



RICHARD FROST

**BRAIN
AND BODY**

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Kasper and Titus are off to London and to be honest, I don't feel too great, all alone in the house (well, not all alone, but with that leather lot on the ground floor I've never got any further than a curt 'hi' when I fail to avoid them at the front door). Ever since I've been working on Jip's story, it seems as if angry young men might come barging into my room at any moment, through the roof if necessary, to come and get me. It's three a.m. already and I haven't had a wink of sleep yet. Each time I close my eyes, some suspicious sound or thought makes me open them again. How I'll manage school tomorrow, I don't know. My classic teacher has promised me an hour of jumps, and jumps still aren't my strongest point. If I possibly can, I skip them. It has something to do with leaving the ground . . . I don't know; I just don't like to let go.

After my fifth check of the locks, I decided to quit my attempts at sweet dreams and have another look at Jip's diary. There's still so many details that need filling in. Yesterday I phone Rose, Jip's sister, and asked if she could help me out, but she sounded a bit reluctant. She's so shy, that girl. She comes here regularly (she's friends with Titus) but whenever we bump into each

other she either makes a dash for Titus's room or gives me a flustered, wide-eyed look. The only time I really spoke to her was at the party after the annual school performance last summer, when Titus, proud to be acquainted with some of the 'rising stars' he'd seen on the stage, guided her up to me. Blushing profusely, she said she'd never seen someone dance so impressively (that was the word she used; as you may gather, I hadn't had to do any jumps that evening). Titus whispered behind the back of his hand: 'She thinks it's such a shame you're gay.' And so do you, I thought, remembering the last time Kasper had complimented me on my looks and Titus had gone into a sulk for the rest of the evening.

Kasper wasn't right about Jip being beautiful, by the way, though he no doubt meant it when he said it. Kasper is an ace when it comes to looking on the bright side, which sometimes, I'm afraid, leads to distorted perceptions. He thinks Titus is beautiful too. Well, I'm sorry, but Titus isn't. In fact, he's one of the least attractive people I've ever met. Sure, he has a nice smile (but who hasn't? Seeing people smile is nice) and can be witty at times, but he's not someone you'd want to fall in love with and then find that it was mutual. I still

can't understand that Kasper enjoys cuddling him: it can't be pleasant to see that hook-nose from up close. Yes, yes, I know, I'm jealous again. But hate doesn't make you blind, does it? It just gives you a sharper view of people.

Only now it strikes me how much Jip relied on Kasper for his memory. I do think Kasper always tried to be objective where people were concerned, but still, some of his more personal opinions must have filtered through. More than that, Menno was only right about Jip having no memory insofar as most of Jip's memory was not his own, but had been constructed by those who took care of him. In one of my interviews with her, Suzanne told me how much of Jip's memory had been erased by the blows to the head he had suffered. Rose wasn't the only one he didn't recognise after the assault: his school chums had become strangers as well. Worst of all was that part of himself had been wiped out. When he'd just come out of the coma, he thought he was twelve, not seventeen. He didn't remember he was a smoker (though he rapidly took it up again), and passing a church when they'd gone for a walk one Sunday afternoon, he asked his parents whether he was religious or not. Bit by bit, he had to reassemble his lost

identity, banking on others handing him the right elements.

His capacity to store the old news as new knowledge was severely limited, however. Suzanne had to go over it again and again, often getting no further than telling him about the assault ('the accident', as she kept calling it) and the current need to learn things afresh to which it had led. In the end she wrote him a short biography so that he could look things up himself. Often Jip would sit staring at the facts of his life, wondering why all those names and dates seemed so meaningless to him. He actually had to study himself, what sort of person he was, where he'd come from, and where he stood. It must have been alienating, having no clear idea of who you are. I can see in his diary how frustrated he feels, getting furious when he can't make sense of himself, the realisation which blocks him time and again. Whereas the rest of us can feel locked up in our past and sometimes wish we could escape from the present it has shaped, Jip was constantly arrested by the lack of a well-known, well-defined self.

The more I learn about him, the more I think this was his biggest problem, the inability to build up experience. As Suzanne said, he could pick things up, but it

took endless repetition and aeons of time. As long as a situation lasted things were all right, the here and now embedded in and explained by what immediately preceded it. But gaps of more than ten minutes his malfunctioning memory couldn't bridge. It prevented him from perceiving any continuity besides that offered by continuous time itself. Likewise, if he had learned something, he couldn't transfer it to a different context. If he wanted to make tea, he went to the kitchen, which by definition meant *his* kitchen. He couldn't make tea in Kasper's kitchen, unable as he was to apply the original skill taught to him by his ergotherapist at a more general level. The same went for events. If they didn't form part of the routine they were merely incidents to him, snapshots, which in his mind were not connected and in most cases didn't endure. To put it another way: there was no flow. Imagine seeing your days in a strobe light with a low frequency, and you'll get the idea.

Jip's poor capacity to make his own film and his tendency to take things literally had the most awkward consequences. For one, he couldn't trust what little memory he did have, and it was often unclear whether he'd made something up or it had really happened. Watching *The Terminator* on video one day, he told

Kasper: 'I know that guy. His name's Arnold. He's my friend.' When Kasper expressed doubts about this, Jip flew into a fit, yelling that he did know Arnold, that they'd been friends for ages and were very close. If Kasper really wanted to know, Arnold had fucked him. At first Kasper thought he'd confused names with personalities and was referring to his cat (though the fucking appeared a bit unlikely in that case), but Jip denied this, and maintained that the Arnold he was talking about was the man on TV. He absolutely insisted on his hot thing with Arnold, screeching ever louder and more hysterical 'fuck!'s. The scene ended in him bursting out crying, as the fragile truth all at once shattered in his consciousness. For Jip wasn't stupid. He knew. He was aware of his own shortcomings, which made admitting them so unbearable to him. Ten to one he'd raged on like that to shout down his own rising uncertainty about whether he was lying or not.

