



RICHARD FROST

**BRAIN
AND BODY**

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Before you start reading this, a word of warning.

Jip is a mess. He's completely fucked up. He doesn't know left from right or tomorrow from yesterday. If you ever thought of yourself as scatterbrained, you'll soon realise this adjective should be reserved for a totally different category of people. Compared to Jip, you're Einstein. The very fact that you've reached this sentence means you'd score at least eighty points more on the IQ-scale.

No, that's not fair, it's not that he's stupid. In fact he's quite clever. Before the accident he was preparing for his A-levels, with a good chance of passing them all. Nor is he mad or anything. It's just that he was thrown into disarray. And ever since he hasn't been able to put two and two together. He doesn't even know what happened to him, let alone how it happened. All he knows is that when he came round, things seemed seriously out of order. Which they definitely were. Broken body, broken brain. A whole lot of chaos and a perforated memory on the side.

Jip's head keeps denying its shattered inner state. It keeps shaking no. It shakes no all the time. And just when you think: oh what the hell, let's pretend every-

Richard Frost

thing's normal, he starts nodding yes. To confirm that, indeed, it's not normal. Actually it doesn't make sense at all – the only reasonable explanation for the constant confusion he's in.

His diary doesn't make sense, that's for sure. It starts here, drops whatever vague subject he's rambling on about, picks up there again, only – after a gap of what must be over three weeks – to begin the whole treatise anew. The trouble with Jip is that every time he closed his diary, he forgot all about it. That is, until Kasper asked him: 'Hey, have you written in your diary yet?' Eight times out of ten Jip would show no reaction but a puzzled, anxious stare, knowing something had slipped his mind, racking his brains for what it might be, but finding no clue whatsoever. Only when Kasper explained to him that he'd begun keeping a diary – and what a diary was – did he shake his head and drawl: 'Yeah, a diary . . . That's a good idea. You know, it might help me remember things.' After which he forgot about the project again.

In the end, all that remained of the diary was a memo pasted to the door of his room saying '*Write in Dairy*', but he could never work out what the message referred to. And even if he had, he probably wouldn't

have recalled where he'd put the damned thing – or he'd have confused it with the big black book he used to convince himself of his existence, jotting down the times he'd had a meal, when he'd last washed his socks or put on a clean T-shirt. Somehow he never got round to making notes on the future, which, after the umpteenth attempt at mastering lesson ten of the memory course he was doing, led to Kasper's decision to keep his calendar for him and give him a schedule each morning.

We found the diary, the real one, in the bottom drawer of his desk. When Kasper handed it to me, I asked: 'Why me? Shouldn't you be the one to do this?' 'Please,' replied Kasper, 'I'm too close. And you spend half the night awake anyway. It'll give you something to do, instead of worrying about what went wrong.' Never being able to say no to Kasper, I gave in, taking the diary and putting it beside the PC on my desk.

And so I started my insomnia therapy, spending my waking hours poring over the fragments my former neighbour had scribbled down, struggling to build an image of the haystack that hid the needle. At first I couldn't even read his handwriting, wobbly and weak as it was. And when I finally did get the hang of it, there

Richard Frost

loomed the titan task of spelling out the meaning of the words. I soon concluded that the best I could do was join all the snippets together into some tentative collage, peer at the resulting mental Picasso from a distance and interpret it into a naturalistic picture. Not easy, considering the greater part of the pages are sheer nonsense, containing no hard information at all.

Let me give you an example. Page sixteen. No date specified (there never is; people like Jip can't handle more than one thing at a time, and don't bother with trivial matters like dates when they're all set to tell their tale).

I've had Kasper . . . Titus . . . Kasper? check this, to make sure it's okay. (Kasper says: I did it, so it's him. He says he did it, so it's him.) That's the trouble with being brain-damaged: it's hard to keep the overview. And I can't concentrate. Kasper told me it's because I'm suffering from brain damage. It was quite a shock, I can tell you. So I told him to correct correct what I'm writing. It's hard for me to keep the overview. Before you know it, I've gone off at a tangent. Kasper told me not to worry, he'll edit those bits out for me. What I had for breakfast is irrelevant in the present

Brain and Body

overview, so he crossed it out. He complimented me for remembering it, though. That's what I like about Titus. He's always kind to me. Kasper, I mean. And he says I should replace the last overview by context. I'm wondering about quotation marks. Maybe I should use quotation marks. Kasper says not to worry, people will understand what I mean. Or else I could just use reported speech. I ask him what the fuck is reported speech? He says when you say Kasper says blah-blah-blah.

Kasper never says blah-blah-blah. He keeps his sentences short. He doesn't use long long words. I always understand him. Sometimes I think he's doing it on purpose, so that I don't lose track. My brain's not in order, you see. Kasper told me I'm suffering from brain damage. It was quite a shock, I can tell you. No wonder I find it hard to keep the overview. And before you know it, I've gone off at a tangent. Or I keep going on and on about things. Kasper says I'm like an express train at times. Going blah-blah-blah. He can't stop me. And when he does, it's impossible to get me moving again. It takes me ages to get back on track.

I can't remember what I had for breakfast this morning. Kasper says never mind, you wrote it all down in your book. It isn't important just now. Let's concentrate on the dairy,

Richard Frost

shall we? Why the fuck can't I remember what I had for breakfast? I ask him. He says you're brain-damaged. It is hard for you to remember things. Jesus. Brain-damaged. That sounds bad. I must have run into an express train or something. So like me: I always go off at tangents, not even looking where I'm going. That's because I'm brain-damaged. Weird that I shouldn't remember it, though.

