



RICHARD FROST

**BRAIN
AND BODY**

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History

I found Rose's postcard. Knowing Jip always carried it with him in his back pocket, I went through his clothes yesterday. And there it was: that red rose. Or rather its faded memory, because the card's all crumpled and bleached; Jip forgot to take it out when he last put his jeans in the wash. Its petals are still visible, though, like lips open for a kiss.

When Jip moved out of his parents' place, it was his sister Rose who missed him the most. And to remind him of her, the first time she came to visit she pinned up a postcard of a rose in his room, right next to the blow-up of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

There's only one postcard, but there are pictures of Jip's pet hunk all over the place, pictures he used to tear from the magazines Kasper's ex left in his wide wake of litter. Jip even christened his cat Arnold, despite its puny appearance. Arnold the cat's a mouse compared to Arnold.

Arnold S., with his brawny body, his proud chin and the smile he keeps smiling that somehow seems to say:

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'Hey, I can't help looking like this, I was born this way' – which I'm sure he wasn't. None of us were born the way we turned out. And yet, no matter how much moulding and remodelling we do, inside of us there's a core that can't be modified. The heart of the matter.

* * *

Despite Jip's twitching and spasming, his motor memory wasn't too bad. Short-term, long-term, for facts, for figures – you name it, he hadn't got it, or at least only in a jumbled form, but his motor memory was more or less okay. It was for this reason that Kasper thought doing weights might be an idea. Jip didn't want to try self-defence any more, saying it was all too threatening, but he was interested in some sport for a hobby. Kasper consulted the fitness trainer at the gym where he did aerobics, who agreed that it'd be just the thing for Jip. Not only did weight training improve your coordination, strengthening the link between brain and body, it also helped to build up self-esteem. And so it was arranged that in the hours Kasper burned calories, Jip would go to the fitness room and expand.

It was for quite another reason that Jip enjoyed being at the gym.

Men's bodies. Sweating, groaning, straining to make that extra rep. Big bodies: the bigger, the more scantily clothed, some of the torsos on display almost as extreme in physique as Jip's dream prince. Often Jip would sit idling on a bench, not even looking at his training schedule, full of fantasies about the flesh that flaunted by in the mirror. And always Menno, his trainer, would think Jip had lost track again, going over to him, pointing at one of the pictures on the schedule and asking: 'Did you do the concentration curl yet?'

'Yeah, right, the concentration curl.' Shaking himself out of his reverie, Jip took up a dumbbell and scrutinised it.

'No, you have to move it. Like this.' Taking over the dumbbell, Menno sat down beside Jip, bent over, placed his elbow on the inside of his knee and – remembering Kasper's advice to feed Jip only small bits of information, at an easy pace – moved the dumbbell slowly up and down. 'Get the idea?'

'Yeah,' mumbled Jip. Dreamily his eyes followed the curve of Menno's arm, seeing the biceps bulge up, grow tighter, tenser, thicker, until it reached a perfect,

compact peak. And back again, the veins full and swollen, the hand with the dumbbell steady and firm.

‘Think you can manage?’ Menno asked.

‘Yeah.’ Jip snorted. And stared into space again.

Menno heaved a sigh. Good-natured as he was, there were times he’d really had it with Jip. Of course, the poor sod couldn’t help being so thick, but the way he’d suddenly switch to off-mode when you were explaining something could really piss you off. It was also at moments like these Menno couldn’t stand the continual nodding and head-shaking any more, feeling the surprisingly violent urge to tear Jip’s head off and screw it back on straight.

Knowing he was being unreasonable, Menno got up and went to let off some steam in the hothouse, the short end of the L-shaped gym, where the heavy-weights worked out. As it turned out, the hothouse was steamed up already, the air dense with that damp, sour smell that comes with hefty workouts. Axl and Eric, two of the more mature bodybuilders, were engaged in a series of deadly intense barbell squats. Axl was going down with at least 400 pounds on his shoulders when Menno entered.

Axl was the gym's showpiece. The first few years he'd been training nothing much had happened besides the usual muscle growth and increase in definition, but then he'd suddenly shot up, quickly developing into a giant of pure, solid stature. He had biceps like concrete melons, more fat-free mass than ten pit-bulls put together, and a chest circumference of 135 centimetres – at rest. Now, as he reached the lowest point of the squat, his upper legs had distended to twice their usual size, the quads alone bulkier than the average man's whole thigh.

When he had completed the series, Axl staggered towards the barbell rack and, with Eric's assistance, put his burden back in place. He continued to stagger, trying to get his breath and bearings back. Then he detected Menno and his bloodshot eyes rolled into focus. 'Hi,' he panted. 'You here?'

'You here?' Menno rejoined.

'I changed my routine. I read that the best time to train is between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Metabolic rate at its highest.' Axl paused, wiping the sweat off his forehead and loosening his weightlifter's belt. 'So, what brings you here? Aren't you supposed to be watching the fitness room?'

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'I got fed up,' said Menno. 'I've got this nutter around. He drives me as mad as himself.' Hearing his own unkind words, he added in defence: 'I don't even have time to read my mags.'

'Throw him out,' suggested Axl.

'I can't. I promised Kasper to keep an eye on him. That was before I knew she was called Kasper.'