Just as he sometimes thought he was friends with fictitious characters, he could hardly develop relationships with real people if they weren't part of his everyday circle. Axl's visits were first meetings over and again. It suited Axl, it was what he wanted, no matter how tedious getting through the same introductory ten

minutes was. Ironically enough, the very anonymity Axl craved so much inhibited Jip from getting acquainted with him: he was and remained a stranger. It took Axl weeks to persuade Jip to open the door for him. Kasper had implemented the rule of answering the door for Jip six months earlier, when Jip had accidentally let a thief in. Knowing he often didn't remember people, he took them at their word, and when one day a boy had stood on the doorstep saying he'd come to collect some stuff, Jip simply thought he'd once again forgotten a face and let the boy come up. It had cost Kasper his acoustic guitar – a genuine Gibson – and the two amplifiers that his band stored at his place.

Axl kept pondering on a way around the problem: he didn't want to have to approach Jip every time through Kasper and his critical eye. To his pleasant surprise, it was Jip himself who handed him the solution.

* * *

A gust of wind breathing down his neck, Axl put up his collar. Standing out here in the cold wasn't good for his muscles. Eric would cry with horror if he saw him like this. Eric himself always wore a fleece sweater and kept

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the temperature in his flat tropical, having read in one of the mags that you made less growth hormone in cool surroundings. Not that Eric could grow much more. He'd been complaining for weeks now about the skin of his chest hurting, and when yesterday Axl had taken a look he'd seen fiery stretch marks, fanning out from the armpits to the pecs like ostrich feet. For a moment Axl had considered postponing his third series of cocktails, afraid he too would burst out of his skin. He knew he was losing weight again, however, and had told Peter to bring him the stuff next week. He'd put on some baby oil; pregnant women did that as well.

He stamped his feet for a bit, then checked his watch. Ten past seven. He peered at the house to see if there was anything moving behind the curtains of the first floor. He'd only been here for a quarter of an hour and still wasn't sure if Kasper had really left or not. Detecting no walking shadows, his eyes travelled to the window a few metres higher. It was dark, always was. Nobody was living there, or the person who did was on a long, late holiday.

After two weeks of first afternoon and then also early evening posting, Axl had a fairly clear picture of the movements of the people in the house where Jip lived.

He'd found out that the leather boys on the ground floor lazed about on workdays, went wild at weekends, and didn't have much contact with the other residents. Kasper had loads of female friends, a somewhat erratic lifestyle, and shared rooms with someone ten years younger (at first Axl took him to be the boyfriend, but on the third day, around six, a well-built guy on a motorbike had arrived, who not only had a key but also, when he left, stood snogging for half an hour with Kasper out on the street – to Axl's deep disapproval). The only regularity in Kasper's days and nights that Axl had been able to make out was that on Wednesdays he wasn't in and that he practised the electric guitar every afternoon between four and six, causing serious noise pollution because he always played with the window open. Kasper's companion was out most of the day, at school, judging by the bag of books he always took with him. Also, twice a week he and Kasper went to band rehearsal, packing all kinds of equipment and stuff into Kasper's car and not coming back before ten, the time Axl quit his lookout.

As for Jip, Axl was pretty certain by now that he did everything according to a fixed pattern. He went to get tobacco for his roll-ups on Mondays, had therapy on

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Tuesdays and Thursdays, and was collected and brought home again on Saturday mornings by his mother. On the evenings Kasper and his companion had band rehearsal, Jip went out at precisely seven p.m. to go to the snack bar further up the road for some fast food. He always ate his meal at the snack bar and came back home about fifteen minutes later. This was the moment Axl had decided was suitable to try and get his foot in the door.

He checked his watch again. Then he heard a shuffling sound and looked up. Jip was coming down the street, on the dot as ever. Seeing his vibrating head (it was 'no' at the moment), Axl asked himself if this, this man, was what he really wanted. Jip wasn't what you'd call handsome. Even if you ignored all the tics and the moronic talk, there was still his body, which couldn't have been more of a beanpole if it had been a real one. In particular, Axl wasn't too crazy about his scrawny shoulders. They reminded him of an IKEA hat-stand or something. And suddenly he knew the answer to his own question, which was not to let it enter his mind. Slowly he loosened himself from the wall he'd been leaning against and crossed the street.

'Hi,' he said when he was within earshot. 'It's me. Axl.'

Jip halted, one step from the front door. Giving a repetitious nod, he frowned, and his right hand made a clutching, trembling movement. He obviously didn't have a clue who Axl was.

'You know me,' clarified Axl. 'I'm from the gym. I've been here before.'

'Yeah, right,' Jip said in a tone as if to say, pull the other one.

'I know Kasper. He let me in last time.'

This appeared to make some sort of impression: the nodding and trembling eased considerably.

'Are you a friend of Kasper?' asked Jip.

'In a way, yes. I'm from the gym. Kasper does aerobics there.'

'Yeah, that's true.' Jip sounded a bit less wary, and his upper body started swaying to and fro as if he was considering welcoming Axl with a warm embrace. Then he asked: 'What gym?'

'Where we – you and I, I mean – work out together. Remember the concentration curl?' Axl made a vague sweep with his arm. Aware of what he was doing, he let

his arm drop again. He felt like a bloody idiot. Jip was the fool, not him.

‘Nah,’ Jip answered. His head was outlining figure of eights now, seemingly full of hesitation as to whether it was going to be yes or no. Raising his forefinger, he said: ‘Hang on a sec. I’ll check the memory board. Kasper always writes down if someone is expected today. Or tomorrow. The whole week. He writes it down for me.’

Before Axl had time to stop him (not that he would have; he didn’t want to arouse any suspicion), Jip had unlocked the front door and gone in. Cautiously he shut it behind him. Even his footsteps had their own rhythm: Axl heard them tap-scrape-tap up the stairs. After a few seconds they died away and the house went silent.

