

Frontal attack

We are cycling wide. Lisa and Marijke on the inside, and Kasper and I almost in the middle of the road. A formation of four.

We approach the bench that stands roughly at our dividing line, where the girls turn right and we turn left. To the right leads straight into the world of white villas and endless ornamental gardens, a world largely unknown to us. With driveways that are impossible to film. Estates into which our two houses would be swallowed up without any difficulty. We have only cycled through that posh neighborhood once, and we wondered then who on earth could possibly live behind those hedges and gates.

Now we know that. Lisa and Marijke live there.

The girls have invited us over to their place for a drink in the garden quite often. Or perhaps in the back kitchen? But we have always politely declined. Especially when another girl from that part of the world called us "those two cité boys." Which we aren't, because technically speaking we live outside the city limits, in a real village (although even there my neighborhood is considered "a cité" by the people from the Center...). Lisa is more likely to call us "the country boys," if she isn't already calling us "the heartbreakers," of course.

Lisa then stops at the bench. "Shall we sit down for a bit?" she asks, but it is more of a decision she has made for us.

"It's going to rain heavily any minute now," I say, looking dejectedly at the jet-black clouds. Cloud-reading is my thing. I can often predict to within a few seconds when it is going to start raining.

"We'll already be home by then," laughs Marijke, "but you really can come to my house, wait until the rain passes... With a pancake or a hot chocolate?"

We laugh. Kasper and I really must do that one day.

So we sit down on the bench. In the same formation as just now on the road. We often have to wave to fellow students cycling past. Whole throngs of girls in skirts or groups of boys, and of course the mixed formations too. Wednesday at noon offers a cycling spectacle.

It is already starting to rain lightly. Just a harbinger, that much is clear. Kasper and I get back on our bikes while we chat a bit more. About music this time, about the sensation from England, according to Lisa's brother, a mega-band called "Pink Floyd".

"Psychedelic rock! That's really something for you!" she says to me. "You're going to love that!"

I am not yet familiar with that term or that music. But I intend to change that by next Wednesday. Besides being an avid reader and 'writer', I surely also have a reputation to uphold as a 'music connoisseur'. Especially since I made the little devils dance on the table to the tune of "School". Although "Et si tu n'existais pas" may have caused a slight dent in my solid reputation among my classmates?

We want to say goodbye. As a rule, we do that with a kiss on the cheek. Marijke usually gets that first from Kasper, and Lisa from me. Then Kasper does the same for Lisa, and I do the same for Marijke.

But today Lisa clearly has other plans. Or is it just a sudden impulse? She walks up to me and then playfully rings my bicycle bell... after which she goes to Kasper and hugs him. She brings her mouth close to his now, she does so very sensually... and then she says: "Kiss me, Kasper!"

Marijke and I stand rooted to the spot. No idea how many seconds. Not very long, that's for sure. Because Kasper doesn't react the way Lisa might have imagined. He very deliberately

avoids her mouth, gives a faint smile, and then says: "Don't be silly, Lisa." He says it softly, but it hits like a bolt of lightning.

At that very moment, incidentally, the heavens open. It suddenly starts pouring. Marijke and I look at each other. It is abundantly clear that Marijke was unaware of this 'plan'.

It is also abundantly clear that Lisa is devastated. She is reacting angrily. I might have expected her to try to avoid losing face with a witty remark, especially in front of her best friend. But she is at a loss regarding what just happened. Kasper was probably also too surprised to react in his typical Kasper way, with a nice joke, and that makes it extra painful for Lisa. Right?

"Drive home fast, you two!" she says wryly. "Then you can put on nice dry clothes later... cozy together!"

Lisa cycles away. Without further ado.

Marijke looks at us and says apologetically: "I don't understand any of it..."

I give her a little kiss on her cheek. Kasper does the same.

"See you on Wednesday, I hope?" she asks.

"Of course!" I say. "See you Wednesday, Marijke!"

Kasper and I battle the lashing rain for nearly another half hour. We say little, but that could also be due to the awful weather.

"Not nice!" says Kasper at last.

"No, not very nice!" I answer.

"I thought that Lisa... I always thought that she was into you!"

I squint my eyes against the heavy rain. "I don't understand any of it..." I shout into the wind.

"You don't understand anything about girls anyway!"

"And you?" I call out. "Have you ever come closer to a kiss from a girl?"

He is driving extra fast now. "Pretender!" he shouts.

When he is finally overtaken, he says: "Lisa is really angry, I think..."

"She feels insulted..."

He looks at me. "What should I have done? Kissed her, perhaps?"

"I'll beat you to a pulp!" I threaten, but I say it with a smile. "Soon we'll all just pretend nothing happened... you'll see!"

"If the girl expert says so..." Kasper replies.

Kasper then stays at my house waiting until the nasty weather rushes past. And yes, we do indeed put on dry clothes. And yes, we have no trouble at all making it cozy.

Two Reverend Fathers

"Pass, Benji! Now...!" Sander shouts.

He gestures with both hands in the air for me to pass the ball to him now; he's standing free in front of the opposing goal. I want to do it, but as always, I react a little too late with the ball at my feet. I'm not a real football player. Although I always throw myself into the fray during our daily football games on the playground. I'm very quick at free running, and I'm perhaps the most adept at slaloming between all those moving obstacles on the overcrowded playground during lunch break. That's true, but shooting itself isn't my thing. Sander swears. Kasper laughs and gives me a pat on the back. With Kasper on our team, we're sure to win almost every match.

