

To Blackbird Creek

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A Hundred and None

Whenever Hericums came by, a change would come over the whole household. My mother would be like a young girl, she'd wrap her arms around the neck of her half-brother, the house was filled with cigar smoke, my grandfather would drink *Elixir d'Anvers* with Hericums from early morning, there was much talk about the past, the table was set festively every day, Hericums would occasionally stand alone in the sunroom reading French poems out loud to himself, and then bellow with laughter, shake his head in astonishment at the poem he'd just been reading by that *knave of a Rimbaud*, slap my father on the back and call him *ne goeie garçon* – my good man. One day he came back from a walk, saw my mother busy at the stove, walked circumspectly to the pump, put his hand under it, and then came over and stroked her cheek. Well girly, he said, I've just had a pee, but I can't help it, I just have to stroke you, see? My mother shook him off, squealing with laughter. I had never seen her like that.

Uncle Hericums had formerly lived in Tournai – Doornik in Flemish, but he thought that was a bit feeble. Tournai, that was his town, a provincial town of proud standing, with a church which had *cinq tours et quatre cents cloches*, that is five towers with four hundred clocks, as he would not fail to say, whereupon we had to correct his little joke and say *quat' sans cloches, nuncle!* That is, four without clocks, because the church of Doornik, sad to say, had only one tower with a clock. So, just like those towers, which ostensibly had five hundred clocks, but in the end were four towers without clocks, in the same manner Hericums himself boomed forth. Everything appeared better, more exciting and thrilling than it really was. Uncle Hericums had something of the magician about him, that had been clear to me even as a child, and when later he met his end in that unbelievable manner (which I only found out about much later, when I was no longer a child), something absurd was confirmed, even though he probably had less of a hand in it than was intended.

Hericums had not long been a widower, but to think that this would make him a totally sad and dejected figure was a miscalculation on our part. He certainly had more time to call on us now. In fact he planned to come and stay with us for a few weeks. His wife had come from a good family, the daughter of the mayor of Rouen, beautiful and somewhat frivolous, and monolingual: she spoke exclusively *en français*. Hericums did everything for her, except refrain from courting other women. He prepared the meals, did the shopping, cleaned the house, bought her expensive stuff, whilst

tante Alphonsine sat enthroned on her favourite chair, smiling and alluring. They had a spacious, bourgeois house behind the large military parade ground, and from their veranda, at that time in the fifties, you could still see a dilapidated army tank left there from the war. They had central heating from Brussels, two stunningly beautiful daughters, who made me insanely bashful, and uncle Hericums cooked *pommes frites* – fries with apple sauce for us, so we could “learn that sweet and salt go well together, just remember that for later, little man”. Whereupon the whole gathering burst into chuckles, quite inexplicable to me.

Hericums had enjoyed an honourable military career. He walked with buoyant step across the square in Tournai, accompanied by my father and grandfather, whilst *tante* Alphonsine was taking a little siesta, yet another thing that struck me as inexplicable – at our place nobody ever went to sleep during the day.

Ah – Tournai on a Sunday, hardly any cars yet, the smell of horse manure on the parade ground, the Delft blue of the lofty lavatory, my two giggling cousins, and then that time that we crept up to the attic and came upon an intricate installation belonging to Hericums, with flasks and glasses, with measuring rods and spice pots, with thick, yucky liquid, with scrapers and scalpels, and on top of the cupboard a foetus in a bottle. The little blue monster, floating in a green murky liquid, ogled us with huge insect eyes, its thumb in its ice-cold mouth. One of my cousins wanted to grab the bottle from the top of the cupboard, but she toppled from the chair she’d just pulled up, the bottle wobbled, shook, teetered, tilted over the edge of the cupboard right above her head, and then, still wobbling a little, steadied itself and stayed put. We fled from the attic. From the little window on the highest landing, we could see my mother walking arm in arm with my father, and Hericums beside them, broadly gesticulating and smoking a cigar. One of the cousins wrapped her arm around my shoulder, whilst we were thus engaged in spying on them. And look, behind a shrub we could see *tante* Alphonsine. She was picking red currants, but it was clear that she was also eavesdropping on what was being discussed in Flemish there. We got the giggles, my younger cousin was picking her beautiful little nose as her big brown eyes sparkled at me. *Tu vois*, she said, *ma mère est toujours un peu seule* – my mama is always a little lonely, you see. I nodded understandingly and smelled her sweet breath.

