



RICHARD FROST

**BRAIN  
AND BODY**

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**A**xl didn't feel well. He wasn't pumping up, he was puffing up. His face was becoming all bloated. It almost resembled that of his Aunt Betsy, who'd been so excessively obese that she had three rolls of fat under her chin, two under each arm, and whose knees you only knew to be there because she could bend her legs; the joints themselves were invisible for the thick, big lobes of overload that lolled from her quads (again, body parts you knew she must have, but would never see). Even his ankles looked like hers, soft and sick and swollen. In the evening, when he took off his socks, he shuddered at the sight of the knitting pattern imprinted on the flesh. Aunt Betsy had been a fervent knitter. In his mind's eye, he could just see her sitting on the settee at his mum's, a monstrous mass of cushions squashing the cushions, the seat that supported it all staggering under the strain.

Having hauled her short, podgy arms over and upon her bosom, her necks sagging over her dress in concentration, Aunt Betsy continued with her work, her sausage fingers clawing at the jumble of threads that rested on her belly, steadily entangling it into the prickly hose she'd force him to pull and suffer around

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his feet. Silently he watched her. And listened. The tapping of the needles was, he knew, the ticking of the ten-ton bomb of bulk Aunt Betsy was buried in. Any moment it could go off. She'd burst and a torrent of cholesterol would spurt across the room. The settee would be ruined forever. According to his mum, grease stains were the hardest to remove. This wouldn't be stains, though: the settee would be soaked through. The whole room would be dripping and the floor so slippery even sliding was impossible. Amidst all the blubber the real Aunt Betsey would be wallowing about, helpless now that her whale armour had blown its cover. That was the only reason why he kept watching her: he wanted to see her face. When she exploded, he'd finally know what it was like. Her bulbous nose might be a sharp, thin hook. She might have high cheekbones instead of just two bulging balloons. The tiny beads in the mask of corpulence might be as wide and bright as his mum's.

He massaged his ankles, hoping to rub the pattern off. And he thought of his face again. His and Aunt Betsy's. What was it with fat people that they all looked alike? Why did they all use the same excuse for a condition that was inexcusable? Aunt Betsy, who'd

babble about being diabetic and how she couldn't help being 'a bit overweight', and then ask for a second piece of cake. Aunt Betsy, the woman who laughed too loud, too shakily, and who smothered him with greed, grabbing his arm as he wormed past her because he couldn't stand the tension any longer, and forcing him down into her rolling lap. He always got into a panic, afraid to be swallowed up by all that floppy, flabby, flaccid flesh. She was his biggest youth trauma, he now realised. If it hadn't been for her, he might have stayed straight. And if it hadn't been for her, he'd never have tried to prove how hard and firm a body could be. His ankles wouldn't have looked like this.

He tried to cure the oedema with hot and cold baths, but all he achieved was that the feeling in his ankles changed from numb to tingly, which again reminded him unpleasantly of Aunt Betsy's socks. Also, he didn't like the way the spray from the shower head indented the flesh. He told himself not to look. Likewise, he quit his mirror sessions, unable to face the not-so-hard truth. He'd take a peep every now and then, but as soon as he saw Aunt Betsy's features flash back he shut his eyes. He didn't want to know. He didn't want it to be there. Most of all, he wanted it to be over.

It was hard to ignore, though. When he shaved it was like smoothing a chubby baby's butt, not scraping the lean face of a trained athlete. And if he didn't look at his face, he'd still be looking at it. He'd gaze ahead of him and see his cheeks, two round mounds at the base of his vision's landscape. He'd never noticed his cheeks before. He took a few extra diuretics, which would have given some relief, if it weren't that peeing had become so difficult. He'd be standing in front of the pot, all ready to spout and spew out, and nothing would happen. From time to time he'd feel a painful little squirt and hear a few drops spatter down, but mostly it was just stifled silence that met him. It was as if the tap was being turned off. There was enough supply, no doubt about that, for he remained faithful to his diet, drinking at least four litres of water a day. But often he'd feel his bladder protest the moment he put the glass to his mouth. It said loud and clearly, no. It was getting desperate.

So was Axl. Up till recently, he'd been deaf to the other signals but now, with his body so bloated, they went off as loud as alarm bells in his head. He had difficulty swallowing, his tongue often as stiff and thick as if he'd been to the dentist for some serious root canal

work and she'd missed the target when anaesthetising his gums. At times he couldn't see and hear properly. He had headaches and dizzy spells, and more bouts of nausea than could be explained by mere indigestion. He had acne on his back. He'd never been pestered by pimples in puberty, yet now they popped out of his skin by the dozen. At night his muscles sometimes locked into a cramp no stretching could get rid of, and he couldn't sleep. He'd lie worrying about the rest he wasn't getting, knowing that the next day he'd pull and push pounds and pounds less. Still, he'd never had any doubts about the course he'd been taking. It had been worth it. He'd thought no more of it than a small price to pay for the big reward of growing bigger. But this was a totally wrong kind of growth. It was gross, not net.

In a way he felt betrayed. His body was everything to him: he worked himself to death for it, he gave it all the care it could want, he'd geared his whole life to polishing and perfecting it, and this was what it did to him. Instead of making mass, it made water. He almost couldn't bear it. And he was increasingly afraid people would comment. The only person he felt at ease with these days was Jip. Jip never knew what he'd been like

before and wouldn't see the difference. The others, however, would. He could cover up his ankles, having bought basketball boots and aerobics socks, but his face he couldn't help but show. He dreaded running into Menno. Menno would tell him to cut the crap. But he couldn't stop, not now. He'd lose all that he'd gained, all that was left. He'd have to stop being.

In a weak moment he did talk to Eric, who suggested anti-oestrogen to dampen the side-effects of the steroids. Axl already took that. 'Ah,' said Eric, 'I think that's the problem. I'd quit, if I were you. Maybe it's time for some rest. A little pill pause. Might do you good.' Yeah, and lose weight, thought Axl. Eric was jealous. Axl weighed 250 pounds now and Eric only a shameful 205. He remembered the warning Eric had given in the past, about nerves and tendons which could get pinched off if you filled out too quickly, about blood vessels that wouldn't know which way to turn and squirm like worms to the surface, about how your heart might not keep up the pace and fail. Eric had always told him to make haste slowly at times when Axl was making good progress, while Eric himself lagged way behind. The last time Eric had tried to put the brakes on, saying a mate of his had developed a tumour

because his liver hadn't been able to cope with all the medication, was two days after Axl had been asked to participate in a contest. Axl hadn't taken up the offer, thinking he wasn't bulky enough yet, but he knew Eric hated him for being such a paramount pro. No wonder he wanted him to slow down.

There had to be some other way besides a 'roid rest. Which indeed there turned out to be, for when he saw Peter that week and told him about the problems he was having, Peter said they were simply signs that it was time to change the dope diet. There was nothing to worry about: it was just his body getting too used to the old mix and a surplus of steroids building up in his bloodstream, which upset the metabolic functions. He gave Axl a new cocktail and a different diuretic, supplementing them with some stimulants to speed up basic bodily processes. Axl wasn't too sure about the stimulants, which – having paid the 300 guilders Peter mentioned as a bottom price – he decided to put aside for a rainy day. The rest of the course did cure him, though. After a few days of the new diuretics the oedema at last started to wear off. Taking a leak still wasn't a treat, but he gritted his teeth and discharged

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as much as he could, relegating the Aunt Betsy syndrome to the past.

