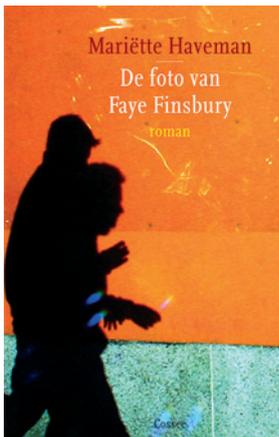


Quest for authenticity

Mariëtte Haveman

Faye Finsbury's Photo



Faye Finsbury's *Photo* is a modern Bildungsroman. Maria van Enschede turns from a schoolgirl with great ideals and little experience into an introverted drifter with a natural tendency to melt into the background. The reader is carried along effortlessly, which makes this first-person novel all the more oppressive and disturbing. We see how easily a person can come close to freezing to death on the streets of London.

It is the winter of 1978-79, known in Britain as the Winter of Discontent. The economy is in trouble, with two million unemployed and a relentless series of strikes. Against this background, nineteen-year-old Maria is training to be an actress. She is young, naive, lonely and looking for a better, more authentic style of life and a better, more authentic style of art. In her quest Maria turns to characters like Rosie, who displays the candour she is looking for but with it a certain harshness, to Faye, with her unreliable borderline personality, and to Wilf, who is perhaps the most obvious representative of the kind of stark existence she is after: wanting nothing, doing nothing. From beneath such starkness the authentic life must surely emerge of its own accord.

The novel paints a vivid portrait of the era. Not just of London and the rise of bands like Joy Division but of young people financially supported by their parents, able to choose any kind of further education they like, yet with no clue as to which direction to take or what their role in society might be.

Art historian Mariëtte Haveman is merciless in her description of the art world. Maria expects to find true life in art, but Faye plays a dirty trick on her (Maria is photographed without knowing it) and when Faye dies the media and the art world steal her work. Articles about Faye's art are published that Maria feels are incompatible with the woman she knew.

Despite the tragic plot, Haveman's style ensures there is nothing melancholy about this novel. Her use of descriptive detail to illustrate her main character's state of mind is remarkably astute. Haveman succeeds in describing her character's world convincingly from within, without the reader ever being required to lose touch with reality altogether. Only at the end do we realize just how far Maria has allowed things to go. It seems her landlady was right to say that 'London is no city for young girls.'



photo Jeroen Stumpel

Mariëtte Haveman (b. 1957) is an art historian and writer. She is editor-in-chief of the magazine *Kunstschrift* and the author of *Studio Secrets*, about Dutch artists' studios from 1200 to the present. *Faye Finsbury's Photo* is her first novel. In 1978 Haveman spent a year in London and on her website she writes, 'There lies the germ of the book *Faye Finsbury's Photo*. But Maria van Enschede is not a self-portrait from that period. Her experiences are invented. At best you could say that the book is a heightened, dramatized and completely fictionalized version of a much more ordinary and messy life that was lived in 1978-79.'

Subtle portrait of Maria and her unremitting descent from 'naive and high-minded girl' to someone who sleeps in cardboard boxes in an empty factory.

HET PAROOL

Haveman strikes all the right chords as she describes the confused mind of a person who has lost her way.

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Sample Translation

Faye Finsbury's Photo

(De foto van Faye Finsbury)

by Mariëtte Haveman

(Amsterdam: Cossee, 2008)

Translated by the author

You shall above all things be glad and young
For if you're young, whatever life you wear

It will become you, and if you are glad
Whatever's living will yourself become

The show was organized in the expectation of massive public attendance, with railings, turnstiles and signs saying *queue here*, but now the rooms were filled with a resounding silence. Most people were in their cars on the way home or there already, setting the table for dinner.

'The Interim'. Six rooms with photographs, clothing, art and design from the seventies. A neglected era, explained tall screens lining the walls by the entrance. It was as if the eager sixties had snatched all wind from the sails of the next decade, leaving it stranded and deflated on the beach of history.

