

**TIES THAT BIND**  
**HAN NEFKENS**

*Translated by Susan Massotty*

For Felipe

“Nothing is as it was, merely as it is remembered.”

Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866 – 1936)

# 1

The reception area in the hospital makes me think of an indoor swimming pool, the kind that uses potted palms, tropical plants, plastic tables and orange umbrellas to create a holiday feeling. A few bathrobe-clad patients are sitting beneath one of the umbrellas, smoking cigarettes. Further down the corridor, a fat Chinese man waiting for a visitor has his hands neatly folded in his lap: a Buddha in pajamas. A woman in a floral duster wheels her IV stand ahead of her as if it were a grocery cart. A Turkish mother unpacks a bag under the watchful eyes of her children and places a flat bread, some figs and a lump of cheese on a towel that she has carefully spread out on a bench. A woman in a red cycling jacket and sensible shoes holds a tightly wrapped bouquet of carnations under her arm like a baguette.

The clock at the end of the corridor is ridiculously large, a constant reminder never to forget the time, not even for a second. The oversized hands point to ten-thirty. As I near the elevator, I notice that my steps are slowing down. I'm secretly hoping the doors will close before I get there, so I can have another minute to myself. But when the woman in the cycling jacket sees me, she thrusts the carnations between the closing doors, which glide open again, like a film in reverse. She smiles at me and I have no choice but to step in.

On the fourth floor, I lose my way for a moment. Should I turn left or right? The corridor looks the same in both directions: gray linoleum floor, gleaming white-tiled walls, doors with small round windows. I go left, then right and see a handwritten nameplate: Rm. 415, Vincent

Brautichem. The circles above the “i’s” are a whimsical touch.

I take a deep breath, then push open the door. My brother is lying in a steel-frame bed next to the window. The pallid yellow walls soften the light from outside. A half-full urine bag dangles from the side of Vincent’s bed like the ballast tethering a balloon to the ground. The air is warm and dry, and the room reeks of disinfectant.

“Hello Vincent. It’s me again.”

He doesn’t answer, but stares blankly at the green indicator light on the monitor to which his IV is attached. I sit down on the stool by the bed. His eyes, which appear to be covered with a bluish-gray film, look bigger than usual in his shrunken face. His skin is pale, his mouth slack, his lips dry—so dry they’re cracked. His puny arms poke out of a hospital gown several sizes too large for him, his hands rest limply on the coarse cotton bedspread.

On the back wall is an instrument panel with electrical outlets, cords, buttons and a nightlight. The other walls are bare. Three empty chairs are grouped around the bed. Since the other bed is unoccupied, the curtain has been drawn around it. A double set of windows runs across the entire width of the room. There’s a heavy fog outside; the city has gone into hiding. Even the high-rise that houses the nearby medical school is barely visible. Here and there a few windows float through space, empty and disconnected.

“Vincent,” I whisper. Then louder: “Vincent!”

A drop of sweat trickles down my forehead and comes to a halt by my eyebrows. My shirt is stuck to my back. The monitor purrs like a cat. Wooden exercise sandals clip-clop down the corridor. Someone shouts. A door slams. Somewhere above my head a chair is scraped

across the floor. Far away a radio softly plays hit tunes. The squeak of rubber wheels on linoleum heralds the arrival of a cart. Could it be Vincent’s meds?

I hear the shuffle of trays, the tinkling of cups and glasses, the clatter of silverware on plates. A nurse announces in a shrill voice that she’s bringing Vincent a delicious meal. She gives the door a push with her ample behind, enters the room backwards, plunks the tray down on the bedside table and lifts the gleaming lid to show us today’s repast: a sausage dripping with fat, a mound of mashed potatoes smothered in gravy and a pile of endive. Vincent hates endive.

With a slight inclination of her head, the nurse asks me if Vincent needs help with the food. When I say that I’ll feed him, she strides out of the room, and the cart rattles on down the hall. I scoop up a spoonful of mashed potatoes and bring it to Vincent’s mouth, which stays firmly shut. Doesn’t he realize that he has to eat in order to keep up what little strength he has left? I push the spoon against his mouth, trying to find a way through his lips, but he clenches his jaw even tighter. The gravy trickles down the side of his mouth and onto the sheet, where it leaves a greasy spot.

I set the spoon on the tray.

Vincent looks at it.

Oh well, I’ll try again tomorrow.

When I get up to leave, Vincent slowly turns his head away from the IV. Even after I’ve shut the door behind me, I can still see his eyes, round and bewildered.

I took the tram that stopped in front of the hospital, but didn't get off at my hotel. It wasn't a conscious decision, I simply stayed in my seat until Line 4 reached the last stop. There, on that tree-lined street in Rotterdam, was my former family home, half of a dark 1930s duplex that peered warily at the world from beneath its heavy roof.

Even in my childhood it looked abandoned, as if the occupants had fled a sudden disaster. The Venetian blinds were always lowered to keep the rugs and paintings from fading, which meant that I never had an unobstructed view of the world outside.

The house was smaller than I remembered, the shrubbery more overgrown. The two rusty lawn chairs on the patio had once belonged to us.

In the spring of 1962, just after my sixth birthday, my mother and I had been sitting in those chairs, reading, when she had suddenly put down her book and asked me if I liked the name Vincent. I did, but wanted to know why she had asked. She explained that I would soon be getting a little brother or sister. I was so happy to hear that I was no longer going to be an only child that two fat tears trickled down my cheeks.

A few months later I was surprised to find our family doctor boiling a kettle of water in the kitchen at seven-thirty in the morning. Daddy was in the kitchen too, even though he, like Mama, usually only came downstairs after I had left for school. Apparently my little sister or brother was about to be born. Why Dr. Hoogewegen had come to our house to make tea was still a mystery to me, but I was quickly sent

off to morning mass to pray for the new baby.

The church was cool, compared to the summer heat beating down on the city at this early hour. No one else was inside. It was a weekday, but the Sunday smell of incense, beeswax and gillyflowers still filled the air. I dipped my fingers in the icy holy water, crossed myself and licked the water from my fingers. Red and green squares of light shone down on the stone floor from the stained-glass windows, which depicted the flight of Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus to Egypt. The wooden kneeler hurt my bare knees—it always took me a while to get used to it—but I asked our Heavenly Father to make the baby come fast and not cry too much.

My first wish was promptly granted. Our next-door-neighbor was waiting by the gate. "Congratulations on your new baby brother! You have heard the news, haven't you?"

"Yes, thank you," I said politely, hiding my disappointment at having heard it from her, and walked around the back to enter through the kitchen.

An enormous woman stood there in a white uniform stretched tightly across her biceps. Gobs of fat, quivering like pink Jell-O, burst from her sleeves. She offered to take me upstairs to say hello to my mother.

The curtains in Mama's room had been drawn. She was lying in bed with the sheet pulled up to her chin. I was surprised at how tired and pale she looked. I kissed her gingerly. Her voice sounded different than usual when she told me how happy they all were with Vincent's birth.

When I was older I once asked her if childbirth had been painful.

She told me she'd forgotten the pain the moment she'd clapped eyes on her new baby. That so much pain could be forgotten so quickly seemed like a miracle to me.

My second wish was granted as well: Vincent rarely cried. He did smile every once in a while, but not of his own accord. First I had to tickle him under his chin, which I did for hours on end, until Mama ordered me to stop, because both she and Vincent needed their rest.

Mama spent a lot of time sleeping, though that's not what she called it. She preferred to say that she was resting. She rested every afternoon between one and four, and yet she was always tired. Just as Eskimos have a hundred words for snow, my mother had countless expressions to describe her fatigue: I'm exhausted, I'm pooped, I'm bone-tired, I'm on my last legs, I'm bushed, I'm ready to drop, I've lost my get-up-and-go, and—her all-time favorite—I'm worn to a frazzle.

With the subtlety of an alcoholic who encourages everyone else to drink, my mother tried to satisfy her craving for sleep by turning Vincent and me into naptime accomplices. At the slightest sign that one of us wasn't feeling well, the two of us would instantly be tucked into bed. A day in bed was the remedy against all ills.