Towards the end of the week he felt so full of confidence that he went for an extra heavy training session. And just as Peter had predicted, it went better than it had done in ages. He even reached an all-time high. As he toiled through his second series of shoulder presses, his self-esteem swelled more and more. He was big, bigger, the best. If they ever wanted to build another Stonehenge, he was the one they could ask. He could move a mountain for them if they wanted the monument on top. At home, for the first time in three weeks, he looked at himself in the mirror again. And sighed. In his worry about the side-effects and stuff, he'd forgotten about his original, main problem. He was still too small.

The guys who'd paid him compliments that morning for his brawn had only been having him on. They were probably friends of Eric, who thought they could stop him getting bigger by saying he was great the way he was. Also he suspected that the mirrors at the gym distorted, to make you feel good about yourself even when you were doing poorly. No doubt Eric was behind all that too. He'd told Menno about Axl's health crisis,

knowing that Menno, concerned as he was about drug abuse, would try to protect him by removing the mirrors and hanging up false ones. Menno might have changed the weights as well. He'd replaced the iron dumbbells by others of some lighter material, thus duping Axl into believing he was as mighty as Conan the Barbarian. They did it in the mags: sometimes you'd be admiring a bloke for his hellish labour, while all he was doing was pulling a tortured face as he held up some plastic plates.

People were double-dealers, that was what they were. Peter was the only one who understood him, the single soul he could trust. And it wasn't just the hot-housers who let him down. His mum had turned on him too. Apart from Jip, she was his only contact outside the gym and she didn't want to see him any more. When he'd phoned her the week before her birthday to ask what day she was going to celebrate, and see if it fitted in with his training schedule, she'd said, after a lot of evasive small talk: 'Actually, I'd rather you didn't come. I don't want the family to see.' 'See what?' he asked. To which she replied: 'Axl, you look like an animal. You can't even get through the door without turning sideways.' At first he took it as a compliment on

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his fabulous physique, but she continued: 'You've changed, Axl. You used to take an interest in people, but now . . . all you talk about is the bodybuilding. And the way you look out of your eyes . . . It frightens me.' He got so angry, he started shouting abuse at her and, when she hung up, smashed the phone to pieces. Which meant he couldn't even call her on her birthday.

He didn't care. She didn't understand what his life was about anyway. She only wanted him small and dependent again. He had to be polite and ask questions, inquiring after Aunt Betsy's health and whether the neighbour on the left had finally got a job. She couldn't stand it that he'd found his own answer: perfect fitness. The broken phone in his hands, he sat laughing, laughing at her small-mindedness and stupid fears. He laughed until he cried.

\* \* \*

Poor guy. Do we feel sorry for him. His own fault and there he sits, crying like a baby. His own fucking doing and he thinks his mummy is to blame. Too small-minded and stupid to see that she was right to be concerned. For boy, was Axl taking risks. It's a medical

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miracle he survived (and a disaster. I'm sorry, but that's the way I see it.). Because Eric was right, you know. You can get cancer of the liver. You can have a heart attack. And you may have to be catheterised because your prostate has swollen to tennis ball size and is blocking the urinary tracts (which was why Axl had such trouble passing water). And you do get acne, bald patches and paranoid – all for a few pounds more.

If Axl hadn't had such a strong physical constitution, I probably wouldn't be lying in bed right now. I wouldn't feel so sick of myself.

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My body is on fire. Not literally, of course, although it does feel as if I'm being hauled over the coals. (Oh, my shrink would just love this. Did I tell you I'm seeing a shrink? Never mind, it's not important, the therapy's addressing something different than what's at issue here – but wouldn't she love to dig out this choice of words. Just the fact that I feel on fire she'd find telling enough.) But to get back to what I was saying, it's particularly my arms and legs that are burning. The pain is so cruelly, so stingingly intense, I can hardly

stand it. I can hardly even stand. No dancing for me, although I must say, I'd imagined my well-deserved rest to be of a less pathetic nature. Also, my writing hours have been curtailed significantly, which is why I asked Kasper to do the typing for me (he's sitting at the computer right now). Needless to say, it isn't hard for me to imagine Axl's horror when his body began showing system errors. All the same, he knew what was wrong with him and why, which I don't. I haven't got a clue. Now, this wouldn't be so bad if my GP had any idea what was the matter. But she doesn't know either. First she thought it was some neurological condition, but the symptoms I have are too atypical (read: peculiar) to corroborate this. In the end she decided upon me being too tense. I didn't and don't believe her. Okay, a stiff neck, headaches, but seared by stress? Very atypical, if you ask me.

The ambiguous diagnosis has only made me more afraid. Because I'm telling you, I'm so scared. My body is my sole means of escaping that clouded brain of mine – the gloom only wears off when I'm dancing. What if my body's not just ill, but giving up on me? All horrible diseases I've ever heard of are going round in my head, getting nastier and nastier, with gruesome,

crippling results. Not, I'm not a hypochondriac, if that's what you think. Well, I am, but I know I am, which makes me dismiss a disease as soon as it occurs to me, knowing I am misreading the signs again. The trouble is, I don't know which way to turn instead for the right interpretation. After my third panic attack (I suddenly knew for sure I had MS and concluded I'd better top myself before I became too infirm to be left the choice), Kasper arranged for me to see someone for a second opinion. The visit wasn't a success, my anxiety turning into despair when Dr Second told me to accept my GP's diagnosis and the fact that I'm suffering from something I can't control. It was probably my difficulty unwinding that had caused all this trouble. I shouldn't have told him about the insomnia, I suppose. He went as white as his coat when I answered his question about how many hours I sleep at night with 'three'. Good thing I didn't mention the shrink, or he would've had me hospitalised.

Still, he could be right. I've been warned often enough of the tight rein I keep on myself. If you pull the strings too hard, they snap. You've got to ease up from time to time. On the other hand, what do you think makes me such a good dancer? (I am: I've been offered

twice this year to skip the last grade and start my professional career after the next term because, apart from the jumps, there's nothing my tutors can teach me any more.) What do you think it is that makes me so competent? Exactly: control. Complete composure and command. Control is my strongest point. It's what a dancer needs, what makes him perfect, even when he seems to show nothing but flow. But this, this condition I can't master. How do you bring something under control you don't know the nature of?

As a last resort, Kasper asked his boyfriend, who's a medical student, if he could do the blood test my GP refuses to do because she's a hundred haughty percent certain that she won't find anything out of the ordinary. Jan did a whole battery of tests and he found nothing out of the ordinary (he also tested for HIV. I hate him for that. Type on, Kasper, I was negative.). Having consulted a colleague and the literature, Jan came up with two hypotheses: the first, that I was overtrained and the second, that I was overstressed, the difference between the two no doubt a small one. He has prescribed rest and given me a sedative, which makes me drowsy enough not to mind so much. But it doesn't take away the burn. Oh no. It's as hot as hell in here.

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Regarding the cause of the stress (for that's what Jan too, in his heart of hearts, thinks I'm suffering from), he and Kasper suspect that it's this Jip and Axl story that has kindled the fire. I may not be able to manage. And they want me to let go. I won't. I'm going to see this through to the point where it ran out of hand, even if it means I never regain my cool again. I have to. I owe it to Jip.

During the past two weeks I haven't seen much of Titus, who explained the first time that Jan carried me down for supper that, regrettably, he finds sick people too depressing to keep them company (God, the way he talks sometimes). Also, my encounter with Rose has been postponed, despite my assurances that I'm well enough to see her. A few fellow-dancers have called round and yesterday the head of our school visited me. He kindly said that every star pupil falls once in a while and that, as far as he was concerned, I could take all the time I need to get better again. I haven't told him, but it is healing I need, exactly what I'm afraid time will not bring.