The most annoying obstacles during those matches are the big boys from the older years, those clowns from Senior High. They're allowed to hang around the sports track during breaks. The playground is actually for the "little ones" from Junior High, so that's us. But those idiots love to sabotage our game on the way to the sports fields. They'll suddenly put a big foot on our ball and push us away laughing when we try to regain it in anger. Some even shoot the ball as far as they can. We hate that.

"The next asshole who puts his foot on the ball..." I say angrily after yet another tease from the big boys.

"Me too!" says Sander. "I'll shoot him up in the air! I'll break his leg!" Sander is one of the craziest daredevils in my class. There's very little he won't do. Especially when you tell him he won't...

"Meeh , easy..." Kasper smiles, "just look around you a bit better, just avoid those clowns... you shouldn't just look at the ball, you should look at who is where..." He gives us good advice and of course he is right.

But it's always the same big boys who target us. Me, especially. I think they're fifth-graders. There's a big blond guy who regularly bumps into me. Literally, because he deliberately bumps into me in the hallway and on the playground, and then says something vulgar that makes his friends laugh out loud. Usually something like "trutteke" or "little faggot ". He's also the one who regularly steps on the ball on the playground when I'm about to pass. I've told Kasper I'll kick him next time.

Last week, Kasper was home sick. That was the signal for that blond bully to terrorize me. During an afternoon game, I was roughly knocked off the ball by two big boys, the blond one and his buddy. I tripped and landed on the ground.

"Oh, look what you did!" the blonde laughed at his companion. "You hurt her! Our poor little trutteke !"

"Oh, sorry, darling! Where's the pain?" the other responds.

I'm quickly back on my feet. I push the blonde away when he tries to put his hand on my shoulder. Sander is already standing next to me and he snaps, "Get off, you idiots ! Leave us alone, you have no business being here!"

" Meeh , you have more than one sweetheart, I see!" laughs the blonde.

"You're welcome to come play with us sometime," the other one says to me. "If you're good, that is..."

"If you're nice, you can get some sweet presents," laughs the blonde, then puts his thumb in his mouth.

Sander and two other classmates then pull me away. The match is over for the day. "Assholes!" Sander shouts after the loudly laughing bullies.

Kasper is back today. He's already scored twice, but the match remains exciting. I saw that the blonde and his friends have already walked to the sports track. Good for us, but also good for them, because I'm prepared to deliver a deadly kick like I did back in the fifth grade playground. Kasper knows about my plan and wanted me to promise not to do it. His "Filiberke !" was telling. But I didn't promise him anything. I told him that Sander and a few others will do the same if...

We continue playing. I give it my all. I actually score. From a pass from Kasper, I just have to push the ball in: 4-2 to us.

A few seconds later, I receive another sublime cross from Kasper... I'm about to score again... but then, out of nowhere, a heavy foot thuds down on the ball... I see only that shoe... unfortunately, at that moment, I don't see that it's a fancy shoe... not an ordinary 'boy's shoe'...

My vision goes black. Or rather, red? I don't hesitate for a second and execute my plan. I give the shoe, or rather the leg just above it, a hard kick. And it hits home. I hear a loud, harsh "Ouch !" I want to look up at the owner of that shoe, but I don't have time... I feel a hard blow to the head and I'm sent flying to the asphalt. I lie there, dazed, for about three seconds. I blurrily see everyone around me, unable to distinguish who is who, staring at me... I scramble to my feet, touch my forehead with my hand, see blood on my hand, see blood dripping onto the ground too... and then I spin completely and fall back to the ground. I lie there, groggy.

I hear Kasper yelling at the perpetrator. He's with me a few seconds later, I'm literally knocked out. I recognize Sander too. And now I recognize the perpetrator too... It's Sleutelbos! The prefect of the boarding school, and also the strictest teacher and supervisor at our school. He's notorious for often smacking the students with his heavy bunch of keys. In the hallways, on the playground, wherever he thinks we're being too wild and boisterous. That smack has been passed down through generations. Many students and alumni can attest to that. I've had the privilege of feeling it a few times. But this time, it wasn't just a smack; it was a hard blow. Everyone was shocked, including Sleutelbos himself. He probably lashed out instinctively after that painful, powerful kick from me. Sander is furious; he stands up to Sleutelbos and says, "Do you want to bash his head in? Are you crazy?" He forgets all distance. I've never heard anyone say something like that to Sleutelbos. Kasper has come to sit next to me, his arm around me, and he's wiping the blood from my forehead with a handkerchief. He seems in shock.

Sleutelbos then wants to help me up, but I refuse to take his hand. Kasper says rudely, "We'll do that!" Meanwhile, the entire playground surrounds us. I hear the voice of another tutor. He gives orders, and then Kasper and Sander lead me inside. I just catch a glimpse of the Reverend Principal and Sleutelbos, who is also a Reverend Father, talking to each other. I can't hear what they're saying, but I can see they don't look particularly happy.

I spend the afternoon in the sickbay, where I have to rest in the semi-darkness. Meanwhile, the nurse has examined me. He doesn't think I have a concussion, but he advises me to stay home tomorrow and, if necessary, to call the doctor if I have a headache.

