

SCHOOL

OF

ERIC BECK RUBIN

# VELOCITY



DOUBLEDAY CANADA



IT'S MY THIRD TIME PERFORMING in Aachen. The previous two were all-Ravel programs. This time I've been booked in, last minute, to accompany a cellist for Fauré's "Elegy."

I had almost turned the offer down. It's been six months since I've practised in any kind of productive way and over a year since I've taken the stage with confidence.

But I was told the cellist I'd be accompanying was young and American and that was the hook. The fact she's young connected it to my own first overseas tour, at the centre of all my recent thoughts; the fact she's American snared me with a different nostalgia, just as powerful.

You've been waiting for this, I told myself. An actual examination of my condition. A performance where the results would be clearer than any lab test or thought experiment. This concert, because it was last minute, something

I couldn't cheat, was the way to decide, ultimately, whether I could go forward or needed to go back.

Though I know the Fauré by heart, and have performed it dozens of times, I'd still normally spend the run-up practising the piece, smoothing the edges and trying to develop something new in my interpretation. But as this is out of the question, I instead spend the remaining days in pent-up anticipation. Mostly I picture myself waiting in the wings, peering past the curtain. I watch as the audience files down the aisles and shuffles across the rows. Look up at the acoustic reflectors and other objects hanging from the ceiling. Then, in my mind's eye, the house lights start to blink. The ushers put away their programs and begin to close the doors. I look out to the stage. The Bösendorfer 280 VC. A resting beast about to be poked awake.

Sometimes I let myself wander farther and walk onstage. I feel the boards creak underfoot. The faint breeze of air conditioning on the back of my neck. But as I get closer to the piano things start to go wrong. Disruptions. Insensitivity. Oversensitivity. The piece I know backwards and forwards, diminishing till I can't hear it, then growing so loud it threatens to burst through my head. What's next? A needling, high-pitched ringing? A cascade of notes, raining down like hammers from the ceiling of the concert hall? In my imagination I can't separate what I fear from what I secretly want.

Normally I meet the soloist the day before a performance to rehearse. She'll explain her general approach to the piece, make specific instructions, and we'll play through several

times. She'll lead and I'll take notes. How slow will we be with the opening? How robust with the sharps in the third line? How dramatic the swings from pianissimo to fortissimo through the middle section?

But as everything in Aachen is last minute, including the cellist's scheduled arrival, there's no time set aside. She and I meet in the green room, one hour before the show, for a quick introduction and to exchange ideas and references, then she slips off to her dressing room.

And I go back to mine, with half an hour till call, to wait.

I flip through the score. Examine and re-examine myself in the mirror. Test that the doorknob still works, and I'm not trapped inside. When I run out of distractions I look at the clock on the wall, ten minutes left, and that's when I start to hear it. It comes in a rush. A violent, disorganized throb of noise. Pouring into my ears, blurring the edges of my vision.

A knock on the door.

"Time, Mister de Vries."

Dread and giddiness run through me as I move through the halls backstage. Is it too late to stop? I ask. But isn't the point to go through with it, no matter what? I get to the wings and see the cellist, technical crew, stage manager. Focused on their own tasks. Not one of them has a clue what I'm hearing right now. Notes from the opening bars of the Fauré, some kind of a steam engine whistle, and, overriding it all, clashes of sounds that have nothing to do with the music, or any music. Boiling inside my head.

I step away from the group to a spot just beside the curtain and look out to the concert hall. The audience is filing in. The ushers are standing by the doors. I peer out to the back row, left, and start scanning. I try to look at the face

of each person in his or her seat, turning program pages, unwrapping candies, speaking to the person in the next seat. It's my pre-concert routine. Meant to anaesthetize. But as I move down the rows, I can't shake the thought of the mistakes I've made these past few years. Quintets where I've confused one player with another. Accompaniments where I've lost track of the soloist. Concerts where I've come in late and thrown off the timing. Not that anyone would tell me, of course. No, the other musicians would just shake my hand afterwards, say something about catching a train or flight, and walk out the back door, leaving me guessing what I'd done wrong because I couldn't have known for sure.

As I scan the faces in the rows I wait for the music of the opening bars to step forward from the noise inside my head. If I can just pick out that starting passage, a clean first bar, I might be able to walk onstage and let my fingers and hands and the rest of my body take over.

The house lights start blinking, hurrying the last ticket holders to their seats. I stop scanning the rows. I step back from the curtain and accidentally brush against the cellist.

