

MARTINE BAKKER

SILENT EXIT



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The theatre's left entrance is reserved for people being photographed and interviewed by the press on the red carpet. The right entrance is meant for regular mortals – although they wouldn't describe themselves as such, otherwise they'd never have been able to get their hands on an invitation to the party of the year.

Suze van Olst has chained her bike to a bridge next to the theatre and joins the queue on the 'plebs' side' of the building. She's been to hundreds of these kinds of parties. At times, she enjoyed the dancing, the snacks, and the people; other times, she wished she'd stayed home, on the sofa, under a fleece blanket. To stay out of sight of the cameras and journalists, Suze pulls the hood of her gold-en kimono a bit further down over her black hair and grey roots. She looks down at the ground and acts if she's part of a group of non-famous men in tuxedos.

Slowly, they shuffle towards the door.

She nods to a security guard who gives her an inspecting look from underneath his cap. He rummages through her holographic bumbag. The thing exudes youthful ugliness, but it's just big enough for her basic mini survival kit – phone, keys, money, mints, an elastic, paracetamol, something to put on your lips, and tampons. As always, Suze feels a light flush appear on her cheeks when the security guard removes the last item from her bag to check for hidden drugs – even now she has one foot in the menstruation-free era.

‘Get your phone ready,’ the security guard says. ‘Your invitation will be scanned inside.’

The Company's fiftieth anniversary is being celebrated with a private event – one that everyone in the industry wants to attend. Suze hadn't realised how in demand the tickets were, until she started receiving all sorts of texts and Instagram messages from loose acquaintances and fellow celebrities. They asked how she was doing, and if, as a member of The Company, she could perhaps arrange something for them. People even offered to pay or tried to bribe her with bottles of Saint-Véran delivered to her home, dinners at the hip microtrend restaurant of her choice... One person even offered to be her personal assistant for the week.

In the end, Suze didn't have anyone put on the list, because she wasn't sure she'd be going herself up until the last minute. She knew it was expected of her, but it's hard to get in a festive mood if you don't want to be somewhere.

'Could you enlarge the QR code?' asks a boy holding a scanner.

Suze fiddles with her phone. Get on with it, she thinks.

'Hey, Suze?' Marloes, The Company's Senior Comms & Media Director, is standing next to her.

Shit.

'You're going the wrong way, darling. Photos first!'

Suze forces a smile and follows Marloes to the left entrance.

'Wonderful, isn't it, a party with beautiful people only.' Marloes smiles, revealing a little diamond on her canine as she does dance moves to inaudible music.

'Yes, everyone's put in an effort.' Suze looks around. She sees female colleagues in evening dresses, black sequinned trousers, and shiny swimsuits with fishnet stockings underneath. The men wear morning suits and white shirts with gold necklaces and the odd bowler.

Suze is placed in front of a wall with sponsor logos. Flash. Flash. Flash.

When artistic director Dennis Zwaartsman spots her, he walks towards her with outstretched arms and hugs her intimately. Suze feels her jaw tense up. Still, she manages to conjure something resembling a smile onto her face for the photographers.

Under his couture suit, Dennis is wearing a shirt with a print of his own face. A young, promising fashion designer could have designed it, but it could just as well have been AliExpress. A typical outfit for El Patrón, as he likes to be called. The last time she'd seen him had been after *that* conversation, after which he'd sent her a text: *Happy we were able to discuss this as adults*. Later that afternoon, a sober bouquet of flowers that wouldn't have looked out of place at a funeral had been delivered to her home.

The good thing about smiling for so many cameras is that there's proof. Afterwards, nobody would be able to say they got to her.

It's her first red carpet since she stopped dying her hair.

The party's theme is *Shamelessly Fabulous*, with the dress code being 'pish posh'. The invitation promised an ecstatic event full of theatrical acts, uncomfortable activities, and raving for life.

Guests at these kinds of events in the theatre are expected to adhere to the dress codes. Yet the odd person

in grimy jeans and battered trainers is never refused entry. Probably because the doormen assume that's a statement only very important people dare to make.

