

CHANTAL VAN DEN BRINK

Letters from my Soul | 2

About being stuck in an old form,
and searching but not finding,
until the floodgates open.



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and searching but not finding,
until the floodgates open.

1999-2005



Uitgeverij Bierman van den Brink

The abused child is unable
to develop an inner sense of safety.

Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Healing



Eerste druk september 2013

Tekst: Chantal van den Brink

Omslagontwerp en opmaak: Hemels van der Hart b.v.

Omslagfoto: Archief van de auteur

Foto auteur: Wilco van Dijen

Druk: Wilco b.v.

Verspreiding Nederland en België: Scriptum b.v.

ISBN 978-90-818172-1-9

NUR 402

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For our daughters,
the pattern is broken.

I.

In love

It's the end of July 1999 and the rain pouring down from the uniformly grey sky creates an intense longing for sun and far away beaches. The sprouting greenery is weighed down by heavy raindrops and water gushing from a ramshackle pipe streams across the concrete drive way in front of my feet before disappearing with a loud gurgle into a pit further down. I shiver as my sturdy rain jacket and heavy fleece cannot prevent the cold from creeping into my bones. This ugly brick garage, which was undoubtedly attached to the main house without the approval of the building aesthetics committee, has the humidity level of a mushroom farm. We, the new owners of this country estate, are sitting on two plastic folding chairs between the green stained doors, staring gloomily at the property we have just acquired.

Country estate *De Viersprong* in Woudenberg consists of a country style house erected in an eclectic style, an accompanying coach house and a Swiss chalet on five hectares of land. Designed as an estate for a rich aristocratic family in the second half of the eighteenth century, it was originally accessed along sandy paths but these days the three buildings stand in a half circle, in the armpit of the junction of two secondary roads. The noise of the passing cars contrasts sharply with the quiet of the park behind the buildings where stretches of grass, rhododendrons and beach

avenues turn into vast deciduous and coniferous woods. In short, an ideal place to live and to establish our office but first we will have to deal with fifty years of long overdue maintenance.

‘Where in Heaven’s name do we start?’ The notepad on which I intend making a list of necessary renovations, lies unused in my lap. Of course we had known that the estate was in a deplorable condition but now that the previous owner’s furniture has been removed, leaving faded spots, cobwebs and remnants of superfluous household goods, the extent of the problem really becomes clear. Furthermore, all that wetness emphasises the decay, just like rubbing salt into a wound makes you feel the pain more.

‘It doesn’t look all that good, does it?’ Wim grins, his black hair sticking to his forehead. ‘We are the owners of a property with potential, darling, definitely for us.’ Resolutely he gets up and holds out his hand to me with a determined glimmer in his eyes. ‘Come on, let’s take a look around.’

I let myself be hauled up, encouraged by his energetic attitude. He’s right, there’s no point in having a mope.

Via the dark storage space right underneath the living room of the main house we ascend the long wooden spiral staircase, up three floors to the loft where we find a narrow corridor. In a large square room to the right, a plastic window seems to have been casually glued in the wall by means of a layer of PUR foam. The spectacular view of the park is the only beautiful thing I can discover in this room. ‘It’s worse than I remember, everything is dirty. And it stinks.’ With one finger I carefully open a cupboard door. A black mouldy shower curtain dangles from just three rings on a rickety rail above an equally mouldy, yellow shower cubicle. Ugh! ‘Can you imagine someone actually washing in here?’

Wim sticks his head over my shoulder. ‘Well, that’s what happens when you don’t install ventilation. There is only one thing to do, pull it down, which goes for everything on this floor.’ Gesticulating widely he paces through the maze of panelled cubicles. ‘We take everything out and we start anew.’ His father worked in the construction industry, just like his older brother. Even though my husband did not follow in their footsteps, he did acquire quite a lot of knowledge from them.

