

CHANTAL VAN DEN BRINK

## Letters from my Soul | 1

To wake up and go on a journey  
in a wonderful world,  
Putting my life on its head.



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To wake up and go on a journey  
in a wonderful world,  
Putting my life on its head.

1993 - 1999



Uitgeverij Bierman van den Brink

Het uiterlijke is slechts uitdrukking  
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De Meesters van het Verre Oosten, Baird T. Spalding



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De werkelijkheid staat niet los van ons.  
We creëren onze werkelijkheid ieder moment van de dag.  
Voor mij is die waarheid de ultieme vrijheid  
en de ultieme verantwoordelijkheid.

Shirley McLaine, Dancing in the Light

Het vermogen van een mens om te helen  
en een vervuld leven te leiden,  
ligt in de verbinding met diens ziel.

Chantal van den Brink

For Wim,

my life partner and companion.

I.

## Knock on the door

What in God's name am I doing here? From behind my desk in my American-style cubicle, a two by three metre pen with half-height partitioned walls, I stare at the sea of parked cars. In the background to the left, I can see the yellow logos of Ikea and McDonald's and on the right the unimaginative, gleaming office towers of Amsterdam's South East business district. Surely life has more to offer than this?

I've been working here for five years now. No one expected me to go into information and communication technology (ICT), myself least of all. Technology was not a field I ever related to and as a child I dreamt of tutus and pointe shoes. After secondary school I had wanted to study ballet at a dance academy but a career in that line was non-starter at home, so I opted to study business administration instead. At a job fair a graduate who was recruiting for NCR, offered me a traineeship and since I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do with my life, I accepted the offer. I had to start working, anyway, so why not here? At the time it seemed like a sensible decision, a respectable position in a respectable company and after a number of marketing jobs I switched to sales. Recently I was appointed account's manager in a financial marketing team, a well-paid job with excellent prospects.

Sigh. I'm 29 and in management speak a 'high-potential' but that's not how I feel right now. For months I've been restless, sick

of my surroundings and wherever I look, everything is grey; my desk, the carpet, the walls of my cubicle, even the sky is grey with rain. Yawning, I glance at my watch, nearly half past one, a dangerous time of day for me as I tend to collapse after lunch. Ideally, I should take a nap, but that of course is impossible so I'll have to fight my fatigue. With a bit of luck I'll feel better later, otherwise I won't get much done this afternoon.

The telephone interrupts my train of thought. It's the CEO from a consultancy firm I worked with last year on a change management project. After some brief niceties, he cuts to the chase. 'There's a vacancy in my management team and I'm looking for someone like you; young, dynamic and ambitious. Besides, I would like to have a woman fill this particular position. Would you be interested?' I get phone calls like this all the time, an average of three per month as my education, age and position put me in a sought-after target group. Usually I don't pursue it, as the offer usually involves work of the kind I do now, but this time I agree to a meeting. Who knows, perhaps a change of working environment will do me good.

The remainder of the afternoon I spend in a meeting devoted to a discussion on the figures for the first quarter. There's no need for me to worry, our figures are looking good, the lion's share of our turnover coming from the sale of ATMs, which are selling like hot cakes. Recently, we concluded a multiple million dollar framework contract with one of our most important clients and already we feel certain we'll receive a hefty bonus at the end of the year; plus we get to travel. Every year, NCR organises an international conference for successful sales people at an exotic location. The stories that circulate within the company about these trips are legendary and the promise of lying on the white sandy beaches of Cancun, gives me something to look forward

to. Patiently I listen to my boss, who projects one slide after the other on the screen. After all, quarterly figures are of great importance in this American company.

At the end of the day, feeling tired to the bone, I drive home to my husband Stephan and our dog Mora. For the past two years we have been living in a semi-detached thatched villa, in a stylish, semirural district. I don't really care much for this affluent region, it is slightly too ostentatious for my taste but when we decided to move outside the city, we found ourselves drawn to this house. Close to Stefan's parents, at a reasonable distance from Amsterdam and surrounded by countryside, I just love our house. It's situated in one of those picturesque neighbourhoods where the smell of the trees mixes with that of burning firewood, and the grass alongside the road hasn't been replaced by paving stones. Taking traffic jams into account, I can be home from work within forty-five minutes. As soon as I get there, I run upstairs to the bedroom where I swap my Jill Sanders suit and high-heels for jeans and sneakers. After that I make my way to the attic where I find Stefan behind his PC.

'Hey, you're back already?' An absent-minded kiss lands on my cheek.

'It's half past six, you know.' He has clearly lost track of time. 'What shall we do about dinner?' I'm starving but I don't have the energy to fuss behind the stove.

'I haven't really thought about it.' Looking up from his computer, he runs his hand through his blond hair, a concerned look on his face. 'Shall we get a take-away? I need to finish this.'