In reality, spoke a civilized voice from a projection screen, the seventies had been a time of great change and experiment. All energy released during the previous decade had born fruit in the seventies. Bizarre sometimes, often excessive but always seething with vigour and vitality.

The exhibition aimed to show that vigour and vitality.

Past the entrance it was silent. The high glass walls were blurred and accentuated the capsule-like reserve of the rooms.

Stuff and more stuff. Much had emerged from cellars and attics, the most unlikely things. Vacuum cleaners, irons, toasters in garish colours, amoeba-shaped coffee tables, chairs, hairdryers, desk-lamps. Here they all were in each other's company like guests at an improbable party, dusted, trimmed and painted, silent witnesses of an era that blushed and bent itself backwards to catch the attention, but also looked away, haughty and shy like an adolescent.

Further along, the image was deepened and expanded. Past the implements, above a set-up of corduroy-clad cubicles, a section of the ceiling was covered

with monitors full of flickering images where history ran its course, soundless and shaky, agitated and elusive, an aquarium full of spent life.

Nixon. Thatcher. Strikes in the coal mines. More strikes, student revolt. A news reader who looked like a younger version of Sean Connery, turning his pages with manicured hands. Improbably long-legged, pale girls balancing down a catwalk on huge block-shaped heels.

Because the exhibition was so wide in scope, it was easy to miss, the photo of two tramps, a man and a girl, both worn-out and scraggy. It hung in the corridor between two rooms, in a show-case, barely visible between a picture of snowed-in houses ('the Coldest Winter Ever') and an ice-cream parlour full of exultant teenagers.

A man and a girl in a murky twilight of reflections and fluorescent lighting.

The cold had crept into their posture and also into their shabby clothing that hung, thick and shapeless, from their limbs. The man wore a guerrilla cap. His chin was covered with a dark growth. The girl's hair was short and spiky. They both looked the other way. Their faces were angry, shut off; faces of people with nothing to expect from contact with the world outside. Behind them the contours of industrial plants emerged, a shed with small sparkling windows, an old factory with a gabled roof; behind that was a wasteland with fences and a sign saying *Trespassers Will be Prosecuted*.

It was a good photograph; striking, unforgettable. It was made with a telelens, pushing the walls and fences upfront. This enhanced the impression of a narrow strip of land, affording these people a measure of space to move back- and forwards in, locked in between the factory walls behind them and the river of time between then and now.

All in all it can't have been more than a few seconds, but it was only when my eye caught the caption below that it really dawned on me just what I was looking

at: Faye Finsbury, London, South Bank, May 1979. Wrong date, I thought mechanically, it was April. Only then what I was looking at, slowly began to dawn on me, from the roots of my hair to my toes, like a chill, so perceptible that I glanced sideways to see if a window had been opened.

I was tired. It had been a long day, filled with the classes of fifteen-year-olds I was charged with to teach the rudiments of the English language and literature.

Was it a wonder that sometimes, at the end of a day like that -

But I knew it, although I tried to keep it at arm's length. I knew why I was responding to the scene before me, even though I'd forgotten all about it, had allowed the episode, so long ago, to sink to the bottom of my memory. There it had stayed like pool of stagnant water which only now and then seeped through into the higher strata. Now in the dead silent room of the museum it had been stirred, as if a hand had broken through the surface.

I held myself still. No movement now. Movement is turbulence. I saw myself sitting on the grey linoleum, surrounded by a hedge of custodians, a woman became unwell, just before closing time, imagine, we thought she was dying.

My heart thumped, steady but strong. Thump. Thump. I guarded my equilibrium, but it wasn't easy. Something tilted. The centre of gravity that first had sat where it should be, with me, between my arms folded over my chest, had shifted now to the world behind the glass that I was looking at.

Impossible to evade.

That there, the small strip of life on that photograph was more real, more tangible than this here: me, almost fifty years old, spending time at an exhibition about the seventies on a damp, rainy November day in 2006.

I cut myself loose and walked away, out of the museum, to the station.

Is it still you, in a photo of thirty years ago?