Axl smirked. Kasper: the Miss World who'd fooled so many men as they stood watching the aerobics class through the glass, drawing up lists of who they wanted to screw first, second and last. Kasper had made it to the top of each and every one of them and, when they'd been told the hilarious truth by the gym owner, been relegated with a shudder to the bottom.

'Fancy a shake?' Menno asked.

Axl looked at Eric, who nodded. They still had an hour to go and could do with some extra sustenance. The three of them walked through the fitness room to the health bar; Menno, probably out of guilt about what he'd just said, resumed his responsibility of checking on Jip.

Jip was skipping back and forth over a large dumbbell, carolling along with the dance hit that was blaring out of the speakers. His fellow fitness freaks sat

pinned to their machines, most of them agape, others laughing at the spectacle Jip was making of himself.

‘That’s him,’ Menno stated the obvious.

‘Holy fuck,’ Eric said. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Well, he can’t help it,’ said Menno, more magnanimous now that his problem was acknowledged. ‘He’s brain-damaged. Got knocked about. Senseless.’

Eric shook his head scornfully, his hands on his hips. ‘It’s fucking pathetic. Why don’t his wardens keep him out of sight? People like that should be protected against themselves. I mean, just look at the guy. What a moron.’

He turned to Axl for confirmation. But Axl didn’t reply. Silently he stood watching Jip, his face drawn into a thoughtful frown.

‘Don’t you think?’ Eric insisted.

‘Huh?’ uttered Axl. ‘Well, as Menno said: he can’t help it.’ He went on: ‘I’ve known someone like that. They’re really not that different, y’know.’

‘Oh, go fuck your own granny. He’s bloody mental!’

Again Axl didn’t comment, studying Jip’s leaping, lanky frame with what looked like concern. ‘What do you do when he’s like that?’ he asked Menno.

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‘Well, I go over and say something. Usually that’s enough to put the brakes on. That’s the problem, y’see: you constantly have to bring him back into line. When he goes into overdrive, he stays in overdrive. He needs some kind of stop sign.’

‘I see.’ Axl undid his belt and handed it to Menno. ‘Want me to take over for a while?’

‘Would you?’

‘I’m having my break anyway. Could you bring me my shake here?’

‘Sure. Won’t be a tick.’ Hardly believing his luck, Menno made a quick jerk of his head at Eric, signalling that they had to move on before Axl withdrew the offer. Eric obliged, although he pulled a face at Axl to tell him what a weed he was.

Axl took no notice. Projecting an imperious glance round the room, he clapped his hands and shouted: ‘Right folks, show’s over! Get on with your work!’ Then he marched over to Jip and tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Hey.’

As Menno had predicted, Jip came to an instant halt, the mouth that had been singing ‘I Wanna Be A Hippie’ freezing on the first syllable. With this cartoonish expression of astonishment he turned and stared at Axl

- rooted, his head for once motionless. When Axl raised his eyebrows and smiled, Jip's mouth opened even wider and a pink blush crept up his neck. Lowering his eyes and seeing the big, broad breasts beneath Axl's body tank, he went beetroot.

At last he stammered:

'I . . . I've got to do the concentration curl.'

'Okay,' said Axl. 'Let's do it, then. What weight do you use?'

Jip gave him a nervous look and began nodding manically. His feet shuffled to and fro beside the make-shift hurdle.

'Where's your training schedule?' asked Axl.

At Jip's shake-nod-shrug reply, Axl went over to the dumbbell rack, chose a dumbbell of twenty pounds and handed it to Jip.

'Not that one,' said Jip.

'Which one then?'

Jip pointed at the bottom row of the rack.

'That one.'

Axl pursed his lips. Eight pounds, a toddler's weight. Still, he'd resolved to help, so he got the dumbbell Jip had indicated and sat down on a bench. Obediently Jip sat down beside him. He was shivering now.

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The first time Axl gave him the dumbbell Jip dropped it, missing Axl's toes by an inch (toddler weights weren't all that harmless), but Axl acted if nothing had happened, picking up the dumbbell and handing it over for a second time. 'Go ahead.'

Shaking his head, Jip stooped forward and gawkily heaved the dumbbell up and down. When he'd done about four reps, Axl interrupted him. 'Concentrate on what you're doing.' Taking hold of Jip's hand and guiding it upwards, he explained: 'Flex your bi's. You won't grow if you don't glow.'

Jip continued, doing the fifth rep with a quivery but steadier arm. After a few times more with Axl's help, he finally got the hang of it and completed an almost fluent movement on his own. Approvingly Axl nodded. Then he straightened up and tossed a glance in the direction of Menno's desk to see if his shake had arrived yet.

But Menno had forgotten about the shake. He was settled in his chair, his legs stretched out on the desk, his Nikes tapping contentedly to the rhythm of the new CD he'd put on. Menno was reading his mags.

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Menno's mags (which were also Axl's mags, the ones Kasper's ex, who was seriously into bodybuilding, bought as well, along with all those other amateurs who consider themselves professionals and will continue to do so until they arrive at the old people's home and find they look twice as crinkly as their contemporaries because, in their youthful craze to pump it up, they stretched their skin so far it reached the point of no return):

Men's Workout, Natural Body, Exercise, Flex, Shape, Gym, Giant, Sport and Fitness, Muscle and Fitness, All Natural Muscular Development, Musclemidia, Musclemag, Muscleman, Ironman, Ironwork, Pumping Iron, Pumping Press, Pure Power, Strong, Hard, Big, Stronger, Solid, Balloon, Ox, Rock, Bang.