As I said: completely fucked up. And this has been corrected for spelling and grammar. It took me half an hour to figure out that 'Kspe says no do sorry, peolp fill accept accept than I abot averge' was intended as: 'Kasper says not to worry, people will understand what I mean.' If that's what it means . . . No wonder Kasper never got round to editing the stuff: it's hopeless. And he was probably too exhausted anyway, after two hours of guiding Jip through writing his diary while constantly breaking the news to him that he was brain-damaged.

Note, by the way, that my problem with Jip is exactly Jip's problem with himself: lack of overview. Not that this is reassuring. For how am I supposed to make a coherent story out of this? It's not even a story, at the

most some slippery stream of consciousness. I could be falsifying history here. I'm so afraid of twisting the facts, I keep asking Kasper the same five W-questions Jip was taught at the rehabilitation centre and which he couldn't recall every time he tried to apply them: Who? What? Where? When? Why? Fortunately Jip's speech was a lot better than his writing, and Kasper's memory a whole lot better than Jip's. And thank God for that journalist who was interested enough in the case to spend three months polishing the other side of the coin. Half the truth is there. At least, I think it is.

Because that's what it's all about, isn't it? Establishing the truth. Singling out cause, effect and aftermath, and putting them in their logical, chronological order. Regrettably, unlike in most other therapies, where the cause is the key to the solution, nothing can be solved here. It is done, over and out.

And it all began three years after it happened.

Past History

It happened four years ago.

Like Jip, nobody knows the exact course of events, but circumstantial evidence, intelligent guesswork and the local police force's experience of similar incidents made a more or less reliable construction possible.

At eleven p.m. one Saturday evening, Jip van der Dam, a seventeen-year-old Dutch schoolboy, was cycling home from Groningen town centre, where he'd had a few beers with some of his mates. At the inquiry, his mates described him as having been 'in a cheerful enough mood, although a bit quiet at times'. His best friend Mark, however, testified that Jip had seemed troubled. Over the second beer he had confided to Mark that he'd decided to 'tell his parents' the next day and was worried about what their reaction might be.

Maybe to put himself to a final test, to make sure that what he was about to confess was actually true; maybe to equip himself with actions instead of just words, on his way home Jip departed from his usual

route and steered his bike in the direction of the Noorderplantsoen, the town's public gardens. Having arrived at his destination he parked his bike and, glancing round to make sure nobody was watching, slunk over to the urinal a few yards off the pavement along the road.

He entered the small concrete building through the opening at the back, and looked around the dilapidated interior. On that particular evening it must have stunk, as it was the day before the weekly hose-down. Not that the place wasn't wet enough already: both the cistern of the one private cubicle and the small wash basin were blocked by wads of toilet paper and overflowing, their rusty fluids mingling with the filth of those visitors who had missed their target.

Jip must have stood there for a while, waiting, nervous about the encounter he was likely to have, proof of which are the half-finished roll-ups found by forensics and shown to have Jip's saliva on them. Finally someone, the someone Jip had been hoping for, entered. It is beyond doubt that this someone was alone and – for obvious reasons – a man.

Whether Jip approached the newcomer or the newcomer Jip is irrelevant. Neither is it of any real

Richard Frost

importance whether they had sex or not (they did). All that matters is that, having had his relief, the stranger turned on Jip and started to beat him up. Now, the people in North Holland are known for their hard-headedness, and the Groningers have the hardest heads of all. It was only the vicious force of the attacker and his determination to put an end to the matter that resulted in Jip sagging to the floor with a fractured skull.

He was found in the early hours by another cottager, who warned the police. By daybreak he was in hospital, wired up to a wall of medical machinery. He was in a coma.

* * *

It sounds almost like sleep, don't you think? Coma: the deepest sleep of all. Complete rest and perfect peace of mind. That ignorant, blissful state in which people are said to experience heaven. Well, it isn't. It's hell. That is to say: it's hell for others. It's being sentenced to burn, to sitting for hours, days, weeks on end waiting for signs of change. It's praying for that liberating moment

when the patient finally opens his eyes and says 'Mum?' or 'Dad?' - whoever meets that wondering gaze.

In Jip's case it was his mum sitting beside his bed, alone. Her husband, after overcoming his embarrassment about the circumstances that had led to his son's infirmity, had come only once. Seeing the tube stuck in Jip's throat and hearing the death rattle that was being pumped through it, he turned and left. He couldn't bear the sight and sound of it. Just the hospital smell was enough to make him sick. So his wife did it alone.

When I asked Suzanne to tell me about all those weeks she spent watching over Jip, she replied stiffly:

'I don't like to think back to it.'

'I understand it was a difficult period for you,' I said.

'Oh no.' She frowned, for some reason irritated with me. Then she smoothed her brow, probably deciding that she'd best get the interview over and done with – or reminding herself that, despite being a pain in the arse, I meant well – and began: 'It was trying, of course. Each morning going to the hospital, talking to him, knowing he couldn't hear me. At least that's what I thought – they're still not sure about that, whether the patient senses you're there or not. Personally I never believed it, which made it harder in a way. Still, I

couldn't leave him. I had to stay, if only to confirm that I was important to him, to . . . to get some signal, I suppose.'