Suze gives the photographers an exaggerated smile and positions her legs strategically to make herself look as slim as possible.

The cameras flash incessantly.

When she gets the heads-up that it's time for the next set of decked-out partygoers to take their turn, she heads for the door.

'Who are you wearing?' a showbiz programme editor calls out as she walks away. A bright light stings her eyes. 'Oh, I'd have to check the label,' she mumbles as she tries to walk on.

The editor glances at his list of questions. 'How does it feel to be back in your old stomping ground for a bit?'

'In this place, with all these eccentrics?' Suze glances around and forces the corners of her mouth into an up-right position. 'Warm, of course. As always.'

At the cloakroom, Suze queues longer than you'd expect for a star actor. Under her kimono, she wears a black gown and what feels like sixteen layers of shapewear, and gold pumps on her feet. The gown – the same one she'd worn to the premiere of her last play – had been the first

thing she put on that night. Then she tried on five more outfits in front of her bedroom mirror because the premiere gown was cutting off her breathing a bit, and she was worried she'd faint in it. For a moment, she considered ditching the whole 'posh' thing and wearing a tracksuit and flats instead. But she eventually ended up back with gown number one. Breathing might have been a challenge with this fabric constricting her body, but it did feel like protective armour. And even though the heels weren't exactly designed for walking comfort, they gave her a sense of strength. She wouldn't need to dance in them anyway.

She stuffs the little cloakroom ticket into her bumbag and looks around. Gold balloons shaped like the number fifty hang on the walls. Hostesses in nipple tassels serve mimosas. A bunch of men with glitter in their beards eagerly grab two glasses each from the tray. There are lots of familiar faces, but Suze doesn't immediately spot a group for her to join. She decides not to belong with anyone for now. It feels pretty good like this, all by herself.

Her gaze settles on her shoes on the floor. She follows the patterns on the carpet she's seen so many times, takes in the smell so familiar to her. This place used to feel like home; now, it's more like a house she once lived in, but with the new tenants' furniture in it.

Suze nods to a couple of people. That way, her presence won't go unnoticed, and she'll be able to leave early. Nobody would find it odd if, later in the evening, someone thought: hey, I haven't seen Suze around – but it was such a busy party! With all the different rooms and nooks in the theatre, it's easy to miss each other.

Has she been in there long enough to head back again?

Or will she have a drink after all?

Okay.

But just one.

With no alcohol.

There's a mobile bar in the foyer, decorated with faux flowers and a blow-up palm tree. A man in a merman costume lies on the bar. He waves his fin and hands out chocolate fruits de mer. Behind the bar is Johanna, the bartender Suze has known since taking her very first steps in the theatre world – to think that was thirty-one years ago. They've spent many evenings together, which Johanna probably still remembers in great detail. 'Don't you look fab!' Johanna says, smiling widely. Like all the other staff, she wears a gold bow tie around her neck.

'Oh, this old thing?' Suze jokes.

Johanna bursts out laughing. 'What will it be, young lady? A shot of vodka?'

‘God no.’ Suze wants a drink that suits her mood, without waking up with gaps in her memory. ‘Do you have any elderflower lemonade?’

Johanna makes an apologetic face. ‘Unfortunately not.’

‘I’ll have a ginger beer, then.’

‘I don’t have that at this bar either, but you could try somewhere else in the building.’

Suze doesn’t feel like looking for another bar.

‘Ginger ale?’

Johanna shakes her head.

‘Ginger... something else?’

‘The only ginger I see is Jochem Mulder. Over there.’

Suze doesn’t turn her head. She knows that as soon as you make eye contact with Jochem Mulder, you’re stuck with him. ‘Bitter lemon?’

‘Babes, the selection was adjusted for the party. We have cocktails. Would you like an Aperol Spritz? Pornstar Martini? Screaming Orgasm?’

It was so much simpler back then. They drank Americanos before the show, then Tempranillo afterwards. ‘Anything alcohol-free?’