One afternoon Vinny and I were building a tower out of red, green and yellow blocks in our playroom, which was next to Mama's bedroom. When the tower was nearly as tall as Vinny, I decided it needed a steeple. While I hunted around for a triangular block, Vinny reached out his chubby little hand and knocked the whole thing down, clattering the blocks onto the parquet floor. I bawled him out for making so much noise. After all, he knew Mama was resting. A few minutes

later she came into the playroom with the imprint of the pillow on her cheek. I didn't dare ask if we'd woken her up, and she didn't comment.

But that same week, a scrawny man in blue overalls rang the doorbell. He was carrying a sheet of lumber about the size and thickness of a headstone. Vinny and I watched him maneuver the board up the spiral staircase, groaning and cursing the whole way. We tried to imagine what it was for. A new panel for Vinny's crib? A platform for setting up our electric train? A plank for a shuffleboard table? Only after we'd sneaked up the stairs and seen him nail it to Mama's bedroom door did we realize its true purpose: to soundproof the door so we wouldn't disturb her while she was resting.

After our domestic helper had given Vincent a bath, Mama came in to read us a bedtime story. The three of us were sitting on Vinny's bed. He was wearing his white terrycloth pajamas with the red elephants, his hair was still wet, and he smelled of his lilies-of-the-valley bubble bath. Thank goodness I was old enough not to have to take an early bath.

Vinny stuck his thumb in his mouth and laid his head on Mama's shoulder. She told him that if he didn't sit up straight, she wouldn't be able to read aloud. Mama had on the white smock she usually wore when she was doing anything with us. It was supposed to keep her dress from getting dirty, but I thought it made her look like a nurse.

That night, Daddy came home early, which he almost never did. Vinny was already tucked up in his "burrow," and I plopped myself down on his bed in eager anticipation, because Daddy was coming up to say goodnight. He had his drink with him, which meant he was going to read to us from *Winnie the Pooh*. Daddy carefully lowered

himself onto the small stool beside Vinny's bed.

He had on a navy-blue suit and crisp white shirt—his cuffs always stuck out a bit below the jacket so you could see his gold cufflinks—and he smelled of the cigars he'd been smoking an hour ago with the men with whom he'd been negotiating the sale of his office building. Now he was reading his sons a bedtime story. He always threw himself wholeheartedly into his task: His normally sonorous voice would deepen even more, and he would pause before a climax to heighten the suspense. He too seemed entranced by Christopher Robin's expedition to the North Pole.

Before going to bed, Daddy paused for a moment in the doorway to check on Vinny and me. I pretended to be asleep, though I was wide awake. By peeking through my lashes, I saw a very different father, one now clad in red-and-white striped pajamas with pant legs that scraped the ground. He stood on his tiptoes to see if I was asleep, then came over to my bed and kissed me. It was all I could do not to open my eyes, but if I looked at him, it would break the spell, and then he might not kiss me goodnight the next time.

I'd been given a Dinky Toy for Christmas: a little black Opel with doors that could be opened and shut. It wasn't my only present—the table was full of gifts—but it was by far the best. Mama, who was sympathetic to the plight of the poor, lectured me about the disadvantaged children who were less fortunate than I because they hadn't received a single present this year. She suggested that I might want to give them one of mine. At age two, Vinny was apparently too young for this lesson in social awareness. It would have to be something I treasured, Mama explained, since it ought to hurt a little. I knew exactly which gift she

referring to and dutifully handed over the little black Opel with the doors that could be opened and shut.

I can't remember if she patted me on the head or complimented me on my generosity, though she must have been proud of me because she related the story to her sisters. Apparently, as I was handing her the car, I had said, "Here, take it before I change my mind," which had made Mama and my aunts roar with laughter.

Had I betrayed my own self in trying to please my mother by giving up something I desperately wanted to keep? In any case, the thought of those disadvantaged children had never once crossed my mind.

We had gone to visit Grandma. While Mama, Daddy and Grandma were upstairs in the parlor, Vinny and I were down in the basement with Nel, Grandma's domestic helper. Nel had on a big white apron and a pair of slippers, because, as she said, her feet were killing her. She poured us a glass of Green Spot soda and served us ladyfingers and gingerbread, even though it wasn't Christmas.

Nel also had several bound copies of Donald Duck comic books. Vincent sat on my lap while I read to him so that he could look at the pictures. I imitated the voices of each of the characters: Donald, Daisy, Goofy and Scrooge McDuck, as well as Huey, Dewey and Louie, though they were trickier since they all spoke at the same time.

At about one o'clock, Nel shuffled upstairs to see if Grandma wanted us to say goodbye to her before she lay down to rest. She reported that permission had been granted, so Vinny and I went hand in hand up the broad wooden staircase that creaked with every step. Grandma,

small and frail in a dark dress, was sitting on a velvet settee in a parlor filled with gloomy paintings and heavy furniture. She smelled of eau de cologne, and the whiskers on her chin pricked a bit when we gave her a kiss. She took a tin of lemon drops out of an oak sideboard and said that we could each take one. They smelled musty, but I didn't want to offend Grandma by refusing her offer. Vinny popped the candy in his mouth and smacked his lips with delight.

On the way home Mama told us that nothing had changed since she was a girl. She and her sisters had eaten their meals downstairs with Nel and been allowed a brief visit with Grandma before going to bed. Vinny asked Mama if she'd also been given lemon drops, but apparently they were reserved for the grandchildren. So I'd been right: Lemon drops were a special treat, and it would have been impolite to refuse.

One day Vincent and I were playing barber with Daddy. He sat in his leather chair, serenely reading the newspaper while the two of us worked on his hair. Vinny, standing on his tiptoes on a low table, was busy "clipping" the fringe around Daddy's bald head with his fingers. My job was to rearrange the four hairs in the middle of Daddy's scalp: First I combed all four to the right and then to the left, next I divided them in half and combed two to the right and two to the left; then I combed three to the right... It's amazing how many possibilities there are with so little hair. From time to time I leaned over and sniffed Daddy's gleaming pate. It had a warm and slightly acrid odor that I've never smelled on anyone else.

Daddy's glass was sitting on the table, next to a bottle of

Underberg bitters. He liked to pour a few drops into his drink. Vinny and I fought over who would be allowed to keep the empty bottle or unwrap a new one. We were supposed to take turns, but I won more often, because I was older.

Daddy always ate later than Vinny and I did, so our game came to an end when Mama brought in his soup. Daddy, expecting his usual big kiss, threw his arms around us so that we rocked back and forth like a ship at sea. Vinny stared dreamily at a faraway point, as if he'd spotted something on the horizon. Daddy gave us each a loud smackeroo—his kisses were always noisy affairs—then took out his handkerchief, wiped his head, carefully re-folded his handkerchief and put it away. Then he opened his newspaper and began spooning up his soup.

I started saving money for the first time when I was ten in order to buy my mother a lipstick: Evening Glow by Christian Dior. She seemed pleased with it, though she thought the color was too bright. To tone it down, she used to apply a lighter lipstick over it. But I liked that warm orange, the same color as the burning logs in our fireplace.

I often watched Mama put on her makeup. Instead of applying the lipstick directly onto her mouth, she painted it on with a brush, like a work of art putting the finishing touches on its own canvas.

Before we set off on a visit, usually to see her sisters, whom we referred to collectively as "the aunties," I would shower her with compliments. I thought she was the most beautiful mother in the world. Mama would smile and put her hand over her mouth in embarrassment, though not without a certain amount of pride.



In 1967 we spent the month of August in the seaside town of Noordwijk, as we had always done. Or rather Mama, Vincent and I did, along with a girl who'd been hired for the express purpose of helping us build sandcastles—or at least that's what Vinny and I thought. Daddy had to work, so he only came to see us on weekends and slept most of the time.

Whenever my mother went to the beach with us, she put on a special outfit: a lightweight twinset with matching slacks, a silk scarf that she draped around her head, and cat-eye sunglasses. I always told her she looked like Grace Kelly.

But that year Mama spent very little time on the beach. Instead, she sat on the terrace of the Grand Hotel and waved to us. She had a very distinct wave, holding her hand in the air and wriggling her fingers as if she were playing the piano.

Vinny and I would wave back while the babysitter dug a hole. When it was deep enough—so deep that even she could disappear into it—we would clamor for a mountain instead of a hole. With a sigh, the poor girl would fill in the hole and start making a mountain.