The train moved, around me people switched on their electronic equipment. Outside the cows bowed their heads under the falling dusk.

Over the wet dishevelled pastures the image returned.

Wilf. Faye.

I pronounced their names softly, and the sound of those names released an emotion, a real one, the first one, something that welled from my centre, warm and painful. And in its wake came a flood of images. Images, sensations, one unleashing the other.

A history. Mine.

I bent over the little table at the window as if intently looking outside, my hands cupped like a case around my eye sockets so I felt the blood throb inside my fingertips. They say your fingerprints remain the same, your whole life. Other than that everything changes, a slow ongoing death from which you emerge time after time until that stops too.

No doubt about it. Even though every cell in my body had been replaced at least three times, my brain aged, my bones hardened and parts of my memory blocked out by thick layers of insulating material.

It had been a narrow strip of life, but it had determined the basso continuo for everything that came after, and probably part of the course too.

It had been an eternity because every minute counts when you are young, just as every brick counts when you build your own house. After that it had turned into a memory. A forgotten memory, effectively stowed away, alongside the knowledge that one day you, too, will sink under the surface, sooner and more definitively than the stuff you leave behind, hairdryer and toaster, sunglasses and umbrellas, train tickets and credit cards.

It affected a period of my life which up to now I had been reasonably well able to shelve as futile because everybody did so, ah the sins of youth, thank God for ageing, come let me refill your glass. But I wasn't quite managing to do that now.

I would have to drag and seize hold of everything that still had some substance, and then for all that I found I would have to retrieve the words, and weigh them, one after the other.

How long did I stay with Wilf? Weeks. Months rather than weeks. With hindsight, it must have been seven months, from June to December 1979.

Wilf and I were poor, living together in the little house. There were days we hardly ate. Wilf had a little plot somewhere between the derelict factories where he grew spinach, rhubarb and sprouts, nettles too, nutritious, full of minerals. Funnily enough I never went there. That says something about our relationship I suppose, but at the time it never struck me as odd. There were potatoes there too, but little else. Only wine in unending supply. Wilf could drink it like water, although he was moderate in his way, never more than four glasses, spread over the day. I quit drinking after a while. It took me to the point where, even without the help of alcohol, I landed more often than I cared for. My days consisted of rising early, waiting, and walking. When the weather was bad I stayed inside with Wilf, who had stopped talking entirely almost the minute I moved in with him. Even the poetry sounded only inside his skull, if at all. He lived according to a regime where every gesture was selected by economy: the fewer, the better. I went along with that. It was OK by me, the silence, the stark simplicity of our life. It was as if we both obeyed the silent agreement to be as un-present as we could. As if our mutual company was a burden for us both that had best be made as light as possible. In case of emergency, a leakage, a small domestic calamity, an exchange took place between us that lasted until the problem was solved. After that we went our ways.

Wilf fulfilled his rituals. He poked the small stove into activity, made his rounds, a walk to his plot, an expedition for some errand or purchase. Sometimes these trips took him longer, days, I never knew where he went, never asked.

When it rained really hard I stayed in. What I did then, I cannot really say. I spent my time, or rather, I let it pass. I read a bit in the newspaper that was left on

the table, looked out of the window and observed how the water of the Thames took on the colour of the sky. I could do that for quite some time. Then I imagined what was underneath that brown-grey surface. Plants. Wrecks. Remains. People, possibly. Human waste.

If weather permitted, I took a stroll, as I called it to myself. I walked for as long as it took me to reach the vanishing point, in order to leave myself and everything connected behind. I always succeeded, although the moment this happened seemed to shift. First it was after five, six hours that the necessary amount of physical and mental exhaustion took hold. Later it took longer, nine, twelve, fifteen hours. Walking through the familiar wastelands my understimulated brain started scanning the vicinity for things to seize on. There were areas I needed to avoid, but I had a trick for that. If I locked my observations into catchwords (hoisting-crane bulldozer fence wreckage wall), I could steer my thoughts adequately toward the dull surrounding plains. After a while boredom took care of them, shutting them up, all thoughts, the good and the bad, like an excitable child who's being ignored and finally drops into a sullen silence. That was the moment of extreme exhaustion when I knew I could very well walk a little more, on will power alone. Then there were no thoughts left, only sensations. This was the moment I sought, my accomplishment of the day. Then it was safe to sit down and rest a little in one of the many shelters I knew. My physical safety was no longer a subject which kept me awake. It just didn't occur to me that anything bad could happen to me.

