Fien Veldman

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Translated by Hester Velmans



An Apollo Book

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If you have nothing in common with other
people, then try being close to things:
they will not desert you.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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Part 1

Performance

Funny that people used to say about us that we lived on the fringes of society, though we only heard about that later. Sanitized terms were coined for our neighbourhoods, and people who knew nothing about us wrote all kinds of policy plans on our behalf. But back then! Back then I was part of a whole little world. Only now, after my integration into the office community, have I truly been flung by the centrifugal force of existence to society's outermost edge. I'm still in one of the orbits spinning round the centre, but it's a fringe orbit. The true edge. And you're there with me, by the way. If the core is the sun, then we are pluto, and pluto isn't even a planet now, just a piece of rock; that's why it doesn't have a capital P anymore.

How hard can it be to put the correct address on a box? Spring has only just arrived and it's far too warm for this time of year. I'm walking in the sun, still bearable this early in the morning. At one end of the long street where my package should have been

delivered, there's a flag waving over the entrance of a bar I would never set foot in. Two shiny black mopeds are parked diagonally across the pavement, and I'm afraid I might set off the alarm if I bump into them. I can't walk on the road because of the morning rush hour. The driver of a passing vehicle, a white delivery van, has rolled down his window. The radio is on. A commercial. An online writing course, 100% customized for your business! The traffic is being held up by a small truck. Someone honks. *Never run out of ink with* [honk] *ink delivery service.* The delivery men move slowly, unloading boxes one by one. I stroll past the cars, manoeuvre past a heap of rental bikes strewn across the pavement. A woman in a faded red T-shirt with a tablet in her hands is scanning and checking each bicycle. I swerve past the overflowing rubbish bin, the bulging paper recycling can, I skirt the terrace café with its four rusty tables, one little succulent on each, and past the huge concrete planter that's spilling into the street. Ever since, somewhere in Europe, a couple of nameless young men ploughed their vehicles into a crowd of pedestrians, this planter has stood here. It was put there by the city, a temporary pacification for the precariousness of our existence. For us it's enormous planters that stop impressionable youths; in refugee camps in Pakistan,

Afghan women weave pictures of drones into their rugs. Hate spreads like a virus, infecting society's weakest, and it becomes difficult to pinpoint exactly when the contagion took place. Someone said at the time that we should view the attackers as a bunch of criminal lone wolves. Instead we think of them as representatives of one part of the world, ourselves as representatives of another, parts that are poles apart and fundamentally incompatible. Anyway, that's why we now have a concrete planter in the middle of the pavement.

I cross the high street, which at half past eight in the morning is already packed with badly dressed tourists struggling to find their way. I stride ahead purposefully. They should know: this city belongs to me. It smells like rubbish, the sour, pungent smell of discarded things. Everything I pass will eventually become rubbish. It just depends at which point you decide something is worthless. If you arranged it on a timeline, you would see: nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, the invention of the thing, the production of the thing, the existence of the thing; the purchase, the use, the breaking, the discarding, rubbish rubbish rubbish rubbish rubbish rubbish rubbish rubbish

rubbish rubbish. Just outside the city, the largest waste processing plant in Western Europe is on the verge of collapse. The street is littered with empty wrappers, shredded plastic, rotting food scraps, a dribble of unidentifiable fluid here and there. The company can no longer process the waste because the plant's workers sabotaged their own incinerators to protest their labour contracts. They carried out the repairs extra slowly, earning overtime and extra vacation days. Management didn't notice, the people at the top didn't have a clue how the equipment worked anyway. But one fateful day a month or two ago, the workers found themselves unable to fix their own increasingly complex sabotage. There was an investigation. The house of rubbish cards collapsed. And the trash kept gushing in from every direction – aside from all of the rubbish from our neighbouring countries, the plant processed almost all of Britain's garbage as well. So now my city will soon be swallowed by an ever-expanding, half-British landfill. The tourists only make it worse. Drunk and stoned, they toss all kinds of rubbish on the ground that we, the innocent residents, have to wade through. But as long as you don't look down, the city is lovely, with its narrow streets, old canal houses, idyllic squares and photogenic cafés. It's a city of

slavery money and quaint diminutives; only the churches are large, though almost none of them are still in use. When the sun shines, the centre looks like a photo from a travel guide. And no matter how much the tourists provoke me, with their wool beanies and vacant eyes, I know they just want to take pretty pictures. They're in search of beauty. I get that. Who isn't?

