whether her eyes are closed or just sunken into her fleshy, wrinkle-ridden face. Her short legs don't reach the floor but hang in the air, motionless. Is the old woman unconscious, sitting there in the chair? Or is she dead? No, she cannot be dead. To get the old woman's attention in some other way (she may be deaf), we wave at her.

The elderly woman does not wave back. Not even a nod of the head. It's possible that her eyelids moved, like butterfly wings, but that may have been in response to a slight draught. The old woman is slouched in the chair at an angle. Just when we're about to pronounce her dead, her bosom heaves up and down. A sigh escapes from the bellows of her sturdy body. The old woman's heavy head falls forward and is hoisted back up. The head is all we need. Everything is under control. She is alive, her son is alive, and he has been given an heir. We'll come back later.

Melanie Vandersanden-Plottier pushes herself out of the armchair. With great difficulty and loud groaning she slides to the edge of the chair until her orthopedically encased feet touch the floor. The heavy body rights itself. There stands Melanie at full length, far more pitiful than impressive. Stefaan's mother is no taller than one of the rose bushes in the front garden under the bluestone window ledge that is luring the first rays of spring to shine on its buds. The roughedged little woman is as prickly as the bush and just as incommunicative. She no longer finds it necessary to reach out to the world around her. Melanie only speaks when she is of a mind to.

Sometimes there are outbursts or brief phases in which she says a great deal. She can give her son a good tongue-lashing when the occasion calls for it, for which her aged body can still work up the energy. Otherwise there's little that disturbs her enough to waste words on. She has a goodly number of obscenities at the ready, though. When she grabbed an open bag of frozen peas from the wrong end recently, strewing peas all over the kitchen floor, her uncouth words tore through the kitchen like a tornado. Down on her swollen knees, she picked up the peas from the marble floor one by one. After the last pea had been swept into the dust pan she disappeared into the cellar, only to re-emerge one hour later, thoroughly subdued, the angry words shaken out and released into the chill of the apple bin.

Her poor vision, bordering on blindness, doesn't keep her from tootling around in her Fiat. Accelerating on the curves and driving down the middle of the road rather than on the right (just to be on the safe side), Melanie cuts her trail through Flanders. Police officers can chase her all they like, but she just keeps on driving—even stepping on the gas if necessary.

She's known far and wide as a first-class grumbling curmudgeon. In all fairness, the gossips do report that there are mitigating circumstances to excuse her dreadful personality: the many tragedies she has endured. She never talks about the tragedies. She saves her peevishness for things no one can do anything about. If the sky is overcast, Melanie has the right to look so disagreeable

and accusatory that an outsider will find himself apologizing spontaneously without having any idea why. If Melanie is deeply displeased by something (bird droppings on the window or margarine instead of real butter), she closes up like a clam and pretends to be as deaf as a post for a couple of hours.

And now the woman raises herself from the expensive chesterfield armchair belonging to her son Stefaan and his wife Mieke. Her eagle eye pans the relatively empty, oversized living room. Persian rugs cover the parquet floor, pieces of antique furniture try to out-age each other, and an original Permeke farmer's wife, dressed in her Sunday best, gazes at the interior. What's missing are little figurines for cosiness, a display case for gaudiness, calendars for memory, and a few crucifixes for piety. Her son and his wife prefer to spend lots of money on superannuated antiques, because they're the kinds of overpriced furnishings that belong in a villa of this calibre. The beams over her head come from a demolished mill, the property of Mieke's father of blessed memory. The house is bigger than the parish church, and it also has a gigantic cellar and a crawl space. Even the bedrooms are heated, and all the windows are double-glazed. As if a person actually needed all that.

Anyway, Melanie knows her place. The mother who scarcely speaks two words in succession is waiting in the lovely home of her still living son. He's come a long way: made it to the mountain, with a wife of wealthy parentage at his side. Only now, at age forty, is he having his first child. God, it certainly did take them long enough.

In the meantime the sun has made its way to the other side of the house. Melanie has already been down to the cellar to calm herself and has now clambered back into her pricey but not particularly comfortable armchair. In the chill of the kitchen behind her, the thermostat kicks in. All this time Melanie has been doing what was asked of her: she is keeping watch. She is the house's security guard.

Finally the taxi turns into the driveway. Her son Stefaan jumps out of the car, leans on the doorbell, lets himself in, tears into the living room, congratulates Melanie for her grandmotherhood, and even makes an attempt to plant a kiss on her cheek. She remains seated. She doesn't move a muscle, doesn't even greet him. She doesn't ask Stefaan how it went, or whether it's a boy or a girl, or how Mieke is doing. Nor does she say a single thing about what or who rudely interrupted her sleep this afternoon. Melanie's eyes wander through the living room, making their way toward her son. Then an index finger shoots out of her solid torso. She points ominously at Stefaan's shoes on the living room rug. She has the right to blow the whistle on her son, regardless of the circumstances. It is her intention to keep raising her one living child for as long as she lives.