You'll have to agree with me: this list is far too long. And most of them can hardly read. Thank God for all those pictures. And for all those adverts, although these tend to be studied more closely than the articles.

With a little aid from the pharmaceutical industry.

* * *

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The breakthrough Axl had made sprang from his trouble getting to the pump. It was common knowledge that you didn't make any progress if you didn't push yourself hard enough. No pain, no gain, that sort of stuff. The most important thing was to get a pump, which meant that the blood surged to the muscle you were working on and saturated the capillaries. It was the best way, and according to many the only one, to stimulate growth.

Contrary to some other guys he knew, Axl had awful trouble getting there. Often when he was doing, say, barbell curls, he'd find himself loading more and more plates on the bar, because he didn't feel what he was supposed to feel. Hoping the overload would do it, he'd start pulling again. The pump never came, though. Blood would be pumping to his forehead, sweat was pumping out of every pore, his heart was pumping like mad. Still, no pump.

He went on, determined to get there. His biceps ached and after a while so did his deltoids, which were trying to take over what his arms could no longer do single-handedly. Halfway through the fourth rep his arms suddenly fell down – and stayed down, as if they'd gone lame or something. He stared at them,

wanting them to go up with all his might, but nothing happened. His might had gone.

In the end, he asked Menno for advice. He usually preferred to work things out for himself, pricking up his ears when the hothouse guys were discussing training techniques and copying them if he thought they sounded any good; but this time he needed some personal help.

‘Well, it’s simple,’ said Menno. ‘When you can’t go on any more, you have to go on.’

Jesus. That was what he’d been trying to do, wasn’t it? And he’d found he couldn’t go on. What kind of stupid answer was this? If there was no solution, you had to apply a solution. Of course. Now why hadn’t he thought of that himself?

Hiding his irritation, he asked: ‘But what if I can’t?’

‘Ah.’ Menno winked. ‘That’s where I come in.’ He threw aside the *Flex Files* he’d been reading, got up and went over to Axl’s bench. When he saw the EZ bar that was lying on the cradle, he said: ‘First you throw off some weight.’

‘I want to go to the max,’ protested Axl, insulted at the suggestion that he couldn’t handle what he knew he could.

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‘Sure, but max as in effect, not effort, right? Now throw off some weight. We’re going to do a little trick, you and I.’

The trick, as Menno demonstrated a little later, was having someone with you who pushed you over the hump and on to the pump. When Axl had done the third rep and the numb feeling began to set in, Menno stepped forward and, with what looked like only his fingertips, steered the bar up to Axl’s chest. ‘Slowly down,’ he said. And again. And again.

At the start of the sixth rep, Axl felt a cold sweat break out. ‘I c-can’t,’ he gasped.

‘Once more,’ ordered Menno, not even allowing him a pause. ‘Concentrate on the movement, not the weight. And breathe. You look like a woman refusing to give birth.’ Firmly he directed the bar up again, Axl by now feeling as if he was a glove puppet in some Punch and Judy show and it was just Menno performing, not him.

‘That’s it,’ Menno said. ‘And slowly down. Slowly, mind.’

Suppressing the impulse to throw the bar at his tormentor’s feet, Axl did as he was told. When he’d finished, his bi’s were on fire and, as he saw when he looked down, bright red. And he had it, he actually had

it, that clammy, feverish, throbbing sensation, accompanied by the near-nausea he knew from the migraines he'd suffered in the past.

The muscles had been drained completely: when a few minutes later he proceeded with inclined curls, he couldn't even hold a dumbbell; every fibre was protesting against a second ordeal. But he'd resolved to go the max, and after a bit more rest he continued, this time guiding his arm up himself when he approached the limit. By the time he left the gym he was dead beat and his bi's so sore, it took them three days to recover.

It worked wonders, though. In the weeks following his first pump, his upper arms increased visibly in size and his chest looked a lot sturdier than he'd thought possible. Inspired by the results, he made 'making mass' his motto. Up till recently he hadn't bothered about things like mass, mainly concentrating on getting stronger. He'd used relatively light weights and done what with hindsight seemed childish long series. Still, it had laid the foundations for the temple he was now building. And he was building it fast.

Things got more and more serious. He dropped most of the machine routine and switched to using free weights and doing structural, multi-muscle exercises.

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He was promoted to the hothouse, for the first time in his life feeling like one of the guys. He found himself a training partner who, instead of just keeping watch in case he couldn't handle a weight any more, spotted when he was threatening to give up and browbeat him into going on. Hearing about the bodybuilding guru Weider, he bought the handbook and starting applying the pyramiding principle, increasing intensity with each following set and ending with a lighter weight to keep the pump going.