Sometimes, near the edge of exhaustion, Faye's image took shape in my brain. Whenever I felt in the mood, I gave it a hand. I concentrated on my dead friend, part for part: eyes, clothes, shoes, voice, just as long as it took to conjure her up. Then I fantasized that Faye hung around with me, smelled and saw what I smelled and saw. That I had to lend her my senses.

Walking through the city together, that had been fun.

Now and then I spoke, half to myself, half to Faye, about what I encountered: look at that trash. What do you think that thing's for?

Less often my thoughts turned to Felix, or Rosie. They had no use for me now, nor I for them. They belonged to the world I had left behind, played away was the word, in the big game. Wrong bet, slight mistake.

Sometimes, walking past the river I fantasized that on the far side another Maria still lived, the real one. Peering at the proud buildings on the opposite bank I imagined how behind their façades the other Maria was meeting friends and seeing shows, moving through the London streets, getting excited or angry, falling in love and learning a profession.

The thought was pleasing rather than painful. It insulated me from the other, less desirable thoughts. Steering thoughts had become my speciality.

It was kind of a scanty, but not an impossible life. At the end of the day, when the soles of my feet burned and my head was cleaned out, I walked home and ate if there was anything to eat. Usually Wilf sat reading his newspapers at the table until it got dark. He got them from the dump, always two days out-of-date making it seem even more as if time with us followed another pace than on the far side of the river where the news took shape. Sometimes I sat with him for a while, as the light slowly withdrew and made place for the reflections of the water on the walls and the ceiling, small, sharp snakes of light, more or less nimble, depending on the wind, the tide. An electric light bulb hung from the middle of the ceiling, but Wilf never switched it on, three-quarters of the world population, he said, lives without artificial light, what good would it do us?

Wilf didn't like stuff. To him, all kinds of modern equipment were equivalent to waste. One time, I don't know how long ago, I had found a radio, a beautiful, small silver thing. I pushed the buttons and cheerful voices reached me, music that consoled you and made you laugh, noise from a merry, feather light world far from here. I gave it to Wilf. He looked at it and placed it on the table. There it sat for a couple of days, gleaming silently amid the newspapers and soiled

wineglasses. Then one day it was gone. I never asked him what he had done with it, afraid of the answer, it would have made me desperate.

So we sat opposite one another waiting for the night to fall, while the water beneath and often also above us streamed, pushed, leaped and lapped around the fragile little house. The wind, the water, patient enemies whispering like friends. When I listened carefully I heard the sounds of the city far away, another world, long gone. I don't believe Wilf ever turned a fleeting thought in that direction, but then I had no clue as to which direction his thoughts took anyway. Perhaps he thought about the birds, I had noticed he knew about those, but even they were few and far away, where we lived. There were gulls flapping and screaming about, ducks and geese floating silently past our house. Sometimes a v-shaped fleet soared through the air, high above the river. Then I saw him look up, and for a moment thought I knew what went on in his mind. There were smaller birds too, tits and finches. Once, unexpectedly, one paid us a visit. I watched him studying the little creature, registering its movements, probably determining its age, what it was doing, why it was there. I looked at him, at his hands on top of the table, his chin, covered with something that never quite turned into a beard, large, light brown eyes absorbing everything.

Now they were turned inwards, forming an impenetrable shield between him and the outside world; between him and me. I watched him, and I wondered, Who are you? What do you want?