For a while Axl stared expectantly at the varnished wood of the door, then he switched to studying the name tags that had been fastened with Sellotape alongside the bells. Kasper’s companion was called Titus, he saw. The names of the leather boys were Rick, Dick and Willy. They must have been joking, he thought. Or they’d purposely tried to create the wrong impression. Rick, Dick and Willy: your guarantee for an evening of

fun. We'll see to the whips and masks. Tired of his doorbell review, he looked at his watch. What the fuck was keeping him?

It took him ten minutes to conclude that Jip wasn't going to come back down. Either he'd decided to keep the door closed because there was no one called Axl on the memory board, or he'd simply forgotten about the whole thing. Axl exhaled wearily. This was going to take even more patience than he'd thought. Somehow he had expected he'd convince Jip of his good intentions; he'd only taken care to choose the right moment to approach him. But now it seemed that a different strategy was required. Having rung Jip's bell – no answer, like all those other times he'd tried the easy way – he gave up, resolving to come back on Friday evening, when Kasper and Titus would be out again.

Again was a key word in his contact with Jip, because two days later they went through exactly the same ritual, Jip again saying 'yeah, right' when Axl told him that he was from the gym, again asking what the gym was (they'd been working out together only a couple of hours before, for fuck's sake) and again telling Axl he'd have to check the memory board to see if anyone was expected.

This time Axl was better prepared, though.

'It won't be on the memory board,' he said. 'I came unannounced. It's a, er, surprise visit. I wanted to see how you were.'

'What's the surprise?' asked Jip, glancing at Axl's hands as though he expected some present to materialise.

'That I'm here. To see you. Look you up.'

Jip gave this some deep thought. Then he agreed:

'Yeah, that's a surprise. Nobody comes to visit me. Only Rose, my sister. The rest is on the memory board.'

Now they were getting somewhere. Amicably Axl smiled. His face fell again when Jip continued:

'But I can't let you in.'

'What? But you know me. I know about the memory board, don't I?'

'That's true. Wait a minute . . .' Jip screwed up his eyes and shook his head. In the course of the conversation, he had assumed an air as if they were trapped in some mystery together, which could only be solved by close and careful consideration.

'And Kasper knows who I am,' Axl added, trying to play along. 'He let me in last time.'

‘Hm.’ His hand on his chin – both of them quivering, but the rest of him more or less steady – Jip reflected on the new piece of information for what seemed like forever. Then he looked up and said: ‘I have an idea.’ He opened his jeans jacket and took out a mobile phone. Grinning, he held it up to Axl (there was a real surprise after all) and with deliberation, as if his life depended on it, pressed one of the memory buttons.

The surprise couldn’t have been more unpleasant for Axl, who understood all too well what Jip was doing. Oh fucking Jesus, he thought, if he tells Kasper I’m here, I can pack it in. Still, he forced himself to stay calm, setting his face in the detached expression with which he always eyed the men in the gym. He’d only interrupt and take over if it went wrong. He could always say Jip had forgotten something at the gym that morning. His brain, for instance.

‘Hi, it’s me,’ said Jip. ‘I want to ask you something. Do I know Axl?’

...

‘What gym?’

...

‘Axl is from the gym. I see. What weights?’

...

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'Yeah, the gym. Yeah, I remember.'

...

'He works out with me.'

...

Jip chuckled, apparently very pleased with himself. 'Cheers,' he said. And after a short pause: 'Yeah, I love you too.' He switched off the phone and put it back into his pocket. 'It's okay,' he told Axl. 'I know you. You're from the gym. Kasper is proud of me for remembering.'

'How, how . . . good of you,' Axl replied when he'd recovered somewhat from the narrow escape he'd just had. That was it, it flashed through him as Jip let him in. He had to phone. And not forget about the memory board.

From then on, things went much smoother. Axl would wait until Kasper and Titus were out (Titus seemed too close to Kasper to risk him being around), go over to the phone booth opposite the house, dial Jip's number and say: 'It's me, Axl. You know me. I'm from the gym. You know, where you do weights?' Here he'd pause, giving Jip time to let the message sink in and start wondering what the gym was, after which he'd carry on: 'Look at your memory board under Friday.' At this

point he'd grant a second pause for Jip to do as he was told and see written on the memory board: *'To gym, do weights with Axl'*. The first time Axl had made his way in, he'd suggested Jip add those last two words to the original message, explaining how delighted Kasper would be to see that Jip did indeed remember who Axl was and had even put it on the memory board himself. Next, having heard Jip's 'Yeah, it's on the memory board', he'd tell him the story about the surprise visit, ending with: 'I'm going to come over now. Open the door, will you?' And he'd be in.

Axl wasn't lying about his visits being of the surprise kind, because he always chose, as far as Kasper's haphazard schedule allowed, a different time for coming over. He had thought about this and concluded that if he wanted to avoid all possible chance of discovery, he shouldn't establish one of the patterns Jip appeared to be able to master. After a few weeks he relaxed about the matter, finding that in this area too Jip's talents were reassuringly small: even the trips to the snack bar were planned and jotted down for him by Kasper. Still, Axl made sure he appeared and reappeared as randomly as possible.

There was only one obstacle left and that was Jip himself. Contrary to what Kasper had more or less said would happen, Jip didn't ask if Axl wanted to fuck. Offering to make Axl a cup of tea was about as far as his advances went. As a rule he just sat with his cat in his lap, stroking it silently, waiting for Axl to say something or ask him a question. Axl did say things and ask questions, but *the* question he couldn't bring himself to pop. It was what he needed to hear, not say. Actually, all he wanted to say was yes. Getting desperate at Jip's lack of initiative, one day he proposed that Jip come and sit down beside him on the bed, so as to pass the ball for him to try and score, but Jip didn't reply, his only reaction a spasm or two. It was almost too little for Axl to bear. He wanted Jip to want him so badly, he nearly felt in love with him.