'You wanted him to recognise you,' I said, hoping she'd get the double meaning.

Again she frowned. I shouldn't have interrupted her; now that she'd begun talking, I ought to confine myself to listening. Nor should I be drawing psychological conclusions about her. I lowered my eyes to my notebook, my biro pointing at the blank space before me, requesting her to fill it in.

'They told me to prepare for the worst,' she resumed. 'But I wasn't prepared to accept the worst. Not with what had happened to him. If it'd been a car-accident or his own fault . . . No, I wouldn't have felt any different. I just couldn't accept it. And told myself I shouldn't. Wouldn't.' She fell silent.

When I looked up, she was sitting staring out of the window, seemingly thinking hard about how she'd actually felt at the time. As I was wondering why she'd first said 'shouldn't', and how often she'd corrected herself and changed it into 'wouldn't'.

'So what did you do?' I asked.

'I brought things with me. Tapes with music I knew he liked, and pieces of fabric, which I'd rub against his arm. They said stimulation was good: it activates the brain. Sometimes I put ice cubes on his chest, or something warm, so that he'd undergo different sensations. The photos I'd brought round were useless. His eyes were half-open some of the time, but he wasn't focusing. He didn't *see*. In fact, there was no response at all. During the tests they did, pinching his arm and the like, he never reacted. He did make sounds and pull faces from time to time, but they had no meaning. They weren't reactions, just involuntary movements. One day he even tore the tubes off. The nurse had to tie his hands to the bed to prevent him from killing himself. It was awful, seeing him like that.' She glanced down at her hands, fumbling with her wedding-ring. Then she concluded: 'Still, all those weeks I had hope. He'd come round and see me. That's what they show in the movies, isn't it? People wake up and start talking again.'

'Well, Jip did wake up,' I remarked, just in time swallowing the addition: 'and start talking again'. Witty comments weren't in place here. Because it wasn't funny. Not at all.

'He didn't,' she said bitterly. 'No, he didn't wake up.'

Richard Frost

As it turns out, you don't pop out of a coma, you gradually rise back to the surface of consciousness. And as the world becomes clearer to you, it becomes ever clearer to the world how badly damaged you are and how goddamned long it will take for you to recover. If you recover. Of those who've gone missing as long as Jip, only a small percentage get back on their feet again. The rest spend their days in a psychiatric hospital or end up in a home.

Suzanne did everything to prevent this. 'The neurologist kept saying he wasn't well enough for rehabilitation, and I kept saying he would be. I practised with him for days, trying to get him to swallow his food properly or sit upright. I even taught him how to use his limbs again. The physiotherapist said I was overdoing things, but I was determined. Anything but have him staying an invalid for the rest of his life. His language problems especially frightened me – I didn't want him to be mentally handicapped as well. The first thing I did when he was well enough was teach him to nod if he couldn't manage to say yes. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he wanted to answer me, and knew what he wanted to say, but couldn't.'

Jip didn't stop nodding. And, when he'd mastered the negative, he never stopped his zealous head-shaking. Unfortunately for Suzanne, who thought she'd read his mind, Jip's bruised brain had mixed up the concepts 'yes' and 'no'. Later he learned their proper meaning again, but the habit lasted, his body language consistently contradicting the terms by which he expressed himself.

'Most of his tics he acquired in that period,' Suzanne admitted. 'I always think I'm to blame. Part of it was just him being spastic – his lack of coordination – but still, I can't help feeling that if I hadn't spurred him on in his motions so enthusiastically, he would've been a lot more normal. Just as I shouldn't have been so delighted when he finally spoke. Because, apart from a lot of unintelligent drivel, it was all curses. Thank God the speech therapist managed to get those out. It was so distressing for people who came to visit us. They just couldn't understand that he didn't mean to swear, but did it all the same, because he lacked the words for what he really intended to say.'

'You're now referring to the time after he'd come back home,' I interjected.

'No, when he was with us at weekends.'

Richard Frost

‘Which was earlier, during the rehabilitation period.’

‘That’s right.’

I jotted down a few notes in my scheme. She was moving both too fast and too slow for me, skipping the part about how he’d got to the rehab centre, but lingering over details I was already familiar with. She’d done it in the previous interview as well: giving me the A to Z of how he’d learned to read and write again, but hardly touching on the months after he’d been discharged from the rehab and lived at home. She steered well clear of the subject of his state of mind at the time, and dodged my questions whenever I got too near.

‘Who came to visit you?’ I asked. ‘Did they come to visit Jip?’

‘Well, the usual,’ she answered with a shrug. ‘Friends, family . . . And I think they came more out of a sense of duty than any real interest in Jip. Their supposed support quickly waned, though. When the physical injuries have healed, people think the worst has passed. They don’t know what it’s like, looking after someone who’s brain-damaged. They kept saying things like: “Well, at least he’s still alive, that’s the main thing.” It irritated me. It still makes me mad. I mean,

what's a life without prospects? Sometimes I think it would've been better if they'd turned off the life-support.' Abruptly she broke off. Fixing her blue eyes on me, she asked: 'Does that shock you?'

'No.' Although I must confess that it did. She was his mother, for Christ's sake. Aren't mothers supposed to love their children unconditionally and for ever? More unsettling, though, was that in spite of her statement that a life without prospects wasn't worth living, I had the feeling she really thought that letting him die would've been better for her sake, not his. She'd just told me that when he'd come out of the coma she'd started to despair, and I had the impression that afterwards disillusion had set in. But had it been so hopeless? According to Kasper, the image of Jip as a loser is false. It could be Kasper's sanguine view of people, of course. He has an unshakeable belief in lost causes: believing them not to be lost. Just when you think you're completely in the dark, Kasper will tell you he's spotted a light somewhere.