A middle-aged Italian tourist passes me, and the stench of rubbish is temporarily overpowered by her cloying perfume. I walk on, past the cheese shop, and enter the sex shop. The email from the delivery service (YOUR PACKAGE WILL BE DELIVERED TODAY) listed my name, the name of the company where I work, and a street name – this street, where our office used to be located, long before my time – but with a non-existent street number. That's why I now have to try the businesses one by one. I don't know what's inside the package, but I do know everyone at the office is waiting impatiently for it, silently judging me each time I come back empty-handed. I've got a flexible contract, so it would be way too easy to fire me.

It's cool and sterile inside the sex shop. It has just opened and I am the first and only customer. A man

in his late fifties stands behind the counter holding a boxcutter. He has a tanned face and his kind eyes are framed by crow's feet.

'Can I help you?' he asks in English. Who here still speaks Dutch these days? There's no need for it. Joost van den Vondel has been dead a long time.

'I am wondering if a package for me has arrived here.' My English could be faster, smoother, a little less overtly enunciated, but I adjust my accent to match this man's pronunciation so it's deliberately incorrect. I know he'll understand me better that way. I actually think it's pretty shameless when Brits or Australians talk in their own accent in the company of other nationalities. 'My name might be on it.' I'm not sure if I should pronounce my name in Dutch or English. '[my first name]' (English) '[my last name]' (Dutch). 'Or the company's name, [name of firm]' (English).

'Let me see,' says the man. He opens the big cardboard boxes in front of him on the counter. Neither box has an address label. The first is full of handcuffs with black faux fur, the second has the same handcuffs, but in pink. 'I am afraid not.' He tilts one of the boxes so I can get a closer look at the contents, proof that he isn't lying.

'Thank you.' I leave the shop, then stop outside a dark Argentinian steakhouse. Inside a group of

people are standing in a circle in the dim light. They appear to be having a team meeting. Why so early in the morning, with the lights off? When I knock on the window they immediately stop talking. The package isn't there either. Neither is it in the cannabis coffee shop, which, even at this early hour, is packed with men in their twenties and thirties. The smiling employee behind the safety glass shakes his head no. But I can't go on without my package! I need this package! That information means nothing to this coffee-shop employee in his bulletproof cubicle, so I thank him and try not to inhale until I'm outside again. I stop to catch my breath in the spot where I almost died the other day.

I found myself stretched out on the kerb. I've told the story quite a few times now. That's what you do when something like this happens: you repeat the story over and over again until you've created a version containing some kind of logic and stability. Narratives have to be given form, otherwise we'd never be able to understand each other. I'd lain there on the pavement. I grabbed a man who happened to be standing nearby waiting for someone and ordered him to help me. I arranged myself in a foetal position. It was a Friday evening, already dark.

The city looks very different when you're lying in the street. There's moss in the cracks between the paving slabs. A cigarette butt lay close to my cheek. The base of a streetlamp is surprisingly broad. It was more comfortable than I'd have expected, warmer too, and I thought, I could fall asleep here. I didn't, because there was a lot happening around me. The man waiting for someone was confused. I probably ruined his evening, but accosting someone directly and clearly, I once read, is the only effective antidote to the bystander effect, and I didn't want to risk dying of cardiac arrest on a street corner just because I'd rather not talk to strangers. While I lay there trembling on the ground, the man said, 'Yeah, I'm not doing so great either. My ex was supposed to be here, but it's been an hour and she still hasn't turned up.'