He made changes in other areas as well. He read the magazines and went on a sports diet, spooning creatine into his shakes and buying jars of vitamins, Mus-L-Blast and Amino Fuel Stack. He avoided social occasions that involved drinking alcohol and made sure he was in bed before ten. To reduce his fat percentage he began doing cardio-training, which he'd previously thought of as treading for women with cellulite. In the evenings he looked at himself critically in the mirror and jumped up and down to see if there was anything left wobbling.

After six months of the new regime the only thing left wobbling was his dick, for he always did his tests without his clothes on, not allowing himself any flattery

of the naked truth. He felt better and better about himself; his smile grew broader as he saw his body shape up and a chiselled, 'cut' look break through. Soon his T-shirts didn't fit him any more. He bought new clothes, stocking up on tank tops by the dozen, so keen to wear them outside the gym that he was furious when the sun refused to shine. He was a muscle-man, someone to reckon with, and he wanted people to see and acknowledge it.

And then, by the end of the third year, it all came to a halt. He'd had it before, periods of standstill between spurts of gain, but this time it lasted far longer than before. And the frustrating thing was, he couldn't get out of it. No matter how he tried, increasing his protein intake, doing supersets, giving shocks to the system in terms of adding pounds of weight in one go, he didn't grow any bigger.

Again he asked Menno for advice.

'Well, I think you've reached the sticking point,' Menno said when he'd heard him out. 'This is as big as you get.'

'What?' He couldn't believe it. Stop growing? He'd targeted his whole existence at growing. Growing was what he lived for. It was what he did.

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‘What if I change my routine?’ he asked.

‘Well, you could tone up a bit here and there, and work some more on your symmetry, but you probably won’t get much bulkier. This is you, man.’

‘No, it isn’t. Flex Wheeler isn’t Flex Wheeler – his real name’s Kenneth. And Jay Cutler isn’t Jay Cutler. He’s a hero, a monster, out of this world. And Arnold . . .’

‘Arnold is Arnold,’ Menno interrupted him sharply. ‘He’s unique.’

‘Yes, but . . .’

‘Sorry, man. But you’re a grown-up now.’

‘I could train harder.’

‘Sure,’ said Menno. ‘But don’t train more. You need your rest. You don’t want to eat up your muscles.’

Dizzy with panic, Axl left – and went straight home, not feeling up to confronting the dumbbells he’d left lying after his last exercise, knowing they’d never be replaced by a pair even more unwieldy.

He was so upset that he didn’t go back to the gym for two whole days. In the confinement of his flat, he studied himself in the mirror. He was big, he could see that, but he wasn’t that big. His eyes veered towards Arnold on the wall. Arnold’s shoulders were twice as big. Compared to Arnold, he was small. It was espe-

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cially his bi's and pecs that worried him. They were nothing if you saw what Arnold had. The more he thought about it and the more he looked, the more he felt a shrimp. On the third day he did go to the gym after all, afraid his body would shrink if he didn't, but he felt so uncertain of himself he wore a T-shirt, to hide his lack of more.

It was Eric, his training partner, who helped him out of the crisis, telling him about a friend of his who could give Axl just the boost he needed. At first Axl had his doubts, but Eric said it wasn't anything rough, just a little something to break the barrier and open the way to the next level. There was nothing to it, really, just a few shots of this and that and maybe a couple of pills. Eric himself had tried it once or twice and it'd done him the world of good. He'd blasted through the ceiling like a rocket.

It was as easy as Eric said it would be. The following day in the hothouse, Axl was approached by a guy called Peter, who said Eric had sent him. If they could just step outside for a minute. Axl put on a sweatshirt and followed Peter to the car park at the back of the gym. When they got to a battered Merc, Peter took out his keys and opened the boot, revealing an inventory a

chemist would have been proud of. 'Cocktail?' he asked. Axl nodded. Next Peter told him to turn round and lower his gym shorts, and thrust a needle into Axl's butt. That was it. He'd be back the next week for the second shot and the money.

As Axl walked back to the hothouse, the thought that he was cheating did nag him a little. But he told himself not to be a sissy. He'd resolved to grow bigger and he would grow bigger. If necessary, with the aid of the pharmaceutical industry. Or: in aid of – for it wasn't cheap. The cocktails alone swallowed up the better part of his dole money, and then there were the fat blockers and diuretics, which Peter had explained were essential if you wanted the skin to cling tight and make the muscles really show – not to mention the food supplements and stuff. He stuck to the resolution he'd made, though, and every Monday he took a shot up.

The effect was spectacular. The first two months alone he gained twelve pounds in clean, hard weight. From simply bulky he became huge. He could look his reflection in the eye again. It was like those 'before and after' pictures you saw in the mags, except that he'd never taken any before. He had a photo of himself in his bomber jacket when he was sixteen, but you

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couldn't really see what a skinny, insecure kid he'd been. He'd always been glad, and kept this one photo in case people asked what he'd looked like when he was younger, as it was the best he could do. Now, however, he wished it was worse. To avoid making the same mistake again, he took some pictures of himself with the self-timer, oiling his body first so that you could see the muscles better. He might enter competitions one day, and they'd do an interview with him and ask what he'd been like before. He'd show himself after three years of training and be twice as massive.

The only trouble with the treatment was that when it was finished he lost weight again. Also he felt tired, at times too tired to lift a finger, let alone an eighty-pound dumbbell. And after the prescribed six weeks' rest, he took a second course.