We went down the stairs and, one by one, sat down on the large parade ground. I crawled on top of the old tank and made shooting noises in the direction of the two blond ponytails. When a little later they ran away, snorting with laughter and not giving me a further glance, I began to study the houses at the far end of the gigantic square. I could see all kinds of deep tracks in the mud, and in the distance, through the car-less streets, a man appeared leading a horse. Look, I heard Hericums say, that would be a good remedy for the colic in the stomach. I didn’t quite understand that. Thought it had something to do with Catholics. But how did they get into your stomach?

Tournai on a Sunday, Hericums waving us off as evening fell. Perhaps, I later thought, perhaps that was the true Blackbird Creek of my dreams. But those were the days before the Great Wall in my life.

The Pain of Love

Later on Hericums moved to Rouen. His father-in-law lived there in an even grander residence, and *tante* Alphonsine was homesick for her place of birth. Homesick for France, for the little square in Rouen, for Normandy, for the Seine, for her mother's craze for little cakes, for the notarial dignity of her father's office, for the smell of parquetry glossed with wax for over fifty years, for the gossiping with her *maman*, for a life of better social standing; she maintained her belief that she had bestowed a great gift on her husband when she granted him her youth, she who could have done so much better. I just like to see you for who you are, Hericums said to her, and she said that it was exactly the same for her.

And yet, it was not out of homesickness that she returned to Rouen, but out of vexation.

Some pretty fierce arguments must have taken place there behind that seemingly peaceful façade, behind that bourgeois Sunday propriety. Sometimes Hericums would come and stay with us for a few days at a time, in a state of great fury. The first day I would overhear heated discussions in the kitchen, in which words such as *spoilt*, *pretentious*, *ungrateful* and *ruinous* were uttered more than once. But then, due to the presence of my parents and grandfather, due to the long walks and the *compagnie*, his mood gradually became contagiously happy again, and he began to long for his *sweet little Alphonsine*, and then he would send a telegram from the post office in our village in the polder, to say he was dedicated to her forever, *toujours*, and that all the others did not count. But those others were, in the end, too much for our Alphonsine. One day she left for Rouen taking with her the whole caboodle, and let it be known that she had another *amant*, another lover.

Hericums fell to pieces, he became a shadow of his former self, sobbed and spluttered night and day, swore that he was going crazy, that he would do himself in, sent telegrams and flowers, and heard that in Rouen they were all speaking ill of him, that he was a whore-fucker, who had locked up his beauty of a wife and mistreated her. Hericums couldn't handle it. He who all his life had looked after her with an old-fashioned military sense of honour, had placed her on a pedestal, as he always maintained, was now being accused of being a filthy bastard, an oppressor of women, a nasty piece of work. One day, a man came up to him in the street and hissed: Hey, you piece of shit, you had it coming to you, didn't you? Your good lady is screwing a Frenchman now! Hericums was forced to retreat to our village for a couple of weeks, just to catch his breath in his misery. It was clear that he still worshipped Alphonsine, but apparently he had wounded her so much with one of his *folies*, that it had become unbearable for her. He cried and whimpered like a baby, and I, who had barely outgrown my childhood, thought it was the most terrible thing I'd ever seen, a big bloke, blubbing like that. It made me think of my own father under the plum tree, when in the midst of his life, he dwelled in a great, dark wood and suffered a heart attack.

Within six months, Hericums had gone as grey as a dove. He was cured of his cheerful flirtatiousness, but now everyone found that strange and morbid. He sent telegrams to Rouen, but nothing came back. It was never right again between the two of them. The children had gone to live with their *maman* in Rouen, and in the end Hericums followed them. He spoke with her parents, caught a glimpse of his Alphonsine in the corridor and then wailed so loudly, that they had to give him *un petit cognac*. Years on, whenever he saw a woman who resembled her even remotely, his eyes would take on a pathetic watery gaze, and he'd say: *yes, yes little man, salt with sweet*, and rub his blue eyes, as if he wanted to press them into his skull. Then he would noisily clear his nose,

throw his head back in his neck, and begin to talk about something else. We heard that in the end he did see Alphonsine again on a regular basis, there in Rouen. Sometimes she would come and have coffee with him in his small apartment, or they would go to the theatre together, there were reports that they'd been seen taking Sunday walks in romantic little villages in the vicinity. But it was public knowledge that he "couldn't touch her anymore". There in Rouen, like a military man at rest, he read his French classics all over again, drank liqueurs in a sedate *petit bar* two houses down, and wept for his Alphonsine.