The strenuous foreplay did have one advantage: Axl learned how to communicate with Jip. He spoke in ever shorter sentences, got used to silences and the feeling of déjà-vu. He'd been somewhat apprehensive about the whole affair in the beginning, afraid Jip might have one of his outbursts again. Once at the gym, when he had reprimanded Jip for not remembering an exercise, Jip had nearly smashed a mirror with the dumbbell

he'd been holding and, when Axl had prevented this, threatened to bash Axl's brains in with it. Axl wasn't afraid of Jip – he knew he could handle him – but he didn't want traces in the form of damage done to things in the room. So he waited. And got to know Jip.

Soon he discovered that the best way to make Jip do what you wanted was to order him about in a friendly, cheerful tone. Applying this method, after three weeks he finally got Jip to kiss him.

Shyly Jip beamed at him as their lips parted. He looked scared but happy. Axl didn't want to see it. And he kissed Jip back, feeling so sorry for him, feeling so sorry.

* * *

That journalist I mentioned has rung me up, and she's decided to withdraw her article. I'm allowed full use of her material – the interviews with Axl – but she made me swear not to mention her name.

'So you're an anonymous source now,' I said.

'You've never even spoken to me. I'm still not sure what the outcome of the trial will be, and I don't want the law on my back for libel.'

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Neither do I, I thought. When I asked her what exactly she was referring to, however, she refused to tell me, saying it wasn't her responsibility any more.

Fearing it was all even worse than I suspected, I went through her notes last night. And you know what: it was as bad as I thought it would be, not worse.

I'm telling you: she's scared. Just like me.

* * *

Jip knew Axl. Only he'd forgotten him again after he'd left. Axl had kissed him. Jip had known that. He'd known he'd been wanting to for a long time. Jip had felt happy but scared. Very scared. And when Axl was back and said Jip could touch him now, Jip didn't dare. Jip remembered him from last time. He thought. And he didn't dare.

Then Jip forgot about Axl again and Axl said, you know me, I'm from the gym. Jip knew that. They worked out together. Mostly it was just him working out and Axl sitting beside him. Axl seemed bored. Jip worked a little harder, not wanting Axl to get too bored to sit beside him. He liked looking at Axl, but he couldn't do that now, because he was doing the

concentration curl and you had to concentrate on the curl. Jip knew that. He concentrated very hard.

Axl was back again and they had kissed. Axl said Jip could touch him. He unbuttoned his shirt. Jip still didn't dare. Come on, said Axl, you weren't so shy last time. Have you been here before? asked Jip. Axl let go of Jip's hand. No, he said, this is the first time, it's a surprise visit. Yeah, said Jip. He wasn't that fond of surprises. They always made him nervous. He couldn't be sure of what was going to happen next. Or they'd mess up what he'd known would happen. Now Axl said, go on, touch me. He added: please. That was a surprise. Jip hadn't thought Axl would want him to. He shook his head.

Axl's chest was soft and hard. The skin was soft but the chest itself was hard. Your skin is soft, whispered Jip. Baby oil, said Axl. This made Jip giggle a bit. Axl smiled back. He was pleased, Jip could see that. Maybe Jip could try another joke and make Axl smile again. Normally he didn't dare make jokes, but this one had gone okay. And it had only been . . . No, he hadn't said it. He hadn't dared. But he had thought . . .

It was gone. Axl's upper body was naked now and his trousers were undone. Jip let his fingers pass over the

six-pack, wondering why it was called a six-pack. It looked like a six-frown. He wasn't sure if this was funny so he didn't tell Axl. It might not be funny at all. Axl was very serious about his body. Jip knew that.

Axl said put out the light. He didn't want Arnold to see. Jip picked Arnold up and took him to the kitchen but when he came back Axl said, no put out the light, I don't want Arnold to see. He nodded at the wall. Jip almost giggled again. Axl meant Arnold. He meant his eyes. That was stupid. They were only pictures. But Jip understood Axl was shy and he put out the light. It was dark now. Jip might have been asleep.

He thought he was dreaming. And when Axl pushed him down, it almost seemed too easy. Like in a dream. He opened his mouth and did what Axl wanted him to. Axl was so big. He was hard. So was Jip. He almost couldn't bear it. He started sucking, first a bit nervously, but then the dreamy feeling spread through his whole body and his head grew still and he could do it, do what Axl wanted, and he himself wanted it too but still he felt scared, not knowing why but knowing he knew, somewhere, somehow he knew, and he sucked harder not wanting to know, not now at least, maybe later, next time, and then it was gone again and

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Axl came, too soon, and Jip came too, too soon, before Axl could touch him too.

It was Jip's first time. Not his first first time, but as far as Jip knew, he lost his virginity that evening. In the months that followed, he would lose it again and again.

Good news. Kasper and Titus are back, but Titus is going away again. Next week Ajax will be playing Feijenoord and, fervent football fans that they are, Titus and Jan got themselves tickets. And here's the best bit: they won't be coming back after the match but staying at an hotel in Amsterdam. Both bosom- and boyfriend away, I'll have Kasper entirely to myself. For a whole night! I keep musing on how we're going to spend that night together, or rather how I'm going to get Kasper to spend the night with me. An outright: 'I want to go to bed with you' probably wouldn't go down well. There are plenty of other options, though. Maybe I won't be able to sleep (can I ever?) and need someone to rock me. I could fake a nightmare, or feign a fever (thermometer, hot-water bottle, you know the trick). Surely Kasper's mother-caring nature won't refuse me. A comforting kiss, a cool hand on my forehead . . . Just lying in his arms will do.