We had to keep to an early bedtime schedule in Noordwijk too. Although I was eleven now, Mama didn't even let me stay up to see the firework show held every other week to entertain the seaside guests. I overheard my mother inviting my cousin, who was only a year older than I, and his sisters to come and watch the show from her balcony, where she had a fantastic view. She thought I hadn't heard her, but I can still hear my cousins talking and laughing as they went past my door. A few minutes later there was a tremendous boom as the fireworks were set off. I threw open the curtains, though I knew I wouldn't be

able to see a thing, since the room Vinny and I shared overlooked the hotel courtyard.

Back in Rotterdam, the weather in September was warmer than usual. One day in particular, the windows were open, the bedding hanging out to air, the sky a brilliant blue. I knocked on my mother's door to ask if I could “please please please” play outside without my jacket.

There was no answer. I pushed open the soundproofed door and saw her sitting on the stripped bed with a box of tissues on her lap. She was crying. Short, high-pitched sobs, like those of a lost child.

I'd never seen my mother cry. I was so upset that I gently closed the door and ran to my room, where our domestic was mopping the floor. To her surprise, I threw myself on the bare mattress and burst into tears. She shrugged, as if to say that just because my mother was crying didn't mean I had to start sniveling too.

Mama came to my room later, having obviously dried her tears. She told me that Grandma was very ill and didn't have long to live. She was going over to see Grandma now. When I asked her about my jacket, she told me I didn't have to wear it today and gave me some money to buy ice-cream cones for Vincent and me.

An ice-cream cone on a weekday—that was unusual. I understood right away that the rules were different when someone was dying. You were allowed to do things you normally weren't allowed to do, just like you were on your birthday. It was kind of like a holiday, except that everyone was sad instead of happy.

Vinny and I went out and sat on the grassy spot at the beginning of the street in order to watch for Mama's car. Every time I thought

of her sitting alone on the edge of her bed and crying, I got a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach.

In the end I decided not to buy the ice-cream cones, because then it wouldn't be a special day, and then Grandma wouldn't die.

Late in the afternoon, we saw Mama's white Renault Dauphine coming down the street. As she drove past, she waved to us and smiled. So the ice-cream trick had worked after all! I ran home with Vinny trailing behind me, but by the time I got to the car, the smile had faded from Mama's face. Grandma was dead.

I was so afraid she'd start crying again that I hardly dared to ask her what had happened, but after we'd gone inside, she told me that Grandma was in heaven now with Our Blessed Lord, and that there was no reason for me to cry. Grandma was old, and when people are old, it's time for them to go to heaven. Mama brought me a glass of water, but I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't bear the thought that Mama no longer had a mother.

### 3

The stone mural my father commissioned when Vincent was a toddler was still in the front yard of our old Rotterdam house. The rough sandstone tiles featured the image of two children and served as a kind of fence. The children didn't resemble Vincent and me in the slightest, except that they were both boys. Two boys and a flower—a sunflower.

Vinny went through a period of growing sunflowers when he was about nine. He watered and measured them every day, writing the number of inches they'd grown in a green notebook. He spent hours staring at them, as if he thought he could make his sunflowers shoot up to the sky by simply looking at them. After a while, however, he lost interest. The leaves dried up, and the round yellow heads began to droop on their withered stalks. The gardener finally pulled them up and tossed them into the field behind the house.

Every once in a while Vinny and I would straddle the mural and pretend to be riding horses. Since there was only one horse, we usually ended up quarreling. Instead of taking turns, we would both mount up at the same time. Vinny preferred to sit back-to-back, but as I pointed out to him, we'd never get anywhere if we were headed in different directions. It made more sense for him to sit behind me with his arms around my waist, so that we—the Indians—could make a fast getaway when the cowboys came charging in. But Vinny refused, because he needed to have one hand free to suck his thumb. He made a pretty sorry warrior. You'd never win a battle with him at your side.

Years later, when my father moved to Belgium, he didn't take the mural with him. The moving costs would have been prohibitive, so he decided to leave it behind for the new owners.

As I walked up the driveway, the sound of the gravel crunching beneath my shoes reminded me of the time I fell off my bicycle. I'd been given my first grown-up bike for my tenth birthday. It was a bit too big for me, but my father believed in letting children grow into things. The clothes we bought had to be one size larger as well. Because I could barely reach the pedals, he told me to go to the bicycle-repair shop, where they would put a block of wood on the pedals. A block of wood! That was for little kids. So of course I took off on my bike without them. Besides, it was my birthday. Everyone knows that you're allowed to do whatever you want on your birthday and that you'll be protected by an invisible bubble of luck. But when I came racing down the street and turned into the driveway, my feet slipped off the pedals, my chest slammed into the crossbar and I fell, bicycle and all, onto the gravel. My left leg began to bleed: The bubble had clearly burst. I cried, not just because it hurt, but because bad luck could also happen on your birthday.

I peered into the house through the long narrow window in the front door. The marble entryway still looked the same, except that the Greek vase was gone. The only rooms in the house that had actually been decorated were the entryway, the living room and my parents' bedroom. The entryway—which my father always called the “vestibule”—had been adorned with a seventeenth-century Flemish

tapestry, depicting Abraham being stopped by the hand of God just as he is about to sacrifice his son Isaac. I found the story incomprehensible. How could God ask a father to do such a thing? Daddy agreed, but explained that he'd bought the tapestry because it was beautiful—and cheap.

Years later a rabbi offered me a different explanation of this parable. According to him, in the days of the Hebrew tribes, it was customary for the first-born son to be sacrificed to God. Abraham rose up in protest against this practice. By refusing to sacrifice his son, he was breaking with tradition. To reinforce the concept of God's omnipotence, however, the story was inverted. In the version we're familiar with today, the decision lies squarely with God.

Our sitting room—until I went to high school I didn't realize that most people called it a “living room”—had been stuffed with antique Spanish cabinets, medieval statues and paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet the chairs had been modern and uncomfortable. I had constantly found myself slipping off the tight leather upholstery.

Both the nursery and the bedroom that I shared with Vinny—our tiny domain—had been furnished with castoffs from my father's office: two metal desks; swivel chairs with castors; black anglepoise lamps; battered filing cabinets in which we were supposed to keep our toys; and a tall wooden cupboard in which my mother stored her furs. I used to open the cupboard and rub the sleeve of one of her coats against my cheek. It was incredibly soft, and smelled of Mama's perfume: *Arpège* by Lanvin.

One night when my parents were off at a concert, I tiptoed into

my mother's room and sat down at her dressing table. In among the silver brushes and crystal flasks was a beige box with the illustration of a dark figure in a billowing cape. Beside it was a smaller figure, which I assumed to be that of a child being protected by the knight in the cape. I opened the box, took out the bottle and dabbed a few drops on my wrists and behind my ears, as I'd seen my mother do. The scent made her seem close to me. I was convinced that the Arpège would safeguard me, the way the cape did the child, from that horrible feeling that sometimes came over me—the feeling that I was hollow inside. Hollow, and at the same time, heavier than lead.

My mother sent for me the next morning and scolded me for going into her room without permission. She felt that an eleven-year-old boy ought to know better. As punishment, I was sent to my room.

A few weeks later I saw Vinny sitting at her dressing table, sniffing her bottle of Arpège. Suddenly I felt that he and I had a bond. We shared the same secret! Now the knight in the cape would protect us both. But Vinny's secret was discovered even faster than mine had been, because he'd poured the entire bottle of Arpège all over himself. Mama sent him up to our room for punishment too.

For years, Vinny used to wet the bed. He was still sleeping with a rubber sheet on his bed when he was five, so my mother went out and bought him a urine alarm. In her white smock, with her pinky in the air, she slipped a rubber sheath over Vinny's sizable penis. There was a wire in the sheath, which was connected to an alarm that went off when the first drops of urine were detected. But Vinny slept through the alarm and woke up the next morning soaking wet as usual. Naturally

my mother hadn't heard the alarm through her soundproofed door. It was years before Vinny finally quit wetting the bed.

One Sunday afternoon, we were down in the basement watching home movies. Or at least we were trying to, since my mother didn't know how to operate the projector. Nor did my father, though as a man he thought he ought to. In his dark suit, which he wore even on Sundays, he tried to feed an 8 mm filmstrip into the projector. We waited patiently. My mother was seated in the front row, a paperback splayed on her lap. Vinny was sitting quietly beside her, for once being as good as gold.

