

Committed

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Jasper Heijting

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Surviving hate and violence in
the foster care system

Throughout the entire (investigated) period from 1945 to the present, physical, psychological and sexual violence occurred in the youth care system. Victims reported physical and psychological violence— primarily perpetrated by group leaders and foster parents—particularly from the years before 1970.

For former wards, psychological violence—such as persistent bullying, humiliation and isolation—has proven to have a major impact on their later lives. Frequently mentioned consequences include psychosocial health complaints, relationship problems and difficulties raising their own children.

The prevailing negative societal view of children placed in care long facilitated violence. The youth care organisations had insufficient financial resources to find suitable staff and retain them long-term. For a long time, there was a lack of adequate training and methodologies, protective laws and regulations, and government oversight. Supervisors often failed to intervene in situations where violence occurred. The children in care could not or did not dare to talk about the violence and had virtually no one to turn to.

From the De Winter Committee report "Insufficiently Protected: Violence in Dutch Youth Care from 1945 to the Present"

FOREWORD

I have always felt different from others. This caused me many problems throughout my youth and later life. I usually couldn't explain how I felt about everything. Only later in life did it become clear that my feeling of being different was directly related to various childhood traumas.

Regardless of why I felt different, what I primarily needed was understanding, a listening ear, support and tailored help. In practice, this was lacking — often the opposite occurred, and I encountered incomprehension, aggression, violence and overt discrimination, which exacerbated many of my problems even into adulthood.

Visible but unclear symptoms of hidden psychiatric issues are often misunderstood or hastily interpreted through one-sided ideas, leading to prejudice. As a result, I was frequently treated differently — *worse* – than others. This also caused me physical injuries. A vicious circle emerged where more problems —with life goals, relationships, my body, identity and sexuality—developed, and I sank deeper into complete isolation.

It turned out no one was interested in who I was, why I was the way I was, or how I could be helped. A difficult search spanning over twenty years for appropriate mental healthcare yielded little concrete results and often brought me the opposite of what I needed. There were no social organisations or institutions I could rely on, and everywhere I turned, my requests for help were met with 'no'. I had no job, couldn't participate in society and moved 57 times. Socially, I didn't exist.

Describing my childhood experiences has been a monumental task for me.

Now, at 57, I've found enough peace in recent years to write down my childhood story. My *drive* came from wanting to tell this story, *needing* to tell it, because what happened in my childhood has

continued to play a

dominant role in my life every single day.

Through this childhood story, I want to shed light on the development and various symptoms of 'dissociative identity disorder' and 'reactive attachment disorder' as they emerged during my youth. Dissociation—the splitting off of the 'self'—can occur when traumatic events are too overwhelming and persist over time. Then it 'runs away with you'. The traumatic experiences continue to exist separately, seemingly taking their own path. This alienates you from life.

From dissociation, separate parts of the personality can eventually emerge, alternately determining thoughts, feelings and actions. In my case, I remember—partially—quite well how this was already happening in my childhood and progressively worsened. I called it 'living in multiple worlds', a life where I existed in increasingly different ways.

Another factor plays a role in my story: *trauma sexuality*. Very little is known about this in psychiatry, and hardly anything has been written on it. In practice, I've encountered no understanding whatsoever of the many problems related to it. Trauma sexuality is sexuality based on traumatic events—usually in early childhood—where others were *all- determining*. It is thus an imposed sexuality, which in my case has remained virtually unchanged. I've tried to write as openly and honestly as possible, because only this way the underlying feelings, questions, doubts and thoughts at different ages can be understood. All individuals in this story are real people, but their names are fictitious. The dates mentioned, the names of organisations and institutions, and all locations in this story are presented unchanged.

Jasper Heijting

In January 1981, I was nearly nineteen. A month earlier, the state guardianship association *Jeugdbelangen* from Utrecht, under whose care I fell, found a room for me in an ordinary residential neighbourhood in Harderwijk. Well, 'room'... it was really more like a large extension of the living room of the residents, Harm and Wilco. When they introduced themselves, they introduced themselves as a happy gay couple.

Harm was quite chubby, and with his small, scruffy moustache and big

smile, he looked like the kind of cheerful character you'd see on a jam jar label. Wilco was a tall, broad man. Whenever I saw him, he was usually wearing black leather clothes with buckles everywhere. Because of this, he looked as if he'd just stepped off a motorbike, though he didn't own one at all. What I really couldn't understand was why anyone would wear such heavy, warm leather clothing even in very hot weather. Both men were friendly, always in good spirits, and generous to boot. The rent for the room was quite low, and there were often biscuits or packets of crisps on the counter that I was free to take.

"If you're short of anything, just help yourself—we were eighteen once too

, lad," Harm said with a wink. The rented room was actually the short leg of their L-shaped living room. It had been separated from the kitchen and the rest of the space by two tall white cupboards placed about half a metre apart. Between them ran a narrow passageway that led into my room. From the kitchen you looked straight at the rough hardboard backs of the cupboards, which stood out sharply against the otherwise neatly furnished house. Both men always let me use the kitchen to prepare my meals. That was incredibly convenient, because I owned almost

nothing at the time—not even a spoon, a mug, a plate, or a pan.
My cooking skills didn' t extend much further than boiling water or
frying an egg.

Harm and Wilco lived a very ordinary life, nothing remarkable about it. Yet one thing did strike me: it often felt as though they didn't really live there at all, and that I was the main occupant. I rarely ran into either of them in the house. That gave me the freedom to play loud music whenever I felt like it and generally do as I pleased. The kitchen was always free as well. In the little space behind the cupboards, I didn't have many belongings. There was a mattress on the floor where I slept under an old, flattened-out sleeping bag. A simple wooden chair from the house stood there too, though I hardly ever used it—I usually just sprawled out on the mattress. In one corner, right on the floor, sat my cheap little suitcase record player, bought for a tenner, with a small pile of LPs and singles leaning crookedly against the wall. The music I played was mostly tracks by *The Ramones*, *The Rolling Stones*, and *Cuby and the Blizzards*. My collection wasn't very big yet; I'd only recently started listening to music and had no idea what existed. And of course, I owned so few records simply because I didn't have the money to buy more.

In one of the tall white cupboards I kept my clothes, which easily fit into a small plastic bag. There was also an old shoebox containing my only valuables: a book of fairy tales, a small tin sweet cup I'd been given to mark the centenary of the children's home where I'd once lived, a dozen old photographs in an envelope, and a brown folder with my passport. Anyone looking closely at my sleeping spot would have noticed two small teddy bears at the head of the mattress — a brown plush kitten named Bimbam and a pink, sawdust-stuffed elephant called Dumbo. They were my only companions, the only ones I truly talked to.

It was here, in this room—perhaps because for the first time in my life I was living independently — that I realised something was seriously wrong with me. Yes, it felt like something bad. Slowly, the awareness grew that I was heading into an incredibly heavy and difficult life. I was nearly nineteen, yet somehow boys of primary-school age were my role models for who I wanted to become. Who on earth felt something as strange as that. Why would I feel this way?

Yes, I wanted to be exactly like the boys I saw everywhere—to look like them, to wear the same tough boys' clothes. But it went further than that. I actually wanted their bodies too: slim, slight, completely hairless. I wanted to live in their world. I hated the hair that had begun to sprout in different places on my own body. My body? That body, which didn't feel like mine at all and kept changing against my will. At first, I hardly noticed it—it crept in so quietly, so insidiously. A tiny hair here and there, soft at first, pale and downy. Slowly but surely, those hairs grew darker and coarser, turning rough and impossible to ignore. An irreversible fact. It began in my pubic area and under my arms. Frightening, yes, but I resigned myself to it. Maybe because it was hidden there, where no one could see. Still, even if no one saw it, I hated it. It didn't suit me at all. If I could have chosen, I would have wiped out every last strand of body hair. I would have needed to be completely boyzilian before I could accept my body.

Then I discovered hairs on my chin as well. Strange, prickly weeds seemed to be taking over a smooth tiled floor. My chest and legs were soon invaded by the same hair virus. My body, it seemed, had betrayed me behind my back. It was presenting something —someone —that I wasn't at all.

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In that little room, lying on my mattress between my teddy bears Dumbo and Bimbam, I closed my eyes and thought about my situation. Who was I, if boys were still my role models? Worse —if I longed to become as masculine as they were? Officially, I was already older. And a man— masculine —that wasn't how I felt at all. How awkward. A man was something I never wanted to be. Never. Men had never been my role models. Boys had. In fact, all of them.

What would you call it, if someone saw boys as their role models? Did that even have a name? Harm and Wilco had told me the name for what they were: *gay*. At least they were something. Though maybe that wasn't so great either—back in the deeply religious Veluwe -region, I'd been taught that gay people weren't good. They were “on the wrong side.” Strange, disturbed, even “people to be fought”—that's what I'd been taught. Later, of course, I learned that wasn't true. Because to me, they were simply on the right side—just different.

According to Harm and Wilco, I probably wasn't gay—because not long after we met, they openly told me more about their own sexuality.

During the conversation that followed, I cautiously told them that boys between seven and twelve were my role models, even for things I saw as truly masculine. Harm smiled warmly, but I could tell he found my story rather strange. I definitely wasn't gay. No—my sexuality wasn't really like theirs at all, I thought. It felt more like a keyboard on which someone else was pressing the keys, forcing me to play a tune I didn't recognise, making me wander into a story someone else had written for me. Wasn't I still living in some cruel, eerie fairy tale every single day?

In my sexuality—if you could even call it that—there were witches. And animals. At best, I was still just a baby, a toddler, simply a small child.

Or perhaps some kind of creature. Everything was mixed together, always with so much violence. And such terribly strange, unpleasant things. None of it felt like it belonged to me. Did a sexuality like that even have a name. I didn't understand. Why was I stuck with something so difficult.

Did others feel this too?

Wilco went on to explain that many people didn't even consider gay people entirely normal—some even thought they were mentally disturbed. That they supposedly belonged in a psychiatric institution. The idea shocked me. Mentally disturbed... didn't that mean you belonged in a lunatic asylum, that they would try to treat you for your sexuality. Was that even possible? I knew enough to be afraid of being labelled "mentally disturbed," so I wisely kept quiet about my strange desires. Almost everything about my life seemed "weird" in other people's eyes. Having little boys as role models for my identity, having bizarre images in my sexuality. And that was only part of the peculiar feelings I carried. Take my age, for instance. It often felt wrong. Or sometimes completely off. Officially, I was eighteen. Me. Ridiculous. Nonsense. What was someone that age even supposed to do. What did an eighteen-year-old look like. I genuinely had no idea.. Lying on my sleeping bag, I suddenly found myself wrestling with so many questions. Was I supposed to become an adult, or was I already one simply because I lived on my own. When was someone actually an adult. Who decided that. Being an adult now would be an absolute disaster for me—the greatest tragedy that could ever happen in my life. An adult. Under no circumstances did I want to become that. It couldn't possibly be the intention, because who in their right mind would ever turn into such a horribly awful person. But at the same time, if I was already an adult, then it was irrevocably too late. That would mean I had suddenly arrived in the time after my childhood while, judging by how I felt, everything was still supposed to be ahead of me.

My entire life seemed turned upside down. I couldn't deny it—I was probably mad. I felt empty, like I was nothing at all. A deep loneliness lived inside me. I felt extinguished—no, wrung out. As though atMy whole life seemed turned upside down. I couldn't deny it—I was probably mad. I felt empty, as if I were nothing at all. A deep loneliness lived inside me. I felt extinguished—no, wrung out. As though at eighteen I had already reached the end of my life while, paradoxically, it felt as if I hadn't truly lived a single day of it yet. I got up, walked between the tall cupboards into the kitchen, quickly rinsed a mug and made a cup of brown liquid with a spoonful of instant coffee and hot tap water—something I called “coffee.” Most of the time I couldn't be bothered to boil water, so it was warm enough like this. Through the narrow gap I returned to my room. I set the coffee on the floor beside the mattress and stretched out again on the sleeping bag, my head resting precisely between Bimbam and Dumbo. I gave them a quick hug

. “You don't know either, do you?” No answer came. The silence felt eerie. Even my teddy bears had nothing to say that day. To understand how everything had come to this, I had to go all the way back to the very beginning of my life.

I lived with my parents for only a short time, from my birth in 1962 until the autumn of 1964. Yet that world—the place where I spent my earliest years as a baby and toddler—has always lingered in my mind. My own house, the place that has always felt like my only true home, is one I never really left.

Home was partly the ordinary world where I lived with my parents and my three brothers and two sisters. My oldest brother, Remco, was six years older than me. Then came Bram, five years older, and Gert, about two years older. My big sister Linda was four years older, and my baby sister Elly was born a year after me. We all arrived roughly a year apart

. My parents' presence, during the time I still lived at home, was something I took for granted without ever thinking about it. Of my father and mother, I remember very little from those years— mostly just a lingering feeling. The only vague image I have of my mother from that time is a single still moment, just the two of us.

Bathed in the warm orange glow of the large sodium lamps lining a cobbled road between tall trees, I sat perched on her arm, waving goodbye to relatives driving away. A perfect we-moment, just my mother and me. Of my father, I remember nothing. Except that whenever I even briefly think of him, two images automatically surface in my mind. The first is that of a large black bird that always frightened me. The second, stronger image is that of a rooster's head—with fierce, piercing eyes and a sharp pointed beak beneath those dreadful dangling wattles. Yes, to me, my father has always existed as either a *crow* or a *rooster-head*.

Even now, a warm feeling washes over me when I think of the large zinc tub in the courtyard behind my parents' house. Sheltered by tall green-painted wooden fences, that little space gave me just enough safety to dare explore the outside world.

The image of the zinc tub in that courtyard also brings back an intensely vivid atmosphere shaped mostly by the season. It must have been summer—gloriously warm, with deep shadows cast across the courtyard by the dark green canopy of leaves. The seasons seem to have saturated everything about those first years of my life, as if I had melted into them. As a result, my life appears to have unfolded mostly outdoors. It feels as though the stubbornly preserved memories of falling autumn leaves— playing on the patio tiles with small broken twigs and scuttling beetles—are the reason I retained anything at all about home throughout the rest of my life. These are my most precious memories, yet they are mingled with hazy fragments of other, far stranger events that would forever cloud the image of my earliest childhood. Because in that same atmospheric setting I called “home,” I was also living in a *completely different world*.

A world partly intertwined with the normal one, yet one in which everything I knew as ordinary simply ceased to exist. In that other world, I was never free to play or go where I wished—everything there was incomprehensibly and terrifyingly different.

The strangest thing about that other world was that it was where the mysterious domain of the witches began. They existed with me in a cruel

, frightening fairy-tale realm. I dealt with witches constantly—though I didn't even call them witches back then. Why I later did, I don't know, because they bore no resemblance to the witches in storybooks. These weren't hunched old women flying on broomsticks, wearing black pointed hats and creepy hooked noses. No, these were *real witches*.

They would dominate my life until I was thirty-five, when I finally managed to “get rid of them”—though they later returned in other forms, haunting my thoughts anew. The real witches were deeply intertwined with animals—cats, crows, roosters. They were also entangled with babies. Mostly, though, they were what I would now call undefined, existing mainly as “things you don't want to think about.”

“Things you don't want to think about” may sound just as strange as the fact that, later in life, I never quite knew who I didn't want to think of.

Or who I had to go to whenever a voice in my head whispered every night before sleep: “You still have to go to the witches.” Or when another voice asked: “Does Jasper still have to go to the witch.” And yes
, the answer was always yes. I was always theirs.

The reason I had to go to the witches in my mind until I was thirty-five is perhaps even harder to grasp. I had to go to them for sex. For filthy, cruel, unspeakable things. Why did I have this. Who were they, really. Who was I being sent to in my thoughts. And weren't witches just fairy- tale creatures. I didn't know.

I only knew exactly what they did when they held me captive. I also remember that the witches' names were sometimes linked to animals, and sometimes to numbers. There was, for instance, a Cat-Witch who came when it was dark. Then I would be taken to large buildings where the Cat-Witch waited. Vaguely, I also recall something about a Three- Witch who looked like an actual four-legged animal. That had to do with "hanging from hooks" in some dreadful place. Why I remember this, or why the witches were named this way, I have no idea. I simply don't know. Just as I don't know exactly who all the other witches were— except one. The most important one, and perhaps the one I saw most often. That witch I called the *Two-Witch*.

She was one of the witches in the life of a little boy I call Gipsy Boy, who knew several witches—witches to whom he was bound in those days. Gipsy Boy was a sturdy toddler with dark hair. He lived mostly outdoors, almost always naked, as if he were barely human. He lived more like an animal. From time to time, he was even tied up somewhere, a collar around his neck, fastened beneath one of the caravans parked near his home at the edge of a field. Why he was there, he didn't know —it felt strange yet also normal, because he had been there so many times before.

In a fleeting glimpse, I see him on an early, sorrowful twilight evening, peering out through the wooden slats of a pen beneath one of the many caravans, where long lines of laundry hung limp in the faint moonlight.

Why was he lying there, collared beneath a caravan. Who had put him there. In the world of his witches, they called him the Clown. They laughed at him, harsh and mocking. Gipsy Boy often found himself in this bizarre world, strangely mixed with crows and babies, with large roosters pecking at him and stabbing knives. There was blood there, too

. He heard strange, incomprehensible words, and sometimes a soft, eerie singing reached him inside the pen. Then he would be dragged out, and they would touch him all over. For a long time they pulled him through the sand until he felt strange, utterly exhausted and overwhelmed by sheer emotion. Who were they.

Large witch-hands slapped hard against his plastic trousers. Witch- fingers, adorned with gold and silver rings, gripped his head firmly. And then he had to eat.

The food and drink were strange—or rather, awful. Everything here was awful. Faeces, worms, and flies were pushed into his mouth by large hands, hands pressing down on his lips. He lay there covered in filthy feathers and blood, among bloody bones where animals and humans seemed to mingle in a revolting spectacle of screams and rage. And all of this was for the Highest One, whom Gipsy Boy called Ieram.

Who was Ieram? Gipsy Boy didn't know. No one did. But it was there, lying in the sand, that Gipsy Boy suddenly looked up at me.

In a frozen moment, I still see his face before me—covered in reddish- brown blood mixed with gritty sand, smeared with filth and feathers, crying out in horror, in unbearable pain and fear. He was breaking apart
; in that brief instant, he seemed to be dying. Outside of him, there was no one left but me. In fact, if I hadn't happened to be there too, no one would ever have known he had lain there like that at all.

In that moment, everything suddenly fell eerily still. Deathly silent. And as he looked up at me in that intense stillness, I saw his lips move ever so slightly. I leaned closer to hear him better and caught his faint whisper. Barely audible, yet unmistakably clear: “Who are you.”

And I—I said nothing. I looked at him, then turned away. So cowardly. I walked away. I couldn’t help him, couldn’t bear to watch, and didn’t want to know what had happened here. I had nothing to do with Gipsy Boy. I had never been here.

At the end of summer, when the days were already growing shorter and the sky’s colours deepened into darker blues earlier each evening, the day came when everything suddenly ended. Gipsy Boy’s world ceased to exist. Forever, he would be severed from his own, his first worlds.

Months earlier, his mother had abruptly disappeared. Then, just weeks before, on an ordinary day, his sister Linda and baby sister Elly had been taken away by complete strangers. Gipsy Boy understood nothing of what was happening. And one late autumn day, he too—along with his three older brothers—was taken by strangers. He would never return home.

3

One afternoon in late October 1964, I awoke as if from a dream in the car of Miss Warre, a social worker from child protection. Seated next to my brother Gert, nearly two years older than me, on the back seat of her DAF Daffodil, we were on our way to Groningen, where we would be placed in a children’s home. Where my parents, my brothers, and my sisters had gone, I didn’t know. No one told me anything.

Through the car window behind me, I saw the moon—low on the horizon, in its earliest first quarter. My moon. The one I knew so well. It was the same moon I had watched during long stretches of solitude, peering out from beneath a caravan through narrow vertical slats. The moon, seeming to travel with us, offered me one last fragment of familiarity.

The journey north was long. In the seemingly endless pastures along the motorway, I saw real, living cows grazing. Black and white—so those were cows. Who else but me remembers the very first cow of their life.

It was such a strange situation. Nearly three years old, sitting beside Gert in a car with a strange older woman, being taken on what felt like an endless journey to a destination completely unknown to me.

What was happening. Where was she taking us. I knew nothing. Everything was uncertain. My only certainty was Gert beside me on the back seat. In the city of Groningen, we arrived at an imposing building. A children's home. I remember the large, oddly protruding bay windows—windows unlike anything I had ever seen.

First, I was examined by strangers. I was malnourished, my face covered in a stubborn rash that healed only with difficulty. After that, I was given a bed in a large dormitory. In time, I came to know the building's interior. On the first floor there was an immense kitchen with rows of stoves lined up side by side. How could a kitchen possibly be upstairs.

The mystery only deepened, because this kitchen had so many lights that

, in the evenings, more light shone above those great stoves than I had ever seen— even in daytime— in any kitchen before.

Behind the tall house, with its many staircases, hallways, and

floors, lay a large walled-in grassy field, shaded by several enormous trees. This was where we were allowed to play.

We often went for walks in the big city with the matron and all the other children from the home. The traffic lights fascinated me: three coloured lamps on a pole that could suddenly change colour. Then you were allowed—no, required—to cross the road before the light changed again. We crossed the street on white painted stripes called zebra crossings.

And all the cars stopped for us, simply because of those stripes. Impressive trolleybuses rumbled past, their wires crisscrossing high above us. Through narrow streets lined with tall houses, we reached what seemed to me an endlessly vast square beside a towering church spire. And as we walked through the heart of Groningen, past the many houseboats moored along the high quay walls, in long canals beneath the many steeply arched bridges, surrounded everywhere by people and cars, I felt unbearably far from my own home—impossibly far from where I belonged

:: After a few months, Gert and I were moved to a large complex of squares and lawns elsewhere in the city. Several buildings together formed a home called Helper Haven. In my memory, the building of the residential unit—known as Sparrow Passage—at the edge of the vast children's home complex looks deserted and silent. As if no one lived there at all. In the longest building, with its many windows lined up side by side, only the very youngest children lived. A tall chimney rose above it, making it look like a large factory. It was there, in that building, that I lived from roughly age three to four.

I remember the layout of this house clearly. From the entrance hall, a long corridor led directly to the right, towards the nursery. For me, this would become the most important place in the entire building. Straight ahead in the hall stood an enormous, wide staircase with glossy black plastic handrails on both sides. At the top of those stairs were the toddlers' dormitories. To the left of the main hall you entered the playroom of the toddler group. My toddler group. We played there together during the day, though I preferred playing alone with wooden blocks and toy cars..

Next to the playroom—where our group spent most of the day playing, drawing with wax crayons, and sometimes dancing or listening to the radio—was the dining room. I have always remembered my usual spot. At mealtimes, I always sat at the far right corner of the high dining table, happily facing the large window. I looked out over the vast green lawn dotted with daisies. Looking outside was a comfort. But the dining table wasn't always cheerful or cosy. I recoiled from the thick slab of liver on the white stoneware plate that I was forced to eat because I still needed to "build up my strength." Together, we toddlers would gag over our plates before reluctantly forcing down the bitter, grey, dry meat

There were feasts at this table too. After choking down the bitter greyness, a cheerful-looking yellow custard pudding would appear. And as a toddler, I truly believed in heaven whenever—on rare occasions— we were treated to a divine semolina pudding. At the top of the wide staircase leading to the dormitories, turning immediately right, the boys slept. Girls, at this age, were already strictly forbidden. They slept to the left of the staircase. The threats uttered by complete strangers, warning me never to go near the girls, left a deep impression on me—one I never forgot

The little boys slept in two rows facing each other beneath a sloping, windowless attic roof. My spot was the third mattress on the left side. Gert slept beside me, which gave me a sense of safety. In bed, we played with our knees drawn up, pretending we were in a real racing car.

Gripping the wheel fiercely with our hands as if taking sharp corners, loud vroom-vroom sounds bursting from our mouths, we shrieked with laughter. The matron who put us to bed always wished us goodnight very kindly. She would leave the door slightly ajar, letting in a sliver of light. Here, among the other boys, with that ribbon of light from the open door, I even felt a tiny bit safe—though I didn't know why I was here.

Spring arrived. On a large grassy field, all the children from the home played cheerful games. "White swans, black swans," we sang merrily in unison. I ran past rows of older children I normally never saw, since the children were divided across different pavilions by age. The older ones formed a living archway for me to run through. Everyone was having fun that day. Blankets were spread across the lawn where children ate sandwiches and drank lemonade. Even the usually strict, primly dressed matrons sat—exceptionally, without aprons—right on the grass. It was a radiant day. Never again would grass seem greener to me than it did on that day, every blade celebrating with us. The older children played with the little ones, and everyone was happy. If only every day could have been like this one. And at the end, I was given the first 'possession' of my life—a small round tin cup, a memento of this feast day marking the children's home's centenary

The cup was filled with sweets, so I always called it my sweets cup . I was allowed to eat the sweets, and the tin cup was then placed on a shelf beside all the others belonging to the children in my group. "This one is yours, Jasper," someone told me. Mine? How strange that I could own something, that there was something entirely my own.

I still remember the St. Martin's Day celebration in early November. The older children, like Gert, were allowed to make proper lanterns. Carrying their flickering lights, they went door-to-door in small groups, singing songs in exchange for sweets. I was too young for all that—the treats and the mysteriously swaying lanterns passed me by—but because it was St. Martin's, I was allowed, just once, to stay up half an hour later: till seven instead of half-past six. On this St. Martin's Eve, I had already been away from home for almost a year without really noticing. Well, almost without noticing, because something peculiar was happening in the background here, too. Deceptively, everything seemed normal, yet this nameless, nearly imperceptible thing would have an enormous impact on the rest of my life. I was being taken back to the baby ward again and again. How often? I don't know. But it felt as though most of my time in the home was spent there, among the babies. Often— constantly, even—a carer would take me into a small nursery where everything was so white and bright. Dear little babies slept here in neat rows of white-painted cots. They wore white outfits and were changed by matrons in white pinafores with crisp white nappies. Soft white towels dried them, and during feeds they wore white bibs. Even the milk here was white. Gipsy Boy couldn't believe his eyes. All these babies together. So this was the paradise where babies lived after they died, he thought. How did he know. Paradise, death, babies, and witches—to Gipsy Boy, they all belonged to the same world, the same strange logic that only he understood.

On this St. Martin's Eve, I had already been away from home for almost a year without really noticing. Well, almost without noticing, because something peculiar was happening in the background here too.

Deceptively, everything seemed normal, yet this nameless, nearly imperceptible thing would have an enormous impact on the rest of my life. They belonged together. Were there witches here too?

On the baby ward, Gipsy Boy watched with rapt fascination. Everything here moved him deeply. The babies seemed like the most important creatures on Earth. He was obsessed with the question: What had happened to the babies. Once the last baby, its little mouth still open, had fallen asleep, I'd slip out of the nursery with the matron, tiptoeing softly. Because all the babies were now sleeping in their white paradise. In my mind, something twisted. Hadn't I been told there were *three* kinds of beings? People, animals, and babies? Was that why they were kept apart here—because babies weren't really people at all? And were animals and babies therefore the ones doomed to horrible cruelty?

Again and again, I was led down the long corridor to the nursery, where I witnessed the care of the babies at eye level. Here, they were washed and changed one by one, and from small white plates they were spoon-fed delicate purées with shiny little spoons. From tall, gleaming bottles they drank milk and soft porridge. Gentle lullabies were sung until their tiny eyes slowly closed and they drifted off into sweet dreams in their white-barred cots.

**:: Sometimes I'd glimpse one of their little naked bodies up close. And then came the thought, you don't want to think about that. But still... it was there. All of it was there. So did it have to do with witches? Yes.

Because babies simply belonged to witches. Was there no one here who realised that. I knew it all too well. Witches—I was

never, ever to think of them again. Gipsy Boy, though, kept thinking about the past. All he wanted was to go back. And oh, how he longed to become a baby again—to be cared for just like the ones here. How did you turn into a baby?

He wanted to sleep in broad daylight in a proper white cot with all those lovely white things around him. He wanted to get back to his mother, who must still be out there somewhere, waiting for him.

Suddenly, Gipsy Boy didn't even care what might happen after that. Not at all. He wanted to leave, even if it meant going back to the Two-Witch. Even if it meant turning into an animal again for Ieram and crawling on all fours. As long as he got back to Mother. Why was he there at all.

Didn't the babies prove he didn't belong here

But then again, that was just Gipsy Boy. I didn't find it strange at all being in this group of toddlers. There was no shouting, no violence. I could feel safe here. It was usually very calm, and the matron left me alone unless it was time to eat, get dressed, or be washed. Here, I was never alone. I wasn't suddenly taken to unfamiliar places—every night, I slept in the same spot. And Gert was here too, wasn't he. I didn't want to go back at all. I'd have to be mad to want that. There were so many nice things in the children's home. Along the long residential building, endless red roses bloomed in roughly raked, wide beds, making it seem as if I'd stepped into a beautiful fairy tale. How could roses be so stunningly red and smell so unbelievably sweet. With wonder, I realised that beautiful things existed.

**:: With my toddler group, I went on cosy walks around the home. Past green meadows and mirror-like ponds edged with reeds. Along mysterious winding paths, we walked to the large park where a teahouse stood on a hill. And very occasionally, we went even further, all the way to an enormous bridge beneath which the railway line stretched far to the south. I began to feel safer and safer in the group because, by then, I understood that nothing truly bad happened here. The toddlers around me protected me simply by being there.

Never again in my life would I feel so safe.

Unnoticed, the weather grew colder, and suddenly coats hung on the rack. Sinterklaas arrived in the country by steamboat, and on presents' night, impatient toddlers found piles of gifts waiting under the grand staircase in the hall. We sang Sinterklaas songs, Zwarte Piet scattered gingerbread nuts, and I received a present—a book of fairy tales. Now, two things truly belonged to me: the tin cup from the home's centenary and the fairy-tale book. In the last month of 1965, winter set in. A thick blanket of snow fell. The world around the home slowly transformed into an enchanted white. Sometimes the snow lay so deep I wasn't even allowed outside, but from behind the large window I could look out over the sill into the garden. The older children rolled huge balls of sticky snow across the grass. With a long parsnip, some lumps of coal, and a broom, they made a snowman who grinned cheerfully at me. When Gert spotted me standing there behind the window, he waved. It was so good that he lived here too.

Christmas came—something I had never experienced before. In the dining room stood an enormous dark-green fir tree, its wide branches drooping under shimmering tinsel, fluffy angel hair, and flickering candles that reflected in silver baubles. On long tables draped with crisp white cloths, rows of plates seemed to wait patiently for the whole group to gather for dinner. Just this once, even the girls—whom I normally never saw—would sit with us. Christmas had to be something very special, then. Bewildered, enchanted by so much beauty, I sat at the long table. Among rows of parentless, cast-off children, in the glow of warm candlelight, I tasted currant bread for the first time in my life.

Less than a week after this wonderful Christmas, Miss Warre appeared. Like an angry, malevolent spirit, she stood beside me and took me away. Without the slightest idea of what was happening, Gert and I were led off by her hand.

Once again, we sat in the back of her car for a long journey to an unknown destination. What did this Juffrouw Warre keep wanting with me. Who was she. What was going to happen. I felt uncertain and afraid
.I looked at Gert, but he seemed just as scared as I was.

4

And so, in January 1966, the longest chapter of my childhood began. I was taken to a strange house on a strange street in a strange village, to live with strange people. The village was called Hamersveld, a small community that would later become part of Leusden. It was exciting and frightening at the same time. What was I going to do here. Would I stay. Why had they brought me. At least Gert was with me—whatever happened, we would face it together. As soon as we stepped inside, Miss Warre told us we would be living here. In a foster family. I glanced cautiously around. The first thing I noticed was a small Christmas decoration hanging on the door: red Christmas bells on a piece of birch bark, adorned with tiny green holly sprigs. That little ornament radiated the same warmth as the children's home. It gave me something to hold onto. Would it be as cosy here? Through the tiled hallway, we entered a living room. Side by side on a sofa, Gert and I looked around uneasily. It was so different from the home, which had been stark and practical.

Here, the living room was filled with homely things. Plants blocked the view from the windows, a large, heavy oak sideboard stood against one wall, paintings hung on the walls—one of a volcano in Java—there were lampshades of beige and soft-yellow linen, and everywhere, cats roamed

. At least thirteen of them. The house felt more like a cat sanctuary. The smell of cat urine lingered everywhere. Was that normal, I wondered.

Later, eight random cats were taken to a shelter, leaving just five.

I liked the cats. They had names like *Dropje*, *Moortje*, and *Dikkie*. They weren't for playing with, but they were nice to have around.

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On the parquet floor beside the sideboard stood a dark wicker basket filled with Dinky Toys. Toys. There was something for children—so we were expected. The foster parents introduced themselves as Hans and Ria Bakker. At first, they made little impression on me; the house, being a foster child, the whole situation was still too tense. And what was I supposed to think of these strangers. So much was happening. Hans, the foster father, was a stocky man nearing forty, with dark-brown hair combed back. Ria had long, dark hair that fell to her shoulders. She must have been a bit younger, and what struck me most was that, unlike the matrons at the home, she didn't wear an apron. That would take some getting used to

We were given a glass of lemonade, diluted with water. Then we were shown around the house. Miss Warre went upstairs with us to see the bedroom we would share as brothers. In the oblong room stood two neatly made beds, each against a wall. Mine was by the window.

Between the beds, at the head end, stood a rattan chair meant for our clothes. A tall brown wardrobe stood directly at the foot of my bed, and on it were placed the tin cups from the children's home. My sweets cup was here too—I could look at it from my bed. That immediately gave me a somewhat familiar feeling. The foster mother opened the narrow brown linen cupboard and showed Miss Warre the empty shelves where our clothes could be stored. Just before we were about to go back downstairs, Miss Warre unexpectedly stopped me: "You'll stay upstairs with me for a moment, Jasper."

The others went downstairs. I watched as Miss Warre slowly and neatly arranged the rest of my clothes from the children's home into little piles in the brown wardrobe. She folded my jumpers and trousers together on one shelf. The plastic pants I still needed because I wet the bed were placed right on the top shelf. A moment later, she pointed to the rattan chair. "Go sit there, Jasper."

I hurriedly sat down. I didn't know who Miss Warre was. Yes, she had once taken me from my parents' house, and I was afraid of her. At the children's home, I had seen her only occasionally. There, I had already grown used to obeying all sorts of complete strangers immediately.

Miss Warre sat on one of the beds and stared at me intently, as if searching for the right words to say something to me. In the stifling silence that followed, I held my breath.

"You must now forget everything that ever happened before this. Never think of it again. Will you truly promise me that?" She emphasised each word, underlining its importance.

"Now you need to listen to me very carefully, Jasper," she began. Her voice sounded so serious that I grew afraid of what was coming. I nodded timidly. "Yes, Miss Warre."

Though I didn't understand what she meant exactly, I dutifully replied: "Yes, Juffrouw Warre."

"From now on, you'll be living here with Gert. These are your father and mother now. You must call them Daddy and Mummy, will you promise me that?" "Yes, Miss Warre."

She repeated her question. “So will you never think again about what happened before. Look at me, Jasper.” “Yes, Miss Warre.

Miss Warre continued staring piercingly at me, as if she wanted to hypnotise me. “Off you go downstairs—they’re waiting for you,” she said then, with a wave of her hand. I scrambled down the unfamiliar staircase.”

That evening, I lay in bed in the strange house of my new ‘Daddy’ and ‘Mummy’. Together they put Gert and me to bed. Having my older brother nearby in the room gave me a sense of safety because everything about this new house with complete strangers felt so unfamiliar

**:: Even stranger were Miss Warre’s words echoing in my ears. What did she mean by “forget everything” and “never think about the past again”. What was I not supposed to think about. Could I simply stop thinking about something. Did she mean I should forget the house with the green fences where I used to live. Forget my brothers and sisters.

Linda and Elly—where were they anyway. And Bram. Where would Bram be. How long had it been since I had last seen them. And Remco. And My own mummy? Was I suddenly supposed to forget the children’s home with all the kids from my group. Forget where I once lived and who I always was. And why were these people my Daddy and Mummy. Who decided that? *What* was I supposed to forget?

One day—by then I had been living with the foster family for a few weeks—the foster mother pointed to a chair. I had to sit and listen. You could cut the tension with a knife. “Now you’ll listen to me carefully, Jasper.” That commanding voice—I grew immediately frightened.

“Soon you’ll be four years old, and then you’ll go to school.”

“Me? Go to school? What’s school?” I asked. The foster mother stared at me for a moment and shook her head. “No, Jasper, when you speak to me, you must always address me with two words, always say Mummy properly. So: ‘What is school, Mummy?’”

“What is school, Mummy?” I spoke as properly as I could “At school, you’ll be in a group of children where you’ll learn all sorts of things.”

I didn’t dare ask anything more. “Okay, Mummy,” I answered, but my head was full of questions. Hadn’t I just come from a group. Where was my group. Where were the toddlers who always protected me?

During my first period with the Bakker family, I regularly received postcards from my real mother. They were displayed standing upright on the sideboard in the living room, and I could look at them for a while. They showed simple pictures—a bunch of tulips in a vase, a cat sitting on a milk pail, a little dog in a basket. Whenever I saw such a postcard from my mother on the sideboard, it stirred something familiar inside me. My actual mother—my real Mama—wrote on these postcards that she loved us (they were addressed to Gert too). That was nice. She always called him *Gertie*. ‘To Gertie and Jasper Heijting, Haydnlaan 6, Groningen.’ And at the bottom of each card was always written: ‘XXX, kisses, Mama’.

Maybe it also felt familiar because I could already read some words: Groningen and Mama were plain enough for me to recognise. Mama no longer knew where I lived, but she still remembered the children's home address, and my crossed-out surname 'Heijting' and the scratched-out address of the orphanage remained visible. Often, I would feel sad looking at those postcards. My time in the children's home then suddenly seemed completely gone. Mama was thinking of me, yet she was so unreachable. Why was she no longer there, and why couldn't I live with her anymore. What had happened. Why had she just left, and why had she always left me so helplessly alone with my father.

Did the fact that she sent postcards mean I might return to live with her. Was I living here because of the terrible thing that had happened. Was it maybe my fault, was this my punishment. Or because my father and mother weren't good. Had the children's home been a punishment too.

The postcards sent with love only confused me more than I already was.

Secretly, deep down, I hoped to go back—and at the same time, I really hoped I wouldn't. Maybe I didn't actually want to go back at all, because not everything had felt right. But did I want to stay here either? My thoughts whirled in all directions while no one ever talked to me.

No one told me anything. I no longer dared think about my mother—there was too much bound up with that. I no longer dared think about anything from the past because it only filled me with despair and sorrow

. At night, I often had nightmares. In one awful dream, I was thrown hard onto the ground between tall, withered yellow grass in a birchwood forest during winter, and as I lay there, someone simply stuck a big knife into me—and I died.

I had another nightmare in which I was being chased by a heavily furred gorilla while I raced away from that great black ape as fast as possible on a scooter. A gamekeeper killed the gorilla with a large knife. How odd that the gamekeeper looked exactly like my own father—he wore the same little hat as my father.

The nightmares were terrible and frightening. I knew perfectly well that

what I experienced in my dreams at night wasn't real, but they haunted

me for so long afterwards. It often felt as if the nightmares were the real world and daytime life wasn't entirely genuine. Which world is the real one, anyway? I often wondered.

Yet despite the nightmares and my insecurities, in those early days everything still seemed to be going well. Behind the house was a grassy field edged with tall shrubs where Gert and I often played, and one day came the good news that my oldest brother Remco would also come to live here. Having my own brothers around me gave me something familiar to hold onto, though it didn't make things easier. It seemed like Remco couldn't settle in the foster home. He kept disappearing for long stretches, staying in an institution to be 're-educated' over and over.

Thankfully, he always came back and eventually stayed for good

:: Playing—whether alone or with Gert—was lovely. It was what I liked most. For my fourth birthday, I had been given a set of plastic farm animals, and with the wooden blocks already there, I built a nice stable on the little coffee table. I made the cows and horses chat with one another between plastic fences, and I played the farmer who herded them all into the block-stable. Miss Warre, who visited every month, sometimes brought discarded toys from the various children's homes she worked in. Once she gave me a Dixan washing powder tub full of plastic rails, colourful toy trains and a little station. I adored it—I immediately loved trains. The yellow, red and blue carriages clicked together easily, and I pushed them swiftly along grey plastic rails I had laid out into a big track. Everything was allowed to stay spread across the hallway floor for a while.

Outside, on the tiled driveway beside the house, Gert, some neighbour kids and I played with a wooden stepladder placed sideways to make a huge ship.

With an upturned bucket on my head, I stood between the ladder's legs steering fiercely as if I were a captain mastering stormy seas. Still

, not everything was fine. Sometimes, for no reason at all, I would get sharp stabbing pains low in my belly that made me violently sick out of nowhere, forcing me straight into bed. One moment I was fine; the next, I felt nauseous. Uncontrollable thoughts whirled in my head, and strange images rushed through my mind. My insides seemed to be tightening in spasms of horrendous pain. It felt as if something enormous was lodged deep in my stomach. As if I had been heavily poisoned, my head spinning dizzyingly from something happening far inside me. But every time, it passed. After a night's sleep, there was no more beautiful sound than the song of the blackbird in the tall birch tree outside our bedroom window.

5

And so I turned five. On a radiantly sunny summer's day, Remco, Gert and I each sat in our own water-filled tubs on the grass in the back garden.

Remco, being the biggest, always got the large zinc tub. Gert had the smaller zinc one, and I was given the smallest—a little blue plastic basin. We looked exactly like the three Daltons. Everything felt delightfully timeless, as if the past no longer existed. As I splashed water over my naked little body with both hands, my gaze—without intending to—landed on a small iron stake in the middle of the lawn. A stupid, strange little post. What was it doing there. Why was there a twenty-centimetre-high iron stake with ring-shaped ends just sitting there in the middle of the grass. What on earth was that nonsense for. There had never been a stake like that in the children's home's garden.

The foster mother came into the garden with Moortje under her arm and fastened long tethers with collars to the stake. The cats were then tied up in turn with their own collars so they could enjoy the outdoors without wandering off. Wasn't that nice. They all got to go outside, basking in the sunshine. Or... was something not right. Cats... collars

... collars and animals... Had Jasper... Had I... My eyes fixated on what I saw. Something peculiar, something nonsensical tingled inside me—as if none of this on the grass was quite right, not quite real. As if I wasn't really here. “Don't think about it,” a voice warned inside me. “You're just on the grass—a lawn, just like the one behind the children's home.” I splashed the water and let it cascade over me like thousands of tiny pearls. There were more impressions now—images flashing past unbidden. Down the road at the neighbours' house, a baby had been born—news that was, of course, shared everywhere. A baby—that was special. Without meaning to, my mind instantly leapt to the white paradise of the children's home. My thoughts flashed back even further, moments before I had gone there. For a flicker, I was back home.

Strange—I didn't think about home anymore at all, yet this baby brought something back. The neighbours' house stopped being just a neighbour's house—suddenly, it held something impossibly important. But why?

Later, on another day, I spotted the neighbours' washing line through a gap between the hedge and the fence. Nappies and plastic pants were hanging out to dry—as if it were completely ordinary. Even though, deep down, there was so much bound up with them. What was it again. Didn't this look just like the setup when I still lived at home. What was it about nappies and plastic pants, anyway. Where had they come from, and how did any of this make sense. ‘Don't think about it. This has nothing to do with you. It's just the neighbours.’