His children no longer wanted to see him. Sometimes he would stand at the school gates, with his upright military air and watery eyes. Then he'd get told off by Alphonsine. Yes, she'd got her own back alright, and he knew it. It seems that the affair in question was practically over, even before Alphonsine had fled to Rouen, in order "to do it with a Frenchman, out of pure revenge". What's more, this particular female couldn't hold a candle to Alphonsine, as a matter of fact that was the very reason the woman had done it, to get at Alphonsine, that dazzling beauty, so cosseted by her devoted ladies' man. Hericums had begged her pardon at least twenty times a day, embraced her time and again, assured her that their love was *pour toujours* – for ever, cooked delicious meals for her, had taken her out to dinner, bought her presents and even organized a trip to Yugoslavia for her. It was no use.

On a beach in Yugoslavia, Alphonsine who was still an exceptionally beautiful and shapely woman, made a Serbian bloke lose his head over her, intentionally and in revenge. He was built like a tank and from that moment on kept pursuing her. At that time she also began making impossibly expensive telephone calls on a regular basis with a distant cousin of hers in Singapore. Hericums felt he was being treated in a most unjust manner, and at times I could hear him cursing to my grandfather that she was a *vulgar, spoilt, bourgeois bitch*.

When Alphonsine died, he finally reconciled with his family-in-law. His own *devastatingly beautiful* daughters were a bit older than me, I saw the photos he'd brought along and asked if I could have one of them. Ah well matey, he said, better leave the ladies alone if you want to be happy. Especially the ones from Rouen.

But he kept on living there. He spoke fervently about a philosopher from Rouen, a man who had written a page a day, his whole life long, little articles which according to him, surpassed the whole of French literature put together, and he confessed that he had begun just such an undertaking himself, writing down his thoughts on random subjects, and that this helped calm his *chagrin d'amour*, his pain of love, for Alphonsine.

The Military Parade Ground

I had a dream in which people built their cities underground. Everything had been removed from the overcrowded, polluted and unsustainable surfaces of the earth, and bit by bit generations of men had been working, lugging, excavating with gigantic machines in order to build these underground cities. The multi-layered nature of this labyrinth contrasted sharply with what was happening on the surface, where the last remnants of the empty, damp and long since deserted houses had been wrecked, dumped or demolished. In their place green zones were laid out. Gradually the surface of the earth changed into an artful imitation of what it once must have been. Forests, expanses of grass, wind and silence where in the previous age cars had raced at speed, trains had collided and planes crashed, where sirens had wailed and where the stench of bitumen, petrol and oil was always in the air. Everything gone, lost in oblivion, the great space under the clouds empty once more.

Underground and therefore undersea as well, everything continued at the same hectic pace, electrically powered traffic sped through gigantic metro systems, across subterranean public squares, through spaces tens of storeys below and above. If you wanted to escape from all this, you could try things out on the surface for a few days. But there barren heat held sway, lack of meaning, dependence on such factors as climate and other things that had become more and more strange and inexplicable. Underground, everything moved about like a rodent colony and above ground young, light green forests of silverbirch stretched out. Feral cats, yellow dogs and crows moved like shadows in an empty, dreamlike and seemingly unnatural landscape. But below ground, it was teeming with true life, warmth, proximity, excitement, danger, communication, in brief with human reality. The earth's surface appeared useless and eerily deserted, a place as unsuited to the fruitfulness of human activity as the space between the planets. Just as in previous ages the depth of the ocean had been a distant and illusory domain, now too the surface of the earth had become an incomprehensible place on the planet. But a third space had appeared: the hollow space of the planet itself, a space without style or variant, without overview or horizon, warm and intimate and at the same time, immeasurable. And when I awoke, I recognized in the confined busyness of the underground cities and roads, traces of my own agitated imagination: some time ago I had read about something similar, a community of long ago with the same dream of being completely cloistered from the world – namely the medieval cave monasteries of Kiev.

