

Annelies Verbeke

Assumptions

Translated from the Dutch
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On Guard Here

Father,

That I'm writing to you says enough. I'm not doing too well, Father. You know that. Perhaps you predicted it. You may even see it as a test. I realize there's no point in writing these words; you read my thoughts as soon as I have them. There's no address to which I can send this letter in its tangible form and I'd be ill-advised to save it in a computer memory regardless. So see this as a prayer. I'm clutching at it as a last possible source of consolation, however much effort it takes me to hit the right keys and however fearful I am that one of my guardians will catch me at it.

Still, that anxiety is probably baseless. If they found me sitting at this monitor, typing, they'd no doubt immediately come up with some explanation that fits what they think they know. Stories. They're good at those. The times when they caught me reading that's exactly how it went. Not that they've caught me reading too often. It's rare to find a good book in this house. He's a complete idiot. I'm supposed to love them, Father, but he's a jerk. He has his tender interludes, but they're no compensation. She occasionally brings in something she ends up not reading. As on all other fronts, resolutions are as far as she gets. She recently decided to im-

merse herself in Rilke and left two of his collections knocking about in the lounge for a day. As I recall you're no great fan of the poet, you don't find him life-affirming enough I suppose, but as soon as they were out of the house I devoured his lines; as I said, I'm not doing too well. Loneliness, Father, is like the rain, and I can't quote any more than that—I hadn't memorized many lines before they yanked the collection out from under my nose. Tssk, they say. 'Tssk,' Father. And now Rilke is all on his own on the top bookshelf, where I can't reach him.

This is solitary confinement. A prison. He never takes me out, it doesn't even occur to him. As a rule she cares about nothing but herself—shockingly negative, she's sure to come to a bad end. Yet she does sometimes take account of my needs. On occasions I even think she appreciates me and I too have my good moments, my little breathing spaces in this vale of tears, there at her side. If I lay my head in her lap she'll stroke it absently, and even when I shove my nose between her buttocks in a regressive outburst she doesn't get angry. Yes, Father. Regression. Between her buttocks. I can't say it often enough: not doing too well.

There's a question that haunts me, Father, a question that keeps me awake or makes me whine in my sleep. Before I ask it I want to remind you that I've never had any qualms about your decisions before. I really gave all I had to give during your previous initiative. I'm convinced you've not once had grounds to reproach me for a lack of team spirit or personal motivation. I never even complained about the post-traumatic stress disorder that first attempt left me with—for all your omniscience, it's probably news to you.

I believed in what you were doing, what we were doing. But then I was a man, a human among human beings. And I understand why you wanted to take a different approach the second time, I really do, it's a rationale I comprehend and endorse. Like you, I was disappointed by the result last time round and I can understand that you thought: all right then, let's take a risk, let's go for a surprise offensive. But why a dog, Father?

There's no doubting the special bond between human and pet, but surely it's not enough, surely it's no recompense, no ticket to Salvation? What do you expect me to do? Perform miracles? Foster a world religion? Become the main character in the greatest best-seller of all time again? I barely get out!

And now that I've had the gall to ask for an explanation, here's another question: if I must be a dog, why a schnauzer? I have infinite admiration for all the fauna you've created. Each creature is beautiful in its own highly individual way and it's breathtaking to discover how they all slot together like pieces of the most ingenious puzzle. Yet it seems obvious to me that every living being, simply by existing, places limits on the practicability of expectations. That was your opinion too until recently, wasn't it? Your plan? Otherwise it would soon all be over for the Almighty, right?

I find it so hard to believe that you still haven't recognized the fact that the form in which you've sent me to earth is incompatible with what you wish to achieve, Father. As a schnauzer I really am subject to too many limitations. It's hard for me to have to expound upon something so absurdly obvious. I'm short-sighted but not blind. During those rare

walks I notice how the German Shepherds and Dobermans look at me. At best they think I'm a sweet little boy-dog. Why a schnauzer, Father? For all the hallucinogenic substances this planet has to offer and for all the insanity that prevails here, no living creature would feel the slightest urge to seek salvation at my hands. I have no hands, Father. This keyboard is already covered in scratches.

The mystery of your ways has cast me into the deepest gloom. Which isn't exactly helping me to behave convincingly as a canine. I wonder how you would react if they put a biscuit on your nose and forced you to sit still. Shake a paw, Father? The days are long and monotonous, the food atrocious. When we're outside and she lets me off the leash for a moment it's not too bad; I pep up and my happiness makes me forget that I was determined to take the first opportunity.

What I'm going to write next is terrible, Father. You're my darling daddy, I've always looked up to you, I want you to be proud of me. If I disappoint you, I disappoint myself; if I hurt you, I hurt myself. Your choice of a schnauzer is so ridiculous, though, that in my gloomiest moods I suspect you no longer care what becomes of humanity. That you think: I've done enough, let them get on with it. I could sympathize with that, in fact I'd even welcome a desire on your part to take things a little easier. What gets to me is my role in all this. If you've given up, then why send me here in such a stupid guise? Is this a joke, Father? An experiment? Or did you want to be rid of me?