I still can't get over the fact that Axl thought Titus was Kasper's lover, by the way. Anyone can see they're not a match, or it would be 'the beauty and the beak'. Did Axl have shit in his eyes? As for the snogging bit, I must confess I made that up. Jan does have a motor-

bike and, sure, he and Kasper do kiss when they part, but Jan is not the type to do his kissing out on the street – he's far too private. I just wanted to give you an idea of Axl's feelings about us (well, I hadn't moved in yet, so strictly speaking it's not 'us'. Let's say: his envy of those lucky, liberated lads who are openly gay). I don't think I replaced fact by fantasy anywhere else; what you've read should be broadly true. Well, you just have to trust me on that, I guess.

Those visits of Axl's during which Kasper played the tea-lady amounted to only two. After that, insofar as Kasper knew, Axl didn't turn up any more. At the gym Axl kept himself hidden in the hothouse. Jip didn't mind, not remembering Axl had been there before and so not missing him when he stayed away. Anyway, Jip didn't need that much assistance, because most of his training programme he could do on his own by now. He'd look around him for a bit, see someone do a certain exercise and simply copy it. Even the loud house music, which in the beginning had provoked him to start dancing instead of working out, no longer distracted him, its monotony no doubt making Jip turn a deaf ear to it.

At first Jip seemed to stay at the same level, obediently sticking to the weights Menno had originally filled in on the training schedule, but after a while he stepped up his efforts, often thinking an exercise was proving so easy he must have taken the wrong dumbbell, and picking a heavier one. After a few months the fruits of his fitness labour began to ripen. Jip walked more upright and was in better control of his body, the major benefit being that when his muscles went into spastic contraction he automatically relaxed them again. What he himself didn't remember, his body did.

In fact Jip was doing so well that he and Kasper added another activity to his schedule. Gay swimming. Don't laugh, there's really such a thing as gay swimming. And no, it's not doing it doggy style or trying to displace water by flapping your hands about, it's simply swimming with other gay men. Like gay gardening isn't planting pink roses, but pruning and weeding in the company of other gays. And there are gay cooking courses, gay dancing classes, gay self-defence lessons (I'm going to take those – still scared), gay fishing clubs, gay sewing circles, gay stamp collectors' societies, gay football unions, a gay Olympic Association, gay gyms (if only Axl had known), Mr Gay

competitions, a gay Eurovision song contest, gay literature prizes, gay studies, gay book stores, gay cinemas and theatres, gay cafes, bars, clubs, restaurants and hotels, gay sex shops, gay clothing boutiques and beauty salons, gay hairdressers (not all hairdressers are gay), plumbers, jockeys, flautists and what have you. You can't call this a subculture any more, it's a culture. Come to think of it, maybe I'll enrol for those dancing classes too. It's probably ballroom, not my favourite style, but what the hell. I'd like to waltz around with a man for a change. That's what I hate so much about ballet, y'see: it's all so hetero. Most of the boys at school are gay, but do you think they'll let us dance with each other? Oh no. We're there for the girls and, as there aren't that many of us, we're often thrust whole bunches of ballerinas into our hands. But I'm going off at tangents.

Jip did the gay swimming with Henk, a friend of Kasper's, who was not only a nurse at a mental institution and knew how to deal with brain-damaged people, but who also looked strong and solid enough to scare off the others if it wasn't fun but making fun of Jip they were after. Unfortunately for Jip (or for Henk, it depends on your point of view), Henk looked so

strong and solid that Jip couldn't resist him. It became doggy-style after all: Henk swimming in front and Jip paddling in his wake as if on a leash. Big-hearted Henk didn't really mind, winking roguishly as Jip didn't take the plunge but stood panting at the sight of Henk in his swimming trunks, and shaking with laughter when Jip went red as a lobster. He even kissed Jip on the mouth when he dropped him off home again (which personally I shudder to think of. Being a butch type, Henk has a moustache that stretches from ear to ear. I kissed him once, on his birthday, only to greet or congratulate him on all subsequent occasions by firmly offering my hand. I don't know what it is with moustaches, I can't bring myself to appreciate them. It's like burying your face in a woman's bush. Sorry ladies, but I experienced that once too and didn't find it very pleasant.).

The outings with Henk appeared to do Jip good. He was less moody and walked about with a dreamy look in his eyes. Noticing the change in him, Kasper thought he'd fallen in love with Henk, no matter how unlikely falling in love with someone you don't remember half the time may seem. In reality, it was the sex with Axl that was making Jip glow so brightly. Axl had by now got as far as bed, and discovered the one thing about

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Jip that was truly beautiful: his cock. The first time Axl saw it, he couldn't believe his eyes. Who would have thought such a lanky-limbs had such a thick, glorious dick? Axl couldn't get enough of it. He'd spend hours stroking it, rubbing it, sucking it, after the first orgasm hardly having the patience for it to rise to power again. When he wasn't with Jip, he was kneading and licking him in his fantasy. Axl was doing it day and night. And the more Jip's cock was cherished, the more cock-a-hoop Jip became. He flourished, he blossomed, he was in bloom.

Before I go on, I would like to ask you a question: if you had been Kasper and you'd found out about Jip and Axl, would you have interfered? Never mind what happened before, forget about the past, just think of it as a sexual relationship between two people, one of whom had a closet complex and the other who didn't fully realise what was going on – but both of them enjoying it. Would you have done something about it? Was Axl sexually abusing Jip, do you think? Or just using him? Or was it maybe some warped way of two sad souls getting their bit of the action?

I'm asking this because Kasper says he would have put an end to it if he'd had the slightest suspicion of why Jip was being so cheerful. He didn't like Axl, didn't trust him, and never would have believed that Jip slept with him of his own free will. But I think that Jip did. Over and over again, he voluntarily and consciously had sex with a stranger. All he wasn't conscious of was the fact that his seducer wasn't really a stranger. Is that so bad? Jip liked it, didn't he? So why this feeling? It still doesn't seem right, does it?