"Lights out!" Daddy exclaimed, and I leapt up to switch them off. The room went dark, and the projector whirred into life. The film was about to start! Sure enough, there we were, Vinny in shorts and me in my new blazer, feeding the ducks by the pond in back of the house. I handed Vinny a piece of bread and we threw it together, my hand cupped around his, in the direction of the pond.

Just then the film began to flicker, slowly at first, then faster, until the screen suddenly went white. "Lights on!" my father bawled, then bent over the projector to change the reel. After the next "Lights out!" we saw Vinny sitting upside-down on the lawn. I tilted my head sideways, as if I were about to do a somersault, in an effort to see the film from the right angle. Oh well, at least it wasn't flickering this time. Vinny, not the least bit fazed, kept staring straight ahead at his upside-down self on the screen. Both Vincents were sucking their thumb. But my father, who had no intention of watching the film upside-down, shouted "Lights on!" again. He stopped the projector, took off his jacket, knelt down until he was at eye level with the projector,

peered inside, re-threaded the filmstrip and shouted “Lights out!” We watched a wobbly Vincent and a wavery Eric feed a flickering duck a piece of bread, at which point the filmstrip shot out of the projector. Once more, we were forced to shield our eyes from the glare of the screen.

This went on for half an hour. Flickering film images would abruptly freeze and be followed by a dazzling white screen. The beam of light emitted by the projector would sparkle like slivers of glass in the snow as the empty reel turned round and round.

My father finally gave up. He told my mother that she needed to buy a new projector. She informed him icily that this one was brand-new. In the end, Daddy went up to the living room and retreated behind his newspaper. Mama joined him later and went back to her book.

I asked Vinny if he wanted to play ping-pong, but he shook his head. I offered various suggestions, but he nixed them all. No, he didn’t want to make clay figures. No, he wasn’t in the mood for drawing. No, it was too cold to go outside. And no, he didn’t feel like singing either. What he did want was for me to tell him a story. So I launched into a story without knowing how it was going to end. The one thing I did know was that it had to be about two brothers.

It started off with the two boys sailing in a big boat to a magic land, where the trees were made of chocolate and the houses of marzipan, and you could eat as much as you wanted. Then the boys flew to the stars on a magic carpet, like the one we had in our living room.

Vinny liked the story, but wanted to know if the brothers had gotten home safely to their parents. When I assured him that they had, his face broke into a smile.

One rainy day, Vinny and I followed Daddy into the garage.

“Is everyone here?”

“Yes!” Vinny and I exclaimed in unison.

“Then it’s time to board,” my father said, as if we were setting off in a submarine. Instead, we climbed into the backseat of the black Cadillac. Daddy never let us sit in front, since he thought it was dangerous. He shuddered to think what would happen if he suddenly had to slam on the brakes.

As the rain came pouring down, we drifted at an excruciatingly slow speed through the outskirts of Rotterdam, so that my father could inspect the real estate. Our Sunday entertainment usually consisted of looking at offices, workshops, factories and warehouses. Daddy always listened to a soccer game on the radio, which meant that Vinny and I had to be as quiet as mice.

As the sleek Caddy poked along at ten miles an hour, the cars in back of us honked their horns. I was mortified, but my father ignored the other drivers. If they didn’t like it, he said, they could always go around him. Vinny and I sat by the fogged-up windows, fighting off carsickness. Even then, Daddy wouldn’t let us open the windows, because that would create a draft, and you could catch a cold from sitting in a draft.

My father was always worried that something would happen to us. Even when it wasn’t all that cold outside, we had to bundle up and put on a scarf and a “skullcap”—Daddy’s word for a stocking cap. We always had to wear undershirts too, even on the sultriest of days, because god knows what you might come down with if you perspired too much.

Instead of doing my homework, I was sitting at my desk, sketching women's fashions. I drew a suit with a round neck and four buttons on the sleeve—the height of elegance. At about four-thirty, I heard my mother's car start. She usually went grocery-shopping at that hour, and she preferred to go by herself. I stood by the window and watched her white Renault drive off down the street. In the distance I could hear children playing outside. They called to one another, shrieking with pleasure and excitement. A ball thudded dully as it landed on a sidewalk. But they were so far away that I couldn't see them, not even when I pressed my face against the window. I longed to play with them, or simply to be part of their group, but my legs felt so heavy and weak that I couldn't move an inch. My feet seemed to be glued to the gray speckled linoleum on the bedroom floor. I wanted to go out, but something held me back.

When I came home and showed my mother my report card, with its many incompletes, she sent me upstairs to wait for my father. "You're really going to get what-for this time!" she exclaimed. I sat down at my desk feeling as nervous as I did in the dentist's waiting room when I heard the high-pitched whine of the drill. I hoped my father would be delayed, that he'd get home late from the office, but today of all days he got home early. He held my report card at arm's length, as if it were a dirty rag, as if the C for History, the C- for Geography and the D for Arithmetic gave off a strong smell. "With grades like this," he said, "you're going to flunk out of seventh grade, and if you repeat a year, you won't be allowed to go to high school, and without a high-school diploma, you won't get into college. The only thing you'll be good for is being a plumber!" I was clearly a disappointment.

What angered my father the most was that my teacher had written on my report card, "Eric can do the work when he puts his mind to it." As far as Daddy was concerned, I was just a lazy bum. But no matter how hard I tried, my grades didn't improve. My head was so full of anxiety that there wasn't room for anything else.

The first day Koosje came to work for us, Vinny had her in tears. Koosje, our new domestic—the umpteenth in an endless series since none of them ever stayed long—was from a troubled family in Tiel.

The three of us were having lunch together without Mama, because she was off at another of her doctor's appointments. Vinny poked me with his elbow. "Get a load of those funny eyes of hers," he said, as if we were standing by the baboon cage at the zoo. I knew I should make him stop, but he was right: Koosje had drooping eyelids, which made her tiny eyes sink even deeper into their sockets. Vinny couldn't stop talking about her funny-looking eyes. Then he pointed his five-year-old finger at Koosje, whose head was now bent over her sandwich, and started giggling. Out of sheer nervousness, I began to giggle too. It was like in church, when the hushed silence was broken by the jingling of the altar-boy's bell and you knew you weren't supposed to laugh but that made you want to laugh all the more. Vincent finally burst into loud guffaws. Koosje's funny little eyes filled with tears, which made Vinny laugh even harder.

Later that afternoon, Mama came to my room. There was a bandage on the inside of her elbow. She asked how I'd feel if my mother had died recently and I'd been sent off to work for a family I didn't know, where I'd been laughed at on my first day. I considered telling

her that Vinny had started it, but decided not to because I should have corrected him. While I was sent to my room to think about what I'd done, Vinny was out bicycling around the yard in the spring sunshine.

Oddly enough, Koosje adored Vincent. She thought I was a bratty little know-it-all. A year later, when she married the scrawny carpenter who had soundproofed our mother's door, she asked Vinny to be her page boy. He wore his communion suit and a top hat that almost came down over his eyes. He held Koosje's veil so high that it looked like a flag blowing in the wind. Or so I gathered from the photograph I saw later, because I hadn't been invited to the wedding.

The night before Vinny's first day at school, he was busily packing his shiny new schoolbag, Daddy was engrossed in his newspaper and Mama was reading a novel by Louis Couperus: *Old People and the Things That Pass*. I was intrigued by the title, so I asked Mama what the book was about, but she said I was too young to read it. She suggested that I go write in my diary.

But I couldn't write a word. The pages remained blank. I didn't dare commit to paper the thought that worried me most, for fear that my mother might accidentally read it.

## 4

At the flower stand outside the hospital, I looked for sunflowers, but it was the wrong time of year. All they had were roses and tulips. Would Vincent think it odd if I gave him roses? Had anyone ever given him a bouquet of roses? While I was at it, I bought some red tulips for the nursing staff.

I glanced at the clock: it was two-fifteen. Not that it mattered, because there weren't any visiting hours on Vincent's floor. I was allowed to come and go as I pleased.

The curtains in Vincent's room had been closed. Pale light was falling into the room, as if a sheet had been stretched across the sky. The other bed had been taken away. Did that mean they weren't going to put any more patients in here for a while?

Vincent was still staring at the green light. I stood in front of him with a bouquet in each hand, feeling like the signalman at an airport who directs the planes to the gate. I hoped that if I stood directly in his line of vision, he would react in some way, as if his gaze was the invisible beam in an electronic security system. But the alarm didn't go off, there was no siren, no buzzer, no bell. He didn't even blink.