As for the daily routine, Kasper stays with me from the moment the curtains are opened until they're closed again. He helps me to get changed (from

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pyjamas into pyjamas), brings me books and watches videos with me. At night Jan takes over, sleeping on a mattress beside my bed. Jan doesn't meddle, doesn't comment, just makes sure that when despondency strikes there are two strong arms to hide in. He even lets me read if the pills he's given me aren't enough to knock me senseless. I'm so grateful for his quiet presence, I find it all the harder to hate him for being Kasper's lover. Like Kasper, he leaves me be. They both know that what I need most is for them to be there. What they don't know is that they probably wouldn't be here if they knew what was coming. The nettle I have to grasp, the string that lurks in the tail.

Kasper is looking up now, giving me a concerned frown, wondering what one earth it is that he's missed. Something very important, my love. A memory. You'll find out soon enough. You just type on; leave the dirty work to me. After all, I was the one who made this mess. Don't ask, please don't ask, not now, not yet, because, unlike Axl, I don't have a conclusive answer – or it must be this illness of mine, feeling so sorry and so sorry, so sorry, whereas sorry isn't anywhere near good enough. I shouldn't be burning but dying with shame.

'Honey, you've got to talk to me.'

'I can't.'

'Please, love, if only to get it off your chest. What's the matter with you?'

'Overworked,' I reply with a wry laugh. 'You should have taken me with you to London. I told you I needed a break.'

'Darling, please.' Kasper swirls round on his chair, the computer screen a blue glare behind his back. 'If your being ill has anything to do with Jip . . . I mean, considering what happened to you yourself in the past . . .'

Yes, considering history repeats itself. Because history does repeat itself. And if it doesn't, it smoulders on like a peatland fire, rising to the surface at a different time, in a different place, but in a similar form. I have no intention of telling Kasper, however. Not yet. It's too big a risk. I can't do without him, not now.

'It's just stress,' I say. 'Never mind where it came from.'

And don't ask. Like the fake physiotherapist my GP has referred me to, who never opens her mouth if I don't first. It's my legs and arms that hurt, but all she

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does is stroke my back with some natural oil. It doesn't help, of course; the symptoms I have are too outspoken to be silenced by a change of subject. Still, she thinks she knows best, trained as she is to believe that all illnesses are due to a negative balance in the body's magnetic field, which can be magicked away by something as simple as positive attention. I don't mind, not really. It's been ages since anyone touched me as tenderly as that.

When I told Kasper how much I enjoyed those massages and that I wished I had them more often than just once a week, he offered to do it at home. Using a cooling gel, he caresses me from head to toe, twice a day if I ask him to.

We're back on familiar ground: mother and child, the mother loving and considerate, the child struggling with its Oedipus complex and wishing it'd been born before. He takes care of me, he takes such good care of me, and I'm feeling more and more ashamed. The low point of the treatment was when I got so aroused I moved his hand to my crotch and asked him to do what I myself couldn't because of the pain. And he did it, he actually did it, gently holding me and kissing my forehead when I came.

And suddenly I knew that if he knew he'd forgive me. Even so, I daren't tell him. Not now. Not yet.

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Jip knew Axl now. He remembered him from last time. Axl was his lover. They had sex together. Jip liked having sex with Axl, but sometimes Axl did it in an angry way. It scared Jip. Also, Axl would ask questions. It was always about Henk. Axl wanted to know if Jip was in love with him. And he'd ask if Jip had told Kasper. Then he'd check himself and say Jip shouldn't tell people. About what, asked Jip. About what never happened, said Axl.

Jip forgot about Axl again and he saw his name on the memory board and it reminded him of something. He wished he had a picture, like the ones Anneke had given him. He looked at Arnold on the door and it all came back again. Axl was his lover. He was a body-builder and looked like Arnold. There was something else, but Jip couldn't recall. The moment he tried to catch hold of it, it slipped his mind. But he knew. He just couldn't angle it up. It was there somewhere. The answer to the question about what he knew.

Axl came back and he'd changed his face and said he'd followed Jip and Henk to the swimming pool. He knew for certain now they had something going. Jip had kissed Henk and it'd been definitely French and on top of that he'd been fondling Henk's butt, God knew what else they'd been doing, for all Axl knew they'd been fucking the rest of the day away. Jip couldn't remember. Still he might have done what Axl said. There was a Henk according to the memory board so it made sense in a way. Jip said, sorry, I won't do it again. He added, sometimes I don't know what it is I'm seeing, I must've thought he was you. Axl relaxed. He said, don't worry, sometimes I see things that aren't there. Are you angry? asked Jip. No, said Axl, I know it's not your fault but I'm telling you, this Henk, he's screwed-up, taking advantage of you like that.

Axl began caressing Jip and Jip felt it was okay, because Axl wasn't doing it roughly but gently. In fact he was doing it so gently that Jip dared to touch him back. He touched Axl's crotch. Axl liked that. Jip knew it from last time. Then Jip saw there was something strange about Axl's balls. At first he thought maybe last time hadn't happened and he was mistaken but then he thought no the first impression is usually the right one,

Kasper said so and he's right, I know there's something wrong, I'm sure Axl's balls have shrunk, last time or maybe a few times before that they weren't like this but bigger.

Axl's cock hadn't shrunk. It was still big. Jip caressed it for a bit, then started rubbing it. It didn't seem to like it. It looked red and angry. And it wouldn't come. This often happened. It was as if Axl's cock was determined to stay as hard and firm as Axl wanted the rest of his body to be. Axl groaned, it hurts, make me come, rub harder, I can't fucking bear it. Jip did what Axl wanted him to but still it didn't happen. Axl growled, you stupid sod, make me come, goddamnit! He grabbed Jip by the neck and held him. Jip got really scared now. He did his very best. In the end Axl came, but only a little. Axl looked as if he was going to cry. Jip caressed his chest, just a bit, so as not to upset Axl any further.

Axl's chest was still big as well. It was hard but not so hard. Around the nipples the flesh was swollen, like it'd been with Rose when she'd developed breasts. Rose had said, Jip it hurts, I daren't ask mum, can you have a look. And Jip had looked and said, you're getting breasts. After that Rose hadn't let him look any more. They'd bathed together before, but now she wanted the

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bathroom to herself. She was becoming a real girl and didn't want a boy to see. Not even when Jip told her he liked men better. No, she said, you're a boy and it isn't right. The next day she'd honestly told him she was ashamed. If Jip could please understand it. Jip understood. He felt very bad about his own body too. He'd caress it in the evening and think no man would ever want to do the same. Until Axl had come along. No, before that . . .

It was gone. Axl was talking right through the memory. He said this Henk, he wants something from me. What? Jip asked. You, I think, said Axl. I don't trust that guy one fucking inch, he could be a slave trader. And Jip wondered who was brain-damaged, Axl or him.

**N**o, Jip wasn't stupid. Long before anyone suspected that something was the matter, he had spotted the problem. Axl's mother had detected a change in her son, but she'd only seen his rage, not the deranged, distrustful mind whose defence mechanism it was. Not even Axl himself was aware of the warped way of thinking he'd slid into. Last night I reread the interviews with him, in which he specifies the moment that he lost his grip as the very same second that he flipped his lid. For all he knows, everything was in perfect working order before that. A statement from his mother in the accompanying psychiatric report supports this view. She blandly denies the misgivings she'd expressed earlier, saying it was Axl's physical, not his mental, state she'd been worried about. Jip, on the other hand, saw it all coming – or would have seen it coming if, instead of just spotting the difference, he could have linked the 'before' and 'after' snapshots of Axl in his memory and deduced the trend towards the future. Jip knew. He was the first to notice, and the last to witness what it led up to.