"I'm sorry," she says. Or at least, that's what I think she says. I mutter a few words and turn away. Where are those first notes? I close my eyes and try to organize the noise, like a conductor marshalling an orchestra, but it isn't working. It's getting worse. Hammering, metallic tearing, a buzz saw swinging left to right. I fix my posture, try to regain focus by looking at the Bösendorfer ten feet away, but the stage lights flash on and the phosphorescent white reflecting off the keys makes it too bright to look at.

Applause begins to swell. I can hear it. The stage manager gestures, and the soloist, grasping her cello by the neck,

marches onstage. I follow at a distance, to the piano, and sink into the bench. I feel for the knobs to adjust the height but my shaking wrists can hardly make them work. The cellist brushes her hair behind her bare shoulder and angles her chair towards the open lid of the piano. She positions her fingers above the cello's strings and inhales.

Now is the moment. I *have* to hear the clean opening of the Fauré. But as an especially cruel joke all I can make out is music from a completely different piece, a different genre. I sit completely still, waiting to place my fingers above the keys, waiting to begin, but the noise keeps coming. More notes, more sound. Every triad, chord, arpeggio, but none that makes any sense.

I look to the soloist, try to tell her I'm not ready, but she mistakes my glance for the beginning of a silent count. I shake my head to tell her to stop, but the side-to-side movement sends blows through my skull. A terrible shrieking, an overriding throng of noise. Everything pressing to the front.

I force the bench back—I have to stop her—and try to stand.

The last thing I see is a stagehand rushing to me, mouthing words. I look up at the burning white stage lights, then see a veil of black dropping in front of my eyes. Somewhere, in the last alert part of my mind, I tell myself I've passed the test. Passed or failed, depending. But it's all the same. The choice is made. And though I'm suffering as badly as I ever have, a small part of me dances in a kind of ecstasy.

Two days later. The apartment in Maastricht. Alone, because Lena is up north for the month, with her mother.

I take a walk early in the day, while the sky is bright. “Extreme clear,” as the pilots say, and I have to shade my eyes as I cross the river. For the first time in ages, I wait at corners for lights to change. I look both ways before stepping onto the street. I take my time on the steep cobbled alleys around the old city. I know I’m overdoing it, but I don’t want some hidden part of me to sabotage this. Not after I’ve come so far and am so close.

The noise during the walk is like the cries of seagulls circling in the air. Now and then I catch traces of the Fauré.

Back at the apartment, I go to the piano, the walnut Bechstein baby grand, pull the tuning equipment from inside the bench, and lay it on the floor. I unfasten the piano’s lid and delicately lean it against the wall. For the next three hours I stand over the soundboard and pick at the hammers, strings, and bridges, using mutes and levers and an electronic tuner. I test every note, left to right, and when I’m done I go through all eighty-eight in the opposite direction. The electronic tuner flashes a green light when I’ve got the balance right. You win: a perfectly tuned, concert ready, Model A.

I use one of the rags from under the kitchen sink to clean discolourations from the keys and fingerprint smudges along the fall. Try to lift the circles left by tall glasses and teacups on either side of the stand. When the case is shiny again, I do a quick once-over on the mother-of-pearl inlay on the body, then firmly refasten the lid drop and lid to the top of the piano.

It looks sharp. As good as the day I first saw it. As Lena and I first saw it.

It would be another two weeks before she got back. By then, I’d be settled elsewhere. I’d be able to explain.



I look out the window and see the sun beginning to set over the river. Soon it will sink into the horizon, make the river disappear, and cover the old town of Maastricht in shadow.

I skirt the piano and open the practice room closet. The old shoebox full of letters and other correspondence is on the top shelf. The paraphernalia, personal and professional, is in a cove at the back. My black leather overnight bag, the one that comes with me on tour, hangs from a hook. The idea is to pack everything in the bag. I try. The bag is fit to burst and the zipper won't close, but I don't mind.

In the bedroom I lay out socks, underwear, undershirt, a collarless white dress shirt in dry cleaner's plastic, and a tan garment bag I've dug out from the farther reaches of my closet. I unzip the bag halfway and look at the crisp midnight blue of the Nehru-style jacket with its covered buttons. My first suit, bought all those decades ago at the Hankyu Department Store, in Osaka.

I sit on my side of the bed and start undressing. I fold my underclothes, slip them in the proper drawers, and fall back onto the mattress.

It always gets worse as the day goes on, and now, just before sleep, is when I'm most susceptible. Dizziness, nausea, weakness, clashing noises trying to confuse me. I force my thoughts into order. Start from the top, I tell myself, like the imaginary conductor in front of his orchestra. First movement, how this story started. Second, where it went wrong. Third, what came after. Lena. My condition. The doctors and their diagnoses.

On this night, I let the sounds play all they want. Tomorrow morning I'll be in my car, suited and booted, driving up the A2.