I wanted to fit in. I'm living here now, on the green grass. I'm behind a house with people who want to be my papa and mama. Play along. Fake it, so there's nothing to notice—because really, there is nothing. Right. But the neighbours' baby wouldn't leave me alone. It spun endlessly through my thoughts. It seemed like babies now affected me more than even my visits to the nursery in the children's home had. And so—most likely because of this ceaseless, churning whirl in my mind—Gipsy Boy came back. More and more often. Especially at night, as I lay in bed and tried to feel safe. From then on, I was always afraid when I had to go to sleep. One Saturday afternoon, the foster parents took me to visit the neighbours to admire their oh-so-sweet, utterly lovable, immaculate, precious, angelic, adorable new baby. "Go on, look—such a sweet little baby. Oh how darling, what adorable tiny feet, what sweet little grabbing hands, how precious, such a little cutie, an absolute angel." The rusk with sugared aniseed was delicious—that was the only good thing about visiting a new baby. The baby itself was overwhelming. My emotions collided in every direction. Sadness, yet total fascination. Fear—but why. What was this baby doing to me. I even became afraid of the bed I slept in. It wasn't just Gipsy Boy anymore. The Two Witch was returning too—so strongly that sometimes I believed the bed itself was an actual person I had to sleep on top of. I thought suddenly of nappies, of plastic pants and of those white baby things, of naked little infant bodies. Why. What was all that about. The frightening part was that anything could slip unexpectedly into my mind just from seeing certain objects. Like coloured pet collars. Or a dead bird I saw lying by the curb. Or sand under the hedges. Or when I suddenly saw the foster mother standing at the kitchen counter with a bread knife. The world was full of places and things that did something to me.

And always there was *Gipsy Boy* . He wanted to go home, he wanted to become a baby again. How intensely he longed for home, no matter what would happen there. He only wanted to live with his own real mama. He wanted nothing of the green grass here. He didn't want neighbours with babies, or plastic farm animals, or grey rails with colourful toy trains.

No, he didn't want a little blue tub of water behind the house on hot days. He wanted no part of having new parents—none of it. Because who was this strange woman who thought he'd just call her *mama* ? He already had a mama. He needed to go back. That's where he belonged.

So he decided to sabotage everything connected to 'having to live here'. These people would never become his parents. *Gipsy Boy* would make sure of that.

At the same time, while all this swirled in my head, I tried to take charge. I actively wanted to make living here work and do my best - I really never wanted to go back. I grew afraid of everything belonging to *Gipsy Boy*'s world. Of course he existed. And of course his world had to contain so much. But me? I could already read. Surely I wasn't him? At four years old I was already reading little books. And when the foster parents bought me several books from the *First Year Reading* series, I felt so happy and proud.

I read about Aaf and An, John and Gus, the dog called Kees. And about poor Pierewit falling from his nest - which upset me so much it made me cry. These were reading books that wouldn't be used in my school class for another two or three years, but at four I was already reading them fluently, and I felt grown-up. And that's what I wanted to be.

Slowly, I adjusted to the new situation. Juffrouw Warre kept visiting monthly even after a year, maintaining the link between my real home,

the children's home and the foster family. She still regularly brought toys from a children's home which always delighted me. I didn't know they'd been played with before, and I doubt I would have cared.

One day, among a box of wooden blocks, coloured rods from *Sio Montage* and some plastic toy cars, I discovered a few stuffed animals I could choose from. I immediately loved them. There was a brown toy cat, which I named *Bimbam*, and a small blue striped horse that became *Pietertje*.

That same evening I took Bimbam and Pietertje to bed with me, one on each side. I felt safely cocooned between them. A new, almost romantic world emerged where I played with my teddies and they talked to me—a place where I could feel momentarily safe. Simply being a little like a baby again, protected and tenderly cared for by two soft toys. I don't know when it started, but one evening they'd simply begun speaking of their own accord.

"Isn't this nice in bed together?" I heard Bimbam say one evening.

Naturally I answered immediately. "Yes Bimbam, I'm so happy you're here. Do you like being in my bed?"

"It's so fun like this together in bed. We're friends now, aren't we?" "Of course—you can always sleep in my bed!"

I looked into the stuffed animal's green glass eyes—what a charming face he had.

"And who's that blue striped horse over there?" asked Bimbam. Behind me I heard an excited little voice piping up: "Me? Do you mean me? I'm Pietertje!"

"We're having such fun here, aren't we Jasper!" declared Bimbam.

"And we have our own real house to live in too," added the stuffed kitten.

I laughed at Bimbam. How wonderful—I wasn't alone anymore, and suddenly people were talking to me from both sides. I pulled my knees up, making a house under the blankets. "Isn't this a nice little house Bimbam? Do you want to live here too Pietertje?"

This was our bedtime conversation, safe beneath the blankets. Pietertje emerged cheerfully from under the duvet and I heard him ask near my face: "Can I always sleep on your other side Jasper? That way I can protect you from now on."

"Protect me? You'll protect me Pietertje? Just like that? Can you do that?"

"Yes, of course! That's my job! I can see everything in the dark, you know!"

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes yes! All us striped horses can."

And so, while Bimbam slept safely against the wall, the little blue striped horse stood guard on the open side of my bed.

7

During my first stay with the foster parents, everything had seemed normal. In the evenings they were sometimes out, and Gert and I would occasionally get an ice lolly from our babysitter, Mia, into the bargain. She was about the same age as the carers at the children's home, even resembling one of the matrons there. Mia secretly let us stay up later

than we were allowed and would smile at us conspiratorially: “Now don’t tell, alright?” No—cross our hearts, we wouldn’t tell. An extra half hour. Wonderful. She asked us about our interests and sometimes read to us. Whenever the foster parents were out and Mia came over, everything suddenly felt good again..

Then things would briefly feel normal—but they weren’t, not really. True, we sometimes played with a few neighbourhood children outside, but I always felt different—mostly just achingly alone. I now lived with a family, of course, yet somehow it still resembled the children’s home. As there, no one ever took me onto their lap or held me close. As there, no one here loved me either. I wasn’t truly important to anyone. And in that sense, the foster family was actually worse, because unlike the carers at the children’s home—who would sometimes smile at me or tell me something amusing—I never received a single kind or affectionate word here. The foster parents never made cheerful remarks and showed no warmth whatsoever. They didn’t even try to like me. It felt as though they had made a mistake by taking me in. Or perhaps they kept me despite their better judgement. I couldn’t warm to them, and they seemed unable to warm to me either.

“Jan-Willem from across the road is much nicer than you,” the foster mother said out of the blue one day. What did she mean by that?

Did she find him more likeable? Would she rather have him as her child?

Deep down, none of this surprised me. I knew something was terribly wrong with grown-ups. That was why I never dared be around them casually. It made life difficult—because they were everywhere.

Always, everywhere, I needed time, so much time. Time to adjust. To gauge whether it felt safe. There was something monstrously wrong with grown ups, something that poisoned every interaction. I understood that I would eventually have to overcome my near- paralysing fear of them. But how—that I

didn't know.

Fortunately, I hid my fears well. I wanted to prevent them from getting too close, from touching me. I even felt vaguely afraid of older children. It wasn't just the foster mother who frightened me—it was also the kindly neighbour who'd just had a baby. Terrified of Juffrouw Warre who brought me toys unannounced. Afraid even of my schoolteacher, despite her occasional warm smiles. No, I didn't trust them. The foster father terrified me; so did our neighbour opposite and the binmen who waved as they passed; the butcher who, with his friendliest face, slid me a slice of sausage whenever I entered his village shop with the foster mother— all unreliable.

Grown-ups—there was something deeply wrong with every single one of them. To me, they all unmistakably belonged to... *'that thing you mustn't think about'*, but thankfully nobody knew. Because privately I found it odd myself, since other children didn't seem remotely bothered. I stayed permanently wary, knowing any grown-up might suddenly *'do that thing you mustn't think about'*—every single one, even if you didn't expect it of them. Without anyone noticing, something profoundly disturbed was happening inside me.

8

One morning—I think I was still five—I abruptly felt as though awakening from a dream. Perched on my bed's edge sat my *five-year-old self*. I observed him from a distance. "Look at him sitting there. That's Jasper—he's clearly not even human, don't you see? He's completely mad, stark raving mad. Actually, he's *an animal*—I see that plainly, it's undeniable. Yes, an animal. My vision's accurate." And it was true—I literally saw an animal on my bedside. Oh yes, I

recognised myself as animal, not human. But why did it appear so clear?

I kept dwelling on it, despite the horror—the pain it caused, how it drove me mad. Animals and people were completely jumbled together in my thoughts. I couldn't explain it, but I always knew – with absolute certainty – that something was terribly wrong with me. I knew – no, I could feel – that things would *never* be alright again. Never again. Nor did I know how others saw me. I often believed people looked at me as an animal, which gave me such an odd sensation. It was as if pitch-black clouds came drifting through my life, ensuring no day could ever end brightly.

Each night before sleep, I now entered what I called the *Terrible One*. This was someone who always wanted to appear. Who made me go to the witches. Who wanted to bring back everything I feared so intensely. Utterly terrified...

At the same time, I knew I truly was the witches' possession – not as a human, but as an animal. And as an animal, it actually felt normal and even right that I existed solely for the witches, because then – as an animal – I was no longer frightened at all, and the witches could simply do with me whatever they pleased.

When the witches acted as they wished, everything made sense again. Then it all became normal and good once more, and things had to remain that way. So the *Terrible One* couldn't suddenly appear unannounced. All in all, something strange was happening, yet for me it felt automatically 'normal'. Because it was all connected to my penis. This much I knew.

Witches and my penis simply belonged together. And cruel witches? They went naturally with an erection.

Hideous images played through my mind again and again. While masturbating in bed at age five, I would envision the witches devouring me – moving their mouths across my body to eat me. During these visions, I felt myself as an animal, tethered while being eaten alive, being touched everywhere by them as I lay helpless.

In my mind's eye I saw them shriek angrily, forcing my head roughly downward – I had to eat... eat? Not normal food, but parts of their bodies. Revolting. Inescapable. Their raucous laughter; entrapment. A true creature of prey for all witches from the *Two-Witch* .

As for who or what the *Terrible One* actually represented, I preferred not to dwell upon it. I had to *conquer* it, overcome it, before the *Two-Witch* could dictate my thoughts, my life, my total self-abandonment. I refused to think about the *Two-Witch* , and by allowing it to happen – by masturbating – I defeated it, and the feeling of fear would pass once more.

It was over until the time when the *Two-Witch* came for me yet again. Every single night. Always. The *Two-Witch* never missed an evening. She kept returning relentlessly, as though that was my actual existence.

So everything was whirling inside me. It was all so confusing, because lower in my body—right there at my penis—it also felt strangely nice. Only later did I realise that from when I was three or four I had already been having orgasms. I never wondered about it. I never thought it might be strange. What I did find strange was how something that scared me so much could at the same time feel so good. How? And that same awful feeling also felt very familiar to me. It became too much—I couldn't make sense of it anymore. Because if something felt familiar, didn't that mean it was already a part of me?

Yet the fear grew even stronger still, perhaps compounded by what I witnessed and underwent one decisive day. Because on that day an idea simply came to me. I grabbed the rattan chair that stood between the beds and placed it in front of the tall brown wardrobe at the foot of my bed. This way I could reach the top shelf of the brown wardrobe where the plastic pants were

kept. I'd put them on to masturbate, making me feel safer from the *Terrible One* . Even so, I could still feel them hitting

me, screaming at me. The threat was overwhelming. Nothing was worse than the *Terrible One*. Everything—absolutely everything—had to be sacrificed to keep it at bay.

From then on, I lived every day split between two entirely separate worlds. One part of me existed as a foster child in the household—going dutifully to school, playing normally with plastic trains, reading books, letting water run over my body in a little blue tub in the garden. But that wasn't my real life. My true life belonged to that other world, with the *Terrible One*. That's where I belonged. That's where I was trapped.

Thankfully, no one knew—or needed to notice—that I kept defeating the *Terrible One*, because I always folded the plastic pants neatly and put them back. And indeed, it was never discovered. Not that I wore them to bed as armour, to defend myself, to ensure I wasn't as helplessly surrendered to the witches as before. Even Gert, who shared my room, never noticed a thing.

I was only five or six, yet I knew perfectly well that I was doing something others would find strange. I could never explain it. Truthfully, I didn't understand it myself—sometimes I thought there was someone else inside me, someone who wanted this. There was no way out; this was the world I had to face, day after day.

Just as I was desperately trying to overcome the *Terrible One*—already confusing enough—something happened one day that made everything even more complicated. I stood there completely undressed, waiting patiently for the foster mother to turn on the shower. She let the water run over her hand to check the temperature, when suddenly I heard myself exclaim excitedly: "Look, *Mummy*, look what I have here— isn't it fun? Look!" Laughing, I pointed at my penis. "See, isn't that nice... Would you like to..."

For a brief moment, there was silence—only the hard spray of water hitting the shower floor—before her voice shrieked in my ears: "What?! You filthy, disgusting child! You're vile!"

It was like flipping a switch on the showerhead. Why had I asked such a thing? Had I assumed she'd want to do something with me? Yes, I was convinced that then I'd be considered good. That this was how it worked with grown-ups.

The foster mother turned off the hot tap at once. The cold water blasted down wide open. She grabbed my upper arm hard and held me under the freezing spray. I cried and shook, whimpering and trembling.

When she finally stopped, she rubbed my numb, chilled body dry with a rough towel, dragging me around like a limp doll.

Everything hurt.

At last I collapsed, shivering, onto the cold bathroom floor. I lay there, crying miserably, until she bent over me and yanked me up by the arm.

"Filthy belly!" she screamed. "You filthy child with your filthy belly! Do you hear me? You're disgusting!"

Her words hammered inside my skull. Filthy, belly, I'm filthy. Bad. Wrong. Awful. Wicked. A waft of the *Terrible One* flashed through the shower cubicle.

"Go put your pyjamas on! And downstairs! Disgusting child!"

Later I made the plastic cows walk across the coffee table again. Clap, clap. Moo. But nothing felt calm. Between the foster mother—sitting opposite me in stiff silence with her knitting, her face twisted in a scowl

—and the table where I played, it felt as if dozens of razor-thin, high-voltage wires were humming, ready to set off alarms at any moment.

She didn't want to look at me. She thought I was filthy. She thought I was something monstrous. Her knitting needles clicked back and forth without stopping, the ball of wool rolling away on its own as if it didn't want to be near me either.

What had I done wrong? What I'd asked was normal between grown-ups, wasn't it? Why didn't she accept me? Why still not?

Fort Gert came into the room not long after. I at
unat smile him. "
ely d

Gert, I'm so glad you're here too," I thought. The cows had to go back to the barn and I became the farmer again.

After the shower incident, everything got worse. The foster mother found out that I masturbated in bed. How did she know? She was never there when it happened. But she knew —without ever saying a word. And I understood exactly what she meant when she yanked up my pyjama top and struck me sharply low on my belly, just above my penis. Like a skipping record she kept repeating that I was filthy, that I was a very bad child, that I did dirty things in bed. Soon my lower belly was covered in red welts. Her voice grew hoarse. Her face showed such deep disgust—I realised she hated me.

From then on I was often dragged out of bed by my arm and hauled to the shower. Then it began: pyjamas off, underwear off, everything off, completely naked, and then "cool down" under an ice-cold spray. I cried

, moaned, whimpered and shivered beneath the horrible freezing jet. The rough drying-off hurt more than I could bear. Her grip on my upper arm already caused pain, and with the towel she struck out so furiously, so hard. It was as if she were trying to swat a troublesome fly to death.

Sometimes she even struck my penis with the towel, with a kind of disgusted menace. The drying ritual always ended with the

same stinging words: "Right, pyjamas back on and into bed, you filthy, disgusting, repulsive child."

In bed I curled up, weeping. I felt so powerless against the foster mother. And just as powerless against myself. What on earth was wrong with me? Why did this keep happening? My thoughts and everything unfolding in my mind never cooled down at all. If she thought her constant roughness, her cruel shower punishments, would stop the bed- time masturbation, she was wrong – because the foster mother didn't know the *Terrible One* I faced each night. The *Terrible One* held me captive with no possibility of escape.

9

During my second year of infants' school, we went on an outing to Soestduinen. All the way from Hamersveld we travelled by coach to the woods and dunes. To me it felt like a global expedition – we'd even brought sandwiches and an apple.

In vast forests unlike any I'd seen before, we walked hand-in-hand across white, yielding sand and carpets of pine needles. It seemed like a fairy tale – a sandpit full of trees.

Together we discovered little bags of sweets hidden here and there along the winding paths – left for us, our teacher said, by a squirrel. We also discovered small bags of sweets behind the rugged bark of a thick pine tree, hidden beneath enormous piles of gnarled branches or between tufts of swaying grass. Something for each of us. We sang songs and played tag and hide-and-seek, darting between the trees. Then onwards – across the loose sand paths, through the pine forests, over the sandy ridges skirting the enormous dunes.

Here and there the trees reflected in glittering puddles. Barefoot, I waded into one such pool. In that moment, I was free. With soft

sand springing beneath my feet, I splashed wildly as the lukewarm water tickled between my toes.

Towards afternoon's end, we reached a flower-filled meadow near the station.

"Shall we surprise all our mummies with a beautiful bouquet?" the teacher called. "Look at everything growing here! Pick some lovely wildflowers for your mums."

Like all the other children, I gathered flowers for my foster mother. Pretty, multicoloured wild blooms.

"Such beautiful flowers are sure to delight any mummy," the teacher said, and I wholly agreed. What brilliant colours—just growing freely in a field. All the way home, I clutched my bouquet tightly. For *Mummy*, as the teacher instructed. Because I too had a mummy, same as every child. Surely she'd think my flowers beautiful.

At the infant school, children ran into waiting parents' arms. Amid the wall of mothers stood my foster mother. Beaming, I handed her my bouquet. I couldn't wait – giving something felt terribly exciting. I laughed; I glowed. "Look! I picked these myself, for you, Mummy. Beautiful, aren't they?"

Would she find them lovely? Silently, she accepted the cheerful bunch, and wordlessly we walked the short distance home.

I chattered about the squirrel, the sweets, the sand; the enormous forests and long woodland paths. Words gushed from me, and momentarily I forgot how she always berated and horribly punished me with the freezing shower. Blissfully unaware, I failed to notice her total silence as she merely dragged me home by the hand.

Only indoors did it dawn on me that she truly hadn't wanted my gathered flowers at all.

"What's the meaning of this?" she snapped, the little bouquet shaking before my face.

"Well—I picked flowers too. For you, Mummy. Just like the other children did."

"Why give them to me?" she demanded. "What use have I for bedraggled weeds? Is that normal manners? Well? Answer me, Jasper. Look at me and answer."

Confusion swirled. "But the teacher said..."

Before my eyes, she flung the wildflowers into the pedal bin.

10

That February I turned six. From then on, Gert and I walked daily to the 'big school' two streets away. Nothing remarkable—despite routine punishments, icy showers and adjusting to new and bewildering expectations, life settled into numb regularity. I played happily; sometimes I almost felt better.

Then something completely unravelled that fragile equilibrium. I needed my tonsils out. Tonsils? What were those? Did I have them? Could they really be cut out—with scissors—deep inside one's throat? The notion terrified me.

Most thrillingly, it required hospital—all the way in Amersfoort! I'd even stay overnight. Hospital... that was frightening.

Would an ambulance fetch me? Now that sounded exhilarating! I asked excitedly while pushing toy cars across the parlour table.

"Will we go in a proper ambulance? With sirens and flashing blue lights, sweeping everyone aside?". I could barely contain myself at the thought.

The foster mother gaped at me—then abruptly grasped my meaning. "What did you just say, Jasper?"

"I'd love riding in an ambulance. Is one coming for me?" I repeated, thrilled.

"What? How dare you mock something as awful as hospital. I'll teach you!"

She lunged from her chair and seized my arm. "Making light of hospital, are you? Insolent wretch!"

She spun me round and struck my backside and back repeatedly.

"Take that! Your impertinence!" I didn't dare cry. When the foster father entered because of the commotion, he struck me too.

Later, when the tonsils had been removed and I'd returned, I watched one morning as the foster mother descended the stairs clutching my blue- striped plush horse, Pietertje.

"This filthy thing is completely ruined. Good riddance." "No! Not my Pietertje! Please!"

"It's useless—the loose seam on its back is beyond repair. Into the bin."

"But—but that tiny split could easily be fixed!" Helplessly I tried rescuing Pietertje's life. Unmoved, she carried him to the kitchen pedal bin.

"Please don't! Don't throw Pietertje away!" Wailing, I trailed after her. "My Pietertje!"

"Disgusting rags can't be mended. Bin it!" came the verdict.

There went Pietertje—just like the flowers before him—vanishing among potato peelings and dented bottle caps. Staring numbly at the bin, I pictured Pietertje nestled among rubbish, rotten scraps, mouldy crusts. Where would he be taken?

Who'd protect me now? Who'd whisper nightly like Pietertje had: "I see perfectly in the dark, don't fear. I've got your back. Nothing can harm you—I'll guard you. Love you always."

That bin lorry's arrival at week's end—tipping the galvanised dustbin with my Pietertje remorselessly into its maw—clinched my certainty: I'd never forgive her this.

A year later, we relocated from Hamersveld to Putten, a larger village wedged between the newly formed Veluwemeer lake and vast forests. Putten—an archetypal lovely Veluwe village—was where the foster parents settled in a new-build semi-detached house near its centre. The small high street boasted key shops and was dominated by a grand Reformed church at the market square. At Dorpsstraat corner by the church squatted the ancient well likely inspiring Putten's name ("Puthem"—its oldest mention—signifies a dwelling or community near water wells).

At the edge of the market square stood an old egg hall used as a fire station. Adjacent to this building on the square's corner loomed a black

wooden sheepfold where sheep were occasionally penned. By *Papiermakerstraat* stood the *Papiermakerstraat School* which I attended for five years.

The foster placement abruptly granted me an extended family - aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins we visited regularly. They all knew Remco, Gert and I were foster children, so I had *so-called grandparents* I was expected to call *Grandad and Grandma* like everyone else. The strictly Reformed parents of my foster father remained impenetrable to me - they frequently forgot my name: *Now what was it again? Jan? Oh no? Say it once more? Ah, Jasper? Hello Jasper.* The interminable mealtime prayers sounded as solemn as if we'd been trapped in the 17th century. The grandfather always dressed entirely in black, never cheerful, barely seeming alive. His sparse grey slicked-back hair only emphasised the rigid monotony that imprisoned him.

Their lives bewildered me. Withdrawn statues they were, consumed only by contemplating their sins while sitting in antiquated chairs, devoid of any true connection with the outside world they deemed 'of the devil'. Their home exuded a mournful awareness of profound sinfulness. Even birthdays weren't celebrations - at best, the atmosphere grew marginally less oppressive.

The grandmother, as black-clad as her husband, seemed even more melancholy and gloomy. Her face showed a funereal dread, as though the earth might perish at any moment and God's wrath would engulf her violently. She lived almost literally in the dour shadow of her husband, a minister in the Old Reformed Church. Usually her expression resembled someone who'd eaten a plate of stewed prunes then accidentally rinsed their mouth with vinegar.

Occasionally, however, an almost furtive smile - barely visible even to God - would crease her furrowed face, like when she nibbled home-

baked cake during rare birthday gatherings.

The foster mother's parents belonged to a slightly less austere denomination - the Dutch Reformed Church. Unlike their ultra-orthodox counterparts, they owned a radio and television, and their home felt distinctly lighter. But despite their differences, it mattered little to me.

These grandparents too showed no interest in me, Remco or Gert.

After

all, they had *proper, real* grandchildren they cherished intensely - a fact made excruciatingly clear to Gert and me. These 'real' grandchildren were exceptionally good and special - about them I constantly heard glowing tales. Nobody actually spoke to me directly. I felt merely an accidental by-product of my foster parents - rather like the foster mother's handbag, or a walking stick forgotten in some corner. I was merely tolerated - never truly their grandchild.

I was fourteen when our so-called 'grandfather' died. The death notice listed: *"Putten, Hans and Ria Bakker, Remco, Gert and Karel."* Karel - that was me. They couldn't even remember my real name. And Remco? He'd already left years before...

Admittedly, not everything was terrible. Suddenly we had aunts, uncles, cousins whom we - as 'the Bakker family' - visited regularly, mostly for birthdays, sometimes at Christmas or New Year. Like any family, some were rather nice, others frankly unbearable. At birthday parties I'd feast on homemade pastries with whipped cream and drink delicious chocolate milk. Occasionally there'd even be old-fashioned homemade fruit punch. I'd shake hands with complete strangers - people who clearly wondered who I was and why I'd appeared at their celebration. The younger cousins, however, behaved perfectly normally. They immediately accepted me, making me feel I belonged in their family.

Then there was Uncle Johan. With Aunt Fien, he represented the family's more progressive branch. Though genuinely the foster mother's brother, he resembled her in nothing. Genial, open-minded, engaged with the

world - his laugh-lined face radiated warmth. He seemed interested in everything. Unfortunately their children were much older than my brothers and me, and living in distant Leiden meant we visited perhaps once a year.

Their Leiden home belonged to another universe entirely. Modern in that era's typical style: warm wood-panelled walls painted citrus-orange, dark brown checkered curtains over light blue and soft yellow window shades. The house breathed cheer, warmth and vitality.

Aside from a fireplace, their living room boasted a sunken conversation pit tiled with large beige slabs, framed by heavy wooden beams, with an enormous television best viewed from the vast leather sofa piled with cushions. So this was where people simply watched TV - what my foster family's religion condemned as mortal sin.

Unlike my foster parents - whose five cats and three dogs kept them perpetually staycating - Aunt Fien and Uncle Johan actually

holidayed abroad. They'd project slides onto a huge screen. France - to me some infinitely distant alien planet. Torrential streams carving through landscapes of sheer gorges and barren brown cliffs; vertiginous mountain roads snaking upwards until disappearing into clouds. I'd never seen anything taller than a dyke before. There was Uncle Johan, grinning from a *Deux-Chevaux* on a narrow track, whitewashed villages clinging to majestic peaks behind him. Suddenly I grasped how vastly the world exceeded the Veluwe or my fragmentary Groningen memories.

Uncle Johan widened my horizons further - being a secondary school headmaster, he once showed us round the empty Saturday school.

I gaped endlessly. Endless corridors; classroom after classroom;

broad staircases opening into vaulted halls. Such an enormous building.

"You'll attend somewhere like this one day," he said. I literally couldn't imagine it.

12

Fortunately, other bright moments illuminated my childhood - none brighter than with a nephew seven years my junior: Aunt Kathy's son, the foster mother's sister's little boy. She was married to Uncle Geert. They lived about thirty kilometres from us.

During our first visits, they only had one child—Gerda, a gentle, sweet and fragile girl with whom I had little interaction. Occasionally she'd seek my help—say, when her toys broke. A dollhouse door hanging loose, a limb detached from a doll's body, a shattered keyring—that sort of minor repair. I recall her dubbing me "a genius" for magically fixing anything damaged.

When Gerda was around three, a baby brother arrived—Jerry. To him, I was unequivocally family. In his eyes, I *truly existed*. Though seven years my junior, we connected flawlessly. Neither ever noticed the age gap. During visits, we'd play endlessly—taking turns hiding in upstairs bedrooms or hunting for deliberately concealed toys. Roaming room to room; crawling under beds, behind wardrobes, beneath curtains or chairs. We'd wrestle and laugh. In those moments, I briefly caught my breath—perhaps even fleetingly became myself.

Yet something peculiar unsettled me. Despite being his senior, I somehow looked up to Jerry—as if he were older. His entire being fascinated me. It seemed almost *magical*, an entirely different—perhaps more authentic—world. Or was it rather an *idealised* one? Compared to my own environment, it was unrecognisable. To me, Jerry inhabited a

quintessential boyhood—a world I yearned for desperately. One I'd come to label *real life* .

Aunt Kathy and Uncle Geert adored him—as did, unsettlingly, my foster parents, who rubbed this in Gert's and my faces with near-sadistic relish. As though confirming our profound worthlessness. We were merely foster children—and barely even that...

"Jerry's such a handsome, delightful, loving boy," the foster mother often crooned. "His school grades are marvellous. Oh Jerry, you're absolutely wonderful—a stellar child."

The gushing never ceased. "Your hair looks darling, Jerry! Come here sweetheart. Such a precious boy! That T-shirt suits you perfectly. How endearingly you play with your toys."

Even the foster father—typically revealing only rage, loathing and disgust—softened around Jerry.

Jerry was indeed enchanting, and the foster parents' faces betrayed awe—dumbfounded by such a golden, almost angelic child.

They'd hoist him onto laps; I once even witnessed them hugging him. He embodied every trait I lacked—and was forbidden to possess—while exuding robust masculinity. The faultless boy.

Jerry received unconditional love and acceptance effortlessly—his mere existence, body, essence and identity automatically commanded respect. Even as a child, this presented life's most fundamental quandary: *how* did he achieve it? What did I need to become to achieve that? How does one become a real child?

Jerry didn't just wear stylish, handsome, trendy clothes – properly

boyish ones. Even his pyjamas were authentically masculine. He played with neighbourhood friends; his bedroom was a proper boy's domain with

cool posters plastered across walls. He owned an actual playboard cluttered with toy cars and rugged boys' toys. Encouraged and supported, cuddled and cherished – he radiated spontaneous freedom, enveloped in care and love. To welcome his birth, they'd planted a chestnut tree – marking his being wanted. People conversed with him, asked him questions. To me, he embodied personhood with genuine identity. Like most lads, he played football, owned a properly rugged boy's bike, casually collected *Titto the Wizard* trading cards – which I once heard my foster parents denounce as 'the Devil's pictures' back home.

How could they adore him so openly when he collected *the Devil's pictures*, grew his hair long, wore trainers and sported T-shirts? I agonised. He even had light-blue underwear – an offence that would've incurred my most brutal punishments.

His birthdays featured candles on cakes and friends coming to play. The foster parents got invited the following Saturday – so I never met his mates, only admired the cake in after-the-fact photos.

What must it be like to properly reside somewhere as a real child – a genuine boy – permitted such an upbringing? Mesmerised, I grew increasingly

fascinated by him, starkly aware I couldn't measure up in any dimension. I was deficient in every aspect.

Simultaneously, Jerry's presence felt utterly safe – my sole comfort zone. Around him, calamities never struck. Respected unconsciously, he became a buffer between me and the foster parents. Only back home would they dare beat me for perceived misbehaviour during visits.

Jerry remained oblivious to the foster home's realities. Arriving visits, he'd already wait expectantly by the stairs – bounding over joyfully. That someone on earth felt glad seeing *me* seemed miraculous. Through him, I briefly existed.

"Shall we go upstairs?" was usually his first question – "Jasper, Jasper, coming?"

Nobody knew my reality diverged entirely. Nobody? Almost nobody. For child protection knew full well what transpired.

Around Jerry's birth, the foster parents escalated cruelly – initially targeting Remco hardest. They reviled boys and boyishness, but perhaps most loathed foster children specifically. We ranked inferior – a subhuman species requiring governmental 'nursing' and especially draconian discipline. After all, we were 'those antisocials' offspring'.

Foster parents seemed selected exclusively from violent, disciplinarian backgrounds. Later I'd discover nearly all foster fathers housing children from our original family came from military or police – mine being ex- KNIL military.

Initially, Remco was deemed the most inferior among us three. Around thirteen then, he endured the brunt of their savagery. At the table he wasn't even permitted a proper kitchen chair—just a small three-legged stool, signalling their profound contempt for him.

The depth of their disdain manifested in extravagant violence purportedly to 'correct' him. The foster father once struck him from that little stool so fiercely he went crashing through the kitchen door's pane, landing flat on his back in the rear patio. Glass exploded outward in a tremendous crash. Through the shattered pane, I saw Remco sprawled – startled, rigid, astonished, contorted.

What astonished me most was him getting up moments later. Not a scratch from the razor-sharp glass. Without a word, expressionless, he solemnly resumed his perch on the stool, took up his spoon, and ate as though nothing had transpired.

The foster parents routinely beat him mercilessly across his bedroom, employing furniture as weapons. I witnessed them snatching his wooden desk chair to pummel his head, his back, while he futilely shielded himself from their furious blows and shrieks. The sheer brutality unfolding before my eyes defied comprehension.

Their beatings were interminable—never sating them. During one assault, an entire bookshelf toppled, strewn volumes until his room resembled a battlefield post-combat. When they finally withdrew in triumphal frenzy, I stood trembling by the small white-painted stair gate at the attic landing, watching in despair and mounting dread. Though they seldom targeted me yet, the escalation felt inevitable.

Remco endured this torment for three more years until the

final blow ruptured his eardrum. That became the breaking

point—his

moment of departure. To stage his exit as 'natural', they enrolled him in

the Royal Netherlands Navy (which enlisted from age sixteen). At least on weekdays this kept him from the foster home. Shortly thereafter, we never saw him again.

Then came my turn. Some time after moving to Putten—once the foster parents made their confession of faith before their ultra-orthodox Reformed church—the devil himself seemed to take up residence in that house.

After witnessing Remco's abuse, their focus increasingly shifted onto me, while Gert was occasionally spared. I never understood why.

Sometimes I wondered if his blond hair lent him a 'softer' appearance...

or was it because he'd once, aged six, sat on their laps?

Naturally, like all children, I did misbehave at times. No saint—sometimes anger twisted my stubborn face. Or I resisted unavoidable chores. My clumsiness toppled things occasionally. I would forget things that needed doing. I would laugh at things I wasn't supposed to.

Mischievous.

But in the foster home, actual wrongdoing wasn't the point. A draconian regime prevailed where—certainly for me—complying with rules, commandments, prohibitions and unwritten laws became impossible.

Often I didn't even know what I'd done wrong; it frequently went unnamed. Like communicating vessels, the foster parents continuously shifted boundaries by introducing ever-stricter regulations, laws and dictates—resulting in increasingly severe corresponding punishments for the simplest matters.

A sampling from the nearly endless list of punishable offences, all met with violence:

Forgetting to turn the light off.

Leaving laundry at the foot of the

stairs. Not having wiped one's feet

properly.

Accidentally knocking something over.

Looking the wrong way according to the foster mother. Getting nine (rather than ten) for reciting psalms.

Soiling one's trousers.

Coming home one minute late.

Unintentionally laughing.

Closing a book that should've remained open.

Unintentionally crying from pain.

Asking something at the wrong

moment. Dropping a book.

Not hanging the washcloth next to the laundry basket.

The fork clinking annoyingly against the plate.

Repeating something incorrectly.

Having one's arm at the wrong angle.

Not polishing the foster father's shoes properly.

Spilling a bit of toothpaste on the washbasin.

Mishearing something.

Saying or using a word incorrectly, making it incomprehensible to them. Making a mistake while reciting the bedtime prayer.

Not drying a plate properly.

Spontaneously running to the back

door.

Not sitting straight enough in one's

chair. Going down the stairs too fast.

Putting the bicycle away incorrectly in the shed.

Replacing the shower sponge incorrectly.

Had I even really done that last one? I never used sponges after all...

Ah... whether I'd actually done something - that wasn't the point. I might have done it, or had the intention to do it wrong, or perhaps even entertained the notion of getting the intention to do something incorrectly. And that's how it always was. My intention, my very being was wrong from the outset. Non-negotiable. Period. There were only knotty demands - I embodied the punishable act itself. I had simply always done it.

They beat me virtually daily. Enough that their hands hurt from it - I'd see them fiery red afterwards. So henceforth they only struck me with coat hangers, shoe horns and shoes. It resembles almost too simple a riddle - but where are such objects found at home? Precisely. Under the stairs in the hallway beside the front door, in the cloakroom. Here, under the stairs, between roughly ages eight to twelve, systematic corporal punishment was administered. Oddly enough, I remember exactly how it went.

"Under the stairs—now!"

I knew what would follow. I lowered my head already, took a deeper breath, and fixed my gaze intently upon the reddish-brown floor tiles. The tiles had a pattern—small black and grey swirls. Grey grout. Not entirely even. Gritty, I recall. Some patches were lighter grey. The tiles where it happened were slightly darker.

Reluctantly and with bowed head, I shuffled to the familiar spot, half-concealed beneath gloomy Reformed overcoats, beside the tall wooden umbrella stand filled with black orthodox Reformed umbrellas.

"Trousers

down!" "Pants

down!" "Bend

over!" "Deeper!"

"Hands to the floor!"

"Further down!"

"Turn your bottom towards me!"

"Arse higher!"

"Stay in position!"

"One. Two. Three.

Four..." "Bend!"

"Five..."

The blows came. They counted each stroke—I wasn't permitted to cry. Tears simply meant more strokes, more pain. They took turns, sometimes the foster father, then the foster mother. I always counted silently, verifying they wouldn't "accidentally" exceed the agreed number.

The coat hangers were dark green or burgundy, wooden, upholstered

in leatherette, with square brass tips that regularly left small dents in my

buttocks—only felt when sitting down later.

The plain wooden hangers and shoehorn struck precisely the protruding bones in my bottom, driving deeper into my lower body. After several hard strokes, this often produced a peculiar tingling excitement in my penis. Yes, you'd frequently get an erection from it—they struck so hard and so long. Perhaps most humiliating was their notice—they seemed to intensify deliberately then.

The number of strokes varied with the perceived severity of my offences. The harshest punishments, I recall, comprised thirty strokes—for instance, peeking during prayers. In church, the foster mother appeared so devout beneath her small black Reformed bonnet that I sometimes failed to keep my eyes closed during prayers. She'd hiss angrily that I'd receive thirty strokes upon returning home.

Their penal system followed an economical logic. Strokes could be accumulated, *saved up*, and exchanged for alternative punishments. Reduction was possible if other penalties had already been imposed.

One incident exemplifies this.

Around age ten, I once opened my attic bedroom window. Why? I genuinely don't recall. Perhaps to look outside? While standing on a chair by the dormer window—a so-called *cuckoo*—I knew this was forbidden, yet lifted the sash.

I'd just begun closing it when a faint rustling sounded behind me. Turning sharply, I found the foster father materialised like a spectre. His voice roared like cannon fire.

"What possessed you, wretched vermin, to open that window?"
"Shut that window immediately." His close proximity unnerved me further, making it impossible to close the window properly. As I wobbled on the

chair, the foster father yanked me down roughly. He slammed the window shut with an almighty crash, as if demonstrating proper window-closing technique.

"What, did you think you were some big bloke? Can't even close a window properly—useless! What good are you?"

"I don't know, I—"

The foster father always shouted with military authority.

"I'll teach you, you insolent little shit, to leave windows open."

Suddenly he locked his arm around my neck and dragged me to the doorway, maintaining a vice-like grip. From the corner of my eye, I saw the razor he'd just shaved with in his hand. He jerked my head upward, so close I could see the thick lips in his oily face contort grotesquely.

Until then he'd only ever touched me with shoehorns or coat hangers— now he crushed me brutally against his chest.

"Thought you were a big man, eh Jasper?" he sneered. "Are those little hairs on your cheek? Let's shave this 'manly' beard then, shall we? Feel this now, big man..."

He swiftly plugged the razor into the socket by the door while pressing its heavy frame against my left cheek, then the right, scraping back and forth violently. The blades gouged cruelly into

my skin, leaving deep, burning gashes. Blood dripped from my chin onto my jumper. Despite the pain and his chokehold, I didn't cry. I fell silent, not uttering a sound.

"That'll teach you to act tough!" he crowed triumphantly.

The bleeding proved worse than anticipated, forcing immediate downstairs intervention with wet tea towels and plasters pressed to my cheeks.

Hearing of my wrongdoing, the foster mother raised the matter of pending canings. "He'll have ten fewer now," the foster father proclaimed graciously.

Gradually I mastered myself—learning to nullify pain, reverse sensation itself.

Eventually, the crack of a shattered wooden coat hanger provoked only

laughter. "Ha-ha. Go on, hit me—I don't feel anything now. Ha-ha. Absolutely no pain—if that's what you're after. I'm laughing at you. Ha, there goes another coat hanger. Serves you right—shouldn't have beaten me."

At the 'under the stairs' command, I at least still knew *what* awaited. The stroke count was predetermined—but things could change. Increasingly, without warning, they'd erupt in unforeseeable rages, violence detonating like static electricity — its discharge always, unfailingly, targeting me.

Vague memories surfaced. Hadn't I known rage and sudden beatings before? Hadn't *Ieram* too erupted unpredictably?

Ha, *Ieram*. Hadn't thought of him in ages— *Ieram* the Supreme who could randomly destroy, make things bleed, slice everything—rendering the whole world into broken filth.

With *Ieram* and his witches, people and animals mingled indiscriminately—just one revolting heap. The witches - now they were truly powerful with their great knives. Sharp, cutting, lethal. They would laugh condescendingly at what transpired here. *Ieram* and the witches

would scoff at the foster parents with their pitiful shoes, shoehorns and coat hangers. A pathetic little coat hanger, is that all you've got? Ha, ha, ha. Did you delude yourselves in this foster home that a coat hanger could accomplish anything against the *Two-Witch* boy? You're insane - the *Two-Witch* boy is accustomed to very different treatment indeed.

And still, nobody in the village knew what was happening to me. Those who saw me walking to school noticed nothing amiss. Just an ordinary boy on his way to class.

None could have suspected that this was someone who belonged entirely to the witches of the *Two-Witch* clan. Nor did I resemble someone regularly subjected to beatings under the stairs, terrified of all grown-ups. Nobody could tell. Not even the kind lady I visited annually.

15

Once a year, the foster mother was absent at lunchtime - I never knew where. On those days, I was allowed to stay with Mrs Müller in the street behind our house.

These were celebrations. When I rang her bell, she'd already be in the doorway as though anticipating me. A large, sturdy older woman with curly grey hair wearing a dark blue apron. Two bright eyes radiating pure kindness.

"Hello Jasper, there you are at last! Guess what I've made for you?"

"Semolina pudding?" I'd ask, shy but hopeful.

"Come now Jasper, don't be bashful. Of course I've made that delicious

pudding for you again. I'll fetch it from the kitchen - pop your coat over that chair there and sit yourself down at the table."

Half the large table in her living room was covered with floral oilcloth, holding only one deep bowl and spoon. Mrs Müller would enter carrying an enormous glass bowl of steaming semolina pudding clutched in home-knitted oven gloves. Semolina pudding - precisely what I'd adored at the children's home - specially prepared for me. She served me a king's portion.

During our first meeting, she'd asked what my *absolute, all-time favourite* food was. I knew immediately: nothing surpassed semolina pudding.

And so here I sat, for perhaps the second or third time, eating Mrs Müller's homemade semolina pudding. Wouldn't any boy feel regal dining on pudding alone?

"There, a lovely full bowl Jasper. And here's delicious redcurrant juice from our garden berries. Shall I pour some over? How much - one spoonful, two?"

"Er, well..."

"I can tell - two big spoonfuls it is. Look how the juice covers the pudding! You can't even see the pudding anymore. There now, eat up and enjoy, lad."

The semolina pudding on my plate *wobbled* so delightfully. I don't suppose anything should technically wobble, but with pudding I found it marvellous. I relished the warm pudding with redcurrant juice - Mrs Müller was a five-star chef to me.

"And Jasper, how's school going?" Mrs Müller inquired warmly as I ate. She'd joined me but wasn't eating herself - her attention was entirely mine.

"Fine, Mrs Müller," I answered shyly, having no idea what else to say.

"And will you be playing outside

later?" "Yes, Mrs Müller."

"Would you like some more, child?"

My eyes must have grown larger than my mouth for her. My hungry gaze towards the pudding bowl must have been obvious, for she promptly refilled my plate to the brim.

I revelled in it. She revelled in watching me. Each in our own way. Until my precious little lunch hour elapsed and I had to return to school.

After the meal, as I passed through her garden gate heading to school, she stood on her front step waving until I was out of sight.

"Goodbye Jasper, till next time! Have a lovely afternoon at school." "Goodbye Mrs Müller! Thank you for the delicious pudding."

She kept waving, as if she were my own mother. A whole year would pass before I'd again experience that rare moment of being genuinely liked by a kind woman I barely knew.

16

At age seven I was baptised in Leusden church after my foster parents joined the strictly orthodox Reformed denomination.

From then on, every Sunday I was obliged to attend the Reformed Church on Reformed Grounds at least twice with

Remco, Gert and our foster parents.

