

War and Turpentine

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In my most distant memory of my grandfather, he is on the beach at Ostend: a man of sixty-six in a neat midnight-blue suit, he has dug a shallow pit with his grandson's blue shovel and levelled off the heaped sand around it so that he and his wife can sit in relative comfort. He has slightly raised the sandbank behind them for shelter from the August wind, which blows over the receding line of waves and out to sea under high wisps of haze. They have removed their shoes and socks and are gently wiggling their toes as they sit, enjoying the cool damp of the deeper sand – an activity that struck me, at the age of six, as uncharacteristically frivolous for this couple always dressed in grey, dark blue or black. Even on the beach and despite the heat, my grandfather keeps his black fedora on his nearly bald head; he is wearing his spotless white shirt and, as always, a black bow tie, a large one, larger than bow ties normally are, with two ends dangling over his chest, making it look from a distance as though his neck were adorned with the silhouette of a black angel spreading its wings. My mother made his peculiar bow ties according to his instructions, and in all his long life I never saw him without one of those black ties with tails like a dress coat; he must have owned dozens. There's one here somewhere among my books, a relic of a far, forgotten age.

After half an hour, he made up his mind to take off his jacket. Then he removed his gold cufflinks and put them in his left pocket. Next, he went so far as to roll up his shirtsleeves, or rather, he carefully folded them over, twice, to a point just under his elbow, each fold exactly the width of the starched cuff, and now he sits with his neatly folded jacket draped over his arm, its silk lining gleaming in the afternoon light, as if he is posing for an Impressionist portrait. His gaze seems to wander over the distant crowd, losing its way among the shrieking, splashing children, the shouting, laughing day-trippers chasing after each other as if they were children again. What he sees is something like a James Ensor painting set in motion, although he despises the work of that Ostend blasphemer with the English name. Ensor is a 'dauber', and along with 'toss-pot' and 'riff-raff', 'dauber' is the worst accusation he can make. They're all daubers, today's painters; they've completely lost touch with the classical tradition, the subtle, noble craft of the old masters. They muddle along with no respect for the laws of anatomy, don't even know how to glaze, never mix their own paint, use turpentine like water, and are ignorant of the secrets of grinding your own pigments, of fine linseed oil and the blowing of siccatives – no wonder there are no more great painters.

The wind is growing colder now. He retrieves his cufflinks from his pocket, rolls down his sleeves, neatly fastens his cuffs, puts on his jacket, and tenderly drapes his wife's black lace mantilla over her shoulders and over the lustrous knot in her dark grey hair. Come, Gabrielle, he says, and they stand, pick up their shoes, and with some effort begin the ascent to the promenade, he with the legs

of his trousers rolled up six inches or so, she with her long black socks stuffed into her shoes. Under their dark forms, I see their four white calves swinging, slow and measured, over the sand. They make their way to the bluestone steps that lead to the promenade, where they will sit down on the nearest bench, brush and pat off the sand until their feet are thoroughly clean, pull their black socks over their alabaster feet, and tie their shoes with what they call drawstrings instead of laces.

As for me, after the collapse of the warren of tunnels that I dug for my large stone marbles – my treasured ‘taws’ – I run shivering to my mother. The tide is rising again, she says, rubbing the warmth back into me as the first puffy clouds form over the dunes behind us. The wind sweeps over the dune tops, as if to muss their grassy hair, and those large, sand-coloured creatures brace themselves for the night ahead.

My grandfather, his gleaming cane of varnished elm wood already in his hand, is waiting restlessly for us to reach the promenade. Then he takes the lead; he is not a tall man – five foot six, I often hear him say – but wherever he goes, people make way. With his head erect, his black boots polished to perfection, a sharp crease in his trousers, arm in arm with his unspeaking wife and his cane in the other hand, he strides out ahead of us with slight impatience, glancing back now and then and calling out that we’ll miss our train if we don’t pick up the pace. He walks like a retired soldier, which is to say not pounding his heels oafishly into the ground, but always landing on the ball of the foot, as a soldier should, the habit of more than half a century. Then he somehow slips out of view in my memory, and overcome by the sudden radiant clarity of this scene from all those years ago, I’m so tired I could fall asleep on the spot.