Maybe it was time I put the squeeze on a bit. I didn't want to upset Suzanne or get her back up, but I wanted her to tell me what I needed to know.

Richard Frost

‘What was it like, having him home again?’ I asked casually.

With a start she straightened up, as if I’d just dropped a piece of crockery at the quiet tea-party we were having. She quickly pulled herself together, though, taking a big breath.

‘It was frustrating in a way. Piet, my husband, had an awfully hard time coming to terms with it. He still hasn’t. His main problem was that he wanted things back to normal. I even heard him say it on the phone one day, when our eldest was ringing from Australia to ask how Jip was doing: “Oh yes, he’s just the same old Jip to us.” Piet blandly denied the situation we were in. Because Jip wasn’t the same. To be honest, he was a totally different person. He used to be very lively and pleasant to be with, but he’d become so . . . difficult. He was utterly unpredictable: sometimes he could get into a complete state about the most trivial things. And then he’d sink into apathy again, sitting on the sofa like a zombie. No matter how you tried, you couldn’t make him snap out of it. It put such a strain on the atmosphere in the house.’

Again she paused, the strain she’d given voice to visible in the lines round her mouth. For a moment I

toyed with the idea of asking her if maybe Jip had suffered from depressions. Remembering her tight-lipped 'I don't know' during the previous interview, when I'd asked if he'd been happy to be back home, I let it pass, continuing instead: 'How did Rose cope?'

'Well, it wasn't easy for her, of course. For a start, in the beginning Jip didn't recognise her. He remembered he had an older brother in Australia, but he'd forgotten the sister he'd grown up with during the past five years. Rose was very patient with him, though: always kind to him, never complaining. She understood he needed time and care. Still, she was a fourteen-year-old going through puberty and I couldn't give her the attention she deserved. My whole day revolved around Jip, and when he'd finally gone to bed I'd be totally worn-out. It was so tiresome at times. Continually repeating messages, time and again mustering the patience to let him think for himself, trying to hand him the right cues if he couldn't . . . And he made less and less progress.'

'Did that disappoint you?'

'So, when Kasper made that offer . . .' she carried on, not paying any attention. 'Of course, before the accident, Jip was about to leave home anyway, though it was clear that, in the state he was in now, he couldn't

go to college any more. But Kasper was so good with him. We consulted the social worker about it and she was all in favour. Jip responded far better after he'd met Kasper, it was as if he'd had a new impulse. I myself wasn't sure he'd be able to manage – he needed a lot of structure, stability, and I doubted if Kasper could provide those – but Jip was so keen on the idea. Once he'd heard about it, he couldn't get it out of his head, not even minding all the change it would involve. With hindsight I think it was his pride at having got to know Kasper. At first he constantly failed to recognise him, you see, but after a few weeks he suddenly said when Kasper had brought him home: "Kasper is my friend." He was so proud he'd remembered. And he never forgot it.'

'Hm,' I muttered. 'That's a bit odd, isn't it? From what I heard of what he was like then, he could hardly store new information, his short-term memory was so poor. I mean, the reading and writing and stuff, that's retrieval of old info, retraining forgotten skills. But learning new names, new faces . . . that's quite another talent. Or am I wrong?'

'Oh, he could pick things up. As long as something was repeated often enough, or if a certain emotion was

attached. It was the same with unpleasant things: even if he couldn't actually remember, he knew that some . . . things would leave him with a bad feeling.'

What unpleasant things? Was she talking about her husband and the way he'd treated Jip? Why was this woman always saying 'things' when we were discussing Jip's time at home? Was she just being colloquial or hiding some 'thing'? Somehow I had the feeling that she was holding me by the elbow and dragging me quickly past the pictures, instead of letting me take a good look round the gallery. And why had she ignored that one question, speeding up as if it was nearly closing time and we had to dash for the exit?

'So you agreed to Jip leaving home,' I said.

'Yes.' Hesitantly she added: 'It was for the best.'

Our house is a dull, red-brick building, flanked on one side by its prettier, rose-plastered twin, and on the other by an apartment block called The Studio, a boldly striped structure in red and white. As bad luck will have it, we live on the very road where, a hundred yards from our front door, Jip was beaten up. Even though I've known it since my first day here, until a few months ago I hardly give it a thought when going into town or for a stroll in the park. But these days . . . I can't pass the spot without it giving me the creeps.

I went inside the urinal once, to see the scene of the crime, but felt so tense I hardly took things in, only wishing I were a smoker like Jip and had some means to brace myself. Which made me think: if Jip hadn't been giving his smoke signals from the entrance that night, his attacker mightn't have known there was someone inside and gone in. Making a mental note to check what the weather had been like (you can't see smoke when it's raining, can you?), I hurried out and home again, relieved not to have run into any queer-bashers.

When Jip left his parental home, he moved into a house full of gay men. Yes, that's right, we're all gay

here, each and every one of us. No - what am I saying? – that's not right. Titus isn't. Oh no. As experience has taught me: don't ever tell Titus you think he's gay, because he'll grab you by the throat and squeeze it shut, if only to prevent you from repeating his worst fear ever again. According to Titus, he's extremely straight. Okay, so he dotes on Kasper, kissing and cuddling him whenever he gets the chance and acting like a jealous husband when I'm around, but no way is he gay. He'd rather make you bite your tongue off than admit to that.