‘In that case, I have Coke, 7Up or Fanta.’

‘So boring!’ Suze laughs.

‘There’s some alcohol-free beer in the fridge as well...’

‘God no, I can’t stand beer even with alcohol in it, you know that!’

‘Sue! Hello!’ In the meantime, Jochem has made his way over to the bar. He grabs Suze by the shoulders, and presses his hot, reddish-bearded cheek against hers.

‘Our celeb,’ Suze says, smiling as she admires his suit. The lenses of his sunglasses are shaped like stars. Jochem’s the type of actor who says he has a photographic memory, so he never has to learn any lines. He’ll take one quick look at the script just before rehearsal, but when you do a scene with him, he makes up lines on the spot and skips whole parts.

‘While you have a think, I’ll quickly grab a pint.’

‘A decisive person!’ Johanna exclaims. She starts pouring right away, then hands him his glass.

‘Cheers,’ Jochem says, and he raises his glass. ‘To The Company! Fifty years!’

Lacking a drink, Suze gives his glass an odd sort of high five. ‘Yeah. Fifty. What a number, eh?’

‘Certainly a number.’

They stand together in silence for a moment. This often happened, right from the day they joined The Company. Then they’d both take a breath at the same time and talk over each other.

‘So, er, I see you’ve been...’ Jochem starts.

‘So, what does the next season look like for you?’ Suze asks.

‘I, er... I’ll be playing *Infinity Freedom*.’

It doesn’t ring a bell to Suze.

‘Based on a novel,’ Jochem clarifies.

‘Oh. Is that that monologue?’

‘Yeah, that’s right. I’m at my best when I’m working with Dennis one-on-one. He really brings out the absolute best in me.’

‘Oh. Quite special, that,’ Suze says.

‘Yeah, it’s ace.’

‘And then there’s that whole audience, finally all to yourself.’

‘Aw. I don’t think like that anymore, like “finally they’ll all be looking only at me.” That might have mattered to me then, but the audience’s opinion is much less important nowadays.’ He smiles, like he’s taking a moment to imagine how he’ll look up on that stage soon.

‘I mostly see it as a great challenge.’

‘Great opportunity, yeah,’ Suze says.

‘What about you, then?’ Jochem asks. ‘Because *you’re* out there spreading those wings.’

‘Suze, would you like an Americano instead?’ Johanna interrupts the two. ‘Oh, wait, the coffee machine is switched off, I’m just realising. How about a cuppa tea

then? I can see if we've got a kettle anywhere in the back?'

'No, never mind.' Suze softly mumbles to herself: 'I'll be leaving in a bit anyway.'

'Or a milkshake?' Johanna asks. 'That's alcohol-free. I've got vanilla flavour.'

Suze has a soft spot for drinks that soothe her inner child. 'Ooh, yummy! I'll have one, then.'

'I'm off to drain the main vein,' Jochem says. 'See you on the dance floor!'

Suze places the half-empty cup of milkshake on a bar table and sets course for the cloakroom. She's stayed for exactly 17 minutes. Time for a silent exit. She loves slipping away from these kinds of events without saying goodbye. In everyone's head, you're still at the party, but you've already gone, off on your bike. People also call it an Irish goodbye, or a French leave. She thinks a *Dutch doei* is a good one, too.

But then she sees him.

Renzo Postma.

Frontman of the band The Night Mass.

He stands in front of the cloakroom, next to The Company's musical director. Are they friends? They must be, or he wouldn't be here.

Laughing, Renzo pulls on the golden braces that hold up his trousers.

How long had it been?

She was eighteen.

Only a girl.

At least, that's what she was at the start of the evening.

He actually doesn't look that different from when she first met him, she thinks.

His eyes might look a little smaller, because his face is a bit fuller now.

Over the years, she'd seen him a fair few times – at trendy celebrity parties, at premieres, and once, they were both guests on the same talk show. But the last time she'd spotted him in the wild was years ago, and there had never been a good time for her to say anything to him.

What if she said something to him *now*?