Jip may even have been conscious of what was happening to Axl, but I can't be sure. My assumption

that he lived in the simple present and had only a minimal perception of the past might be wrong. The trouble is, there's nothing in his diary about Axl in the weeks following Axl's slave trade theory about Henk. It's during this very period, those last few weeks, that Jip leaves a total blank: apart from some notes on other, less relevant subjects and a couple of self-satisfied descriptions of his encounters with Henk (Jip began recognising him around that time), there is nothing. It's as if Axl disappeared from Jip's mind the moment Jip started to figure him out. He must have forgotten to write in his diary once again. Or maybe he simply didn't feel the need to jot things down any longer, at last knowing for sure that he remembered Axl and who he was.

Guesswork, guesswork, I'm always condemned to guesswork. Axl's side of the story is all I have to go on and, really, it's one big plea of innocence. I try to read between the lines as well as I can, but after all the stupidity Axl displayed before, he suddenly shows a talent for formulating very clever answers. I wonder who edited his lies for him. Some solicitor, no doubt. Thanks a lot for falsifying history, whoever you are. If only you knew how much time it'll cost me to distil the

truth from this. I could sue you for that, if it weren't for the fact that I may need a solicitor myself and you seem a suitable candidate. If you can twist Axl's tale so expertly, surely you can get me off the hook.

But what am I worrying about? Nobody has caught me out yet. And probably nobody ever will.

As you may have gathered by now, I'm up and about again. My arms and legs have recovered somewhat and I can do my own typing, although I'm still not well enough to dance. I'm seeing a different physiotherapist (Jan referred me this time; that is, he asked our school physician to do so) who, instead of pampering me and patting me on the back, makes me do the most terrible exercises. As it happens, my physiotherapist is an ex-dancer who – just my ironic luck – has specialised in therapeutic fitness. I too am doing weights these days, although I'm never allowed to handle more than three pounds at once. I do leg-presses, calf-raises, sit-ups and, sure enough, concentration curls. Well, it does help, if only to build up some confidence in my body again. Why do clichés always turn out to be truths? Thanks Heavens the man isn't called Menno, or I would've had another breakdown.

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Actually I have to get better, because after three weeks of nightly separation from Kasper Jan got fed up, announcing one morning when I awoke: 'Today you're going to start rehabilitating.' He practically dragged me out of bed and onto my feet and, at my fierce protests, told me to take a hike (by which he meant that I might feel like a walk, or so he alleged later). He says he doesn't think I've just been putting on an act, and he does believe that I'm still in pain, but according to him the worst has passed. When I told him it hadn't – I still hadn't finished Jip's story – he replied: 'Okay, then finish it. And finish it fast. I want to sleep with Kasper again.' I must confess that his words did give me the idea of playing for more time. I'd never get away with it, though: lovesick Jan would see right through it. Not that it would make any difference. If they can't fuck each other in reality, they do it in their minds, which somehow seems even more serious. It's one thing for two people to be hot and horny when they're lying skin to skin, but burning with lust when they're not even in the same room?

Also, next month I have to be fit enough to work, as I've been asked to dance in a video of some obscure band. I don't want the job, but the school head has

more or less ordered me to take it on, saying it would set me a goal to strive for. To tell you the truth, I've had it with videos, having twice performed for Kasper's band and found it utterly unrewarding – apart from the money, of course. First they go to great lengths, any lengths, to choose the right dancer, and when they've decided it's you, special you, they're interested in, it turns out it's only your silhouette they'll use. On top of that, when the film director phoned me yesterday, he revealed that instead of just some straightforward street dance, he'd dreamed up a screen of exultant jumps. I told him I was a terribly down-to-earth type and that he'd better seek someone else to go wild with, but he insisted. He'd seen my silhouette in one of Kasper's videos and the way it had capered about was just what he wanted. Hey, that was for Kasper, I thought. Kasper brings out the best in me. Honestly, it wouldn't be the same with you. But then he said something interesting, that he'd been thinking of me ever since he'd first seen me. He just couldn't forget me. Flattery or flirtation? Who knows. The thing is, afterwards he sounded seriously queer to my ears. He already has my phone number. And if it's special me and me alone he wants, who am I to say no?

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Amazing how deep an impression movement can make on the human mind. It appeals almost as directly to people's emotions as music. I first became conscious, truly conscious, of this through Jip, when I read his account of my first evening here.

*I have a new neighbour. He arrived late late last night. He's a dancer and has left his boyfriend. Now he's my neighbour. He lives next to me. This morning he was in the kitchen and I thought I was seeing a ghost. It turned out to be my new neighbour. He arrived late last last night. He's left his boyfriend, but I don't like his eyes. They know things about me. So I said, hello, I'm Jip and introduced myself. We shook hands but I can't remember his name. I wrote it down somewhere and forgot where. I'll ask Kasper. He let him in. My new neighbour, I mean. I wonder why he has left his boyfriend. He's lean and lithe but I don't don't like his eyes. He knows things about me. This morning we met in the kitchen and I knew Kasper had let him in. But he's very handsome. And here it comes: He's like someone from TV. I think he was in a film. He was moving so elegantly.*

In fact, this was the third time Jip and I saw each other. He'd forgotten about the previous occasions we'd said hello and shaken hands, but the video Kasper had

shown him of the new single had left an indelible imprint on his memory. A *film*. No snapshots this time: I'd been *moving* so elegantly.

The very first time Jip and I met had been a few months earlier, at a gig Kasper and his band were doing. I was walking around with bruises then; my boyfriend had found out about my feelings for Kasper and tried to scare them out of me. I'd already heard a few things about Jip from Kasper. During the video days I'd once asked him who the flatmate was who he always checked with before making the next appointment, and he'd told me about the brain damage, how it had been caused and what consequences it had for Jip's daily life. When, after the gig, he introduced me to Jip and I stood face to face with the consequences, I thought: this is what could happen to me. Up till then my boyfriend had confined himself to pinching and punching, but who was to say he wouldn't bang my head against the wall during the next row? And when Jip asked me for the fourth time in five minutes who the fuck I was, I knew I had to run away.

It must have been around then as well that Jip blabbed to Kasper about his relationship with Axl. Unfortu-

nately for Axl, Jip had taken the order not to tell people about what hadn't happened too literally and told Kasper about what *had* happened. Kasper was more than worried at the news. Just when he thought Axl was out of the picture, Jip alleged that he was seeing him again.

Kasper's biggest problem was that he didn't know whether he should believe Jip. Jip and Axl having a relationship? Just the idea of Axl being a man's man seemed absurd. Jip's colourful story might just be a variation on the Arnold fantasy or a mental spin-off of the two occasions Axl had been over for tea. He asked Jip over and over again if he was really sure that Axl had called round as often as Jip said he had, but gave up when Jip got so mad at Kasper doubting his sanity that he started kicking the furniture. Having calmed him down, Kasper checked with Titus and the leather lads if they'd seen anyone answering Axl's description around the house lately. Nobody had.

In the end Kasper decided to confront Axl himself with it. Jip had been too rhapsodic about the oats he'd been getting - 'over a thousand fucks' - to exclude the possibility of a grain of truth. Axl's reaction to the accusation (for Kasper considered fucking Jip a serious

offence) would tell whether Jip had dreamed up the whole affair or not. Horror, disgust and outrage were the answers to hope for. Stutters or blushes would testify to guilt.

And so the next day Kasper stepped into his car and drove to the gym. Having gone in and seeing no Axl in the fitness room, he went over to Menno's desk and asked if Axl was around.

'Hothouse,' mumbled Menno, not interrupting his scrutiny of a semi-scientific advert for artificial anti-ageing hormone. And as Kasper strode off: 'High heels are not allowed in here.'