The Reverend Principal himself comes to pay me a quick visit. He asks, genuinely concerned, if I'm still feeling dizzy. I answer just as sincerely that I'm feeling okay again. I ask him if I can go back to my classroom. He demands that I stay in the sickbay for another lesson.

"Reverend Maertens is asking how you are," says the principal. He doesn't call him Sleutelbos, of course. "He wants to talk to you tomorrow or so..."

I nod. I can understand that his outburst was an unintentional reaction. But I also realize that Kasper and Sander are right, that I could just as well have been in the hospital. Sander even thought I could have been dead, but that's undoubtedly a Sander-style exaggeration.

"You shouldn't have kicked him, Benjamin!" the principal says sternly.

"I know..." I answer, "but I thought that..."

"That it was one of those big louts?"

I nod again.

"You'll apologize tomorrow, I can assume that, right?"

"Yes, sir..." I say, but I want to follow it up with a "but"...

"Reverend Maertens is open to a good conversation with you, he understands the misunderstanding and he also feels..."

"Guilty?" I say what I'm thinking at that moment.

He smiles now. "He's also very sorry. Talk to him about it." Then he asks very seriously, "Do you want me to talk to your parents about this, Benjamin?"

I shake my head emphatically. Of course, this isn't an option. My mom would definitely be mad at Sleutelbos, but she'd blame me. Kicking a teacher? My dad would punish me severely. Not an option at all!

"I hit my head on the faucet... that's actually happened before!" I smile.

The Reverend Principal sighs. "I don't like those little lies... We can't do that, Benjamin! White lies often turn into real lies... and that's how terrible things sometimes remain hidden..." He looks genuinely worried now. He hesitates.

"But otherwise I will be punished very severely at home, sir..."

He still seems to hesitate. I count a lot of instances. Then he says, "Tell your mom or dad a slightly... softened version of the truth... Tell them about the kick and the misunderstanding... and also about the slap and the misunderstanding... Can you do that?"

"I can do that, sir! To my mom... I never talk to my dad."

He's looking at me intently now. "If your mom... wants to come talk to me, she's always welcome. I'll talk to her."

I nod again. I can't suppress a sigh.

"And now you're going to rest! Do you want me to take you home later?"

"I can definitely ride a bike, sir. My friend rides with me. Always."

"And, Benjamin..." He shakes his head at me. "Don't let that happen again! You're not going to kick any of those big boys, understand?"

"But..."

"You heard me, Benjamin! When you talk to Reverend Maertens tomorrow, tell him about the bullying from these boys... I'm sure they won't bother you anymore after that..."

I got the message. I suddenly see, albeit a bit hazily, that we may have gained a powerful ally today.

"Rest now!" he says, opening the door.

"Thank you, sir, I'll..." But he's already closed the door behind him. It's almost dark in the room now. I close my eyes and imagine how wonderful and undisturbed we'll be able to play football on the playground in the coming weeks.

The icy heights of Mont Blanc

Kasper's been lying with his head on my shoulder for a while. He's more or less asleep. As much as the shaking of the bus allows. Dikke Bus, our driver, dimmed the lights a while ago. A reading lamp still burns here and there. The music, cheerful and loud just moments ago, has also given way to relative silence. The bus is too loud for me; I can't fall asleep. Kasper doesn't seem to mind, especially after he's put his arm around me and turned completely towards me. I think he thinks we're at home in bed...

Suddenly, a far-too-awake face appears just above the seats in front of us. A broad grin follows. "Meeh ! Lovebirds ! Am I interrupting, Benji?" And then a far-too-loud laugh.

"You always are, Sander!" I say.

"That's going to be a romantic trip!" he laughs. He says something to the boy next to him. His face immediately pops up too. And the boys across from us are now awake too.

"Look!" laughs one of our neighbors. "A love nest! How sweet!"

"I think you sleep together in the same bed at home..." Sander says extra loudly.

Kasper wakes up now. The smiling faces are right in his sights. He sits up and says sleepily, "Sander, you idiot... go to sleep!"

"I never sleep on the bus or train; I don't want to miss any of the scenery!" he bellows. Everyone around us laughs.

Kasper then reacts as only he can. "Sleep tight, you clowns!" he says, pulling the two travel blankets completely over his and my head, and clearly turning completely towards me. He hugs me and whispers in my ear: " Dobranoc !"

I have to laugh. In the safe darkness, I stroke his neck and wish him " Dobranoc !" too. In the background, I hear a whistling concert and some remarks, most likely lewd and therefore funny.

We've been really looking forward to this trip. Ten days in faraway Switzerland. To the real mountains of Europe. An exciting prospect, especially for Kasper and me. Unlike many of our more affluent classmates, we've never traveled very far. I've been to Luxembourg often, visiting my uncle who lives there, but compared to the mountains we're about to see, they're just small hills, of course. We're even going on a trip to Mont Blanc in France. The roof of Europe. Kasper himself has never really been on a trip, so he's also really looking forward to this adventure. We'll just accept the fact that we'll have to share this with many boys from the second year of high school. In case of emergency, we'll just duck under the covers...