I fled to the kitchenette, where a handsome male nurse was drinking coffee. After introducing myself, I handed him one of the bouquets and suddenly realized it was the roses. I felt myself blushing.

"Thank you," he said. "It's very thoughtful of you, sir."

"Could you also put these tulips for my brother in a vase?" I asked.

“He’s stopped reacting to whatever’s going on around him, hasn’t he?”

“But he can hear what’s being said. This morning, when I asked him to open his mouth so I could swab inside it, he opened it immediately.”

I knew it—it’s me he didn’t want here!

“I’m sure he appreciates your company, sir.”

“What am I supposed to say to him? I don’t get a single reaction.”

“Why don’t you tell him the latest news? It’s important for patients to stay in touch with the outside world.”

But there was no outside world for me these days, there was only Vincent’s world. Even when I was reading the paper or watching TV in my hotel room, I was seeing the giant clock at the hospital, the fluorescent lights in the elevator, the empty and echoing corridors, the gloominess in Vincent’s room, the green light on his monitor, his averted face. I heard his silence. If only he could tell me what he wanted me to do!

The nurse carefully arranged the tulips in a round glass vase. I followed him into Vincent’s room.

“Look at the lovely flowers your brother’s brought you, Vincent!” He held the flowers up to his face, but Vincent’s stare never wavered.

Why was he calling him by his first name? Vincent wasn’t a little boy, he was almost thirty. Me he called “sir.” Did I look that old, was my hair that gray? Or was it because he didn’t know me very well? Or because I was still in good health, standing on my own two feet, while Vincent was lying on his back like a baby?

The nurse put the vase in the gap between the double set of

windows, which made them look like they were in a display case.

He turned and was about to leave, but I stopped him. “Isn’t it time for Vincent’s sponge bath?”

“We gave him one this morning.”

“Well, then, shouldn’t we change the sheets?”

“We always change them after the sponge bath. The best thing you can do for your brother now is simply to sit with him.”

The book I bought for Vincent a few days ago was still on his nightstand. I’d had to unwrap it myself, since he no longer had the strength. Vincent’s eyes had lit up when he saw that it was a collection of verses and songs by Annie M.G. Schmidt, the author of one of our childhood favorites, *Jip and Janneke*.

I told Vincent to pinch my hand if he wanted me to read one of the verses to him. I hesitated before closing my hand over his. Would he mind being touched? His fingers were soft and warm, but there wasn’t the slightest movement.

Ah well, I was sure he wouldn’t mind. I knew he adored Annie M.G. Schmidt. I picked up the book and turned to a random page. I opened my mouth to start reading and realized, just in the nick of time, that under the circumstances the line “My uncle died of curiosity” was not the best choice. I quickly turned the page and read: “The world is oddly empty without you.” Couldn’t the damn woman have written about anything else? Then all of a sudden my eyes fell on exactly the right one: “What’s the Weather Like Now in The Hague?”

“Vincent, do you remember when we used to sing this song?”

I began reading it aloud and before long, without any conscious effort on my part, the words started bobbing up and down like the



ducks on the pond behind our house. I sang softly at first, then loudly:

When I've left this old country for good,  
when I'm living in France down by Nice,  
in a bungalow close to the beach,  
where the weather's not freezing and damp,  
I'll just lie on my back on the sand,  
beneath hills covered with flowering herbs,  
and I'll never go back to the north,  
and I'll sneer: What's it like up there now,  
still that wet, still that cold?

What's the weather like now in The Hague?  
Overcast with a good chance of rain?  
What's the weather like up there today?  
Are they wrapped in their coats and their scarves?  
Has it rained all this week?  
Is it blustery and bleak?  
Has the wind blown the people away?  
Has the winter set in like a plague?  
What's the weather like now in The Hague?

It must have looked strange: one man lying motionless in his steel-frame bed, the other sitting on a wobbly stool, singing at the top of his lungs.

What's the weather like now in The Hague?  
Are there leaves on the trees in the Square?  
Oh, how much I would love to be there,  
for an hour today  
in my birthplace The Hague  
at the Prisoners' Gate or the Place.  
I just want to go back and to stay,  
for my heart is still there in The Hague.

The song took me back in time. The three of us were once more sitting on Vinny's bed. I smelled his lilies-of-the-valley bubble bath, I saw the red elephants on his pajamas and the flush of excitement on his cheeks. We were home again.

It was April 20, 1989. I had some bad news that I wanted to share with my father and my stepmother Anna, but I thought it would be better to tell them in person. By then I had moved to Paris and they were living in Antwerp, so I took a train, caught a bus and walked the last fifteen minutes to their house. Even though I'd been mentally rehearsing my speech the whole way, I still couldn't decide what to say.

Six months had already passed since I'd been tested in Manilla, but I simply hadn't believed the results. For months I'd gone around thinking there had been a mistake. I hadn't accepted the inevitable until the test had been repeated three times and I'd consulted an American doctor.

I was still rehearsing my speech when I rang the bell. Dad and Anna weren't expecting me. I usually set a date and time in advance since they didn't like having people drop in unannounced. Anna insisted that she, my father and their daughter Marjolein were entitled to their own lives.

The gate, which was hard to open, squeaked in protest. I walked up the broad driveway to the chateau-style house and found Anna standing in the doorway, sheltering from the rain. She was dressed in gardening clothes—baggy corduroys and rubber boots—and holding a rake and a spade.

Anna immediately asked me what was wrong. Her directness caught me off-guard. Was I going to have to break the news to her here on the doorstep? I told her that I needed to see my father. We went

inside and she phoned him at the office. He promptly canceled his appointments for the rest of the day and was home within the hour.

We sat down around the empire table in the dining room. My father and Anna were waiting for me to begin, but suddenly I didn't know how. Stumbling over my words, I told them that I hadn't been feeling well, that I'd been tired and weak and suffering from flu-like symptoms. The doctor hadn't found anything wrong, but had suggested that I get myself tested for HIV. The test had been positive.

My father closed his eyes. In a letter he'd written me a year ago, he had already expressed his concern: "The newspapers are filled with articles about that dreadful disease they call AIDS. I can't help thinking of you and hoping with all my heart that we will be spared such an ordeal. Please be careful." I'd been touched by his concern, but thought he was being a worrywart, as usual. After all, Tom and I had been together for years, and I'd been careful the few times I'd strayed.

I explained that I was doing fairly well, given the circumstances. My T4 cells—the soldiers of the immune system that are knocked out by the virus—were still at a reasonable level.

"What's your count?" my father asked, pulling out his appointment book.

"Three hundred and thirty."

He wrote the number on one of the blank pages.

"What's the normal range?"

"About a thousand."

He jotted that down too.

"I've started taking AZT. I didn't know I could be so disciplined,

but I take a pill every eight hours on the dot. I've never been late, never skipped a pill. My whole life revolves around my medication: the hours I get up and go to bed, the hours I eat. It's like an army regimen. If the pills work, I can live a healthy life for years. By that time they will probably have come up with a new drug that can keep the infection under control. Some doctors believe that HIV will eventually be as easy to treat as diabetes." I deliberately neglected to mention that they didn't expect this to happen for at least another decade.

"Do you know how you got infected?" Anna asked, pushing back an imaginary lock of hair.

"No." I had asked myself that question over and over again, but I still didn't know the answer. I'd always been careful. Had I gotten infected before we knew that such a thing as AIDS existed? Or had something gone wrong one time, without my having noticed?

"You must have picked it up in Amsterdam."

"What makes you say that, Anna?"

"Well, we all know what goes on there."

"And Tom? Is he also...?" Both my father and Anna were very fond of Tom.

"No, Tom's lucky, he hasn't been infected."

Tom had gotten himself tested after I'd been diagnosed. Of course he'd been relieved when the test was negative, but he'd told me that he wasn't feeling a whole lot of solidarity with me just then. Which was just as well since solidarity wouldn't have helped me in the least.

"You have a big responsibility with respect to Tom. You mustn't infect him. The two of you will have to be extra careful." A note of sternness had crept into my father's voice. "Who have you told so far?"

"My friends in Amsterdam."

"Oh. Well, it's too late to change that now, but you mustn't tell Vincent and Marjolein. It would be too big a burden for them. In any case, don't go blabbing it any further!"