There are still a number of people in West Flanders who can tell the story of how Melanie brought her oldest son into the world at four o'clock in the morning. She had just enough time to wrap the little one in a sausage of linen and bind him to her bosom before relieving the lowing cows of their straining udders and spending the rest of the day working in the field. Stronger than a workhorse, that was Melanie.

During his first hours of life her oldest son filled his lungs with the moist stench of manure and the sour smell of barley gruel. Eighteen years later he turned his back on the farmer's craft. Stefaan has worked his way up with an industriousness and drive he didn't get from strangers. And now, at age forty, he's a successful manager at a large pharmaceutical firm. He has both a degree in medicine and an MBA from Wharton Business School hanging on the wall of his spacious office. He owns a villa that's still echoing with newness in the housing estate on the mountain.

Stefaan looks exhausted. His cheeks are ashen, yet he's beaming. His dark eyes sparkle, his smile is so wide it almost tears at the corners. Stefaan has been awake for twenty-four hours. Not as in 'not sleeping', not in a slumber setting like his mother. He's as hyperactive as a talking clock. One hour ago he stormed out of the maternity ward of the Sacred Heart Hospital in search of a passing taxi, calling out euphorically to the honking cars. He would never do such a thing in a normal, sober condition, but what has happened here is a wonder of the world guaranteed to make the world instantly forget all its turmoil, all the nuclear warheads and iron curtains.

'Oh, my God,' Stefaan shouts exultantly from the living room. He stumbles over his own words. 'So extraordinary, so unbelievable.' He keeps repeating it, ad nauseam. He wants the whole world to share in the towering happiness that's taken hold of him. Delirious with joy: that's what it's called. A man hugging the sky and momentarily forgetting the dark shadow. From now on, happiness will be on his side. He had already collected the outward signs: wealth and advancing status. Now there's this new dimension to add to them. 'So extraordinary,' he keeps repeating while shaking his head.

'Every birth is extraordinary,' his mother sighs. Her mouth has moved. Words have come out. Four words. She spoke at least four words, one after the other, and she isn't talked out yet. She goes on: 'Extraordinary in its own misery.' His inaccessible mother thinks he can put up with anything. All these years he has been reacting appropriately to her callousness: properly and submissively, because it was she who gave birth to him.

Today Stefaan can hardly hear her. 'A little daughter, Mama. A little girl.' He takes off his loafers, puts them in the shoe cabinet in the utility room, and runs to the ironing room. No running in the house, Mieke would shout if she were here now. Behind the door of the ironing room are a couple of cardboard boxes. He had them ready months ago. He takes the boxes upstairs and goes into one of the seven bedrooms.

He's lived this moment over and over again in his dreams. He goes to the stereo, searches for the right cassette, and chooses the most suitable track by his big hero, Bob Dylan: 'Forever Young'. He wants his daughter to stay young forever. But there's a contradiction there: in order to stay young forever she would have to die. He opens his eyes wide but it's too late; they fill with weary tears. It's all too much for him after such a wakeful night.

In the nursery there's a lovely antique cabinet for linens and clothes, as well as a child's bed that cost three times his college tuition. A royal child from the Habsburg period slept in it. On the floor is a fanciful rug featuring a pattern of purple and red giraffes against a white background. And her desk is where he'll fold the little boxes for the sugared almonds. Follow the instructions on the lid of the cardboard box to fold a compact little house out of rice paper. Stefaan's fingers are definitely not slender piano fingers. They're completely unsuitable for origami, a game played with rice paper that was adopted from the Land of the Rising Sun not so long ago. A Flemish farmer like his father would have blown his nose on rice paper like that.

Last night Mieke went over the instructions with him again, slowly and carefully. She wasn't at all sure it was going to work, yet he soon succeeded in folding a little box with straight walls and a ribbon bow for a roof. His fingers tremble from the effort. He starts in on a second box, and then a third. Stefaan looks with astonishment at how his hands have turned into skilful dancers, daring to perform such perfectly choreographed origami.

He opens a drawer in the table and takes out the felt-tip pen. He and Mieke had had quite a squabble over the felttip pen just before her water broke. Mieke said she preferred professional printing to his chicken scratches, an unreasonable demand. Stefaan writes with silver-coloured ink on the outer walls of the boxes: Sarah, 28-04-1980. Sarah. The name they chose for her together, Jewish in origin, the name of a strong, high-spirited woman. It was their shared secret for seven months. They quickly agreed on a first name for a girl. But for a long time Mieke had doubts about the child itself: whether she should go ahead with it or not, whether she and the world really needed another child. These were doubts that Stefaan couldn't relate to. Once they had made the decision it took years before Mieke finally became pregnant. Now their daughter is an indisputable fact. They have everything within reach to make sure their child, more than any other child in the world, has a golden future.

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