Kasper and Titus share the first floor together. Below them live three boys of the heavy leather type the rest of us seldom mix with and who Kasper wants to replace, when they finally see they don't fit in, by a nice bunch of sissies. I myself live on the top floor, over Kasper's room and next door to Jip's. It is quiet on this floor now and, to avoid lapsing into sandwich suppers and because I like Kasper's cooking better than my own, most days I have my meals in the kitchen downstairs. On the nights Kasper's boyfriend isn't staying over, I lie listening to Kasper and Titus talking, the murmur of their voices keeping me awake rather than lulling me to sleep because it makes me feel lonely. Or

Richard Frost

maybe I'm just waiting for Titus to clear off to his own room, so that I can slip downstairs and be the one to cuddle Kasper for a change.

Actually, it's not surprising that Titus fancies Kasper (as it's no wonder that I do). Kasper is a she-male, so beautifully so that he could pass for the prefix only. He looks like a girl, walks and talks like a girl, and most days he dresses as one, bra and fake breasts included. Personally I like best what goes under the female attire: the most exciting body I've ever seen. (Titus agrees with me on this point, by the way. Now who isn't gay?) He's our queen of hearts, Kasper – as he is our mother goose. Having once taken Jip under his wing, he later gave shelter to Titus, and last year to me.

But those are different stories: different lives, different endings. I'm still wrestling with Jip and his unhappy fate. Yesterday I had a talk with Kasper about Suzanne, asking what he made of her duck and cover style of answering questions. His psychologically trained mind soon made 'things' clear to me.

'She has nothing to hide,' he said, 'she's simply going through a process of mourning. All she's hiding is her anger at Jip, knowing it's unreasonable, useless –

blaming him all the same. And maybe she blames herself, for her relief at being rid of him.'

'And her husband?'

'Well, he obviously still has a long way to go. He'll probably start crying in a few months.' With these dry words, Kasper swirled round on the stool he was sitting on and started rummaging through the clutter on his dressing table. Having found what he was looking for – a tube of mascara – he raised his chin and looked into the mirror, concentrating on the face to be made up.

'Could it be that he's denying what happened out of shame about what led to it happening?' I asked.

'Honey, you're making things too complicated. Just try to imagine what it's like: some frustrated brute taking your son away from you like that. Of course he tries to deny it.'

'Suzanne doesn't, though.'

'No. But she's a woman.'

Oh, thanks very much, I thought. As if men are so emotionally underdeveloped. Why give me the job of writing Jip's story then?

Unaware of my sulking, Kasper blinked a few times and reached for a Kleenex. Having removed most of the mascara he'd just applied, he started to work on a

Richard Frost

second layer. I've never understood this: first putting on the stuff, then wiping it off, and putting it on again. He does it with lipstick as well, except that he adds face powder before the second round. Why not give one good smear and be done with it?

'You know,' I remarked, 'what really amazes me is their lack of anger at the offender. I'd be livid if I were them.'

'So would I. And they no doubt are.' He frowned, then drew a finger along his lower eyelid, screening the skin, as I knew, for crow's feet. 'God, I wish I hadn't turned thirty,' he sighed. 'It makes me feel as if I'm past my best.'

'You *are* the best.'

'Please, don't Titus me.'

'I only mean it.' The beautiful and the best. Which I'm sure he'll always be. I took care not to enter dangerous ground, though (we've had endless rows about it: me, fed up with his matronising attitude, almost ordering him to see me as temptation incarnate, he giving me solicitous looks and, when he got fed up with my rejected lover act, telling me to go to my room). I asked: 'How do you feel about it?'

Brain and Body

‘About what happened to Jip?’ He’d turned his head a little, now inspecting the side of his face. ‘Well, angry and sad, of course, although the words seems hopelessly lame.’ He thought for a moment, then he said slowly: ‘I’m afraid it’ll happen again. I still don’t trust you or Titus to go out after dark.’

‘You’re a lot frailer than us,’ I said, not telling him that I did feel anxious about going past the urinal. ‘And you look far more conspicuous.’

‘Yes, darling,’ he replied. ‘But I’m a black belt.’

* * *

Kasper is a black belt in karate, and until two years ago he worked part-time at a dojo, a school for martial arts. Not having the credentials to be a full-blown instructor, he trained the juniors, jittery little rascals whose main lesson from Kasper was how to master the concentration and composure indispensable to a karateka.

It was the lack of those same basic qualities in one of his students that led the instructor of the adult beginners group one day to call on Kasper for help. Kasper had just finished class and was on his way to the showers when his colleague, standing with a troubled

Richard Frost

face in the doorway of the room where he was teaching, waved him to a halt.

Without preamble he muttered to Kasper:

'I don't know what it is with this guy. He's hopeless: two left fucking feet and as ham-handed as a clown. He's determined to stay, though. I just can't get him to bugger off.'

He pointed over his shoulder to the training room where, amidst the white belts, a hunched figure in a faded T-shirt and shapeless jogging pants stood swaying back and forth, one leg in front of the other, as if he was about to jump from the high board but had difficulty overcoming his fear.

'Who is he?' asked Kasper.

'I don't know, some imbecile or something. Maybe you could talk to him. I mean, you're good with people.'