Heading to where the farmers' fields give way to swaths of grass. To where the trees line the sides of the highway like an honour guard. To the Gestelseweg exit, where I'll turn off and look for the lights, where I'll take the right and follow the narrow street to the end. Where it's been waiting all these thirty years.

Home.

# PRACTICE





I SAW DIRK before I met him. I saw him several times before I even knew his name. He was like a new word that, once learned, you heard spoken everywhere. Compelling attention. Mine, yours, anyone's.

The first time Dirk directly crossed my path, though, was at an after-school music rehearsal. I was in line next to the temporary stage at the back of the room, looking over the crowd, waiting for my girlfriend, Lise. We were both in grade nine, new in town, and new to the school, Sint Ansfried, where Lise was in the drama program and I was in the music program.

Sint Ansfried was the first arts school I attended, but I had been in music classes since I was a child. It was my parents' idea at first, but something that became my identity. Other children played sports and games and went to camp over the summer. I was at the keyboard, spending hours on my own

every day. My parents were proud. Their son was quiet. Diligent. It took the buzzing halls of Sint Ansfried to see this could also be loneliness. That I had met Lise and asked her out, even if she'd gotten one of her friends to tell me to, was a miracle. We'd been going out for close to four weeks.

“Vollweg! Fortuyn!”

Two of the students in front of me. I looked over to the door again and that's when Lise walked in. She was with her friend Stefa, also in the drama program, and someone else I recognized. A stormcloud of dark wavy hair, school sweater tied around his waist, shirttails out, and sleeves rolled above his elbows. His locker was near mine and I had seen him loping through the halls, calling out people's names and crashing the lunchtime card games. He liked to throw in expressions from other languages when he spoke. *Hola. Basta.* And here he was, with Lise. Mister Everywhere, Señor Todas-Partes.

“Zapirli! Baumwolle!”

I'd be up next. I had two pieces for rehearsal that day. Chopin's *étude* no. 3 in E Major, called the “Tristesse,” and the *Gnossiennes* by Erik Satie, a slow and eerie walk through the woods. I looked down at the notes I had written on the sheet music, trying to ignore the tingling of excitement in my fingers. I was getting better at performing, but I preferred practising. No crowd to please. When I looked up I saw Lise and Stefa had found a seat at the back of the room on either side of Mister Everywhere. His arms were spread wide, his fingers dancing through the air. Lise and Stefa were leaning in. Soon he was also leaning in, covering his mouth to share a secret, his left hand resting on Stefa's shoulder.

“De Vries!”



As I walked up to the stage, I started playing the first bars of the étude in my head, establishing the pace with my imaginary left hand. Sitting on the bench, I put the sheet music on the stand, spread my fingers above the keyboard, and was about to start when, despite myself, I glanced across the room.

Was it possible that guy's hand was on Lise's shoulder, not Stefa's?

Focus, I said to myself, and began to play.

Later in the week, at the bike racks where we met most days after school, Lise told me Dirk was in her drama class. He'd been a child actor, she said, in a popular television show. "He played the younger brother. I must have watched him every day."

I knew the show. Was that why Dirk was familiar?

"The cast won a Goldie one year," Lise said, "and Dirk went onstage to accept it. It was against the rules but he said it was amazing."

We got on our bikes and cycled to Cromvoirt, where Lise lived. When we got to her house, we disembarked and went to the backyard, to the shed. The hinges of the shed door always moaned. Inside was bare except for an old couch, where Lise and I kissed. She lay on top, a small gold chain dangling in front of the curves of her breasts, tantalizing me.

That day, after Lise got up from the couch and tucked the chain beneath her shirt, she mentioned Dirk again. He did radio plays for the RNW, she said, and speaks English fluently. "He doesn't even have an accent."

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As I cycled from Cromvoirt to my house in Vlijmen, along the empty road and under an open sky, my thoughts kept turning to Dirk. The child actor who was on television and in radio plays and spoke English without an accent. That last bit, about having no accent. Was that really possible? Wouldn't he have *some* kind of accent?

That night I brought my dinner to the Grotrian upright in the living room, where my father was sitting on the couch, dictating charts. I wanted to work on the "Tristesse," specifically the second section. After a series of octaves, the left hand rumbles and the right hand is meant to soothe the pent-up harmonies in a string of notes that leads back to the opening melody. Recently, instead of leading to the opening melody, my right hand, going its own way, was drawing me back to the climbing and descending octaves. It was strange for me to make mistakes, and I'd made this one at the after-school rehearsal.