He just wanted to look good; what was wrong with that? What did it matter if it was because of the stuff? It was still his body getting so big, wasn't it? The cocktails only helped him to develop his potential. If he didn't have it in him already, it wouldn't have come out.

* * *

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Menno knew. Of course he did. But Menno played dumb. It was part of the job, playing dumb. Not that Menno was completely daft. Nobody did it without. They all did it with, each and every one of them, just like the famous guys.

There was just one person Menno knew who didn't, and that was Menno himself. He'd read about those side effects and it had really put him off. But if the other guys wanted to, well, who cared? Sure, Menno did, he did care, checking their heart rates from time to time and warning them if their heads got too bloated. But if a guy's heart rate was a bit irregular, Menno didn't make a fuss. He only worried about heart rates when they were way over the top.

Actually, the only line Menno drew was that those who developed 'roid rage were thrown out. It was one thing to do dope, but he didn't want people to smash each other's skulls in. Roaring and stuff was okay if that was the only way you could push or pull it, but as for the rest, he wanted peace and quiet in his gym. He had reading to do.

I've only just begun and I'm already fed up with these guys. I mean, how much smaller can your world be? I've asked Kasper if I can't skip this bit and just concentrate on Jip, but he said I should give both sides of what was, after all, a two-sided affair. It was Axl who approached Jip, not the other way round. And if it hadn't been for Axl, Jip would have been thrown out of the gym: Menno wouldn't have tolerated him much longer. First, Menno had his image to consider.

'Yes, yes,' I broke in, knowing ten other perfectly understandable reasons would follow, 'and, boy, did need time for his mags.'

I'm fed up with Axl and his crowd, and Kasper is getting fed up with me. Yesterday we had an argument about the half-term holidays. Kasper is going away for a week with Titus and Jan, his boyfriend. They'll be staying in London, where Titus used to live before he came to Holland. I've never been to London, which Kasper knows, but he hasn't invited me to come along. When I asked if I could, he said no. Again he gave me loads of good reasons: the first, that I'd only get jealous of Titus and Jan again and see nothing of London because I'd have my head in the thunderclouds all day.

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Before I had time to defend myself (though I probably would, I have to admit that), he threw in the deciding factor, which was that I won't get time off from school anyway. I told him I'd find some excuse, call in sick, or break a leg if that was what it would take, but he wouldn't hear of it. I have my career to consider.

As it happens, I'm a ballet dancer. I'm allowed only three weeks a year off from school (the Academy, I should say, but I call it a school, with its finicky rules and the report you get every three months). Actually, that's the only good reason I have for taking myself off to London for a week: I could do with a break. It's all supposed to be so responsible, the tight rein they keep at school, but at times it tires me out. I read in the mags (Menno's kind of mags, mind – and no, I wasn't toying with the idea, I had to study them for Jip's story) that it's far better to take a week off every two months instead of just hop till you drop.

When I mentioned this to Kasper, however, he retorted: 'That's the problem with you, you don't relax. You seem so cool and composed, but inside you're on fire. The way you can explode when you're with me . . . your teachers wouldn't believe it if they saw you like this. Have you ever told them that, despite the outer

discipline, you don't get half enough sleep because you're always simmering, and it's your hot temper that makes you so sinewy, not the dancing?'

'What is that supposed to mean?' I snapped. 'Sinewy people are nervous wrecks?'

'No. But I do think the way people look says something about the way they feel.'

That was when I walked out of the room and slammed the door. How could he say that? How could he, when people always take him for what he's not – a woman? And how on earth could he say it after what I've found out about Axl, who, despite looking so strong and hard, turned out to be so soft-centred?

Come to think of it, he was downright contradicting himself, with his remarks about me being cool on the outside but such a volcano at heart. But Kasper being Kasper, he'll refuse to admit he was wrong. Oh yes, Kasper knows best. He always does.

* * *

The week after he'd first met him at the gym, Axl made sure he was there again around the time Jip would be working out. And when on Friday at half past eleven

Jip came in, Axl was glad to see him, even though Jip's weird new hair-do (a bleached crew cut) did put him off for a bit. Still, he'd made his decision, and signalling to Menno he would take charge of Jip, he strode over. He'd introduce himself this time; during the past week it had bothered him that he hadn't told Jip his name.

'Hi,' he said when he reached Jip's bench.

Jip didn't react.

'It's me, Axl. I'm Axl.'

Jip still didn't respond, nodding frantically at the mirror in front of him, seemingly too ecstatic about his new hairstyle to pay attention to anything else.

Baffled by his wild head-banging, Axl stepped back, then stole a glance round to see if anyone had seen the blunder he thought he'd made. He was just about to give up when Menno called from behind his desk:

'He won't recognise you! He's got no memory.'

'What? No memory?'

'Nope. He starts again every fucking week. Kasper tells him before he goes in what he's here for, so that he won't get into a state, but he never remembers the last time he came. A complete blank, that one.'

Axl looked at Jip, unable to believe it was so very bad. And discovered that maybe it wasn't: although still

ignoring Axl, Jip had spread out his training schedule on his knees and studied it as if to see where he'd got to last week. Tapping the picture of the concentration curl, he turned towards the dumbbell rack. It was only then that he noticed Axl. And stared.