The curious thing is that the same Kasper also claims he wouldn't have minded if it'd been Henk. For one, Henk had come out. He wouldn't have gone about so slyly, tricking Jip into surrender through his own weakness. Most important, according to Kasper, Henk wouldn't have forced Jip to keep silent about it. But neither did Axl. He only took cunning advantage of Jip's inability to understand the situation. Jip didn't have to be silent: to his knowledge, there was nothing to tell.

Besides, wasn't Axl's wish for anonymity understandable? The insecure little kid who'd become such a giant, finally feeling like one of the guys? Wasn't it understandable that he didn't want the other hothouse

hunks to know that it was really their bodies he lusted after and not just his own reaching physical perfection? What do you think the hothousers' opinion was on gays? I'm asking you, isn't it perfectly understandable that Axl wanted things to be kept secret?

Understandable maybe, but no, not right. You know why.

It was about a month after Jip had taken up his new hobby of swimming that Kasper found him a job. As a chef. How Kasper got it into his head that Jip would make a good cook, I can't imagine. He keeps saying he had a hunch right away that Jip would be just the person for the job, but somehow I find it hard to believe this. Someone who'd taken three weeks to learn how to make a cup of tea? Get out of here.

Anyhow, Kasper thought he knew better. A year before, a friend of his had opened a restaurant, and business was going so well she'd recently decided to hire some extra staff. Still not being out of debt, however, she couldn't pay the second chef she needed full wages. When she discussed the problem with Kasper one day, he suggested Jip. Anneke, the friend, had her doubts about the plan (she'd heard enough about Jip to

get the impression that he was, to say the least, a problem child), but seeing Kasper's hopeful face, she gave in, making an appointment for Jip and Kasper to come and see her at the restaurant the next day.

The job interview went badly. First Anneke and Kasper had to go through the motions of explaining to Jip where he was and what was expected of him. Then came a whole lot of nothing. There was nothing to be said: it was clear that Jip had no credentials whatsoever. The only accomplishment vaguely connected to cooking that he could claim was his completion of the Daily Activity Skills course, which had included such things as boiling an egg, but had also taught Jip 'How To Hoover The House'. In the end Anneke took him on at a small salary, more out of pity and loyalty to Kasper than any real enthusiasm on her part. If it didn't work out, she reasoned, she could always tell him to chop onions. She did give him a fair chance to convince her of his merits, though, and the first time he arrived at work she asked him to prepare a pot of boeuf bourguignon. Having given him the recipe and shown him where he could find the things he'd need, she left him to himself.

At first Jip was so nervous he couldn't even read the recipe for his trembling fingers. He phoned Kasper twice for moral support, which Kasper gave by saying that Jip was an excellent cook, for whom boeuf bourguignon was a piece of cake. Used to trusting Kasper's judgement, Jip set about the task, starting by carving the beef into thick slices. Then he saw from the picture opposite the recipe that the meat ought to be in the shape of dice. He reduced each slice to dice and looked again, smiling when he saw he'd got the basic appearance right. He proceeded by reading the next sentence, which said he should put salt and pepper on the beef. This he did. After which he moved on to the next sentence.

Step by step, he worked his way through the recipe, in his urge to do things right completing it perfectly. The only mistake he made was that when he was done, he went to have a roll-up at the kitchen door. Coming back in ten minutes later, he'd forgotten what it was he'd been doing. Not sure if whatever it was was finished, he started searching the kitchen, hoping to find some reminder, but to no avail. At last he made the random guess of opening a tin of peaches, mashing

them to a pulp and chucking them into the stockpot of stew that stood steaming on the stove.

When Anneke came to check the result, she was surprised to find how well it had turned out. Somehow the bourguignon tasted even better than usual. Her chubby face cocked to one side, she held up the wooden spoon she'd used for sampling and sniffed at it, trying to identify the tender, florid flavour she had detected on her tongue. With rising dread Jip stood watching her. By now he was sure he'd done something seriously wrong. 'I put some peaches in,' he clarified, unable to bear the tension any longer. 'Did you now?' said Anneke. And putting down the spoon: 'Brilliant idea. It's absolutely delicious.' Jip smiled with relief, freeing his arms from their nervous cramp and swinging them happily to and fro. Then he admitted: 'Actually, I'd forgotten a step. I just did the first thing that entered my mind.' 'Which are often the brightest ideas,' replied Anneke kindly. 'You follow your brainwaves, Jip. I have a feeling we're going to get along just fine, you and I.'

Which was exactly what happened, because as time went on Anneke appreciated Jip more and more. Besides being a good cook, he was nice to be with, and full of surprises. She even liked his odd body language,

always greeting him with a giggle: 'Hi, I'm Anneke. Nod if you don't remember me', and using as a starting signal for work: 'Shake and stir, sir.' In his turn, Jip liked Anneke. Once he boiled over because he couldn't find a skimmer he needed, but mostly the cooperation went swimmingly.

As far as the cooking was concerned, Jip's literal approach to it ensured a basic quality, and when he did get lost he always found a creative way back again. He even tried something different on purpose now and then, although he never did so without asking Anneke's permission first. Anneke never refused, fond as she was of his daring dishes. 'Cool cooking,' she called his style. She put a Chef's Fantasy on the menu, giving Jip a wide range of ingredients and free reign to play around with them. Sometimes the experiments ended up a mess, but Anneke didn't mind, simply telling the customers that regrettably they were out of Chef's Fantasy that day. In most instances he concocted the most fanciful food, however. What made Jip such an imaginative but impeccable chef was that, out of uncertainty whether he was pursuing the right course, he relied strictly on his smell and taste when it came to testing the end product. If something had a funny smell or didn't taste

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right, he wouldn't let it leave the kitchen, no matter how Anneke tried to persuade him that people ate whatever excuse for a meal you dished out.