As I began my warm-ups, my mind wandered to the drama studio, the rehearsal. Had Dirk's hand really been on *Lise's* shoulder? I remembered the glint of silver off his ring. I thought I saw it beside Lise's dark hair. Surely Dirk knew Lise had a boyfriend, even if he didn't know my name.

My father started speaking into the Dictaphone. "Patient Schutte, a lovely thirty-nine-year-old female, presented with mild—"

"I'm trying to practise, Dad."

My father switched off the Dictaphone and looked at me.

I looked back at my fingers, suspended a half-inch above the keys. I realized the mistake. I'd been using the third instead of the fourth finger for a particular triad and it was shifting me from major to minor. I took a pencil from next

to the stand and wrote “4” above the vexing note, indicating finger usage.

I restarted the section slowly, right hand only. With each correct run-through, I sped up, and eventually added the left hand.

My father folded up his charts and took my dinner plate to the kitchen. I repeated the section a few more times. Dirk must have known Lise had a boyfriend. Which meant he knew about me. Knew I existed, if nothing more.

“Paging Old Man Johannes de Vriesland!”

It was within a week of the rehearsal that I first heard Dirk call out my name, or his version of it. I was at my locker, between classes, and when I turned I saw him walking towards me, shirttails out, sleeves rolled up, feet splayed as he walked, tucking stray hairs behind his ear. When he stuck out his hand, I noticed the thick silver ring around his index finger.

“I was watching you the other day,” he said, wiggling his fingers in the air. “Not bad.”

When he smiled I saw one of his front teeth was chipped.

“So, I have the Budapest Radio Orchestra paying a visit to my living room after school today,” he said, “and apparently they’re short a piano soloist. Interested?”

That’s how he invited me to his house. And it wasn’t just me he invited. It was Lise too. And another girl, Beate, who was in the circle of lunchtime card players that Dirk sometimes nudged himself into. She was thin and tall with a crown of ginger curls.

At the last bell we met at the bicycle rack and left in pairs. Beate rode with Lise, I rode with Dirk, all of us



heading towards the Sint Jan steeple, which marked the centre of Den Bosch. Dirk didn't introduce Beate as his girlfriend, he didn't introduce her at all, but when he and I put some distance between us and the girls, he leaned over, looked at me, and said he had seen Beate naked when the two of them had gone skinny-dipping in a neighbour's swimming pool. Before I could think of anything to say, or ask, Dirk's eyes were back on the road.

That afternoon was my first time in Den Bosch without my parents. Vlijmen, where we lived, was a postwar village, and Den Bosch was the nearest big city, where we sometimes visited on weekends. The roads near Dirk's house were cobblestone. The houses were tall, narrow, and close to the street. Where main-floor curtains were open you could see into living rooms. Chandeliers, oil paintings, old and ornate furniture, porcelain plates on display, and vases filled with flower arrangements. One after another, all alike.

At the end of a dead-end street Dirk pointed to an alley behind his house where Lise and I could lock our bikes, while he and Beate leaned theirs against a tree in the middle of a small fenced-in garden.

I expected Dirk's house to be like the ones I'd spied into on the way over, but it wasn't. The entranceway was tile, not hardwood. There was hardwood in the living room, but the furniture in it was simple and looked comfortable. The kitchen had a rectangular island at the centre and a small circular table by the bay window. I'd never been in a house that looked as inviting, or felt so immediately welcoming.

Dirk impatiently waved us upstairs. "I'll be there in a sec," he said. "Beate'll lead the way."

We walked through the living room and up the staircase. At the top was a narrow carpeted hall and the first door on the left was Dirk's room. It was about the same size as mine but completely crammed. A bunk bed, with the bottom bunk covered in baggy pillows and duvets. Rickety bookshelves overflowing with books, magazines, stacks of photographs, records, and, as a centrepiece, a hi-fi stereo system with silver turntable and shoebox-sized speakers. His desk was buried under papers, and his cupboard overstuffed with shirts and sweaters and jeans, none of which was part of the school uniform. The walls were painted a deep blue-green and plastered with posters of bands I knew, like the Beatles and Ike and Tina Turner, and movies I'd never heard of, like *Dr. Strangelove* and *Amarcord*.

Dirk appeared, balancing a box of biscuits, bottle of milk, and four glasses. "Huzzah," he said. "Make yourselves at home. I mean, at my home."

Beate curled up on the bottom bunk, among the pillows. I settled against the bedpost. Lise asked for the bathroom. Dirk directed her next door and plonked himself in the middle of the bottom bunk, scattering some of the biscuits.

As soon as the bathroom door closed, Dirk leaned towards me.

"So, Old Man de Vries," he said, "what's she like?"