That seems fine to me but first I take Mora, our young black bouvier, out for a walk. My mother had bought Mora as a playmate for her first dog, but the puppy had triggered a new lease of life in

the normally calmer older dog, and the strain of the two dogs horsing around the house quickly proved too much for her. So now Mora lives with us. Back downstairs, I get the leash. 'Come on, girl, we're going out.' I don't have to say that twice, in no time she's standing by my side, wagging her tail merrily.

With my collar turned up and my hands in my pockets, I stroll across the road towards the heath which is just around the corner from our house. Mora trots ahead. How I love this neighbourhood. I so enjoy being able to get some fresh air after work.

Stefan and I met at business school. He was already in his third year when I started as a fresher and at the very first party I fell for his great dance moves. My female friends warned me of the male students' reputation but he turned out to be a nice, reliable guy. We've been together for ten years now and married for five. Our life is similar to that of many couples around us, ambitious careers and no children as yet. Ultimate freedom, you might think: skiing, travelling to far-away countries, golf club membership, film marathons, champagne brunches and dance parties. But lately things haven't been going well for Stefan. A few years ago he and a partner set up a software company and while at the time it seemed like an innovative plan, now they are being overtaken by big guys like Microsoft. More money is going out than is coming in. Fortunately, I'm earning well and we can get by on my income. But I don't like being the breadwinner, the situation feels vulnerable and I sincerely hope it won't be long before the tide changes.

Upon returning, I order pasta from the local Italian, then a quick meal, a bath and straight to bed. If I want to be able to function tomorrow, I need to sleep. Ten to twelve hours a night is more the rule than the exception for me. At weekends I tend to rest

at least three hours every afternoon, it's something I don't even think about anymore; I've been tired since I was eighteen.

Over dinner I tell Stefan about the phone call. His blue eyes regard me with interest. 'What kind of job is it?'

I swallow my food and wipe my mouth with my napkin. 'I'm not entirely sure, but it's definitely not in ICT. They specialise in change management consultancy.' I tell him the names of some large organisations the agency works for.

'Sounds interesting, but ICT isn't really your thing, is it?'

Heavens, tell me something I don't know! But what field do I want to work in? Something different yes - but is this it?

Since I always seem to glide effortlessly from one job to the next, I don't expect this move to be any different. But things take a different turn. When I meet the CEO concerned a couple of days later, I'm shocked to learn that he concludes I'm too young for the position after all. Me? Too young? And what about everything I have accomplished so far? Why didn't he think of this before? Wasn't he the one who approached me? Luckily, the CEO doesn't close the door completely but suggests that maybe I'd like to talk to Henry Koek? Yes, of course I'd like to talk to Henry. In my world he's a wellknown management consultant and I'm curious about the man behind the stories. Apart from that, I'd like to prove that I *am* suitable for the job.

The morning of the interview I leave home early. It's the first week of April 1993. The weather is calm and humid; a grey sky is hanging over the Netherlands. The last part of the long drive to School runs through dense woodlands, prettily green with the first budding of leaves. At the given address I turn my BMW estate through impressive gates and onto the gravelled drive of

a detached villa. It is a charming old house, a lush climbing plant adorns the brick front under the thatched roof and in the background sounds the murmur of the sea. A friendly blonde woman answers the door and shows me to what had once been the garage but is now fitted out as an office.

'Welcome, you must be Chantal.' A slim man, wearing jeans and his long hair in a pony-tail, holds out his hand. 'I'm Henry Koek. Have a look around while I make us some tea.' He disappears into the pantry. Nervously I pace the room. An immense wall cabinet filled with books, CDs and art objects dominates the space. In front of two French windows stands a round conference table with some chairs and a flipchart; in the background the sound of jazz is playing softly. Strange, all this feels more domestic than business-like to me. In order to conceal my uneasiness, I pretend to read the book titles.

'Would you like to go for a walk?' he asks, as he places a wooden serving tray on the table.

A walk? Am I not here for a job interview? But my sense of decorum prevails over my doubts and I agree. 'Sure, why not? That sounds lovely.' I quickly finish my tea and retrieve my shawl from the coat rack.

Confidently Henry walks ahead of me, through the gate, out of the back garden. The sandy path runs steeply up to the woods on the edge of the dunes and after only a few steps, I regret my choice of clothing. As usual, I am smartly dressed in a business suit, fine for a job interview in an office environment, but hopeless for the situation in which I now find myself. Luckily I'm wearing flat shoes. Enviously I glance at the man beside me, noting his light-weight jacket and climbing boots.

'What kind of nest do you come from?'

Although I had never expected this question, I answer almost automatically. 'My father drowned when I was seven.' It's the first thing that comes to mind. 'My younger brother and I were raised by my mother. When I was a teenager a foster brother came to live with us. Before my father died, my mother had been a housewife but after his death she had to go out to work to provide for us.'