Jip relished his hours at the restaurant. Anneke reminded him of Rose, his sister. Reassuringly plump, a bit reserved at first, but affectionate and humorous once the ice was broken. Instead of looking at him as if he was some kind of danger, she treated him with respect. He was so fond of her that he could get terribly upset when he realised that as soon as he left the restaurant he wouldn't remember her. Copying the example of Rose and her postcard, he asked Anneke for her picture to write on the back who she was, so that he could match her with the messages on the memory board. She gave him three photos taken from different angles and, as an extra mnemonic, threw in a few polaroids of the restaurant kitchen as well. At home Jip would often stand looking at his memory board, asking himself who the girl was he'd pinned up and why she seemed so important. Until one day the essence of Anneke hit him. Running down the stairs and waving Anneke's picture at Kasper, he cried: 'I know her!'

* * *

Axl wasn't pleased. He wasn't pleased at all. His legs planted wide apart, his arms folded across his chest, he surveyed the memory board. '*Swimming with Henk*,' he read. And: '*To restaurant, to cook*.' The last message was written under Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evening. Jesus. The whole fucking week was booked up. There'd be no time left like this.

'What's that all about?' he asked Jip, nodding at the cooking code. A picture of a gross, ugly girl hung beside it. Axl didn't like the look of her. People like that shouldn't have their pictures taken. It was bloody offensive, that. Seeing so much fat made him sick.

'Er . . .' Jip walked over to his desk and opened his big black organiser. He drew a quivering forefinger across the Monday page, until he arrived at the last line. 'I have a job,' he said in a voice full of dignity. Pointing at the girl, he added: 'Anneke is the maître d'. I know her.'

'What d'you mean: you know her?'

'I know who she is,' replied Jip, swelling even more. 'I remember.'

No, Axl wasn't pleased. He wasn't pleased at all.

* * *

Well, Kasper and I spent the night talking about Jip. After the usual argument, of course. As it happened, I had decided to be blunt after all. And it didn't go down well.

'What?' shrieked Kasper, sitting up straight in bed.

'I'm only asking,' I said. The definition of feeling stupid: standing naked with a prick like the tower of Pisa in front of your dream prince and being given the thumbs down. To explain the simile: my cock is crooked. Like me, actually. Neither of us have our heads screwed on straight.

'Yeah, sure,' Kasper grumbled, 'only asking. When Jan and Titus are away, you come to my room to play. You've got some nerve, you know that?'

I didn't, having lost what bravery I'd had, knowing I'd blown it. Even my cock gave up, slowly stooping, then drooping and cringing out of sight.

Kasper had got out of bed by now and was pacing up and down the room, his hands on his hips, as if he was a general trying to work out a strategy for the counter-attack. Then he became aware of his nudity and reached for his negligee. I love that negligee, a black

silk wrap-over dress with a print of gold bamboo on it. It makes him look even more lissom than he is. Fluid, almost.

Having girded up, he came to stand in front of me and said: 'This has got to pass, love. You . . . you're too intense.'

'I don't want it to pass. All I want is for you to return it.'

'You wouldn't want me to sleep with you if I didn't really mean it, would you? Because if you do . . . I mean, if you think it would help . . .'

He shouldn't have said that, for in my feverish state the sarcasm was totally lost on me. Instead I got fired up again. 'Remember *The Hotel New Hampshire*, about that brother and sister who were in love with each other and had sex for a whole night, to get it out of their system?'

He took a step back. With what seemed like caution he scrutinised my face. Then he replied slowly:

'Yes, I've seen the movie. But I don't have to get anything out of my system, do I?'

'And you don't think of me as a brother but as a child.' I was almost crying now, feeling goose pimples

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rise and standing shivering on my legs, although it might have simply been the chill after the initial heat.

‘You behave like one,’ Kasper retorted.

He was right. Why was he always so right? Because it’s true: I don’t want him to sleep with me if that isn’t what he wants. The old cliché: I want him to want me. Which he doesn’t. He only wants me not to want him. Which I don’t want him to. Christ. How predictable, how pointless can you get.

‘Come on,’ he said quietly. ‘Put your clothes back on. Come on, now.’

I reached down and hauled my jogging trousers up from my ankles, feeling only slightly less stupid. When I was decent, Kasper took me by the hand and led me to the bed. He told me to sit down at the headboard, then lowered himself in a cross-legged position on the duvet. My worse half was doing it again: spying at the chink in the negligee to get a glimpse of his balls. As if I hadn’t seen them bouncing agitatedly up and down only a minute ago. The thrill of the hidden, the thirst of the forbidden. He was aware of what I was doing, changing to a Little Mermaid pose and pulling the negligee closer round his legs. Silk and silky skin, the fine fabrics Kasper dresses in.

‘Honey,’ he spoke, lowering his chin and looking me straight in the eye. ‘I love you to death and, please believe me, I do think you’re gorgeous – you’ve got a great body and a beautiful face and everything – but I don’t want you. It’s as simple as that. I’m in love with Jan and I’m not going to sleep around. I’ve had all that.’

‘Oh?’ I snapped. ‘Why did you sleep with Jip, then? Or was that before you’d had it all?’

I shouldn’t have said that. It was as if I’d slapped him in the face. He went white, he went red, and raised a horrified hand to his mouth, as if he himself had made the allegation and wished to God he hadn’t. Eventually he managed: ‘Who said that?’

‘Jip. It was in his diary.’ I toned down hastily: ‘I shouldn’t have brought it up. Sorry. I take it back.’

‘What did it say – his diary?’

“*I did sex with Kasper.*”

‘Oh Jesus.’ He looked desperately around, thinking of what to say. Then he explained: ‘No, it wasn’t like that, not at all. What I did was give him sex education. You know, telling him about safe sex and such.’

‘I see.’ I didn’t want to believe him. I wanted to. And then I knew I could, and should. ‘*I did safe sex with Kasper.*’ Another lie I’d told, another hold over Kasper

I'd lost, and another reason I had for feeling stupid. With a pout I hated myself for, I said: 'Well, he did fill a whole page with "fuck"s. What was I supposed to think?'