With my last remaining strength, I said, 'How frustrating.'

'I'd carry you to that bench over there, but I threw my back out last week.'

I wanted to say that it wasn't a problem, I fully understood, but I was having trouble speaking. I was barely conscious when, out of nowhere, a head appeared in my field of vision.

'Are you all right?' the new face asked in a Scottish accent.

I made a noise.

The face said something to someone out of my periphery. 'Should we call you an ambulance?'

…

'What's your name?' The person placed her finger against my carotid artery.

…

'Can you count to ten?'

'One,' I began. Deep breath. 'Two.' Long pause. 'I'm sorry,' I said (another deep breath; her face still hovering over mine), 'to inconvenience you.'

When the ambulance arrived, I saw the paramedic approaching me horizontally. She was brusque, as you'd expect from a healthcare professional, and said in a weary tone, with a heavy Dutch accent:

'So what's the matter?'

'I don't know.' I tried to enunciate as clearly as possible, but the muscles in my face wouldn't cooperate. It sounded as if I were drunk, and I could understand that the paramedics saw a young woman lying in the street on a Friday night, surrounded by a bunch of Brits, and arrived at the logical conclusion.

'Oh, you're Dutch?' said the medic, suddenly a great deal more friendly. 'You're coming with us.'

She beckoned her colleague, a big man. As he was

carrying me to the ambulance, I thought, maybe I should write a eulogy about myself, then at least they'll have that ready to go.

An allergy, it was determined a few days later at the doctor's office. An autoimmune response. My body determines what I can and can't handle. What I have to fight off. And what I apparently fight off at all costs, until death or an adrenaline shot, is exertion. My body has started to turn against me whenever I exert myself. It attacks itself, like a dog biting its own tail. In dogs this is a sign of stress, frustration and lack of intellectual stimulation. In humans, no one has come up with an explanation yet.

'It's an epidemic,' the allergist told me, 'especially in young women aged around twenty-five to thirty. They make up eighty per cent of my patients.' (That's exactly the category of woman I am! I'll have to look for a support group forum when I get home!). When I asked, polite and a little intimidated, why it's mostly young women who seem to have allergies, he said, 'It's probably hormones.' He pointed to a poster on the wall showing how mast cells work. 'You can read more about it over there.' The allergist turned his attention to his computer screen. I thought he was reading something

he was going to share with me, but after a minute or maybe even two I realized he was already busy with something else. I was waiting for nothing. I just had to accept that I have a deadly allergy. If I found myself in some natural selection scenario, being chased by a pack of wild hyenas, for example, I would go into anaphylactic shock before the pack could even tear me to pieces. That's how fast it can happen with those cells of mine. Run one lap and boom, dead. I am being betrayed by my own body.

'What can I do about it?' I asked the allergist.

He tore his eyes from his computer screen and gazed at me. 'Just take it easy.' He nodded solemnly and stood up, a sign that our appointment's ten minutes were up.

Back to the hunt for my package. I've accepted the fact that I'm not going to find it today, so I slowly walk back to the office and install myself in my little room. I will calm down here, get over my failed mission in peace. I sit down next to my printer. The machine is on the table where I'm working. It is a typical office appliance, a square, bulky piece of equipment. I press my cheek to his right flank. Smooth, comforting plastic. He's in standby mode.

My energy is absorbed into the device; my nervous system's electrical signals are understood by him.

When my heartrate normalizes and I've detached myself from my printer, my marketing colleague walks in. Marketing wears shoes that always look new. He seems tired lately, with blue bags under his eyes, but he has a beard, like nearly all the men his age in this city, and that diverts the attention from his worn-out face. Because of that beard, half of his head is concealed, and you can't really tell if he's handsome or not. In men, even the most misshapen face can be acceptable when left unshaven for long enough. My colleague, whose manner of speaking implies that he thinks everyone else is a bit stupid, asks if he could perhaps use the printer for a stretch today, if I would explain a few things to him.