Without any transition, the next image I have of him is that of a man silently weeping. He is seated at the small table where he painted and wrote, in his grey smock, his black hat on his head. The yellow light of morning shines through the small, vine-framed window; in his hands I see one of the many reproductions he tore out of art books and used to practise copying (pinning the reproduction to a board that he attached to his palette with two wooden pegs). He holds the picture in his hands; I cannot see what it is, but I see that tears are running down his cheeks and he is silently mouthing words. I climbed the three stairs to my grandfather’s room to tell him about the rat skeleton I’d found; now I quickly, quietly back away, my steps muffled by the carpet on the stairs, and close his door behind me. But later, while he’s downstairs having coffee, I slip back up to the room and find the picture on his table. It is a painting of a nude woman with her back to the viewer, a slender woman with dark hair, lying on some kind of sofa or bed in front of a red curtain. Her serene, dreamy expression is visible in a mirror held up for her by a cherub with a blue ribbon over his shoulder; her bare, slender back and round buttocks are prominent. My eyes drift to her frail shoulders, the delicate hair curling around her neck, and then back to her derriere, which is thrust almost obscenely towards the viewer. Shocked, I put down the reproduction, I go downstairs, there is my grandfather in the kitchen, beside my mother, singing a French tune he remembers from the war.

My childhood years were overrun with his tales of the First World War, always the war and nothing but the war, vague heroics in muddy fields under a rain of bombs, the rat-a-tat of gunfire, phantoms screaming in the dark, orders roared in French – all conjured up from his rocking chair with great feeling for spectacle – and always barbed wire, shrapnel whizzing past our ears, sub-machine guns rattling, flares tracing high arcs across the dark heavens, mortars and howitzers firing, billions of blistering bombs in ten thousand thundering trenches, while the tea-sipping aunties nodded beatifically and about the only thing that stuck with me was that my grandfather must have been a hero in days as distant as the Middle Ages I’d heard about in school. To me, he

was still a hero; he gave me fencing lessons, sharpened my pocket knife, taught me how to draw clouds by rubbing an eraser over shapes sketched with a piece of charred wood from the fireplace, and how to render the myriad leaves of a tree without drawing each one separately – the true secret of art, as he called it.

Stories were meant to be forgotten, since after all, they always came back again, even the strangest stories of art and artists. I knew that old Beethoven had worked on his ninth symphony like a man possessed because he was deaf, but one day a disturbing detail was added: he didn't even go to the trouble of visiting the toilet while he was working, instead he did 'his business' by the piano. Consequently – and I quote – 'the man who wrote that lovely song about all men becoming brothers did his composing next to a heap of dung'. I imagined the great composer, deaf as a post, seated in a Viennese interior with the capitals of the columns painted gold, wearing his luxuriant wig, gaiters and galoshes, next to a towering pyramid of excrement, and whenever the miraculous adagio from the Pastoral Symphony drifted through the house on one of those long dreary Sunday afternoons, while my parents and grandparents nodded off on the brown floral sofa by the radio, I would picture a mountain of crap next to a glossy lacquered spinet as a cuckoo from the Wienerwald warbled along with the woodwinds and violins and my grandfather kept his eyes tightly closed. He was a firm believer in romantic genius; his reverence for it ran so deep that he could not face the mundane world of his home and family at such exalted moments. Not until many years later did it dawn on me that he himself had spent about a year and a half next to a real dung heap in the miserable trenches, where as soon as you put your head above the parapet in search of a better place to do your business, you were punished with a bullet through the brain. Thus the things he wished to forget kept coming back, in shards of stories or absurd details, and whether hell or heaven was the subject, shards and details like these were the puzzle pieces I had to fit together before I could begin to understand what had gone on inside him all his life: the battle between the transcendent, which he yearned for, and the memory of death and destruction, which held him in its clutches.

At home, my grandfather invariably wore a smock – always the same short white or light grey garment, the length of an old-fashioned dressing gown – over his white shirt and bow tie. No matter how my mother and her mother washed and boiled those old cotton smocks, which he wore with a certain flair, they remained mottled with stains: scattered swipes of oil paint in all the colours of the rainbow, criss-crossing fingerprints, a composition of careless, intriguing smears, the raffish graffiti left there after the real work.