'Sure.'

They went into the training room. The boy had changed position, now teetering from side to side in the mat's danger zone, his head pumping forwards and back. Around him, the other students in their proudly purchased karate gear cast their eyes to the ceiling to express both their annoyance and their impotence at persuading him to get out of the way.

Brain and Body

Reaching the starting line on the mat, Kasper bowed and said: 'Hi. I'm Kasper. Who are you?'

The boy gave him an uneasy, to-and-fro gaze, then released a loud snort. When Kasper didn't react, but continued to look at him serenely, the boy fell silent and, with unsteady fingers, wormed a note out of his pocket. Having unfolded it, he read aloud: 'I've come to take karate lessons.' He concluded the announcement by rocking up and down on his heels, seemingly demonstrating how flexible a karateka he'd make.

'So they told me,' Kasper said. 'What's your name, love?'

The boy didn't reply, only emitting a snuffling sound. Restlessly his eyes travelled down over Kasper's perfect face and spotless suit, his head vibrating a silent no. Arriving at the black belt his eyes jerked up again, as if the question he'd been asked had finally hit home and he was now expecting Kasper to give the answer.

Trying to hint at one, Kasper flicked a quick glance down at the note. The boy too glanced down and, having first sniffed noisily, he read: 'My name is Jip. I've come to take karate lessons.'

He looked up, his expression slightly stupefied. Seeing Kasper's face again, he smiled – then exploded

Richard Frost

into a convulsive, violent sniggering, apparently finding his own friendliness very funny.

‘Hello, Jip,’ said Kasper, taking no notice of the strange reaction. ‘I’m your new instructor.’

Beside him, his colleague hissed: ‘Don’t! He hasn’t paid for private lessons! Just tell him to clear off. Say we don’t take spastics!’

‘You heard the man,’ Kasper replied coolly, ‘he has come to take karate lessons. So we give him karate lessons.’ And addressing Jip again: ‘Are you coming with me, Jip?’

Jip looked wildly about, his head shaking in perplexity. The hand with the note trembled back to his side. ‘I’ve come to take karate lessons,’ he repeated helplessly.

‘Yes, honey,’ said Kasper. ‘And I’m your new instructor. Let’s go.’

When Jip showed no intention of moving, except to make a staggering lunge for Kasper’s colleague, who, despite having a third Dan in karate, shot like a startled deer behind Kasper’s back, Kasper explained: ‘We’re going somewhere else, love. Come on.’ Gently he took Jip by the hand and towed him away, leading him to the room where half an hour earlier the karate kids had

been practising their first hook kicks and fallen about laughing when one of them had tumbled over backwards and made it an about-turn.

Concerned about Jip's panting and gasping, Kasper decided to put first things first and start with some relaxation exercises, telling Jip to stretch out on the mat and breathe deeply. The head-shaking continued, only interrupted at intervals by a frenzied nodding as Jip's head bobbed up and down like a floored punch ball on the rebound. Nor did the nasal noises die down, going from a snort to a snuffle to a snigger and back again.

'Who are you?' Jip asked when Kasper had laid a hand on his stomach and told him to aim his breath there.

'I'm Kasper. I'm your karate instructor. Inhale slowly. Try to push my hand up.'

'Why am I here?'

'This is a karate school. You're here for lessons. Breathe towards my hand.'

'Why do you call yourself Kasper?'

'It's my name.'

Jip contemplated this for a while. Then he remarked: 'Kasper is a boy's name.'

Richard Frost

'I *am* a boy.'

'You look like a girl.'

'I know, love, but I am a boy.' Sitting up, Kasper pushed the lapels of his jacket aside and said: 'See? No breasts.'

'No breasts,' echoed Jip.

'That's right.' Kasper closed his jacket and laid his hand on Jip's stomach again. 'Let's concentrate on the breathing now, shall we? Try to imagine . . .'

'Do you have a dick?' Jip cut him short.

'What? Yes – yes, I have.'

Jip leered curiously at Kasper's trousers, for once sniggering at the right moment. Kasper, who by now had come to the conclusion that first things had better be done in the second place, sat back. Quietly he regarded Jip's angular, awkward body and the electricity that seemed to jolt and shiver through it. Maybe he should just let him lie for a bit, though he doubted if the tics would lessen.

Still ogling Kasper's crotch, Jip inquired:

'Are you a transport?'

'I think you mean something else,' said Kasper.

His words were met by a panicky silence. Screwing up his eyes, Jip tried in a quavering voice: 'A man who dresses as a woman . . . Does it start with a t?'

'Very good. Actually, you had the whole beginning right. It starts with "trans".'

Jip's mouth twitched and his body grew even more restless, the struggle to remember now tugging at his whole system. After a few seconds the spasms subsided. Triumphantly Jip said: 'Transvespите.'

'Well done. Transvestite.'

'Are you a transvestite?' – asked in a tone as if the question was completely new.

'No,' said Kasper. 'I just wear what suits me best.'

'You look like a girl,' maintained Jip.

'Yes. But I am a boy.'

'Shall we fuck?'

'Sorry?'

'Do you want to fuck?'

'No, honey,' Kasper declined. 'I'm sorry.'

It was unclear whether Jip had heard the answer. He seemed to have lapsed into thought, although his gaze stayed fixed on Kasper's crotch, maybe because he expected, after Kasper showing him his bare chest, to see hard evidence here too. Then he asked:

Richard Frost

'Who are you?'