Quite a mouthful - hence why people more aptly called it the 'Black- Stockings Church'. For black attire was *compulsory*, the most distinguishing feature of this congregation. Black functioned as their calling card, the trademark of their faith. The blacker, the better.

For me as an unwilling participant, a far deeper blackness lurked within this church. There were the oppressive dogmas that turned life gloomy and bleak. The rigid rules supposedly ordained by God Himself through Old Testament enthusiasts cast a truly dark shadow over my existence.

Blackest of all for me were the cruel biblical tales. During interminable services, from the pulpit thundered terrifying horror stories in fierce, archaic language I often couldn't comprehend as a child - tales of a wrathful God the Father and His son Jesus; of hopelessly sinful Publicans, Philistines and Pharisees condemned to burn eternally in hell. The most abominable stories poured over me in ominous, threatening rhetoric. Each Sunday a man clad in black robes bellowed at us, wild-eyed with raised finger, recounting frenzied tales.

I'd frequently turn away, gazing vacantly at the peeling plaster of the flying buttresses in the vaulted ceiling far above while God's supposed words thundered about me. With fearful awe I absorbed these brutal narratives dominating the lengthy sermons - how divine wrath inevitably unleashed terrible pestilence and cruel plagues upon wretched, depraved sinners like myself, according to the minister. These bleak stories echoed bitterly against the tall, bare church walls. The echoes reverberated through every remote corner of the church. Even the mice would convert. Here they told me about nails driven through hands and feet, about Jesus being pierced; about a baby held upside down while threatened with a sword about to be cleaved in two. Helpless newborn infants had to be slaughtered bloodily on

Herod's orders - simply because Jesus was to be born.

These stories etched themselves deeply into me. Every Sunday I'd hear afresh about torment, vengeance, death and stoning, about hanging on a cross and a profoundly abandoned Jesus crying out to his Father in deepest isolation. Strange tales of wine and blood, of slaughtering lambs, blood smeared on doorposts, sharp knives and righteous swords. And as if God Himself were the *Terrible One*, His vengeance and cruel punishments could only be escaped by submitting to Him fully, day after day. The church's narratives showed me a dark menace

I recognised all too well within myself - one I'd been trying to forget yet couldn't begin to process.

Perhaps due to these brutal church stories, everything in my mind worsened during this period. Regardless, my thoughts and feelings grew increasingly tangled. My surroundings could transform suddenly, seemingly without cause.

When we next entered Aunt Kathy and Uncle Geert's living room, the environment had warped into a new, unfamiliar world. I recognised nothing. How? I visited so often - why had everything become unrecognisable? It felt utterly terrifying.

Though I'd sat on that sofa countless times, though their wall unit was entirely ordinary, suddenly everything appeared new to me. As if I'd never seen it before. It seemed almost as though I'd become someone else entirely. Someone completely unfamiliar with this setting.

"Go away! I want to see everything as I wish, as it always was!" I'd scream inwardly. I could have wept from how strangely everything looked, from how alien this version of myself felt.

It might take ages before I saw the living room normally again.

Worse still, I increasingly experienced my surroundings shifting abruptly. Then I no longer knew which version was real. Even more - I questioned who I was. What was normal supposed to be? I felt myself losing grip on my core identity.

During this period of ever-escalating beatings from the foster parents, I began experiencing bizarre episodes in bed. I'd hallucinate cruel slaughters - blood, crosses, the merging of humans and animals. And all this bizarrely intertwined with masturbation.

While my brother Gert slept soundly, I'd often lie awake. One summer evening in the half-darkness, an actual crucifix with large sharp iron hooks beside it materialised on the wall just above my bed. At least, to me it had been undeniably visible.

Why was I seeing this - something that wasn't even really there? How could that just happen? It had arisen spontaneously, from my own mind of all places.

As I observed that crucifix and the meat hooks on the wallpaper above my bed, it suddenly came to me how I ought to be hanging upside-down from a hook with ropes, how they should slaughter me with an enormous knife until I dripped with blood like the Lamb of God himself.

Where did this come from? Why would I identify myself with these images? Why did these thoughts keep returning?

I didn't know, but in my mind I could already feel the blood coursing over my body. I also knew precisely that they would slice me open from behind, right at the base of my spine, and that I then belonged to that cross. I felt everything as though it were actually happening. It felt even worse. Because wasn't it still more horrific that hanging from hooks and being cut open was all

connected to *eating* and *being eaten* ? In my

mind, I was simply butchered like livestock. Chopped open, dripping with blood, I hung there. Dead. My head was severed, my body nothing but a lump of meat. I wasn't human. Everything made me feel like an animal. I knew they were even touching my penis now. To eat. My buttocks were edible, my penis too. They were preparing me to be eaten.

It was scary, thrilling, awful and strange. But also fascinating and arousing. Something inside me felt that I *too* was this. I felt myself an animal - nothing about me felt human. Simultaneously, I shuddered with fear because I knew they ate animals. Sometimes I'd see great hunks of meat like that at the butcher's. Was I that? Was I just like that too - nothing but meat? Now vague images of the *Terrible One* were forcing themselves upon my mind.

I quickly turned away from the ominous hooks on the wall and looked into Bimbam's sweet little face. His soft voice calmed me: "Don't think about anything. I'm with you, aren't I? Shhh now."

Bimbam was right. This was all just 'things you shouldn't think about'. I had nothing really to do with it. It just existed 'because it existed'.

Though I neither knew nor understood anything about death, a voice within me suddenly said I must die too, just like Jesus. I didn't know how to die. But I must. In church I'd heard the story of Jesus sweating blood, and I knew bleeding meant death.

If only I sweated enough like Jesus, eventually I'd surely *bleed to death* when the sweat turned to blood.

I didn't consider what *death* actually meant, because I realised that bleeding, gutted open and hanging upside-down from a hook, I'd still feel everything exactly the same way as when dead while they touched my penis.

17

One evening I stripped completely naked, burrowing deep beneath the blankets until it became unbearably stuffy and hot. I could barely breathe and was completely suffocating. This was good - now I could die. I shrank swampy with sweat and waited. I waited longer still. Sweat was gushing from my body. Finally, my body and bedsheets were soaking wet. But it didn't bleed. Not a drop. I failed. I couldn't do what Jesus could. That made everything feel even worse.

Later I tried dying again, this time with the help of a large laundry sack kept behind wooden panelling in the storage space under our sloping attic roof, near my bed. Back in the far end of this attic storage, I crawled headfirst into the thick black plastic sack. To suffocate. Because I knew that suffocating would kill me.

I didn't truly understand what suffocation was, but it had to happen in a bag. And I had to die.

The sack completely enveloped me. What would happen to me afterwards, I didn't know. It grew hot and stifling. I panicked. I couldn't bear it any longer and suddenly inched back slightly, just enough for fresh air to rush in so I could breathe again.

What was I to do? I tried not to think. But I felt I was failing, because I remained trapped in something terrible. Something I'd never escape.

18

Between ages eight and twelve, I often played in the attic bedroom shared with Gert. I'd created an island by placing a discarded painting - its hardboard back painted over - upside

down on the floor. The wooden

battens on the back now formed dikes surrounding a rectangular island. The surrounding floor became the sea.

Between the battens, I drew lines with felt-tips across the smooth hardboard to represent roads. Together with some wooden blocks, toy cars and cardboard houses, this became a beautiful landscape where I could play for hours.

From colourful Lego bricks I built a boat, wooden blocks formed a harbour, and the small coloured pieces from the *Ludo* game became the island's inhabitants.

I pretended the island was perpetually threatened by enormous waves that might engulf it. The coloured playing pieces were desperately needed for defence. Each colour formed a unit alongside same-coloured toy cars. They could be directed as groups to threatened sections of the island when necessary. And I - I was *the king* of this island. Wherever I went, I remained connected to my island, conversing with the units protecting it. Even when walking outside - I'd ask my pieces about the situation and whether high waves were coming.

"Green pieces?"

"Yes, your

majesty?"

"How are things on your side?"

"Here by the harbour the sea's completely calm, thankfully. But when waves come, we'll all be ready to help!"

"White pieces?"

"Yes, your

majesty?"

"Where are you positioned?"

"We're by the big car park, near the dike house." "How's the situation behind the dike on your side?"

"A high wave is approaching, but we can handle it. We're sending the boat out."

"Excellent, summon me immediately if needed."

"Understood, your majesty."

Once, as I lay absorbed in my island's affairs, the foster mother unexpectedly appeared behind me. I hadn't even heard her come upstairs.

I instinctively turned slightly, briefly thinking she might just be hanging laundry in the attic as she often did. Suddenly, without any warning, she kicked my entire island to pieces, scattering all the figurines, little houses, toy cars, my boat - everything mixed up in chaos, my Lego boat breaking apart.

Then she grabbed my head violently. She shrieked: "What have you done, filthy brat!"

Had I done something wrong? I couldn't think of anything.

"I don't know!" I cried, because I genuinely didn't understand what she meant.

"You know perfectly well, wretched child!"

"No, really, I really don't!"

"Lying too? Here, you'll feel this, you miserable brat! Those who won't listen must learn through pain."

She took my head between her hands and shook me violently back and forth. With difficulty I wrenched my head from her gripping

hands and scrambled away. "What? Don't you dare run. Get back here, filthy liar. You know exactly what you've done. Here!"

"I don't know anything!" I sobbed. But she seized my ankle and dragged me across the attic floor as if I were a vacuum cleaner, hitting me wherever she could reach. It became a struggle where I knew I had to escape. It was her against me, my back throbbed painfully from her blows and my ankle, which she still held in a viselike grip, hurt so much. I whimpered and writhed in pain.

Finally I broke free and crawled far from her until I reached the skirting board under my bed. I pressed myself against the wall there. Face down, I lay absolutely still for a long time. I can still see the dust under the bed. I heard her going downstairs again. It grew quiet. It was over again.

What had I done? I still don't know. I carefully rebuilt my island. Was that allowed?

19

Early one beautiful summer evening I went to watch a spectacular event that occurred only rarely. Several hot air balloons would launch from the fairground not far from my house. It was always a great spectacle since they only ascended occasionally in summer. At school I'd heard children talking about it and I'd once seen some balloons rise beyond the houses in our street, so I walked hopefully beyond our neighborhood.

In the large corner garden at the end of the street, I happened to glance sideways. Two toddlers were playing together on the

grass. They frolicked about completely naked, chasing a ball happily in the still- warm evening sun. How they were enjoying themselves - giggling

wildly before collapsing together on the grass. Without realizing, I'd stopped walking. It was as if some part of me suddenly said: "Remember? From before? Look carefully, you know this. You'd want that too, wouldn't you?"

I hurried on - I needed to be on time. It wouldn't be long now until the last balloon ascended. I absolutely didn't want to mis-

s it, because once the hot air filled the balloon, it would take off within half a minute.

I knew how it worked. A large flame thrower shot fire into a limp cloth envelope - every few seconds you'd see a long, fierce burst of flame. Having reached the large sandy field, I watched fascinated as gradually the cloth formed into an enormous round balloon with a large wicker basket attached. Then up it would go.

A flame several metres long shot into the cloth at regular intervals. The balloon already strained at its lines. The aeronauts climbed into the wicker basket. The anchor rope was released and silently the balloon rose, shrinking rapidly as it ascended. The balloonists waved down as if embarking on a grand voyage. How lucky I was to be on time.

Slowly I walked home. The image of the flame thrower stayed with me, the perfectly rounded envelope, the balloon ascending and the distant people in the basket growing smaller and smaller... but something wasn't right. I noticed I felt sad - something else was forcing itself more strongly into my consciousness. How could that be? Watching a big balloon ascend was meant to be fun, wasn't it? But no - it wasn't the flame thrower or the balloon, those toddlers on the grass kept invading my thoughts. They eclipsed all the excitement of watching the balloon flight. It was as if the image of those playing toddlers was trying to tell me something intensely important that I couldn't put into words. I didn't want to think about it anymore - it

made me sad, angry, afraid. Yet the

image proved too strong and seemed to keep controlling me. I walked on and glanced up once more.

The balloon still floated high above Putten. Hanging in that basket, you must have had a magnificent view over the woods and the village. The people in the basket - mere specks now - waved downwards... I waved back. Could they actually see me? Quickly I hurried home.

After this, I started noticing toddlers everywhere.

Who saw that? Why did I see that? *Gipsy Boy* had never gone away. Who I was or how I currently lived meant nothing to him. He only saw everything from his own world. Time had never progressed for him. He had to maintain control over the most difficult things. No, *Gipsy Boy* had nothing to do with trivial matters like hot air balloons.

20

Though I lived with Remco and Gert in the foster home and went to school daily, I felt profoundly lonely. I tried participating at school too, but no connection existed. I was trapped in my own worlds, though no one knew. It was as if I didn't truly exist anywhere, though to others I was doubtless just another schoolboy. My grades were mostly good, sometimes excellent even, making everything appear fine. Even Juffrouw Warre from the child welfare agency thought so.

Every month she visited precisely at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon. Her dreaded *DAF-daffodil* parked prominently out front, and I always found her sitting in the living room.

"Good afternoon, Juffrouw Warre," I'd greet politely. She frightened me. To me she seemed peculiar. I knew nobody like

her. She smoked through a metal cigarette holder, sometimes blowing perfect smoke rings. She peered through a monocle and usually wore a woollen tartan skirt with

an enormous bronze nappy pin that always reminded me of a safety pin. Who'd want to wear a nappy pin? She owned small glistening golden music box that played Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* when wound up. And if I privately called my father "rooster-head", to me she was the *chicken-head* because she exactly resembled a hen to my eyes.

Juffrouw Warre almost never spoke to me - I'd be promptly sent to my room unless I'd received a school report. She knew precisely when they were issued. In her creaky, genteel voice she'd ask: "Well Jasper, where's your report? Quickly now, fetch it for me."

Fearful, I'd hurry to the sideboard and retrieve my report card, presenting it in deep anxiety. "Here you are, Miss Warre."

For me, it felt like showing my report to someone crossbred between a judge and God Himself - this strange potentate standing even above the foster parents through some murky, dark alliance. Juffrouw Warre could decide whether I'd be sent to an institution for severely disturbed children - a threat the foster parents wielded chillingly often. She could whisk me away to other strange places - to my mind, she possessed unlimited power over me.

"Well Jasper, a ten for geography, nine for natural science and eight- point-five for arithmetic - these are good marks. It seems all's well with you. Run along upstairs now so I can speak with your *mother* . Goodbye Jasper."

"Goodbye, Miss Warre."

The foster mother entered with tea.

"Still here? Upstairs with you - we need to talk!"

Obediently I hurried upstairs. Was Miss Warre going to talk with my

mother? That couldn't possibly be right - I still knew perfectly well my

mother lived somewhere far away.

21

The *Two-Witch* returned increasingly to my thoughts. Again I re- experienced being restrained somewhere while violently beaten. The *Two-Witch* continually touched and tasted my

body. Mentally I endured this peculiar, acute pain I recognized when - between my buttocks down there - harsh penetration occurred with what I was certain must be a large finger. Then the memory of them holding me tight while screaming angrily would replay.

This deep pain between my buttocks felt utterly familiar. It seemed significant because it made my abdomen feel somehow 'opened' and needing filling'. I knew many pains, but toothaches, beatings on my backside or headaches felt entirely different.

I'd deliberately induce that painful sensation deep in my belly because it belonged to me - it gave me the feeling of being real. This pain defined my *true self*. Strangely, it thus felt comforting and even 'right' in some alien way.

By day I'd search nearby woods for sturdy twigs. An ordinary boy collecting sticks - nothing suspicious. Breaking them short, I'd push fragments between my buttocks in bed until finding that excruciating pain as awful as I knew it should be. It always hurt terribly, existing only through pain.

Sometimes I used hard carrots from the kitchen cupboard for the same purpose.

These vague experiences contained more sensation than imagery,

more atmosphere than action - immediate experience requiring no

interpretation. My body felt everything as comfortingly familiar - this was how things 'ought' to feel - yet simultaneously I loathed this forced self-infliction, despised the desperate fulfilment of daily necessities.

Lying lonely in bed, I might suddenly envision dirty great flies and tiny worms being pushed inside my mouth; recalling this felt simultaneously bizarre and intimately familiar. Sometimes when I needed the toilet, I'd remember again. Seeing my poo in the bowl, I'd simply know once more what had happened.

I also remembered how a hand pressed my mouth shut when I was still very small. *The horrible thing* had to go inside me. It frightened me, yet felt so familiar. Even now, 'adults' hands' still struck me as something terribly threatening, something *decisive*, something dreadful. Hands were usually the first thing I noticed about grown-ups.

In my daydreams I always wore a nappy - everything about me remained tiny. Then I'd crawl across the floor again in my plastic pants, in this bewildering world. I'd be taken to a place where bird feathers and bones covered the ground. Imagining this made me certain I'd be eaten.

Sometimes it even seemed I *was* the nappy itself. Everything turned senseless, crazy. An object, an animal I was in the witches' world - just a piece of meat, not a living person. Perhaps I was a rolled roast tied in string netting, tightly bound. I was something terrible, I belonged to *The Terrible One*. Surrendering to these thoughts, I'd become overwhelmed and intoxicated by the witches' world, though I wanted no part of it. I understood I had to resolve things so I could keep moving forward.

Never again did I want to remain in that world. I was desperately afraid

the witches' world might hold me forever. And from this struggle emerged a new problem.

Gert and I shared the enormous attic that spanned the whole house. Every evening we'd be put to bed simultaneously without issue - until the foster mother began spying on me. She knew that even as a small child aged four or five I'd regularly masturbated in bed, something she'd punish with freezing showers, but something must have happened to make her observe me so intently before confronting me relentlessly. She must have listened at the bedroom door one evening to catch me in the act. To discover if I was doing something she considered

wrong in bed - and she must have succeeded, because masturbation naturally makes noise - something I'd never considered.

I was about eight when the bedroom door burst violently open one unexpected evening and both foster parents stormed towards my bed with heavy footsteps. Lightning fast, as if prearranged, they tore all the covers off me. They roughly yanked down my pyjama trousers and underpants, then took turns striking my penis, my balls, hard. Not using their hands like the foster mother sometimes had before - but with a clothes hanger they'd brought up from the wardrobe by the stairs downstairs. They struck hard. Everything turned fire-red and tingled between my legs from the rapid, brutal blows - four, five, maybe six. I didn't count them, I felt them.

They hit just as they normally delivered cane strokes across my bare buttocks, but now the blows were to my groin. It hurt terribly - I shrieked, I howled from the often stinging pain. I wanted to turn over, to protect my sensitive genitals, but one of them grabbed my hands together tightly while I lay on my back so the other could hit me.

It began happening more frequently. Afterwards, my genitals would glow and turn from deep red to blue, looking bizarre - as if they were on fire. The pain radiated deep upwards into my

abdomen, where it lingered, throbbing, swarming. I sought ways to ease the burning and pain. I remember well how I'd use a piece of the cold sheet from the

edge of my bed to press very gently against my genitals, allowing some cooling relief. That felt comforting. Other times I'd fan the sheets; I'd moisten my hands with saliva and rub it along my genitals to cool them, or I'd get out of bed and walk softly back and forth. Sometimes I'd simply sit in the dark on the edge of my bed with my pyjama bottoms partly undone for a while, waiting for the pain to subside.

With some 'luck', their strikes didn't always land perfectly - sometimes the shoehorn or shoe would hit my thighs, upper legs or lower stomach, leaving only

temporary welts. But if they thought this would make me stop masturbating, they were wrong, because even after these beatings - as they padded back downstairs in their stockinged feet and everything ached terribly - it still had to be done. I needed to become *safe*. To overcome. The witches' world always needed separating from the rest of my life. Often I'd fall asleep crying - crying from the pain, from loneliness, from not knowing what to do.

At first both foster parents would come together to beat me in bed. In subsequent years it became more systematic, more premeditated. Gert kept waking when they hit me. So they separated us. At bedtime Gert could no longer sleep in his own bed beside me in the attic. The first part of each night he had to sleep in the foster parents' bed so they could beat me undisturbed. Only late in the evening, when the foster parents themselves went to bed, was he returned to his own bed.

After a while, only the foster mother came to hit me - sometimes completely unprovoked. If she heard even the slightest bedspring creak, she'd strike; if Bimbam fell out of bed, if I turned over, the faintest sound brought blows to my groin. She insisted I could only lie in one rigid position in bed. Should she ever find me not lying flat on my back, she'd immediately slap my genitals.

"Otherwise you'll start up again, you filthy dirty child with your dirty arse."

I remember often walking to school with pain between my legs, gratefully feeling it ease as I moved.

Gert frequently heard me screaming from pain. Though excluded now, he knew exactly what was happening. From the foster parents' bedroom where he had to sleep, he'd usually hear them coming upstairs. Knowing their purpose, one day we arranged that he'd warn me of approaching danger by knocking signals on the wall. I learned every creak of the attic stairs by heart. The fifth step

from the bottom. The uppermost stair also gave the tiniest creak. The softest *krrr* sound functioned as my warning bell.

At age twelve I visited the school doctor. Standing before him in my underpants. "Those must come off too," the doctor indicated. Ashamed, I stood bare before this stranger who gave my genitals the briefest glance. He clearly saw something was wrong.

"Everything's fine," I heard the doctor say.

Had I hoped he might intervene, might make the bed-beatings stop? Yes, for the first time there was someone who saw that something terrible was happening. Yet simultaneously I had no idea who he was - whether he belonged to all those awful adults. Perhaps I was relieved nothing further was asked about my fiery red genitals. I feared him, feared what awaited me if the school doctor knew I masturbated. Also feared what horrors might befall me if the headmaster or foster parents spoke with him.

When my brother was around thirteen or fourteen, he started sleepwalking. It became dangerous. Once, Gert sleepily stepped out of the foster parents' bed and nearly walked straight out the

window. After

that, he was allowed back in his own bed with me in the attic. Thankfully for me, because finally the beatings stopped since Gert slept in our room again.

23

My schooldays were defined by being sinful, deserving punishment, and receiving increasingly severe punishments. Usually I didn't know why, but ever worse punishments were devised, like the *bed punishment* .

A bed punishment meant I'd often spend days - during holidays sometimes weeks - in total isolation lying almost completely

in darkness, with absolutely nothing to do. Reading was forbidden, no playing, no looking out windows, no lights allowed. A bed punishment meant the end of everything: nothing was permitted anymore. Even Bimbam couldn't stay with me. I was completely cut off from the outside world, because during bed punishment no speaking or asking was allowed - not a single sound could I make, the foster parents wanted no reminder of my existence.

During bed punishment I never had any notion of boundaries. I never knew how much longer I'd have to lie there before it ended. This made it worse than the canings, which at least stopped after a predetermined number of strokes, even if the pain lingered.

One day they began occasionally sending me to bed without dinner as punishment, straight from school. Why I can't recall - I must have done something wrong in their eyes, though often I truly didn't know what.

The curtains would be completely drawn, and in the nearly dark bedroom I had to lie *completely silent* . An enamel white chamber pot would be pushed under the bed for my needs so I wouldn't

have to leave the room. The rest of such days I spent in bed. In emptiness, in dark

nothingness. Next morning I'd return to school, and with some luck it ended there.

However, the bed punishments grew longer. What began as occasional afternoons extended into consecutive days, until once I endured a full week's bed punishment. Often sent straight from school to bed, entire weekends would pass without emerging from under the blankets. Days and nights in isolated bed confinement, except hurried downstairs meals

-

Sometimes Sundays too. One foster parent would skip church to monitor me. Gert frequently received these punishments too, usually as mystified as I was about their causes.

In heavy twilight I'd stare at the ceiling. My dark-adjusted eyes traced the broad skirting boards along the ceiling corners - I recall they were mitred. Studying the faint visible wallpaper patterns, my gaze fixated on slivers of unintended light seeping past curtains, sharply delineated against opposite bedroom corners.

Such bright slivers crawled like sundials throughout the day, slowly descending the closed door until precisely reaching the skirting board beside my bed around seven-thirty pm.

Seven-thirty, *the* moment.

Because then the foster mother would finally appear upstairs.

Briefly permitting toothbrushing beforehand, though that was incidental. Finally I could drink. The thirst during bed confinement was unbearable

- entire afternoons between lunch and seven-thirty pm without liquid. My solution became gulping schoolyard tap water rapidly at three o'clock. As precaution.

Every Monday morning I received a ten-cent coin for mission funds. One pathetic dime - a drop in the ocean earmarked for starving African or distant Biafran children - places my child's mind couldn't fathom their

suffering. They said it was horrific there. That dime could feed someone, so we'd help.

Yet for weeks, instead of dutifully donating these missionary dimes, Gert and I spent them on sweets.

Opposite our school on Papiermakerstraat stood a tiny sweet shop - every child's paradise. Upon enormous glass counters on both sides of the shopkeeper's shrewdly narrow viewing space towered dozens of glass jars filled with temptingly

colourful sweets. For mere five or ten cents you could choose: liquorice twists, sugar sticks, pink-yellow foam blocks, coloured lollipops, lace liquorice or jaw-breakers, two packs of Donald Duck chewing gum or black-and-white liquorice packets. My favourite was a '*negerzoen*' - imitation chocolate and fake cream on fake cake. So artificial, yet delicious. And exactly costing that missionary dime.

Our luck didn't last. School discovered Gert and I hadn't donated collections for weeks, informing our foster parents. We received a lifelong-memorable punishment. Spending missionary funds meant lacking responsibility for entrusted money - punishable by the severest penalty. Doubly unfortunate as summer holidays began. Judgment: immediate punishment. Gert and I separately endured entire summer holidays perpetually bedridden. Six unending weeks.

Mornings I didn't even rise for breakfast. Day and night I wore pyjamas like some gravely ill patient. From my bed I'd be moved directly to the foster parents' bedpost surveillance. There I lay alone, deprived even of beloved Bimbam. All holiday's days stretched ahead lifelessly identical in that adult bed. Hours, days, weeks crept agonisingly by.

Sleep became difficult. My rhythm changed. At night, back in my

own bed, I'd often lie awake for hours. Then I'd hear the clock downstairs

chime twelve times. One o'clock. Half past one. That clock every half hour. Sleep wouldn't come. How could I still feel tired? How could I still sleep? Some nights I stayed awake till morning. My metabolic problems worsened—digestion blocked entirely, toilet trips became increasingly difficult. Not that I was allowed toilet access anyway - a chamber pot perpetually stationed beneath the bed prevented any bedroom departure.

In the foster parents' bed, I listened for days to the terrible monotonous ticking of their light-green iron alarm clock with

its bell and glowing hands marking time from the oak headboard framing. *Tick-tock* , a thousand *tick-tocks* , a million *tick-tocks* , infinite *tick-tocks* - the nothingness of monotony measured out in mechanical clicks.

The cloying scent of *Eau de Cologne* constantly assaulted me, wafting from tissues the foster mother stuffed under her pillow. I hated that bed, hated the clock's *tick-tock* , hated those tissues, hated the chiming clock downstairs with its hourly reminder. I hated my foster parents, hated their house, their belongings, all adults. I hated life, hated everyone, the entire world, existence itself. Perhaps most of all I hated still being alive to endure this.

Twilight filled the bedroom and my mind; like some living corpse I lay there waiting for time's passage, those blankets a burial shroud in what felt like an open coffin-bed. Sometimes the strange wall shadows seemed capable of speech. My island figures' voices called inside my head. The faintly visible skirting boards morphing unconsciously into dykes until I looked down upon my twilight island from above.

Eventually grey silhouettes dissolved back into time. Briefly my Lego boat materialised, until boundaries between time and bedroom blurred entirely.

My back ached from supine imprisonment - terrified masturbation might occur, they'd mandated back-only positioning. Legs developed queer fatigue and numb tingling; grew leaden weighty, sometimes near- paralysed. Thoughts squirmed away for hours. Until a shock - foster mother suddenly appearing in the doorway signalling meal time.

Outside sounds became extraordinary events. The doorbell. The baker's weekly bread delivery containing sweets for children. Never received.

Midday and evenings allowed brief half-hour downstairs kitchen respites. Clutching the banister, kitchen daylight dazzled and confused.

Respite. Brief bed escape. Briefly sitting upright. Briefly seeing something new. Legs allowed motion, arms and hands briefly permitted occupation. After eating I had to return to bed immediately - straight into darkness, no stealing time, no dawdling, the punishment had to be endured in full.

Early evenings often brought sounds of real children playing outside - laughing, shouting, running about. It was summer holidays after all. Sound remained my sole connection to the outside world.

How many days left? How many weeks? Occasionally they'd simply forget me, only allowing me back to my own bed when they retired.

24

A war was waged against my body. The foster mother meticulously inspected my used underwear, often holding it up to mock and berate me if soiled.

"Look at this, filthy child - you're disgusting, filthy. Didn't I warn you?
Shower immediately."

Each time brought burning shame, though I knew perfectly well she'd frequently retrieve worn underwear from the laundry basket and order me to wear it another full week. Fortnight-long wear before washing wasn't unusual.

Meanwhile, her obsession with my genitals intensified. Nothing seemed to matter more. From morning risings to bedtime, she spied relentlessly. She'd amassed a repertoire of names for my penis, spat out with visceral

revulsion. Names like Pete, Thomas, Stiff Rod, Poker, Dick and Filthy Knob.

This was strictly Christian foster care after all. My penis even received biblical names. Her rage-filled tirades branded my young member apostles - Peter, Pilate, Lazarus, likely all twelve. Most horrific were these names shrieked hysterically during beatings. Naked before her, I burned with shame about my body's maleness - what made me a boy and what I could never hide from her.

Saturdays meant shower permission. I always undressed inside. Once, mid-undress, soft sounds alerted me to the foster mother standing in the doorway. Inexplicably, she entered and locked the door behind her - unprecedented.

"Turn around Jasper. Now. Immediately."

Had she waited upstairs until I'd completely undressed? Wordless, I stood exposed before her stern scrutiny.

"Wait."

My shower postponed, she pointed threateningly at my genitals.

"This stops now Jasper. You disgusting, filthy, wretched boy.

You'll see - filthy creature. Did you really think you're a proper boy? Real boys

aren't like you. We've told Juffrouw Warre everything about your 'Stiff Knob' habits. She knows every bedtime thing you do."

Juffrouw Warre's name jolted me - surely the same woman who'd removed me from my parental home and children's home. Who held monthly mystery meetings *about me* with the foster parents. Had they told her my private acts? Did she know everything?

I offered no reply. What could I say?

"Juffrouw Warre knows precisely how to handle disturbed children like you," she continued, "She's instructed us exactly what to do with you. Didn't expect that, did you?"

Her face hardened as she delivered her ultimatum.

"Juffrouw Warre will soon collect you personally and take you to a doctor who will cut off your Filthy Peter and everything between your legs. "She thinks you're a disgusting, disturbed child too, Jasper."

I stared at the floor, everything trembling inside. There I stood naked before her, unable to hide anything, holding my breath.

"They'll cut off your filthy Lazarus with a big sharp knife," the foster mother snarled. "And if that's not enough, Juffrouw Warre will take you to hospital afterwards. There they'll cut away even more. You'll bleed, Jasper. That's what happens to dirty, deranged children like you."

An icy silence hung in the bathroom as her words slowly faded. Her message had entered me like poison. My groin already ached constantly from her beatings. I lived in perpetual fear of my own thoughts - but now new horrors awaited. Their plans made me

fear the foster parents more than ever.

The foster mother pretended to sort laundry, absentmindedly setting aside a sheet before continuing.

"Juffrouw Warre will soon take you to an institution for disturbed children, understand? To a madhouse. That's where you belong - it's hell there. You'll never be a boy again, never, hear me? I'll make sure of it."

She turned. "And don't throw your underwear in the laundry basket, you filthy thing - you're wearing it another week."

Still paralysed with terror, I listened to her descending stairs. Inside me raged unbearable confusion. I wanted to sob violently, but couldn't - I'd completely unlearned crying. My breathing accelerated. From now on I must prevent any thought of what might happen to me. Showering became impossible. I dressed hurriedly. What would they do to me?

From that Saturday shower onwards, I lived

under permanent threat, engulfed in massive dread. The terror of them cutting into me - especially my penis - consumed me. Would I cease being a boy? What remained without a penis? Like girls who have *nothing* there? I already felt nothing compared to other boys. How, penis-less, could I ever become like them?

Blood fears haunted me - visions of it gushing between my legs during the cutting. Nearly matching my lifelong fear of the *Terrible One*. Now the word 'boy' blazed constantly across my mind's black screen. Like a computer reprogrammed by deranged hackers, endlessly repeating that *word* - a desperate buffer against the foster mother and all frightening people. Nothing mattered more than 'boyhood'. Boys were good. Wholly good. Boys had penises. This was correct, unchangeable.

Here the real war must have begun. Not when she beat me in bed.

Boyhood became the only goodness, the calibration point, the reference against everything worldly that felt wrong and threatening.

Surviving as a boy became vital - perhaps the defining imperative of existence. To remain a boy, to *become* a boy, to be seen as one, to have everything as boys should. The prospect of losing this became earth's worst nightmare. A fear continuously nurtured, for from then on the foster mother periodically dragged me abruptly into the garage behind the house. One Wednesday afternoon it happened again.

"Juffrouw Warre's collecting you soon - today that doctor will cut everything away, you filth."

She slammed and locked the garage door. Pitch-

darkness. For hours I clung fearfully to the wooden workbench beside the large iron vice I recognized by touch. Nobody knew I stood imprisoned there until finally, late afternoon, release came.

"Juffrouw Warre couldn't come today," I'd hear when the door finally opened. Or she'd invent other excuses.

"She's coming another time - you got lucky this time, just wait..."

Even during bed beatings she now screamed about everything being cut off. I dreaded the *horrifying act* spontaneously occurring. Merely imagining their plans made my mind prickle like skin with goosebumps.

25

One day - how it happened I can't recall - a classmate wanted to play with me. We lived nearby and coincidentally walked home together from school. Blond, perpetually cheerful Fabian from my

year five class.

"Hey Jasper, walking together? What you doing this afternoon?"

"Dunno, probably playing with my island. I built a Lego boat to protect it."

"Lego? A boat?" Fabian exclaimed, "Does that work?"

Fabian had a point - Lego boat sets didn't exist then. I'd invented mine by using inverted blue-sloped roof bricks as bow and stern. Building the entire boat upside-down challenged me, but I'd succeeded.

"I build everything inverted," I explained.

"Weird. I wanna see! Can I see your boat? And your island?"

Someone wanted to play with *me* ? Me, who always watched playground activities from the sidelines, who never participated? Had I spontaneously made a friend?

I heard myself saying excitedly: "That's so nice! Yeah, come, we'll go to my house - I live near you."

"Just need to ask permission," Fabian said upon reaching his house.

My smile widened when he returned approved. Perhaps I'd never felt such happiness before that afternoon.

Through our house's side driveway we entered the backyard via a green door. Chatting, we approached the open kitchen door - where the foster mother stood blocking the doorway with angrily questioning eyes. Was I late? What was wrong?

"This is Fabian, he's my friend," I tried explaining. "He wants to come play this afternoon - his mum said yes."

The foster mother slowly shook her head. Her face signalled the approach of boundless rage.

"What were you thinking, Jasper? What did you imagine? Fabian, go home, you can't play here this afternoon."

Why not? I wondered. Why ever not? The foster mother was unmistakably furious, as if I'd committed the worst conceivable offence in her eyes. Fabian walked back through the gate, back to his house.

The moment the gate clicked shut behind him, she dragged me inside. The kitchen door slammed violently. We went immediately to the space beneath the stairs.

"What were you thinking, wretched misfit, bringing someone home uninvited? Did you imagine that was permitted? Who do you think you are? Did I ever give you permission?"

She yanked down my trousers and gave me thirty strokes of the stick for bringing home a friend. Thirty - that number remains forever seared in my mind, for it marked friendship and playing together as belonging to the category of 'most severe violations'.

After punishment came upstairs banishment.

"And heaven help you if you ever dare bring a friend home again in your entire life."

Exhausted, I collapsed onto my bed. Utterly alone. Devastated. Tremors ran through me. Bimbam pressed himself softly against me. He found no words - so terrible was this injustice.

Like every year, spring 1972 brought house martins returning from southern climes. They darted endlessly, repairing nests for new broods. Numerous swallow nests clung beneath the driveway's eaves.

This year proved special. Somehow, fledglings kept tumbling helplessly from nests onto the pavement below, gaping yellow beaks broadcasting desperate hunger-peeps. Nearly every nest seemed to be losing its young.

One ordinary Saturday - I was upstairs in my attic bedroom - the foster father's shout came bellowing from below.

"Jasper! Down here

immediately!" I hurried

downstairs.

"Wellies on, then out here."

At the gate he thrust a cardboard box at me.

"Collect EVERY bird from the driveway in this, then bring it round back. NOW! All of them."

Picking my way through scattered fluffy bundles, each wide-beaked peep stabbed my heart. Some were sizable - how had they survived such falls? Their sweetness made me wonder - how would we help them?

Soon a box of peeping fledglings stood behind

the house. Setting it down, I saw the foster father emerging from the shed wielding a large spade.

"Here. Take this."

Frozen, I stared at the tool. What use was it?

He snatched a hatchling from the box, hurling it onto a paving slab.

"Thought yourself a real boy? A tough man? I'll show you. You're smashing this creature dead in one blow."

"Me? Kill it?! Not me! No!"

"YES YOU! Dare contradict me? Do it! They'd have died on the driveway anyway."

Briefly, I resisted. "But I don't want to—"

"Pathetic cringing coward. Refuse, and it's under the stairs. Enough! KILL IT!"

Beneath-the-stairs meant... beatings...

Trembling, I raised the spade. The helpless creature peeped desperately, yellow beak stretched wide. THUD. The blade fell harder than intended. Metal - flesh - stone. Blood sprayed sideways. The slab turned crimson. The foster father's lips curled approvingly.

"Scoop that filth aside with your boot. Next one. Harder! SMASH! You'll execute EACH one now. Pile them by that slab."

I struck. Again. And again. Until none remained. Staring at flattened, bloody corpses, my inner voice died. There were so many...

"Good! That all? Now clean up. Dig a hole there - box-sized."

Clumsily, I scraped a shallow pit with the heavy spade.

"Chuck 'em in! Tidy burial, understood? TIDY! Or else! Faster!"

Repulsed, I scraped shattered birds into

the hollow and shoveled dirt over them.

"STAMP IT DOWN!" came the command.

My rubber boots obediently tamped earth until all evidence vanished. "Flip that slab!"

The bloodstained paving tile I turned obediently clean-side up.

Hypocritical tidiness now covered everything.

Granular soil, smooth sand, the upturned slab - all betrayed what occurred there. As he hosed the spade clean, interior weeping began. I must never acknowledge this. Never remember.

27

Between my tenth and eleventh years, mental torment intensified. Violence surrounding me demanded outlet. I existed nowhere; emotions were forbidden; nothing inside could emerge. Anger, sorrow and violence writhed through thoughts, battling for supremacy. I was under assault from within myself.

Was it killing those fledglings? My carers' daily brutality and endless threats? Perhaps their very sadism left no mental escape routes.

For entertainment, they'd sometimes force tablespoons of sambal into my mouth. The burning made me sob repeatedly from shock and agony. The foster father roared with laughter - his favourite joke. Spitting was forbidden until permitted, by which time water only prolonged the fiery torture before numbing returned.

To him I wasn't a boy - merely an *ant* . A weakling preoccupied with childish things

like soft toys and make-believe.

Meal-time petty torments began. Without warning, toppings would vanish from freshly-prepared sandwiches. "Ha-ha, that's more than enough for you, Jasper," I'd hear a mocking voice say. Then I'd eat a sandwich with just a few sprinkles of hagelslag or whatever cheese they'd scraped off.

Contempt and often downright open hatred towards me were ever- present. Once, the foster father forcibly shoved my head into the dirty cat litter tray. This happened when unexpected guests arrived, forcing me to sleep on a mattress in the spare room. Since the mattress didn't fit properly, he'd placed the usually present litter tray half on the pillow.

"But I have to sleep there, don't I?" I asked, pointing to the fraction of pillow barely protruding from beneath the tray.

"What are you implying? Suggesting I did this wrong? Giving me lip now, are you?"

Suddenly he seized my

head. "You mean like

this?"

He violently yanked me downwards, forcing my face into the filthy cat litter.

"Go wash that disgusting head of yours," he shouted angrily before descending the stairs as if nothing had happened.

I couldn't comprehend *why* this was happening, but my thoughts

seemed to escalate in parallel with the foster parents' violence.
Horrific images

pressed unbearably close in my mind, making everything feel too visceral, too intense to withstand. Cruel scenarios flooded my consciousness. I relived being completely powerless, tied down somewhere. Saw a huge fish head held to my mouth.

"Kiss it!" voices screamed. Obedience would mean the head being sliced off with a knife. Where did this come from? Had it really happened? I loathed fish - especially the smell. I struggled

against these strange, bloody thoughts, but they persisted, intensifying when resisted. Did I even control my own mind anymore? Because everywhere I went, eventually all I saw was blood.

Walking to school, it coated the traffic signs at crossings. It streaked the hedges of the Catholic cemetery I passed daily. Blood dripped from pavement edges behind school, from my shoes. In class it smeared blackboards, desks, my clothes—clung to my hands. Blood suffused everything. At bedtime, my bed bled. Only blood remained.

28

One night, exhausted by bloody visions and inner turmoil, I lay in darkness, whispering my plea—asking the emptiness around me if it could finally stop. The blood visions. Violent thoughts. The masturbation. The *Terrible One*. The witches. The animals in my head. The *Two-Witch*. My perpetual bondage. Being an animal. The beatings. Eating excrement and worms. The self-inflicted anal pain. Being just meat. The non-stop punishment. Could everything please just disappear? I'd had enough. Reached my limit. Everything inside was spent. None of this was me; none I wanted.

"Please stop, please..." I whispered before sinking into sleep.

Afterwards, I barely recalled my plea—until unexpectedly, one pre-sleep evening, I noticed the impossible. Stunning silence filled my skull.

Everything had vanished... Simply gone. Even the compulsive masturbation ceased—no longer done or needed. I felt emancipated; blissfully empty, clean.

Walking outdoors afterwards, everything regained normalcy. All blood disappeared. I'd conquered *myself*—perhaps my greatest life victory. An unreal lightness, terrifying relief, as if shedding an unbearable burden.

Yet gradually, change crept back. An unfamiliar voice began sporadically speaking inside me. Whose voice? Its purpose? Origins?

It proclaimed Jasper must visit the witches. Must. Not me—Jasper. He had no choice, being nobody—trapped by others.

Masturbation also resumed because Jasper belonged to the witches, especially the *Two-Witch* who demanded it. There, with them, his life existed. Only they defined him.

This voice was new, unknown. It uttered bizarre words and elaborate sentences that sometimes even froze mid-flow. Ha-ha, such peculiar language—it made me laugh. Where did these absurd phrases originate? Yet seriousness underpinned everything. The voice apparently knew all about the witches and even *Ieram*—yet spoke so differently from me.

Repeatedly, it narrated terrible things that *must happen* to Jasper. Nightly commanded: "Jasper must go to the witches."

This Jasper wasn't me—someone else entirely. I ceased existing when awful things happened to him. Though sensing the physical occurrences, visually witnessing them, I knew it wasn't truly me.

Odd yet preferable—anything terrible targeted Jasper, with whom I'd severed connection. Similarly, the *Terrible One* no longer haunted me...

provided Jasper obeyed. This facade of normalcy became easier to maintain.

For my eleventh birthday, the foster parents gifted me—sincerely delighting me despite their malicious intent—a soft pink elephant, typical toddler fare. Its pink trunk, ears and sawdust-filled plushness gave such comfort. Yet pink then signified femininity exclusively— unthinkable for boys.

Their cruelty intended highlighting my perceived immaturity. No "proper boy" clung to toys—especially not a girl's colour. Being attached to beloved Bimbam further damned me as weak, effeminate.

They made me show this pink elephant to Uncle Geert and Aunt Kathy—prouding explaining it was my eleventh birthday present. Hoping they'd think: "This oversized child still cuddles dolls for girls? Definitely deranged."