Rolling his eyes, Kasper took off his stilettos, planted them pontifically on Menno's desk and stalked on in stocking feet. When he entered the hothouse and saw Axl and Axl's reflection in the mirror, he stopped in his tracks, stunned by how much Axl had changed since he'd last seen him, stunned even more by the close resemblance Axl bore to his ex. The same bumpy, lumpy pattern of veins Raymund had had, the same intensely tense muscles, the same big, round forehead and heavy, square chin. It was the dead and buried past come to life again. Then Kasper pulled himself together and tapped Axl on the shoulder.

With a sudden swing Axl turned round, almost knocking Kasper into the next life with the ten ton of steel he was trying to hold high. It was only Kasper's trained reflexes that saved him, dodging the barbell just in time. Having stepped back a little, he asked Axl if he could have a word. At first Axl refused, saying he was not to be disturbed while working out, but when Kasper explained that it was about Jip, Axl nodded to Eric that he could help him lower the bar and followed Kasper into the fitness room.

At Menno's desk Kasper halted, and remained immobile when Axl suggested going outside and getting a drink at the health bar. The stilettos stood where Kasper had left them, with the difference that Menno had discovered what a perfect prop for *Body Blast* they were. He was now reading with his arms folded.

Instinctively Kasper followed the example, crossing his arms, raising his chin and asking Axl snappily:

'Were you at our place the other day?'

'No,' replied Axl in a tone of surprise, 'why would I have been?'

Kasper remained silent. He felt too small. It was like standing face to face with a trained gorilla that might go ape any moment. Although he knew it wasn't just

the difference in height, he snatched the stilettos away from Menno and placed them back onto the floor. Having stepped up, he turned to Axl again, this time looking him straight in the eye – only to feel himself shrink further as he saw the dilated pupils that met him. Oh God, he thought, he's just like Raymund. And he realised that if Jip had spoken the truth, he was in for serious trouble. As drastically as the drugs remodelled the body, just as radically they changed the personality. Just standing here arguing with this guy was risky.

Summoning what little courage he had left, he resumed: 'Jip said you came over to visit him last week.'

'Huh?' muttered Axl. He frowned, then glanced at Menno, who studied the pair of them with curiosity, obviously listening in and dying to hear the rest. Turning his back on him and lowering his voice to an almost inaudible whisper, Axl confided: 'No, after those first few times . . . I mean, he's a nice enough guy, but you can't really build anything up, can you? He still doesn't recognise me. When we work out together, I mean.'

'He says you were there,' maintained Kasper.

'Well, I'm sorry, but he must've made it up.'

‘Why would he want to do that?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know him that well.’ Axl pulled a thinking face. Then he raised a forefinger and suggested: ‘Arnold? I mean, he’s a big fan.’ He added a meaningful smile.

This wasn’t outrage, thought Kasper, it was cooperation, sympathy almost. Axl even seemed to understand why Kasper was feeling so concerned. It could be an act, of course, but if it was, it was a damn good one. The surprise in the beginning had looked genuine enough too. But what about that anxious glance at Menno then? And the obvious wish not to be overheard?

And suddenly Kasper saw. It was true. Oh Jesus, that was why Jip’s fancy had taken such a flight. Of course. With fresh interest he surveyed Axl’s gargantuan body, took in his worn-out, too tanned face. God, how frustrated, how unhappy he must feel. No wonder he pressed himself so hard. He was trying to work it off.

‘Well, as long as you stay away from Jip,’ he said, sounding somewhat milder. ‘And as far as those workouts are concerned, I’d appreciate it if you left him alone from now on.’

‘Sure. I mean, if that’s how you feel about it.’

'I do.' Turning to Menno, Kasper remarked: 'You're the instructor here. Why don't you do your job?'

'Now wait a minute. Don't you start picking on . . .'

'If you don't, Jip and I will find another gym,' Kasper cut him short, 'as will all my other friends who come here. We don't pay to see someone sitting reading trash all day. Good day, gentlemen.'

On much lighter legs than he'd come in, Kasper left the gym and walked towards the car park. Back in the car, he sat staring ahead of him for a while, still dazed by the discovery he'd made. Axl. Of all people. God, you'd almost feel sorry for him. Just his evasive expression when he'd seen Kasper in the hothouse had been telling enough. He hadn't been annoyed, he'd been scared. Doing his utmost to prove he was not a sissy and here the epitome of effeminacy was standing, requesting a private chat with him.

As for Jip, maybe Axl had toyed with the idea but thought better of it. Kasper saw it all now. How shy and ashamed Axl had looked when he'd asked if Jip was in. His flushed face when Jip hadn't known what to do with the biscuit Kasper had served with the tea, and Kasper had put it in his mouth and kissed him on the cheek. Those times Kasper had gone into the fitness

room to see if Jip was all right and found him working out all on his own. Axl hadn't been away for a pee or a drink, as Kasper had supposed at the time. He simply hadn't been there. Running from his feelings.

Not realising the crucial mistake he'd just made, Kasper started the car and revved into reverse.

No, I shouldn't put it like that. Kasper isn't to blame. He did what he could to protect Jip. Besides, he knew Jip far too well to take him at his word. Jip's word against Axl's: who would you believe, the one who was brain-damaged? The one who also claimed to be on fucking terms with Arnold Schwarzenegger? I wouldn't.

Kasper himself sees his letting Axl off the hook as an inexcusable lack of loyalty. He should've sided with Jip, he says. He should have taken him more seriously, as seriously as Jip's vulnerability deserved. Also, he should have listened more closely to his own feelings. What you know from bitter experience isn't likely to leave a sweet taste in your mouth next time. But when he guessed the predicament Axl was in, he pushed his dislike aside, thinking he mustn't let his own bad memories cloud his judgement. Wrong. He should've reported Axl to the police instead.

I can see Kasper's point, but still I don't agree. If you ask me, the only mistake he made, if it was one at all, was that he didn't think things through far enough. But why should he have? Why be paranoid about it? Why expect the worst?

Kasper felt more or less reassured after his talk with Axl. All the same, he warned Jip not to open the door when he and Titus were out, and asked the other flat-mates to keep their eyes wide open. And when I moved in a few months later, he told me that if I ever saw a monstrous bodybuilder sneaking through the house, I should phone Henk and ask him to come and throw Mr Bad Guy out. He didn't want Jip to see that sort of scum.

I ran into Axl two days later, when I came home from school. On the upper landing, as I took out my keys to my room, I noticed that the light had changed. Usually it wasn't that dark around this time of day. Assuming it was the kitchen door that was blocking the light, I looked to my right.

The kitchen door wasn't closed, but filled by the biggest silhouette I'd ever seen. Noticing me, it withdrew, in its haste to get out of sight stumbling stupidly

back into the light, where it showed itself to belong to a grossly fat man in a jogging suit who gave me a startled, flustered look.

Slowly I raised my hand to greet and calm him, although I couldn't help gaping with open astonishment at his appearance. I'd never known people as deformed as that really did exist. His legs alone looked as thick as an elephant's. For some reason his head, angular and fatigued as the dancers' faces I was so familiar with, made his obesity seem all the more monstrous. But all at once it hit me that it wasn't fat but muscle underneath the jogging suit, and I was looking at the bodybuilder Kasper had spoken of. My revulsion immediately changed to awe. The size of him. The vastness. The . . . the bulk. If we'd been living in the Middle Ages, he would have been a circus attraction. Come and see the colossus. Meet mammoth man.

'Er, hullo,' the visitor stammered. 'You must be the new neighbour. I'm a friend of Jip's. Just a . . . I, er, I know him from the gym.' He gave me a nervous grin.