'That he was feeling frustrated because he couldn't remember what exactly we'd talked about?'

Of course. And it had indeed crossed my mind that that had been the case. Still, you never knew with Jip. A thousands fucks might amount to just one, have no meaning at all, or be short for a million. Or simply express a thousand fucks.

'I thought it must have been quite a big thing to him,' I joked. 'As if you'd fucked him a thousand times.'

Kasper smiled. 'I repeated it a thousand times. "Always fuck with a condom." He probably picked the most interesting bit out. He recalled that all right.'

I smiled back, although sourly, thinking I too could do with a bit of sex education. Up till now, my experience had varied from hot but scorching to cold and painful. It'd never been, well, just lovely. It'd never been love.

'Why did you give him sex education?' I asked. 'I mean, you didn't know about Axl, did you?'

'I don't know why I felt it was necessary. Sometimes I think that, subconsciously, I knew after all there was something going on. At the time it seemed there was just Henk, but I was fairly certain that he didn't fancy Jip. And anyway, Henk wouldn't have done anything with it, even if he'd had any desire; and if he had, he'd have made sure it was safe.' He broke off, glancing at me uncertainly. 'Oh God,' he said. 'I should've known – I probably did. Why did I feel the need to tell Jip about safe sex then? And later . . .'

'Kasper,' I interrupted him, 'now don't you get any silly ideas into your head. Stop blaming yourself for overlooking the not so very obvious. If anything, you took too much care of him rather than neglecting him.'

'I don't know, love. I don't know if it was "not so very obvious". Sometimes I feel such an idiot for not realising. I should've taken Jip more seriously. I completely misjudged the situation.' He bit his lip. Biting back the tears. Kasper cries so easily. As fluent as his movements are, just as fluent are his emotions.

The flood ebbing away again, he concluded:

'Anyway, I'm glad that I did talk to Jip about it. Axl with his injections . . . God knows what could have come of it.'

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‘Jip didn’t test HIV positive, did he?’

‘I don’t know if they checked on that. Not that it matters.’

He fell silent and hung his head, all the strength in him suddenly gone. Reaching out, I pulled him towards me and wrapped my arms around him. Just out of compassion, mind, it wasn’t a jump at the opportunity. But God, that soft, wavy curtain of hair caressing my chest. And the gratitude in him, snuggling up to me and saying: ‘That’s good. You take good care of me.’

‘I will. I won’t neglect you any longer.’

He tickled me in reply. For a moment we sat like this, him with his face pressed against my throat and me keeping myself under control and my hands to myself.

Then he asked: ‘Honey? Can’t you just think of me as a friend? I hate these rows.’

Friends? I wasn’t sure. If you wanted it to be boy-friends? ‘I’ll try,’ I said. ‘I promise.’

A promise which I’d already broken a second later. What the hell. As long as I tried. I’d try again. Then I smelled his warm, sweet body odour and I had to make the resolution anew. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Worth the tries, though. Because more than wanting him to want me, I wanted him to like me. Love me.

‘Suzanne rang,’ Kasper broke the silence. ‘She wanted to know when you’re going to interview her again.’

‘I thought she hated being interviewed.’

‘She does. You constantly give her the feeling she’s hiding something.’

‘I’m not accusing her of anything. It’s just that I still find it strange she let Jip go just like that. I mean, she sort of gave up on him. After all the time and effort she spent on him just after the accident.’

‘The assault, love. Don’t you start too.’

‘Exactly, why does she keep calling it an accident? To emphasise it was no fault of hers? Why should it be? You only use euphemisms to avoid something: the truth, feelings of guilt, shocking people . . . Are you sure she never beat him herself?’

‘Honey, please, why these suspicious thoughts? She was always kind to him. I’ve seen her with him often enough and, really, a boy couldn’t wish for a more devoted mother. But to get back to what I was saying, she’d heard from Rose that you’d tried to get her to talk

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to you, and thought that maybe you needn't see Rose, but she could help you out.'

'No. I want to see Rose, not her.' I took up a ringlet of his hair and wrapped it round my finger, surprised to see how much its shine resembled that of the bamboo on his negligee. You read about goldilocks, but you never really see them, do you? It's always straw, sand or salt. Not Kasper. Spun from the purest precious stuff. Letting go of the ringlet again, I asked, 'What is it with Rose? Why is she so evasive?'

'Well,' said Kasper with a sigh that indicated he was getting tired, 'for one, she's in love with you. Don't tell me you didn't know, because you did. And secondly, she doesn't want to talk with you about Jip.'

'Why not?'

'I think you know that too,' he answered.

* * *

Oh yes, I know, but I don't want to know. What is it with me? Either I want what I can't get or I don't want what I can.

I started out with snippets and it's still just snippets. That collage I made when I first began I cut up again as

quickly as I could. Because I didn't want to know. And I still can't bring myself to pick up the pieces and put them back together again. For in the end it's only the result that counts. And I don't want to know. Because I do.

Outside the leaves are loosening their grip, revealing the urinal, uncovering the grey, bare truth. Last time I cycled past, some men from park service were raking the fallen leaves into a heap. Clearing things up. Preparing for the dead of winter. That's what I should do. But I don't want it to come. I want it to be spring.

I know the urinal is empty apart from the occasional visitor who hasn't heard about what happened, but in my mind Jip is still lying there. Blood, life is leaking from his skull. His fingers are trembling, clawing at the concrete as if trying to find a way out through the floor. After-shock.

Oh yes, I'm getting closer, sidestep by sidestep, I am. When there's a truth to circumvent it does form the centre of your attention; an issue to avoid determines the roundabout route you take. Going out of my way to avoid the conclusion. A bad memory. A bad conscience. Bad news.

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Tomorrow I'll give Rose a call. If she has a problem with me, I want her to tell me straight out. After all, her problem is likely to be mine.