They meant to humiliate an eleven-year-old—but it brought me inexplicable joy. Such softness, such dear ears. I named him Dumbo and from then on he took over Pietertje's role: protecting me in bed. From that moment, he often managed to soothe me. In the darkness I'd hear Dumbo flying above me with his large ears. Like Pietertje, he could see perfectly well in the dark. With two soft toys, bedtime became much safer for me.

The family I was born into had eight children. I was the fifth - Remco and Gert lived with me in the foster home, meaning the rest of my siblings lived elsewhere.

I knew we were deliberately kept apart from our other brothers and sisters - I once heard Miss Warre say: "The

Heijting family is so dysfunctional that the siblings would only negatively influence one another. They can see each other as little as possible."

When we were placed in care in 1964, there were six of us, but during our time in foster homes, my younger brother Rudy and sister Mirjam were born at home. Eventually they too were taken into care and placed with foster families.

Every two, sometimes three years, there was a family reunion. The children from our original family were allowed very brief meetings in our mother's presence.

These reunions took place amid absolute secrecy - everything was *top secret*, as if child protection were some North Korean spy agency conducting special operations. To them, my mother represented the ultimate enemy - to both the foster parents collectively and Child Services - someone who must remain outside to permanently prevent any chance of family reunification.

We could never mention anything about these secret operations or our other siblings to the foster parents. My own relatives and origins remained the ultimate taboo. Even the names of siblings not living with us could never be spoken aloud. On the rare occasions the foster parents referred to ' *Operation Mother Heijting* ', it was done anonymously, deliberately stripped of family connection. They'd only say: "You're going back to *De Oude Tram* " - the Amersfoort restaurant where we occasionally met. It played out like a shadowy scene from some poorly directed spy film - foster parents screeching to a halt outside, doors stealthily opened. Under Miss Warre's watchful eye, a foster child would be unloaded and personally escorted into the restaurant hall. She'd keep staring at her watch, because exactly ten minutes later the next foster child would arrive. Until all six were delivered. Mission accomplished.

With screeching tyres and at full speed, the respective foster parents would immediately flee this dangerous spot by *De Oude Tram* 's entrance to avoid being spotted by other family members. As if hiding from terrible criminals who might one day seek vengeance.

In a separate restaurant room sat my poor mother like a brood hen at a small table. The coffee and pastry before her tried to lend the reunion a festive air, though the atmosphere always remained heavy with her tears and the brief struggle to recognise your own flesh and blood.

Mother Heijting was a sturdy woman - decidedly worldly, someone who relished life's pleasures. With steaming coffee and a cigarette accompanying a hefty slice of cake, she felt completely at home. To me, she embodied everything the foster mother wasn't - wearing cheerful clothes, sporting an ordinary hairstyle, decidedly secular.

My mother laughed, cried and talked. She responded to others. Sometimes energetic, extroverted and lively, but she truly *lived* . In my eyes, she was a real person.

She was always dreadfully happy to see me again, calling my name excitedly from afar and weeping at the sight of me. Her embraces were intense. Yes, she even kissed me. Took me into her arms.

"Oh Jasper, my Jasper, come to Mama, my boy."

Once every couple of years, for one small moment, I'd be held tenderly by the very person Child Protection saw as my greatest enemy.

And yet... What no one could know was that when my mother held me close, something inexplicable would occur within me.

What was that faint shudder? Why did I tense up against my own mother, wanting to push her away? I felt simultaneously joyful and fearful. Why couldn't I feel entirely comfortable around my own

mother? What was wrong with her?

Gipsy Boy laughed. Here he was briefly home again. Even in this strange restaurant, he'd gladly have stayed forever. Here he belonged. With his actual mother, he was somebody real. He couldn't take his eyes off her - here lingered something of home's atmosphere. He seemed enamoured with her.

How he adored her. His mama. Here more clearly than anywhere he felt he belonged with the *Two-Witch* . Here, briefly, he knew who he truly was.

Miss Warre lurked inconspicuously in the background. Like some shadowy spy she observed everything unnoticed, eavesdropping on every conversation - ready to intervene at the slightest deviation from Child Protection's predetermined protocol of deliberate detachment, harsh discipline and complete indoctrination.

There were pastries, lemonade, gifts and sweets for all children. We played together - to an outsider it might have seemed like a cheerful birthday party.

It resembled something of the cosiness I'd created with my soft toys during early childhood. Here people talked, laughed - I briefly experienced a sense of *togetherness* . Here, in this abnormal situation, it suddenly felt almost *normal* - far more normal than anything the foster home permitted.

Surrounded by brothers and sisters and with my mother, I became almost a child again briefly.

These family reunions ended when I was around twelve or thirteen, and the final one became the most extraordinary I'd ever experienced.

That time, without warning, a six-year-old boy was brought in. I'd never encountered him before and momentarily thought he'd been delivered to the wrong room. But Miss Warre definitely had him by the hand nevertheless.

He turned out to be my little brother—Rudy. So funny, he looked just like me. We played together, fooled around, and devoured the leftover pastries.

Child Protection clearly had even more tricks up its sleeve. Miss Warre slipped away unnoticed and returned triumphantly leading a sturdy blonde girl of about seven by the hand. Guess who? Did anyone recognise her? Any ideas? The child she presented also belonged to my parents—another piece of our family. I realised my mother knew her well from how she hugged and kissed her, crying: "Mirjam, my Mirjam, Mama's missed you so much!"

That's how I learnt this sister's name, but it would remain our only encounter. For those final ninety minutes I saw all my siblings together—a moment never repeated through the rest of my childhood in foster care.

31

Around age ten or eleven—initially without realising it—I began looking at boys my own age more often. Just *naturally*. Simultaneously, awareness grew about the systemic violence in foster care, noticing stark differences with how children lived with biological parents. Obvious not only at school, but with cousin Jerry too. I felt like I peered through invisible glass at the unreachable world of normal children—that "proper" world where I simply didn't count as real.

The immediate difference from other boys was their effortlessly age- appropriate clothes. My appearance seemed girlish, antiquated, unnaturally *grown-up* —almost elderly. At least that's how I experienced myself. Nowhere did I see boys dressed as appallingly as me in that bizarre dark green velour over-

shirt, or sickly orange girly blouses with odd stripes—like some transgender parody. How I loathed it, always the glaring exception. Even my underwear proved problematic. One pair for fourteen straight days.

Filthy. I stank. Really.

At secondary school, I always took the back exit through Amersfoort station's red underground tunnel nicknamed 'the Trunk'. Shamefaced, I'd stare at the raised bumps on the grey floor, keeping maximum distance from the other children—who'd all detour wide around me because of the reek.

"Piss-boy," they'd jeer. "Filthy Bakker!" More inventive biblical taunts followed: "Oi, stinking Job! Baldy! Get lost, baldy, baldy, piss off!"

The shame consumed me—I felt like some vile specimen. Combined with the rank underwear, grotesque clothes and shaven head, such abuse felt almost deserved. A walking grotesquerie. To escape notice, I withdrew further from all social contact.

Any situation requiring changing—like PE lessons—became catastrophic. I contorted myself in every possible way to stop others seeing my filthy underwear, ensuring I was always the last one changed. As punishment, the teacher would then make me join the girls' group.

"Latecomers do PE with the girls," came his stern judgement.

The shame followed me everywhere. At the swimming club, in the

pool, in the changing rooms. The foster parents' dirty laundry was literally

hung out for all to see.

The church prohibited almost everything too, controlling nearly all aspects of life. Jeans, ordinary T-shirts, bright colours, even trainers were strictly forbidden. Collecting football stickers or joining playground crazes was banned outright. Letting hair grow a millimetre below my

ears would condemn me *straight* to hell - so God had decreed. While girls were only permitted dresses or skirts and required long hair.

The church dictated which school I attended, what I could read, deemed candyfloss, sticker albums and chips with mayonnaise *worldly* and *devilish*, prohibited footballs. They decreed near-total Sunday inactivity. This exclusion extended to everything - even daylight savings time was rejected.

"We'll have no part in that," I heard the minister declare "if it's introduced."

Sundays meant a dark navy blazer (almost black) with double rows of shiny silver anchor buttons, paired with an awful starched pale blue striped tie against a snow-white shirt. How I despised that noose-like tie. Completing this torture were black trousers with razor-creases and absurdly wide legs, polished black shoes sporting ghastly silver buckles.

Even my school clothes often fit terribly - not from outgrowing them or inheriting Remco and Gert's castoffs - these were proper adults' secondhand garments. My obligatory wardrobe, oversized like billowing marquees, came from Reverend Bogaard himself - the same man who thundered about *God's Wrath* from the pulpit. His discarded suits should have gone to church jumble sales, but foster parents plundered the attic storage box instead. Naturally this adult dress-up invited relentless bullying.

Clothing caught my attention, but observing other boys' natural, authentic

behaviour fascinated me more. While I neurotically analysed every action for foster-parent approval, boys around me moved *simply* - freely, spontaneously, unselfconsciously. They occupied their own skin.

That's what I craved. That ordinary, real, *normal* existence.

But how does one become normal? I felt utterly fake, worthless, and opposite in every way.

During this period the foster parents began constant "corrections" of my movements, emotions and daily behaviours. Visible individuality invited beatings. Displaying emotions was forbidden - no crying, laughing, or expressions of happiness, anger, sadness, shyness or interest. My face became a blank mask - a robotic non-self conforming perfectly to foster parents' and child services' warped standards.

If my arm rested 'wrongly' over the chair back in their view, I'd get an immediate slap. Or if I sat with my legs angled slightly too much to one side.

"Keep those limbs in check!" Whack!

"Sit up straight!" Whack! "Put that spoon down!" Whack!

"Hands above the table!"

Once I merely brushed against a wall outside.

Whack! "Mind those hands - what were you

thinking?"

"Get your hands *out* of your pockets!"

"Don't walk like that! Pay attention!"

"Stand straight!"

"Stop fidgeting!"

Constant aggression. Relentless beatings. Monitoring my behaviour became second nature. I grew obsessive. Was I behaving properly? Had I done anything spontaneous? Did I meet all their demands and rules?

Yet occasionally I'd act spontaneously, from instinct, I recall.

I must have been about sixteen when we visited the Beulakerwijde lake in Overijssel. After swimming, I was ordered to 'dry off and get dressed immediately.' The foster parents were already waiting. Having dried myself, I glanced across the water where suddenly a girl of about seven or eight disappeared under the surface. My swimming club training kicked in - without hesitation I plunged in. The girl had vanished into a depression in the lakebed caused by a slow-turning boat propeller. I brought her ashore frightened but breathing, soon sitting upright again.

"Hadn't we told you to dry yourself?" screamed the foster parents storming over. The girl's parents only arrived as we drove away.

School especially emphasised my difference. In class I'd deceptively appear reasonably normal beside others, resembling some *completely-ordinary-nothing-to-see-here-child*. But in the playground when other children played, I just watched. Never participated. I witnessed their daring and freedom.

"Who dares climb that wall?" "Who's fastest?" "Who can hop ten tiles on one foot?" Not me. Never me. Children ran, shouted,

played. While I - I simply stood there. Like one of the trees planted around the schoolyard.

From loneliness I unconsciously sought further connection. I started occasionally cycling down Harold Kleine's street - a boy from swimming club who was about my age, maybe eleven. Similar height with brown hair, we shared some superficial resemblance. But he proved my complete opposite - difference between night and day, black and white, minus and plus.

And Harold was all plus. Pure plus-symbol to me. Gradually he grew into my

true *idol*. Christ, he was cool. What must it be like - being Harold? A proper boy given physical form. I'd have plastered my bedroom with life-size posters of him if possible, just to stare at endlessly. He became my prototype - obsessively studying every element because he embodied

everything I wasn't. Besotted. Utterly mad really. For months I cycled daily down his street hoping for glimpses. Even his house fascinated me
- this was how real boys lived.

I worshipped his clothes, his gaze, his posture, movements, body, hands, casualness - his entire being. I didn't just see him - I absorbed him.
Seeking his secret for true boyhood, learning how one transforms into reality.

Occasionally I'd spot Harold with his mother - astonishing to witness boys freely interacting with mothers them like that. Daring to touch them! Most bizarre: mothers kissing children. Strange knowing such phenomena actually existed. Harold would chat away, smile at her. And she'd smile right back.

I witnessed similar joyful exchanges everywhere. Togetherness. Actual human connection.

Once his father collected him from swimming. Parked nearby, I watched Harold's dad take his sports bag. They conversed, laughed. Harold

showed no fear - even joking as his father patted his shoulder.

Harold radiated self-assurance, reinforced by peers. Boys our age conversed effortlessly with him, never me. I remained "that Bakker kid"

- inept conversationally.

"My silverseal my silverseal my silverseal gets cold" they'd sing on the bus to swimming practice.

I understood none of it. Couldn't join in - their shared cultural currency of music and TV left me stranded. Nobody spoke to me, ever. Not even at swim club where I'd gone weekly since turning nine.

Harold had friends. At Putten's woodland pool I'd watch their mysterious *boy rituals* - executing stylish low dives, retrieving black plastic discs from the deep end, racing each other, water-fighting. Afterwards lounging together on towels or visiting the kiosk for sweets. From my distant observation post, I'd study the mechanics of companionship: What must that feel like?

Alone on my towel. Bored. Staring at birds crossing that endlessly blue sky where birch branches waved above the pool's playground. Golden sunshine everywhere rendered mocking by my isolation. Watching slow-moving advertising planes trailing detergent chainsaw-brand banners.

Playing with birch twigs in warm sand. Dropping pebbles onto my foot, flicking them comically away from between my toes. Counting children hurtling down the slide. Spending disproportionate time on the swings - ideal solitary recreation.

Circling the pool's perimeter canoe lake, I'd watch enormous carp surface when spat upon, their cavernous fish mouths breaking the water. I played with fallen leaves or waded across the canoe

lake - both strictly forbidden. But always alone, forever alone.

Harold wasn't my only role model. Increasingly, other boys became my idols too. They embodied all the *masculine* qualities I lacked - their tough clothes,

football skills, friendship circles, bravery, belonging, rugged boyish bikes and sheer authentic identity - being seen as genuine boys.

How I wished I could fly a banner plane over Putten trailing an enormous sign: "I WANT TO BE LIKE ALL THE BOYS! I'M NOTHING LIKE WHAT MY FOSTER PARENTS WANT!"

Boys fascinated yet terrified me simultaneously. Often their presence unsettled me profoundly. At the pool, I'd observe swim team boys in tight trunks where bulges were sometimes visible. This intrigued but panicked me - I'd stare transfixed, imagining how absurd it would be if someone cut off their penises and testicles. Would they remain boys? What would that make them? Where would they belong? How does one live with nothing left?

I tried erasing awareness of my own genitals, but swimming confrontations forced acknowledgment. Changing rooms particularly - watching boys undress beside me, occasionally sharing showers.

I stole glances at naked boys. Some seemed shy too, though others appeared comfortable. Curiosity consumed me - comparing myself, desperate for reassurance that my penis looked normal. Proof that despite foster parents' manipulations, I remained male. Harold's parents surely would never dream of mutilating their son - undoubtedly they respected his body.

By now girls terrified me. Justifiably so. Once I accidentally saw my eight-year-old niece Gerda naked post-shower - that frozen

moment as she awaited drying. The image seared my retinas with horror. Suddenly

the foster parents' threats became devastatingly clear. The unthinkable had already happened to her, exactly matching my worst night-

mares' grotesque imaginings.

32

Gradually Gert and I became the Bakker family's cheap house slaves. It started aged seven or eight doing dishes. Soon endless chores followed - tidying newspapers, polishing shoes, cleaning fridge and cooker post- washing up, wiping surfaces - the list expanded endlessly.

Several years later we essentially attended housekeeping school. While other children played outside after school or at weekends, Gert and I maintained the entire household. Every room in the house had to be dusted and vacuumed. With a feather duster I removed dust from every skirting board. I learned to scrub mirrors and sinks until they gleamed as if ready for a commercial. Wiping windowsills, beating rugs, emptying bins. Even polishing copper became part of my duties.

Eventually I could mop floors until they shone like mirrors. I could strip and remake every bed in the house as if I'd worked for years in a *Bed & Breakfast*. Sheets folded so crisply they might never have left their packaging. Yes, I became the perfect little housemaid, adept at streak-free window cleaning and scrubbing tiled walls. I knew everything about sponges and scouring pads, about squeegees and polishing cloths - I'd have graduated *cum laude* from advanced domestic sciences. We unpaid child-slaves worked for hours only to have our labour rigorously inspected under threat of punishment.

"Did you get the skirting behind the wardrobe? We'll check

everything - woe betide you if we find imperfections!"

And often enough, woe did indeed betide us.

The prevailing mood in that foster home remained perpetually sombre, repressed - we all coexisted in parallel isolation. Nobody ever spoke properly about anything, even the foster parents barely conversed, maintaining near-constant silence. Yet it could grow quieter still.

There exists a parlour game where players compete in sustained muteness. The foster parents played this regularly - except their version wasn't gamesome. They called these 'silence days'. For one or sometimes several consecutive days, nobody could utter *one single word*. Not an exclamation like "Ah!" or "Eh?" or "Ahem" or even "Ouch!", for this was deadly serious business.

Any accidental word invited immediate thrashing. Normally beatings came with torrents of abuse - during silence days, they were administered wordlessly. The purpose of these mute ordeals escapes me, though they certainly marked bizarre interludes.

Silent homecomings from school - just the harsh click of the front door locking behind me. Soundless climbs upstairs. Meals consumed in sepulchral quiet, evening prayers and Bible readings suspended - though God wasn't forgotten, simply addressed mutely.

The dinner table's atmosphere verged on dark comedy - were it not so ominous. Any accidental scrape of cutlery rang out like cannon fire, drawing venomous glares. Tension so thick you could carve it. Quite funny actually. Like Carthusian monks we retired without uttering goodnights - a crash course in deaf empathy perhaps. The house held its breath - just a chair's faint creak, a cat's plaintive mewl for food, a door slamming hard. My silent bedtime prayers ascended to

heaven - God heard nought from me during silence days. Mute mornings getting dressed, soundless departures for school.

Maybe bearable - until nature called. Even normally, toilet visits required elaborate permissions since about age eight. For me it never involved simple urgency - between bodily need and relief stood the foster parents' immovable blockade.

Compounded by chronic bowel troubles from earliest childhood. My bowel problems had intensified by this point, meaning I often could only pass small amounts at a time. This necessitated more frequent toilet visits during these episodes, sometimes requiring slightly longer than usual durations.

Now my foster parents didn't just control *whether* I could use the toilet at all, but precisely *how long* I was permitted inside it. My bowel movements were allotted exactly two minutes. No excuses.

Thus it became routine for one foster parent to stand sentinel outside the bathroom door, stopwatch in hand like a track referee, to photofinish- declare any time violations. These two minutes held life-or-death stakes
- overtime meant a thorough beating and verbal assault. And I owned no watch myself.

When urgency struck, I had to politely petition in full sentences:
"May I please have two minutes to use the toilet, *Mother*?"

Depending on their temper, workload or sheer spite, they'd cruelly refuse, forcing me to hold everything in until eventual permission came.

Toilet runs became anxious sprints against time, thick with existential threat.

Silence days magnified the torment - then I had to hope they'd notice my discreet two-finger signals raised while passing them, our mute code for toilet requests. At least then they didn't distinguish between numbers ones and twos.

But would they actually see my raised fingers? Never interrupt newspaper-reading foster fathers or potato-peeling foster mothers. Tough luck.

Cooking times, foster father's naps, telephone calls, cat-feeding or laundry routines all seemed to hang invisible "Do Not Disturb" signs around their necks.

Silence-day toilet negotiations required tactical finesse - appearing visible enough for acknowledgment but not so much as to provoke rage, walking a tightrope where bathroom permissions easily tipped into theatrical violence.

I eventually learned to maximize school toilet visits whenever possible. Because sometimes they'd just say no.

"No, you're not going! Come back later!"

I remember desperately relieving myself behind garden shrubs, pretending to study imaginary butterflies while urinating between bushes.

34

When I turned twelve, we relocated again - exchanging our semi-detached house for a much larger standalone semi-bungalow near Putten's woodland pool on the edge of the forest. This new house, which came with a substantial stretch of woodland, had

only one floor with a slanted roof, where Gert and I each got our own bedroom for the first time. Here, on the village outskirts, I lived for nearly four years.

At the end of primary school, I received a recommendation for pre- university education (vwo). The Christian Lyceum *Groevenbeek* in Ermelo, just three kilometres from our home, would have been an easy solution. Cross one road, then cycle along the highway's bike path, and I'd be there.

But no – that was impossible. This school wasn't *sufficiently devout* nor *strict* enough. A pity, because Harold attended there. For me, the foster parents decreed I must go to a Reformed school for intermediate and higher secondary education, twenty kilometres away in Amersfoort – the *Lodenstein College* , at that time arguably the strictest school in the Netherlands.

Consequently, my school commute involved cycling to Putten station, then twenty kilometres by train to Amersfoort. There, a special school- hired bus would transport me directly to campus. Every afternoon I reversed the entire journey, repeating this exhausting routine daily for five years. An inflexible schedule permitting almost no contact with the outside world.

My secondary school memories have vanished almost entirely: no classrooms, no lessons or teachers remain. Even the other students elude recollection. Erased, as if it never happened. Did I really attend that school? Five years of higher secondary education? Never once in all those years did I form connections with others there.

I vaguely recall the enormous gloomy building – a repurposed Catholic monastery complete with church tower. It unnerved me, a place I'd have gladly avoided forever.

It felt like someone else attended classes in my stead, sitting among pupils on my behalf, absorbing knowledge, taking tests and exams while I remained absent.

What does linger from those years are disconnected impressions unrelated to academics,

preserved only because of their emotional resonance.

I cycled extensively through the wooded surroundings, amusing myself collecting sweet chestnuts and beech nuts, always delighted to spot a slowworm twisting fearfully away from me across heathland or sandy paths. The forest became my refuge – a place where at least I couldn't do anything wrong.

Though technically still a member of the local swimming club throughout secondary school, my terror of punishment prevented any meaningful interaction with other children there.

My secondary school years feel like a black hole: dark, lonely, unreal.

During this period, the foster parents remained perpetually angry, aggressive and violent. Ultimately, they once beat me merely because someone else – entirely unprovoked – had assaulted me first.

I was about fourteen. After swimming, I'd been drying off alone in the woodland pool's changing rooms when abruptly, out of nowhere, a much older boy – still in his trunks – entered. Sixteen or seventeen perhaps, substantially taller and stronger.

In several long strides he crossed the room and unexpectedly smashed his fist into my nose, then walked out without explanation. Blood gushed from my nostrils in torrents. I grabbed the towel I'd used to dry myself to stem the bleeding. I didn't cry. Back at the foster home, the foster mother immediately began beating me without asking questions - no, I wasn't allowed to explain either. My face and the towel were covered in blood, and apparently that was my own doing.

"There's always something with you, stubborn piece of shit," she yelled.

I hurried to my bedroom to get out of her sight.

Another incident from that time remains vivid in my memory because it terrified me so much when it happened. I was cycling along a small shell-covered path

near Putten's Telgterweg. Suddenly, out of nowhere, an enormous black Bouvier came charging furiously from a farmyard, barking and growling, knocking me and my bike to the ground. Its teeth tore my trousers and the fall snapped the top tube of my guardianship bicycle. I got up and ran away dragging the broken bike, not daring to look back. My trousers were frayed along the tear and I had a deep cut on my knee that bled heavily. How frightened I was - not just of the dog, but of those strangers who fortunately called it back. So I hobbled home, as cycling was impossible with the crossbar dangling at an odd angle.

Back at the foster home, all hell broke loose. The blows rained down until I ended up in bed. My trousers in tatters, the bike completely wrecked - how had I managed that? They didn't ask how it had happened; for them it was unquestionably my fault.

35

By now we'd been living for a year in the bungalow by the forest edge near Putten. Gert's bedroom and mine were upstairs directly under the sloping roof, connected by a narrow landing. The angled walls in my room were pale green, with a distinctive square section in the middle where a washbasin with mirror was mounted, so I could wash in my room. The square section was simply the chimney from the hearth downstairs that passed right through my bedroom. From my window I looked out onto the vast forests. In the birch tree outside my bedroom window, the tawny owl would regularly utter its plaintive call at dusk. My life now consisted of going to school, doing household chores,

homework, the swimming club I attended on Saturdays and catechism classes on Monday evenings.

During this period I felt more profoundly lonely than ever before - the only existing relationships were with Gert and my cousin Jerry.

Otherwise the world was empty and there was nobody who ever truly spoke

with me. I couldn't cope with all the overwhelming impressions, causing me to regress entirely in deepest secrecy back into the witch world of *Gipsy Boy*. The witches were my real existence, though of course nobody knew.

And so, between thirteen and fourteen, I suddenly began deliberately wetting myself again in complete secrecy. Something inside me compelled me to avoid the toilet, instead relieving myself in my bedroom using a cloth I'd secretly placed in my underwear beforehand. In this way I returned to the time when I wore nappies.

Of course this was terribly difficult. Why was this invented? Who would want such a thing? So filthy, so appalling. Yet it seemed in these moments I could briefly feel truly present again, as if momentarily existing.

Me? Was that me? Then who was I?

Regardless: it had to be done. I had no choice, no capacity for thought or decision. Everything simply happened as it must. Yet deep inside I still knew I was doing something utterly inexplicable. Just like previously donning plastic trousers before encountering *the Terrible One*, this was something nobody could understand. Again it felt like someone else within me was doing and desiring all this. Another being decreed this necessity.

It created dreadful complications that kept me constantly occupied. I'd quickly open my bedroom window to air out the room. Using tea towels as nappies made a terrible mess and stench. Fortunately, having a washbasin and soap in my bedroom somewhat simplified cleaning.

Finding old tea towels to use as 'nappies' in my underwear was simple – they lay in piles behind the partition on the landing. Like Reverend Bogaard's discarded clothes meant for a bazaar that never occurred but might someday happen. In any case, nobody would miss them.

Each day I'd take the tea towels soiled in my bedroom away in a hermetically sealed plastic bag, deeply concealed among my schoolbooks.

Along the cycle path by the highway, near a small ditch running through woodland parallel to the road, I'd stop daily on my way to school. Hiding my bike swiftly in the bushes, I'd carefully rinse all the dirty tea towels before concealing them to dry behind dense shrubs.

It became a frantic race against time to catch my train. Often I'd see it departing just as I arrived, making me too late for the school bus which had already left. This meant walking the final stretch to school, arriving far too late and being punished accordingly.

In the afternoons after school, I'd check if everything had dried, sometimes rewashing items. The 'clean laundry' would return to the foster home, allowing most tea towel 'nappies' to be reused. I might as well have been the laundress of a children's home nursery wing.

What had I gotten myself into? Suppose they discovered this? Their threats to institutionalize me as severely disturbed would certainly be fulfilled. I couldn't deny it either – with all this I was

behaving quite madly. Who did such strange, filthy things? Who masturbated as a teenager guided by voices describing scenarios with *the Terrible One*

and *the Two-Witch* ? Who imagined that for sexuality one had to be a baby or toddler, or an animal about to be captured and eaten? Was this me?

I don't know how long this incontinence lasted – until I was about sixteen, I think. It must have simply stopped by itself one day.

Thankfully Gert knew nothing of this, and nobody ever found out.

However Gert did know about the foster parents' ongoing threats – their plans to have me bloodily castrated by either the family doctor or in hospital, and their frequent mentions of the madhouse where they claimed I belonged.

Like a true older brother, he reassured me.

Me: "I'm so terrified they'll actually do it one day, Gert. That they'll cut off my willy and balls like they keep threatening. Yesterday she shouted it again. I've just been lucky so far that it hasn't actually happened. And I'm terrified they'll send me to the loony bin too."

Gert: "Loony bin? You? Come on Jasper, you get good grades, you're doing higher secondary – they don't put people in loony bins for that! That's where the proper nutters go, the ones who can't learn a thing, they're definitely not doing higher secondary. That's why they call them *nutters* – because they can't learn."

Me: "But what if they do it anyway, cut it all off? Higher secondary doesn't guarantee anything."

Gert: "Of course it does. If someone can learn properly, they don't do stuff like that."

Me: "So it really all depends on my grades?"

Gert: "Yeah, they only do that to really stupid kids, proper nut cases who fail everything. Only kids like that get their willies and balls chopped off."

Me: "And I bet those kids get sent to the loony bin afterwards?"

Gert: "Yeah, them obviously, makes sense – they can't learn properly, that's why they're nutters. But you definitely won't, Jasper, trust me."

Me: "Then I'd better keep getting good grades. I can do that. If that's all it takes..."

How grateful I was that Gert explained everything so clearly. Luckily I was good at studying, and if my brother said so, it must be true. It really helped. Because it almost always felt like *Gipsy Boy* and his *Two-Witch* were the only ones I truly connected with, as if no real outside world existed. Everything simmering inside me became monstrously amplified in importance. I wasn't living – I was festering. In reality there existed only these fragmented worlds of mine: school, catechism classes, swimming club, church – all seemed like meaningless background noise from someone else's life...

noise from someone else's life...

In the woods I'd search for bird feathers. At plucking sites of pigeons and jays, in dark dense young spruce thickets, I gathered them. For *Gipsy Boy*, who had me constantly hunting for feathers. I knew something wasn't right, yet I obediently performed every demand of that toddler self. He controlled me. Governed my existence.

The feathers had to be scattered in clumps across my naked body in bed until I lay completely buried beneath them. My stomach, chest and face would vanish under tickling plumage that felt

bizarre yet necessary. I became an animal then. Anything for
Gipsy Boy – even eating excrement

because 'that's what animals do'. I ate. Disgusting. Rotting madness. But I was just an animal after all. He knew this, wanted me to understand who I was – for him. Utter derangement. I'd been hunted, captured.

As if *Gipsy Boy* realised no authentic 'self' remained inside me at all. I contorted, meandered within myself, my mind was *amoebically* malleable into whatever was needed to utterly forget. Or precisely the opposite - to experience intensely, so at least I still existed somewhere. The world slipped away from me, I became unreal, the world grew unreachable and empty, time became distorted.

And all the while *Gipsy Boy* laughed. I found myself inauthentic and *Gipsy Boy* knew it. Only he still seemed real, unflinching real. I wanted to be like *Gipsy Boy*. Someone. But I couldn't be. *Gipsy Boy*, whom I barely even knew, came to completely possess me. When I precisely followed his every command, he'd whisper my true name in my head - mean and false. "There you lie, *Clown*."

36

Juffrouw Warre retired and a younger woman with ginger-red hair and matching red blotches on her cheeks replaced her. Her name was Greet van Loo. Every month she visited the foster mother for an hour. What they discussed during these visits, I never knew.

Greet van Loo's arrival came at a strange time, because that same year the situation with Gert escalated. He too had endured prolonged periods of various forms of violence. He too knew countless cane strokes, humiliating remarks and curses, and like me was constantly told to 'go back to the gutter he came from.'

The foster parents beat him over trifles too, and just like me, he

served lengthy bedridden punishments in total seclusion. Once they humiliated

Gert by making him wear girls' clothes because he supposedly fancied a girl. They forced me to watch as he walked around dressed like that while they called him a girl. Gert flushed crimson with shame. The foster parents knew precisely how to psychologically wound children.

Some time before Gert ran away, there was another eruption of violence. It happened one evening in the kitchen. Gert was washing dishes as usual while I dried. The foster father appeared from nowhere and attacked Gert unexpectedly. He grabbed him roughly by the neck in a vicious chokehold, pressing Gert's face tightly against himself. Then from above he began punching his face brutally. He didn't stop. The punches kept coming—maybe ten times, perhaps even more. Always directly into Gert's face.

Suddenly the moment came when Gert could no longer tolerate the violence, pain and injustice. He fought back. Hard and merciless. He wrenched loose, forced the foster father's arm down, and with incredible strength seized his head firmly between both hands. The foster father gasped for air as his face began reddening.

My brother yanked his head downwards, pressing him deep into the narrow space between kitchen units. The foster father's face turned nearly purple, gulping for breath. Moments later his body slumped to the floor. Gert had won.

Shortly after, the foster father regained consciousness and hauled himself up laboriously against the counter, still gasping for air.

He was furious, raging at this first defeat in his decade-long war waged against his foster children. Apparently he wasn't accustomed to losses. Because now that Gert, who immediately retreated to his room, had overcome him - whom from then onwards he wouldn't dare touch - the foster father turned his full breathing rage upon me. Panting, his head

still flushed red, he began roaring like a drunken sergeant desperate to assert himself.

"You filthy snake, you viper's spawn. You disgusting, low-life bastard. "I'm calling Greet. She'll come collect you tonight. Get out. I never want to see you again."

"But I didn't do anything?" I ventured uncertainly.

"Answering back now, you filthy wretch? Shut your insolent mouth or I'll beat you senseless. Into the shed with you!"

I watched his square red face advance menacingly towards me. He must have recovered, because he dragged me into the shed like a sack of potatoes and hurled me inside with tremendous force. As I lay there on the floor, I could still hear him raging outside.

"Out with you. I never want to see you again. Never ever."

The door slammed violently shut. I scrambled to my feet, still clutching the dishcloth, and waited. I'd long known I was wholly unwanted, that they hated me, but the uncertainty was dreadful. Because meanwhile I still had to live there.

After a while I was let out, but the atmosphere remained heavily charged, worse than ever. Gert felt it, I felt it - something hung in the air, something ready to explode. It didn't take long before the complete eruption came. On a sunny Saturday morning, the foster father was stacking bricks ready for the bricklayer who'd use them after the weekend to build walls for the new boiler room. There was going to be a small extension at the back of the bungalow for a new heating system. I watched from a distance. Who knows why, but suddenly an unbelievably violent argument erupted between the foster father and Gert who was walking past with his bike. What happened next was horrific.

The foster father became like an erupting volcano - spewing aggression, shameless swearing, limitless raging. The inevitable climax came when I heard him scream while picking up bricks from the pile.

"Stone him! Stone him!" I heard him shout. Had he actually gotten this from the Bible? With all his might he hurled several large bricks at Gert. By some miracle they missed, passing so close they nearly hit his face square on. A direct brick to the face would probably be fatal.

That same day, my brother took his bike and fled to our older brother Bram, whose address he somehow knew. I wouldn't find out he'd gone there until many years later.

And so, five years after Remco had run away, Gert too had disappeared. Greet had one final talk with the foster parents about Gert - I was briefly present. Yet although both my brothers had fled due to abuse, she simply left me there.

Nevertheless, discussing these violent incidents must have made some impression on the foster parents, because from the day Gert ran away they only beat me occasionally. I was still thrown down the stairs once, bruising nearly all my ribs, and got struck so hard on the back of the head that I bled profusely - but from then on their methods for disciplining me became subtler.

One day in the early summer of 1978, I spent a day with the foster parents, Aunt Kathy and Uncle Geert and their children, by the shores of the Veluwemeer near Bad-Hoophuizen, not far from Nunspeet.

What Aunt Kathy, Uncle Geert and Gerda were doing, I've forgotten, but Jerry was playing in his yellow and black inflatable boat with a few other children. What fun they were having.

Naturally, I was secretly terribly envious of Jerry, who could play so freely and have friends just like that. From a distance, I heard their cheerful boys' voices echoing across the water for some time, growing fainter and fainter until they became little moving dots, barely visible to me anymore.

Why didn't I follow them? Well, since springtime, around the same time as my sixteenth birthday, I was suddenly no longer allowed to play with Jerry. Because I had *grown too big*, too old even. I couldn't believe my ears. Too old? Me? For me, nothing had changed – I still felt just as nine years old as Jerry did.

It was the worst punishment they could have devised; my only real connection with someone outside was now gone.

Of course, I was used to amusing myself. Far from the family, from Jerry and his friends, I searched among the dense reed beds along the shallow sandy shores of the lake for hidden fish. At lightning speed, like fired rockets, they would suddenly dart away from me, leaving swirling wakes. Mostly, it was small pikes fleeing before me. I found this exciting because, from their invisible underwater world, they momentarily became visible only by fleeing.

Among the water plants, I tried to spot the small dark gray fish I always mistakenly called *guppies*. With their tiny mouths, they would aimlessly snap at the surface. As a little game, I let a small twig dangle in the water among them, instantly triggering a mysterious pattern of escaping fish.

And with the frogs hidden deep in the tall grass by the shore, I played a different game. I tried to creep as close as possible without startling them into the water. Sometimes it wasn't the frog, but me who was startled when one suddenly catapulted itself into the air.

Every now and then, I found washed-up objects—a lost buoy, an old

yellowed plastic ball, some forgotten child's sandy mould which I floated

on the water and filled with tiny stones until it sank. I spent entire happy hours by the shoreline.

At the end of the day, Jerry and his friends had finished playing, and the inflatable boat lay upturned on the shore to dry. Everyone had started dinner by the time I strolled over; they sat on foldable camping chairs around Uncle Geert's large picnic table. There was bread and soup that Uncle Geert heated on a primus stove.

I was given some lemonade, but I wouldn't be joining them to eat - that year, the foster parents had decided I must never eat alongside others in company. That was reserved for afterwards, when I would eat alone.

So I asked if I could take the inflatable boat for one last ride. I knew no one would miss me, and with Uncle Geert and Aunt Kathy present, the foster parents perhaps wouldn't dare refuse. Uncle Geert nodded kindly. "Go on then, have one last little sail on the water."

Shortly after, I waded knee-deep, dragging the inflatable boat behind me on its rope, moving further into the lake. Right before reaching the shallows where they abruptly dipped into treacherous deep navigational waters, I stretched out inside the little vessel, hands and feet dangling overboard into the lukewarm water. I luxuriated in the soft rocking motions of the boat upon the gentle swell, under the long golden glow of the setting sun whose rays spread widely across the mirror-like lake.

Here, during this late summer sunset on the lake, I felt intensely happy. Nobody could disturb me or say I was doing something wrong. Nobody could brutally order me about here. It was so silent, so peaceful. Here there were no intrusive images of animals, buildings, babies, toddlers or boys. Nothing could

agitate or provoke me here. There were no worries - not even *Gipsy Boy* and the *Two-Witch* could reach me anymore. Here I was completely

alone. Safe.

I even dared briefly close my eyes. I surrendered completely to the gentle bobbing motion, softly illuminated by the slowly expanding sun. The lapping waves, a seagull gliding overhead, reeds swaying lightly along the straight polder dyke - through these I slipped into timelessness and stillness. The orange sun grew larger, shifting to fiery vermilion. Its glow spread like a vast stain across the faint ripples of the lake, stretching this moment of happiness to its limit - a joy I've never forgotten. Slowly drifting through this palette of colours until the sun disappeared irrevocably behind the green polder dyke on the distant horizon, signalling it was time to return.

38

In May 1978, our havo class marked the end of the school year with a summer camp at a farm campsite in Epe. I looked forward to it desperately, if only to briefly escape the foster parents. On a school camp I'd surely experience new things - and I loved that. A different environment, enough to eat, blissfully away from it all.

But then, just before the camp, I became seriously ill. A severe sinus infection literally flattened me. Darkness swam before my eyes, I vomited violently, and with my soaring fever - over 40°C - it became clear I'd be spending time bedridden rather than happily joining the camp.

As an invalid, I wasn't allowed my own bed - the foster mother found stairs too troublesome now she had to care for me. So during my illness I lay downstairs in a small oblong room next to the shower, just big enough for a bed. Essentially it was a

storage cupboard - narrow, rather low and quite dark as there was only a small skylight through which barely any light filtered because of the large trees surrounding the house. I was ill and lonely. The foster mother paid me no attention, the foster father worked all day.

Occasionally I heard the foster mother doing housework; the rest of the day was eerily quiet. One of the foster parents' dogs occasionally broke the silence with short, irritable barks. The wretched wall clock did its duty here too, chiming slowly and mournfully as it marked the interminable hours.

Fortunately Bimbam lay beside me, stroking my feverish face with his soft teddy-bear paw and whispering endless sweet nothings to help me recover. Slowly I improved. I heard the baker knock - still delivering bread weekly, still bringing three sweets 'for the children', unaware both brothers had long disappeared. No one in the village knew what happened hidden within that house.

Then suddenly, on one of my loneliest days, the doorbell rang sharply, unexpectedly. I pricked up my ears; visitors never came to the foster parents.

"For whom?" I heard the foster mother ask in the hallway.

I half-raised myself to eavesdrop. Something was

happening! "For Jasper."

My heart raced. For me? Did I hear that right? Was someone really coming to see me? Could that just happen?

"Are you sure, is it not a mistake?" I heard the foster mother ask.

"No, I'm Ralf van Houtem - you know my father from church? We live down the road at number ten."

"Oh yes, I know your father indeed... an elder, isn't he? Do you really need to see Jasper? Well, come in then."

Not long after, the cupboard door opened. In the doorway appeared the cheerful, slightly sharp-featured face of a slender

boy of about ten years old. He had dark brown hair and his face was covered in amusing freckles. I vaguely recognised him from a few houses down our street, and I knew his name was Ralf. Had he really come for me? His cheerful face was a breath of fresh air after the foster parents' sombre expressions, which had grown more aloof and severe since Gert's departure. Recently they'd often had fierce arguments too - violent shouting echoing through the house, doors slamming, sometimes crockery flying. The atmosphere was heavy and I constantly felt afraid.

"Hello Jasper!" Ralf called enthusiastically, "my parents asked me to pay you a visit, because Nellie said you weren't there last evening."

Nellie? Oh yes, Nellie, his sister. I went to catechism with her on Monday evenings. She'd apparently noticed my absence.

"It's so dark in here?" I heard Ralf say in wonder. "Are you meant to sleep? Are you very ill? Is that why you're just lying in the dark? And what do you do in bed all day?"

"Nothing," I answered shyly. I didn't know what to say. I felt increasingly awkward around boys - the gulf between me and all boys seemed unbridgeable by now. They'd become intimidating, especially now I wasn't even allowed to play with cousin Jerry during those few annual visits anymore.

Interacting with small children was the only thing I still dared and enjoyed, where I could still feel safe. But that too was now forbidden and gone.

"But you really have nothing to do all day?" asked an increasingly amazed Ralf. He couldn't imagine anyone just lying in bed doing nothing.

"I have..." I began. But then the foster mother entered. Although I wasn't allowed to mix with others, she couldn't forbid this visit - Ralf's parents were from the same church. And Ralf's father, Mr. Van Houtem, was an elder - one of the few figures the foster parents still appeared to respect.

"How's your father?" the foster mother asked Ralf.

"He's away, I think he's gone to Switzerland again. He'll be back next week."

The foster mother nodded.

"Don't stay too long, Ralf. Jasper is ill and needs to sleep."

Thankfully she left us alone again.

"You have nothing to do, eh?" said Ralf. "Would you like something to read? I've got loads of Donald Ducks at home. Shall I fetch them for you?"

I nodded shyly, not daring to say another word. Was the foster mother listening behind the door?

"Be right back, I'll just go get them. See you in a minute."

Ralf disappeared like lightning, and moments later I already heard the door slam behind him. But within ten minutes he returned, cheerful face beaming, arms stacked high with Donald Duck comics.

"For you Jasper, this should keep you busy." He deposited the pile at the foot of the bed and started chatting. Did I ever go to the

swimming pool?

Did I know the field where he played football? Had I heard Nellie cared for a pony at a farm near Ermelo? How extraordinary that someone was talking to me. For a moment I forgot how ill I was, how lonely and empty I felt. It reminded me of something from long ago. It even seemed that after so many years, I briefly heard the voice of my *own mother* again. A voice that had once spoken softly and calmly to me. A voice full of care, gentle and sincere.

Ralf couldn't stay long - the foster mother soon called him from the hallway. Before leaving, Ralf promised to return soon. I hoped so. How I already yearned for his quick return. I felt so desperately alone. His departure that afternoon almost felt like my mother leaving me all over again.

"Bye Jasper. I'll definitely come back, promise. I've got loads more comics to bring."

"Bye Ralf. Thanks for bringing the Donald Ducks. Will you really come again? Really?" I dared ask.