We barely know most of the students. So, for now, we're all forming class groups. That means we, Kasper and I, are saddled with the most boisterous little rooster. Sander, of course. We don't know most of the teachers either. The Great Leader is a priest we don't learn from. He looks quite stern. His lieutenants are two PE teachers, one of whom is the infamous belly-twirler, and the other we don't know. Luckily, there's Dikke Bus, our driver and tour guide. We've known him from a few class trips. He's undoubtedly the funniest and most beloved bus driver in our part of the world. He usually does the talking, but he's also a good listener. Most of the boys see him as a kind of dad, the one you go to when you have a problem or when you're not feeling so happy. That's what dads are for, I've been told.

For some reason, Dikke Bus has a soft spot for the two of us. It's been that way since previous school trips. We're usually allowed to sit next to him, and he often reserves a spot for us at the table or by the campfire. Sander, of course, squeezes in there too, without an invitation, but we've long since stopped being surprised. Quite a few students get jealous, because

everyone wants to hear Dikke Bus's jokes and pranks (less so Sander's) as close as possible. The teachers think Dikke Bus should sit at their separate table during meals, but that almost never happens. He always sits at one of the long tables, surrounded by all his eager boys. That's also the table where there's a constant roar of laughter. Except when the meal begins, because then, of course, the Great Leader prays first, and then we have to eat in silence. Only after dessert do things lighten up a bit. Our fun table doesn't always adhere to that strict monastic rule, so Dikke Bus sometimes has to apologize afterward.

"Guys..." he whispers, "I have a box full of apologies ... they could use a few more... when it's empty, I'll just fill it up again!"

All the boys around him then laugh loudly. He responds with, "Oops! That's one less apology!"

The first day was wonderful. We strolled through the green valleys, singing and whistling. Kasper and I (and Sander too) were usually right next to Dikke Bus. Dikke Bus launched the most successful, hilarious joke of the trip that very first day. From then on, it would become our class's, and perhaps even our school's, go-to joke, at every opportunity... Kasper and I actually already knew this joke because we'd heard Gianni tell it once. But we didn't tell Dikke Bus that.

"The girl then asks her sweetheart: tell me exactly how you think of me!" says Dikke Bus in a feigned, delicate voice.

Of course, we all hang on his lips.

"The boy says: if you really want to know..." he continues in a coarser voice, "...usually with my right hand!"

Everyone's laughing wildly. I even catch the two PE teachers smiling. The Big Leader isn't joining us, so that saves Dikke Bus an apology.

The joke spread like wildfire, and that same evening we heard quite a few variations. Sander, of course, with, "Don't think too hard about each other, lovebirds ! Tomorrow's going to be a tough day!" And another version from further down in the dormitory: "Who's left-handed? When you get tired, do you think with your right hand?"

But that same evening, the mountains immediately cast a chilly shadow over those first sunny days of vacation. At least for Kasper and me.

We sleep in bunk beds in the dormitory. Kasper chose one of the furthest corners for us. He sleeps on top, and I sleep on the bottom. We don't have any direct sleeping neighbors, unlike many other bunk beds. Kasper was the first to explore the dormitory, and he chose this quiet corner for us. He's clearly proud of it. And I'm proud of him.

But that first evening isn't pleasant. We're all exhausted, of course, from that long bus ride, during which some of us didn't sleep a wink, and from the first long hike through the hills. At the table, we were still kept awake by the stories of Dikke Bus, but once we'd washed up at the sinks and were in our underwear or pajamas in the now-cold dormitory, there wasn't much time for long chats and jokes. Everyone was completely exhausted . Some immediately crawled under the covers, and here and there, half or full bunk beds were already humming after five minutes. Sander was still wide awake, and he joined me on the bottom bunk, laughing in his Sander way: " Meeh , they've found the coziest corner again, the lovebirds !"

Kasper is also sitting downstairs on my bed and he answers, of course, in his Kasper style:

"Will you come and lie down with me soon, Sanderke ?"

"You've probably thought about that... before?" Sander jokes. And then he whispers, "Anyone fancy a drink ? I've got some... in my thermos!" He's chuckling now. Apparently, he's filled his water bottle with something strong at home. He'd already announced it last week, even though the letter to our parents clearly stated that anyone caught 'drunk' would be sent home immediately.

Kasper and I thank him festively. "I wouldn't do that, Sander," I say seriously.

"Pour it into something and save it for the last evening!" suggests Kasper.

"Hmm ... maybe a good idea!" yawns Sander. "Firewater for the campfire!"

"Tomorrow we'll have a campfire too..." I say. Or maybe it's the devil in me saying this.

"I'm saving half of it in my thermos... for tomorrow! Good night , babes!" Sander says, and he goes to bed. Finally.

Kasper then makes a move to crawl upstairs. But first, he sits close to me and whispers, "Am I coming down, or are you coming up?"

I look at him, slightly surprised. "Now?" I ask with a smile.

"No, not now... In a little while, in about half an hour..."

"Are you crazy?" I whisper. "Can we do this?"

"No? Why not? We're not going to sleep apart all night... are we?" He sounds surprised himself now.

"But... what about in the morning... when everyone wakes up?"

"Silly! We always wake up early, come on..." he smiles. "Then you just hop back downstairs..."

I'm laughing now: "You've already decided where we're sleeping? Upstairs, then? And I'll have to move twice?"

He laughs too. "You're the fastest!"

I don't think this is a good idea, or rather... I think this is a wonderful idea, but I'm a little afraid that someone, probably Sander, will surprise us at night or very early in the morning... I tell Kasper.