Nothing, I believe. Wilf is the one person in my life of whom I am as good as certain that he wanted nothing. He just sat there, hardly moving, hands on the surface of the table, sometimes very still, often quietly tapping his fingers as if to an inner rhythm, surrounded by the morose, sombre element which was his. There was no way of telling whether or not he was aware of my presence while all around us the reflections jumped over the walls and the water patiently gnawed at the foundations of our small shelter. The rats made a racket amid the papers, every now and again one caught my eye; big, emaciated animals, never

truly frightened. At nine I fell asleep, rolled into the reeking grey-green sleeping bag.

It had started to turn cold and the dark was falling earlier when Wilf asked me how long I expected to stay. That is the way he put it, casually, as if it were a mere passing thought, a question that hardly needed an answer. In fact it sounded like an announcement. He turned round immediately and started poking into the little stove. No respite this time, no explanation.

Not that I asked for any. It is funny to find, whenever I try to retrieve some fleeting particle of my feelings during that period, how impossible that is. I really believe I didn't have any feelings any more. Like Wilf, I had disposed of them as of something for which I had no use. Or if I had them they were buried so deeply beneath layers of apathy and the relentless training of my waking consciousness into the narrowest possible passages that I was no longer aware of them. There were images, the same that tormented me years later in my dreams, and when it was really bad also during the day. Something to do with a pit, where time crept upward like a slow stripe. Something to do with dead streets behind every corner of which a new street is hidden. Something about strange faces that hung over me, wanting something of me, my destruction.

The following day I went to the one place I could think of, the storage yard where I had been earlier, in my former life when Faye had still been there (or was she gone by then? Yes. She was gone). But when I got there, with the sleeping bag that I had stolen from Wilf and the plastic bag with my sweater and leggings, she was there.

I sensed her presence more strongly than during my expeditions when I imagined we were cruising together through the wastelands and derelict warehouses. She just sat there waiting for me, under the roof where the newspapers were piled so high they almost toppled over, but for some reason never did. She sat crosslegged, smiling her big broad smile, wearing the pyjamas

she used to when we sat in the windowsill talking. So there you are at last. Come here, you're soaking wet, you idiot, what are you up to anyway?

Even now my memory offers no surprise at her appearance. Of course she was there. That is the only feeling time still permits, whenever I try to retrieve that moment in my memory. That and the image of my friend, my crazy, wild friend who was dead and waited for me.

I sat down with her, too tired to speak. She proposed a game but I fell asleep, just like that, the sleeping bag shoved underneath my head as a pillow, while Faye explained to me how things stood. That Wilf suffered from depressions, so protracted and so deep that he was beyond anyone's reach. That she, Faye and Wilf, understood one another on that score. That it was something that tied them together and shut them off from the rest of the world, even if that hadn't done much good to either of them.

In the course of the night she must have spread some papers on top of me, quite a pile, which is the only reason I didn't perish from hypothermia right away. I simply woke up, next day probably because it was light, and dry. I got up and started looking for the small tap that I knew to be there somewhere not far away. At last I found it, and that kept me going for quite a while, together with all the other small pieces of luck like a discarded sandwich and a plastic container of peanut sauce, but Faye had vanished and she has never come back.

Months earlier:

At a party in Clapham Maria meets Faye, a young artist. They talk, and Maria confides to Faye that she's desperately trying to find a place to live in London. Faye advises her to turn to Matthew Fowler, who owns a house in East London where young artists can live and work. So Maria does, and in the next scene we find her in her new digs, a beautiful room in a mansion in the London borough of Spitalfields. Maria hasn't yet met

many of her neighbours, who all seem engrossed in their work and private affairs.

I have almost forgotten the girl I talked to at Rosemary Rooster's party when I bump into her, a week or two later, in the top corridor. She enters my field of vision beneath the relief of the labourers, and I am startled by her highly coloured presence; that pale face, those broad cheeks and the small chin, the dark red coat, the sound of the heels of her Spanish dancing shoes in the stair-well.

'Hey, hello! We've met!' I feel stupid, my voice reverberating in the vaults of the building.