The other possibility that occurs to me is—and on this point I suspect you'll agree—even worse. There are times when I wonder whether you exist at all, whether you might

just be a figment of my runaway imagination, a delusion that's convinced me I'm a helpless saviour. Do I even exist myself, Father? Is this a lounge, are my owners real? Am I the hallucination of someone locked in a stinking white room, barking like a dog, confounding all diagnoses?

If you exist, you'll punish me for what I've just written, but with all due respect and in the hope that you won't interpret what I'm going to say next as a provocation: no matter how you make me pay for this, nothing could be very much worse than the frustrating dog's life I have now. Don't forget that I've got the horror that befell my previous manifestation to compare it with.

Make sure I quickly come to regret the tone these words convey. It'll mean that I feel you in my heart again, that I know why I'm a schnauzer, that you are there watching over me and I'm on guard here. For you.

Until then I'll go on waiting for a sign, an answer. I'll look forward to the day when you call me to you and everything will be clear in the light of your love. But perhaps my despair will take the first opportunity to get the better of my hope.

Forgive me, Father, for I no longer know what to do.

Your Son

Henny Verhasselt's Life's Work

Henny Verhasselt hovered a fragile, brimful glass of Cava over the heavy tablecloth and tried not to look at Josephine.

'It may sound strange now,' he began, 'but even as a child I wanted to specialize in supplying decorations to the catering industry.'

'That's nonsense, Verhasselt,' said Josephine. 'It would be great if your business was your childhood dream. Especially now that we're celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary.'

Henny tried to suppress the fluttering of his right eye. He failed and sensed that his son had noticed the tic. He mustn't worry the boy. Josephine was Martin's wife, he needed to bear that in mind. Martin had said so himself—that he needed to bear that firmly in mind.

'But I did,' said Henny. 'Laughing polystyrene portions of chips, bigger than I was. Plastic mussels. Even as a child I couldn't get enough of them. I can show you photos.' His fluttering eye sought his assistant Brigitta, his rock, responsible for transport, who disliked eating out but did it all the same, for him.

Brigitta put down her glass, leaned back a little and concurred. 'That photo with the plastic sausages round your neck.' Her right hand circled her own neck, then indicated how small Henny was in the photo and finally fell exhausted

into her lap. 'On the wall out there,' she sighed before turning her attention to a vast inner Nothingness that seemed to afford her immense serenity. It wasn't the first time she'd made Henny think of power tools. Safe electric power tools that automatically disconnect when a short circuit threatens.

'It wasn't a childhood dream,' Josephine impressed upon her father-in-law with a kindly smile. 'This is just life, Verhasselt. Chance. It's important for you to realize that. Pure chance brought you here. To the top of a company selling catering decorations. There's nothing wrong with that.'

'No, of course there's nothing wrong with it!' He hadn't quite shouted, but it was definitely too loud. His son looked stern. Josephine put on her most anxious mask. The glass in Henny's hand had roughly the same diameter as her eye sockets.

She had seemed so different, Josephine, at the start. A clever lightweight possessed of a vision. With a coquettish tread she'd walked into his life to put an end to his son's bachelor existence. She immediately mutated into a business partner, who with breezy insouciance got the company's profit margin growing again. By launching substantial discounts at the right moments, she'd managed to create a hype around a 210-centimetre hotdog that squirted ketchup over its own head, and a waste bin in the form of a flute with scoops of brightly coloured ice cream. Henny saw them everywhere, even abroad. Yes, Josephine had a natural instinct for business. And he admired that.

So he told himself it was perhaps a little odd but certainly

not a bad thing that his daughter-in-law addressed him by his surname. No one had done that since primary school. It felt impersonal, but he could no doubt safely assume that Josephine was just being chummy. The way her face creased when she spoke to him might have come across to a less positively inclined person as falling somewhere between impatience and pity. Fortunately Henny knew better.

The fact that she called the classification system he used for his book-keeping ‘the work of a psychotic neurotic’ and his absent-mindedness ‘an infantile expression of unprocessed grief’ was another thing Henny was able to live with. It made sense: she’d spent a long time studying these things, far longer than he had; she was more of an expert and she might even be right. Perhaps he was indeed a psychotic neurotic who expressed his unprocessed grief in an infantile way. The thought made him a little nervous.

Josephine treated his son rather fiercely, he felt, but Martin never seemed to detect anything humiliating in the categorical imperatives she deployed to spur him to action, or her frequently repeated remarks about balls, about Martin’s lack of them and, very often, about how you needed to have them and it was fortunate she, metaphorically, did. Since he kept forgetting what ‘metaphorical’ meant and no longer dared ask, every time she talked about those metaphorical balls Henny visualized her with a pair of metal testicles in an odd colour. He knew that every relationship is different, that you can never tell exactly what goes on between couples and that therefore you shouldn’t intrude with judgements or helpful advice. Perhaps his son liked the fact that she treated him that way, maybe it had to do with some unconventional