"Really? You're a wimp !"

"Come lie down here for a bit, with me... and then we'll sleep safely separately, what do you think?" I can see he's not happy about this at all. "We're always together, Kasper, these few days here... we'll still have half the summer..."

"Don't you want me to hold you to fall asleep?" he asks, surprisingly irritated.

"Pipo! Of course I'd love to!" I say a little too loudly.

He lies down next to me now and, without saying a word, does what he always does when we sleep together: snuggles close to me and puts his arm around me.

I sigh. "You're really crazy..." I say, "and you're really hot too..."

He caresses me under the covers.

I sigh again. "Pipo!" I whisper again.

Then suddenly, from the darkness, a familiar voice resounds. Much too loud. "Are you sleeping on top or on the bottom, darlings? Hands above the sheets!" And then, of course, Sander chuckles. A few other boys laugh as well.

Another voice addresses Sander: "Are you thinking again, Sander?" More laughter erupts. But then the hilarity quickly fades, and exhaustion takes over.

I turn to Kasper now. I stroke his hair and face briefly. "You see... he's going to come and bother us sooner or later, you know him..."

Kasper sighs deeply. "I'll drown that idiot in a river somewhere tomorrow!"

"Go upstairs now..." I urge, "we can't be stupid..."

"Come upstairs to me... just for a minute?"

I shake my head. "No, Kasper, come on... Go upstairs and sleep now."

He's clearly a little pissed off as he climbs up. "If you really don't want to..." he says, disappointed.

"That's not how it is ! You know that very well!" I say quietly. "I'll wake you up very early tomorrow, just wait... Think of the snowy mountains tomorrow... and the rivers..."

"Yep!" is his only response.

I feel a bit orphaned. A bit sad, too. Confused, actually. Is Kasper really mad at me? He must understand... isn't he afraid of what others say? Am I really a scaredy-cat ? I consider

climbing up for a few seconds... Then I try really hard to think of those snow-capped peaks and those rushing rivers of tomorrow, which I've been looking forward to so much. But I can't, and I notice I've really started counting...

"Wake up, sleepyhead!" Kasper shakes me awake and roughly pulls the covers away. I wake up from what appears to be a long, deep sleep. That counting has worked after all. I yawn and stretch completely. He takes advantage of this by pulling my nightgown over my head and arms.

" Meeh , yuck..." I laugh. I see he's in a cheerful morning mood. I'm very happy about that, because I was afraid he was really angry with me. "How early is it? Is everyone still asleep?" I look around and see only a few signs of movement here and there. The first light is shining through the windows.

"I'm going to wash up... are you coming with me? Then we'll go outside for a bit before breakfast..."

I yawn again, but I still manage to get up. "Yep!" I say. "I'm coming!"

We wash ourselves at the sinks. The water is freezing, and we're shivering. Especially when we attack each other with handfuls of that cold water. " Meeh , unbearable!" he calls, shivering. Then I realize I've forgotten my towel in the dormitory... " Wow , give me your towel, Kasper... I'm blue with cold!"

He wipes his hair dry and then walks away with his towel. "Come and get it!" he calls, laughing.

"I have to do pipi," I say, gritting my teeth.

"I don't think you're going to make it..." he laughs, looking pointedly at my panties. "You're not going to find your little rascal !"

"Idiot!" I laugh. "You're not just standing there freezing!"

"I'm here to thaw you out..." he says, vigorously rubbing his towel through my hair. "The rest too?" he jokes.

We grab some warm clothes from our backpacks and then enthusiastically walk outside. Dikke Bus and the Great Leader are standing there, calmly smoking a cigarette. They're a little surprised to see us. "That's early, guys!" Dikke Bus laughs.

"What brings you out so early?" asks the Great Leader. It's the first time he's spoken directly to us. He even smiles.

"The mountains, sir!" I answer quite spontaneously.

They both laugh. "That's a good reason to get up early indeed... Your first time in the mountains?" asks the Great Leader.

We nod. I think they can see the joyful anticipation in our eyes. Dikke Bus says to the Great Leader: "Those are my two little charelkes !" And he adds: "That enthusiasm, isn't that why we do it?" The Great Leader smiles broadly.

"Can we go to the river, sir?" asks Kasper.

"But no further!" replies the Great Leader. "We'll wake everyone up for breakfast soon. Perhaps you'd like to lend a hand in the dining hall? Since you're already so cheerful?"

We nod again. "Certainly, sir!"

We then run like half-wilders to the river below. Of course, we recognize the high Winnetou & Old Shatterhand vibe of this wild area. Dikke Bus calls after us: "Don't go in the river, guys!"

"We've already been washed!" Kasper calls back.

We're having a wonderful day trip. A steep climb to reach a fantastic viewpoint. Views of at least ten snow-capped peaks. Clouds play across the mountains and valleys with a magical coming and going. This is where you can truly read the clouds, but unfortunately, we have no time or privacy.

Of course, lots of fun and enjoyment on the road. Kasper and I, and inevitably Sander as well, were often in close proximity to our guide, Dikke Bus. Yesterday, at our table, we observed twice that one of our classmates, Marc Two (there are no fewer than four Marcs, albeit two with -c and two with -k, in our class), seems to have the terrible habit of loading his own plate so full of food that there's hardly anything left in the bowls for the other tablemates. He then gobbles it all down and, with his mouth full and his plate still half full, he's already looking forward to a potential new helping. Dikke Bus has, however, indicated that the portions per table are generously calculated, but still limited.