The truth is that, for me, the encounter comes at the wrong moment, cold and tired as I am after a long expedition.

'So you made it,' the girl says, observing me with a curious look in her eyes.

For an instant I am confused as to what it is that I made, then I realize she means my stay in the Workshop, Matthew's Mansion as the other tenants call it. The girl appears to misunderstand my hesitance, and sets out to explain with disarming elaboration who she is and where we have met. I hadn't yet caught her name, but she mentions it as a self-evident part of our shared memory of the party in Clapham. Faye.

Not only my voice, Faye's, too, sounds different from what I remember. Hollower, and a little piercing, maybe due to the surplus of space around us. What a small person she is, I see now. But there is something else to her too, apart from size; something that entitles her to more space than her stature really calls for. Faye holds the secret to the art of representation, as small people can do.

A few days later she knocks at my door. Barefoot, wearing pyjamas of sorts, dark blue with a glossy texture that enhances her appearance of a particularly sleek night animal, she stands in my doorway at seven o'clock in the evening when I am sitting behind my little desk crumbling some bread and cheese on top of *The Daily Telegraph* from the day before yesterday.

You reading the *Telegraph*? Don't let Matthew catch you.' I quickly fold up the paper.

'Your room could do with improvement,' says Faye, glancing at my possessions. 'Bit of colour here. Some fabric over there.' Her laugh immediately livens up my sober surroundings.

Did I fancy a glass of wine in her room?

'It's warmer upstairs,' she says, rubbing her arms, whose skin is very light, like her face.

'Something about the circulation of air in this place.'

Faye's room is not only warmer and more colourful, but seems bigger than mine. This can hardly be true as all the rooms in the building are copies of each other, except the entrance hall downstairs, and the boardroom upstairs, which is bigger and situated at the south-east corner, overlooking sombre rows of nineteenth-century houses with identical windows, now mainly used as offices where, behind the glass curtains, sometimes the shadow of human life, a typist or secretary, can be detected. Faye's room, like mine, is situated at the north-west, lit by three tall windows filled with sky and clouds. But Faye's room is different. She has painted her ceiling blue with white and yellow-orange streaks, like a spring sky. The walls are covered in a glossy silky fabric, in colours that change according to the light and the visitor's viewpoint: on entrance they seem greenish, greyish blue from the middle of the room, and farther back they change from grey to a deep dark blue.

Faye doesn't seem bothered by the mess around her. Assorted objects are strewn about, one of which, on its own pedestal, surrounded by an odd, ill-fitting little chapel of broken plaster, is a six-armed Indian god or goddess with green glass eyes, arms and legs bowed in a dance. Around the deity lies a small cache of pebbles and junk, old beads and plastic armbands plus what look like the contents of a broken bag of old candy. The whole array is reflected by two large mirrors along the walls, on either side of the door.

The windowsills are as high as they are downstairs, but deeper. That is the only real difference. Here too, you have to pull yourself up from a chair in order to look outside. Faye has filled them with cushions to make them comfortable, looking out over the grey roofs of East London.

‘What a divine view, Faye.’ The word I’ve chosen, *divine*, lingers in the silence of midday like a mistake, but it doesn’t seem to bother Faye.

‘Divine ’s the word,’ she says, a little smile curling in her cat face. She places two glasses on the sill, then joins me, light and quick, on leg folded underneath her body, the other pulled up, tightening the dark blue fabric as a support for her crossed arms. I look at her face, turned to the window. From the side her short nose adds something sad, unfinished to her appearance.

‘Look,’ she says with her little smile. ‘From here you can see how insignificant everything is, when looked at from the right perspective.’

I turn round and take in Faye’s possessions. A kingdom with a secret. Here and there, tacked to the wall on the fabric, are photographs in black and white. For an instant they take my breath away. Thirty to forty inch; Felix’s format. There is even a superficial similarity between the harsh beauty of Felix’s city views, inhabited by streetlights or a lone bicycle, and Faye’s London locations. But Faye’s photos are less carefully composed, here and there they are out of focus, the front part leaking fuzzily into the corners by the distortion of the wide-angle lens. All are peopled by a single human presence, sometimes on a street corner, sometimes in a classroom full of empty chairs, a bedroom or a bar. The person always sits or stands a little off-centre, in an attitude of complete repose, at the same time exuding a terrible loneliness.