Silently I nodded. And not wishing to embarrass him any longer, I turned and went into my room.

Maybe it was the sheer shock of seeing so much mass clumped together in one man; maybe it was the

clumsy way he'd tried to conceal the real reason of his presence, which seemed endearing for someone so hefty; maybe it was simply because I was irritated with Kasper for acting as if he knew best what was right for Jip and what wasn't (in fact, I was jealous of the important place Kasper assigned to Jip in his life) – but I decided not to tell anyone. It was Jip's own affair who he saw, I thought. Just because he was brain-damaged, he wasn't some helpless victim.

Now that was a mistake.

\* \* \*

Menno. It must've been Menno. Menno had followed him on his way to Jip and seen him going in, and he'd told Kasper, saying that Axl was seeing Jip and might well be doing so on a regular basis; Axl hadn't looked left or right but known exactly where to go, as if he was going home or something. Or it'd been Kasper himself, going out the front door and in again through the back, hiding in the kitchen next to Jip's room and listening to Axl's 'ah's and 'oh's and all the rest. Kasper was a two-faced freak anyway, no matter which way you looked at him, he was a fake, and if he had false breasts, he could

have eyes in his back, which could see right through his clothes, like when you looked at him you knew you were looking at a woman but actually at a man, you could see right through his clothes once you'd seen him naked or heard from the aerobics girls that yeah, sure he was a man but used the same showers, they didn't mind, he was gay after all, but Axl did mind, it wasn't right, a man acting as if he was one of the girls and couldn't care less.

Or maybe it'd been Jip. The whole memory problem might've been a charade. Yes, Jip had known all along and now he'd had enough and told Kasper to put a stop to it, knowing Kasper would do everything to spite Axl, because he hated him, the fucking freak just hated him, he hated him for being so manly.

No. No, it hadn't been Jip, he was just a stupid bugger who sometimes couldn't even remember his own name. Once he'd asked: Jip? and Jip had said, what, were you saying something? when that something had been his name, everyone would've recognised his own bloody name goddamnit, but Jip hadn't, not straightaway at least, he'd had to repeat the question. Christ, Jip was such a fool at times. Still, when he'd come into the hothouse the other day, there'd been

serious doubts in Axl's mind, Jip had asked him, do you want to fuck? and told the others: we fuck, yeah, we're a team all right, and Axl had said: in your dreams, only just in time before Jip could say more, but by God he'd been scared out of his wits. And then Kasper walked in, all dressed-up, and the other guys had tossed suspicious looks and he too had had his suspicions, Kasper was such a fake, he could be Jip in disguise, come to think of it, apart from those first two visits he'd never seen them together, Jip might have acted both parts and moved about so quickly, making Axl so dizzy with all the nodding and head-shaking, he hadn't noticed there'd been only one person who was dressing up and down all the time and serving the tea while drinking it. Yes, Jip had used Kasper as a cover, because Kasper was the hold Jip had over Axl, which Jip knew all too well, no he wasn't brain-damaged but very clever.

No, Jip hadn't been in the hothouse, he wouldn't have dared. Axl had told him, don't go in, they'll beat you up, they hate gays, or they'll make so much fun of you you'll never laugh again. It had happened in his dreams a few times, suddenly Jip had been standing there saying to Eric, he fucks me, didn't you know, yeah sure, he fucks me all right, he does it day and night, if

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he isn't doing it in reality he's doing it in his mind. Jip hadn't remembered the warning but he'd remembered what they did in his room all right so maybe his memory wasn't that bad after all, it could be one big false act. No . . .

He had to stop. He was going round in circles. Better take a rest first. Gather his thoughts. And not get so worked up. He needed his energy for tomorrow's training. He'd check on Jip tomorrow afternoon, to know for sure. But first he had to rest.

That flatmate last week had really put him off. Like seeing a ghost. After all the time he'd stayed away to make Jip forget about the whole affair, and all the trouble it'd been to make him open the door again. They were probably in it together, all of them, including the leather boys. Menno was in it for sure, he'd found out and told Eric; Axl had seen the look in Eric's eyes when they'd been in the dressing room and he'd complimented Eric on the way his butt had developed lately, Eric had been really suspicious and Axl had said, what are you looking at, nothing, Eric had replied, but he'd been thinking, what are you looking at, eyeing me like that, you're not queer are you, I know the type and Menno says you're one of them. They'd had a row and

he'd almost got rough on Eric but Eric had calmed him down saying, don't get all steamed up, it's me, Eric, because Axl had been calling him Menno according to Eric. Which only showed how close the pair of them were, two heads thinking they'd better be one to confuse him. As if he couldn't tell the difference, all Eric did was sit reading trash all day, he hated him for it, sitting there all day and still look good, it wasn't fair, who knows he might be working out secretly at night to make Axl feel like a fool for having to work so hard and still not be big enough. Two-faced bastard. Bastards. Two-faced, both of them, which made them four. Squaring up to him.

It didn't matter. What mattered was Jip. He had to concentrate on Jip. All that mattered was whether Jip knew him or not. He didn't want it all spoilt, because he did care about Jip, really cared, it was important to him, those hours together, although sometimes he'd get home all depressed he'd been doing it with such a nightmare. Still Jip was a nice enough guy, Axl had been rough on him once and Jip hadn't held it against him. Or he'd forgotten. The memory loss might be for real, then. But then he wouldn't have told Kasper. Or

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was Kasper the part of Jip that knew, knew everything, and Jip the part that kept forgetting?

Yes, that was it, Jip was a part of Kasper. Could be. Which would mean that maybe he himself was straight after all, seeing that Kasper was practically a woman, and he really fancied Jip, despite him being so ugly. And that flatmate had been a sissy type as well. Pretty boy. Not his type, though, but why then had he let him off the hook? He could have dealt with it right there and then, up against the wall and shut up, deal with it once and for all, nobody would ever know except that sissy boy had a really bad headache and lost his tongue. But he'd been too afraid, the shock of his life, seeing him standing there all of a sudden, and he'd been grateful, truly grateful, he'd knocked later and asked if he wouldn't tell Kasper, he'd said, look I wasn't here, right? and the boy had asked, who said you were? He'd been truly grateful, because he did care, did care about Jip and he didn't want some bloody drag queen to fuck it all up, if Kasper found out he could forget about the whole affair, Kasper had almost found out already and it'd scared the life out of him.

Most important was that Jip had forgotten, had never remembered and never would. He'd check with

him tomorrow afternoon, ask do you remember me, do you know who I am, and if Jip said no, it'd be all right, he'd only correct the mistake if Jip made it, only if Jip wouldn't say, no it has never happened what do you mean I don't remember a thing I never saw you, not here nor out there, you know, where we first met. No, Jip shouldn't say that, it would mean that he did remember. All he had to say was no. And all *he* had to do was ask. Because only Jip knew if he knew him or not. Yes, that was it: Jip would tell him yes or no and he'd know what to do. All that mattered was that Jip was too brain-damaged to remember. If he didn't remember it was okay, all right, not a care in the world.

He was calmer now.

\* \* \*

Well, I finally got my interview with Rose. And what a short interview it was. Things went wrong as early as the first question. Or actually they went just as I'd hoped they would. I'd been waiting for this moment so long, knowing that somebody had to say it out loud, and she was the only one who'd spit it out. Her pain was purer than anyone else's. She wasn't like her

parents, ashamed at their own relief that it was all in the past, feeling too guilty themselves to start questioning me. She wasn't like Kasper, kind and wise enough to leave me the choice of wrestling with the truth or telling it straight out. She'd covered for me so far, but no way was this girl going to keep her mouth shut. Not if I asked her to open it to me.