"Lise?" I asked.

He laughed. "Yes, de Vries. Lise."

I didn't know what to say, or what he wanted to hear.

Beate giggled.

Dirk cupped his hands in front of his chest and squeezed. "Have you . . . ?"

I shook my head.

He pursed his lips and nodded in a kind of sympathy. "Suction?" He opened his mouth and pointed to the tip of his wiggling tongue.

I was about to make up a lie when Lise appeared at the door. "What did I miss?" she asked.

"We were just talking about eating soap," Dirk said, leaning back against the wall and yawning. "Your parents ever make you eat soap, de Vries? No? My parents sometimes do. Usually the translucent kind, which I prefer anyway."

Beate broke out into a full-blown laugh. Dirk shifted closer to me to make room for Lise, and in the same movement dangled his hand off my shoulder.

"So, de Vries, you just moved here, right?"

I nodded, conscious of his arm hanging there, wondering what it might be up to.

"Where were you before?" he asked.

"Haarlem," I said.

"School?"

"I went to an all-boys school," I said.

"I did too!" Dirk said. "Grades six and seven. Good times."

He told the story of the time he helped organize an overnight raid of a nearby girls' dormitory. He told the story of how every day before first bell a card circulated his homeroom that had a picture of a naked woman on it, and that everyone called her Bushwoman. He shared the rumour that the regular photography teacher at Sint Ansfried hadn't come back this year because he had been sleeping with a grade twelve student and that apparently someone had found *proof* in the school's darkroom.

When Dirk spoke seriously he bobbed his head and sometimes closed his eyes. When he got close to a punchline

his sides began to shake in anticipation. All through the afternoon he left his arm hanging over my shoulder.

Was any one of Dirk's stories true? Did it matter? Lise and Beate were fixed to every word he said. And so was I.

When he was done, Dirk led us to the front door, leaving Beate in his room upstairs. He said he had to do homework, winking as he said the word, then observing almost philosophically that if he actually *did* his homework he wouldn't be failing half his classes.

While I went to the alley to unlock the bicycles, Dirk stayed in the glass vestibule outside the front door with Lise. When I came back, his hand was on the back of her neck, and he was smiling while whispering in her ear. When he saw me he let go of Lise and, with the same hand, pointed to me.

"Janos Miklos sends his regrets about the Budapest Radio Orchestra and says we'll do it next time, okay?"

Lise and I rode our bikes through the narrow streets and between the tall houses of Den Bosch and for the first time I cycled slightly ahead of Lise, pushing the pace. By the time we arrived in low-lying Cromvoirt, with its asphalt roads and bungalows, the sun was approaching the horizon and there was only a thin line of orange behind the silhouettes of far-off trees. Night coming, but still time. I was thinking of the gold chain hanging in front of Lise's breasts, and of Dirk cupping his hands in front of his chest. But as I was about to let my bike drop on the lawn in front of her house, Lise waved at me to stop.

"I have a scene to memorize for tomorrow," she said. "So not today."

The next Monday, I was sitting by the bike racks at the side entrance to Sint Ansfried. The last bell of the day had rung fifteen minutes before. Lise still hadn't come out.

Wind was rustling the branches. The sky was a light blue and criss-crossed by the double-lined vapour trails of passing airplanes. I replayed parts of the Chopin in my head to keep myself busy while I watched other students pour out the side door. First large groups, then stragglers. When I saw there were fewer than a couple dozen bikes left in the rack I started to look for Lise's. It was my third time circling the rack, looking for the cream-coloured Batavus, when it dawned on me she was already gone.

I cycled as quickly as I could to Cromvoirt. Skidded left at the post office and right at the stop sign. I slid to a halt in the middle of the street in front of her house. Lise's Batavus lay on the lawn. Beside it was a bike I recognized.

I lay my bike on the curb, handles on the grass, and walked up to the back gate, where I peeked over the wooden slats. Still and barely breathing, I fixed my eyes on the little shed in the corner of the yard.

Of course I couldn't see any of it, but it was easy to imagine. Lise would have lain on the couch first, making room for Dirk beside her. After a moment he'd take her in his arms, kiss her with his tongue, and she'd kiss him with hers. Then Dirk would slide a hand to her waist and, when he sensed she was ready, slip it beneath her shirt, touch her bra. He had shown me exactly what he would do, and more or less told me he was going to do it, on the day he had invited me to his house.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIC BECK RUBIN is a cultural historian who writes on architecture, literature and psychology, and this novel is his first foray into fiction. He is currently at work on a second: a family saga spanning several generations, from pre-World War II Germany to present-day Los Angeles and Western Canada. He lives in Toronto.