That real work, which he had carried out uninterrupted since his early retirement as a disabled veteran at the age of forty-five, was painting for pleasure. The small room where he stood in front of the small window day in and day out smelled of linseed oil, turpentine, linen, oil paint. Yes, even the odour of the large erasers, cut down to size with a knife, could be detected in the irreproducible mixture that gave the room its ambience, the glamour of the endless hours he passed in silence, zealously yet fruitlessly emulating the great masters. He was a superb copyist and knew all the secrets of the old materials and recipes that painters had used and passed down since the Renaissance. After the war he had taken evening classes in drawing and painting in his home city of Ghent, despite all the times his late father, a painter of frescoes in churches and chapels, had warned him against it. Although he was still doing heavy manual labour at the time, he pressed on, and just after reaching the usual marrying age, he earned a 'certificate of competence in fine-art painting and anatomical drawing'.

From his window he could see a bend in the Scheldt river, the slow cows in their pastures, the heavily laden barges chugging past low in the water in the morning, the faster-moving empty

riverboats leaving the city with a shallow draught at day's end. Countless times he painted that view, each time in a different light with a new set of hues; another time of day, another season, another mood. He painted each leaf of the red creeper from nature – apparently, art sometimes demanded exceptions to its great law of illusion – and when he copied a detail of a Titian or Rubens, he knew himself to be practised in patience, in sketching accurately with charcoal or graphite, in the secrets of mixing colours and thinning pigments, and in waiting just long enough for the first layer to dry before adding a second, which gave the impression of depth and transparency – another of the many great secrets of art.

His grand passions were treetops, clouds and folds in fabric. In these formless forms he could let go, lose himself in a dream world of light and dark, in clouds congealed in oil paint, chiaroscuro, a world where nobody else could intrude, because something – it was hard to say what – had broken inside him. His warmth and generosity were always tinged with shyness, as if he were afraid that people would come too close because he had been too friendly. At the same time, he exuded a higher, nobler strain of friendly guilelessness, and that naivety was at the core of his good humour. His marriage to Gabrielle seemed idyllic, if you didn't know better. Intertwined like two old trees forced to extend their branches through each other's crowns for decades in their struggle for scarce sunlight, they passed their simple days, which were punctuated solely by the frivolous-seeming gaiety of their daughter, their only child. Days vanished into the folds of distracted time. He painted.

The room that served as his studio, three steps up from the small landing, was also their bedroom; it is hard to believe how unremarkable it once was to live in cramped quarters. The bed was by the wall behind his small, makeshift desk, so that his wife would have something to lean against in her sleep – she slept far away from him despite their narrow bed. Clouds and folds in fabric; treetops and water. The finest paintings in his staunchly traditional body of work each contain a few shapeless smudges, strange abstract masses that he regarded as tokens of fidelity to nature, as if he were painting from the model that God laid out before his eyes and bade him unfurl in the meticulous patience of his daily work as a lowly copyist. But it was also a tribute he dutifully paid, his way of mourning the untimely death of his father, the lowly church painter Franciscus.

For more than thirty years I kept, and never opened, the notebooks in which he had set down his memories in his matchless pre-war handwriting; he had given them to me a few months before his death in 1981, at the age of ninety. He was born in 1891. It was as if his life were no more than two digits playing leapfrog. Between those two dates lay two world wars, catastrophic genocides, the most ruthless century in all human history, the emergence and decline of modern art, the global expansion of the automotive industry, the Cold War, the rise and fall of the great ideologies, the popularization of the telephone and saxophone, the synthesis of Bakelite, industrialization, the film industry, jazz, the aviation industry, the moon landing, the extinction of countless species of animals, the first major environmental disasters, the development of penicillin and antibiotics, May '68, the first Club of Rome report, rock 'n' roll, the invention of the Pill, women's lib, the rise of television and the first computers – and his long life as a forgotten war hero. This is the life he asked me to describe by entrusting his notebooks to me. A life that spanned nearly a century and began on a different planet. A planet of villages, cart roads, horse-drawn carriages, gaslights, washtubs, devotional prints, old-fashioned cupboards, a time when women were elderly at forty, a time of all-powerful priests who smelled of cigars and unwashed underwear, of rebellious bourgeois girls in nunneries, a time of major seminaries, of episcopal and imperial decrees, a time that began its long death throes when the small, grimy Serb Gavrilo Princip sent the enchanting illusion of Old Europe crashing to pieces with one not-even-that-well-aimed shot, ushering in the calamity that

would engulf the world and with it my short, blue-eyed grandfather, determining the course of his life for ever.