Marc Two's behavior disturbed the whole table, but no one really dared to say anything. Dikke Bus now has a plan for dinner... When we're almost home, all completely exhausted and especially terribly hungry, he says in a loud voice: "Is anyone hungry yet?" Almost everyone around him shouts out how incredibly hungry he is. Marc Two says he's about to drop dead. Dikke Bus then takes his three musketeers (two plus one, actually) aside and whispers his plan to us. We all three laugh loudly because we can already picture it. "But hold back your laughter, guys! Otherwise he'll catch on quickly!" he warns. We nod with conviction.

Kasper, Sander, and I volunteer to serve the food in large bowls from the kitchen for our table. The soup isn't part of the master plan yet. Or maybe it is, to avoid raising suspicion... Everyone gobbles down the soup; I think Marc Two does it in one go, without a spoon. He's clearly hungry. We're already looking at Dikke Bus, but he's perfectly able to suppress his laughter. Then we jump into action. Kasper does the fries, Sander the meat rolls, and I the green beans. Marc Two has taken up a position at the front of the table, but we're just starting to pass the bowls to his right, making sure he gets the very last turn. After the meat rolls pass to his right, and therefore completely out of his reach, I see a slight panic in his eyes. Meanwhile, Kasper and Sander have taken their seats immediately to the left of Marc Two... it's a well-oiled plan (I also see Dikke Bus, already with a broad grin). Kasper and Sander then pile their plates so high with what's left in the bowls that the very last person... is served a total of zero fries, zero meatballs, and a single green bean. Sander nonchalantly lets that single green bean land on Marc Two's empty plate.

Meanwhile, all eyes are on the poor boy. Because by now, almost everyone at the table has realized a joke is being played. The sad face of Marc Two over his disastrously empty one-bean plate is hilarious. Everyone starts laughing and a few seconds later, howling and screaming. Marc Two continues to look from us to his plate and back to us. Then he starts to cry. He walks away from the table.

The whole table is still laughing. All the other tables in the dining room are wondering what's going on at the fun table. I also see the distant, irritated looks of the Great Leader and his assistants. Dikke Bus then goes after Marc Two. I think he's feeling a little guilty now. The three of us aren't bothered by that yet. We think it's a great joke. Sander even says a few times: "Food can be delicious, right?"

Later, we see Dikke Bus talking to Marc Two at the Great Leader's. Dikke Bus has his arm comradely around Marc Two's shoulder. I see they're smiling again. But we all agree that this has cost Dikke Bus at least a few apologies.

Then comes the second evening... Part two of a very unfortunate and icy episode in our journey. That long-awaited journey through the mountains, which had been announced as so wonderful and majestic...

We're all sitting around a large campfire. Everyone's tired, but it's far too cozy to even think about sleeping. To our considerable surprise, the PE teachers are playing guitar and singing too. Not bad, we think. Almost everyone sings along, because they're the songs we know.

Lots of Boudewijn de Groot and Simon & Garfunkel , of course . No Supertramp, the teachers don't know them... There are homemade waffles, chocolate milk, and soft drinks.

Dikke Bus also sings along at the top of his lungs. He laughs loudly when we tell him we think he's capable of a lot... but not singing. Marc Two, by the way, is sitting next to Dikke Bus. Kasper and I brought the poor boy a plate with a stack of waffles. All for him. Everyone finds it funny, including himself. He's already admitted to us, when we offered him an apology or two, that it was his own fault. He seems a much happier little boy tonight. Especially after his third waffle.

When it gets late and some of the boys have already gone to bed, Sander sneaks out his thermos. " A sip ?" he asks with a grin. I decline, because I know what's most likely in it. Kasper, somewhat to my surprise, accepts the invitation. He takes a big gulp, then rolls his eyes, and exhales deeply. " Bweugh ! Meeh !" he whispers.

I nearly fall backward from his strong breath.

"Not bad, huh, Kasperke ?" whispers Sander. He offers the bottle again.

I tell Kasper not to do that. "Pipo!" I say.

"Sissy!" Sander says to me.

Kasper accepts it anyway and takes a second sip. He nearly chokes. "Still just as bad !" he laughs.

We're sitting, or rather lying down, listening to the songs. Some of the songs have already been played a few times, but that doesn't bother anyone. I'm now lying with my head on Kasper's shoulder. Quite a few other boys are also in that position. The more melancholic, romantic songs are clearly more popular now than the cheerful ones from earlier. "Don't start crying , boys!" teases Dikke Bus. Everyone laughs.

"Should I ask if they can play Louis Neefs ' Benjamin ?" Kasper asks teasingly.

" Meeh , pipo, don't do that! No way ! "

He chuckles and then starts playing with my hair, a bit dreamily. He does it quite ostentatiously. Then he says a little too loudly: "Are we going to sleep, Filiberke ?"

I flinch slightly from his alcohol breath. I whisper, " Bweugh ... gross, Kasper!"

"I think it's vodka," he says, laughing, and again, too loudly. " Nazdrovje !" he giggles.