Anna nodded vigorously in agreement.

"I'll think about it," I said.

My father lay down that afternoon to rest, which was highly unusual. When he came downstairs for dinner his eyes were red and swollen, but otherwise he didn't seem at all upset. He talked about the rise in steel production and his plans for expanding the export market and putting up new office buildings. Business was going well.

Perhaps he was merely pretending to be cheerful so Marjolein wouldn't get suspicious. In any case she said she was delighted by my unexpected visit and was only sorry that Vincent hadn't joined us. It would have been nice to have had the whole family together again after such a long time.

A few weeks later, in the train on my way to meet Vincent, I felt torn by an old conflict: Should I tell him my secret? I couldn't decide whether I ought to be loyal to my father or to myself.

In my childhood I'd been burdened with a secret that hadn't involved me directly, but this one did. Did that give me more right to bring it into the open? I wasn't sure, so I decided to wait. After all, I was in reasonably good health. There was no big rush.

Vincent wanted to show me around Rotterdam's harbor. I hadn't been there in years. As we were standing on the quay, beneath a giant crane that had been made in one of my father's factories, I suddenly

blurted out my news. I hadn't meant to tell him or even wanted to. It had just slipped out before I knew what I was saying: "Vincent, I'm seropositive."

"I thought you might be."

"What made you think that?"

"It was that bullshit story you told about moving back to Europe because you had TB. You kept saying you had a virus, but tuberculosis isn't a virus. It's a bacteria from the mycobacterial family."

"How on earth do you know stuff like that?"

"I must've read it somewhere."

"Dad didn't want me to tell you."

"That's ridiculous!"

"So you're not sorry I told you?"

"Well, to be honest, I'd rather not have known." There was a short pause. "How did Dad react?"

"He was shocked and worried. And sad, I think."

"What about Anna?"

"She was shocked too. She asked me where I'd picked up the infection."

"As if that mattered. Are you taking AZT?"

"You're well-informed! I've just started. Two capsules every eight hours. The way it works is—"

"Let's not get into that right now. I'm hungry. How about Chinese?" So we went to the Happy Dragon and talked about typhoons, the ozone layer and global climate change over steaming bowls of rice.

Vincent avoided the subject for the longest time. It was as if I'd never told him. But one fall day as we were strolling through Rotterdam, he suddenly asked me if the AZT was working and if he could see one of the pills. I shook a blue-and-white capsule out of my pillbox and placed it on the palm of his hand. We both stared at the unicorn in the Burroughs Wellcome logo.

"Sometimes," I said, "I picture the capsules breaking open in my bloodstream and thousands of miniature unicorns galloping out to lance the virus with their horns."

"Isn't it a drag, having to swallow all those pills?"

"No, it's become as natural as breathing. I can't see the virus or feel it, so there doesn't seem to be a link with the pills. The only thing I feel is the needle inserted in my vein every three months when they take a blood sample to determine the T4 count. But even that's turned into a routine check, since the count has been stable."

"Have you heard about that new drug that's going to be tested in a DDI study? The clinical trial is scheduled to begin in January. Who knows, it might turn out to help you in the future."

"You're so knowledgeable, Vincent. You almost know more about it than I do."

"Almost? I know a whole lot more about it than you do!"

## 6

Once when Vincent was a senior in high school, I went to his boarding school for a visit. After his finals, the school he'd been attending since he was thirteen would close its doors forever: The market had dried up.

Vincent introduced me to the boys in his group. He was beaming. Not only had his twenty-four-year-old brother flown in from Asia, but I was a freelance photographer to boot, conferring a kind of status on Vincent as well. There were seven of us at lunch. The other boys dominated the conversation, though Vincent managed to interject an astute comment now and then.

After lunch, he invited me up to his room. Just me, none of his friends. I assumed that he'd cleaned up his "cubicle" for the occasion. The curtains matched the orange chairs, the walls were decorated with family pictures and posters of an exhibit on ancient Egypt, and the shelf above the bed was filled with books on anthroposophy, astronomy, the universe and, of course, the weather, since Vincent was planning to major in Meteorology at Wageningen University.

He was currently working on a project about the Philippines and wondered if I'd help. Naturally I agreed, so we spent the rest of the afternoon getting it into shape, and then he accompanied me to the Driebergen-Zeist train station. I leaned out the window and waved until Vincent was a mere dot in the distance.

In the middle of the empty room were six cardboard boxes that Vincent

still hadn't gotten around to unpacking, even though he'd been living in Ghent for six months. He never did major in Meteorology. He had obviously not done his homework, because when he got to Wageningen he discovered that the university didn't offer any courses in Meteorology. So he signed up for Non-Western Sociology instead, but quit after two years. He wanted to switch to an anthroposophical school in Hilversum, where he could study Homeopathy, but my father insisted that he study Medicine first, after which he could always decide to specialize. Either that, he said, or Vincent would have to support himself from now on. So Anna had loaded Vincent and his belongings into her station wagon and driven him from Wageningen to Ghent to study Medicine.

"Vincent," I said. "Why don't we unpack those boxes and fix up your room a bit?"

"There's no point, I won't be here long."

"Where are you going to move to next?"

"Hilversum, of course."

"How do you intend to pay for it?"

"Stop asking me all those impossible questions! How about a cup of tea?"

"Sounds good."

"Okay, but we'll have to go to the café around the corner, because all my cups are in those boxes."

Vincent's year at the University of Ghent was a failure. He didn't pass a single exam. My father eventually surrendered and agreed to let him go to Hilversum to study Homeopathy.

To my great surprise, Vincent phoned me in Manilla on my thirtieth birthday. I hadn't heard from him in ages. He wanted to know if the monsoon had already begun.

I asked him how things had been going in Hilversum.

"You sound like Dad. All he ever asks about are my grades."

"I don't care about your grades. I was hoping you'd suggest something I could take for my asthma."

"I dropped out of school. It wasn't right for me. All the other students were wimpy hippies in sandals. Has the monsoon already begun or not?"

"So what are you doing now?"

"I'm working for a temp agency in Amsterdam. Hey, I gotta run, this phone call is costing me a fortune. Have a happy birthday."

"Give me your number and I'll call you back."

But all I heard was crackle. Vincent had hung up.

In 1987 I flew to the Netherlands to celebrate Christmas with my family for the first time in years. The atmosphere at home was grim. Vincent had recently been given a scholarship and was now studying History in Leiden. Dad had unexpectedly dropped in a few days before and found him in bed.

He was still fuming when Vincent arrived on Christmas day. He asked him what on earth he did all day long. What was a healthy young man of twenty-five doing in bed at two in the afternoon? Didn't he have classes to go to?

Vincent didn't bother to reply. Instead, he stared sullenly into his

coffee cup, as if he hoped it would swallow him up before the avalanche of recriminations descended on him.

Anna had been annoyed for years by Vincent's lack of clothes sense and his habit of showing up in a wrinkled shirt, ragged, bespattered jeans and run-down shoes with untied laces. To make sure he'd look "casual but respectable" on Christmas Day, Anna had bought him a sports coat with a matching shirt and slacks. At Anna's urging, Vincent tried them on, marching woodenly around the living room with his arms and legs spread wide: a scarecrow in a Sunday suit.

After dinner, when my father was in a better mood, he slid a chair next to Vincent's and asked about the current focus of his studies. History was my father's great passion. He was hoping to expound on the Greeks or the Romans or, in a pinch, Napoleon. But Vincent's answers were evasive.

I asked Vincent what he thought of Leiden, if he'd made any friends there, if he got along well with his fellow students, if he went out occasionally. But I didn't get much information out of him either. All he wanted to talk about was the weather. Did I know that it had been a hundred years since Malaysia had had as much rain as during the last monsoon, even though it had been unusually dry in Indonesia, which is not all that far away? Did I realize that Europe had had four hot summers in a row? And what did I think of the South Pole, which had begun to melt as a result of a hole in the ozone layer? This time I was the unresponsive one, since I know nothing about the weather.

The next morning, after Vincent had gone, Anna called me into the kitchen, then led me out to the garbage can. Without a word, she lifted up the lid and nodded. There, among the remains

of last night's venison and rice pudding, were Vincent's brand-new sports jacket, slacks and shirt. Anna's neck was covered with angry red blotches.