'You're the expert!' he says.

'No worries.' I do my best to smile. 'But only after three o'clock this afternoon, when this' (I point to a stack of papers on the desk) 'is taken care of.' A lie. That pile doesn't need to be printed.

'Of course!' my colleague says, much more emphatically than is necessary. 'Your work comes first!'

Two of my colleagues do this, and I hate them both. They act as if my job, the lowest paying in the office (with the exception of the cleaner), is more

important than theirs. Whenever they see me, they engage in this exaggerated farce, and it makes me want to say, 'Calm down, Marketing.' But if I did that, Marketing, who makes seventeen hundred euros more a month than me, who has a permanent contract and a mortgage, would say, wide-eyed, 'What? I think what you do is truly important. You're the link to the customer, indispensable to our process. If we didn't have you, then [something semi-philosophical], while I [self-deprecating joke].'

So it would only make things worse, because after a comment like that, no matter how despicable, I can hardly say, 'Well, actually, my job's really monotonous and a robot could do it.'

Because *then* he'd say, 'Oh, maybe you should talk to HR,' and send me links to all kinds of articles with headlines like 'What If Your Job Doesn't Challenge You?' and subject lines like 'Interesting' or 'Food for thought' followed by the emoji wearing glasses. He'll keep it up for weeks, until, in a moment of weakness, I'll put my cynicism aside and think maybe he really does have my best interests at heart. That's when he'll pounce. Some mind-numbing job will come up, something like shopping or a market research survey, and he'll say, when everyone can hear:

'Hey [my name], maybe that could be a fun new challenge for you!'

The printer had officially broken down a week and a half earlier. A repairman came, a man with a receding hairline who had driven 120 kilometres to get here. It had taken him forever, he made that clear several times, but, after that long and arduous journey, there he was, finally, at my side in the office. We both looked at the printer. *I'm so sorry that this intruder is going to take you apart*, I said to my machine in my head. *Later I'll put you back together with love.*

I asked the repairman if he wanted coffee, and how he took it.

'Sugar,' he said. I felt very aware, right then, of my role: I was a woman in an office asking a man how he took his coffee, then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, meekly serving him. I thought about porn, about how really I should take my clothes off, put on a little apron and bend over the desk, naked.

'It's the paper,' the man said when I returned with his coffee. 'It's doing something weird. It's too rough to move through the printer smoothly, but that only happens once it's inside the printer.

From the outside, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the machine.' He held out a sheet of A4. I grabbed it and examined it.

'When it isn't in the printer, it's fine, smooth – the fibres stay in their place, as it were.'

I stared at the paper again, frowned and nodded.

'But the moment the sheet enters the machine, they get roughed up. The fibres.'

I nodded again, this time making a 'hmm' sound. *Hmm, fascinating!*

'Frankly, it's a worst-case scenario. Once the paper is inside, it's at the printer's mercy.' He asked if I had tried a different type of paper, but I hadn't. Our in-house designer probably wouldn't allow it anyway, since there are strict rules about the type and weight of the paper we use. If we wanted to change it, it would take all kinds of meetings, and the entire house style would need to be overhauled.

The repairman had to get going, he said. He left me with an uninspiring tip ('Another brand of paper might help, but who knows') and twenty-two boxes of very specific paper stock that was no longer of any use because the paper had decided to rebel against the printer with every fibre of its being. Trees respond to heat even when they're dead. After being ground into wood chips, then into pulp, then bleached, and then pressed and sliced, even then

they continue to react. The fibres slowly swell up, it's not something you can see with the naked eye, but it does happen, and that makes it hard for a sheet of paper to squeeze its way through the device on a hot day. (Dry winter air, by the way, brings its own problems.)