It was eerie, Axl thought. The same astonishment, the same evasive look, and then the blushing and the head-shaking. And the same opening:

'I . . . I've got to do the concentration curl.'

'Sure,' said Axl. 'I'm here to help you. My name's Axl.'

'I'm Jip. I have to do the concentration curl.'

'So you said. I'll get you a dumbbell, okay?'

Jip didn't answer, but his shoulders started quivering. Remembering the reaction from last time and taking it as confirmation, Axl brought over a dumbbell and sat down opposite Jip.

They started up, the session turning out just as Menno had said it would. Yet, somehow it appeared to go easier than last time, Jip almost confidently and firmly moving the dumbbell up and down. It was only when he looked at Axl that he lost the rhythm again and Axl had to help him out. Partly satisfied, partly disappointed, Axl left to start his own warm-up,

promising to be back to show Jip how to do preacher curls.

As he passed Menno's desk, a voice sounded from behind the latest copy of *Ironman*: 'I don't know why you bother. You won't get anywhere.'

Axl pretended not to hear, moving on to where the exercise bikes and steppers stood. He did know. He felt guilty. They shouldn't have laughed at Jip the other week. Because it wasn't funny. Not at all.

In fact, Jip needed protection. The likes of him weren't too popular with the hothouse guys. They'd think he was contagious or something and give him as lousy a time as they could. Axl had seen it before: boys with earrings on the wrong ear, people who didn't wear the right clothes, girls who, hearing the coarse comments on their tits, didn't smile but answered back. They were out of the gym in no time. You never opened your mouth to the hothouse guys twice.

He knew he couldn't wait for another week, wanting to know for certain if Menno had been right about Jip having no memory. And the following day, when he'd finished his training, he decided to pay a visit to Jip. Surely he'd recognise him. You didn't forget someone

you'd been working out with for two hours. Having checked that no one was around, he looked up the address in Menno's card index. With a shock he saw that it was quite close. Walking distance. Hastily he changed, not allowing himself a shower and the time to change his mind.

He had prepared for Jip not answering the door or failing to remember him, but he hadn't counted on Kasper appearing in the doorway, large as life. For a moment he felt taken aback, then he pulled himself together.

'Hullo,' he said. 'I hadn't expected to see you here.'

'I live here.'

'Oh, I see. Is Jip in? I, er, it was his bell I pressed.'

'Yes, I heard. I always open the door for him.'

Crossing his arms, Kasper gave him an icy glare. With equal antagonism Axl glared back, but soon he lost the contest and cast his eyes down. Kasper was wearing a pink ballet cardigan on top of tight black jeans, the bulges beneath both of the garments creating a confusing form of cross-dressing.

'Oh, I see,' he said at last. 'Is he in then? Jip?' He shouldn't say 'I see' all the time. It sounded too timid, too ashamed.

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‘What do you want to see him for?’

‘I was just wondering how he was, that’s all.’

‘Hm. Well, in that case I guess you could come in.’

Kasper stepped aside, revealing a narrow staircase that led almost vertically up. ‘Jip!’ he shouted. ‘Someone to see you!’ And to Axl, in a tone as if he were the landlady in some posh hotel: ‘Follow me, please.’ He turned, the two sexes in him suddenly one again, and his small round behind started swinging gracefully up the stairs.

Jip was standing at the top of the stairs. He was wearing a tie-dye T-shirt, a bull’s-eye pattern of bleached circles on his chest.

‘Hi,’ he said when he saw Axl.

‘Hi. I stopped by to see how you were.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Swaying to and fro, Jip shook his head.

‘You do remember me, don’t you?’ asked Axl.

‘Yeah . . . no . . . no.’

‘I’m Axl. We’ve been working out together.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Axl is from the gym, honey,’ Kasper intervened. ‘You know, where you go on Fridays? To do weights?’

‘Yeah. Yeah, the gym.’ Jip grinned. Then he told Axl: ‘I don’t know you. I don’t know who.’

‘Never mind. That’s okay.’ Axl fell silent, at a loss how to continue. If only that bloody tranny would go. The way those long-lashed eyes pinned him down made him feel even more uncomfortable. Tentatively he began: ‘Can I . . .’

‘Come up,’ Jip broke in. ‘I live here. There.’ He jerked his head up and down and pointed to the ceiling.

‘I see. Thanks. Yes, let’s go up.’

‘I’ll bring you tea in a minute,’ Kasper said. At last dismissing Axl from the chill of his scrutiny, he left them and entered one of the rooms that led off the landing.

Together they went up a second flight of stairs, Jip climbing it with remarkable steadiness and certainty. When they arrived on the top floor and Axl saw the poster on the door to Jip’s room, he cried:

‘Wow, you’re a fan of Arnold!’

‘Yeah. He’s my favourite.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Jip, as if this was a matter of course.

Axl told himself not to get annoyed. It was just a filler, which Jip probably used to bridge the gap between opening his mouth and the moment he might

or might not remember what he ought to have said. Poor kid, having no memory like that. Personally he'd go crazy if his mind were such a sieve. On the other hand, there were things you might like to forget. What had possessed him to come here, for instance.