I open my notepad and start a list of items that Wim lists at high speed. Then he points to the dormer in the corridor. ‘That has seen better days and the roof needs to be checked.’ He draws my attention to a brown spot on the edge of the ceiling.

When I have two pages full of notes, we move down to the first floor. Wim is leading again. ‘Shit!’ I hear his exclamation, followed by a heartfelt curse when I myself am still halfway down the spiral staircase.

I make a dash down the last steps towards him. ‘What?’ Then I see that in the long corridor rainwater is flowing down the walls and the faded carpet is soaked. Shocked I put my hand over my mouth. ‘What on earth..?’

He pulls a window open and peers up. ‘That gutter is overflowing.’ I open the door of the adjoining bedroom and to my horror the long wall against which there used to be a bed, is also black with mould, although it’s dry at least. Quickly Wim checks the other rooms on this floor and fortunately they are also dry. However in the large living room downstairs water is also seeping along the walls, not as bad as on the first floor, but enough to cause serious damage, the plaster on the walls is drenched and there are puddles of water on the old parquet floor. Defeated I stand and look. ‘Shouldn’t we put buckets down?’

My husband laughs at my naïveté. ‘There’s no point. We can’t

do anything here. I'll call a plumber this afternoon. Hopefully it will stop raining.

A little later we cross the parking space, armed with a large umbrella. Parking space? The whole ground, with spaces between the trees which will just about fit a car, resembles nothing more than a large mud bath. Wim says what I think. 'This is impossible, of course. Can you imagine our clients getting out of their cars in bad weather? It'll ruin their fancy shoes for sure.' I make a note to put down paving. 'We will also have to tackle those trees as they are top-heavy with gnarled offshoots.' He takes a branch in his hand. 'The lower branches I can do myself, but for the crowns we need a tower crane, otherwise we run the risk of a branch falling on a car.'

'Or on a head', I say and make a note, tree surgeon. So it continues wherever we look, the weeds at hip level, no terraces or pavement, or lighting.

The coach house on the other side of the parking space has been patched up, albeit with the most unsuitable building materials for a historical building, but it's usable. We decide to live there for the time being. At least we can shower and cook.

The chalet proves to be in the same bad state as the main house. The electrical installation is pre-war, the sanitary fittings calcified and the heating system works on underground oil-tanks. There is nothing, but absolutely nothing usable in it.

The fourth building on the estate, the forester's dwelling, an immense barn with a tiny house attached, we don't even bother to examine. That'll have to wait till later. We have quite enough on our hands already.

'Can you believe that they let it get into this state?' I throw my note pad on the backseat of the car. 'Unbelievable that people actually lived here!'

In the evening after dinner I work out my notes; main chores, sub-chores, timeline and a first estimation of the necessary budget. The summary makes me swallow hard. 'What have we let ourselves in for?' I place the list, four A4 sheets of paper, in front of Wim on the kitchen table. 'It's a lot more work than we thought. We'll never be finished before Christmas'. The office in Laren has been cancelled as from 1 January and I count the intervening months on my fingers. 'We only have five months.'

He examines the list attentively. 'Yes, it's tight. But with smaller contractors the process will be quicker. First we need to pull down most of the interior and I know who to ask. When that mess is out, we can take stock of the situation. In the meantime we will look for the right people to do the job.'

The rest of the evening we discuss the renovation in detail and decide to focus on the most necessary maintenance. We cannot afford a total renovation anyway. The estate will be listed as a monument in a few years, which brings all kinds of subsidies and deduction opportunities within reach but that is no use to us right now, later perhaps.

'Honey, something totally different, did you speak to Ilse recently?'

I put the papers in my lap and shake my head. 'Not since she moved. I don't really know how to deal with the fact that she's changed so much.' I picture the face of my dearest friend whom I met at the same time as Wim at the Visions' 'empowerment' training in 1994. A few months ago she moved in with her boyfriend in Germany and I know I should be happy for her, that I should go and see her and maintain our friendship. But I feel numb. Since this new relationship started, I hardly recognise my friend and the change goes deeper than her appearance. She talks and behaves differently but when I address it, she gets

angry, whereas before we could always talk about anything. 'Her leaving feels like an amputation.'