Today it's nearly thirty degrees. The trees outside are trembling in the heat, but I'm inside, on standby next to my printer again. Now the paper is getting stuck between the feeder and tray one after every eight pages. Why eight, you ask? Only the printer knows. Error code 001: Paper Jam. He's like a baby, he has few ways of communicating, so what could be wrong is anyone's guess, but it does become easier to work out with time. I stand there patiently, counting along with the machine's heavy breathing, and with every count an A4 sheet slips out until there are eight in total. Then comes a rustling and then a wheezing sound: the printer is choking! The wheezing turns into a gurgling and beeping. (He's suffocating! *Do* something!) When people are choking, they will, out of sheer embarrassment, try to find somewhere secluded so they can die in peace. Printers can't do that, they're at the mercy of their partner. So I immediately open the front of

the device and pull out the jammed paper, carefully, it mustn't tear, like a fishbone in a child's windpipe that has to be pried out in one piece. Then I switch him off, unplug him, wait twenty seconds, plug him back in and turn him on again. After about thirty seconds of whirring and clicking start-up sounds, the announcement comes on: Resuming Print Job. He's breathing again. So am I. Eight counts to go.

I haven't dared to tell my boss that the package is still missing, but luckily no one monitors my work. They don't watch my daily activities too closely: all they care about is that the letters go out on time. The printer is so noisy that I have been given an office to myself, which helps. No one can see my screen. I do sometimes browse the internet, but I don't feel guilty about it. I'm making minimum wage minus the cost of my lunch.

What if I'd grown up in a different place? Somewhere in another part of the country, next to a body of water? Somewhere with a little boat? What if I'd been rich? Then I'd never have had this job. It wouldn't even have occurred to me that this kind of work existed. Maybe I have a huge lack of self-confidence I'm unaware of, self-confidence that I would have had if I were rich. But it's the rich people who should

have a crisis of confidence. They should be the ones asking themselves: that scholarship in New York, that internship at that cultural institute, that PhD position, that Master's at an arts academy, did I truly earn it? But they never think about that, because they've been gifted everything from the moment they were born. Aside from their driver's licence at the age of eighteen, these things are more or less the following: piano lessons (piano at home); good books; skiing holidays; feeling at ease in expensive spaces; unwritten rules about how loudly to speak and how to sit at the dinner table; what a mortgage is; what smart investments are; a friend, family member or acquaintance named Emma; chess; etiquette; proverbs; the right television shows; a familiarity with classical music; the polite way of addressing your elders; the kinds of alcohol and alcoholism that are acceptable. That you don't sit on certain chairs because they're designer. How to hold a wine glass. That it's rude to inspect someone's bookcase. The rules of tennis. And because you know all these things, you'll never really wonder, in the depths of your soul, whether you have earned it. You're not a bad person: you object to the inequality in the world, everyone deserves the same opportunities, you mean well, of course you mean well, that's how you were raised. But the subtle, burgeoning

consequences of this unequal distribution elude you: you believe the gap has got smaller over the years rather than bigger, and you think you can't personally do anything about it. Maybe there's an inferiority complex lurking in my subconscious that I'll never be able to shake because I'm ashamed of my family and ashamed of the accent I used to have. I don't think someone who knows the rules of tennis would ever be doing this job. I can't even imagine it.

I have all the time in the world to contemplate these things in my tiny office while my printer haltingly prints out eight letters at a time, while it swallows and spits out the paper, as it tries to compress nature into A4-aligned order. It really is sad how quickly people turn their back on their printers when they're experiencing problems, how they don't want anything to do with them anymore. Even the repairman showed up with great reluctance. 'Have you tried uninstalling and reinstalling the drivers?' Deep sigh.

The machine just stands there, helpless and dependent. People turn him on and off, yank at USB cables and plugs, open and close trays and covers, but no one really cares. Sometimes, when I'm in a bad mood, I think: Is *this* what I've been working

towards all this time? Struggling my way up the social ladder, only to end up *here*? But then I look at the printer and feel guilty because I don't want to abandon him. *I* respect him. I do.