We walk on in silence. Above us seagulls are gliding in the grey sky, calling to each other with shrill, stuttering sounds.

'What was that like for you?'

I shrug my shoulders. 'I don't know, I guess I didn't know any better. My mother did her best to care for us but she was never there. When we were little, a babysitter would take care of us after school, then once we started secondary school, we got a key.' The image of that dark house is forever imprinted on my mind. Each night my mother came home at six, prepared dinner, and then either immersed herself in her text books or turned on the television. Usually she was too tired to pay us any attention.

At the end of the dune ridge we cross over to the completely deserted beach and the shifting sand makes walking heavy. 'So, who did you turn to when you were troubled?'

Despite the cold air on my face, I'm starting to feel hot. These are really intimate questions and why is he asking them? 'I had a boyfriend who was a few years older than me so I used to spend most of my afternoons with him or my girlfriends. My younger brother would hang out with his own friends. We didn't go home until we really had to.' I wrap my shawl a bit tighter around my shoulders.

Thankfully Henry switches to a safer subject. 'What made you decide to study business administration after secondary school?'

I smile apologetically. 'I'd wanted to go to a dance academy, but my mother would not allow it. One day she stood me in front of the mirror and asked me if I seriously thought that I'd ever be a successful dancer with these legs? That was the end of my ballet dream.'

'That seems rather crude to me.'

'Yes, that's the way she is, straightforward. I think she wanted to save me from a life of poverty. She'd had to fight hard to build something after my father's death.'

'And then? What did you do when your dream shattered?'

Deep in thought I stare at the dark sea, momentarily caught up in the scattered memories of that confusing time. The grip of my mother's hands on my shoulders, the sight of my apparently too plump body in the antique mirror and the empty feeling with which I was left. I shrug my shoulders.

'Since I'd completed secondary school without too much effort, I knew it made sense to go to college but I didn't have a clue what subject to choose. I considered public administration, but the town in question seemed too grey and too far away. Dutch literature, law and economics - my mother's favourites - struck me as dull and too limiting. In the end a classmate showed me a brochure about a business school. It offered campus-life, an international orientation, sports, languages, in fact a little bit of everything and after graduation I could still take any direction.'

Henry gives me an appraising look. 'Did it live up to your expectations or did you not have any?'

As I'm pondering his question, I observe the sand shifting under my shoes. 'It was a complete shock. I started full of enthusiasm because the invitation to introduction week had looked really promising. Bring your guitar, it said, so I did and

I also brought a suitcase full of nice clothes. As I have no older brothers or sisters, I'd never heard of initiation rites.' I laugh scornfully, realising that even after all these years the memory still hurts. 'Not a fun introduction week with guitar and cabaret, but more of a survival week supposed to build character. Us freshers were the 'zeroes'. We had to wear track-suits and were bossed around by senior students in smart suits and dark sunglasses. Little sleep, no privacy and total discipline. Such a farce!'

'And your studies, how did they go?'

'As I have already said, a little bit of everything, economics, mathematics, statistics, accountancy, philosophy, sociology, English, Spanish and daily sports. Three meals a day in the refectory and private study in between, doing assignments, writing papers and preparing exams. At weekends you could either go home or stay on campus. The bar was open every night, most rooms had a television, and you could pick up a newspaper from the concierge or arrange a lift into the neighbouring village. It seemed good fun to me but on the Thursday of the first week I fell severely ill and I had to go home, back to my mother in Amsterdam. She put me to bed and fed me fresh orange juice, thinking it was just a 'flu and I would be better with a few days of rest. But it wasn't a 'flu and I didn't get better. After a week our GP came by. He had my blood tested and discovered that I had glandular fever caused by the Epstein Barr virus.'

I tell him how I spent three months in bed and missed the whole first trimester. The senior students assured me that being so much behind I'd have to repeat the first year. That, for me, was a reason return to campus before I had fully recovered. With serious cramming and a bit of luck I managed to pass my year.

But Henry doesn't settle for the general picture and keeps probing. How did it feel to be home, while the others were

starting a new life as students? What was it like to return to the group later?

Help! It seems this man can't be fobbed off. I suck the cold air into my lungs and again reveal a bit about a subject on which I seldom talk. 'At first I didn't care, I didn't have the energy to worry about it. I lay in bed like a limp dishrag and I was perspiring so much you could wring out the sheets. I wasn't up for anything, watching TV, reading, playing a game, even the slightest effort was too much for me. I didn't even have the strength to hold the telephone receiver. When I went back to campus after three months, it was hard. Not everyone believed that I was ill, in fact I looked well. But I never really recovered, I'm still tired.'