Wim takes my hand. 'I know you find it hard, but you should let her know how important she is to you.'

I kiss his cheek. 'I'll call her,' I say, but I know that I will not. Sometimes I'm like a tortoise and when I feel uneasy for whatever reason, I retire deep into my shell.

A few days later the son of a good friend and his mates start the demolition work. The main dwelling alone produces twelve 10-cubic containers of waste and the trucks are driving back and forth all day. Ceilings, walls, floors, partitions, with the exception of the historical elements, we strip it all. Underneath the lathed wall we find old newspapers from the last century with notes made by the then carpenters, behind the hard-board sheets we discover old doors and underneath an ugly as sin layer of self-levelling mortar, we find the original tile floor, all pleasant surprises. Only the discovery of a bee colony behind the roof boarding is not so useful, and the local bee-keeper has to come to move the population.

Wim and I clear out our house in Huizen and move into the coach house. On the top floor we arrange our bed, clothes and other necessary items, leaving all other moving boxes stacked downstairs next to the sofa against the wall. Our temporary accommodation feels like a cross between a holiday home and a transit shed while meantime, one tender after another falls on the mat, thick piles of paper with specifications of conditions and prices. Each night we study the small print and list the alternatives.

'We'll have to borrow some more.' With the last printout of

my spreadsheet in my hand I lean next to Wim against the kitchen table.

He looks up from a tender that needs to go out tomorrow. "You'd almost forget we also have a business to run. Is it that bad?"

I bite my lip. 'Worse, we're short of a few hundred thousand.'

He puts the tender aside. 'Then we'll have to see what we can drop.'

Together we analyse which parts of the renovation are strictly necessary. But after two hours of heated discussion and striking out there is still a large gaping hole. 'What we do, we at least have to do right.' I fill our mugs. 'A historical building like this deserves to be restored properly.'

'Then our fixed charges will go up.' As a contribution to the mortgage, Soulstation will have to pay a steep monthly rent.

I pick up the documents and put them in my work bag. 'Yes, that's true, but we can't go back now, in for a penny, in for a pound. Just imagine how beautiful it will be. Can't you see us sitting by the large open fireplace in the drawing room, with clients or colleagues? The beauty, the peace and the space is an investment that will more than pay for itself.'

That the purchase of *De Viersprong* is a large gamble, we know perfectly well. That our young company has to almost double its annual turnover, we know as well. But what we have seriously underestimated is the weight of pressure we have taken on our shoulders. Love is blind.

Fortunately our account manager at the bank does not see any problems and within a few weeks the additional finance is arranged, in fact this is a time when everything appears to happen on demand. As soon as we get the green light, the fitters, bricklayers, plasterers and painters start work, each in succession and on an average day there are no less than sixteen men on site.

The exterior looks like a battle field, the buildings surrounded by piles of sand and earth wherever you look. A contractor digs away two meters of earth next to the outer walls to make them impermeable from the outside, the removal of the oil tank at the back, leaves a man-sized hole the length of an average sailing boat and large machines chip away old layers of earth for new paths and a parking lot.

Like some kind of anti-riot squad we get through this period and the telephone never stops ringing with various problems that need attention all at the same time. We plan, plea and have heated discussions with the workmen, make overtime and race back and forth between Woudenberg and Laren where Soulstation is running normally. It seems insane and almost impossible but we are determined to succeed and go all out to achieve our ambition. Nobody asks us whether we are doing the right thing. Family, colleagues and friends express their admiration at us having the guts to chase this dream and if they have any doubt, then they keep it to themselves. Only my mother, who comes to have a look in the middle of the worst mess, objects. 'You're really letting yourself in for a lot, Chantal.' With raised eyebrows she steps over a freshly dug ditch in the parking lot. 'I hope that you know what you're doing.'