The first page slides out of the machine. *In my first year of secondary school, someone said to me, 'You're the poorest person I know.'* Second page. *'Poor' is a big word. I knew people who were a lot poorer.* Three. *Children whose parents cried when primary school was over, knowing it was only going to get worse.* Four. *Later, at my middle-class secondary school, when everyone owned a raincoat except me.* Five. *That kids used words like 'cinema', that they ate avocado, actually had real boat shoes and a sailing jacket. I always thought that was a cliché.* Six. I hear a noise. Slow footsteps on the carpet moving past the door. I've trained myself to hear them over the sound of the printer. I don't move; the printer is on the seventh page. Nothing to worry about. *'Cinema' and avocado. I had never even heard of it.* Almost there. After the eighth page I hear the first knocking sounds coming from the machine, then a low buzz. I start my choreography before the wheezing begins. *To be honest, it seems like a lot of hassle being rich. To have so much*

stuff, and to have to protect it all. Locks on the door, insurance. You have to make sure nothing breaks. And if it does, where did you leave the warranty? Did you put it in a clear plastic sleeve in some drawer? You have to worry about your inheritance, and how much of it will have to go to the tax office. You have to work out how much you're allowed to give away as a gift before that's taxed too. When you buy a house, you're stuck with it, so you have to keep an eye on the housing market and figure out when it might collapse. You have to find out which political party wants to keep the mortgage interest rates low and make sure that that party will have the final say in this country. You have to think about the price of petrol and whether it's cheaper across the border, and then calculate whether the difference is worth the trip. Someone's mother once told me, after describing how much the annual maintenance on their sailboat cost, that no property is duty-free.

A message pops up on my screen. An event has been added to the shared calendar. How much effort will it require? I need to know in advance. Will it be physically demanding? I'd rather just stay in my little office. I hear enthusiastic footsteps

approaching, then the click of the door handle. My colleague from PR sticks her symmetrical face round the door. 'I don't know if you've already seen it, but we're having a picnic at lunch!' She closes the door. I hate picnics. They're just like karaoke: everyone gets dragged in and you're the grouch if you complain. The door opens again.

'By the way,' she says. 'Isn't the heat in here suffocating? We could do something about it, move the printer or something.'

Move the printer?

'Oh, it's no big deal,' I say, feeling a drop of sweat rolling down my armpit. My hands leave moist marks on the printer, on my keyboard, on the letters. My legs stick to the chair. 'I have a fan.'

'OK!' The door is shut.

The fan, an enormous white, rattling thing, makes a quarter-turn, swinging first towards the printer and then in my direction. When the fan is aimed at me, I selfishly wish it would stay there, cooling the film of sweat on my face. It's only when the fan is pointed this way that I can think clearly. But I can't deny my printer the cooling breeze. He's already having such a tough time!

I eat lunch at my desk. When Marketing stops by in the afternoon to print his documents, he shows

me a video of something that happened at the picnic. He laughs very loudly about it.

'You should've been there,' he says.

So maybe it's a good thing my dad has nothing but debt. Having your finances in order, paying your bills on time: if you ask him, that's reserved for normies. He looks down on these people with a sneer. I think, you can sneer all you like, but if the bailiff walks out with your TV because you haven't paid your bills, you won't be happy. Whatever. It's his life. Is there anything worth watching on TV these days anyway? After the divorce my dad moved to a new city, started a new family and then left them as well. We see each other once a year now, and even then we don't talk about anything. He never said much to begin with. Was that a trend in the nineties? My mother was allocated a new council house nearby. The small back garden was converted into an aviary by the previous occupant. That was the beginning of the end. No, we didn't keep any birds, that's a very niche hobby for a very niche kind of person.

To summarize: I would very much like to be someone who casually keeps family photos on the mantelpiece, but I'm not that kind of person. And I don't have a mantelpiece.