He nodded, smiling. Moments later I heard the front door slam behind him. Buried deep under the blankets, I wept quietly.

Ralf never returned. The foster parents absolutely refused potential busybodies. They would return the Donald Ducks themselves later.

39

That summer we moved from Putten's woodland edge to northern Ede. There we occupied a large villa right next to extensive woods near *Huize Kernhem*. The property included two small wooden summer houses - one attached to the main building, the other standing alone at the rear. A broad gravel driveway flanked the villa, leading past sprawling lawns

entirely bordered by colourful flower beds. Nestled between them lay several ornamental ponds.

Additionally, the villa came with a large orchard of mature apple trees, bounded by tall shrubs concealing a small gazebo beside an expansive woodland roughly one hectare in size. Immediately facing this woodland stood a large wooden outbuilding used as a garage, while hidden among taller bushes lay a garden shed full of tools. My bedroom on the villa's first floor overlooked all this woodland.

I still played with my teddy bears, wooden blocks and toy cars. By now I also had a fine wooden fort for my cowboys and Indians - *Fort Texas*.

What fascinated me most was the square-shaped wooden spruce tree that came with it. You could position an Indian warrior behind it to ambush the fort.

Through the villa's woods, I could easily access the *Edese Bos* north of

Kernhem via a small wicket gate, where I could find some respite. Deeper in these woods lay a stately little beech-lined avenue where a double row of trees had originally been planted on each side. Most extraordinary. It was a remnant from when these woods still formed part of the adjoining *Kernhem* estate.

I christened this dignified avenue *Jasper's Lane* because I kept returning to it. This was my own special place in the woods. Here I could find peace, temporarily escape everything. It became my personal sanctuary. Countless lost hours I spent there dreaming and thinking. I threw pebbles at trees, arranged pine cones into intricate patterns in the soft yellow sand. Patiently I searched for hollows where bats hid, and once crawled too far into a fox den until I could barely retreat. Outdoors at least, I could still feel content.

Indoors with the foster parents, things gradually worsened. Suddenly they put me on rations - just four slices of bread per day at most. Every

Sunday they locked me in a back room without toilet access, not even a chamber pot, forcing me to hold everything in until briefly released. Doors constantly locked behind me as if I were their prisoner. They wanted no "bother" from me on Sundays - absolute silence was demanded. On such days, I didn't utter a word.

In this room, at least I could sit at a small table. What I did there escapes me now. Barely four metres by two, this narrow storage space connecting to the villa's attached summer house contained little to observe - just high bookshelves, hanging plants with trailing stems, stacks of *Reformatorsch Dagblad* newspapers, spare shoes and ironing waiting its turn. Only church visits and toilet breaks temporarily released me from this cell on Sundays.

Once I returned late from school for dinner - previously a beating offence. Now they played a bizarre game: they'd stir my hot meal into yoghurt or custard, creating a mush I had to consume.

"If you can't be on time, you'll have to *guzzle* it all at once."

Guzzle . Did I hear that right? Had I uttered that word years earlier, all hell would have broken loose. The foster parents were changing.

This wasn't isolated. It became *routine* - a disgusting routine. Peas and potatoes with fatty gravy would be blended with custard into foul slop I had to eat. Kale with gravy, sausage and yoghurt - mix it up and guzzle. Puréed spinach and potatoes swirled through chocolate custard: every revolting combination imaginable. From then on, all my meals were served this way.

Gipsy Boy laughed about this, remembering far worse times, even trying to acclimatise me to it. Oh well, was it really so terrible to have all my food mixed together? After all, it was still proper food,

wasn't it? The taste of boiled potatoes with vanilla custard wasn't actually that bad?

What felt far worse than the food torment was how the foster parents increasingly ignored me - to them I often amounted to nothing more than a useless collection of air molecules. What purpose did I still serve in their house? They terrorised me by utterly denying my existence. If I asked for scissors, they'd labour away pretending I wasn't there.

I wasn't permitted any independence, so this presented difficulties - everything had to be requested. Without responses, I remained in limbo. Eventually I stopped asking altogether and fumbled along alone. Thus they invented new torments. My bicycle suddenly disappeared from the wooden shed, relegated to standing outside exposed. So what if it got wet? Anything to spite Jasper.

A heavy tension permeated the house, palpable every second. A strange atmosphere reminiscent of earlier silence days prevailed, yet distinctly different, for those had been general decrees - now everything was directed solely against me.

Perhaps the worst was that ghastly pretence - the charade of not noticing I existed.

When I entered, not a word was spoken, not even a glance in my direction. Timidly I'd creep through the house - increasingly *their* house
- desperate to reach my room as quickly as possible.

To them, my presence in their house was an aberration. I'd long known myself unwanted - that they'd always deeply despised and even hated me.

But what had I done? Why were they growing increasingly vicious while acting like I'd vanished? Where was I failing? How could I change?

What was wrong with me? Confusion overwhelmed me - their

unspoken demands, their expectations of who I should be. I felt so diminished, so *nothing* . A *worthless mess* - the most worthless mess on earth.

The foster parents no longer answered even simple requests like "May I go outside?" My uncertainty escalated. What were they trying to achieve? Did they hope I'd make a mistake, misinterpret something to justify beating me? Frozen by fear, I often remained motionless, paralysed by not knowing what was permitted. Why were they always angry with me?

Then the foster father purchased a dark wooden walking stick with a silver bulbous head and flattened silver tip - an implement I'd never forget.

Ostensibly bought for walking support, yet he carried it constantly, clearly demonstrating authoritarian power.

Once, as I happened to pass him, he raised it to strike me. I don't recall why - was my walk insufficiently subservient? Too hurried? His face would always flush crimson with rage, features hardening into an angry rectangle - but now everything teetered on violent eruption. Terror immobilised me - sheer mortal terror. Suddenly something snapped - I was done. My mind couldn't

endure anymore. I'd suffered sufficient violence, enough humiliation, screaming, hatred. I just wanted out. Before conscious thought, I was bolting outside - grabbing my bike from the shed and fleeing. Did they imagine a casual bicycle ride? Did I myself know what I was doing?

Where to go? Somehow I knew precisely. Pedalling furiously towards Ede's northern heathlands and forests - towards the vast military training ground, theoretically off-limits but where firing-range warnings and red flags warned trespassers during exercises.

I'd previously ventured there despite prohibitions and been struck by the enveloping quiet - only distant tank noises interrupting profound

stillness, the absence of people. That deserted space became my sole destination. I took nothing - not even a coat.

Wheeling my bike along woodland paths, penetrating deeper into the forest's heart - away from all humanity. Freedom! No more commands, no possible mistakes - free as any woodland creature.

Eventually abandoning my bike in bushes, I lay on an open heath between dark spruce forests, carefully lowering myself onto soft white sand among heather tufts and moss. Scrupulously lying fully supine - even in freedom still constrained by engrained rote: I dared not sleep otherwise than drilled into me.

There I lay, directionless. Could I sleep here? Forests I knew intimately - but sleeping wild?

Dusk approached. I dared not - but more importantly - would not return. Light faded into darkness, the pines transforming to black silhouettes against deep evening blue. A crescent moon's melancholy apparition provoked tangible desolation - profound exclusion from human fellowship.

In twilight's last moments, as trees completed their shift to deepest black, mysterious rustlings surrounded me - brittle twigs cracking. Something moved through the forest. Then suddenly, from all directions, dark wild boar backs appeared against the cobalt sky, passing scandalously close - almost within touching distance. Their contented grunts and rooting snouts disturbing loose sand in quest of prime beetle larvae formed a strange cradle song as they worked.

Of them I felt no fear. My Putten childhood had plentiful wild boar encounters - I knew even now, prone as I was, simply

coughing would send the sounder stampeding.

Next day, instinct drove me to construct shelter from branches and torn heather sods. The cold ground having chilled me through sleep, I fashioned a grass bed. Like proper woodland forager I explored my territory's oak woods and heath edges, gorging on abundant bilberries and blackberries.

It was nourishing, more than sufficient, and quenched my thirst too. After eating I sometimes felt slightly dizzy, but it tasted good. I ate exactly as much as I wanted.

The days blurred together, each new day presenting another challenge.

I'd lost track of the date, but what

difference did that make anymore? Nothing counted here - not even being human. In the distance I sometimes heard tanks moving or the occasional artillery drill. No people came near, nobody even knew I was staying here.

Perhaps I was growing accustomed, despite having fled unprepared into these woods. So I remained there, day after day. It felt good to be liberated from the foster parents.

Yet gradually the truth emerged - I was no woodland creature. No fox or hare, no deer or stag, utterly unlike the free-living wild boars. For I wore clothes that grew filthy, I felt cold despite it being summer. I couldn't subsist on acorns, bark or leaves - increasing hunger left me progressively weaker.

Then came days of relentless rain. Even beneath the dense spruce branches of my shelter, I became soaked through. By day's end, I had no choice but to return to the hell I'd escaped from. My bid for freedom had failed.

Several times before, hunger had made me consider returning. I felt myself weakening - wild fruits proved inadequate sustenance, and I'd already lost considerable weight. Torn between fear of going back and terror at remaining, what choice remained?

Ultimately I realised I had absolutely no idea *where else* I could escape to - no outside contacts despite five years of daily train commutes to school. Defeated and afraid, starving and exhausted, I cycled back late at night through torrential rain to the foster home. The rain-spattered asphalt around me, my soaked clothing - everything felt like a mournful funeral march after losing some gruelling ordeal. I was broken, I was nothing - I hadn't even managed a clean getaway like Gert.

From a distance I could see lights glowing in the villa - everything looked so ordinary. So the foster parents were still up. Had I been missed? Were they searching for me? Was I even allowed to return? Would they beat me because

I'd run away? Was that permitted? Would they lock me up again?

When I entered, barely a word was spoken, as usual. Under the kitchen's harsh lighting, they silently gave me vanilla custard which I wolfed down greedily. Against all expectations, I was offered a second bowl.

How peculiar to sit at their kitchen table so late - I was being allowed to return.

I put all my clothes in the laundry basket and staggered upstairs. I collapsed into bed like a dead weight. Their only instruction was that nothing about my escapade should be mentioned to Greet during her visit the following week.

I barely knew Greet. I wasn't aware of any appointment. We'd never actually spoken before. She never asked me anything and would utter only three or four sentences on the rare occasions I

saw her. Had they

suddenly become afraid I might tell her something? Did I dare? All I feared was Greet blaming everything on me.

40

Thus the summer holidays of 1979 passed. I travelled to a new school. A higher secondary institution chosen by my foster parents, just as they'd selected my secondary school subjects. I wasn't permitted to study mathematics or physics - according to them I lacked technical, musical or creative aptitude... in their eyes I was suited for nothing. I wasn't even allowed career aptitude tests, for my foster parents decided for me. They decreed I could become either a minister or a schoolteacher - nothing else. I wasn't fit for anything more. Having completed secondary school, I now had to train for a profession.

Me, pursue a career? What?
Minister or schoolteacher.

A minister? Me - one of those men who on Sundays angrily spews *hellfire and damnation* from the pulpit while wearing that black frock coat, speaking that archaic language I never understood, always looking so gloomy? Ministers - men whose cast-off pinstripe trousers I'd been forced to wear in my first year? Would adulthood mean daily wear of clothes that had brought me such bullying? Would 'religion' - the very thing I'd always struggled with - become my profession? Did they honestly intend for me to become a minister?

My 'choice' became teaching. They enrolled me at the orthodox Reformed teacher training college where I'd learn to give lessons. To children.

Teach *children*. Me? Teach my role models, my idols? Those I wanted to be?

The *Driestar* - that was the name of the orthodox Reformed teacher training college in Gouda, about eighty kilometres from Ede, where I was headed. Once again I faced long daily commutes, just like secondary school. Up at five-thirty in the morning, rarely home before five in the afternoon.

41

As a foster child, I was automatically required to bear my foster parents' surname, though it was clear I'd never be adopted. Unlike adoption, there was never any intention of me truly becoming family - their surname mainly served to conceal from outsiders that I wasn't their natural child. That spared awkward questions for both foster parents and myself. On principle that wasn't a bad thing. With my real surname I'd have constantly had to explain coming from another family, and the other children might have bullied me even more.

Carrying my foster parents' surname had never caused me problems before. My school reports, swimming certificates,

cycling proficiency badges or primary school sports day certificates all bore their name: Jasper *Bakker*. As official qualifications they're invalid

- that surname being no legal name of mine. But does it matter? I

swim,

cycle and play sports regardless of what the certificates say.

Problems only arose upon passing my HAVO exams. My diploma required my legal signature. The signing involved much mysterious fuss. My name wasn't called during the graduation ceremony. The signing took place in a small back room when everyone had left. There I secretly provided my signature, hidden from all - the first time I'd ever written my real name.

Now I was attending *De Driestar* , however, I had to decide which surname to use henceforward, as no exam or qualification would remain valid without my own name. This thrust me into confusion once again. The heritage I'd spent my entire childhood disowning surged painfully into focus through the unexpected, decisive question my foster parents abruptly posed. I remember distinctly sitting opposite them at the kitchen table when I heard them ask.

"Which surname do you want to use at *De Driestar* - ours, ' *Bakker* ', or your birth parents' name, ' *Heijting* '?"

Did I hear that correctly? Were they actually asking what I wanted? Unbelievable. Suddenly I had to choose whether to remain Bakker or become Heijting - a permanent decision, no switching back and forth.

"And," the foster parents informed me, "your choice is *completely free* - naturally it won't have any consequences. Nobody will judge you for whichever name you pick. Greet will formalise your decision officially."

What that "formalising" entailed, I didn't know. Truthfully, I understood nothing about what was happening in my life - everything seemed to unfold outside myself. At seven-

teen, I still needed permission to salt my own egg - "May I please have salt on my egg, *Mummy* ?" With that compulsory 'Mummy'. Sometimes arbitrarily refused, sometimes allowed. I remained utterly dependent - still requesting clean underwear, begging to use their toilet, pleading to go outside. Spontaneous action was forbidden. Yet now I had to make a monumental decision about something I'd never previously considered.

From my heart's core, I chose Heijting. That was my name, my belonging, my true self.

Gipsy Boy smirked approvingly - in his view, I'd only ever truly belonged to my birth parents anyway. Living with the Bakkers had always been wrong, he maintained.

Even the witches, including *Two-Witch* , seemed to nod agreement - as if bearing my true name would make me better comprehend I'd never been anything but *Two-Witch* 's boy.

Thus I uttered words that sounded strangely foreign even to my own ears: "I choose *Heijting* as my surname."

Silence fell. The cards, shuffled carelessly for years, now lay exposed. That heartbeat pause between a lottery number's announcement and the cheering. The dead stillness before grief erupts when death's reality strikes. An irreversible moment where understanding seeped through - I'd invoked the forbidden name in the foster home. The ultimate taboo shattered, their sacred foster house most cursed word spoken.

"What?" You choose to be called Heijting? So that's been festering inside you all along, you filthy creature."

My foster mother's piercing voice shattered the razor-sharp silence. "You deceitful gutter-child – is this our thanks for all we've done these years? Should've stayed with that woman in your slum, there in Apeldoorn – that's where you belong, rotting. Go

back to that creature if that's what you want!"

As always, it was a monologue of unconsciously or deliberately strung- together vitriol, crammed with the limited repertoire of insults still permissible within Reformed circles.

My foster father joined in. "We've always been profoundly disappointed in you – wretched little bastard. You've never been good for anything.

Miserable, worthless, ungrateful waste of space. You're not even a proper

boy. Never had an ounce of use, you stubborn glutton. Absolute vermin – you can piss right off.” He gasped for breath before continuing hoarsely. “If you’re so desperate to be Heijting, Jasper, Greet will come collect you. Now fuck off upstairs. Out of my sight.”

I fled the kitchen table and bolted upstairs. Perched on my bed's edge, I sat stunned and bewildered. From this moment, I was no longer Jasper Bakker – the name I'd carried through nearly my entire childhood – but suddenly Jasper Heijting. Tentatively, almost inaudibly, I repeated my new name. “Jasper Heijting,” I whispered, “Heij-ting”. Two syllables... yes, that was me. Strange yet truer. Familiar.

Images of the children's home flickered behind my eyes – my name handwritten on mother's postcards. There too, I'd been Jasper Heijting. So ordinary, so achingly real. Memories surfaced of the toddler group. I smiled abruptly, feeling unshakably authentic. I still belonged there, among them. This realisation – that I'd never truly left the children's home – lingered as I drifted into daydreams for hours, until reality reclaimed me.

“Don't let us see your face again, vermin,” still echoed in my ears.

But how? Could I really stay upstairs forever? Then again, I reasoned, they'd spat such threats routinely. What weight did words carry anymore? Armoured by a decade of their tirades, I descended – hadn't I waged near-daily battles with them for my very right to exist as this 'wrong'

body, this boyhood, this being?

Downstairs, the glacial atmosphere hit me instantly – the air thick with unmeltable ice.

"What are you doing here, you two-faced rodent?" my foster mother's icicle voice snapped.

I assessed the situation. More coming? Yes.

"Why are you still here, Jasper? Didn't I tell you to piss off? Back to your room."

Their warfare – threats, violence, degradation – was nothing new. Yet now, having crossed some invisible line in their eyes, they wanted *absolutely nothing* more to do with me.

42

From the moment I claimed my birth name, their hostility became overt, their humiliations relentless. The house simmered in perpetual hostility. My foster father now routinely blocked me with his walking stick – whether I tried retrieving my bike or carrying schoolwork upstairs.

"I've got homework."

"You're not going anywhere, you filthy little wretch. Did I ever give you permission to go upstairs?"

"But I need to do my homework in my room?"

"'My room'? Nothing here belongs to you. This is my house. That's my room. I decide what you may do."

Threateningly, he prodded me with his stick, shoving me back into the hallway like a movable barrier - an obstruction deliberately making my life harder. Often I wasn't even allowed back inside the house. This sometimes prevented me sitting exams at school.

"What do I care about your exams? You'll stay right outside until I let you in - now piss off."

So I'd slink away. Ultimately, nobody cared whether I took my exams. Even during rainstorms I'd sometimes stand dripping by the kitchen window until finally permitted entry. I felt utterly powerless against everything in my life - my foster parents, my confused emotions, the perpetual exclusion, my inability to be someone. Whenever possible I'd rush to my bedroom to escape their presence entirely. The reverse also occurred - being forbidden to go outside, trapped in the kitchen as he pointed his stick to the chair by the door.

"Sit there. Until I say you may leave."

He always barked commands in that harsh voice. The kitchen chair became known simply as ' *The Kitchen Chair*' - my designated waiting spot.

I spent endless hours there patiently until granted permission to leave. Frequently missing trains, arriving late to school where nobody understood why - my existence unknown anywhere...

Outdoor chores brought relief despite their compulsory nature. I maintained the lawns beside the house, raked the bordering path, mowed the vast orchard, cleared woodland trails of weeds and branches, treated the summerhouse planks, even once built them an entire chicken coop.

Outside offered brief escape from their scrutiny, though my work was always inspected - never satisfactory, never good enough. Not once in my life had I done anything right according to them. Every task ended with tirades about my worthlessness.

Meanwhile, I coexisted intimately with *Gipsy Boy* and other stunted *child-selves* . Gradually something new emerged within me -

an unbridgeable distance from humanity that made me constantly study boys, desperate to understand what made them recognised as real people. Increasingly I scrutinised how boys existed as *authentic humans* - their vivid realness. Observing their lived experience while I remained a dead trinket, an irrelevant absurdity, more nonsensical animal than person.

I became fixated on my body, particularly the recurring pain between my legs. Showering, I examined myself, feeling less than human. Searching for how to become real, to truly live and exist. Sometimes glimpsing a boy's bare arm or leg evoked strange sensations - musing: *So that's what a real person looks like* , or *This is the form required to be seen as human* .

Seeing boys anywhere made me doubt myself. Wasn't I theoretically a boy too? And weren't boys human by definition? Yet I perceived them living authentically while my mind endlessly conflated humans and animals. Why was everything about me so wrong? Why was I something terrible?

These questions tormented me internally while externally I attended school, cycled, caught trains - maintaining the pretence of normality.

Nothing felt normal. Three-year-old boys governed my psyche. I felt inferior and bad, unequal to life's simplest demands. Daily routines like using the toilet or showering - seeing my body - destabilised me. Eating carried ominous awareness: *Something's wrong here* .

Objects triggered me disproportionately - knives, hammers, spades, gendered clothing. Even babies, toddlers, children, various animals could provoke overwhelming, ineffable emotions. I existed behind a hazy screen observing but never participating.

Did losing contact with Jerry compound this?

Amid this profound confusion between humans and animals, my foster parents deliberately intensified my disorientation.

Normally they'd mix my hot meal with yogurt or pudding, but after claiming my birth name, my foster father grabbed the dog's empty feeding bowl. With a malevolent expression, he scraped my mashed food into it, slamming it before me, commanding I eat *like this* .

I stared at the mess in that filthy bowl - glossy light brown enamel outside, light blue interior often crusted with old dog food. Hating the stench, I ate automatically, thoughtlessly. No thought of resistance crossed my mind. I dared nothing, was nobody. Had I ever been someone? Possessed a self? Mechanically I emptied the bowl, my consciousness switching off. Fully dissociated.

Worse followed. They placed the dog bowl on the floor beside the kitchen table, ordering I eat *there* . *Dog's feed*, my foster father said. Sitting cold tiles, cutlery forbidden, I was to feed like an animal - I had a muzzle.

Still I complied. Internally frightened and confused beyond resistance, I accepted everything, seeing no possibility of change. I'd never defended myself against anyone in my life. Everyone had always done exactly as they pleased with me. Everyone.

They stopped expecting me to say grace - knowing I'd never pray again. In matters of faith too, my foster parents had somehow slipped away. I now occasionally even heard my foster father swear. I was furious too - I knew they hated me, sitting there above me at the table.

My foster parents ate in silence. From the floor, I heard the

clinking of their cutlery against plates above me. I stared at their shoes, their legs, the tights of my foster mother which I'd always loathed. There

was something about women I couldn't pinpoint. I didn't look up, hunched over the dog bowl as I ate. Not a word was spoken, as if I didn't exist. As soon as the bowl was nearly empty, I hurriedly left the kitchen and went straight upstairs.

I sensed keenly that a line had been crossed, that things were escalating unreasonably. I went to my foster parents' room where there was a washbasin, rinsed my mouth thoroughly, then returned to my bedroom where I pressed Bimbam tightly against me for a moment. He looked at me briefly - his presence meant everything in such moments.

More than anything I wanted to play now, but that was no longer possible. My building blocks, my toy cars, my beloved cowboys and the accompanying *Fort Texas* - all the toys that formed such an essential part of my life - were gone. Thrown away or given away?

I yearned for my toys, longed to lose myself imagining the cowboys valiantly defending the fort against wild Indians attempting to storm it unexpectedly. And the cowboys would win - that exhilarating feeling when the fort remained secure. I missed my shiny silver knights too, so brave with their shields, lances, crossbows and swords.

Since playing wasn't an option, I decided to do homework instead - that still felt vaguely comforting. Studying meant escaping too. Not having to think about anything. Fleeing reality.

I read about the *senary numeral system*, a method for teaching children arithmetic. I stared at the numbers.

0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... and then not 6 but 10. A *quinary system* only had digits 1 through 4 before reaching 10. I was supposed to explain to children how to add and subtract numbers beyond ten using these systems. Senary system problems. $5 + 3$? Simple: that's 12

because after 5 you continue
counting 10, 11, 12. Next question, $10 - 4$? Just count backwards...
um

10 = 6

, so that's 2. Easy enough - why was I learning such trivial things?

I worked through the sums until suddenly questioning why I was still studying this. What was I doing at this school? Academically I could manage well enough, but to what end? Wasn't playing infinitely more enjoyable? Of course playing was better. I should be playing. I wanted nothing to do with my life as it stood. A wave of guilt hit me too.

Perhaps choosing my own name had been completely wrong. Should I go downstairs to tell them I regretted choosing Heijting and would rather remain Jasper Bakker? No. Absolutely not. Never. I was Jasper Heijting and no one else - well, apart from however many others still lived inside me. Together, with all that I comprised, we were Jasper Heijting. And nothing else.

I never dared oppose my foster mother, even as my body grew taller and I reached seventeen. Sometimes my foster father wouldn't be home when I returned from school. Frequently then, my foster mother would make me put all my clothes except underwear in the wash.

"Put your bag neatly there, then strip everything off - into the laundry basket, then wait in the hallway."

It might have seemed she simply intended to wash my clothes, but the real reason was entirely different.

I'd return to her in just my underpants, then wait in the hallway beside the door leading to the front room.

"Come in. Go to your spot."

Your spot meant sitting cross-legged on the floor far from the sofa and coffee table, often facing away from the window while drinking my tea.

She'd enter with two teacups, placing mine beside me on the floor.

Seating herself on the large sofa wall-mounted perpendicular to the window, she'd settle among their three dogs and several cats. No words were exchanged. Sometimes she'd shuffle papers, read a book, or sip tea while gazing sideways through the window at the

gravel path fronting the villa – which my back faced. Occasionally she'd iron laundry in that room while I remained floor-bound. Even in profile, her face beneath its grey up-knotted hair looked flinty and bitter. Her usual attire - a black, navy or plum dress over a white blouse pinned with a small golden or silver brooch - gave her an impeccable appearance.

These silent tea ceremonies contained no trace of togetherness or 'we'-ness, only the deliberately enforced distance reinforcing my position as an inferior, insignificant creature on the floor while she reigned above with her dogs.

The unnatural quiet of absolute subjugation. The unavoidable humiliation of submitting to others' whims made me feel I'd ceased being a child. Here I existed as *nothingness*, a zero with a teacup. I had to remain in position until she uttered the redeeming permission to rise and dress again.

From my floor spot, I was meant to look up at her, but I always avoided her gaze just as I avoided meeting any adult's eyes. Usually I stared fixedly ahead at the greyish rug with each ridged strand ending in a frayed knot.

Nobody knew what transpired there. When the foster parents received an inheritance, conflict arose - with relatives, even Jerry's parents and church members. Eventually they stopped attending church and receiving visitors entirely. Whether Greet ever returned, I don't know.

Some religious observance remained - Sundays were still spent locked away. But instead of the back parlour, I now endured them in the basement beneath the stairs.

They wanted no sight of me - making Sundays the week's worst days.

The hallway's cellar door beneath the closed stairway led down wooden steps to a concrete-floored cubbyhole. Its particular stench came from the tiny vents barely recycling air. A solitary bulb cast that uniquely cellar light - simultaneously harsh and dull, gleaming on flaking paint to bathe everything in diffuse greys. Most cellars feel stuffy and stale, but here hung that distinctive deep cellar atmosphere - a blend of old vegetables and overripe fruit, damp timber, moist walls and mouldy humus-soil.

In one corner, wedged between wooden shelves laden with preserves and surplus goods, stood a small wooden stool that was my designated perch. On a folding table beside it, my foster parents had placed one volume from the multi-part Bible concordance. A random tome from the exhaustive theological reference work lay opened arbitrarily on that little table for appearances' sake - though apart from having zero interest, I sat isolated beyond the bulb's faint circle of light, making reading practically impossible.

Thus I spent entire afternoons imprisoned, though the door wasn't actually locked. It didn't even have a lock. But my foster parents alone held the authority to open or close it.

Not even toilet breaks were permitted without their consent. It never occurred to me to climb those steps and leave. My terror of them outweighed any such notion. Confinement below seemed simply part of the natural order - I knew no alternative.

Those interminable Sundays underground were tedious, claustrophobic and lonely. Similar to being sent to bed as punishment, except there was still light and eventual evening release for bathroom relief. The wooden stool numbed my backside until I'd stand to pace the few permissible steps between wall-mounted shelves.

In those moments, I hated that cellar, those Sundays, the countless solitary hours devoid of purpose. I detested my foster parents most acutely. But above all I loathed existing as someone visible to others. If only I could vanish completely.

The cellar offered one clandestine consolation: here, like the proverbial starving cat stealing bacon, I surreptitiously supplemented my meagre four-slice daily bread ration. Rows of homemade jams in assorted flavours stood arrayed like a private underground grocery store, ripe for the taking. Sometimes I'd smuggle down a spoon from the kitchen drawer and, once locked in, empty entire jars in single sittings. The evidence I carefully concealed behind old cardboard boxes. Thankfully, this theft went undetected.

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The teacher training college in Gouda occupied a magnificent building where I loved to be. I adored its broad staircases in soaring stairwells, the many large windows and endless corridors - precisely the kind of grand institution that Uncle Johan, headmaster of some secondary school, had once shown me years before. Here I studied to become a teacher, officially alongside peers, yet never truly *together* with them. With my fellow students I shared no contact, no meaningful connection. Their conversations revolved around matters wholly foreign to me. Their world was so different, the distance between us far too great. I wasn't particularly interested in how they lived either -

what did I share with them? Nothing. In no way did I feel like them; in nothing did I fit

amongst them. I was acutely aware of being profoundly different, despite blending in completely during normal lessons.

Secretly, I did observe my fellow students. I wondered how they managed to interact so effortlessly with each other, just like the boys at

primary school. Some students were clearly friends - chatting together, walking the corridors arm in arm, laughing at shared jokes. I wouldn't have known how to begin speaking to them.

The full extent of my alienation became devastatingly clear when teaching placements began. The foster parents had chosen this educational path for me, so work placements were unavoidable.

My assigned school nestled in a picturesque village near Woerden surrounded by storybook landscapes. Patchwork fields and meadows crisscrossed by shallow canals carpeted with white water lilies, their banks lush with bulrushes and yellow iris. Charming little bridges connected farms along these waterways to dead-straight parallel roads. The village itself had a central canal.

I'd be teaching Year 1 and Year 3 - children aged six to ten. What a seismic shock, after such profound isolation, to suddenly find myself amidst a horde of children. I didn't understand what was happening to me. In the playground, sensory overload petrified me - I froze internally, feeling myself transform. Everywhere, casually playing, I saw living examples of everything I'd been denied. Running, shouting, laughing, expressing, belonging. Was I supposed to *teach* here? Me, among all these children? I recoiled at the thought but had no choice. I hurried inside the school building.

On that very first day, I introduced myself to the class. Introducing

myself to those I'd never been allowed to socialise with? An unbridgeable chasm yawned between me and those classroom children.

How bizarre facing all those staring eyes from my position at the blackboard, chalk in hand, playing teacher. Me - suddenly the adult in the room.

Observing from the back sat my mentor, Mr Jan van Essen - his first name something I'd only glimpsed accidentally on paperwork, as using Christian names was strictly taboo in Reformed circles. He embodied the archetypal village schoolmaster

radiating strict Calvinism. His sombre patterned clothes mirrored his expressionless face - stretched tight as if with some internal rubber band suppressing whatever feelings might surface. Never saw him laugh, never fearful or irritated. He seemed sculpted by rock-solid faith permitting only one emotional outlet: praising God through deepest humility.

Each morning, after lunch and at three o'clock closing, he'd lead the class in lengthy prayers - as if compensating through protracted devotion for having only been permitted to become either pastor or teacher, never anything else.

"Hello boys and girls. I'm... um... Jasper Heijting. And... I... um... I'm here to learn how to teach," I heard myself say, "Um, I'll be sitting at the back and... um... will also be teaching you. Yes that's right, yes..."

The children all stared at me, girls and boys alike. How dreadful. Boy. That six-letter word hammered inside my skull - the concept that had been twisted into my torment. Here I stood, confronting the self my foster parents had forbidden. They didn't belong in school, those boys. At least not in this one where I had to teach while barely having turned seventeen myself. Secretly, they were my unattainable idols - where I desperately wanted to belong. I longed to sit alongside them at those desks. To play together as friends in the schoolyard. Properly united.

And, if it was something boys did, I wanted to join in harassing the teacher.

Everything became excruciatingly clear now. The enigma of my identity, my very being, loomed closer than ever through this act of standing before the class. I didn't understand *why*, but my outsized body didn't match anything I felt inside. I might have been academically capable, but emotionally I bore no relation to my chronological age. I felt completely severed from the outside world, from real life.

Of course I had no choice - everyone judged solely by appearances, by my age, by my good grades. Seventeen was apparently considered quite grown-up. So I simply tried performing as expected, attempting to play this *teacher role* assigned to me.

There I stand during arithmetic. Before the blackboard, chalk in hand, impeccable teacher posture. "The seven times table. Who can write the seven times table on the board?"

A girl comes

forward. "What's

your name?"

"Miranda."

"Right Miranda, please write the seven times table on the board."

I watch Miranda writing. The blackboard distorts. Miranda transforms. The entire class melts around me. Time itself warps as perspective shifts. Suddenly I'm mutating while observing Miranda's chalk forming:

$$4 \times 7 = 28$$

,

$$5 \times 7 = 35$$

.

Wait - that's right, isn't it? My mind races. How does she know this automatically? Do I know her? Isn't she in my class? And isn't that Paulien over there? Or is it Wilma? Where's Fabian? After school I need to... Why am I standing by the blackboard?

"Is this right, sir?"

I snap back to reality. Neatly chalked in perfect script, the seven times table awaits my judgment. More than correct - Miranda writes more beautifully than I ever could. "Such neat handwriting, very well done Miranda."

The girl beams with justified pride. I re-enter the charade. "Who can write the two times table on the board?"

A boy called Tom gets his turn. As he scratches the sequential numbers in crude, nearly illegible chicken-scratch across the blackboard, I watch in trance-like horror while my mind recites: "The table of *Two-Witch* .

One times *Two-Witch* is *Two-Witch* . Two times

Two-Witch is *Four-Witch*. *Three times...*

I was insane. Something in my existence had driven me completely mad.

"Well done Tom, all the numbers are correct," I hear myself say moments later. "And written so very neatly too."

The class erupted in laughter at my words. Tom was happy because I, the teacher, had said it was good. I stared at the near-illegible scrawls on the board. I didn't register the children's laughter, nor Van Essen's disapproval from the back where he was assessing my teaching. I was gone, my thoughts elsewhere,

myself displaced. A completely different person stood teaching at the front now.

At the back of the class, a boy made funny faces at me. I laughed. Loud and long. Ha, ha, ha. He pulled another silly expression, sensing victory.

My laughter grew louder, longer, more uncontrollable. I spun abruptly towards the blackboard.

Turning back to the class, I tried to compose myself. My eyes wandered and found him again. A burst of giggles escaped me. How funny he was, what hilarious expressions. I could watch this forever. The class fell completely silent, every eye fixed on me.

Burning with shame, I turned back to the board but couldn't stop laughing. I fled the classroom, howling with laughter in the corridor. How funny their little faces were. Secretly how delightful to be made to laugh like this.

When the fit subsided, I returned sheepishly to my observer's seat at the back, hiding my face behind an upright book. What must the children think of me?

Van Essen silently shook his head. He gave a deep sigh. Something so silly, so odd and inappropriate - he'd never encountered anything like it before. His eyebrows rose high in astonishment.

The Year Five boys now appeared as very big lads to me. How competent they seemed in their rugged T-shirts. "Why are all these big boys here? And why am I here?" something inside me wondered in confusion.

" *You're here on teaching placement, aren't you?* " came a voice.

"As what? Me, a teacher? The master? Don't be ridiculous. I'm sitting right here in class. But what are these big boys doing here? What year am I actually in?"

Thus my thoughts whirled.

"Stop fussing, just teach. Write the sentences on the board."

"Senten... what are they?"

"Verbs. Go on, write down the verb *to do* ..."

The class waited. For me. I felt so small. Simply small.

"Act normal, write the verb ' *to do* ', now, quickly, stop being so strange."

I resisted transforming back from the person I now felt myself to be into the teacher I was supposed to be for the class. A voice inside me forced me back to reality.

To do. I do, you do, he does. I wrote. Who was writing this? Was this real?

We do, they do, you do. Suddenly this was reality again. The reality of doing my teaching placement.

I grew nervous. I realised I felt *mad* , confused, thoroughly shaken up. Because who can't stop laughing when a boy pulls funny faces? Me. Who thinks ten-year-old boys are already huge, bigger than my seventeen-year-old self? Another me. Who, while teaching class, looks up to boys of about eight? Yet another me. And who still wants to get good marks, try his best and hope everything proceeds as normally as possible? Still another me. I kept cycling through multiple *se/ves* within me. So many different and sometimes contradictory *se/ves* .

The problems during my teaching placement only worsened. Once again seated at the back of the classroom, this time observing mentor Van Essen to learn teaching techniques. Two

boys, Erik and Bart, briefly

whispered to each other during class - something I hadn't even noticed, but unexpectedly provoked Van Essen's anger. It startled me.

"Quiet back there, Erik! And you too, Bart!"

The next moment, complete silence fell across the classroom. Every eye turned towards Erik and Bart.

"You'll stay inside during break as punishment. That'll teach you not to talk during lessons."

The boys glanced over their shoulders at me - first Bart, then Erik. Just an ordinary blond boy, slight-framed, wearing a dark blue Mickey Mouse jumper. Erik... he looked so much like cousin Jerry. To my eyes, he embodied all that makes someone truly human. I admired him profoundly. How could this mentor grow so angry with this boy? I never wanted to see anyone angry ever again. Least of all with children.

And punishment? Had I ever enjoyed punishment? I asked myself. Punishment. Always punishment. The whole world seemed built on it. I couldn't bear to watch these boys being punished. So when they were supposed to stay in during break as punishment, I simply sent them outside. "Go and play outside, boys," I called with forced cheerfulness.

"But the teacher gave us detention," little Erik informed me honestly. "I'm a teacher too, and I say you can go outside.

Honestly, go on."

The boys scurried outside. I heard myself say *"I'm a teacher too."* Deep inside, this made me want to laugh. Me? A teacher? Ha! How skillfully I could twist reality to keep going. Wasn't I pretending to be a

real teacher standing before a class?

Through the classroom window I watched Bart and Erik running joyfully across the playground. Good. This was how things should be, I thought.

But no, it all went wrong. Battle lines were drawn when Van Essen returned to class and noticed Erik and Bart's absence.

"Where are Erik and Bart?"

The commanding tone in his voice and his searching eyes scanning the class-

room already showed me what was coming. I confronted him. It seemed that bearing my own name had gradually changed me. As if for the first time in my life, I could stand up to an adult. Though my smile remained nervous, I tried answering as firmly as possible: "They've just gone outside, Mr Van Essen."

Well done, a voice inside said. They're your idols - they may do everything, they have everything and can do everything.

And yes, that's truly how it felt.

Van Essen immediately broke from his rigid demeanour with an astonished, harsh tone. "Outside? Simply outside? What do you mean simply outside? Didn't I say they must stay in as punishment?"

I shrugged. "I sent them out because those children did nothing wrong - just talked a little, nothing more really?"

Inside, I was laughing. "Good, that man should respect children."

Van Essen reacted as if I'd made him step barefoot into a bag of drawing pins.

"What? Talking, disrupting order - it's the worst thing that can happen in class. You've still got loads to learn, lad."

But now I couldn't stop myself. Nor did I want to. I felt free. Broken loose from something that had always bound me tight. "Well I disagree. Keeping kids in is too harsh a punishment. It's simply not right. Children should be playing happily outside."

The face before me darkened further, flushing crimson.

"Not right? NOT RIGHT? Who do you think you are to decide what's right? Who says this isn't right? Who's the mentor here? Who still needs to learn everything about teaching? Well?"

From the corner of my eye, I watched his face - not just burning red but seemingly swelling, capable of grotesque shapes. The elastic restraining his emotions seemed ready to snap. His gestures became wild and uncontrolled. His subdued, proper clothing now looked like a ridiculous costume. His voice rose.

"Do you know what's wrong with you? You're completely incapable of teaching, you ninny. You stand at the blackboard giggling like a nervous schoolgirl. You titter at every little thing and you're constantly absent, as if you couldn't care less about teaching here. Are you listening? You're not paying attention - just gaping at the children like you've no clue what you're doing. You seem to be everywhere except standing before this class. You can't even keep order."

Silence fell briefly. His words echoed inside me, and I felt rotten because he'd called me a girl. He might as well have been the foster father.

"You seem completely deranged standing there, Jasper Heijting. You're just mad. Hear that? In all my years I've never seen a crazier, more unhinged trainee than you, 'Mister' Heijting."

He emphasised my surname, which I immediately took as an insult. He probably knew from the college that I'd always been called Bakker

before becoming Heijting just months earlier.

I stayed silent. No reply came to mind. I couldn't explain anything - didn't even understand my own behaviour or how I should behave.

My silence fuelled his fury. Like some hellfire preacher pouring down the most horrible *hell and damnation* upon his meek flock, he finished his harsh monologue.

"You're dismissed. I'll inform the college how you've behaved like an utter idiot here - you can leave now and never return. Never again, is that clear? Let us never see you here again. You'll come to a bad end, Jasper Heijting. I shall also inform your foster parents about you, make no mistake. What you need is to have respect and discipline beaten into you - you deserve punishment. Severe punishment."

I left without a word. On the playground, the two boys I'd sent outside briefly glanced at me, smiling. I didn't even dare meet their eyes - I admired them so much. But something inside smiled back. Erik would forever remain my role model.

The very next day, my foster parents had already been informed about my misconduct at the teaching placement. The foster father began his tirade first - naturally, as expected.

"You worthless good-for-nothing, wretched miscreant, piece of useless vermin, we knew you'd amount to nothing! Didn't we say you should have stayed in your filthy slum in Apeldoorn with those slumdogs?" "You're completely useless, you're just mad and then you have the nerve to be so insolent to your mentor? We'll teach you a lesson."

I remained silent here too. I couldn't explain anything. Shortly afterwards, as expected, I got another tongue-lashing from the

foster mother.

"You should count yourself lucky they haven't expelled you from teacher training college - normally they'd have done so immediately," she explained, pointing to the mentor's letter which he must have sent straight away. "Just you wait, you'll get your punishment for that insolence, we know how to deal with your stubbornness. You'll end up in the gutter where you belong. Go upstairs now - I don't want to see you anymore."

I sighed - it never ended, these often daily torrents of abuse. In my room I was glad to be away from them again. I always felt relieved when I didn't have to see the foster parents. I didn't understand anything - myself, the foster parents, school - only the children still made sense to me.

The foster parents now became even crueller and, as punishment for my poor performance at school, they humiliated me even more. Their war against me escalated. I was no longer allowed to sit on any chair in the house, and as punishment for the failed placement, whenever I was home I had to go straight to my room so they wouldn't have to see me. I was only allowed downstairs to eat, on the floor, from the dog bowl.

"Let's not see you in between meals."

It didn't feel bad at all. I hated the foster parents, I hated the world I had to live in and I would rather never enter

that despised kitchen to eat again. The tension was only increasing, I had nowhere to turn. I was exhausted, desperate and done - truthfully, I didn't want to live anymore.

The foster father became increasingly harsh in his demands, in his commands. He ordered me around in a hard tone as if I were a dog, though they never treated their actual dogs like that. On the contrary, their pets were almost sacred. Pampered, practically worshipped.

"Sit! There!" he barked, pointing with his walking stick.

I obeyed because I always did whatever they asked without thinking. I sat. For exactly as long as required and not moving an inch.

Without provocation, the foster father now regularly jabbed the silver tip of his walking stick into my stomach until he saw it hurt. I didn't dare resist. He revelled in my powerlessness, in my feeling lost, in his own authority. No one would stop him. No one could oppose him and he seemed to know it... He still thought he possessed boundless power over me - and at that moment it was absolutely true - but change was in the air. Something stirred inside me. Having dared to oppose Van Essen's decision had unmistakably shown me I could have influence. Apparently, in some way, I existed after all, I was still somebody. The boys I'd let play outside had looked at me so gratefully because / was the one who let them go outside. / made that difference. Even though everyone might think badly of me for it, inside it felt right, completely right.

Could I - by opposing others - achieve something for myself? At the work placement, far from the foster parents, I'd just done that suddenly. Slowly, the realisation arose in me that maybe I could change something.