Nodding as if to tell Axl that he'd made a grave mistake indeed, Jip pushed open the door and let Axl in. Jip's room was tidy beyond neatness. No clutter or litter anywhere. Everything seemed in place, in order and stowed away. It was like entering an office, with the difference that there was a bed in the far corner. A bony brown tabby lay nestled on the duvet, looking up over its shoulder when Axl came in and giving him a disdainful stare.

Jip remained standing. So did Axl, feeling it wouldn't be right if he sat down and had to look up. Jip asked again who he was. Axl said his name. A silence fell. Axl started a conversation about Arnold, but Jip didn't seem interested any longer, only peering at him in a bemused but troubled sort of way. He probably wasn't used to visitors, thought Axl, and didn't know whether to trust them or not. Especially not since they were all strangers to him. To show Jip he meant well, he sat down after all, choosing the spot beside the cat

on the bed. Clumsily he stroked it a few times. He didn't like cats.

'His name's Arnold,' remarked Jip.

'Ah.' Axl's face cleared with relief: they were back on familiar ground. 'Yes, I really admire him.'

Jip gave him a puzzled look. 'Why?'

'He's the best.'

'Yeah.' Jip smiled broadly. 'He's a bodybuilding cat.'

'Huh?' From Jip, Axl looked at the tabby. Christ. The fucking cat was called Arnold. Arnold wouldn't have been pleased to know. Neither was he, to be honest. You didn't name a runt like that after Arnold. It was a fucking insult. Again, however, he told himself not to get annoyed.

'Do you like bodybuilders, Jip?' he asked.

Jip's face froze. Then he gave a quick, shy shake of the head. And suddenly he was full of movement, his arms swinging back and forth at his sides, his mouth twitching, and his pupils ping-ponging to all corners of the room. Axl wanted to say something to calm him down, but just as he was about to, a knock sounded and Kasper came in with the tea. Immediately Jip relaxed again, the spasms slowing down like in those rabbits running out of batteries you used to see on TV. Axl

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breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't wanted Kasper to catch him upsetting Jip.

They'd be having herbal tea, Axl saw as Kasper lowered the tray on the table. When he smiled to say he appreciated it, Kasper didn't smile back, only scowled. Apparently, in the time it had taken him to make the tea, the atmosphere had plummeted from freezing to well below zero. Yeah, right, thought Axl, deciding to drop all attempts at making a good impression, and I hate you too.

What he detested most about Kasper was the way he acted, mincing about as if he were Jip's mother or something. It was him pouring the tea, him offering Axl a biscuit (Axl refused: it contained sugar) and him who took the tea tray downstairs to wash up. And when five minutes later Jip said he was getting tired and Axl decided to go, it was also Kasper who saw him out. He'd obviously been lurking around on the first floor, waiting for Axl to come down and blow his chance of leaving quietly.

When Axl had stepped outside, Kasper said out of the blue: 'If he asks if you want to fuck, just say no. He won't mind; half the time he doesn't mean it anyway.' And, wham, he banged the door shut.

Frowning at the strange remark, Axl walked off in the direction of the park. Then he smiled to himself. He'd say yes. That was what he'd do.

* * *

Kasper didn't like Axl from the start. Not that any bodybuilder would have stood a chance with Kasper, who'd had such a lousy time with his big-bossy ex. Axl was bound to end up in Kasper's bad boos; ten times of trying to make a good impression couldn't have changed that.

Kasper was ashamed of his own hostility, realising he was being prejudiced. Also, he felt jealous. He'd always been the one to take care of Jip and now there was this stranger trying to join in. It was different with Suzanne or the therapists: they had always been there, and looking after Jip was part of their duty. But when Menno had told him that Axl had taken over Jip's training, Kasper had felt worried. He hadn't minded Menno, whose task it was to assist people, but that someone else had volunteered for the job unsettled him. He kept telling himself it was a good turn: it was high time Jip made friends of his own. Still, he couldn't feel pleased.

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I think, no matter how he denies it, that something inside of Kasper knew that Axl would take Jip away from him. And he dreaded the farewell.

* * *

Jip knew Axl. When Axl was with him, that was. As soon as Axl left, he disappeared from Jip's mind. But he'd be back again. At the gym he was there. Axl introduced himself and Jip knew him. And sometimes he came to visit. They drank tea together. Jip knew who he was. His name was Axl and he was from the gym. Kasper had said so.

On occasions Axl said things Jip thought were very important. He wrote them down in his diary. Then he couldn't find his diary any more. Kasper helped him to find it again. Jip read about Axl in his diary. He didn't know who Axl was. Axl came to visit and introduced himself. Jip knew him then, but he'd forgotten what he'd written in his diary. And he'd forgotten he'd written it down.

Axl introduced himself and Jip knew him. He knew he liked him. What he liked best about Axl was that he was so big. He was as big as Arnold on the wall. When

Axl stood beside Arnold, he was even bigger. Jip looked at Arnold and giggled. Arnold was so small. That was what Jip liked about him. Arnold wouldn't harm you. He was small and cuddly. Jip loved it when he purred. He never forgot about Arnold. Besides Kasper, Arnold was the one he loved the most.

