

Up to Date

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An extract

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I should work you into this first sentence like a crumpled handkerchief in a fist, ready to be pulled out as a bunch of flowers by a clown. That's the way a letter should start: with the most important quality expressed in a single adjective (possibly preceded by an adverb) followed by the name of the addressee, not necessarily the most-widely-known name, but often a variant that suggests the relationship between sender and recipient. A salutation like that is impossible here for many reasons. This isn't a letter anyway, so I'm excused from the obligation to address you and summarise you – summarise us, and what happened between us. In this kind of writing other rules apply.

I am in a house you know well, in the exceptional company of someone with whom you once cohabited. Not for so very long perhaps, but long enough. How well can a person get to know a cat? How much time must pass, how many shared events before you're close to an animal, and what remains of that closeness once you've said goodbye? For the coming month I will live in this house which is not mine, but belongs to friends who are on holiday for four weeks. As they can't take Mousekins on holiday with them, as there are plants in the house that need water, as fish can't survive in a fishbowl without fresh water and flakes of artificial food, because the post would accumulate and fill the letterbox, obliging the postman to return the letters to sender, and because I don't mind living somewhere else for a while, even if it's just the outskirts of Ghent, the city I usually live in the middle of – for all these reasons I will be living here for the month of August, just as I lived here last August, together with Mousekins, and together with you, in this house, in these rooms. You're sure to have memories of it.

I am looking out through the first-floor window at the elongated brick building that borders the small garden and provides a backdrop to the solitary tree, lawn and shrubs, a building which starts and finishes left and right outside my field of vision, and which is crowned by a series of asymmetric angular roofs that follow one after the other like the teeth of a saw – a gigantic saw that can separate a piece of land from the world. Beyond it there are tall spruce trees, close together, almost a wood, and in the distance I can see a block of white flats rising up just over the strip of trees. This is the very edge of Ghent, just before the satellite towns begin and the real estate bears a different label. "It's lovely to be able to live here together with you and Mousekins, and it's a beautiful house where I will be able to work really well – but unfortunately, it's suburbia," as you

put it, finding an angle that kept surprising me, “suburbia, whereas Ghent, all things told, is an extremely suburban city that doesn’t even deserve the name city. In Ghent, nothing happens or at most one thing at a time. If you’re in Ghent and you feel like doing something on a particular evening, you only ever have one option, unless you are in extraordinary luck, then you have two. I won’t say a word about the quality of that option or options, but the restriction alone makes Ghent uninhabitable as far as I’m concerned, a city that thinks its residents have no desire to choose and chooses for them. That’s why Ghent is a city of phases, and in those phases it’s clear what’s happening, and anyone who doesn’t like what’s on offer during those phases is expected to leave town. At fixed intervals the city’s various consumer groups appear like insects when the temperature reaches a certain level – students, tourists, alcoholics, bike racing fans, environmentalists, foodies, hikers, marathon runners – always just in time to await the starting signal for their event. There is no place in this city for things that happen without a starting signal. That’s why Ghent is unlivable, for me, and Ghent’s suburbia, if possible, even worse. Nothing ever happens here, but all the residents think they live in a city. What are these people actually doing here? It is in suburbia, especially the suburbia of Ghent, that life becomes truly pointless. What’s weird and insufferable is that people here don’t realise it, but keep each other trapped in a web of socialising and friendliness. It’s good for us to have a chance to stay here for a few weeks, but that really is long enough.”

Last year’s sojourn in this house didn’t last long. In fact, the only time we stayed somewhere together day after day without breaking it off prematurely was our very first holiday together. We’d met each other years earlier at a mutual friend’s birthday party, but it wasn’t until much later that you made it clear that you wanted to spend more time with me by convincing those same mutual friends to take us on holiday with them, although there was no *us* at that stage. That was the purpose of organising that successful trip years ago: to call *us* into being, to make sure that from then on there would be an *us* at every moment of the day because we, if only in our thoughts, would be in constant conversation with each other, consulting, asking permission, exchanging opinions and verifying desires. After receiving the invitation from our mutual friends, it occurred to me that their offer might be a cover for your intentions, and although I modestly wrote that suspicion off as a pipe dream, it refused to die, and may have even led to me accepting the invitation out of curiosity. In any case you later confirmed that you had set your sights on me, unreservedly and with inexplicable determination, and that your strategy, despite minor setbacks here and there, went completely as planned – something you saw as one of the greatest accomplishments of your life, at least at the moment you retrospectively apprised me of it.

During that holiday, we stayed on a boat that was moored just off the coast of Crete in a bay and belonged to the family of our mutual friends. When our group, consisting of a couple and two acquaintances who were meant to become a couple on that very holiday, got off the plane, I discovered that my luggage had not travelled along with us in the hold. I stood next to the carousel and waited.

The black rubber plates didn’t stop, but remained empty. Although nothing else appeared, I still wasn’t prepared to accept that my bag had definitely been lost, until you approached me with a smile and said that I could use your clothes for a few days. The boat we were staying on remained anchored almost the whole time – only once did we spend a half-day pottering around on the sea without any particular destination, just to give the engine a run.

The rest of the time the boat bobbed around more or less on the spot, without moving more than a few centimetres to the left or right, forwards or backwards, but not staying motionless for more than a few seconds at a time either. Day and night it was gently shaken, like a pram when a baby needs to be rocked to sleep. Slowly during that holiday it became clear to me that your desire existed outside of my imagination and slowly I gave it more and more chance of survival.

One evening I was all alone and floating stretched out on a lilo, when I first heard then saw you paddling out from behind the boat until the transparent lilo with your body on it was floating parallel to my lilo and my body. I looked at you and then returned my focus to my reflection in the water, which I touched now and then with a little tap of my fingers, sending a concentric shiver through it, as if through the sun-baked air of the desert. Unable to make eye contact, you stretched your hand out over the channel between our lilos and took hold of mine. For minutes it was either your hand in mine or mine in yours, as if we were studying molluscs or shellfish on the beach and trying to wash away the sand.

We still hadn't looked at each other. The lilos bobbed closer together, the sun had begun its daily descent. It was obvious what was going to happen between us, but it wasn't yet obvious how.

Then we heard someone calling us from the boat. Our first names sounded in quick succession, one after the other, and when the call went up a second time the conjunction "and" had been added between them. We looked at each other, first via the water surface, then for real. It turned out my luggage had arrived at the airport. Every day, the scene from the lilos was repeated like an echo, in different positions and circumstances, in the double bunk we slept in in the hold, under an olive tree that didn't have a single leaf left and provided hardly any shade, at the table in the messroom, by a sea-level porthole – until finally, in a small air pocket, we kissed for the first time, in the plane, just after it had pushed its nose into a dark layer of cloud to begin its descent to Belgium.