I had resolved not to read his memoirs until I had plenty of time for them, in the belief that the experience would fill me with the overpowering urge to write his life story – in other words, I felt I would need to be free, with nothing else to devote myself to but him. But the years slipped by, and the time approached when the inevitable hundredth anniversary of the cataclysm would release a flood of books – a new barrage alongside the almost unscalable mountain of existing historical material, books as innumerable as the sandbags on the Yser front, thoroughly documented, historically accurate, made-up novels and stories – while I held the privilege of his memoirs but was too scared to open them, didn't even dare to open the first page, in the knowledge that this story would be a farewell to a piece of my childhood; this story, which, if I didn't hurry, would be published just when readers turned away with a yawn from yet another book on the blasted First World War. I left the notebooks closed, even though I knew that this exceptionally rich and detailed account belonged in a First World War archive – knew, in other words, that my scandalous indolence was actually keeping a vivid eyewitness narrative out of the public domain. At this thought, I felt a fear of failure descend on me, making it even harder to move forward. And when I called to mind some of the stories I had once heard him tell and began to understand their true meaning and import for the first time, a feeling of powerlessness and guilt washed over me. Again I wasted precious years, diligently working on countless other projects and keeping a safe distance from his notebooks: those silent, patient witnesses that enclosed his painstaking, graceful pre-war handwriting like a humble shrine.

But during those years of stalling and suppressed guilt, something came to light that only seemed to make the matter more urgent. My uncle, having come by to help my father replace a few rotting boards in the old parquet floor of the front room, found, in the dust at the darkest end of the crawl space below, a gravestone. He called to my father to join him, and the two men crept over to the stone on their hands and knees, lighting their way with a torch. It was the gravestone of my grandfather's mother. I heard my father say, Well, I'll be damned. So that's where he hid it! They dragged the heavy stone to the trapdoor and lifted it out. Even then, I didn't fully understand the situation. My grandfather had died some ten years earlier, and I couldn't see why anyone would hide a gravestone in the furthest corner of a crawl space, in the apparent conviction that it would never see the light of day again. Years later, I noticed that my father had mounted the stone on an ivy-covered wall of the garden with heavy metal brackets, about three feet from the ground, behind the old garage where he used to park his car. For the first time, I read the inscription carefully:

PRAY FOR THE SOUL OF

CELINA ANDRIES

B. 9 AUG. 1868

D. 20 SEPT. 1931

WIDOW OF

FRANCISCUS MARTIEN

WIFE OF

HENRI DE PAUW

Two notebooks lie before me. The first is small and thick; the edges of the pages are stained red. Its cover is light-grey linen, as if it had been fitted with a pre-war tweed jacket. The second one is larger, almost the size of a modern legal pad, and has an old-fashioned marbled cardboard cover, a bit like the faux marbling he loved to paint on walls. In the first notebook, he recorded his memories of growing up poor in Ghent and some of his experiences in the First World War.

He was seventy-two when he started using the notebook – the date is 20 May 1963 – possibly so that he could go on telling the story of how his life had been deformed, since his family and relatives had grown tired of his anecdotes and would cut him off, saying, I've heard that one often enough, or I'm tired, I'm off to bed, or I have to go now. His wife Gabrielle had died five years earlier; somehow, through the act of writing, he completed his period of mourning. His firm handwriting hardly evolves in this first notebook. Usually writing in midnight-blue ink, he strings his stories together cheerfully, with a flood of memories from his days in a grey provincial town – I can still picture his Waterman fountain pens on the small, nineteenth-century dressing table that he'd painted in fanciful wood-grain patterns in the hope of making it look a bit antique. The original marble tabletop must have cracked; the clumsily attached wooden replacement is slightly too small. He wrote at this small dressing table for years, even though it was too high and he sat uncomfortably. The table, with its simple drawer smeared with colourful streaks of oil paint, is here behind me in the room where I am writing; I still keep the two notebooks in it. The second notebook, which he started because he regretted having described the humiliating poverty of his childhood in such copious detail, opens by explaining that he had put too many personal anecdotes into his first notebook and would have to start afresh, this time confining himself to his memories of the war. Besides, he had come to the end of the first notebook after only six months. He writes, *My war diary is more than half filled with tedious stories of childhood and scores of irrelevant pages. Now I shall write only about the war, truly and sincerely, not to glorify it. So help me God. Only my experiences. My horror.*