'I'm Kasper. I'm your instructor.'

'Why am I here?'

'You're here for karate lessons.'

'Why are you called Kasper?'

This conversation, with all its possible variants, would keep repeating itself, and be repeated over and over again in the six sessions it took Kasper to realise that all he could do for Jip was listen and talk to him and, in the spare moments of concentration he could muster, teach him a few stretching positions.

After class Jip refused to change and just as firmly refused to leave the changing-room while Kasper took a shower, greeting Kasper's naked body with a snuffle-snort-snigger sequence and a shaking of the head that, contrary to his apparent delight, appeared to wish the image away.

When the two of them came to the exit of the dojo, a middle-aged woman stood waiting for Jip. Having embraced him as if she was relieved to have him back in one piece again, she asked: 'How did it go?'

'We did some relaxation exercises,' said Kasper when Jip remained silent. The woman tilted her chin in surprise, then repeated the question. This time Kasper

decided not to beat about the bush, answering: 'Jip wasn't sure where he was.'

'Yes, er . . .' The woman blushed. 'He, er, he suffers from a brain injury. He's had an accident.'

'I see,' said Kasper. 'Maybe you should put that on a note.' Aware of how critical he sounded, he added: 'It would help people to understand him.'

The woman nodded slightly. 'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'I should've said, I know. I just was afraid they wouldn't take him on. Can he come back next Saturday?'

She glanced at Jip, probably thinking that by directing attention to him she could command Kasper's clemency. Jip seemed calmer than he'd been before, standing almost still beside her, although he started fumbling the sleeve of her coat when he saw he was being watched.

'Sure,' said Kasper, 'but you'll have to bring him, say, half an hour later.'

'Thank you. My name's Suzanne, by the way. I'm Jip's mother.'

'Kasper.'

'Huh?' With a startled grimace she looked him up and down, taking in the fine, feminine face, the long, blonde locks of hair, the elegant wrap-over blouse –

Richard Frost

frowning openly at the tight mini he'd put on after the dreariness of two hours of baggy trousers. Then she corrected herself, either out of politeness or for fear of blowing Jip's chances of karate lessons. Straightening her shoulders, she said: 'Very nice to meet you. And you will be Jip's trainer?'

'Yes,' said Kasper. 'For the time being it'll be on a one-to-one basis. I think it's best if he has a few private lessons first.'

'That's very thoughtful of you.' Her tone was amiable enough, but her face still looked worried. From Kasper, her eyes veered to Jip. No doubt she was asking herself if the oddity in front of her was the right person for her son to hook up with.

'Could you bring a towel next time?' Kasper said to Jip, pretending he didn't see the hesitation. 'We need it to make a head support.'

'I'll put one in his bag,' answered Suzanne for him. Then she told Jip, who had let go of her sleeve and was fingering something in his pockets: 'Come on, we have to go.'

And, for some reason, Kasper was unwilling to let her. He wanted to know more, about Jip, and why on earth this woman had signed him up for karate lessons

he obviously wasn't cut out for. In an attempt to prolong the conversation, he asked:

'Have you got a car?'

'Yes. We live quite close, but it's more . . . convenient this way.' She put an arm round Jip's shoulders, preparing to steer him away.

Upon which Jip suddenly jerked out of his mental pause, winced at Kasper and confided:

'I still can't cycle, y'see.'

He still couldn't cycle. But his bike had been repaired long ago. Six months, to be precise.

After that first encounter Jip's mother unbent a little, growing more at ease with Kasper and even beginning to enjoy her chats with him after class had finished. From her, and later the social worker, Kasper learned about the nature of the accident Jip had had. He also heard that Jip had almost finished, or rather failed, rehabilitation and had to find new ways of improving himself. It was the social worker who had enrolled Jip for karate, to give him a break from all the intellectual training, and because she thought it might do him good after what had happened to him. Seeing the point,

Richard Frost

Kasper kept his doubts to himself, promising to do his best to make Jip a model of self-defence.

He didn't get very far. Having first surmounted the difficulty of making Jip see the purpose of his visits to the dojo, he was faced with the vain struggle of getting him to fight. In the course of time, he did manage to work him up to the level of basic punches and blocking techniques, but he never could persuade him to put them into practice. Jip's main problem was his lack of confidence: even when he did remember a certain stance, he didn't dare apply it for fear he'd got it wrong. Moreover, he was too scared of being attacked to defend himself. The first time Kasper moved in on him he freaked out, not understanding why the gentle she-male he'd always felt so safe with was suddenly out to brain him. After that Kasper decided to concentrate solely of katas, set combinations of techniques, although Jip would only do them if Kasper did them first. The rest of the hour was spent talking, which seemed to fortify Jip more than the fighting he found so frightening.

During those conversations, Kasper increasingly got the feeling that, although severely handicapped, Jip had more potential than either Suzanne or his social

worker credited him with. Suzanne in particular, with her protective attitude and her tendency to take over when she thought he couldn't manage himself, did him more harm than good. From a young man about to launch into adult life, after the assault he'd been relegated to the role of mummy's boy. Kasper asked the social worker about sheltered housing, but she told him that, because of his mood-swings, Jip wasn't a suitable candidate and couldn't apply. Kasper kept pondering the matter, believing there must be some way for Jip to become more independent. And when, six months after they'd first met, one of the rooms in the house where he lodged became vacant, he offered it to Jip.