I've forgotten the exact trigger, but one day, towards the end of October 1979, I found myself sprawled face down on the freezing floor tiles under the kitchen table. The foster parents stood on either side of it. The foster father was trying to jab me hard with his walking stick. Again in my back. I was so afraid of him that I crawled towards the other side of the table to escape him. But there suddenly stood the foster mother, trying to block my way out with her feet.

"Stay put!" I heard screaming from above.

The black of the tabletop seemed to be falling on me. I saw the walking stick, their legs and heard them screaming. Something snapped. I was

done, I couldn't take it anymore, I was crying, and a voice inside me yelled: "Enough, you *have* to leave! Away, go away, away, away.
AWAY."

I had no other choice. The unbelievable, which I'd always considered impossible, happened. I forcefully pushed aside a chair that was half under the table and suddenly got up from alongside the table. There I stood, beside it, upright without permission, face to face with the foster mother.

Her piercing eyes pinned me in place, staring rigidly and authoritatively at me. In her face I read bitterness and anger, but also profound shock. In a final attempt, she tried to block my way by reaching out her arm and grabbing my jumper.

Then I did something I'd never dared before - I just pushed her aside extremely hard. It was an exceptionally strange moment for me, and not just because I fought back. No, the most remarkable thing about that moment was that I touched her. In the almost fourteen years I'd been in the foster home, I'd never touched her before. Hard as I pushed, she lost her balance and tumbled backwards. Just like that into the Sunday best crockery displayed on the shelves of the built-in dresser. What hidden strength I possessed. I'd never expected anything like it. Cups and plates, the porcelain teapot, almost the entire expensive dinner service fell clattering broken on the

stone floor. In the foster mother's eyes - dazed as she landed in a sea of shards - I saw fear for the first time in my life, a thoroughly unreal sight. Could she be afraid of me? Of me?

Yes. Suddenly she was frightened. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. Her face was still set in a thunderous expression, but the ever-present threat had disappeared.

In just a few steps I reached the kitchen door that opened onto the scullery. Through the dividing glass, I saw the foster father's furious face, bloated like a red toad. I heard him cursing and raging behind the pane, bearing no resemblance to the proper reformed *minister-in-black* who'd piously recited the confession with a blank hypocritical face at the front of the church. He shouted something unintelligible, but I paid him no more attention. I opened the back door and ran outside, all the way to where my bike was parked against the large wooden garage. The saddle was soaking wet from the endless raindrops that had been beating down on my bike for hours from the roof, but I didn't feel it.

I wasn't free yet because I still had to go along the long gravel path by the villa to reach the road. Threateningly, the foster father came outside. Standing beside the villa, he wildly swung his stick back and forth, roaring savage cries towards me.

Clever as I was, I didn't take the gravel path but ran with the bike along the adjacent grass field. With a slight curve, I reached the wrought iron gate separating the gravel path from the public road. I opened the gate, glanced back one last time and saw he wasn't coming after me anymore. Apparently he knew he couldn't stop me now. One of the dogs came barking after me.

"Go back, Bobby!" I called.

The dog immediately obeyed my voice. The poor creature didn't understand what was happening. I slammed the heavy gate shut behind me and cycled away. I didn't feel the soaked saddle. I pedaled as hard as I could. I was gone. It was the greatest victory of my life. I was free. Forever.

I was free. Suddenly the world had completely changed. And then

Greet entered the picture, the vague unknown whose exact purpose – like her predecessor Juffrouw Warre – I'd never understood in the foster home.

She turned out to officially be a social worker for child protection. Someone who played an important role in my life as the link between the executive power of the child protection guardianship organisation and me – effectively a ward under guardianship.

When I ran away from the Bakker family, I hadn't gone to the guardianship institution of my own accord because I simply didn't even know it existed, nor what it was or meant. So I also didn't know there was an address where Juffrouw Warre or Greet came from – I'd never understood that.

Fortunately, I now knew exactly where to go. By chance, I'd discovered Remco's address and telephone number, because an engagement announcement card of his had been lying on the hallway table one day. How the foster parents obtained that card I didn't know. Perhaps from Greet?

'Remco Heijting to be engaged to Joke van Asten' was printed on the card with their address and phone number underneath. They would be living in Sneek. I'd neatly copied everything onto a small piece of paper. From that day forward I had a telephone number and an address.

Heijting . I still wasn't accustomed to sharing that surname now. It made Remco feel like a real brother.

After my escape, I cycled straight to Ede station. I knew the route well from always travelling by train to the teacher training college. By chance, I still happened to have the money in my trouser pocket intended for renewing my monthly train pass. Coincidence? Normally I kept the money in a black wallet behind the desk lamp in my bedroom. It was my only real responsibility - every month I had to buy the pass afresh at the station. Yet I'd been carrying this money around with me for a while, as though

the plan to escape the foster home had been brewing inside me for a long time.

I phoned my oldest brother from the station. He was surprised to hear from me – I could come straightaway, he completely understood I'd run away. So I traveled to Sneek, where I stayed for a good week. He and his fiancée Joke took good care of me – the atmosphere was relaxed.

New. Everything was new. It felt like the world was opening up to me for the first time in my life. I was happy to be free at last. I listened to music booming from my brother's enormous stereo speakers. *Paradise by the Dashboard Light* by Meat Loaf. What a track – I thought pop music was so cool. I discovered a snack bar called *De Vigi*. There I ate fries for the first time in my life – from what the foster parents called the devil's forbidden temple.

Delicious. I tried everything – chips with mayonnaise or satay sauce, a frikandel, a lihanboutje, a kroket.

Everything my foster parents would forbid, I craved. But my mind reeled. So many impressions. An enormous weight had lifted, yet what now? The freedom felt vast and confusing simultaneously.

I slept on a simple mattress in a corner of the living room. My brother let me talk – I felt welcome. Yes, happiness mixed with being broken and utterly exhausted. So exhausted. I felt shattered and grew more depressed by the day. It was as if freedom itself bore down on me – my feelings about myself and the world around me were completely in tatters. I'd run away, yet fallen into a deep hole, an emptiness called freedom. Virtually every moment in the foster home – even in bed – I'd been under enormous pressure, feeling threatened, searching for survival strategies. That had stopped. My brother looked after me well and I lacked for nothing. I cycled around the area a bit and spent hours by the beautiful Sneekerveer lake with its wide reed beds. I watched gorgeous sailboats with billowing sails on the lake's

rippling water. So peaceful.

But inside my head, turmoil. Loud music couldn't drown my raging
anger and hate.

I lay aimlessly for hours, eyes closed on the mattress – wandering around Sneek at other times. I could walk anywhere now. No silver cane or harsh voice held me back. What should I do? Who was I? Where did I belong? Inside my head, I seemed to scream too much at myself, cry, hate myself, hate the world. And yet feel utterly inadequate to cope. One morning I stood on the flat's balcony by the railing wanting to jump. To die. Staring down, I yelled to my watching brother inside: "I want to die!"

He gave me a strange look. Shook his head. Didn't understand – grew angry at me, seemed embarrassed towards the neighbours too.

"You're mad!" he shouted back. "Why would you want to die? Come inside!"

"I don't know. I don't know what I want. What can I do? I don't want to live." Crying, I went back in. I felt ashamed yet couldn't explain. My confusion mounted. Sensing my brother couldn't cope either – I couldn't stay with no room or income, just being in the way, being unstable.

Schools between Sneek and Gouda were impossibly far – 180 kilometres

unbridgeable daily.

Remco phoned the guardians. One gloomy autumn morning in 1979 I said goodbye to my brother, travelling to the appointment he'd made for me. We promised to keep in touch.

The Stichting Jeugdbelangen office in Amersfoort turned out to be above a shoe shop on Korte Gracht. I found the buzzer – the name '*Stichting Jeugdbelangen*' embossed with letter pinchers stuck beside it faded, barely legible as if hiding. The office was only accessible via an alarmingly narrow, steep staircase secreted behind a door.

Soon after, I perched nervously shifting on a chair before Greet's desk, piled high with files and scrawled notes.

"Well Jasper, so now you see where I work," Greet said as she noticed my surprise.

I nodded. "I didn't know any of this." I had no idea what else to say or how to start a conversation. I'd never really spoken to an adult before, certainly not to Greet. My eyes were wide with wonder. So Greet worked in a proper office. I tried to connect this office with the figure of Greet who'd visited the foster home each month like some mysterious presence. To me, she belonged to the enigmatic world of child protection, which I'd never understood.

"Good that you're here," Greet began.

She seemed completely prepared for my arrival.

"I've heard from Remco - obviously you couldn't stay with him. The rules don't allow placement with family when you've been removed from home by court order."

I half-nodded, though none of it really made sense to me.

"I've arranged a place for you with temporary foster carers in South Holland, so you can continue at your school in Gouda."

I didn't know what to say. My entire life had been listening to strangers and doing exactly as they decreed. Greet wasn't completely unknown to me, yet remained essentially a stranger. Yet no part of me questioned her authority to decide where I should live, what I should do, how my life should unfold. Others commanded me, dictated to me, determined and lived for me. I felt surrendered. My involvement with child protection, I was learning, was *because my parents were so bad*.

Greet didn't mention any possible reason for my fleeing the Bakker household. She seemed to find it perfectly normal that I'd suddenly

turned up at my brother Remco's and left the foster home. Glancing at the clock, she grabbed her bag. It was nearly half eleven.

I wanted to explain how impossible school had become, but Greet cut me off.

"Tell me about that another time. We really must go - you're joining a new family now. They're very kind, you'll see. Henk and Margreet de Boer, with two children, Marty and Meike. Maximum five or six weeks stay. Come on, our appointment's already at half one."

I couldn't comprehend any of it, just the gnawing in my stomach.

Greet heard it too. She smiled briefly. "Your stomach's in a hurry too. We'll grab lunch en route - the institution's paying."

I hurried after her down the long narrow stairs. Something about her was suddenly different. Her authoritarian manner and utter dismissal of my experiences from the foster home weren't entirely gone, yet now I seemed *somebody* to her. Back there I'd always felt purely *incidental – nuisance – rubbish* in the whole fostering charade.

Would she listen now if I told her everything? Would she help me? Take me seriously? Could I actually talk to her?

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We drove in Greet's car to Lekkerkerk - an elongated riverside village near Gouda, meaning I could keep attending teacher training college. At a roadside café, I had chips with mayonnaise and a frikandel. Then came the moment.

We stopped at my temporary home. Henk opened the door - a cheerful, slightly balding man in his late forties or early fifties, with an openly

smiling face.

"You must be

Jasper?" I nodded.

"Welcome Jasper, I'm Henk. Come in and meet everyone."

Unexpectedly, the connection was instant. Henk ran a small speech therapy practice in Rotterdam. His wife Margreet, delicate with curly hair, cosy appearance and warm dark eyes, looked like she could grace magazine covers as *'Mother of the Month'*. She baked biscuits and cakes, practiced yoga, made seasonal decorations and was always cheerfully busy with the children.

Eight-year-old Marty lived in perpetual motion. His extensive Playmobil collection was everywhere - I kept finding figures all over the house.

Each morning he'd dramatically wake me by yanking off all blankets, laughing hysterically. He loved rough-and-tumble with his parents and then with me. I gradually met every Playmobil figure personally - farmer, pirate, even the monkey.

Six-year-old Meike mirrored Margreet completely - not just appearances but by copying her every mannerism. Often I'd find them baking chocolate-crumbed biscuits together in wonderful shapes I couldn't resist.

The household revolved around creativity and togetherness . Glossy conkers and acorns were gathered in Rotterdam parks, strung together with twigs and coloured paper into decorative displays that immediately warmed the home.

Meike loved sitting on Margreet's lap listening endlessly to fairytale records. Margreet patiently re-listened every time,

laughing in all the right magical places.

First names instantly prevailed. Remarkably, I was perfectly at ease from day one. They were genuinely warm people, ideal temporary carers.

Here, for the first time ever, I could truly recover.

My guest bed stood in Henk's study,

beneath wall-mounted steel shelves laden with books. I belonged completely. Each day, a twenty-kilometre bus journey took me to college.

Though the school was unchanged, my world had transformed. With Remco I'd discovered pop music - here I properly explored it. Amazing. I lacked any musical discernment, dazzled simply by upbeat rhythm - anything unlike dreary hymns. Naturally I played *Paradise by the Dashboard Light* by *Meat Loaf*, *Roll Over Beethoven* by *ELO* and songs by the *Beatles*. I thought the *Rolling Stones* were brilliant. Rebelling against everything churchy, everything the foster parents stood for. I wanted nothing more to do with any of it. It had to be loud, wild, as non-Reformed as possible. Maybe even downright *devilish*.

Since leaving the foster home, a whole new world had opened up to me. After discovering chips at Remco's, I now occasionally visited snack bars in Gouda after school. So many unfamiliar things - a vending machine that initially baffled me (where was the fruit?). I tried a pinball machine, losing constantly. Posters on walls meant nothing yet to me.

Such delicious treats available! Cola and disposable plastic containers were novelties. This was where the foster parents' so-called *worldly people* gathered - wrong, sinful, misguided. To them, every snack bar was *of the devil*. Like all hospitality venues, cinemas, record libraries, discos, most museums, game stores, exhibitions, record shops, poster shops, gift shops, fashion boutiques, ordinary bookshops (Christian

bookshops being barely permissible unless selling the wrong Bible translation), outlet stores, art dealers, off-licences, craft shops. Plus obviously sex shops, brothels, casinos. About 95% of the Netherlands

had been a *no-go zone* on religious grounds. Godless, worldly, sinful and depraved.

With my first-ever guardianship clothing allowance - now suddenly in my own hands - I splurged on expensive Ten Cate underwear from a fashion boutique, though no one would ever see it. I also got proper T- shirts, jeans, and trainers like I'd seen boys wearing at primary school. My metamorphosis from staunch churchgoer to secular was complete.

At Henk and Margreet's, I suddenly had enough food, no forced labour, no beatings or verbal abuse. Quite the opposite - unfailing kindness and courtesy. I could simply sit on chairs or sofas, my hot meals properly separated on plates allowed on tables. To me, this felt like a luxury hotel, a perpetual warm bath where I truly existed and people genuinely liked me. Marty's morning wake-ups made me instantly cheerful.

"Wake up! Hahaha!"

Sometimes he'd walk a Playmobil figure across my face, reminding me of joyous times with Jerry. I missed Jerry intensely again.

Breakfast involved actual conversation.

"Sleep well, Jasper? Come join us." Henk would indicate the empty chair.

"Yes," I'd say. "Slept wonderfully, it's perfect

here." I slept late here - early to bed, often last

to rise. "Sleep alright?"

"Want an egg?"

"Shall I pour tea?"

"Fancy anything else?"

"Tasty?"

"What are you doing later?"

Ordinary phrases, so kind and sincere, yet I'd never heard anything like them

in the foster home. It all sounded so strange to me. So friendly. Here I was someone who belonged, who mattered, who counted. We'd chat about pleasant things, look at photos, lounge on the sofa watching television series. Watching TV - always forbidden before - was suddenly normal here. Sometimes we played board games, Henk taught me chess, we observed birds at the garden feeding table. I could name nearly all of them, having always lived close to nature and taught myself.

One day Henk suggested visiting Rotterdam's record library. I had no idea what this was, but he explained I could borrow records there using his membership - up to five at a time. With the cassette recorder he'd given me, we could then copy tracks from the LPs onto cassettes so I'd have my own music collection.

"This way you can explore what music you like without having to buy it straight away. I love jazz, but you probably don't," he said with a wink and a broad grin.

Margreet pointed to the living room wall completely covered in LPs and singles - exclusively jazz. Eight sections each two metres sixty centimetres wide, crammed with records. "See Jasper, this is what happens when you let Henk loose. He's been collecting for twenty-five years."

During the day I attended college. After dinner, I'd often take long walks along the Lek dyke. I let my thoughts drift with the wind and

river

waves. Mentally, I'd sometimes hitch a ride on distant freight barges betrayed by their green and red lights. Gazing at the empty dark floodplains beyond the reflecting river waters, I occasionally descended via small paths to escape the wind. My eyes traced the dyke cottages on the opposite bank, dark silhouettes against a deep blue sky. My thoughts glided across the water back to my island where such a dyke cottage had once mattered so much. Suddenly I saw them again in my mind's eye - the little green figures by the parking area on my island, near the small cardboard dyke cottage. How I longed to play with my figurines again.

My own dear figurines who always helped protect the island. "Your Majesty?" I suddenly heard in my head.

"Yes, green figure?"

"It's safe here. We'll help protect everything. You can always count on us."

"White figures?"

I listened intently, my face taut against the wind. Just the rustle of wind, nothing more.

Then thankfully, a voice came.

"Your Majesty, are you there?"

"Is that you, white figure?" I asked with relief.

"Yes, Majesty. Safe here too. We white figures can handle any high waves."

Smiling, I sighed. Thank goodness - I wasn't alone. My figurines

were with me wherever I went. I remained king of my island.
Without

thinking, I studied the dyke cottages opposite - so close on this riverbank yet utterly unreachable. How different from the Veluwe.

The Veluwe. My Veluwe. My thoughts flew from the riverbank as vast forests suddenly materialised before me. Barely two months after my escape, I felt homesick for the scent of deep green spruce forests. That glorious resinous perfume of woodland fungi, of honeysuckle, the scent of freshly sawn, rain-dampened timber. How I yearned for parched heathlands with spindly broom shrubs, crisscrossed by soft sandy paths flanked by towering white birches. It dawned on me that I could stay here for just six weeks at most before moving on. Where would I end up next? I had no choice, could only wait to see what Greet decided for me.

My future felt less certain than this wildly rushing river water that would inevitably reach the North Sea. What was I to do with this life? Who was I, and where did I belong?

Sometimes thoughts of foster home life resurfaced. Only months ago, I'd lain beneath the kitchen table there. Sudden groin pains also dragged me back unexpectedly. Something was physically wrong, but I dared not mention it or even contemplate it. Thankfully the discomfort always passed, bringing relief. It felt easiest to simply hope things would resolve themselves.

Yet I believed Greet should know what had happened. I had to trust she'd know what should be done. Because alarming images kept intruding unprompted, especially when seeing boys on the street. Strangely, my mind had linked the sight of boys with *'things best not thought about'*. I avoided dwelling on it - yet around Marty, I felt it acutely. At seventeen, I seemed younger than him somehow. I felt utterly unequal to younger boys. Truthfully, I realised I idealised them absurdly. Marty seemed so real, so complete, so fully actualised - mastering existence effortlessly. Watching him, I couldn't fathom how the foster parents had hated boys'

bodies so violently. Fortunately I wasn't like them - I admired boys intensely. I longed to look like them, to be *utterly right* like them.

Why had I aged? Who was I, if I so idolised younger boys? For the first time, I felt certain my age didn't match my self. I wanted to be Marty.

And Jerry. To stay that way forever. Little time for reflection remained - too much was happening.

After my first week, Greet visited. We talked in Henk's study. Greet sat at his large desk while I perched on the guest bed's edge.

Smiling, Margreet brought coffee which she placed on the grand desk occupying the room. "I'll leave you now. Just call if you'd like refreshments later."

Margreet was that rarest being - a genuinely kind woman, soft-spoken, considerate, engaged with everything.

Greet nodded, sipped her coffee, and surveyed Henk's book-lined study with interest.

"Well Jasper, this must feel strange. Settling in alright here?" I nodded.

"You sleep here, in this bed? Among all these books?" "Yes, I sleep very well here."

"Do you ever read any?" "Me?"

"Yes, you. Who else?"

"Oh no, never. I really don't like reading at

all." "Are they being nice to you here?"

"Yes, very nice, absolutely everyone"

"And is it nice then, with Henk and Margreet's children?"

I nodded shyly. I sighed. Greet was asking me so many questions. It was hard to talk about things that felt good but also hurt at the same time.

What I found pleasant here also painfully highlighted everything my entire childhood had lacked. And showed me that soon enough, I'd have to leave here again. Which I didn't want. But wasn't allowed to say, because I had no say. Couldn't ask anything. I didn't count, I belonged to *others* .

I belonged to youth services, who decided my life. Emotionally, I also always belonged to the *Terrible One* . But perhaps now I mostly still belonged to the foster parents. Everything that happened in the Bakker household still haunted my thoughts constantly. In countless ways it forced its way through, repeating in my mind every single day.

Nobody knew that, nobody noticed, but my head was con-

stantly full of violence - often sexual violence too. The foster parents invaded all sexual thoughts and feelings with their brutality, and I was powerless against it. Inside me, the beatings against Jasper kept recurring. The shouting echoed in my skull. "Trousers off!" Why was I bad? Wasn't I a boy? I kept feeling the blows. Everything swirled chaotically together, without resolution.

Anything connected with sexuality sometimes became

unbearable, veering off in all directions. A grotesque equation of the *Terrible One* and the foster parents. And *Ieram* , the Highest being, was there too.

Witches. Birds. Cruel, filthy things. And Jasper still belonged to the witches. But now Jasper was *a boy*, had a boy's body now. Never before had Jasper been a boy in the witches' eyes. He knew that well.

My emotions were a garbage pit, my sexuality completely deranged, idiotic, insane. But I didn't want to dwell on it. It never really felt like 'mine' anyway, so why think about it?

Mostly I wanted Greet to help me. To listen. To find someplace I could talk about all the crazy things inside me, everything that had happened to my body. Somewhere to address the pain I still felt so often. Deep in my guts. In my groin.

"Is something wrong, Jasper?" Greet asked carefully.

"Greet, I... I have to tell you something you might not understand," I started with great difficulty.

I'd never talked properly with adults before, never shared anything about myself or asked anyone anything. How did that even work?

Greet looked at me wide-eyed for a moment. She would have preferred avoiding this but seemed to realise I'd bring it up eventually either way.

"Is this about when you were with the Bakker family?"

I nodded, grateful for her prompting. Relieved no one else could overhear. Felt strange speaking openly

without instant punishment.

"Yes, about what happened there. Some really bad things happened, um... concerning... uh..."

I stalled out. Better try a roundabout approach. "You know very bad things happened - did Gert ever tell you?"

Greet's face flushed vermilion as she shrugged with feigned nonchalance, trying to mask her visceral reaction.

"Gert?" Oh yes, Gert. You mean your brother?"

Silence fell. Well, who else could I mean? I hadn't seen Gert in over two years. For a moment it felt like the old days when speaking my own brother's name was forbidden. I felt slightly affronted.

"Yes, Gert, obviously Gert, my brother."

Greet composed herself. "Ah, Gert yes of course, um... he did tell me something back then, I believe. That... the atmosphere was very bad and you weren't allowed anything. That sort of thing."

I recognised how she was carefully selecting euphemisms from her convenient deaf-ear strategy. "Didn't Gert tell you about the really awful things that happened? About a violence-addicted foster father and a sadistic foster mother?"

Greet turned away, staring momentarily at the enormous bookcase as if searching the countless titles for some quote to fob me off with. Then, looking into empty space, she admitted evasively: "Well yes, I am aware of certain... things. They've been discussed. But what's that got to do with you now?"

Her voice took on a slightly sharper edge, as if signalling this topic shouldn't be discussed. At first I didn't know how to continue. But suddenly I overcame my fear and began. "It's left me with so many strange after-effects, even now... at times... I don't know."

Deep shame washed over me. Sitting opposite a woman. An adult. I felt utterly powerless, humiliated having to admit others had completely defeated me, that I'd lost everything. That I'd had to endure it all completely helpless.

To me it felt like I'd completely lost the years-long battle with the foster parents. As if all masculinity had been stripped from me, everything taken away. That hurt - feeling swallowed by things where I'd never preserved any sense of my own self.

Greet pretended not to understand much. "Difficult things, like what?"

I started with what Gert had endured. "Gert ran away because they threw stones at his head - surely you know that? That he was lucky, remember, that the stones didn't hit his face. You must know all this?"

Greet gave a curt nod.

"Gert mentioned something about stone-throwing. Did they... do that to you too then?"

Speaking properly with Greet for the first time in my life, I noticed she'd started pronouncing the second half of her sentences slightly quicker than the first. I'd never met anyone who did that; it sounded faintly comical.

I continued in fragmented anecdotes, first about Gert's experiences then several of my own. Greet listened horrified, hand over her mouth, unable to hide her difficulty comprehending these events.

"Well... that was all before my time, when Miss Warre still visited you. I only got involved when you were about thirteen or fourteen. Naturally I know absolutely nothing about any of that." "

"I often get sudden pains too," I explained.

There was silence as I watched Greet thinking. I took a sip of coffee. Relief washed over me for daring to say it. How had I found the courage!

"Pain?"

I nodded sheepishly. I sensed she would ask

where next. "Where?"

"Er... well..." I gestured briefly between my legs.

Greet stared at me in disbelief.

"Is that because of...?"

I nodded. I knew for certain it had started back

then. The room fell silent. I felt ashamed.

Greet stared casually out of the window for a moment. I heard her sigh

loudly. Soon after, she looked back at me, her tone suddenly serious.

"You know Jasper, while this all sounds serious, what exactly do you think I can do about it? Why are you telling this to *me*? What can I do? It's all in the past and nothing can be done now. I could check whether Mr and Mrs Bakker are willing to speak with me about it, but that's really all I can promise you."

I stared at her incredulously. Every Friday without fail, Greet had visited the foster mother - she'd been complicit in that woman's actions. Why was she now checking if they'd even let her back in?

"But you can just talk to them - you visited them monthly all

those years?"

"Well I certainly hope they'll speak to me, but I can't force them." "What about this pain then?" I persisted.

Again Greet looked away. She swallowed. "Well, I'm not sure yet, we'll see, perhaps it'll pass. Are you going to school tomorrow?"

I nodded.

Greet picked up her bag. "I'll go speak with Margreet. So you know? Goodbye Jasper."

I heard her go to the living room as I remained alone with all my thoughts.

I hadn't even dared mention my school problems.

The days with Henk and Margreet flew by; somehow I felt completely at ease here. But sadly, the goodbye couldn't

be delayed much longer - I had to leave on 6th December. Fortunately this meant I could experience one proper St Nicholas celebration.

It became wonderfully cosy celebration. We made nice surprises for each other. Real presents were given and received. Margreet baked a delicious chocolate cake which Meike proudly served on a large platter. There was hot chocolate and inviting bowls of spiced biscuits on the table. My surprise was a large cardboard steamboat containing a single from the *Rolling Stones* with the eerily appropriate track: *Crazy Mama*. Feeling numb, I played it on Henk's sound system.

The next day brought farewells. Greet came to collect me. Though leaving was warm-hearted, having to leave this kind family devastated me. For the first time in my life I'd met such genuinely nice people, but it lasted so cruelly briefly.

Marty threw his arms around my neck. Some Playmobil figures waved before my eyes. "Bye Jasper," his little figures cried. I laughed when he kissed me, but inside I felt so sad. How attached I'd grown to him in that short time - I wanted to stay with him forever.

Henk shook my hand and pressed a flat rectangular present into it - for my cassette player which I could take with me. I nodded gratefully.

Henk was simply the best. Margreet and Meike gave me a homemade chocolate cake 'for the journey'. Margreet simply smiled as she shook my hand. "All the best to you, Jasper."

I understood how deeply she meant it, and a moment later knelt down to look Meike in the eyes. "Bye Meike, see you!"

She smiled sweetly and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek. Suddenly something strange happened to me. Here stood a little girl who wasn't frightening. I even found her sweet. I would have liked to cry, but circumstances were relentless. Greet was waiting on the doorstep, car keys in hand. She beckoned. My time with these people was over.

Greet took me to Rotterdam-IJsselmonde where I would be staying with another host family. This location was also chosen for its proximity to the teacher training college.

We stopped at an ordinary terraced house in the middle of IJsselmonde's sprawling residential area, where an elderly couple were waiting in the doorway. They introduced themselves pleasantly as Uncle Herman and Aunt Irene. Uncle Herman was a cheerful balding chap, clearly much older than Henk, wearing a neat suit. Aunt Irene seemed mismatched with him - an ordinary, friendly working-class woman with a rather round face, curly hair and baggy clothes.

They showed me round their house and took me to a small upstairs room at the back where I would be sleeping.

The most striking feature was how the entire room was painted dark blue. My eye immediately fell upon the hammock strung between the walls - where I was supposed to sleep. Very modern, but completely impractical for sleeping. Near the door stood a crate of beer ready for me, alongside an inviting dartboard with darts. I was instructed to address this temporary host family as *Uncle* and *Aunt*.

Uncle Herman and Aunt Irene were undeniably kind people. Friendly and well-meaning. Their hearts were undoubtedly golden, despite spending practically the whole day and part of the night watching television with hardly any real contact.

They informed me they usually didn't go to bed until two in the morning because the 'real films' (wink) didn't start until after midnight, and they always slept in until about noon.

I was to make my own breakfast and do everything else myself. I could get bread, make tea, boil eggs - everything was my own decision. Didn't feel like breakfast? No problem. And feel free to shower. As much as you want. Everything's allowed. No desire to get up? Just stay

and sleep. School? If you don't feel like it, it's really not necessary, you know. We'll see. This was the epitome of *laissez-faire*, an attitude of 'see how it goes - do what you like - it doesn't matter'.

The crate of beer in my room was *the household's*, paid for by them, serving as a hint that they considered me grown-up enough to drink beer. However, I didn't drink any beer at all.

Before leaving, Greet unexpectedly informed me about my stay while we were in the bedroom.

"You do know you can only stay here for six weeks?"

I was shocked. Looked at her in surprise. How would I know that?
"Do I have to leave again after just six weeks?"

"It's difficult finding placements for someone your age.
Seventeen-year-olds can't really go into families anymore –
you're really lucky *that* they'll take you anywhere at all."

"And after this?"

"I honestly don't know. I just hope we can find something for you –
we'll see."

So there was my future: *we'll see*. With the promise that she'd
check on me in a week, she left.

Though it was a liberal host family, I never felt truly comfortable
there from the start. Perhaps because of the stark contrast with
the Bakkers just months earlier, when I wasn't even allowed to
decide whether to have a glass of milk or take underpants from
the cupboard myself. This was the complete opposite. Here I was
entirely left to my own devices because anything was allowed.
With nothing to do but combat boredom like some pensioner
counting trees around the neighbourhood: one, two, three... Ten.
Ten trees.

There, on the huge grassy patch between two wide lanes, they'd
planted ten ash trees, evenly spaced about ten metres apart.
Thriftiness? Couldn't they spare any more? I knew I'd never adapt
to city life. I longed for the woods where I'd lived when I first ran
away – Jasper's Lane on the Veluwe.

You couldn't possibly adjust here if you were used to forests. The
woods had always been where I retreated to relax.

Weekdays at school distracted somewhat, but come weekends
I'd tediously sketch pencil portraits of the foster parents, pin

them like

bullseyes on the dartboard, and throw darts until they were completely shredded.

I tried drinking a beer but immediately spat it out. How could anyone consume this? Maybe the foster parents were right – the liquor store truly was *the devil's den*. I felt profoundly alone.

I wondered what difference this made from the Bakkers, where I'd also spent time utterly isolated. And hadn't being with Henk and Margreet felt right precisely because Henk took me to Rotterdam's record library?

Choosing music together was something I'd never experienced. Henk became the first adult who ever did anything with me.

Henk had been happy for me; Marguerite loved seeing me enjoy her cooking. Sometimes we'd gone on trips together, like visiting Rotterdam's Euromast tower. I still see Henk looking at me as he ordered coffee in the restaurant upstairs. "Tea for the lady, Fristi for both children, but coffee for us men." For us. We.

The teacher training college found me another primary school placement 'to *try again*'. Nobody – not even I – understood my situation. The school only knew I had a different surname, which fellow students wouldn't have noticed as I interacted with precisely no one. I was doomed isolation

incarnate, unable to connect with those my supposed age. I never felt seventeen anyway nor understood how to live accordingly.

In this predicament, the new primary school where I was placed for teaching practice made everything even worse than before. I didn't realise I was constantly being 'triggered' by the children, subtly shifting in age and feelings without noticing. Like a chameleon, my age seemed to fully adapt to whatever children were before me.

The great teaching fiasco began when I refused to give religious instruction anymore – having broken with the foster family, I wanted nothing more to do with Christianity either. Nothing in me wanted to remember the Bakkers. I needed to detach from their ultra-Reformed world, but it wasn't easy. This wasn't a thread you could just snip. Years of strict Calvinist upbringing had branched through me like a sectarian indoctrination network. Like heavy methadone, the church's faith had colonised every territory of my awareness, daily feeding me profound shame and overwhelming guilt, the crushing certainty of being sinful and wicked; everything about me felt punishable, dirty and wrong in the eyes of both the foster parents and God. I still felt like a despicable object – a completely failed, wrong kind of human – something that shouldn't be alive.

And I knew that those who had received God's word yet rejected Him would suffer even worse – *eternal* punishment exceeding that of ignorant unbelievers. This was hammered into my head aged seven or eight. He'd been crammed into me, day after day. Now I wanted free, which proved an immense challenge.

My mentor at the new placement school was Wim Streefkerk. I'd read his first name on some school document. Streefkerk was a particular sort – friendly yet extremely reserved. He looked every inch the weekend vicar, immaculate in black suit before the class. Reluctantly, he agreed I could teach all lessons except

religious instruction. Perhaps he preferred keeping the preacher's role for himself – at lunchtime prayers, he practically glowed with pious anticipation. Hands devoutly folded, he'd recite some flawlessly rehearsed invocation; had I been God, I'd have richly rewarded such altruistic diligence.

By now I wore different clothes, essentially dressed like my students – dark jeans, a plain T-shirt and blue-white trainers

before the class, my

hair grown over my ears. Apparently this hadn't disqualified me from teaching primary school. An admirably progressive attitude – almost merciful – yet far worse than my appearance were the inner upheavals.

There I stood again: before the blackboard, sixty eyes mostly staring my way, paralysing me with insecurity because I felt no kind of authority. I wasn't a teacher. Not an educator, nor a seventeen-year-old adolescent – often I struggled to feel even human. I felt so inadequate, so empty, so *insignificant* compared to every child before me.

Unexpectedly, they kept making me revert to childhood. Eight years old. Suddenly I'd see Fabian or Jerry sitting there desperately wishing to join their games—it made me happy.

"Fabian! How lovely you're here

too." A blond boy looked up

puzzled.

"Me? No, I'm Frank,

sir." "But you are

Fabian?" The class

laughed.

"Who's Fabian, sir?" voices demanded.

So physically adult, I'd feel no age difference whatsoever at the front. That was precisely how I was. And complicating everything. *Being myself proved increasingly intricate.* I was an eight-year-old in an older teenager's body – someone standing to teach yet

yearning to sit among the pupils. These conflicting ages

within me entwined with the age externally required of me, each existing simultaneously in *my* present where the past never faded.

My relationship with the here-and-now, with officially measured time, had become dangerously unstable.

The sight of children also unlocked panic – intense fears that something unthinkable might be happening to them right then, unnoticed, anguish never spoken aloud. It echoed my own helplessness back at me. I needed to protect them. I distrusted the mentor. I trusted no one. I felt stupid. I wanted time reversed; time had reversed. Time itself malfunctioned. The world often made no sense. Ages overlapped in me. Temporality spiralled dizzyingly within. Was this *then* or was what happened then occurring *now* ? I couldn't determine which life-stage housed my true existence anymore.

Occasionally, classes proceeded somewhat normally – superficially suggesting nothing amiss – but then I'd fiddle absently with chalk forgetting who I was. Mindlessly sketching something absurd. "Did you know I can draw the whole world from memory? Teacher says it's lovely."

Netherlands. Europe. The globe. Stick figures. A squirrel. Giggles erupted. What an odd teacher. I failed noticing Streefkerk shaking his head disapprovingly from the back row.

One lesson, I abruptly forgot why I was at the blackboard and scurried shamefaced to my seat.

"Teacher-in-training's headaches have returned," Streefkerk quipped. The class howled.

I couldn't maintain composure – likely the most deranged student teacher that ever stood before children. Seeing pupils also devastated me at times. Longing warred with crushing sadness. Their world now lay daily

before me – unreachable. My age surged like a merciless torrent sweeping away childish landmarks on distant shores, forever severed no matter the seeming proximity. My life churned *chaotically together* – I sensed being more than one persona, though terrified to acknowledge these fractures because everything paradoxically still felt normal. Wasn't I entirely whoever I was and felt? How could I arbitrarily select any single version as truly 'me'?

Shortly thereafter I collapsed abruptly. No more teaching – I just wanted to be with the children. I turned furious at this failed self realizing none of these shattered pieces constituted an actual 'self'. Rage consumed me – at my botched existence, ruined body, fractured ages, destroyed life, my whole misbegotten being. I hated myself, I hated the entire world around me. I perceived myself and the world I was forced to inhabit as the ultimate contradiction - like enormous positive and negative poles that had invisibly collided.

Several days later, I stood seemingly composed before the class when it happened. Unbeknownst to myself, I suddenly hurled the chalk hard against the blackboard, shattering it. Fists clenched, I stormed from the classroom, swearing, yelling - no, bellowing - roaring obscenities down the school corridors with unprecedented fury. I howled with frenzied rage, violently tearing coats from hooks as I sprinted past, pounding doors and shattering glass along the hallway until terrified teachers came rushing from their classrooms.

Mentor Streefkerk, who had watched events unfold from the back row with escalating bewilderment, gave chase, but I outpaced him effortlessly. Out of the school building, away, away... From suffocating confusion... From so much forced pretence, such longing and pain, such *not-me* , *too-much-me* , *almost-like-me* . Fleeing everything I refused to see or feel.

During this period, it wasn't just *Gipsy Boy* and the *Two-Witch* but

other, more aggressive voices within me that alternately dictated what I saw or felt. I frequently felt myself changing. I often felt angry, aggressive, furious, desolate - shifting not just in mood or age, but in fundamental identity. This plunged me into crisis. Every intention of mine was too often thwarted by *someone else* inside me. I never noticed mid-process yet bore the consequences afterwards. The result was utter chaos. Greater estrangement from 'who I was supposed to be'. Amid the maelstrom, I didn't even question which part of me was making which decisions - why my thoughts and feelings kept mutating. The turbulence simply exceeded comprehension.

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Uncle Herman and Aunt Irene considered me very mature. I could stay up quietly till 2am or later. Come and go without explanation, even at night. They gave me a key. Such kind people, trusting me completely. Any teenager would view this as a *whoop-whoop-hooray situation*, but I didn't know how to inhabit it.

Greet came round within the week to check on me. She was 'in the neighbourhood visiting another care-leaver' and thought it 'good to speak with me straight away'. I found it touching that she'd spontaneously remembered me.

She accompanied me upstairs to my bedroom. I fetched chairs from another room so she could sit down. The moment she began speaking, I liked her considerably less.

"Expelled from school, Jasper?" Greet barged in without preamble. Her arched eyebrows conveyed utter incomprehension, her entire demeanour radiating indignation.

"Yes, something like that," I mumbled almost inaudibly, having no desire whatsoever to discuss this. Greet was determined to discuss it at length.

She pulled a letter from her handbag, sighing and shaking her head at me.

"I've received this letter from the college. Our institution handles all the administrative burdens for the school - finances and such." She read it aloud pointedly to me.

"Why don't you read it yourself too."

I read. It barely affected me. I shrugged. "Well. I don't know. Was that really me?"

Greet shook her head disapprovingly, lips pursed as if preventing herself from saying something wrong. Then came the lecture regardless.

"It's unwise of you to appear so angry and aggressive like that, Jasper," she reprimanded.

I understood her perspective, but to me, I hadn't been aggressive at all. Confused? Yes. Heartbroken? Powerless? Living in the wrong world, at the wrong age, among unattainable ideals - but aggressive? Had I actually been angry? I remembered nothing of the kind. It was impossible to explain how I felt. I was always trapped in something terrible, that's how it was for me. But angry? I just shrugged again.

"Jasper, you're permanently suspended - you read that, do you understand what it means? You can never return. There'd already been issues with you before, during your time with the Bakker family. That's what the college writes - how does that stand? Were you rebellious back then too? Just flouting your mentor's rules like that! And why did your foster parents never tell me

about this?"

"Since you mention them," I said, "have you actually spoken to them? Have you confronted them about everything that happened there? What do they say?"

Suddenly the roles seemed reversed. She cleared her throat and slowly shook her head.

"You know Jasper, I went to their door. And then they wouldn't even let me in, I had to stay outside on the doorstep. They both came to the door and said they'd never speak to me again, or with our institution. Then they just

slammed the door, they didn't even let me finish. Understand? So we can do nothing. We'll just have to leave it at that, won't we?"

"They wouldn't even let you in? When you visited them every month?"

Greet nodded, and her posture revealed she'd felt completely powerless against the foster parents. I'd never expected that.

"But couldn't someone else speak to them... They could ask...

because..." "No Jasper, we really can't do anything more.

However regretful it is.

We'll probably just have to leave it at that, it's for the best... what's done

is done..."

I shrugged. I knew nothing about what might or might not be possible. There was silence for a moment. Then Greet spoke again. "What we must focus on now is how you'll move forward, Jasper. In a few weeks you'll have to leave here. We'll need to

see where you can stay next.

Wouldn't it be wiser if we concentrated on

that?" I didn't know what to say to that.

"It would also be better to simply stop talking about what it was like with the Bakker family - with anyone," Greet continued. "And if you still have that pain you mentioned last time... I discussed it briefly at the office. Through our foundation we could go together to a doctor if you like? Or arrange for scans together at a hospital?"

I was terrified. A doctor... a hospital... with Greet... this was exactly the situation I'd found so dreadfully frightening. What the foster parents always threatened: someone from child protective services taking me to a doctor or hospital to...

I wanted to stop thinking about everything. "No, not that," I hurried to say. "Really not, no. No thanks, that's not necessary."

"Really not? But you did say you were in pain?"

"Me? Pain? No, it's gone. Well, um... it doesn't bother me much now, not enough to see a doctor," I lied quickly.

"Alright then, that's your choice"

She continued speaking hastily

now.

"You're better off just completely forgetting your foster parents. Erasing that whole chapter. Try never to think about it again. Why keep looking backwards?"

I stared at her bewildered. In my mind I saw Miss Warre taking me aside. "Do you promise never to think about anything from before ever again?"

Greet stood up and promised to visit again before too long.

One day there was suddenly a little card among the bottles in

the beer crate on my bedroom floor. As I examined it curiously,
a voice spoke

behind me.

"Don't you like that? An entry ticket to the disco from Aunt Irene and me. Nice, eh? Just right for you, Jasper."

Uncle Herman stood in the doorway grinning broadly. How sweet, I thought. So well-meaning. Extremely kind. But how little they knew me. None at all.

"You might meet a nice girl there," Uncle Herman winked almost mischievously. He walked to the dartboard and actually hit a bullseye, looking at me triumphantly as if to say *piece of cake* .

"Well thank you Uncle Herman, for a disco. I... uh... where is this disco? I mean, what exactly do people do at one?" I absolutely didn't want this. Meet a girl? Definitely not. Nor did I want to go to a disco, whatever that was. What happened there? What would I even do?

"A disco? You don't know?" laughed Uncle Herman, throwing another dart to showcase his skills, though this one landed nearly a metre wide in the blue-painted wall. Recovering instantly, he painstakingly explained disco fundamentals.

"Loud music, flashing coloured lights, lots of beer and

dozens of girls looking for a nice boy like you. You'll clean up for sure - you're quite the handsome lad. You know that yourself, don't you?"

He spoke with bizarre enthusiasm, as if living vicariously.

"I don't know... I..." I stammered weakly. I hated him asking if I thought myself handsome - I absolutely didn't. Nor could I articulate why disco terrified me. Undeterred, he disappeared briefly, returning from his bedroom with clothes draped over his

arm.

"Look at these smart clothes! You'll look proper for impressing girls. Take it from me - they claim girls don't notice, but I should know." They consider a boy's appearance very important indeed."

I eyed the dark suit jacket with golden buttons and matching black trousers that he'd placed on my bunk with sidelong distaste. Just the razor-sharp crease and those flared trousers alone - horrific. I regarded them with visceral repulsion, though part of me wanted to laugh. Of course Uncle Herman had no idea what kind of appalling clothes I'd been forced to wear before, nor how that had felt for me. No more suits, no black trousers, no girls, no discos - ever. Yet he kept pressing with kind intent.