So he summarized a number of stories he'd already told, adding fresh details here and there, and went on until 1919. The second notebook contains some of the traumatic scenes on the Yser, the particulars of his wounds, his recovery periods in England, and the discovery of the fresco in Liverpool that meant so much to him. After the year he was shot for the second time, he becomes more terse, because the descriptions of his squalid life in the trenches can only be repeated so many times, the scenes of killing rats with your bare hands and roasting them over a fire in the night, the cries of wounded comrades, fumbling with rolls of barbed wire in the mud as your hands bleed, the rattle of machine-gun fire, the bursting of shrapnel shells, and the eruptions of soil and torn-up limbs. But he lingered over his third stay in England – in Windermere, in the Lake District. In the final pages of this second notebook, when he comes to the personal tragedy he experienced a year after the war, during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1919, his handwriting disintegrates. Yet despite this loss of discipline, his tone as a narrator remains surprisingly reserved. The lines in this section cross the page diagonally, teetering to the left and to the right; sometimes he returns to his old, regular script, and sometimes it all goes reeling. He must have been well into his eighties by the time he laboriously scrawled the final pages. By that stage he was writing with ballpoint pens in different colours, and his eyesight had greatly deteriorated – as far as I'm aware, he never bought a new pair of glasses in the decades that I knew him, and he may hardly have been able to see the page he was agonizing over. Seventeen years of work on six hundred manuscript pages in total. His memory was still so clear and retained so many details that I believe some form of post-traumatic clarity must have been at work; the details in the second notebook, laid beside the first one, show that he descended ever deeper into the trenches of recollection. All his life, he could not escape those details, not the fluttering leaf at nightfall just before he yet again stared death in the face, nor the image of his dead comrades, the smell of the mud, the mild wind over the blasted countryside in the first days of spring, the scraps of a blown-up horse in a bullet-riddled hedge. On the last page,

there is a stain where liquid seems to have soaked through the paper; on one side of the gap is the word *night*, on the other the word *panic*.

I gave myself time to absorb what I had read and then began numbering the pages and noting the scenes where the first and second notebooks overlapped. It took me almost a year to type up his memoirs, and in the process I gained insight into how the many events and suppressed stories were interrelated. It was taxing work: on the one hand, I was at a disadvantage, because I could not reproduce his combination of old-fashioned grace, awkwardness and authenticity without falling into mannerism; and on the other hand, when I adapted his long-winded narrative into a modern-day idiom, I felt as if I were betraying him. Even correcting the often endearing errors in his writing filled me with a vague sense of guilt. This task confronted me with the painful truth behind any literary work: I first had to recover from the authentic story, to let it go, before I could rediscover it in my own way. But time pressed harder than ever, and somewhere in my head the idea had lodged that I must finish the job before the centenary of the Great War, *his war*. My struggle with his memories.

Like a clerk, I ploughed through the hundreds of handwritten pages, cursing my own mediocre style, the result of my equivocal attempt to remain faithful to him while nevertheless translating his tale into my own experience. Then I compiled an index of scenes and key words, made a list of the places I needed to visit, had the notebooks copied for fear they might be lost, and locked them away in a fireproof safety deposit box. I spoke with the few remaining survivors, who could tell me just a few uncertain details. I asked my father, his son-in-law, who by this time was living alone in the house on the riverbank, to write down everything he could recall; still clear-headed and energetic in his nineties, he helped me find the glue I needed to put the fragments together, to take the apocryphal versions that my grandfather had cheerfully strewn about for decades, hold them up against the versions in the notebooks, and learn to see everything in truer proportions.