‘But it’s you, in those photos!’ I jump off the windowsill to take a closer look.

‘Right.’

‘Faye’s head between her drawn-up shoulders, her smile.

‘Now that you say it. Ha ha.’

My intense attentiveness to her pictures seems to cause a change in her expression. Her face turns earnest. She shrugs as if to shake something off.

‘At least I’m cheap,’ she says, arms circling her knees, ‘and always available.’

Late into the night we sit on the window sill talking and munching crisps. Every once in a while we are silent. Then the room fills with the sounds of the city, which from here seem to have a dizzying, echoing depth.

‘The thing about art’, says Faye, her mouth stuffed with crisps, drawing a furrow between her eyebrows, as if in an effort to pull her thoughts together into a coherent whole, to collect the words that fit. ‘The thing about art is that it makes you less, but also less lonely. I mean: every picture I make, I pay for. Something gets lost. What is left behind, is less. Thinner. Emptier. But what I give, I can share.’

She wipes her mouth, and looks at me.

‘See what I mean? Say, you just live your life, as a cashier, a secretary, teacher whatever, and you stay intact, but you are also continuously busy killing time. Why else do you think so many people constantly listen to radio’s, watch TVs? All those minutes waiting to be filled with activities, phone calls, chats and chores. And then by the end of the day setting the alarm for another day just the same. I couldn’t live like that, could you? It would feel as if I were half dead, to begin with. Don’t you agree?’

I don’t answer immediately. This kind of reasoning frightens me. Faye continues undaunted, following her own train of thought.

‘In any case that’s how I feel about this stuff. As an artist, at least you’ve got something to pay attention to.’ She tilts her head backwards, closes her eyes for a few seconds and then opens them wide, as if something has caught her attention and now, with that oddly frozen look, she is trying to hold on to it.

‘Once. I’m talking about ten years ago or so. I can’t have been much older than fourteen. I looked into the mirror sometimes then, you see. I mean, not to

check whether my hair was alright or anything, but really look. You know what I thought?’

I peer into the room where now only the goddess gleams in the dark. I fold my arms, and shake my head, not sure if I want to know.

‘Empty. That was what I thought. I saw a nose, a mouth and eyes. But no connection.’

‘And now?’

Faye laughs. ‘Now? At any rate, now I know that the mirror can’t really be empty, that I have to be somebody. I mean if it is printed, and fixed and published and all, it’s got to be true.’

Together we look, legs drawn up, at a photo of Faye that lies between us. The photo shows a bed that looks as if someone had lived in it for at least three weeks. Greyish blankets twisted into a knot, a half-unwound roll of toilet paper, mugs of old coffee, empty strips of pills. On top of all this is the girl, her back to the camera. Over her t-shirt runs a streak of light that makes it seem electrified, a game of the sun with the crumpled cotton that makes the girl seem even more lifeless. Her lower body is nude. The photo is printed, full page in a magazine, propped against the sill between us. At the top it says: *Faye Finsbury. A better future for British art.*

I read the column next to the photo. There it says how British art, on the lowest rung of Britain’s socio-economic policies, for the first time in decades playing a part in the international scene. The binding theme is the chaos of the modern world. A short summary of Faye’s biography follows. The information gives me a strange sensation, of distance, as if in my thoughts I pull back. It has the flavour of a fairy tale, black and unreal.

I read that Faye was born as the extramarital child of a Catholic couple who fled from Ireland in the fifties, and that she grew up on the Blackpool sea front. The journalist describes in vivid detail how her parents lived in a hotel, first as tenants, later as owners. Then came the years when Blackpool boomed, but

instead of flowing with the high tide her parents' business had gone ever downhill. After the bankruptcy her mother had swallowed as many pills as it took so as not to wake up again. And Faye and her little brother, had been cut adrift.