"The disco starts at nine tonight - you can catch the tram right opposite here, just take Line Twelve towards Central Station. Three stops and you're there. At the community hall. Last tram's at half past twelve I think, but I can check for you. We're happy to cover your tram fare too."

Not wanting to disappoint him, I avoided committing either way. "Thank you both, please thank Aunt Irene too?"

I studied the ticket in my hand. Their golden-hearted gesture had backed me into a corner. Naturally I didn't want to let them down, yet it filled me with unease. Why was this being

forced upon me? Refusal seemed so ungrateful - yet I wanted none of it. I didn't drink beer, couldn't fathom spending hours among crowds, and dreaded meeting girls - the thought repelled me. How does one explain this decently without inventing excuses? Claiming sudden illness within hours would hardly be believable.

That evening I left both the house key and entrance ticket neatly on the kitchen table beside the telephone - placed deliberately

where they'd find them late that night or next morning alongside
my brief note:

Dear Uncle Herman and Aunt Irene, I can't stay with you any longer.

I'm leaving and will see where I end up.

Thank you for everything you've done for me. Jasper

Around half ten, while they watched their favourite TV programme, I boarded Line Twelve. Just jeans and trainers, wearing only a short brown suede jacket. I didn't alight after three stops, but rode onward to the station instead. The gulf was too vast. They assumed I was a normal seventeen-year-old boy - I couldn't explain my truth. I'd become one monumental disappointment. My entire possessions amounted to a plastic bag with clothes and liquorice rolls - the remainder still lodged at the Youth Needs Foundation office.

Train travel posed no issue, but trams were different. Line Twelve did go to Central Station as Uncle Herman said - yet I accidentally disembarked at a massive tram depot, mistaking it for Rotterdam Centraal. Then I boarded the wrong tram again, stranding me in some unfamiliar district.

In this sprawling city, everything looked identical. Trams weren't for me. By the time I actually reached the central station, it was past midnight.

No more trains running. There I stood in the small hours before the station. What now? Confusion swamped me.

One thing was clear - I was leaving Rotterdam. No more school, no ties left here. Where could I go? Back to Remco in Sneek? To Greet's foster institution? Greet would be absolutely livid. *"It's difficult placing someone your age anywhere,"* I heard her say.

Unaware of doing so, I simply began drifting aimlessly around

the station.

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The drizzle spread a wet blanket over the city as I crossed the vast station square shortly after midnight. I wandered aimlessly along wide, almost deserted streets bathed in the orange glow of tall street lamps.

Clueless about my destination, I just drifted. No pedestrians remained, only cars coming and going. The orange light evoked a melancholy sense of profound isolation, while the countless raindrops' reflections on the asphalt seemed to mirror my loneliness. Almost as if everything around me was quietly weeping.

Deep inside, everything felt so pointless. As if I wanted to die. Truthfully, I'd been thinking about death more frequently recently. What was I even doing with my life? No one cared about me. I didn't know where I belonged, who I was, what I should do. How was this different from being dead?

I didn't want Greet anymore, no guardianship, no foster families, no more places to live. I didn't want to be myself, I didn't want anything at all. I felt no connection between myself and the outside world - nothing truly mattered to me. Where could I go? The surrounding world felt harsh, cold, merciless. So contrary to what I needed. It was probably all

well-intentioned, but I didn't want a girlfriend - couldn't even bear the thought. How could I ever explain such things? I stopped deliberating. Nothing mattered. Explanations didn't. Aimless walking didn't. The drizzle didn't. Even thinking was pointless.

Crossing a cycle path, I reached a broad pavement along a main road that gradually ascended to an overpass. Here I was. Just walking in the dead of night along a deserted road in a city I didn't want to inhabit. My life - everything was wrong. From the overpass, I looked down. Should I jump? What would that be like? A brief fall, impact with a car, and I'd be gone. Everything would be blissfully over. No more struggling. The intolerable mess

in my head would stop.

I stood still. My hands gripped the railings. Would death be instant? My gaze wandered.

Would it be better to climb that tall block of flats there and throw myself off? Or later, at the station - leap before a train?

During my school commuting days from Putten to Amersfoort, that had happened occasionally. The Ermelo-Amersfoort train passed right by a psychiatric institution, sometimes experiencing unexplained delays.

Later you'd hear another patient had thrown themselves on the tracks. I'd never understood it before. Now I did.

My resolve to die solidified. I felt worth-

less, damaged, exhausted. My name was Jasper Heijting now, but what did it signify? I was essentially nobody's child. Officially somewhere

I still had a father and mother. But where did I belong? With my birth mother? Would she still recognise me? Still want me? What was her actual name? Could I ever find her again? I genuinely had no idea.

Suddenly a rather odd notion struck me. In a daze, I retraced my steps towards the station. I stepped into an illuminated telephone booth.

I searched through one of the phone directories hanging from an iron rack for the address. My father surely still

lived in Apeldoorn, the town where I'd been born.

Moments later I found his name. *R. Heijting*. That had to be him - he shared my eldest brother Remco's name. Without hesitation, I slid the coins into the slot. Someone answered.

"Remco Heijting speaking. With whom am I
speaking?" "Hello?" I asked.

"Yes, who's calling me this

late?" "It's me, Jasper"

"Who? Jasper? Which

Jasper?" "Jasper Heijting,

I'm your son." There was a

brief silence.

Then a small cough.

"Oh it's you, Jasper? Yes... what do you want, why are you

calling?" "Can I come to you? Tomorrow, by train? I'm still in

Rotterdam now."

"To me, from Rotterdam. You live there? Well alright then, come tomorrow. About what time will you be here, do you think?"

"Well the train takes several hours. Around ten o'clock, I think. I'll take the first train anyway. Is that alright?"

"Yes, that's fine, I'll see you then. You know where I live?"

"Yes, I found the address in a phone directory."

"Can you find it?"

"Yes, I'll find my

way."

"Good, see you later

then." "See you later,

bye!"

It was so strange. Suddenly I'd spoken to my own father. I hadn't seen him since I was nearly three, and here in this drizzly night, after fourteen

years in a phone booth in Rotterdam, I'd heard his voice for the first time.

Tomorrow - or rather today already - I would meet him. It was exciting and scary at the same time.

I knew absolutely nothing about my father. No one had ever told me anything about my father, my mother or the rest of my family. Who were they really, those relatives? Who was my father? I'd never

thought about it before? Who was I going to see tomorrow? Was that even wise? Would guardianship allow that?

With great tension I waited for the very first train in the early morning. My watch showed about quarter past six. The station kiosk was still closed but in the train, a small buffet trolley was already going through the aisles serving coffee to the early morning travellers.

Munching on a currant bun and drinking chocolate milk, an hour later I watched the dawn light break over the rushing landscape. I was dead tired and confused. Was this really a good idea? Did I maybe want to live with my father? Could I just do that?

I hadn't slept all night, and although the train moved with a calm rhythm, even now I couldn't settle from excitement.

A few hours later I arrived in Apeldoorn. A city bus took me from the station right near my father's house. With great tension I rang the bell. Moments later the door opened and I saw a slimly built but muscular man, neatly dressed in a suit complete with bow tie and shining cufflinks, his hair slicked back tightly. His eyes were intense and sharp. Those eyes immediately gave me a somewhat odd feeling and I tried to avoid his gaze as much as possible, pushing away my emotions about it. I had to deny such

reactions, my father was receiving me kindly. I

wanted to have a good time here and not let myself be guided by a vague feeling.

He took me to the kitchen, put a plate on the table and made me sandwiches with fried eggs and filled a large glass with milk. After the meal, I followed him upstairs where he showed me the guest room. A clean, neatly made bed stood ready. There I could rest and recover for a while.

I slept like a log for several hours. Only in the early afternoon did I descend the immaculately carpeted staircase. Along the walls hung black-and-white photographs in small silver frames. In one photo I'd never seen before, I recognised Remco. And there in another photo - somewhere in a garden - stood Bram, Linda and Gert. Gert looked so small there.

Further along hung a separate photo of my little sister Elly on what looked like a sheepskin rug, and next to it a picture of Mirjam with baby Rudy together on a rocking horse. Just as I moved to continue downstairs, it struck me that I wasn't there - not in a single photo. I retraced my steps and examined them all again. No, I wasn't featured anywhere. Not at all.

"Looking for something?" my father suddenly asked from the foot of the stairs. I shook my head. Yet he must have instantly known I was lying.

He'd observed me studying the hallway photos.

"Yes," he said, "those are pictures of *all* my children. I still keep them *all* on display, even though I haven't seen most of them since. Because well... a father remains a father, doesn't he?"

I nodded. I hadn't asked for this explanation, nor dared inquire further. Why was there no photo of me? His emphasis on ' *all* my children' lay too thick upon the silence. Was I not his child too? What nonsense.

Soon after, I sat with him at the kitchen table. Our conversation staggered awkwardly.

How does one speak to a father unseen for nearly fifteen years?

He broke the silence first. "So Jasper, come to visit your father, have you?"

I nodded.

"Yes, it's been a long time..."

"Yes... very long..."

Tension hovered palpably, as if an invisible monolith of *unspoken matters* lay between us.

Our stilted discussion turned first to his house's fastidious furnishings where everything appeared meticulously ordered. My father was a true perfectionist in this regard. Every detail conveyed scrupulous care—not a speck of dust nor stray fibre in sight. Neatly pleated curtains, flawlessly taut carpeting, some old-fashioned cabinets against the walls, a painting of a farmhouse on a sandy lane - all struck me as dull and antiquated, especially compared to Uncle Johan's place. Moreover, it resembled more a furniture showroom than

an actual lived-in home. Dreadful, I thought.

Then our halting conversation shifted to my father's occupations and hobbies.

"I could show you what I do presently. Let me make coffee, then you must come see the back garden."

The coffee was promptly ready. I followed him outside where he gestured towards a large shed behind the house.

"Come along, I'll show you something."

Mug in hand, I trailed him inside the outbuilding where something wondrous awaited: resting on high trestles lay a partially constructed wooden cabin cruiser.

"Built it all myself," he said proudly.

Whatever you might think about my father, he was undoubtedly a skilled craftsman.

"Absolutely beautiful," I said, genuinely impressed.

It was a flat-bottomed boat about five-and-a-half metres long, entirely constructed from dark oak with a glossy finish. Nearly ready for launching - even the mast and boom were complete, perfectly varnished and resting on trestles beside the hull. Only the bow strakes remained unfinished, with a few sections still missing.

"In a few weeks she'll be launched," my father explained, "on the

IJssel." I showed my admiration and examined everything with

keen interest.

Then he took me to the other half of the shed, partitioned off by a wall.

Behind it was completely different – a neatly tiled space almost entirely filled with orderly clothing racks. Men's suits, women's dresses, children's clothes, curtains, bedsheets – all hung meticulously sorted on racks, looking practically new. He told me

he dealt in second-hand clothes sold at various markets. Earned a decent living, he said.

Back inside, our conversation turned to how he got fresh eggs and milk from a nearby farm, and about his flower garden that bloomed profusely each summer. He showed me photos of that garden

and what his interior used to look like. We leafed through meaningless albums filled with pictures of houses, insignificant things, an old car he'd once restored. He told me he was also a silversmith and showed me various jewellery pieces he'd designed and expertly crafted. Though I understood little about it, I found the pieces beautiful to see. He spoke proudly about his encyclopaedia, his love of cooking and his regular library visits to read about East Groningen's history, where he was born. It almost felt ordinary – a father and son talking. About so much interesting *this and that* .

And yet, when you hadn't seen each other for fourteen years, everything seemed secondary to me. Not once did he mention me, nor my siblings, nor speak of the past. Essentially, everything was passed over in silence. Wasn't that somewhat odd? At the very least, shouldn't a father ask how I lived, what school I went to, if I had friends, or at least where I'd just come from by train?

It was clear he wanted to know nothing. As if he considered the gap of roughly my entire childhood, all those years we hadn't seen each other, perfectly normal. As if it didn't interest him that he'd never seen me again. Had I ever given him any thought? No, never. Maybe *deliberately not* .

The first day seemed normal enough. But when I went to bed that evening in the immaculately tucked guest bed, I was suddenly overcome by a very strange feeling. I realised I simply didn't *feel/ safe* . With my own father, of all people. How was this possible? A weird, vague yet intense anxiety rose within me. I found it hard to fall asleep.

The next day my father made several odd remarks.

"What exactly did you come here for?" he suddenly asked.

I looked up, startled. What I came here for - to see my own father? Did that really need explaining?

I didn't understand what he meant. "Well, I thought..." I tried. Truthfully, I didn't really know what to expect here either. "I thought I'd come and see you - you are my father, aren't you?" I could hear the irritation in his voice, which soon became

apparent. "I actually find you rather bothersome. I don't want

you touching my

radio without asking. What are you plotting? Do you imagine you'll be making the rules here?"

Suddenly I understood he wasn't like Henk at all. Henk had been pleased when I moved freely about, made myself at home, listened to the radio.

He'd watch me with laughing, satisfied

eyes. My father was different.

"And I think you're slovenly - your clothes weren't neatly draped over the chair by your bed."

His words seemed to reach me from far away. It confused me. Not neat? Had I returned to my foster parents? My father was old-fashioned. Dull. Narrow-minded. It pained me to think this of my own father. But what a disappointment he was turning out to be.

His attitude shifted almost hourly. His eyes seemed to grow sharper by the minute. Deep inside, I thought I recognized

something within them momentarily - something awful.

My clothing style also displeased my father. Far too trendy and modern. I should be wearing sensible clothes.

"A T-shirt is worthless, you should wear a proper shirt. And those jeans of yours look so scruffy, like some hippie. I've got a decent pair of flannel trousers for you."

Oh no! Though inwardly revolted at yet another person dictating my clothes - and again forcing me into outfits I despised - I didn't dare refuse.

Awkwardly, I soon found myself wearing dark brown flannel trousers topped with a pale green shirt. How I loathed them. So grown-up, so dull, antiquated, geriatric. So completely unlike me.

"The top shirt button must be fastened, that's where the tie goes."

I was gutted but didn't dare object. Reluctantly, I threaded the top button through its hole. The collar tightened around my neck like a noose.

"A tie?" I asked with anxious disbelief. "You really want me to wear a necktie? Surely that's not necessary?"

I hated anything tight at my throat. No ties - not even the lightest chain necklace could I tolerate around my neck.

"Yes, a proper shirt requires a handsome tie. In this house, I decide what you wear. Wait downstairs while I select some - I'll call you."

Soon he summoned me to his bedroom where dozens of ties lay displayed across the bed: striped, checked, plain black with brown stars, tartan ties - all in subdued colours. It resembled a haberdasher's shop window.

But even if these ties were woven from thousand-guilder notes, I wanted none. "I really don't like wearing ties, truly," I ventured

cautiously. The shirt already gripped my throat uncomfortably.

"No, Jasper, you'll do as I say! I say you wear a tie while you're under my roof. So you will. Pick whichever you fancy then. Should suit this pale green shirt."

He pointed to a pale yellow tie with diagonal dark green stripes. Revolting. Unease crawled up my spine. My father dictating what I should wear. His tone no different now from the foster father's. I stared at the bizarrely extensive tie collection. Unexpectedly, my father looped his chosen tie around my neck and yanked hard. In that instant, lightning shot through my brain. I pushed him away, bolted from the bedroom, fled downstairs where I desperately tore off that dreadful neck-thing.

Still, nothing seemed seriously amiss. I could still dismiss it by saying ties felt antiquated or cumbersome. That it hurt my neck - which it genuinely did.

Descending the stairs, it flashed through me again that I didn't appear in any photos. This wasn't right. Was this truly my own father? I wrenched open the top shirt button and knew something dreadful existed between my father and me, beyond his clothing opinions.

Downstairs that evening, the tension became palpable. We watched television barely exchanging words. By nine I bid him goodnight, desperate to be alone. He didn't reply.

That night brought no sleep either. Terrifying anxiety gripped me with grotesque visions. Restless on my back, I couldn't feel safe. Haunting images of dark nights under sickle moons where I cowered in terror flickered through my mind.

Enormous trees loomed against cobalt skies. Orange sodium lights lining roads. Distant soft singing, waves of cruel whispers penetrating thick mist. A horrid laugh pierced my ears - laughter that petrified me.

Panting breaths and sighs. Suddenly a post appeared in sand. The post. Briefly, I peered through wooden slats of some shed. Sank into black abandonment. Startled awake. Had I slept?

I'd been compelled to obey *Two-Witch* , to submit to *Ieram* , yet refused my father's authority. Did my father connect to *The Two-Witch* ? To *Ieram* ? Some sinister link existed here, but whatever knowledge I possessed remained padlocked away.

In dawn's first light, having scarcely slept, I resolved to stealthily leave my father's house. I could never explain the terrors he evoked. Dressing cautiously, I crept downstairs barefoot. But he must have sensed it - I heard his bedroom door open. Frantically pulling on my jacket, I scrambled for shoes across the hallway. Too late. His voice already carried from the stairwell. His shadow fell across the tiles.

"What are you doing? What do you actually want? Why are you wearing your coat?"

His voice was razor-sharp, burning eyes piercing my soul. Nothing remained of the father reunited after fifteen years. And I... I saw only the *rooster* . Exactly as I

remembered it. The *rooster* inextricably linked to terrible things - to babies, crows, cats and witches. There, in that moment, I knew what dwelled inside me had truly occurred, though precise memories eluded me.

"I want to leave, I just..." I stammered desperately. He said nothing. Haltingly, I floundered on. "Just... away. Thanks for uh... everything. I need to go... I *have* ... got to go... really..."

"You're going nowhere, it's far too early in the morning. You're staying here, as I decide. You'll do exactly as I say, hear me? You will obey. Take

off your coat."

What happened next would be hard for an outsider to believe, but for me it was a familiar reality. My father dashed through the hall to the kitchen. From the corner of my eye, I glimpsed him snatching a large meat cleaver from the drawer. He clutched it in his hand. His eyes gleamed bright as a rooster poised to strike, the sharp blade held threateningly aloft. Deep in my memory, savage roosters pecked menacingly at a baby in the sand. My mind was pierced with visions of witches like black crows swooping over me, cackling cruelly because I was a *clown* .

The raised cleaver sent me into panic. I screamed violently and fled through the front door in my socks. On the street I kept shrieking with terror. Shreds of distant memories churned into grotesque visions that left me capable only of screaming.

Until I was violently thrown to the ground. A shoe pressed hard against my chest, exactly like when my foster father had once flung me down the stairs. Triumphantlly he'd planted his shoe on my chest as I howled in pain, ribs bruised from the fall.

This time it was the police. I was arrested with rough force though I could barely stand, moaning like a madman.

It later emerged that my father had called the police himself, convincing them I'd come to make trouble. Finding me in socks, screaming and wailing in the street, they believed him immediately.

So I ended up in a police cell, distraught and confused. At the station I'd first been forced to strip down to my underpants. It felt like being put 'in my place' by the foster mother again, or locked back in the cellar.

They asked my name and address. I had no address - only my

brand-new name was official.

"Well Jasper Heijting, we'll just have to call that Greet when her office opens."

I waited in my underwear on a wooden bench in a stark concrete cell. Was given tea in a plastic cup.

As a wards-of-court minor, I did have one small advantage - at lunchtime an officer brought white plastic tray with chicken, applesauce and chips. He said it could take a while for Greet to arrive as she was busy.

Only late that afternoon did Greet finally collect me. I dressed, and when I stood before her she glanced briefly at my shoeless feet as if knowing exactly what had occurred. She asked nothing at all.

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Greet took me directly from Apeldoorn police station to temporary accommodation in Utrecht. What happened to me afterwards, and in what exact order, I can no longer even properly describe. It was just *chaos*. I didn't fit anywhere. Because of my age and my background as a former foster child. Alternatingly, I stayed in shelters for the homeless, temporary accommodation for addicts, night shelters where I wasn't allowed during the day, temporary housing run by evangelical or idealistic organisations, and basic night shelters for the homeless. That was my life now.

My accommodation changed sometimes weekly, even daily

until eventually I stubbornly wandered off and ended up homeless in Utrecht city centre, at Hoog Catharijne. Here I aimlessly drifted past the many shop windows and saw an escalator for the first time in my life.

Out of boredom I must have ridden it up and down a hundred

times. Suddenly I had something to play with.

People ambled covetously past the numerous displays. Normal citizens with full shopping bags. They drank something at one of the outdoor cafés, came here to eat a bite or to gawk at the crowds streaming past. They came for mountains of goods screaming to be bought. For me, penniless, all that remained completely out of reach.

I saw a stereo system exactly like Henk's. Such an expensive thing. The cheese and nut bar smelled mouthwateringly delicious, making me even hungrier than I already was. I lived among the homeless and addicts, among people who, for whatever reason, had fallen through society's cracks - I belonged to society's dregs.

By now Greet knew I was roaming Hoog Catharijne, but she no longer cared about me. She'd given up trying to find accommodation for me or doing anything else to help.

I had a short note from her in my pocket with the phone number of a friend in Wijk bij Duurstede where she'd be at Christmas. Only in absolute emergencies was I allowed to possibly call her there, but she preferred I didn't bother her further.

This is how I ended up on the fringes of society. In the gutter. Among drifters and junkies who seemed to move invisibly through the shopping centre. They still dared to approach others. Begging for money, for a hot meal, for *alms*. Others dealt openly and were sometimes aggressive. But I did nothing, I was mainly afraid and anxiously avoided the corridors and spaces beneath the shopping centre. I tried to survive as inconspicuously as possible without contact with others. I slept on hard benches, in dirty corners, in society's filthy crevices.

Most drifters scavenged for their daily bread and even seemed content. They snorted their coke on benches or in concrete corners turned away from everyone. They seemed satisfied with a spot on an old sleeping bag

or cardboard box. I looked at their lined faces and couldn't believe I belonged here, was one of them.

There were others too - shady, sly and cunning criminals who roamed here with different intentions. And I stood out. I was so clearly homeless and unprotected that I was approached by Charley Schreuder, perhaps one of Hoog Catharijne's most notorious gutter specimens. Charley was one of those men who wanted me working for him. I guessed him around thirty-five, with lank brown hair, a ashy-grey square face with predatory sharp eyes constantly scanning in all directions. In my mind I saw him as a bird of prey.

Never at ease, and clearly capable of spotting any approaching danger in the periphery of his hawk-like vision. Unlike most drifters here he was clean-shaven and didn't stink either. Charley was different - not an ordinary customer shopping here, but not a drifter either, he was somewhere in between. Perhaps he even had a rented room somewhere where he lived or stayed with someone he knew. I was hunched deeply on a bench when he approached me.

"Hey mate, I'm Charley. Rotten day, eh?"

I looked up, wondering what he wanted. Charley gave a brief laugh, then suddenly turned serious.

"Bet you'd like to earn some money. Get yourself something to eat or a few lagers. Man, I know exactly how to fix that."

Though I tried to avoid contact with anyone, money was everything here. It made all the difference between having something or nothing in your stomach, and Charley was making me a truly tempting offer.

"You could make fifty guilders, maybe even a *hundred* , mate, if

you nick some trousers from C&A for me. Just layer them and you're done,

no one will notice, you can

walk straight out. I can't do it myself - they know me."

I hesitated for a moment. Then heard myself ask: "Fifty guilders... would that be enough for a proper music system? With speakers?"

Charley smiled. He knew he'd hooked me. Glancing around, he sat down beside me on the bench. As though granting me some great favour by promising so much money for something as trivial as stealing a pair of stupid trousers, he declared expansively: "Oh yes, certainly, that would buy you a nice stereo but you'd need to run a few more errands first. You could get rich, man, just by lifting a few things for me. Though we're talking more than just trousers, naturally."

There was a brief silence. Then I heard him say the incredible.

"If you work out for me, mate, you could make a thousand guilders and buy absolutely anything you want."

An unfamiliar enthusiasm bubbled up in me, a strange feeling took hold. Did I hear that right? A thousand guilders? Could a proper music system like Henk's really be within reach?

One day when we were still living in the bungalow, there'd been visitors at the foster parents' house and after they left, I'd seen a huge stack - maybe twenty centimetres high - of thousand-guilder notes lying on the dining table. Never in my life had I seen so much money in one place.

And now Charley was offering this to me. Even I could earn a thousand guilders.

Charley saw the tense anticipation on my face and realised he'd caught me.

"It's so easy, you know. Looks really difficult, but don't let that bother you. Before you know it, you'll be able to buy whatever you want, mate."

Overwhelmed and somewhat uncomfortable, I remained fascinated. Who'd have thought it? Stealing - when you thought about it, it was almost strange that everyone didn't just steal whatever they wanted. But what had I ever actually stolen in my life? I'd pilfered missionary money biscuits, emptied jam jars in the cellar. Secretly stuck a spoon

in the peanut butter jar sometimes or taken a mint from the tube. I never regretted it and they never noticed anyway. Once I secretly took a few carrots from a basket – was that stealing too? Sort of. I suppose so. But this here, this was the real thing. The big league.

"I'll think about it," I said, but Charley shook his head firmly.

"Think about it, think about it... come on mate, that's not like you. Show me you can nick something and you'll get that thousand guilders in no time."

I was still hesitating, but he pressed on.

"I need to know right now whether you're going to do it, because I need those trousers by tonight. If you don't dare, I'll easily find someone else who wants to make good money. Know plenty who'd jump at it – but I'd rather it be you."

I panicked. Others? Who'd then earn that money for a stereo system? Suddenly I heard myself almost eagerly agree: "Alright, I'll do it. I'll try. I want it so badly."

"Ever nicked anything before?" Charley asked. I shook my head. Charley didn't seem too bothered.

"You'll pick it up in no time. Start small first. Practise. Need to know you've got what it takes. Begin at the chemist's – pinch four small perfume bottles, slips right into your trouser pockets, yeah? Two in each – they won't notice. Get the expensive brands though, they're next to that big glass display case with combs and gadgets. Twenty guilders to get you started, since you're my mate. Not making any profit here myself.

The chemist's just there – see the popcorn stand? Next to it."

I was already on my way. Twenty guilders – what a fortune. I hurried to the chemist Charley had pointed out. The excitement of my mission hummed through me. Inside, I scoured the aisles where shop assistants were rummaging in shelves and unpacking boxes. I tried to stay inconspicuous. Everything felt alien and uncertain. Never been in a chemist's before.

My eyes darted everywhere. I wandered past shelves stacked with household goods. Bleach, ammonia, large plastic bottles – but no, this obviously wasn't perfume, just loo stuff. Perfume would be in fancy little bottles. Of course – over by the lipsticks, near that display cabinet with combs and gadgets Charley mentioned.

Sure enough, neatly arranged shelves displayed angular and elegantly shaped bottles. But which should I take? Was this actually perfume? Yes, must be – certainly looked like it. All seemed terribly expensive to my untrained eye. I knew nothing about perfume, remembered only the *Eau de Cologne* bottle on my foster mother's bedside table during long bed-punishments in her room. Those oddly angular bottles that baffled me, filled with liquid stinging in its sweetness. I examined several bottles, but couldn't properly see their prices. How were you even supposed to know how expensive something was?

"Can I help you?" came a voice behind me. I startled. There we go... clearly I stood out.

"Oh, uh... I'm looking for, uh... perfume," I answered quite truthfully, "The slightly more expensive kind."

"Well you've come to the right place. The better brands are there, in those lovely boxes. That shelf there – those are the top-tier ones."

I pretended interest in the fragrances while searching for the price – I needed the most expensive. What did Charley want? What counted as expensive or cheap? I saw a perfume bottle marked at £15.95. Was that expensive enough? Seemed reasonable. But over there – look – boxes priced at £49.95, even £69.95. The boxes were already small, containing even tinier bottles. That much money for so little? I could slip one into my trouser pocket just like that, but it wasn't going to work. I grew nervous. I didn't dare. Something inside me felt this wasn't right. Suddenly I felt awful. What was I doing here?

I didn't know why, but abruptly I wanted nothing to do with chemists or perfume, nothing with stealing and nothing with Charley. I put the box back and hurried towards the exit, back to Charley.

From a distance I called to him: "I can't do it! It's not working!" I felt relieved but somewhat ashamed. Charley shrugged. He stood up from the bench and didn't even

dignify me with a glance. Clearly, I was no longer his 'mate'. Relieved, I ran off. No longer thinking about stereo systems, just about the hunger gnawing at me.

The only things I could still steal – the only things I *had to* steal due to hunger – were bread rolls. Very early in the mornings, perhaps by half past five already, in a side corridor of the shopping centre near a bakery's rear entrance, stood racks filled with freshly baked, fragrant finger rolls. The neatly arranged rolls

smelled divinely oven-fresh. They'd make anyone's mouth water.
And after I'd apparently carelessly strolled past,

suddenly a few rolls would be missing. I stole them directly from the trolleys. Neat and quick. But it wasn't enough. Living on three or four white rolls per day was impossible.

I had another source of income I never asked for and felt deeply ashamed about. Though I feared strangers and most adults generally, friendly approaches happened regularly near the escalators.

"Hey, you look cute. Fancy a drink? Maybe something to eat?"

I was hungry. The man seemed kind. Overcoming my fear, I nodded. We walked to a nearby diner. I got food. So delicious. A plate of chips with a frikandel sausage. He paid. Smiled at me. Kindly. It seemed genuine - like actual interest.

"Want to come with me? Quick shower, clean clothes. Come on, my car's just nearby."

I shrugged. I wanted away from Hoog Catharijne. Anything would do. Soon I was in a stranger's car heading somewhere unknown.

Inside, I sat on a sofa drinking something. He brought tasty food too. Sat beside me. Stroked my hair. I startled. He laughed.

"Want to shower?"

Naked in the shower, he stood beside me handling

my erection building. It felt familiar, known. I didn't react. Just don't touch my balls still so painful sometimes. Necessary – I needed food. Don't think, just endure, the moment will pass. Half an hour later I drank coffee before being returned. Back at Hoog Catharijne beside the escalator with ten guilders in hand, I watched him leave.

Others came too. Friendly approaches. How did they know I waited by the escalators? I often went with them. For showers, food, money. Sex for chips. One man claimed defensively he wasn't *just* some creep preying on boys – with evident pride explained he was a respected Utrecht GP. His house matched the story. The only one with a proper bathtub.

Returning to freezing Hoog Catharijne left me confused. In his home, briefly, I'd been the most precious thing he knew.

Temperatures dropped. Winter arrived – Christmas. Those final pre- Christmas days turned bitterly cold even inside the shopping centre. The only warm spot I found was a heated yellow window frame outside a third-floor dead-end corridor shop. No customers came here. Through tiny grates, warm airflow emerged. Warm air! Essential for surviving freezing nights as temperatures plummeted beyond negative. I owned only the clothes on my back. No blanket, just a thin jacket inadequate even in sunlight. Completely unprepared for winter.

The thirty-centimetre-wide shop windowsill was hard but deliciously warm. Lying sideways with knees drawn up would surely keep me warm till morning. Wonderful. Or so I thought before my comfort shattered violently. Barely ten minutes passed before harsh knocking struck my shoulder.

"Get up!" barked a commanding voice. "Out! You're trespassing. Move it!"

The tone held contempt as well as authority. I froze in terror. Images flashed before me. The touch and rough words made me jolt – suddenly hearing my foster-father's commands anew. Turning, I faced an angry uniformed guard. I sat upright, legs dangling off the sill. Should have just obeyed and left but couldn't. "It's freezing outside," I pleaded, "Where should I go?"

The guard laughed. "Don't care where you go. Out, now."

Unexpectedly he yanked me violently from my warm haven. Inside me, panic erupted. Muscles tensed. The guard's-face distorted – became my foster-father's cruel sneer. Rage and hatred flooded my mind. Something coalesced inside. All *my selves* united into one *super-self*. Biblical strength surged through me. I wrenched free and with impossible force punched the stunned guard's jaw so hard he flew backwards and skidded metres across tiled floor, dazed. This phenomenal strength terrified me - I didn't know it existed within. I fled desperately. Just wanted warm sleep. Harsh radio voices barked through walkie-talkies.

Within moments police flooded the corridor and after brief struggle with officers I was cuffed. Back to the cells. This time allowed to keep clothes and given a blanket laid upon hard plastic mattress. Lying confined, the walls instantly

closed in. Trying to mentally escape, I focused on the distant past - that lovely Christmas in the children's home with the whole group. My own group. The Christmas tree. The currant loaf. Warm, cosy, together. The only happy Christmas of my whole childhood. Really I belonged there, safe among the toddlers. What was I doing here? I stared at some writing on the cell wall that I'd never forget. *Cheer up, one day you'll be sprung out.*

That night I barely slept. It was warm, but I was imprisoned. I decided I'd rather be outside in the cold now – free, away from all people. The next day I got tea in a plastic cup, a few sandwiches. A couple of hours after breakfast, a grumbling officer brought in a white plastic tray with chicken and chips – my Christmas dinner. Apparently standard fare for children under guardianship. I ate in silence, staring at the concrete cell walls.

Naturally Greet was far from pleased when she heard I was back at the police station. Right in the middle of her nice dinner with a friend. An officer took me to a room where she sat waiting by a large desk. She gave me a long hard look, shook her head slightly, and launched into a lecture.

"So here you are back at the police station again. I've heard the whole story, Jasper. You wanted to sleep in a shop windowsill so you punched a guard, just like that, someone simply doing their job? Do you think that's normal, Jasper? Hitting people? Don't you know hitting's completely wrong? What possessed you to do something like that? Where did you get this from?"

I shook my head. "Is that my fault? If he'd just let me sleep in my warm spot nothing would've happened. What was I supposed to do?"

Greet fixed me with a piercing look. "Hitting and aggression are always wrong and deserve punishment. You of all people should understand that by now, Jasper – you're not a little child anymore."

At first I didn't respond, then explained I hadn't just

started without reason. "I had nowhere to go, Greet. It was freezing outside. I couldn't sleep in the cold."

"Doesn't matter Jasper, violence is a serious criminal offence. You can't just hit people when you disagree with them. Hitting is always wrong. Always, Jasper. Surely you know that by now. Did you know that guard is injured because of you?"

None of it registered. I hardly felt real anymore. I didn't want to be at Hoog Catharijne, didn't want to sleep in shop windowsills or knock out security guards. I had no overview of what I was doing. I lived from one minute to the next, my thoughts constantly

shifting. At that moment I

could barely imagine being capable of punching a guard. Had I really done that?

I expected nothing from Greet by now. She'd never truly understood anything about me. In fact she knew nothing real about me. Between us stood an insurmountable wall built from completely different worlds. I knew Greet had written me off long ago. She wasn't waiting for an answer anyway.

"Well this really isn't very admirable of you, Jasper. Actually you are legally in the wrong here, did you know that? But since you're under guardianship I can probably sort something. We've got direct channels with the authorities. It's not the plan for you to appear before court immediately."

She stood up. "I'll go speak with someone." Within ten minutes she returned and I followed her to her car.

"Now we'll have to try finding you somewhere else then. I'll check the addiction shelter here in town – they often have spaces."

There was room. The next phase of my stay was in a shelter housing alcoholics and drug addicts – at least I'd landed somewhere. Because how often had that proved impossible before Hoog Catharijne? Before ending up homeless, Greet had genuinely tried placing me somewhere. We visited all sorts of children's homes and institutions. Travelled to Hilversum, Den Dolder, Zeist, even to the Veluwe and down south, but in none

of those institutions, private group homes, Youth Care facilities or specialised children's units did I fit anymore. Like an unwanted dog I'd wait in the car while Greet negotiated possible placements. Usually quickly established that I wasn't suitable, didn't belong. Youth Care services had no solutions for me.

Eventually Greet admitted that after the last foster home, I literally had nowhere left to go. Couldn't be placed in another foster family, couldn't go to a children's home, nowhere. My situation was apparently 'too different', 'too problematic', 'too complex'. Each time we came back empty-handed from our search for a permanent solution. Every single time she'd just drop me on the pavement outside the guardianship office, calling through the open window of her grey Mitsubishi Colt: "Bye Jasper, we'll try again next Monday then!"

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I knew these woods well from my time near Putten and Ede. During that period I'd had *Jasper's Lane* meaning the forest always retained something comfortingly familiar for me. Even after going through the military training area – the first time I'd run away. Back then I'd barely sustained myself from wild berries and brambles for weeks, but it had to be completely different this time. I made thorough preparations now.

Using what little money I had left, I took a single ticket from Utrecht to Amersfoort where Greet was at the guardianship office.

"Jasper? What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in the addicts' crisis shelter in Utrecht?"

"I couldn't take it anymore, it just wasn't working."

"But you've only been there two weeks or so?" She sighed. "Well then we have to start all over again with you." She thought for a moment, her expression stiff. "The best thing is if I take you back there, so at least

you have a roof over your head tonight."

Her voice now sounded genuinely unfriendly. Clearly she'd completely lost patience with me.

"No need to think anything up," I said quickly, "I already know where I want to go – to the Veluwe woods."

"The Veluwe? To the woods? What would you do there?"

"Just... live," was my simple reply.

Greet shrugged her shoulders almost with relief that she didn't need to arrange anything for me. I heard her mutter something like: "I can't stop you anyway."

Then, slightly more kindly: "So why did you come here?"

"I need money, shouldn't I still be getting the care allowance for the next two weeks? I want to take that into the woods with me. Possible?"

The plan surprised her, but she heard me out. "Er... yes, I think so technically. Doesn't matter where you stay, that money is allocated for you anyway. Let me see if we can process this immediately. "Just remember you must come back in fourteen days to collect more money if needed."

She wrote a note for me to collect cash from accounts. Somewhere in another office.

"Could I also get bicycle money immediately?"

"A bicycle? To cycle to the Veluwe, I suppose." Now she didn't hesitate. "Yes, you're entitled to that too."

She was right. Every few years I qualified for a *guardianship bicycle* worth about 75 guilders – something I'd not claimed since getting another bike after failing my test when a dog attacked me.

Later, a staff member paid me several weeks' living allowance alongside the bicycle money – 175 guilders total, more cash than I'd ever possessed.

"Don't forget to return in fourteen days, Jasper. Tell you what – meet me at the restaurant on Stads-

singel corner. You know it?"

"Near that small rotunda building?"

"Exactly. We'll be near the bank then – can pop straight there. So Friday fortnight at the Stadsring restaurant. Shall we say 3pm? Will you remember? Should I write it down?"

I nodded. Greet gave me a note with the date. If I wanted survival money, keeping this appointment was essential.

"We'll leave your belongings here," Greet suggested. "No use in the woods. Collect them when properly housed again."

I peered into the cardboard box containing my almost-forgotten possessions: an old record player, teddy bears, photographs. Cradling Bimbam briefly lifted my spirits. I considered taking him and Dumbo from the box, but they'd probably get lost in the forest.

That same day I bought a decent secondhand bike from a shop near Greet's office. Cycling from Amersfoort through the Gelderse Vallei towards the Veluwe's vast forests, gently rolling sand drifts and deserted heathlands. I carried little – just a plastic bag under the bungee cord containing spare clothes, a small trowel, a knife and a mug.

Stocking up at a village shop in Vierhouten, I passed a cattle grid onto a narrow gravel path beside a wider track. 'Zandenplas – 5.5km' read

a

sign. Cycling deep into the woods until spotting a random animal trail vanishing between trees, I dismounted there.

Pushing my bike along the game trail through shrubs and thickets, I reached an undulating area with scattered pine trees, where a natural sand-

ridge rose prominently. This looked more than adequate for shelter – midway up the slope stood a large pine whose substantial roots formed a small hollow at its base. This hollow was the beginning of my shelter. I excavated it further until it became large enough to lie in.

The thick, heavily twisted roots provided exactly the right structural support needed for the roof of the burrow, preventing collapse.

The excavated space offered sufficient room to lie down, though sitting upright remained impossible.

The great advantage of this hideaway was its naturally inconspicuous appearance, remaining bone-dry inside even during prolonged rainfall. Occasionally, small streams of sand would trickle down onto me, covering me in gritty dust – but what did it matter? There was nobody to see me here anyway.

Thus began my period of living in the forest. I felt like an entirely different person now. Relieved to be away from the commotion of Hoog Catrijne, free from the overstimulation of city life. Nothing in me wanted to become a boy here. Here there were no boy-identities, no foster parents, no schools – no human world whatsoever. No triggers, just the usual nocturnal flashbacks or occasional intrusive memories.

Like a human lynx I crept through thickets, scrupulously hiding from ramblers on the broad woodland paths. I became vigilant for foresters,

constantly searching for animal tracks.

Without conscious thought, I began collecting animal bones and feathers scattered through the woods, bringing them to my hidden dwelling.

Among these fragments I slept. This was my world. Here I belonged, far from humankind.

I encountered roe deer that froze statue-still when I approached. They smelled rather like goats or horses. Mouse-silent, moving like a real Apache, I stalked rabbits and spent minutes watching pine martens tightrope-walk

along slender branches. I conversed with snuffling wild boars and smiled at abruptly soaring goshawks – these felt like my only true companions.

My diet consisted mainly of preserved staples from the village store, stored in a self-dug hole topped with pine bark. Basic but nourishing: dark Frisian rye bread thickly spread with peanut butter, buttermilk, oranges or apples, occasionally supplemented with foraged berries and chips from Nunspeet's cafeteria. An almost complete food pyramid that sustained me for months.

Forest living proved manageable despite minor discomforts. Ants frequently traversed my rye bread, their legs sticking in peanut butter. Initially I'd painstakingly remove them until realising the futility, later consuming them with the bread. They didn't even sting, likely immobilised by peanut butter adhesiveness.

Mosquitoes bit voraciously. Once I gashed my bare foot on glass, slicing my big toe. Another time, startled, I leaped bare-chested into what proved a nettle patch – I paid dearly for that mistake.

Yet woodland existence remained simpler than Hoog Catharijne's

chaos, radiating profound freedom. Like a true forest creature I roamed miles through undulating woodlands. Every tree in my territory knew me. I

memorised blueberry-laden clearings and undisturbed hollows where wild boars dozed lazily.

Forest rhythms became second nature quickly. Only at dusk would realisation creep in that something remained amiss. In the forest's silence, I'd sometimes hear a distant car door slam shut. Then I knew people were going home to sleep. Only *animals* slept randomly in the woods.

My entire kitchenware consisted of one dirty knife – mainly from peanut butter – which I'd simply wipe clean with moss. Moss served many purposes. As toilet paper, but also to sleep on, to stuff in my shoes when they were wet. The moss would absorb moisture from my shoes since everything air-dried without fire. I drank buttermilk straight from the carton, leaving my mug untouched in my den where it gradually filled with bird rings and pretty stones I collected. Not far from my hideout flowed the Hierdense beek, a clear shallow stream where I washed my clothes and regularly bathed myself. Here I played with freshwater shrimps swimming sideways and sometimes got startled by small miller's thumb fish scurrying through the shallow water. The money for groceries from Vierhouten's village shop came through Greet from the guardianship institution. Every month I'd collect my payment outside Amro Bank on Stadsring in Amersfoort, after first meeting her at our agreed spot in the restaurant on Stadsring's corner.

My only real concern was the slip of paper with the date and time when I was expected to meet Greet again in Amersfoort. She was my sole contact with the outside world, and even then only when she paid me my monthly guardianship allowance.

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Sometime in December 1980, when I came to collect another

month's funds, it had grown considerably colder. By then I'd acquired a coat,

better shoes, a blanket and a woollen hat. And although frost had already set in, I never once considered how I would endure winter in the woods. But suddenly, something was actually being arranged for me. The Foundation had found a room in Harderwijk for me, a place where I could live. Had they placed an advertisement or responded to an offer? Did the guardianship organisation finally think

it strange that I was living in the woods for so long?

This is how in early 1981 I came to rent that small room from Harm and Wilco in Harderwijk. And here it was, perhaps through conversations with this kind gay couple I rented from, that I began to realise all these alien feelings living inside me that I had absolutely no idea how to handle. This realisation meant I couldn't go on. I didn't want to continue either. The prospect of having to keep living so 'mixed up', being preoccupied every day with boys while inhabiting a body that had by then become far too mature for that, seemed like the worst nightmare imaginable – worse than anything except my childhood experiences.