One day when Jip knew Axl, Axl said Jip could touch him. Jip didn't dare. It wouldn't be like touching Arnold. Axl said, go ahead. He started unbuttoning his shirt. His chest was big. It was huge. Jip wanted to touch it but he still didn't dare. Axl said, I know you want to. Jip shook his head, knowing he wanted to very badly. But he felt scared. Axl asked, do you know who I am? Jip nodded. He'd forgotten again. Then he remembered. Kasper had said it was Axl, from the gym. Jip knew him all right.

Axl took Jip's hand and pressed it to his chest. Go on, he said. Jip tried a little stroke, half expecting a purr in return. Instead there came a sigh. Yeah, go on, sighed Axl. He undid the rest of the buttons, revealing what they called a six-pack. Jip wasn't stupid. He knew things. Only he couldn't say them. People would laugh or frown, because he often said the wrong things, mixing up words and cursing again. Or the thoughts he

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had would suddenly vanish. They'd be back. It was all in his mind: answers to every question about what he knew.

Axl asked, do you like bodybuilders? He moved Jip's hand down to the six-pack. I worked real hard for this, he said, do you like it? Jip shook his head, just a little. He felt shy. Axl said, go on, it's yours. And then Jip nodded. Because it wasn't. But he wanted to. How he wanted to. And Axl knew. He knew him. Jip knew that.

And then the electricity started and Jip couldn't keep still any more. Axl was trembling, but Jip knew it was only in his mind, just the way things looked if you were trembling and quaking and quivering and shivering yourself. It wasn't as bad as it looked but it wasn't the right moment. Kasper came in with the tea and Jip's thoughts vanished.

One of those thoughts:

There was a man in my room . . . I can't remember his name. I'll have to ask Kasper.

I'm back and Kasper said it's Axl. That's the name of . . . I'll have to ask Kasper. I'll be back.

Brain and Body

There was a man in my room. His name is Axl. He said something very important, only I can't ask Kasper, because he wasn't there. I know that for certain certain. It was just me and the certain. Man, I mean. He came to . . . I have to ask Kasper. I'll be back.

There was a man in my room. His name is Axl. He was here to visit me. He's from the gym (Kasper told me) and sometimes he visits me (Kasper said he was here once before, to drink tea with me). Kasper wasn't with us. I remember this clearly. I remember Kasper brought us tea. I ask him why did you make the fucking tea I did the Daily Skills the therapist said I was brilliant and can make my own tea fuck it. Kasper says I wanted to make sure you were okay (Kasper is with me now, so I needn't go down and up the stairs stairs all the time in case I forget something and have to ask and go down and up the stairs again hoping it won't have slipped my mind by the time I get back).

I ask what's the gym fuck. He says it's where you do weights on Fridays. It's on the memory board, see? I look at the board and under Friday it says: to gym, do weights. Kasper wrote it down for me. But now I've forgotten what I wanted to say fuck it. Oh yes. Let's try

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Kasper is in my room and his name is Kasper I'll never forget that he's important to me. He's a boy and looks beautiful today. He says . . . Hang on a minute, I've got to listen. He says honey, you're the one that's beautiful. (I told him how beautiful he looked.) I say no, I know I'm a nightmare and write it down. Kasper says I mean it love. I don't believe it, but say okay if that's what you want to think I don't mind. Where was I? There was something else. Oh yes. No. It's gone. I'll look at the next previous previous page.

Yes, there was a man in my room and his name is Axl and he said something very important but I've forgotten now fuck it makes me so angry it really irritates me the way my brain doesn't do what I want it to do sometimes I feel like banging it to pieces on the wall why do I keep a bloody diary when I can't even remember what I'm writing down oh no that's not true nonsense fuck it fuck I

I'm back. Kasper stopped stopped me. He said I say you're beautiful and you get all worked up now stop it and he said stop, real loud, loud and I stopped. He asks what's the matter with you today I say I'm nervous because there's something very important but fuck now I can't fucking remember what it was. Hang on. I'll look at the previous page.

Brain and Body

Yes, there was a man in my room and he said something very important. It was his name. He didn't tell me his name the first first time I saw him. I think that's very important. On the other hand I may have forgotten my mother would say Jip you stupid sod you forgot again surely he introduced himself first time round my mother would have said so I'm sure fuck I'm forgetting all about commas and things again never mind I'll put them in later. I ask Kasper can you put them in for me but he's still not sure he says a diary is a private matter. I say I like you I trust you I don't mind still he refuses which really makes me mad because I forget half half the time I wrote things down and when I'm at the next stage I don't know any more what's on the previous one I can't make sense of it and I'm the one who wrote it down I can't even make sense or myself and I know I'll be getting the words wrong again now my handwriting's going all wobbly fuck it those spasms they hurt like hell and it's all trembling now fuck it fuck fuck fuck it fuck fuck

I'm back. Kasper stopped me. He said stop and I stopped. Calm down, he said, there's all the time in the world, calm down, just try again and I said okay and was back again. I'll read first what I've got so far before I go go on. Continue, I mean.

Richard Frost

Yes, he didn't tell me his name the first first time I saw him, that mean, man, I mean. It was all in the dark but now I know this for certain. That's very important.

As Jip said: it was very important. If only Kasper had read his diary. He would have seen what Jip was trying to get a grip on. A memory.