In the summer of 1988, Vincent visited Tom and me in the Philippines for the first time. Anna had paid for the trip in the hope that afterwards he would settle down to his studies with greater enthusiasm.

I assumed that he'd want to go exploring with me, to examine the flora and fauna in the jungle. But when I was sent inland for a photo shoot, Vincent opted not to accompany me. He said he didn't like the sweltering heat. Instead, he stayed inside our air-conditioned house and watched TV. Tom took care of him, plying him all day with food and drink. Once when Vincent was taking a bath, he asked Tom to soap his back. Tom was surprised, but thought it must be some kind of strange Dutch custom. He declined the offer nonetheless. His Filipino hospitality drew the line at back-scrubbing.

I begged Vincent to send my father and Anna a postcard. As far as I know, he never did.

In 1989 my father decided to heed the advice of his financial advisor and transfer a portion of his estate to his children while he was still alive. We would inherit the remainder after he died. He ordered his attorney to draw up the necessary papers.

When the clock struck eleven, Dad, Anna, Marjolein and I were seated around a damask-covered table in the attorney's dimly lit office. Vincent still hadn't arrived. So we waited. While Anna attempted to get through to Vincent, the attorney impatiently tapped his black fountain

pen on the pile of documents that, in a few short minutes, would leave us a fortune.

At eleven-fifteen we went ahead and signed the papers without Vincent, then celebrated by having lunch in Rotterdam's one and only Michelin-star restaurant. Vincent later claimed that he hadn't been informed of the appointment. He'd apparently forgotten that Dad himself had phoned to tell him about it. Dad was deeply hurt by Vincent's indifference to his life's work, to everything that he held dear.

Why had Vincent failed to appear? Perhaps he'd been afraid that Dad would lecture him. Perhaps he'd wanted to hurt his father in the place that would hurt him the most. Or perhaps he'd simply overslept and had unplugged the phone, as he frequently did.

In any case, a new appointment was made for him. Having already signed the papers, my father felt that his presence was no longer required, so Vincent was obliged to go to the attorney's office by himself.

On August 6, 1990, Vincent turned twenty-eight. To celebrate his birthday, I took him to the zoo. He headed straight for the Reptile House, his favorite attraction, and pressed his face against the glass cage of a curled-up boa constrictor. I noticed that he had a bad cough and had lost a little weight.

"You ought to do something about that cough."

"I sweat so much at night that I must've caught a cold. Sometimes when I wake up, the sheets are soaking wet."

"But Vincent, night sweats are one of the symptoms! You haven't got HIV, have you?"

"Aw, come off it! Don't be silly! It's just a lingering cold, and I'm

sweating so much because of the heat. Not everyone is seropositive!”

“You’re right, that’d be too ridiculous. But you ought to have a doctor take a look at that cough.”

Later I phoned him to ask what the doctor had said. Our old GP hadn’t found anything out of the ordinary. Although I was reassured by the news, Dr. Hoogewegen had failed to discover what really ailed Vincent.

Anna and I were scheduled to have lunch with Vincent. We rang the doorbell at the appointed time, but there was no answer. After waiting for fifteen minutes, Anna suggested that we let ourselves into his apartment. She knew that he kept his key on the ledge above the door. It seemed like an invasion of his privacy to me, something you just don’t do. But Anna was worried that something might have happened to him, that Vincent might be lying unconscious in his room. So we went in. We didn’t find Vincent, but we did find a huge mess: newspapers, clothes and magazines scattered over the raw floorboards; plates of rotting food stacked up in the kitchen sink; a bare mattress on the bedroom floor. The only furniture consisted of a broken chair and a three-legged table. An old blanket had been hung over the window to serve as a curtain. The hall was lined with empty beer bottles, the harvest of months. The apartment smelled like a garbage dump.

Anna took a seat on the broken chair, while I lowered myself onto the mattress. What had happened to all the furniture Vincent had taken from home: the desk, the orange sofa and matching chairs, the bed, the bookcase, the stereo? How could he live in such squalor?

Vincent didn’t come home at all that afternoon. Anna and I finally

had lunch by ourselves. A few days later, after Anna had eventually managed to get hold of him, Vincent told her that he’d simply forgotten the appointment. By then her anger had transformed itself into worry. She promised Vincent that if he would get rid of all the empty beer bottles, she would arrange for a carpet and curtains. A month later, when the bottles were still in the hallway, Anna canceled the order.

Still, she couldn’t stop thinking about Vincent’s filthy apartment. How could he study in such chaos? So Anna and my father decided to rent an apartment for him on the thirtieth floor of a new high-rise in the middle of Rotterdam.

The apartment was ready in July. In October Vincent still hadn’t moved. I asked him why.

“Because I don’t want to live there.”

“But you told Anna you did.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

“I was saying no in my head.”

“No wonder Anna’s mad at you!”

“It’s clear to see whose side you’re on.”

“I’m not on anybody’s side.”

“No, you’re too chicken to take sides.”

I left it at that, and he did finally move in.

At 7:00 A.M. on November 20, 1990, my father phoned. His voice lacked its usual strength and decisiveness. He spoke slowly, sounding a bit dazed, as if he couldn’t believe his own words. He told me that



Vincent was in the hospital. He had pneumonia and... Dad paused, the way he used to when he was reading us a story—except that this time he wasn't trying to heighten the suspense, though he succeeded in doing exactly that—Vincent was seropositive.

“What? Vincent seropositive! That can't be right!”

“He says he slept with a man twice, a fellow student. According to him, it happened before he realized what he was doing. How could he have had unprotected sex? Everyone knows what the risks are these days. Both of my sons seropositive... I just can't believe it.”

Vincent was gay! Why had he never told me? It's something we could have shared. There had been enough opportunities for him to confide in me—my joking remarks about cute guys, my relationship with Tom or, for that matter, my entire lifestyle—but not once had he ever taken advantage of them. He must have been laughing up his sleeve when I described the bars and discos that he must have gone to himself dozens of times.

Only recently I'd been telling Vincent how much my life had changed since the sword of Damocles had been hanging over my head. He must have suspected then that he was infected. How could he have not said anything? How could he have gone on deceiving me?

“Why didn't he tell us, Eric? Why didn't he give us a chance? If I'd known, I could have kept it from happening.”

“How?”

“By warning him, by doing *something*. We'll have to do all we can now to make sure he doesn't get sick.”

“But Dad, he's already sick. He has pneumonia, he's seropositive, and he probably has AIDS.”

“No! They didn't use that word. They didn't use that word at all!”

That same day I took a plane from Paris to the Netherlands and went straight to the hospital to see Vincent. There was an elderly man in the bed beside him. The first thing I asked Vincent was if he had AIDS, but he put his finger to his lips: He didn't want the old man to know. So I climbed up on Vincent's bed and pulled the curtain around us, creating a kind of tent: a wigwam made out of white sheets.

“Well?”

“Yes, I do have AIDS. You never suspected, did you?” He lay back against the mound of pillows with a triumphant smile.

“Vincent, why didn't you tell me you were gay?”

“The good news would have too much for dear old Dad.”

“I wouldn't have told him if you didn't want me to.”

“Of course you would have, you can never keep a secret.”

“But no one in our family had a problem with it. I told them I was gay when I was fourteen, and they didn't bat an eyelash. Dad and Anna think of Tom as a son-in-law.”

“Yeah, because it's you. You're the oldest. It's different in my case. Dad wouldn't have been able to bear the disappointment of having two gay sons.”

“So how do you think he feels now?”

“Hey, who's the patient here? How do you think I feel?”

“How do you feel?”

“Fine.” He had to laugh. I'd never seen Vincent so cheerful. His diagnosis had apparently not sent him into a depression. On the contrary,

it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Doesn’t it bother you to think that you might not live to a ripe old age?”

“The thing is, I can’t feel sorry for myself. I hope I’ve got a couple of good years left. Four, maybe five. Hey, Eric, you and I now have a tie that binds us together.”

“Haven’t we always had a family tie?”

“Of course, but now we’re bound together even more closely. Just think, we’ll be able to go to the doctor together, Eric. And to gay bars!”

His cheeriness was catching. The strange brother I had never really known had vanished. In his place was a brother with whom I now shared a lot of important things. I was pleased with the new contact between us. It was an unexpected gift. But a temporary one, on loan.