Sure, she was as timid as ever when she first came in, almost leaping out again as I offered my hand, then fumbling awkwardly about in her pocket and pulling out a get-well card.

'I'm not that ill any more,' I said.

'No, I know.' She blushed and stared at her shoes. 'I just thought . . .'

'Thanks anyway.' Before she could get even redder, I stepped aside and invited her to sit down.

She looked at the floor, perplexed, then darted a glance at the mattress in the far corner. If you must know, apart from my desk and a few side tables I don't have any furniture. I don't even own a bedstead. The floor and a few cushions are all I need to keep me comfortable.

Rose, however, felt uneasy at the lack of anything to sit on. After some hesitation she moved towards the

window and lowered herself into a cross-legged position on the mat I use for floor exercises. For someone as plump as her she showed remarkable agility; a professional ballerina couldn't have touched down any softer. Neither could she have chosen a better place to sit: keeping herself in the dark and letting the light shine on me.

Settling opposite her on the carpet, I remembered the card. I'd only read the back of it. As I turned it over to look at the picture on the front, my fingers trembled. They were right. It was a rose, the same one she'd once given to Jip.

'To put them back on your cheeks,' she said.

Not in a million years. It was a reminder. No question about it: she held me answerable all right.

Quietly I laid the card aside and took up my notebook. Having leafed back to my first interview with Suzanne, I began, asking: 'Did it ever bother you, having a brother who's brain-damaged?'

With a start she looked up, her lamb-like pose totally gone. 'Why do you do this?' she asked sharply.

'Pardon me?'

'You said: "is".'

'Did I?'

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'Yes, you did.'

'Oh. Sorry. Slip of the tongue.'

'No, it wasn't.' Her hands, that a second ago had been resting so serenely in her lap, had turned into fists. She was finding it so very hard but, God, was this girl angry with me. If she hadn't been so modest, she'd have bared her teeth right there and then and bitten my head off.

I gazed back at the card, thinking of the message she'd written on the back. '*Get well.*' Get better. Boy, you've gone from bad to worse and if I wasn't in love with you, I'd hate you for it. Remember Jip, and try to make it good. Do your best.

Closing the notebook, I offered:

'Look, Rose, I'm sorry.'

'Why?' she asked as if I hadn't spoken. 'Why?' Her voice had risen to a shrill pitch. She was about to cry. She was crying.

When I remained silent, she looked away from me and breathed deeply, trying to regain her calm. Not only did she have to ask, she also had to spell it out for me. After all I hadn't done.

Finally she said: 'Is it because you think you're to blame?'

## Brain and Body

Bingo.

Because the answer was yes.

Because I was too late. And arrived only when it was done, over and out.

Rose left a few minutes later, saying that the way she saw it, it had just been an unfortunate sequence of events. Those were the words she used, then added that it was all best forgotten.

But she didn't mean it. Oh no.

## *Repeat*

**I**t happened six months ago. Nobody knows the exact course of events, but circumstantial evidence, statements of those indirectly involved, and the local police force's experience of similar incidents made a more or less reliable construction possible.

At two p.m. one Saturday afternoon Axl Hamer, a twenty-four-year-old bodybuilder, was driving home from the gym he was a member of, where he'd been working out with some of his mates. At the inquiry, Axl described himself as having felt 'okay, but bothered by a bit of a headache'. His training partner Eric, however, testified that Axl had seemed troubled. Halfway through their workout he had confided to Eric that he'd decided to get 'some answers' that afternoon and was worried about what those answers might be.

Maybe to get the answers he had hinted at, maybe because he wanted some action instead of just words, on his way home from the gym Axl departed from his usual route and steered his car in the direction the Noorderplantsoen, the town's public gardens.

It happened six months ago. Unlike everybody else, I know exactly what happened. I have access to facts nobody has heard of, and as for the rest . . . well, it doesn't take much fiction to make the story complete. Also, Jip filled me in. His diary gave me the hindsight to see that history repeats itself. Because history does repeat itself – as Jip never did see until history had repeated itself a thousand times and more.

Around two p.m. one Saturday afternoon I hopped on my bike to go into town and do some shopping. Much as I hate shopping, I'd postponed the bigger tasks for weeks, only getting some groceries on Fridays, with the result that I now had a list as long as all the roads to Rome put together. Cursing myself for not having made any of these trips earlier, cursing life in general for all the earthly errands it burdens you with, I cycled off.

When I got to the town centre, it began to rain. Now if there's one thing I hate more than shopping, it's shopping in the rain. And so I cycled home again.

Having arrived at his destination Axl parked his car and, glancing round to make sure nobody was watching, slunk over to the houses a hundred yards further

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up the road. In front of a tall red-brick building he stopped, checked his watch, and rang one of the bells beside the door. He didn't wait for an answer but walked straight on towards the phone booth across the road. Having made a short phone call, he returned to the house. A few minutes later the door opened to reveal Jip van der Dam, one of the boys who lived on the top floor.

'Hi,' said Axl. 'Remember me?'

Jip rocked up and down on his heels and shook his head.

'You do remember me,' said Axl in a disillusioned tone. When Jip kept shaking no, he probed, taking care not to sound too pissed off: 'You know who I am, don't you?'

Again Jip shook his head, even more ferociously than before. Then he replied: 'You're Axl. You're my lover.' He concluded the statement with a satisfied smile.

Axl didn't smile back. The wrong answer. Fuck.

'Well,' he said with a sigh, 'are you going to let me in or not? One more bloody minute and I'll be drenched.'

Jip nodded jerkily. They went inside together.

What happened next is irrelevant. Nor is it of any importance whether they had sex or not (they didn't). All that matters is that, upstairs in Jip's room, they both drank a glass of water, proof of which are the tumblers found by forensics, which were shown to have Jip's and Axl's fingerprints on them.

In the ten minutes it had taken me to race back, I'd got soaked through. Fucking Dutch weather, I thought as I chained my bike to the lamp-post in front of our house. If it wasn't windy, it was wet, or wet and windy. Muttering that it was ridiculous to try and stop the greenhouse effect, I mounted the stairs.

As I reached the upper landing, I heard voices coming from Jip's room. One of them was Jip's, the other appeared to be Axl's. It was a man's voice, at least. It couldn't be Kasper: he and Titus had gone away for the weekend. As for the leather boys, they never came up unless the last bottle of beer and closed shops forced them to. No doubt they were still sleeping off Friday's hangover.

I hung up my coat and went into my room. When I had towelled my hair dry, I took off my jeans, hung

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them over the radiator, and put on a pair of ballet tights. Having made myself a cup of coffee, I picked up one of the books I was reading that week and snuggled up against the radiator, waiting for the rain to ease off. If it didn't, I'd only go and fetch the dry-cleaning Kasper had asked me to collect. The dry-cleaner's was only two minutes away. And dry.

After half an hour of chit-chat Axl suggested going for a walk in the park. At first Jip refused, saying he wasn't to go out on his own, but Axl wouldn't take no for an answer, grabbing Jip by the arm and telling him to shut up. They were going out, he hissed. The walk would do Jip good. It would clear his thoughts. Help him put things in the right perspective. Jog his memory.

I hardly paid attention when they left, only smiling when I heard Axl stumble and curse. No doubt he was too broad for those narrow staircases of ours to descend without having to squeeze himself in.

A few minutes after they'd gone, however, I looked up from my book. Odd to go out when it was raining so heavily. Odd that Jip should go out at any rate. He never went anywhere if it wasn't with Kasper or his

mother – except for his trips to the snack bar, that was. But those trips were planned. That much I'd learned about Jip in the three weeks I'd been living here: he did everything according to plan. If something wasn't on the memory board, he didn't do it, and if something was, he did, not even asking himself whether he felt like it or not.