We've come to a halt, close to the shore. White-crested waves roll rhythmically up to my feet. My heart is pounding like a loudly ticking metronome in my throat.

'That must be hard for you.'

I nod. 'It's not much fun to miss out on a lot.'

Henry places a comforting hand on my arm, a touch which is both reassuring and disconcerting at the same time. Inadvertently I turn my head away. With his questions he has come closer than I like, I can't think straight anymore.

'How did you know what you wanted to be?' Finally, the conversation is steering towards my career. Grateful for this turn in the conversation, I tell him about the job fair, my work for NCR and my restlessness. Then, addressing the reason for our meeting, Henry says, 'In order to determine whether this consultancy firm is a suitable place for you, you really need to know what you want from your career. Can you tell me what you long for?' For a moment I look at him in bewilderment. Nobody has ever asked me this before and I really don't know how to answer. 'It's a simple question, isn't it? What do you wish to create

for yourself in this life?'

I shrug my shoulders. 'I don't know; I guess I'm just looking for a nice job.'

A little later we return to the office. Henry has poured fresh tea and is leaning back in his chair, one leg casually crossed over the other. The sun, which has finally broken through the clouds, is shining through the French doors onto the table and miniscule specks of dust are dancing in the beam of white light.

'You don't know who you are, do you?' The words sound more like a statement than a question, as two clear blue eyes watch me closely.

For a moment I believe that I have not heard him correctly and stare at him, speechless. What did he say?

'You're just like a chameleon, you take on the colour of your environment. I almost fell for it, by the way. You're really good at it.'

Blood floods up into my cheeks as I search for words to defend myself, but nothing comes. The message is so far removed from my image of myself that it takes a while before the meaning actually sinks in. When that happens, the lights go out and I feel myself disappearing into nothingness. Outside in the garden, a bird starts singing, its song breaking the sudden silence.

'I see a wrapping, a presentation, but the shape you take on, doesn't fit. Who are you? Where's the real you?' Henry is speaking softly, but his observations are piercing me and I shrink at every word. However hard I try to fight back my tears, I can't prevent them rolling down my cheeks and there's nothing I can say. We both know that he's hit the nail on the head.

Preferably I would have gone straight home and to bed, but my agenda dictates otherwise so dutifully I drive to the office and

somehow manage to get through two meetings while my body is screaming that it can't take anymore. At the end of the afternoon I gather up my things as soon as I can; I need to get home, I must sleep!

At home Stefan asks, 'And, how was the interview?'

I sit next to him on the couch and rest my head on his shoulder. 'I don't think I'll get the job. But it has nothing to do with my qualifications, he barely asked about those. In fact I've never had such a strange job interview.'

'What did he ask then?' Stefan pours me a glass of red wine.

'He asked about my childhood, what it was like at home and so on and he also asked about my longing, about what I want from this life. I didn't have an answer. He came to the conclusion that I don't know who I am.' After a few small sips I feel the wine warming my body.

'Sounds vague. Don't let it worry you, you're terrific.' He kisses my hair and disappears to the attic. 'I still have a lot to do, see you later.'

I follow him upstairs and slip into bed. God, I'm tired. Sleep first and then I will think about what to prepare for dinner.

But I never make it to dinner. By the time the sound of the shower wakes me, it's already around eleven in the evening. When Stefan crawls into bed with me and gently places a hand on my arm, I pretend to be asleep. Sex is not my favourite pastime and tonight I'm definitely not in the mood.

Not until years later do I realise that the conversation with Henry was my 'knock on the door'. Probably not the first one, but the first one I heard. At different moments in our lives we all receive a call to leave the path we're on; the soul's longing for fulfilment and the impulse of the psyche to move to the next phase in its

development. Those who choose to answer the call, embark on 'the hero's journey', the universal mono-myth or the leitmotiv in the lives of all people, so beautifully described by Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

'But whether small or great and no matter what stage or grade in life, the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration – a rite, or moment of spiritual passage which when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar horizon in life has been outgrown, the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit and the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand... That which has to be faced, and is somehow profoundly familiar to the unconscious – though unknown, surprising, and even frightening to the conscious personality - makes itself known and what formerly was meaningful may become strangely emptied of value... Thereafter, even though the hero returns for a while to his familiar occupations, they may be found unfruitful.'

But that story hasn't reached me yet.

I wish the ground would swallow me up; my sense of shame is so overwhelming that I want to hide under the covers and never come out again. My self-image has been shattered in one fell swoop and the inner turmoil I've been feeling for a while now, has only increased. The evening after the interview, I sit on the edge of my bed and stare at the skin of my arms. If I'd understood Henry correctly a lot must be stored under that skin of mine, but I really have no idea what that is and even less about how to find it. During our goodbyes, he urged me to learn to go inside, to discover who I truly am and thankfully, he also gave me the name and telephone number of someone who could guide me.