I'm now pretty sure he took a few sips from Sander's thermos while I was doing pipi. He playfully runs his fingers through my hair, which a few of the boys next door clearly notice. I quietly ask him to stop, and he does. But a few moments later, he takes my hand and starts playing with my fingers. He does it so casually that I realize he's a bit "sleepy-drunk", in both senses of the word.

"So tired!" I say. I get up and wish everyone good night.

Kasper looks a little bewildered, but then does the same.

"I'll come and cover you two up in a moment!" Sander jokes.

When we are standing at the sinks, Kasper says, clearly irritated: "Why are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" I ask, also a little irritated.

"I can't even lay a finger on you... You're exaggerating!"

I sigh. "Kasper, everyone's looking at us..."

He sighs now too. "In your thoughts, yes! You're a wimp ! Just act normal..." And he adds: "And now you even think I'm dirty?"

"Honestly, Kasper? Are you drunk? I never find you disgusting, if you don't know that by now..."

He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't wait for me either. He goes straight to the dormitory and immediately climbs upstairs.

I also crawl into bed and I say quietly: " Good night , Kasper, see you tomorrow!"

"Yep!" is his only response.

I'm feeling unhappy, just like last night. Am I a little angry at him for being a little tipsy and attracting unwanted attention? Or am I more irritated because he says I'm afraid of the unwanted attention from the others? Why is everything so perfect when we're alone together? I think how fantastic it would be if we were here alone together... Here in those mountains, under those clouds, tomorrow alone together on the Mont Blanc glacier. Alone together in that blue ice cave ... I start counting.

The next morning begins the most icy and terrifying day of the Switzerland trip. Or perhaps of my entire thirteen-year existence?

We're all woken early by Dikke Bus. I feel like I've barely slept. Kasper is the quickest out of bed and heads to the sinks without a good morning. I follow him, a bit groggy. This time I take my towel with me. The sinks are already crowded, and most of the boys look like zombies. Wasn't Sander the only one with something strong in his thermos?

In no time, ten seconds at most, Kasper is done. He goes to the dining room without a second glance. I hurry after him again, even though I've barely finished brushing my teeth. Just before we enter the dining room, I tug on his sleeve and ask, stammering slightly, "What... what's wrong, Kasper? Are you... angry?"

He's indeed angry. I can see it in his eyes. He replies grimly, "If you don't want me to touch you... then I'll leave you alone! Don't be afraid..."

I look at him, surprised and shocked. "What are you saying? Come on, Kasper, you know..."

He pulls away and sits down at the table. Not in his usual spot, not next to me. I remain there for a few moments, completely lost. I immediately feel tears welling up, but I fight them back fiercely and go to my usual place at the table.

I keep looking across the table at him. I see he doesn't touch any of the breakfast. He only sips his glass of milk occasionally. He's clearly avoiding our eyes meeting. I'm not eating myself. I'm holding the cup of hot coffee in both hands. Sander poured it for me, because he knows I always crave coffee in the morning.

"Are you sick, Benji?" asks Sander. "Bad timing, we're going to the roof of the world today!"

On the far-too-long bus ride to France, Kasper doesn't sit next to me either. I'm inevitably joined by our chatty Sander, who immediately starts to get on my already tense nerves.

"Who is that handsome boy Kasper is sitting next to?" he asks teasingly.

I don't answer. I don't even look.

"He's from Greek-Latin, I think..." He actually asks two other boys. They confirm. "You can tell... with his hair so short, meh ! Upper class, clearly!"

I've been watching for two and a half second now. The short-cropped boy really does stand out in our crowd of long-haired people. He's tall and clearly handsome. He looks much older, though that's impossible, of course. He's talking to Kasper... I can feel my heartbeat practically everywhere in my body, I feel shivering... I see now (another three seconds) that they're both smiling... I'd like to disappear now. Of course, I feel tears welling up again, whether out of anger or not.

We're then loaded in small groups into wobbly hanging cabins. The cable car to the famous ice cave of Mont Blanc. Normally, I—no, we, especially the two of us—would be staring at the landscape in endless awe right now... We've dreamed of this for so long... But first of all, there's absolutely nothing to see; we're in a thick fog. You can barely see who's sitting across from you. Everyone finds this appalling, but I selfishly think that at least this way I won't miss a long-dreamed-of highlight for Kasper and me... I immediately realize that the mountain gods wanted to spare me this.

Oddly enough, it's much clearer higher up, by the glacier and near the ice cave . The gods don't want to play along here anymore. We still have a bit of a climb to the cave. There, we're

allowed to enter in very small groups. Do I really hope he's waiting for me at the entrance? To go in together?

I approach the cave with my group. My heart pounds in joy when I actually see him sitting at the entrance. He's perched on a rock. He seems to be waiting. Is he really waiting for me? Then he sees me. He doesn't wave, nor does he give a sign. But from that great distance, I can just see that he's been waiting for me and that he's now expecting me to go inside with him. I'm very happy. For a few seconds... I don't count them, because when I'm happy, I rarely, if ever, count.

But then something seems to stop me... I feel a kind of anger welling up inside me. I remain standing for a moment, and then I sit down on a rock myself. I feel both angry and sad. Do I want Kasper to feel what I've been feeling all morning? Do I want him to feel the same pain? Is this some kind of revenge? The devil definitely wins over the angel, and I decide not to go to him. Again, I feel the tears welling up...