Maybe he and Axl had agreed to go to the pictures or something like that. They were dating, after all.

As they reached the park, Axl said he had to take a leak. He gripped Jip more firmly by the elbow and guided him towards the urinal a few yards off the pavement. They entered the small, concrete building through the opening at the back into the dilapidated interior. Outside the rain was pelting down, inside the world seemed even wetter: both the cistern of the one private cubicle and the small wash basin were overflowing.

Jip cast an anxious look round. Apart from a trembling nodding of his head, he stood completely still. Axl shouldn't have brought him here. Kasper would be angry. He'd forbidden Jip ever to go in. Jip had to go home and pee there.

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‘Remember this?’ said Axl, giving Jip an impatient shake. ‘Eh? Remember this?’

Cautiously, Jip shook his head.

It must have been about then that I decided to go out and take a look. The incongruity of the outing kept nagging me. At a more selfish level, I was worried about what to say in case Kasper phoned and asked to speak to Jip. Putting my book aside, I changed into a pair of dry jeans and put my socks and shoes back on. As I was about to take my coat from the hat-stand on the landing, I saw that the door to Jip’s room was ajar. Maybe I’d been so engrossed in my reading I hadn’t heard them return. Quietly I knocked and, when nobody answered, pushed the door open a bit wider. They were out all right.

Again the situation struck me as odd. Jip was meticulous about locking doors. I stepped inside and swung back the door to look at the memory board. Maybe something had been planned after all, even if it was only to go out and buy some tobacco. Under Saturday morning it said in big chalk lettering: ‘SHOPPING, WITH MUM’. Saturday afternoon was empty.

And suddenly I knew for sure there was something wrong. Not even bothering to put on my coat, and taking two steps at a time, I bolted down the stairs. Out on the street, I hesitated. I didn't have a clue where to look. They could be anywhere. They could have gone away by car for all I knew, or taken some bus. I turned left, with the intention of checking the snack bar, but as I did, it occurred to me that a snack bar wasn't a likely place to find a bodybuilder. Also, they'd left over fifteen minutes ago, and if they'd gone to get some fries or a packet of chewing gum they would've been back by now. In the end I made the random guess of heading for the park. If they'd gone on foot, they were most probably there. Surely the only place fit for walking when it was raining was under the trees.

I set off. I ran. On my way to the park entrance, I sped past the urinal. I dashed past Axl's car. A silver Ford Cortina, which I didn't consciously notice at the time and would later deny I'd seen.

Nobody will ever know if Jip really did remember, or if he just shook his head in the hope that a positive answer would pacify the obviously hostile Axl. Neither can anyone tell what Jip experienced in the five

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minutes it took Axl to set the record straight. And it can only be guessed at whether he realised that the first first time had in fact been the first round and this was the crucial second.

I think he did. But I can't be sure. Guesswork: the best I can do. And what a poor guesser I am.

By the time I'd searched the park, it was done, over and out. By the time I passed the urinal for the second time and decided to take a look inside, it was too late. Axl had already left. Jip was lying on the floor. He was dead.

\* \* \*

What haunts me most is the image of his fingers, clawing at the concrete as if trying to find the way out through the floor. And the gruesome thing was: they were still clawing. Later I thought I must have imagined the movement, because I couldn't feel his pulse, although now, as I'm writing this, I'm not sure I actually took his pulse. I'm not even sure whether I did go in. There was blood all over the place and I arrived

back home without so much as a spot on my shoes. Maybe I just took one good look at him and concluded it was over. Maybe I didn't even take that good a look, but saw what had happened, knew I couldn't handle it, and turned round straightaway.

For that was what I did. I turned and went back home. My hands in my pockets, I walked back through the rain, slowly, almost at a stroll. Arriving at our front door, I bumped into Rose, who'd come to see if Titus was in. I told her that he wasn't and wouldn't be back until the next evening. As she got on her bike again, she commented on me wearing no coat. I said I'd only been out for some cigarettes. I forgot to add that the cigarettes were for Kasper. I don't smoke, as Rose very well knew but realised only later.

When Rose had left, I went up to my room. I remember making myself a pot of tea. I changed into my ballet gear and did some floor exercises. I watched television for a bit, but couldn't concentrate. My tea had grown cold. So had I, as I hadn't put on a sweat-shirt after my exercises. I jumped up and down for a few minutes and did some stretching, trying to prevent my muscles from getting stiff. When I felt warm and supple again, I wondered if I should take up smoking.

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I went down and watered Kasper's plants, as I'd promised to do. I stayed in Kasper's room a while longer. I inhaled his perfume and wished he was there. I went upstairs again. I made new tea. I put the TV back on. I took my jeans off the radiator. I folded them and put them in the wardrobe. I closed the wardrobe. I switched off the TV. I told myself I should do something.

At five-thirty, two hours after I'd first found him, I rang the police to say that Jip was missing. Again, way too late. If I had phoned an ambulance straight away, they might have resuscitated him.

\* \* \*

I never told Kasper. But he knows. Why else would I have warned the police? Why else would I have come up with the idea that the urinal might be the place to look? Why should I have been so worried in the first place?

It was Kasper, however, who suggested that Axl, the only occasional visitor Jip had ever had, might have something to do with it. It was Kasper who told the

police to go to the gym and look for Axl, not me. Still, he knows. Why else did he never ask where his dry-cleaning was? Why did he never lament that if only I'd come home a little earlier, it might not have happened? Why didn't he ever ask if I'd seen Axl around the house? And why, why else did he give me the task of writing the whole horror story down?

Kasper has known all along. And deep down I've known all along that he's forgiven me. I still can't decide, though, if that makes me glad or sad. Kasper thinks that what happened to me is that I sat frozen with fear. He even suspects that Axl threatened me in some way or other. It wasn't like that. I was simply, stupidly too late. Always a jump behind. That's me.

Even the threat came too late. For Kasper isn't the only one. Axl knows too. A few days after he'd been arrested, I received a note through the post. In bold type it said: **'My friends know where to find you. Right where you are.'** The moment I'd read it, I screwed up the note and threw it away. Because I didn't want to know. And I was scared. Oh yes, I was scared, scared to death, scared they'd beat the life out of me. So scared I destroyed the only evidence there was.

‘Of course he’ll be convicted,’ says Kasper. ‘They’ve got his fingerprints. Plus those trainer prints outside the urinal . . .’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘He’s going to plead temporary insanity.’

‘What? But then there’s still the first time.’

‘There’s no proof. It’s his word against Jip’s. And Jip never recognised him.’ Not from that time, that is. But at one point he surely recognised Axl. The first first time, which everybody would see as some aphasic error, whereas it really hit the nail right on the head. And if Jip had recognised him, remembered Axl in a way understandable to us of sound mind, it wouldn’t make much difference. There’s no Jip to testify.

Kasper could vote for the truth, though. He could show Jip’s diary and explain . . . No, he won’t. A diary is a private matter. This we agreed upon. For personal use only. For mine. And even I, after two months of painfully close study, cannot tell if the interpretation I’ve given is true to fact. I may have been twisting lies.

‘But that statements of Menno’s, then?’ Kasper asks.

## Brain and Body

'All Menno said is that Axl spent some time with Jip at the gym. Like he himself did, before Axl took over.'

'He also said that Axl was on drugs.'

'Which acquits Axl of premeditated murder rather than testifies to it. Junkies are junkies, not killers.'

'We could sue the drug dealer,' Kasper gives it one last try.

'Axl's going to do that.'

And Kasper starts to laugh, a terrible, hysterical, unbearable laugh. Because it isn't funny. Not at all.