'We really have carefully calculated it, Mum. Yes, you're right, it is an enormous step. But if it goes wrong, we can sell the estate again, can't we?' I speak from my experience of the constantly growing real estate market. My former house and Wim's flat in Amsterdam sold quickly and made a profit at the time.

'You take it too lightly, really. If the market collapses, you're left holding the baby.' My mother started her business during an economic recession years ago and she speaks from experience.

But I'm deaf to everything except what I want to hear.

Fortunately, there is also a distraction. In the early fall I have the almost two-year old son of a friend come to stay with me; his recently divorced mother is going away for the weekend so I make a plan starting on Friday, when I take him to the Zoo to have a look at the monkeys, on Saturday I put him in his buggy to go shopping in the village and on Sunday he comes with us to the sauna. On Wim's back he glides through the water in the pool, shouting with joy. But of course the little boy doesn't think much of the hot rooms, so, wearing his rather tough-looking bathrobe, I put him on a rug on the floor in the relaxation room and settle myself in a reclining seat.

Tenderly I look at the little person who's playing so attentively with his cuddly toys. 'Look, nice!' he proudly shouts now and again. Alternated with shrieks of 'yees, aaah, booh...'

I would have been seven months pregnant now. For a moment I put my hand on my flat belly and a pang goes through my heart. If all had gone well, our baby would have been born in November. Did the child's soul know that such a large renovation was awaiting us? Would that be the reason why I had a miscarriage? Guess work, of course. If you know, tell me. I take a bottle of apple juice from my bag and give it to the little boy next to me. He takes it with two hands and starts drinking with greedy gulps.

Will I ever become a mother? According to my guides, next year is the moment and if so then lot will have to change in my life. Now I am in charge of my timetable and there are no demands on my time apart from my job and this renovation, however if I think about how many hours I work currently... But never mind, it's a phase. When the renovation is finished, it will get quieter, that is if the renovation ever ends and I admit there are moments when I have my doubts.

But of course all turns out well, or at least it seems so for a while. When my 'child-for-a-weekend' has long been returned to his mother and the trees start losing their leaves, the first results become visible. Of course the most important improvements aren't even noticeable; a completely new electric installation, insulated walls, ditto floors, new window frames where necessary, a (partial) new roof with new gutters. But we are in strict compliance with the aesthetic norms of this era; a mix of modern comfort and historic elegance.

At the end of November in the middle of a working day and during the last phase of the renovation, I walk into the coach house and put my bag on the sink when my telephone rings. Absent-mindedly I pick it up, expecting that Wim wants to fine-tune something with me. But it's my gran, an intensely sad and weeping gran. 'Chantal!' her voice is so hoarse that I can hardly hear her. 'Chantal, will you please come and help me? They left me like this and I don't know what to do!'

With the telephone pressing against my shoulder, I put the kettle on. My throat is as dry as parchment. Left? Who? Where? Then it dawns on me. She is supposed to have moved into a different flat this week. 'Popoe, calm down and tell me what's going on.'

Sobbing she tells me her story. The movers, as agreed, neatly packed her things and moved them to her new place but they do not unpack or organise her room.

'But don't the people of the home help you?'

'No, they think it's a family thing and your mother refuses to come.'

My blood boils, how can my mother be so unkind? How can she desert her mother, her blind, old mother who can only walk

with the help of a stick? Yes of course, her mother, my gran can whine a bit and be quite annoying at times but really, under the circumstances? In my mind I scan my programme and realise that going to her aid will cause problems as I have to prepare something and my body is screaming for some rest. But it seems I have no choice, what has to be done, has to be done. 'I'll be with you in an hour.'

I call Wim, who is at the office in Laren, and explain the situation. 'Can you come with me?'