What would people think of me? I'd never be accepted. How I felt, how I thought was just too different. And I'd never be able to become who I wanted to be. How would I ever get out of this? My mind kept churning relentlessly. I played music by *the Rolling Stones* on constant repeat and kept listening again and again to: *Crazy Mama, Jumping Jack Flash, Brown Sugar*. Sometimes deafeningly loud, as if the music could shape my feelings into form or drown them out entirely. Or make me forget everything, just for a while.

Greet came to visit once more, but her purpose wasn't clear to me. Was it obligation? Because I remained under child protection? Because she got paid for it? Maybe just checking I hadn't returned to the woods?

The conversation was brief - as always - because she had 'so

many genuinely important appointments'.

I could have run from rehab centres, foster homes, host families or my father's house. I could flee anything - except myself and the chaotic turmoil within. This realisation shattered me. Why were my feelings so bizarre, so utterly opposed to what others displayed? My thoughts chased their own tail endlessly.

Nameless, broken fragments of my child-self regularly dominated my emotions and thinking, triggered constantly, often without conscious awareness. Triggered by toys, by playing chil-

dren, playgrounds, ordinary sights. Finally free from foster parents, now this. How could I - newly liberated - possibly live and feel like a free person?

"Oh, stop whining with your self-pity and defeatist attitude," taunted a voice in my head - that vile bastard-voice I occasionally debated.

"Easy for you to pretend nothing's wrong. To act like I don't exist, right?"

"Ha! The stupid one here is you. Just go outside and play normally like other boys. Why can't you? Make some friends and have fun. You're no different, are you?"

"D'you think I'm allowed friends? Really? They'll laugh at me - or worse. I'm too big now anyway. They'll see me as wrong, bad, as someone wanting horrible things. Or just mental. There you go."

"Pfft - why care what anyone thinks? You're free now, aren't you?"

"I can't. I'm scared they'll hurt me. Think I'm weird for wanting to play with boys."

"Cowardly little shit! Hiding in your room - that you can manage. Sneaking out at night when everyone's indoors - like some wild

boar. Should've stayed in the bloody woods."

"I'm useless. It's hopeless. Too scared, I... "

"Just a worthless coward who daren't even play. Scared of everyone, eh? Go alone then. Local playground. Or if you're too chicken here, try the beach one. Just bloody play!"

"I can't - they'll probably laugh at me."

"Oh terrified of seesaws now? Of swings? You loved swinging, didn't you?"

I silenced. The bastard-voice always won. I recoiled from my obsessive thinking, my grinding mental gears, my utter paralysis. That invasive voice's perpetual presence probably proved my actual

madness. The thoughts churned endlessly. Suppose I wanted to start something - where would I begin? What age should I be? Where do I belong? Not here behind these cupboards surely? Should I attend school? Which one? Primary school? Something inside whispered I should. But also shouldn't. Maybe attempt vocational training? Do I want that? Which version of me?

Stop! Perhaps what I needed was a good kick up the arse. That shocking jolt might actually make me try something. Trying my best. For what?
What did I want?

Should I live as a man? What even was a 'man'? Isn't that someone like the foster father? God no, I never wanted to become like him. Merely seeing him had always terrified me. Could he be my role model?

And then the adult world - what exactly was that? Like the minister? My vocational mentor? Those men who kept taking me

with them at Hoog Catharijne? Was I actually gay because I'd gone with them? Probably not that either. I didn't know what I was. Completely stuck, every subject felt

loaded. Each word could drown me, sinking almost into the foul swamp of my thoughts without even a fragile reed to cling to.

"Just stop! Everything! I hate myself! At least, the 'me' that's thinking here!" screamed inside my head. My mind churned like a runaway carousel, like a shattered pot confused by its own fragments. I felt like the living embodiment of Led Zeppelin's *What is and what should never be* .

The room's window taunted me with its miserable view: a small, gaily coloured playground featuring an exciting yellow climbing frame, an inviting bright red slide and a simple blue seesaw. 'See-saw' whispered my brain automatically. Even those cheerful colours seemed to beckon me.

There, right outside my window, I saw children - my idols - playing together, running, laughing, moving, *living* . Together. With each other. Exactly who I wanted to be, right there beyond my window.

The sight brought unbearable pain. Pain from seeing such cheerful colours, knowing this wonderful playground existed - just not for me. For me, it seemed there was nowhere on earth I could exist.

I closed the curtains to block out the playground and playing children, shielding myself from all triggers.

I bought a box containing perhaps a hundred instant soup sachets, and this became my breakfast, lunch and dinner. I wanted nothing else. This way, I nearly stopped eating entirely. Just some salty powder in a deep plate, mixed with hot tap water. Soup.

Nutrition for a month, I calculated. Tomato, chicken or vegetable -

it didn't matter anymore. I didn't want to taste. I wanted to starve, to break, to expire, to escape everything. I didn't want to know anything anymore.

I barely left my room - terrified of encountering children outside, scared of bright colours that stirred too much, frightened of adults, animals, buildings - fearful anything might shatter my fragile equilibrium.

Days slipped past in darkness. I vomited randomly into a corner. I grew weaker. Sicker. Increasingly debilitated. Stopped cleaning. Who would I clean for?

Then one day Harm appeared. He barely squeezed between the cupboards, just peeking tentatively around the corner.

"Are you in there somewhere in the dark? Jasper?" I heard him ask, "Jasper?"

"Yeah, I'm here... Just lying on my bed."

"Goodness, we haven't seen you in ages. Mind if I switch the light on, lad? It's pitch black in here."

Before I could answer, Harm turned on the light.

"Haven't you been staying in bed rather long?" he inquired gently, "Not that I want to interfere, but are you alright?"

I shifted slightly upright. In the harsh light, Harm peered between the cupboards at me with a kind smile. He now squeezed through the narrow entrance into my room. Standing beside the mattress where I lay, he looked down at me.

"Blimey, son, this isn't right for someone your age – holed up in bed like this. You're positively grey! Are you poorly? What's the matter? You look ghastly, truly."

I didn't respond. His eyes surveyed my room – empty soup packets scattered about, LPs and singles strewn across the floor, a dirty plate left

where it fell, clothes heaped arbitrarily, spoons crusted in mugs, and barely concealed under a towel in one corner, my vomit.

"How're you feeling?" Now genuine concern edged his voice, "I don't think you've been outside in donkey's years. You look bloody awful. You're not seriously ill, are you?"

I stared blankly ahead. "Oh, I'm fine. Just not in the mood. Might go for a walk tonight. Nothing unusual, happens sometimes."

"You know, Wilco's mentioned you often. Says you're quite lovely really. Perhaps you're a bit down. Why not stay with us a while, lad? Wilco's got a smashing house in the woods. You could move in properly. Even share our bed - it'd be cosy. Do you good, I reckon. Boys your age need that, better than moping alone in bed. Shall I open the curtains for you?"

"NO!" I panicked. Harm likely mistook my vehement refusal for protest about the bed sharing – though I absolutely didn't want that either. I didn't want to share anyone's bed, nor even be in my own. I didn't want to lie, sit or stand – wanted nothing at all anymore.

"Alright then," Harm offered jovially, "I'll tidy the kitchen for you later. You just rest up now."

He squeezed back between the cupboards towards the kitchen where I heard him add: "Hope you feel better, son. I'll be at Wilco's for now but I'll check on you later. Get well. Want the light off again?"

I nodded instantly. Darkness suited me better.

So I remained. Lying in bed by day with curtains drawn – exactly like the prolonged punishments from my foster parents all those years ago. Now I imposed it on myself. And again my throat

burned with thirst. But this time I chose not to drink. Couldn't even swallow without pain. Kept nothing down. No hope left. I knew I'd never live normally with what

filled my head, felt *cursed* . The *Two-Witch* would keep clutching me to all the horrors and twisted sexuality. The *Two-Witch* stayed so duplicitous for me – there I heard her, even intensely yearned for it, whilst utterly fearing it. She seemed to know everything. My terrors, how I remained animal deep down - she knew the *Terrible One* . So why still tremble?

Then suddenly *Gipsy Boy* reappeared. Back in my thoughts again. That small dark-haired boy with whom I felt some inexplicably intense connection. His little face appeared before me as I tried to understand who he was. He always seemed to trap me in so many strange aspects of his world. A world I didn't want at all. What was wrong with him - with me? But didn't I know *Gipsy Boy* ? Had I forgotten everything *Gipsy Boy* had *done for me* ?

Behind the tall white cupboards, lying on my sleeping bag in suffocating darkness, that brief moment returned when I saw *Gipsy Boy* lying with a filthy face in the sand. Clearer now than ever before. Though the exact events remained vague in my memory, I felt something terrible.

There lay *Gipsy Boy* , a rope around his neck tied to a stake in the sand. I saw it all vividly again. Completely silent - just him and me present. I saw him lying so strangely naked and

suddenly I remembered. I'd only approached him because I wondered what he was doing so strangely by that stake in the sand. And when he looked at me and asked my name, I didn't immediately run away. Now I saw that I'd stood there frozen in fear, amazed that he asked who I was.

"Who are you?" *Gipsy Boy* asked me softly with his smeared, tear- stained face.

And I simply told him. "Me? Who I am? But I'm just Jasper, aren't I?"

A moment of silence. Then *Gipsy Boy* shook his head and whispered to me, crying softly. "You? Jasper? No, that's impossible, *I'm* Jasper."

I looked at him more carefully now. "Are you...? Do *you* share my name? *You*, smeared and tied to a stake in the sand, groaning in pain? *You're* Jasper? Then am I...?"

And then I must have pleaded with him, coward that I was. Because I realised it couldn't go on. I just wanted to get away. I wanted nothing more. It *had* to stop. I leaned closer to him and heard myself ask exhaustedly of that boy falling apart in the sand:

" *Gipsy Boy*, I really can't take it anymore. I can't do this. Truly. Please let me go. I can't bear all this. Please cry for me instead. Please let me leave. Stay here in the sand for me. Do this for me, *Gipsy Boy*? I need to leave, I don't want to be here anymore. Never again."

I saw he couldn't take it either. He wept and groaned in such agony. But one of us had to carry on. I had to. Slowly I rose to my feet. Abandoned him. Left him lying there in the sand. I walked away. Away from the child he was. Away from the little boy he truly was. Away from the person he would have become. I couldn't *be* him. I wasn't an animal.

Nobody on earth would want to be him. Not even me. I never wanted to look back. I didn't want to know he was lying there. I

didn't want to know anything more about him or what kept happening to him. I never wanted to be there again. Me? I'd never even been there.

But though I'd walked away from him, *Gipsy Boy* had always stayed with me. So terribly. Why wouldn't he leave? Why did he

keep bothering *me* ? I hadn't done anything to him, had I? I'd simply walked away, hadn't I? Why didn't he go to his *Two-Witch* , to *Ieram* , to his other witches? What did he want from me?

The soup tasted salty. I barely noticed any more. Every soup I ate was just watery and salty. I felt weak, I was in the process of dying. My throat was raw, I could hardly swallow; I waited with closed eyes. I wanted to know nothing more about everything that had happened in my life.

I don't know exactly when, but one morning Harm found me - worried and afraid something was wrong. An ambulance took me to hospital.

Wailing sirens, flashing blue lights, but I noticed none of it.

I didn't wake until several days later.

I almost didn't make it. I was skeletal and could no longer walk. I had kidney problems, stomach and intestinal issues. I'd lost control of my bowels and bladder and was on an IV drip.

Harm and Wilco remained kind. They visited me in hospital with juice and a nice card. So warm-hearted. But I didn't know what to say, had no energy to respond. Confused, like a half-dead fly. I spun around in my own thoughts. Exhausted and aimless, empty and broken, I lay in bed recovering from something I couldn't escape.

The nurses were kind, and so was the doctor who checked my pulse. But I was afraid of them. And even in hospital, lying in that bed, all the things I struggled with just kept going on.

Greet came to see me. When she appeared by my hospital bed, I could see she was shocked this time. Yet her manner remained distant, and she didn't ask how or why I'd ended up in hospital. Not that I could have explained.

"I've already arranged a place for you," she said. And for the first time there was something human in her voice. "When you're discharged, you can go straight to Henk and Margreet to

recuperate."

I smiled faintly and nodded. Henk and Margreet - that was good. "The police came too," said Greet.

That startled me. The police? Why?

"Yes, that always happens in cases like this. The police cleared your room and gave me a box with your belongings. It's at our office in Amersfoort now."

Later it turned out that when they'd cleared my room, not only had my passport disappeared, but Bimbam and Dumbo with my colouring book from the children's home were gone too. Gone for good.

After about two weeks I left hospital to recover further with Henk and Margreet in Lekkerkerk.

Recover from what? My body healed, but in my head everything remained hopeless and empty. Henk, Margreet and Meike and Marty too remained as kind and warm-hearted as before. Marty tried to cheer me up with his Playmobil figures. I smiled at his sweet little face, but I couldn't feel anything anymore. Meike baked delicious biscuits. I felt their affection and genuine concern. How kind they were. But I remained unreachable and numb.

Though I stayed weak for some time, thanks to their devoted care I slowly recuperated. After about a week, I could go outside again.

Huddled deep in my coat, I walked a short way along the sparsely lit dyke beside the River Lek in the evening darkness. Yes, it felt deceptively similar to that earlier period here after fleeing the foster home. Yet everything was different now. Now I

understood something was terribly wrong with me. Last time in

this temporary home, I hadn't truly known. Now I saw my life seemed doomed to fail.

The black, towering silhouettes of willow groves scattered along the rivier floodplains appeared to loom menacingly towards me. The wildly churning river water, visible beneath a crescent moon, and the throbbing diesel engines of passing barges left me despondent. In my lonely despair, I hurried back to Henk and Margreet's safe house.

On their sofa under the bright reading lamp, I briefly felt alright. Henk handed me drinks and my prescribed medication. Margreet brought homemade cake. Such good people. Why couldn't I reciprocate their trust, affection and heartfelt attention? And why couldn't I stay here? Where would I go next?

Henk and Margreet too seemed to now grasp something was dreadfully amiss - something beyond their understanding. That made this visit entirely unlike the first. A subdued atmosphere lingered, and I suspected they might even feel angry or disappointed. Because I couldn't keep living.

After two weeks I'd recovered enough to leave. I knew I couldn't - wasn't permitted to - stay. Following warm farewells, I sat empty and sorrowful beside Greet in her car again. This parting was final.

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From Lekkerkerk we drove straight to Utrecht where Greet had secured me a Youth For Christ shelter home. She had additional news: this was her final engagement as my Stichting Jeugdbelangen caseworker. She was being replaced by a male colleague.

Menno turned out fairly young and rather more progressive than the

reserved, hesitant Greet. That offered me hope - hope for some change, though he didn't strike me as someone who worked for child protection or could achieve anything for me. He looked somewhat scruffy in a

faded denim jacket with straggly shoulder-length hair. Behind NHS spectacles, dull eyes stared blankly, giving me the impression he was permanently slightly stoned.

With him as Greet's replacement, I eventually tried again to draw attention to my problems.

One mild afternoon in early May 1981, Menno invited me for a drink at a pavement café. I liked that about him. How different from the formalities with Greet. We settled on the terrace of a bistro along one of the canals. Enjoying the sunshine, we began our first proper conversation. Menno drank cola while I nursed a cup of black coffee. To an outsider, we might have looked like two student friends or mates having a pleasant drink together, but our discussion was far from it.

Menno set the tone – open and constructive. Or so it seemed.

"So Jasper, you can tell me anything, you know that, right? I value openness so you can just say whatever's on your mind. That's the only way to build trust, especially after your hospital stay in Harderwijk. You didn't end up there for nothing. Just talk to me, say what's bothering you, alright Jasper?"

I nodded, but inside I sighed deeply. Just empty words. It sounded like social worker jargon to me. Who could I trust anymore?

"Are you settling in at the Youth For Christ shelter? How long have you been there now?"

"How long? Two weeks? I think? Or three? I've lost all sense of time. Don't you know how long I've been there? You people put me there, didn't you?"

Unlike with Greet, I was immediately allowed to address him informally. Menno belonged to a modern generation that wanted to do

things

differently. Now

he shook his

head.

"I don't know exactly how long you've been there, but are you comfortable, is it working for you?"

"Well frankly, I'm not comfortable at all. All that constant God stuff, prayers and whatnot – that's really not for me, you know my background? I don't know what I'm doing there, I don't even have my own room. I feel miserable there."

Menno nodded understandingly, pushed back the hair that kept falling across his eyes, took a sip of cola, then said with his perpetually stoned- looking expression: "Well Jasper, this is simply all we can offer you.

There's nothing else available for you, you know that. Really, we've tried so many things for you already. It's already something that we're making such an effort for you. Especially after you got out of hospital."

A brief silence fell. I considered my situation. The hospital and everything around it. That I didn't want to keep living. I wanted to forget it all as quickly as possible. *There's nothing for you, you don't fit anywhere.* How often had I heard that? I didn't even question why that should be true. I resigned myself to never belonging anywhere. I knew...

Menno interrupted my thoughts, suddenly enthusiastic.

"Well wait, I do have something to tell you - we're working on something else for you. A better shelter placement. But will that work? For you? We need to prepare carefully. Because you cause serious problems everywhere, you know that? That's what

I'd like to discuss with you now."

"Me? Problems? No way. I don't do anything. I... uh... do we really have to talk about this?"

"Yes, we do. You know I've taken over Greet's case files," Menno continued. "I know everything about you. Your whole childhood since entering that children's home in Groningen. I've read your entire file and know absolutely everything. You just run away from everywhere, without reason. You ran from those nice people in IJsselmonde, from the sleep shelters, from the youth advice centre. You suddenly went looking for your father, and when something doesn't suit you, you hit people - you just assaulted a security guard at Hoog Catharijne, is that normal? The problem is everywhere you go, right from childhood, problems follow. Before any new

placement, I need to prevent this pattern

continuing." I stayed silent. What could I

possibly say?

"I read that out of nowhere you decided to go live in the woods," Menno continued. I think for more than half a year. "And you lived there completely alone. That's not normal?"

I shrugged. "I don't remember why I was there, but it was peaceful." Menno paused briefly, seemingly to let me think, but I couldn't wait for what came next.

"Were you... um... actually working on something for me? You mentioned better accommodation just now?" Maybe I could leave this place here in Utrecht?"

"Yep, another shelter, yes. Maybe you can stay there, perhaps even longer term, about six months or so. We're trying to get you placed there."

I took a sip of coffee. Sighed. Six months - for me that was already a very long time. My days were such a jumbled mess,

often I couldn't even

see through a single day. Mainly I just wanted out. I'd see how things went from there.

"When can I go? And what exactly would I do at this new place?"

"I'll let you know, Jasper. Honestly. But you'll have to wait a bit - I'm still in talks with the institution," Menno reassured me.

A silence fell. A young waitress came to ask if we wanted more drinks. The same again. Then I gathered my courage, because I had no choice, and asked Menno for help.

"Menno, I need to ask... could I see someone, a doctor, well... I get shooting pains regularly, you see? In a... difficult spot. I have so many nightmares. I don't feel right - every day is such a struggle. So many questions. Everything in my head keeps getting tangled up. I really need to tell you what happened in the foster home. How they..."

"Whoa, Jasper. What do you mean by pains? Are you talking about what happened

in Harderwijk in that room? When you ended up in hospital? Do you want to talk about that? Are you still dealing with it?"

"No, it's about the foster home, when I was with the Bakker family."

Menno briefly watched a passing seagull before giving a firm head shake. The name 'Bakker' was apparently as taboo for him as my own surname had been in that foster home.

"No, Jasper. There was an agreement with Greet that you wouldn't bring up the foster parents anymore - that we can't do anything about that, it's a closed chapter. Whatever supposedly happened there, I don't want to hear another word about it."

"But I sometimes have actual pain, low in my belly, um... down there. It doesn't look right to me. And there's so much going on - my thoughts feel so strange. I—"

Menno shook his head vigorously. His lank hair fell across his glasses momentarily. He swept it back with practiced ease and said decisively: "Greet briefed me thoroughly. There's a clear agreement. We don't discuss the Bakker family, your time there, or anything connected to it. We absolutely won't be revisiting that. You must move forward, look to the future. Dwelling on the past is pointless. You mustn't keep clinging to what's behind you."

"But so much happened there. I... I see... I have... I feel..." "Jasper, there you go again. I really don't want to hear it." "The coffee... for whom?" the waitress interrupted.

"For me," I heard myself say. "And the cola is for you." The waitress walked away.

Menno continued his point. "You keep harping on about those foster parents, Jasper. Endlessly harping. As if we could do anything about it. As if it's our fault you claim to be such a mess. Forget it. Move on, forget everything, forget the pain, just wipe it all clean. You should be focusing on school. Think about your future. That's what someone your age should be doing."

Of course Menno had a point too. I should be building a future. An education—yes, I wanted that as well. A club, a sports team,

some activities with others. A permanent home with kind people. But how? From a sleeping shelter? From temporary homes where I'd be ejected

after six weeks? And at what age should I begin? Menno's reaction slowly made me angrier. To me, he now sounded just like Greet.

"What future? How? And why won't anyone help me with this pain?" My voice now held real anger.

Menno responded unexpectedly sternly and irritated. "I'll explain this clearly, Jasper. Every time we arranged a doctor's appointment for you with our foundation's GP you never showed up to fill in the forms.

Always some excuse afterwards about being too scared to go. True or not? That's evading responsibility. We try arranging medical help yet you don't turn up, dismissing it as being afraid. Why can't you just see a doctor normally? Everyone your age manages that. You're not a little child anymore."

"Me? Did I say that?" I asked, surprised. I had no memory of any appointments being made. Nor could I explain why doctors frightened me. The thought alone unsettled me.

"I don't know... I don't understand it myself," I attempted.

"Exactly—you're the problem, Jasper. You don't even recognise this, like so many older teenagers. Unaware of the disruption you cause. Quick to blame others, eh? The foster parents—it must've been their fault. Oh yes, nice and easy. Maybe examine everything *you're* doing wrong first."

I sighed deeply, drank my last sip of coffee. A small boy in a cheerful blue tracksuit with a bright yellow emblem skateboarded happily past and briefly caught my eye. Wow—he looked like *Superman*. I was instantly captivated. Stirred. His cool clothes, that awesome skateboard, how confidently his gaze met mine from his world. So

completely how I wanted to be.

In a trance I stared after him along the canal, across the bridge, all the way to the church square where I could still glimpse him. My role model. My idol. He'd even looked at me like I was somebody real.

I transformed entirely. I refused to be that *stupid* idiot sitting at a café table with someone. Who was this man beside me? Drinking coffee—of all things. Did I drink that? Me? I hated coffee, never drank it, loathed terraces and despised such intensely grownup things as sitting on chairs making small talk. How pointless and dull. Nothing but adult nonsense. What was I doing here? I was nothing like the person sitting here—how ridiculous. I wanted those tracksuit colours. I wanted that skateboard so I could speed along the canal for everyone to see and think: *Hey, that Jasper is a proper boy with proper boy stuff, just like boys everywhere.* Then everything would match up again with who I was and how I felt.

From afar, I could hear Menno continuing to talk. I responded, but barely registered my automatic replies anymore. I was sinking away inside, disconnected from Menno entirely. I no longer existed as the person required to sit here. Me? I wasn't really on this terrace at all.

I wanted to become somebody. I wanted to climb Utrecht's Dom Tower and scream that I longed to be that boy.

"Jasper! Are you listening?"

I returned from my true reality to the bitter actuality of the café table.

"At least enjoy the weather," I suddenly heard Menno say from far away. "You've got to take life by the reins yourself - nobody will do it for you. You know, if everything gets sorted with the new centre, I might come and fetch you as early as next week and we'll have another drink here on this terrace. Then you can leave Utrecht. But I'm making no promises."

"I don't want a fucking thing from you, you stupid prick," I heard myself snarl angrily. "Everything's bullshit, my whole life's bullshit, I don't want anything

more from you. Don't even bother collecting me. I'm not going anywhere else. I'll stay right here in your shitty joke of a shelter with your worthless guardianship mob. My life's just nonsense, total crap, one big *fucking miserable disaster*. I hate you, Menno. You're just *a bloody wanker* with your whole *guardianship rubbish*. All your shitty grown-up nonsense, your disgusting fucking mess. I want to smash everything here to pieces. I hate this whole place. I hate everything, Menno, everything's a fucking catastrophe, I hate the entire world."

Oops. The crude vocabulary I'd recently picked up at Hoog Catharijne came spewing violently from my mouth. I was furious with myself, furious to be stuck here pretending to be someone that felt nothing like *my real self*. Furious at the world I was forced to inhabit.

Menno was dumbfounded. "You're seriously unhinged, Jasper. You're genuinely disturbed, did you know that? Swearing – that's all you can do. You flare up completely unprovoked like this. Out of nowhere. Is that normal?"

I shrugged. I couldn't care less about Menno's opinion. As he launched into his lengthy analysis of me:

"Oh I've heard about you alright, Jasper. The teaching placement incident – same explosive anger, such needless aggression. You've a violent streak. Hitting security guards, this foul-mouthed tantrum. Did you imagine you'd solve anything by kicking off? Where did you get the idea this was acceptable? Absolutely reasonless, completely conscience-free. Blazing anger out of nowhere. What precisely was our offence? My door's always open, I'm just trying to help you. What has guardianship done

wrong? Running away? That's your specialty. *Shirking*

responsibility – that's what we call it. These tantrums let you dodge accountability. Is this how you repay years of effort from the guardianship service? Let's hope your behaviour improves at this new shelter."

I barely heard his sermon now. My anger had vanished as abruptly as it came. I just stared empty-eyed at the canal. I wanted to buy a scooter. A beautiful, shiny scooter with black wheels and a handbrake. And I wanted to go fast. All the way to the church square. I smiled at Menno while believing myself to be eight years old. Except I wasn't. Yet

I truly was eight.

Without even looking at Menno, I simply stood up. Wandered along the canal. For a while, I remained eight years old without knowing my actual age. Repeatedly – as if surfacing from a dream – *somewhere inside myself* I would wake.

A week later, Menno did indeed take me to yet another temporary address – a homeless shelter in Amersfoort where I could stay for a maximum of six months pending a *permanent* solution. This specialised shelter employed social workers who collaborated as a team to create tailored individual plans for residents – both as guidance and a stepping stone toward another life. A life with more stability, structure and certainty. A life with *future* .

The new shelter occupied a vast listed building containing a veritable labyrinth of long, high-ceilinged corridors with numerous rooms. The premises were so expansive that entire families with multiple children could be temporarily accommodated. Everyone here had their own room and considerable freedom. My only obligations were attending a communal breakfast each morning – ensuring I'd rise on time – and a weekly residents' meeting where my presence was expected.

The meals were excellent. Moreover, you could prepare food at absolutely any hour, even deep into the night.

What bliss never to be hungry again. Like everyone here, my days were mine to spend – some residents worked paid jobs, others attended daytime activities or lingered in the large garden behind the building. I mostly wandered aimlessly nearby, passing long afternoons in a patch of woodland not far from the shelter, waiting for whatever might come next. Here, aided by specialist social workers, I would finally begin working on that future.

Yet one evening, lying atop the yellowed bedspread of my old-fashioned shelter room, I suddenly felt transported back to Harderwijk. Repetition compelled me to reconsider everything.

When discussing *my* future – which *me* did that entail? What was I to do with this life? Existence seemed to fling me in every direction, an aimless drifting in some vast ocean. To have any future, I needed to truly be *someone*. Yet I mostly felt like a rudderless vessel commanded by multiple captains who could never set a steady course. I existed, yet the sum of my fractured parts amounted to far less than who I should've become. My *self* comprised countless interchangeable broken shards of childhood, while outwardly I merely resembled an ordinary early adolescent.

The greater part of me still felt like a child urgently needing to finally live as one. True, I'd graduated secondary school. I knew some mathematics, chemistry and French. Held swimming certificates and could perform lifesaving rescues. I could cycle and survive alone in forests. None of this, I realised, reflected my inner truth. For who was I when my internal identity kept shifting beyond recognition? And – however contradictory – I desperately wanted boyhood normality while dreading the terrifying prospect of ever fully becoming it. Daring to remain a child now felt like the most dangerous act imaginable. Because

who would find it normal if I, now that my body was grown, wanted to play and tried to make friends?

A deeply buried and unreachable part within me never spoke. Had always remained a real animal that felt trained and simply continued to exist in that state. And with all this inside me, I had to play the grown-up and *pretend*. Carry on as if nothing was wrong, act like I'd had an ordinary upbringing. Not to be a nuisance to anyone. So that adults could never regain power over me again.

My future felt like perpetually concealing what was *happening* inside me. I had to maintain outward normality, so all that *stuff you don't even want to think about* could never resurface. Never truly recur.

But how could I know it wouldn't happen again? How did I know adults wouldn't recapture me? How could I be certain no one would ever...do terrible things to me again? Who would protect me if they discovered how messed up I felt inside?

I drew my bedroom curtains. Early dusk had become unbearable. Sealed off from the outside world with the light on, I lay back on the bed again. Staring at the high ceiling, I wondered why I had no choices in life.

My thoughts inevitably wandered back to the children's home, to my nursery group. I was back in the playroom, seeing those wooden building blocks. Scrawling wildly with wax crayons on giant sheets of paper. I'd never truly left - I belonged with the toddlers. That, there, was my real self. Whenever I saw toddlers anywhere, they instantly became children from my group.

Then I saw my toy farm animals, my plastic train set. And I knew this had been my life. I wanted playmates, yearned to run and laugh, longed to build dens and kick a ball around. I remembered Fabian and Ralf, my makeshift island, my Fort *Texas* and toy

knights, my beloved teddy bears

I missed so terribly, and saw my *Jaspers Laantje* again. All this remained my actual existence. Time had completely stood still.

In 1981, after nearly nineteen years on earth, I was still both a baby and simultaneously two years old, barely three. Yet also freshly six and almost nine, well over eleven, sometimes thirteen, fifteen or perhaps even seventeen. What seemed impossible and invisible to others had manifested in me. I'd remained a child of every conceivable age.

But most intensely I felt seven years old. Seven-year-olds can feel extraordinarily vulnerable, I knew. To protect my *seven-year-old self*, I needed to appear big and strong. And I was tall. I *seemed* tall. No one would detect the hidden

traces of glue within the deep fractures between all those little *Jaspers* that constituted who I was. Nobody knew about the secret glue tube I unconsciously used daily to deceive the outside world. By pretending I was already grown up.

Unbeknownst even to myself, I was walking around with one of the most severe psychiatric disorders, yet could still shift between different parts within me. Being cheerful, laughing effortlessly as if nothing terrible had ever happened. I could still make wild plans or, seemingly without any fear, chat with all sorts of adults. I could travel and believe I could take on the world.

In every way, I now began to appear normal and mature on the surface. I drank my first beer because I was grown up. Rough and loud, I played records by *The Rolling Stones* and *The Ramones*. Turns out I was strong – ha, I could bend a bicycle frame with my bare hands. Yes, big and strong, that's what I was.

And here in the shelter, I even drew up a future plan. Oh really? Truly? Did I still have a future then?

The summer of 1981 passed, and dusk began arriving earlier each day. And as the world outside my closed curtains grew progressively darker, something intensely vivid emerged in my thoughts.

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On a solitary, deserted island surrounded by a vast raging ocean—yet still my only fixed beacon, the silver lining of my life—I suddenly saw my teddy bear Bimbam waving affectionately at me from a large ship built of Lego bricks, accompanied by a little pink flying elephant.

Tears welled in my eyes as I watched him finally returning to my island. How he landed in my harbour built of wooden blocks. He came toward me, walking past the little dike-

house along the safe embankment. And then I gathered him in my arms. I snuggled close, and together we watched the ocean's raging waves.

With his soft stuffed paw, he tenderly touched me, and when I gazed into

his round green glass eyes, he whispered comfort into my ear: "Hush now... I know all about the witches... everything about *Gipsy Boy*."

For a moment I looked at him in surprise, then pressed myself closer against his soft plush body. As the wind picked up and waves crashed violently against the dike, Bimbam told me what I needed to hear.

"My dear child, I know everything about you and the *Two-Witch*. And yet I find nothing too terrible, nothing at all. I am with you now, I, your very own Bimbam. I will always take care of you,

forever. I will always be here for you. Am I not your mummy?"

Sobbing, I burrowed deep into the arms of my dearest teddy bear.
Now I would never be alone again.

The boundary of time had dissolved. In the dim glow of the lighthouse, high above the waves, the face of my own mother suddenly appeared. Bimbam and I listened in wonder as her familiar voice called clearly to us from afar, rising above the roar of the ocean.

"Jasper! My Jasper, my child! Come to the *Two-Witch* . My boy, come now, / will look after you."

An immense wave of sorrow crashed over me as I recognised that coaxing voice so plainly. But this time, I turned away. Without looking back, I walked hand in hand with Bimbam deeper into my island.

AFTERWORD

Although the entire series of traumatic events from my childhood form one continuous narrative, certain aspects remain impossible to describe.

It concerns absence—all that was *never* there in the first place. Such emptiness, the profound loss and that loneliness cannot be described, even in a million sentences. What it truly means when no one ever speaks to you, when you don't genuinely exist anywhere – not even within yourself. Everything that was missed, never being allowed to feel like a child – these things defy description yet perhaps play the most pivotal role within the disorders that emerged in me from all that violence and fractured relationships.

It's evident that over the past forty years, prolonged physical and psychological violence against children as a form of abuse – unlike sexual abuse – has not been taken seriously by police, judiciary and other government institutions. Even within specialist mental healthcare, where you'd expect extensive knowledge

about the consequences of child abuse, physical and psychological violence against children turned

out to be poorly understood and above all, taboo. Speaking out about misconduct within foster care and Youth Services was forbidden.

Child Protection and Youth Services were – much like the Catholic Church prior to the abuse scandals exposed in the 1990s – regarded as unquestionably pure institutions where nothing could ever go wrong.

I was told to stay silent and above all be grateful. And what had been done to me regarding physical and psychological abuse was quickly dismissed everywhere as ‘my own fault’. Issues related to being a ‘foster child’ – such as loyalty conflicts and attachment disorders stemming from deliberate detachment and alienation – were unknown and undiscussed.

A telling indication of how foster children were perceived – as deeply inferior creatures – occurred in 1986 when I heard from

official government representatives that ‘...all foster children are criminals’. Foster children were additionally described as ‘the rubbish of child protection’.

In 1993, I was profoundly shaken and utterly devastated by the murder of toddler James Bulger in England. What followed were years of traumatic re-experiencing. I created hundreds of paintings, wrote dozens of poems and songs, and in 1996 began talk therapy for the first time.

In subsequent years, I was diagnosed with multiple psychiatric disorders including chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), personality disorder NOS, dissociative identity disorder (DID), and reactive attachment disorder.

It also became clear that I struggled with severe issues regarding sexuality and sexual orientation (*trauma sexuality*) as well as

exhibiting almost all symptoms associated with transgender distress.

The therapy I underwent established a foundation for learning to speak with adults and viewing them differently. The revelation that someone actually wanted to listen to me broke through. Therapy taught me to reflect on what was happening internally. Yet I never received treatment genuinely tailored to my needs. There was only ever what's termed 'covering therapy', focused solely on temporary stabilisation.

It wasn't about processing trauma or learning skills to cope with triggers and flashbacks, navigating time or managing the disparate parts within myself. The evident violence within youth care – particularly perpetrated by female offenders – always remained undiscussed, as did religious oppression. Therapists systematically *denied* these realities.

Consequences inevitably followed. Alongside daily flashbacks and heavy triggering, I made several suicide attempts, had a brief psychiatric hospitalisation, and accumulated further

traumatic experiences. From late adolescence onward, I endured years of sexual abuse including one instance of severe physical assault. Setting life goals became problematic, and though I managed volunteer work intermittently, paid employment proved impossible. For long stretches I lived in profound social isolation, developing an autoimmune disease around age thirty that persisted for decades. Prolonged flashbacks also led to self-injury severely damaging my metabolism, leaving me permanently dependent on a strict diet.

In early 2000 – aged thirty-eight – after four years of talk therapy, I was labelled 'untreatable' and left to figure everything out alone. Feeling worthless and discarded, within a year most symptoms worsened dramatically.

The abuse and humiliation in foster care had been reported in 1979 to Greet and in 1980 to Menno – both then serving as

officials for the child

abuse hotline AMK (General Reporting Centre for Child Abuse, established 1972).

In 1994, the foster home abuse was again brought to Youth Services (Foundation for Youth and Family) with requests for judicial investigation, acknowledgement and apology. No response came beyond a cold, harsh dismissal: “Those were our legal predecessors – child protection was never responsible for your childhood.”

Immediately after these rejections, still within the statute of limitations, I filed an official complaint with Utrecht’s public prosecutor against my foster parents. This included an extensive witness statement from my brother Gert detailing the systemic violence he’d observed.

The prosecutor dismissively closed the case within two weeks, deeming it too insignificant to investigate. A so-called ‘minor offence’, article 41 grounds for dismissal among

insiders. No investigations occurred, consequently the foster parents were never confronted.

Only twenty-three years later in 2018, following establishment of the *Commission for Research on Violence in Youth Care* led by Professor Mischa de Winter, was I first offered victim-perpetrator mediation.

Initial attempts focused on facilitating dialogue with either the foster parents or Greet from Youth Interests Foundation – thwarted by issues like advanced age and untraceability.

Mediation ultimately proceeded with representatives from Dutch Youth Services.

After completing professionally supported restorative mediation, Dutch Youth Services publicly acknowledged all traumatic events in foster care along with their lifelong consequences.

After nearly forty years, foster parents were formally recognised as perpetrators for the first time, with Youth Services as moral accomplices. They conceded intervention should've occurred decades prior, and that psychological/medical care had been deliberately withheld to suppress awareness of misconduct.

My story ends with hope and recovery. Hope that no child in the Netherlands will ever have to experience what I endured - both with my biological parents and within youth care.

Also the hope that my story fosters better understanding for all severely traumatised people struggling with complex psychological or psychiatric issues, who are swiftly judged or even met with aggression by their environment. Too often the human aspect is forgotten, as people only see the surface and draw hasty conclusions. Too often people only see what they want to see in someone.

Finally, I hope to recover further, precisely because it so often feels like my foster parents ultimately won their struggle. The trauma from my childhood remains current and present in my daily life. Despite my fourteen-year fruitless search for specialised DID treatment, I keep looking for new therapy. There's finally some support available through the Social Support Act. I've even tentatively made some future plans.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgement is vital for victims like Jasper. Now, decades too late, he has finally received it. The Preliminary Commission on Violence in Youth Care interviewed Jasper about his past. Based partly on his testimony, the De Winter Committee produced its report "Insufficiently Protected: Violence in Dutch Youth Care from 1945 to the Present". In 2019, the Rutte cabinet responded: "This

violence should never have

occurred. Apologies, acknowledgement, government help and support for these victims are warranted." Thus Jasper's story contributes to preventing new victims.

The apology letters from the youth care institution and the Child Protection Board that Jasper finally received in 2018 and 2020 confirm this view and its value. They have been appended to this book.

Publisher Tobi Vroegh has made it their mission to give a platform to stories like Jasper's, however distressing and confronting they may be to read. Jasper wrote this under a pseudonym because he doesn't want his past to hinder his future any further. We thank him for the courage to commit his story to paper and entrust it to the world.

Team Tobi Vroegh

Child Protection

Board

Ministry of Justice and Security

Date: 18 March 2020

Subject: Sincere

Apology

Dear Mr XXXXX, dear XXXXX,

When we first met, you told me your remarkable life story. I was shocked. That something like this could have happened to you as a child in the Netherlands. Growing up in a foster home where child abuse occurred goes completely against the natural order.

The suffering that has resulted over the years is visible and evident in you.

In addition to being shocked, I was grateful that I'd invited you for a personal conversation. So I could listen directly, be stunned, horrified, understand what responsibility the Child Protection Board (RvdK) has and had in contributing to children's safe upbringing, and what the consequences can be when this goes wrong.

No files remain from the period when the Board was involved in your life. We can no longer determine what was done, what was neglected, what was said, what was forgotten, and by whom. All we have is your memory - a shocking account of how Board staff behaved at certain moments. This would be unacceptable in 2020 and unimaginable now, and shouldn't have happened in the twentieth century either. For this, I therefore offer you my sincere apologies on behalf of the Board.

Through the De Winter Committee report, more insight has been gained into the misconduct that occurred in the

past within youth care. There's also greater awareness of the victims and their needs for acknowledgement and concrete help they require. This also came up during our conversations. I've tried connecting you with available forms of support, knowing this isn't simple.

I want to thank you for the conversations we were able to have, as they provide profound reflection on our responsibility toward children. I hope our talks also help you with processing your experiences, and I wish you all the best.

Yours sincerely,

Director of the Child Protection Board

XXXXXX. XXXXX

23-02-1962

13 September 2018

Subject:

Acknowledgement and Apologies for Abuse

Dear XXXXX,

Over recent months, accompanied by XXXXX XXXXX from Perspective Restorative Mediation and your support person XXXXX XXXXX, we've spoken with you several times about the severe abuse you suffered in the foster home where you lived at the time.

The abuse is almost indescribable, but certainly included: enduring years of extreme violence; frequent beatings with various objects, particularly targeting genitals; continuous humiliation; severe emotional and physical neglect involving prolonged isolation. These were very intense conversations where you gave us some impression of the horrors you underwent in foster care and the enormous consequences this abuse has had on your life.

Consequences that are impossible to fully comprehend: identity problems, emotional difficulties, issues with social relationships and sexuality, daily re-experiencing of the violence and humiliations by your foster parents. It led to a life of complete isolation, never feeling at home anywhere, being unable to hold paid employment, problems defining life goals, and being unable to go outside due to various triggers.

Acknowledgement and apologies

Your life story is marked by prolonged, intensive and utterly reprehensible abuse. Even then, systematic abuse

was punishable. Sadly, no one helped you at the time. You will suffer the consequences of all these events in foster care for the rest of your life.

You've since connected with Perspective Restorative Mediation, we've been able to speak with you, and from our current responsibility for youth care and from our hearts, we can now say:

XXXXX, you are a victim of abuse - this was never your fault, it should never have happened!

Your foster parents were the perpetrators, the actual abusers. The youth care sector at the time, including child protection and guardianship institutions, share responsibility for these utterly reprehensible circumstances. They should have provided supervision, offered guidance, intervened when necessary. Your foster parents, who severely abused you, should have been stopped, and you should have been placed elsewhere. In this sense, the institutions were morally complicit. Despite multiple signals and desperate requests for intervention—where stepping in was absolutely warranted—you were abandoned to your fate in that horrific foster home.

Investigations by the Samson Committee and the De Winter Committee reveal how many children in institutions and foster homes suffered sexual abuse and violence in the past. Contemporary youth care acknowledges this suffering, recognises that it occurred, and offers heartfelt apologies. Terrible things happened historically, things that should never have been allowed!

Continuation

The (limited) support available to you afterward—over nearly forty years—proved insufficient. It was never oriented toward trauma processing or teaching you skills and resilience to face

the future. Consequently, your social isolation persisted. Appropriate help tailored to your complex identity issues remains urgently needed yet still unattainable. It's been a fraught search, with GPs and other carers willing to refer you but none knowing where to direct you.

Where possible, we're cooperating with efforts that could assist you in processing this past. We've connected you with Dutch Victim Support, which also handles cases for the De Winter

Committee. They believe

they can guide you further, referring you to specialised trauma services. They'll maintain contact to ensure you're on the right care path.

A joint mediation report has been prepared by Perspective Restorative Mediation, which you can use to explain your lifestyle and its background to others. Additionally, in collaboration with the De Winter Committee, Dutch Youth Services will strive to publicise the research findings nationally—highlighting the suffering inflicted on countless children through abuse and the vital importance of acknowledging it.

We wish you all the best that life can offer.

Yours sincerely,

Annet van Zon

Chair of the Executive Board
Board Member, Dutch Youth Services