Jip was elated at the idea; Suzanne was full of misgivings, telling Kasper he didn't know what he was letting himself in for. Also, she objected to Jip going to live so close to the spot that had been the source of his troubles. A talk with the psychotherapist Jip had started seeing finally brought her round. According to the therapist, if Jip was at all aware of what was wrong with him, which seemed disputable, he didn't know what had caused it and was unlikely to regain his memory on that point. The location was unfortunate for Suzanne rather than for himself, and maybe it was

time she faced up to things. The urinal wasn't the source of his troubles: it was the offender who had done it, and that couldn't be undone. Moreover, it was unlikely to happen again, as regular police controls had been implemented after the assault. Thus Suzanne gave in, although she did beg Kasper never to let Jip go near the urinal, which Kasper solved by telling Jip that if he ever had to piss while in the park, he should go home and do it there.

Together Suzanne and Kasper prepared the move, doing everything they could to make the transition as smooth as possible. They painted Jip's room, applying the colour codes for different pieces of furniture he was familiar with, hung up the memory board he used to keep track of the week, and made agreements about how his day should be organised. When everything was ready, Jip brought over his few possessions and moved in. At first he reacted badly to the new situation, sitting waiting every morning in the kitchen for his mother to come and serve him breakfast, and flying into a fit when she didn't turn up; but when Kasper explained to him that he had to work out his own routine from now on, he calmed down and began taking care of himself,

although regular assistance from Kasper remained necessary.

Contrary to Suzanne, who had found Jip so difficult to deal with, Kasper could cope. Admittedly, he was shocked when he found that Jip didn't even know how to use a knife. He phoned the social worker and insisted she call in an ergotherapist, preferably the same one who'd taught him to dress and brush his teeth again. The therapist in question wasn't available, but another one was hired, who developed a rigorous programme of Daily Activity Skills, which Jip, contrary to expectations, followed brilliantly. Suzanne saw to most of the intellectual training, coming over twice a week to do sums with Jip, teach him how to use money, or go through the post with him. Now that she had some breathing space, she was more tolerant with him and had the patience to let him work things out for himself.

As for Kasper, he was never confronted with the crisis Suzanne had predicted. The main difference between him and Suzanne was that he didn't regard Jip as a burden he had to carry, but rather as someone who regularly needed a push to get moving again. Whereas Suzanne focused on the capacities that were lost,

Kasper took a forward look, stressing what Jip *could* do, and accepting his limitations – or being strict with him if he thought Jip didn't give things enough of a try. Likewise, he didn't let Jip rule his life, but continued to devote most of his time to himself. He still hadn't finished his studies in social psychology, was active as a pop guitarist and had a large, busy circle of friends. The only concession he made was leaving word with Jip when he went out, writing down on the memory board where he was off to and what time he'd be back. Last but not least, Kasper had far less trouble with Jip's moods. He was not at all impressed when Jip threw a tantrum over a shoe he was wearing but couldn't find, nudging him nonchalantly and saying: 'Hey Jip, what are you having for supper this evening?' or something of equal insignificance. It was as simple as that, so simple Suzanne had never tried it.

In the months following the move, Jip shot forward like a cripple on speed. The more he got into his stride, however, the graver the side-effects which emerged. Now that he was making such mental progress, he became more conscious of the condition he was in and, paradoxically, of the severity of his impairments. His angry outbursts grew less turbulent and frequent, but

his periods of depression increased. As time went by, he grew ever more despondent, often just sitting in his room all day, too disheartened by his own failings to lift a finger, too scared of being taken for an idiot to go out. First Kasper thought the proximity to the urinal did bother him after all, but Jip didn't appear to remember, not moving a muscle when one day Kasper took him out for a walk and they passed it. However, Jip still didn't dare to go out on his own.

The same insecurity prohibited him from engaging into social contacts – even if people had been willing to be friends with someone who might laugh his head off if you told him your aunt had died, because his brain had got its wires crossed when attaching expression to emotion. Apart from Kasper, his family and his therapists, Jip saw no one; the only other creature to comfort him was his little tabby, which Kasper had given him for his eighteenth birthday. His loneliness was intensified by the idle life he led, not having anything worthwhile to do apart from pushing the limits of his potential further. But the days of leaps and bounds were over, and the pace of his progress slackened to a shuffle, after a year grinding to a halt.

Worried about the desolate state he was getting into, the social worker tried to get him a place at an activity centre for the mentally handicapped, without any luck. He applied for voluntary work, but the jobs he was offered were either too simple and therefore boring, or too complicated. Jip often finished step four without being able to recall if and how he'd done step three. At last, when in the second year Kasper went on a traineeship to England, it was decided that Jip would go to his brother in Australia, who, hearing of Jip's problem in finding work, had phoned and said he could do with some help on the farm.

Jip's stay in New South Wales, and especially the flight there and back – which he completed alone – was a success, and it was prolonged when, after a few months, Kasper came back from England and Jip wrote to him to say he didn't want to come home yet. Jip's brother did phone a couple of times to ask how to handle this or that, but he and his wife quite enjoyed having Jip over. They didn't even mind when, having been asked to weed the garden, he had pulled all the plants out to make sure all possible forms of unwanted growth were removed.

Brain and Body

Back home, Jip once more fell into a depression, the vacant life he'd left behind before going to Australia proving just as vacant after his return. It was when he began sending postcards to himself that Kasper decided it was time they looked for a hobby.