'Not really, but we can't leave her like that. I'll see you there.' Such a sweetheart!

We find my gran, hair dishevelled, in a state of collapse. She is in her chair in a corner of the room, surrounded by piled up moving boxes and randomly placed furniture, so full there is not enough room to swing a cat. Next to her chair I sink down on my knees and put my arms around her frail body. 'It'll be all right, darling.' She smiles bravely through her tears. 'Tell us how you want it.'

'Well, I thought my bed in that corner,' starts my gran. She may be blind and frail, but her mind is as sharp as ever. However, I quickly realise that this new room is half the size of her former home so she can't have everything in it. Cautiously Wim and I start moving things around until the best pieces are given a place. Next to her chair on the right hand side will be a second velvet armchair and in the middle the small oak table that witnessed so many long talks over numerous glasses of sherry. Against the long wall is the heavy blanket chest which used to be full of linens I loved to touch as a child. Above it the carpenter will mount a Gobelin tapestry and on that same wall at a place will be found for her collection of tin plates and her oil paintings. Over the

bed will be my favourite, a soft green painted panel with white roses. Finally, we squeeze a small table to the left of her chair on top of which we install her telephone with the extra-large buttons which she can find by touch. And of course, her stereo, most important because now that my gran can't watch television anymore, she likes to listen to radio broadcasts, preferably about world politics. She often catches me out when she draws me into a discussion about our government's latest decisions. She knows much more about the world at large than I do. The other furniture we put in the storage space for now.

After that we unpack the boxes. Crockery, linen, clothes, we find a place for everything as best we can, working late into the evening and grabbing a quick bite at the snack bar. My gran chatters away. 'Did you know that my sister just had an operation?' I don't have to answer the question as she automatically starts relating all the details. She comes from a family of five girls, of which two are still alive and she has found it very hard, losing her loved ones. She herself has been close to death a couple of times, the last time a few months back, when she was rushed to hospital with a severe case of pneumonia. But a creaking gate hangs on, and she surprised everyone by recovering completely within one week. Then she changes the subject. 'Never have children, Chantal. There is no point. Look at me. Your uncle is always abroad, luckily he telephones, but I never see him. And I don't hear anything from your mother.' Every visit it's the same tune but no matter how much I feel for her, I have little influence on the situation. So we let her talk, we listen, nod and in the meantime work as hard as we can.

Before we leave, we help her into the freshly made bed. Carefully she lowers herself onto the edge, one hand tightly gripping her stick. Her wrinkled face is pale, she must be dead

tired. 'You go along,' she says softly. 'I'll manage now.'

'We'll come back at the weekend,' I promise and we both give her a big kiss.

In the car going home, I can't let go of the image of my gran on the edge of her bed. How hard it must be not to be able to see where you are, to get your bearings by touch and to be dependent on other people's help, while your children don't bother about you. How did it come to this? But I know that there is no point in talking to my mother about it.

Nevertheless, I can't help myself on the phone a few days later. 'The movers left her just like that, Mum.'

My mother responds coldly. 'Well, those people simply don't unpack. Didn't the house help her?'

'No. But surely you could have done something?'

'I wouldn't think of it, Chantal. She's always harping at me, I never do anything right.'

'But Mum,' I start my protest.

She doesn't give me the chance to finish my sentence. 'Mind your own business! This is between her and me.' After which she swiftly changes the subject. 'Are you coming this way soon? I want to rehang that large picture and hoped that Wim could do it for me.'

I heave a sigh. The last thing I feel like now is an obligatory family weekend. 'Not for some time, Mum, we have our work cut out for us here.'

But she will not accept that. 'You don't know what it's like, Chantal, always having to do things on your own. I don't have a man beside me. It's easy for you to talk.'