When I woke up I saw Hericums' friendly face, smiling at the open window. He was back from a long walk along the canal, and he told me to get up. The spring day was as beautiful as a woman, he said. Nuncle Hericums, I said whilst I was still in bed, I dreamed the whole of the earth's surface had turned into the parade ground in Tournai. When can we go back there again? Hericums was silent and looked inside with a sad and foolish expression on his face. Instead of giving me an answer, he asked me if I was still writing in my *cahier*, my notebook, that I should write down everything that I remembered of the parade ground. That seemed such a crazy idea to me, I turned over angrily and pulled the blankets over my head. I fell asleep again and dreamed that Hericums' beautiful daughters flew over the Iron Curtain with wings of enormous pleated birch seeds. I could hear them giggling and laughing on the other side. I thought that they were laughing at me and that the Tournai parade ground began on the other side. But suddenly I could walk straight through that stone wall, at first I found myself in a suffocating darkness, as if I was drowning in stones and then I surfaced as it were above water, on the other side of the wall. I was still heaving and sobbing. There was the parade ground. But it was full of light green birches, their

tops swaying like fleeting clouds of foliage, and my cousins were running ahead of me. The older one was wearing a light summer dress, fluttering up and down, I could see her legs and then suddenly the dress blew up so high that I could see her white panties. At that moment I woke up with a start, something was happening under the sheets, something hot and lovely. My mother came in and said it was unhealthy to be staying in bed so long and that uncle Hericums was not pleased with me.

Again it was such an unbelievably beautiful day, the light stretched like skin against the glass of the sunroom, Hericums was smoking a cigar in a blue haze of backlight, my grandfather was pruning his vines and my mother was singing, as she was hanging up the washing to dry. I hopped along to the village on my crutches, and in the main street I saw Margreet riding towards me on her bike. When she saw me, she braked and screeched to an impressive halt. That made her burst into laughter. I didn't know what to say, thought of the white panties in my dream and didn't hear what she was saying. But because she was picking her nose whilst she spoke, and looking at me with her big brown eyes, I was reminded again of those Sundays in Tournai, long ago, before the Great Wall even, and it was as if one of my cousins from Rouen had crept into Margreet's skin. I stood there like an idiot, and then she kissed me and said she'd come around to my place sometime soon, tomorrow afternoon if that was okay with me. I said that was fine, though the words coming out of my mouth sounded like gibberish. Then Margreet rode off again, and her dress looked like a birch seed.

There, coming along the street totally unexpectedly was uncle Hericums. He had seen me talking with Margreet, or rather that Margreet had been talking with a stuttering imbecile. Matey, he said, you've got to understand that we'll never be going back to the parade ground again. The days of *les exercices* are over. You'd better get that into your head. And he left me where I was and continued his walk along the country road. I walked home along a different, smaller backroad. And there, somewhere in the sand, I saw the letters A.H. written with the point of a sturdy stick. I knew straightaway that it was a childish sign of Hericums' secret misery: that he had once been so young as to write letters in the sand, and that now, when he had grown old and long after Alphonsine had died, he was doing it again. I resolved never again to ask him about the parade ground.

I limped into our yard. The early spring made the iron of the gate emit a heavier smell than usual.

My mother was sitting by the gas stove, it was eleven o'clock in the morning. She had stripped the sheets from my bed and shoved them into the big laundry tub. She looked like a thundercloud and snapped at me, did I want to bring some spinal cord disease upon myself, or what? Why Ma? I asked her. But she walked off to the living room, full of disdain. I myself went to potter about in the garden. And suddenly I was sure of it: that bastard of a chestnut tree was shifting itself ever so slowly but surely in the direction of our new garden. It was only a few metres away now from the hedge. Once again, just like long ago, I wanted to tug and pull at the tree, to wrench it out of the ground. Of course that was even more impossible now: I didn't even have a foothold, or rather just like the tree I had only one foothold, and one leg is no match for a tree trunk, a sturdy tree trunk at that, close to fifteen centimetres thick in fact. So I sat down under its budding branches, under its spreading bones, on the subject of which a poet once stated, that it is the greatest folly of fledgling poets to persist in comparing those flowering crowns to candles.