There is also a small photo of a slightly younger Faye, in jeans and a v-necked t-shirt, shoulder-length brown hair. A tough little girl with a triangular face: small chin, broad cheeks and eyes like slits against the sun.

I look up. 'Faye. What a story. But you're famous!'

Faye nods a few times, as if her mind is elsewhere.

'Yes,' she says distractedly. 'That's probably true.'

She rubs her arms, then perks up a little. 'But you know something? It doesn't impress me at all. It's as if I have nothing to do with it!'

I think I understand what she means.

'Still,' I say, blowing into my tea, my thoughts shaping themselves on the steam as if free to take any shape and run any course amid the silken walls of Faye's room. 'Being famous. That must be nice, in itself. Being admired for something you've achieved.'

Faye stands up. She starts pacing through her room, now almost entirely dark, picking up things and putting them back as if searching for something.

'Well, of course, fame, whatever that is, is kind of cool every once in a while. But, you know,' she says, coming closer, a conspiring look in her small, white face, pushing at the spikes on her head with one hand. 'It's also something that needs maintenance, if you follow.'

She's back on the sill. I follow her gaze over the rooftops where a leaden sky is pierced and shredded by the pale moon below. Far away a siren starts wailing. The tramps keep silent.

A strong girl, I think.

Then I sense before I see, Faye's eyes turned to me, one slightly more askew than the other, with those amazingly large pupils. 'Anyway, what took you into the art business, Maria?'

I start to laugh. I wave my hand to ease the pressure this question puts on my already troubled motivation. 'Took me into the art business, ha! If that's how you want to put it. No you're right,' I continue, more quietly. 'There must have been something.' I search my memory, past the films in the little Dordrecht cinema, past the photo books. 'It was something to do with truth, I guess.'

'Truth?'

I feel the inevitable – damn, why does it do that – blood rise to my cheeks.

But here is a fact, small and simple, so hard, like a pebble, that you can almost take it in your hand. Truth. This is how it is stored in my memory, deeply buried, but still.

The truth of art, a truth more real, more tangible than the daily one. A truth less vague, more complete and substantial than anything in my daily surroundings.

Something that would make my life more real. That is how I put it, a century ago. That was what I went for, above and below the smaller, less noble fantasies and impulses.

'Yes,' I talk on now, stubbornly. 'That was what I felt, that art contained more truth than the ordinary life I knew. A bit high-minded, I admit. But now, thinking back,' I press my palm to my cheek as if to contain my thoughts, to prevent them from fleeing, and me from losing my courage, 'There was something else, as well. How can I describe it? More possibilities to feel something. I think that was the main objective. To live for something real, truthful.'

Again I feel the blood rising to my cheeks, but this time I take no notice. In the warmth of the room, Faye's presence, our solidarity, I feel freer, almost thawed; free from all the conditions I had imposed on myself, all restrictions that my life had to be tied into, the lies, the half-truths, the stupid mistakes and compromises. Then, as if testing myself, I give Faye a bone-dry, ruthless version of my birthplace under the smoke of Rotterdam, of the schoolgirl existence that in its deadordinariness seemed not only dull now but shadowy too. The streets. The smells.

‘It’s as if everything was swaddled in cotton wool, that prevented me from seeing or feeling what things really meant. Even words had a vague, fleeting quality. Although, in hindsight, I can see just how fleeting and vague I was myself.’

Faye’s face doesn’t disclose whether she understands what I’m talking about. It is still. It waits. So I talk on, nothing to stop me now, wishing passionately to explain myself, while at the same time taking a distance towards myself, the world that made me.

‘Everything seemed to be made of cardboard, you see. As if everything, our house, the street, the whole neighbourhood could be folded and stowed away in a shoe box. Including me, of course. I think that was my biggest fear, back then, that I’d forget there was life outside the shoe box, or that I’d be too frightened, too cowardly to even look over the rim.’