Typically, being my mother, she applies double standards. She has never helped us, ever. Wim's family is always ready to help

us, but mine always fail. Help unpack, clean up, paint or wallpaper? Just hire someone. God, how much I hate her sometimes but I suppress my irritation as if I join in the tirade, it will just get worse. So I remain polite and start talking about the renovation. 'It's really getting somewhere, Mum. With a bit of luck we can move in soon. Do you want to come for dinner at Christmas? Then you can see how it has turned out.'

But my mother refuses to commit herself. 'I don't know yet, I first want to hear what your brother's plans are. I'll call you.' And she hangs up.

With the receiver against my chest I stare out the window. In front of the coach house Wim tackles the park's overgrowth with a group of friends. Man-high bramble bushes, all sorts of tangles and numerous Christmas trees are knocked down. The rented shredder consumes the trunks as if they are matches. The men, relaxed with each other, laugh freely, unrestrained, now and again warming their hands at the fire. How much I would like to laugh so uninhibitedly but I know I never could laugh like that, act funny, move freely in a group. I make them some tea. At least I can make myself useful.

When I walk to the kitchen, I am aware of the dull pain in my heart. I had hoped that my mother would soften up by taking part in the healing training at Snowlion. My friend Ilse, who now lives with her partner Franz in Germany and my healer Meta tell me that this did indeed happen. They both study at the same training and even sleep with my mother in the same room. According to them my mum shows a different, vulnerable side, during the exercises at school. But to me she is still her usual distant self.

'It's time to heal this,' my guides tell me, when I write in my journal that evening. *'Next spring you will be pregnant again. If you heal this*

pain now, you won't pass it on to your child.'

Yes, that is quite true. What parents do not process in their lives, they pass on to their children. Of course I know that and I don't want to hurt my child. Hopefully my eldest will be a boy, so the pattern won't repeat itself. 'I've been angry at her for such a long time,' I think, 'I wouldn't know how to change things.'

'Welcome the anger, it is genuine. Do not push it away, you've done that too often. It keeps you away from your power.'

Power, I let the word move through me. Ever since the miscarriage I have felt reasonably well and according to my naturopath that was due to the hormones. But with this renovation I've asked too much of myself. My old symptoms are back, I'm dead tired again. Could the answer really be in the suppressed rage towards my mother? Somehow my feelings do not make sense. Yes, we have a difficult relationship and yes, she is cold and distant but does that really legitimize this rage? Why are things so strained between us? Although that's how it has been my whole life I fail to understand why we have not been able to become closer over the years.

I write on for a bit and receive tips on food, meditation and letting go. I have to smile. The spiritual world doesn't understand the concept of time and my guides just keep repeating their advice until I apply it. I resolve that I will first move house, then after that I really will better my life.

Mid December 1999 and just before Christmas our office moves into the three story country house. Next to the entrance on the ground floor is the most beautiful set of offices in the Netherlands (what office manager has such a view!), the large drawing room next to it serves as a reception and meeting room, on the first floor is space enough for four coaching rooms and in the loft there will

be a large training room with its own kitchen. Of course we don't have the furniture to furnish an office this size, but with the new bank loan (we paid off the old loan) we can go shopping.

Our private home is the charming chalet, a wooden cottage with colourful shutters right next to the main house, which we move into a week later. With a large living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom it's exactly right for the two of us. The coach house will be rented out after a proper fix up. We really don't need the extra space and we can pay the ground lease from the revenue.

The memory of that first period on the estate I will always carry with me. The smell of the burning woodstove while we unpack, the sound of the heavy shutters which we pull close because the cold comes through the single pane of glass after sunset, the silence of the park when the noise of the traffic comes to an end during the night. For hours on end I stand in my slippers in front of the window and stare outside filled with love. That admiration I also see in the eyes of friends and family when they visit over Christmas. We show them around, yawning with fatigue, but as proud as any man living, first through all the buildings, then through the park. We cook in the new kitchen and eat at my festively set French dining table. The candles are burning, the music is playing.

Somehow it feels unreal, I can't fully take in the fact that we actually live here now.