Meanwhile, almost everyone has been inside the cave. I don't think anyone, in all the excitement, has noticed that I'm still sitting here on this rock and that Kasper is still sitting up there on his rock. For me, and I'm sure for him as well, these two distant rocks are currently the center of our universe.

I'm still sitting there counting when someone suddenly tugs at my arm. I'm startled out of my trance. It's Kasper. He looks both angry and sad. He grabs my wrists in his strong grip and pulls me to my feet. I gasp for breath. I immediately start crying too.

"Let me go!" I say, sobbing.

"I won't let you go!"

"Go into the cave with that Greek idiot...I'm not going anywhere! I don't need to see that stupid cave!"

He tightens his grip, and now he's hurting me. I try to push him away, but his arm is now so tightly wrapped around my neck and shoulder that I can barely move.

"Ouch, Kasper!" I scream. "You're really hurting me!"

He loosens his iron grip now. We both gasp for breath. He hugs me now and says, "Please come with me! I'm so sorry..."

I look straight into his eyes, and they are indeed almost desperate. I thaw instantly. I hug him now. I have no idea if anyone in the world around us is witnessing our reconciliation. I don't care at all. Kasper puts his arm around my shoulder, as he so often does, and together we climb that last bit to the famous ice cave.

The blue grotto doesn't disappoint. It's breathtakingly beautiful. It's probably icy cold in there, but compared to the long, chilly morning walk, this feels heavenly. We admire the bluish ice sculptures and the white vaults of this cathedral, but perhaps we're even more focused on... each other. The relief still clearly lingers in my throat. Meanwhile, everyone has already gone outside. We're here completely alone together...

"The mountain gods..." I say, hugging him.

He smiles. "What's with those mountain gods?"

"I thought for a moment that they had completely abandoned us..."

"Not at all!" says Kasper. We feel immense relief in everything we say and how we say it. Without many words.

Dikke Bus is clearly relieved when he sees us. "Finally! Where have you two been? Aren't you frozen?"

"They have enough anti-gel..." Sander laughs loudly.

"When they're together, well..." laughs another boy.

"That rhymes!" booms Dikke Bus. "This is where great poetry is born, boys!"

While everyone is still laughing, Dikke Bus says to me: "Everything back in the bag?"

I nod. He probably sees that I'm still sobbing a little.

"Tonight, if I were you two, I'd better drink hot chocolate milk... and not from a thermos..." he laughs.

I smile and nod again.

Almost back at the cable car I say to Kasper: "I wish Dikke Bus was my daddy... you know?" Dikke Bus isn't far ahead of us, and I thought I could whisper well... Then he suddenly says, laughing and quite loudly: "What are you saying? I'm your daddy! Here! From all of you!" We laugh loudly. "Is it still far, Dad? What are we having for dinner later, Dad?" Sander then calls out.

That evening, the whole world can and may see that Kasper and I are inseparable friends. Anyone who cares to see will see our wide smiles. Anyone who cares to notice will notice that we're constantly playfully clinging to each other. Of course, Dikke Bus sees all this, and he smiles spontaneously every time he bumps into us or whenever we try to make a clever remark at the table.

Late at night, when many of the boys have already gone to bed, we even go along with Sander's devious plan without a fight. He's decided to test a widely held theory on one of our classmates... It's Marc Three, who usually snores terribly. Sander claims that if you hold a finger of someone who's sleeping very deeply in a bowl of water... they'll spontaneously pee. No sooner said than done... Sander carefully makes sure Marc Three's finger lands in a bowl of water... At least six of our classmates are gathered around the snoring Marc Three.

"How long can that take?" asks Kasper.

"We're going to find out..." whispers Sander. "This is a scientific experiment!"

We all chuckle. Especially when I return from the kitchen with two white aprons. I give them to Sander and Kasper. They immediately put them on, and indeed, they look like scientists in a lab. Hilarious.

We notice that Marc Three is starting to get restless... We keep a close eye on one particular spot. That's not so difficult, because he's thrown off all the covers. And just when we think, or at least hope, that the wet confirmation of our theory is coming, Marc Three wakes up with a start. He knocks over the bowl of water and sits up... He looks around sheepishly. "What's that? Meeh ..." is his first reaction.

We all laugh loudly. After two seconds, he gets it too. Everyone in our class knows Sander's theories. "You bastards!" he laughs now. He immediately looks anxiously at his crotch.

"I think scientist Sander is right..." I laugh cheerfully. "But you woke up a bit too early!"

"Go back to snoring!" laughs another boy. "We'll try again tomorrow!" says Kasper.

Despite the failed experiment, everyone happily heads to their own bunk beds. There's still some laughter and joking around. Everyone in our group then calls out " Goodnight , darling!" to everyone else. Deliberately too loudly, of course. But it's fun. I shout to Sander that we're just like the Waltons . In that iconic children's series about a large family on an American farm, all the children wish each other good night this way every night.

" Good night , Ben! Night , Kas!" Sander shouts in English. As always, he'll have the very last word. We all know that, so we won't respond to that again.

In reality, I have the final say. Right here in our bunk bed, anyway. I whisper to Kasper, who's already tucked up nicely: "I'll be up there sleeping with you in fifteen minutes !"

His cheerful "Yep!" is then the very last word.