## 7

Vincent and I were sitting on a bench in the public library with an AIDS self-help book between us, one half on my knee, the other on his. He wouldn’t let me hold it upright for fear that someone would see the title. The library was nearly empty that afternoon. A few feet away a man was napping in a chair, his jaw hanging so slackly that, like the Mouth of Truth in Rome, you might be tempted to stick your finger in it.

Vincent shot me an accusing look: I was talking too loudly. So I lowered my voice to a hush while he started thumbing through the pages. He showed me a picture of an oral fungal infection called thrush, in which the tongue was covered with so many bumps and cracks that it resembled a lunar landscape. Suddenly forgetting his need for secrecy, he stuck out his tongue. The purplish flesh was flecked with patches of what looked like cottage cheese. A clear case of thrush. He wondered if I had it too and asked me to stick out my tongue, which I obediently did. He leaned closer and narrowed his eyes to slits as he peered into my mouth. Nothing. Well then, did I have a rash? His chest was full of little red bumps that itched like mad. No, I didn’t have a rash either. Vincent was disappointed. Competing with me was apparently no fun.

As we skimmed through the book, I noticed that he knew the names of all the infections and had even memorized the medications prescribed to deal with them. He knew that you could go blind from the cytomegalovirus and that it could be prevented by Foscarnet or Acyclovir—provided you caught it in time. He knew that the mycobacterium avium complex was tricky, since it was difficult to diagnose. It

could also give you diarrhea. *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, PCP, was the pneumonia that had led to his AIDS diagnosis. To make sure he didn't get pneumonia again, he was taking Bactrim. He could have also inhaled Pentamidine once a month, but it didn't reach the upper part of the lungs, which is why he preferred Bactrim. If you got toxoplasmosis, which affects the brain, you'd be a goner in no time.

He talked about these infections with distant amusement, as if they were products in the latest Sears catalog.

"Taking all those AZT pills can't be good for you, Eric."

"If I don't take them I'll die, and that won't be good for me either."

"I wouldn't mind dying. I like the idea of slowly fading away."

I was appalled. Not only at his willingness to shuffle off this mortal coil, but particularly at the ease with which he admitted it. As if he were bored. It was the same when we were kids and he'd stop in the middle of Snakes and Ladders because he'd grown tired of it.

"Do you really want to die, Vincent?"

"No, of course not. What makes you say that?"

To this day, I still don't know if there was a connection between Vincent and the words that came out of his mouth. It was possible that they led a separate existence, entirely unrelated to him. Words were balls that he tossed in the air and deliberately let fall, or else slammed into the net or kicked against your shins. By the time the balls bounced back to him, he'd forgotten they had ever been his. It was as if every ball was sent spinning just for the heck of it. Here one minute and gone the next.

Vincent had asked if he could spend his birthday with Tom and me, though we had to promise to do it the Dutch way, which meant decorating his chair with paper streamers. I had no idea where to buy the streamers, so Tom and I wrapped his chair in pink and blue toilet paper and made a few bows out of brightly colored napkins. It was a poor imitation of birthdays past, but Vincent sat down happily on his floral-scented chair and opened his presents. I'd bought him a huge 4 x 6 foot map of the world. Tom gave him a meteorological encyclopedia. When I launched into the traditional birthday song—"May You Have a Long and Glorious Life"—Vincent threw me a sardonic look.

While I arranged the candles on his cake, Vincent fantasized about how he'd like to celebrate his birthday next year. He'd invite everyone he knew and they'd all come to his apartment bearing gifts. Then he'd retire to his bedroom and watch TV all by himself.

It took him six tries to blow out the candles. And I hadn't even put on all twenty-nine.

My father had read in the paper about DDI, a new medication that had finally been approved for use. He wanted Vincent to get started on it as soon as possible. Vincent had recently stopped taking AZT because it made him anemic and nauseous. In consultation with his doctor, I arranged for him to get DDI. He was supposed to dissolve the tablets in water twice a day, take them on an empty stomach and not eat for an hour. But he'd experienced tingling in his fingers and toes for three weeks, so he wanted to stop taking them.

My father was worried and called me. He wanted me to convince Vincent to continue with the pills. Since he was planning to have lunch

with him, he suggested that I come along, so the two of us could tackle him together. Of course I flew home for the lunch. I met Vincent in his apartment ahead of time and asked him if he'd taken his DDI that morning. There was no answer.

“Vincent, if you aren't experiencing any other side effects, why don't you just put up with the tingling?”

“Easy for you to say. It's not your fingers and toes that are tingling.”

“Better to feel a little tingling than nothing at all.”

“I'm not so sure.”

“Don't be ridiculous, just take them.”

He went into the kitchen and emerged five minutes later with a few drops of water on his chin.

In the restaurant we waited forty-five minutes before ordering our meal—the time Vincent had to wait before he could eat. My father and I discussed the economic situation, predicting that interest rates were likely to go down. Vincent's eyes glazed over in boredom. He barely touched his asparagus omelet, insisting that he wasn't hungry, so I finished it for him. Only when we were saying goodbye did Dad launch into his lecture. He kissed Vincent three times on the cheek in the usual Dutch fashion—left, right, left—then begged him to continue taking his meds. Vincent said he'd give it a try, but he clearly didn't mean it and was only saying it to please our father.

Since then interest rates had soared. So much for our ability to predict the future.

Vincent came to Paris to see Tom and me with a gift for each of us. Mine was a free book given away by bookstores during the annual Book Promotion Week. He asked me to return it when I'd read it, because he'd borrowed it from a friend. Tom's gift was a carton of cigarettes he'd bought at the airport. I must've forgotten to tell him that Tom had stopped smoking.

On Vincent's first morning, Tom got up early to fix breakfast for him. He arranged a tray with smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, toast, jam, croissants, coffee, orange juice and—just as in a five-star hotel—a single rose in a bud vase. He came back a few minutes later looking crestfallen. Vincent had refused it, claiming that he didn't like eating breakfast in bed.

That evening, when Vincent said he wanted to watch TV, we lugged the television from our bedroom into the living room. Half an hour later, Vincent announced that he was going to bed, since we were only sitting around watching the boob tube.

In the morning he said he was tired of the hustle and bustle of Paris and longed for some country air. So Tom and I decided to take him to a forest about an hour away. After we'd canceled the meetings we'd scheduled for the day and installed ourselves in the car, Vincent asked us where the forest was. He was surprised to hear it was outside the city, couldn't remember our having told him that it would take us an hour to get there and informed us that he wasn't in the mood for a long drive. So we turned around and drove back home, where an irritated Tom took refuge behind his computer.

After that Vincent wanted a popsicle. It had to be raspberry, he called to me as I was heading out the door. No other flavor would do.

I walked through the rain for an hour and a half before I found a deli that sold popsicles. They even had raspberry. But after one lick, Vincent said it tasted yucky and threw it in the garbage.

Weeks later Vincent phoned me from Rotterdam. “Eric, you’ll never guess what I found at the flea market! A record with the songs from ‘My Fair Lady.’ Do you remember when we went to see the play?”

“Of course. ‘With a Little Bit of Luck...’”

We sang the first verse together through the phone. There was a short pause.

“But I don’t have a record player.”

“Oh.”

“Could I come and listen to it at your place?”

“Vincent, now is not a good time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He said it softly.

“Come another time, then we’ll play the record and dance to it.”

“Assuming I can still dance. Well, goodbye.”

“See you soon, Vincent.”

Vincent and I went to London, our first destination in a series of European trips that we embarked on together. I had finally found a way for the two of us to have a good time without going to either his place or—even worse—mine.

We were walking past an old-fashioned lingerie shop. I leapt in front of the window with my arms outstretched to block the display of lacy bras and panties on a backdrop of blood-red silk. “My little brother

mustn’t see such things.”

“Jeez, Eric. You know they don’t get a rise out of me.”

The two of us burst into raucous laughter. Not only at Vincent’s snappy comeback, but also out of sheer relief. We could finally joke about things that Vincent had kept secret for years. There was nothing more to hide, there were no longer any barriers between us.

One night, when we were in Copenhagen, we decided to go bar hopping together for the first time. Off we went, Vincent clutching an unwieldy map of the city in his hands, and me with the *Spartacus Gay Guide* under my arm: a veritable Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes. We turned left at the corner, walked two blocks, and then turned right, stopping at number 54, which was halfway down the street. I went into the bar first. Everywhere I looked there were men dressed from head to toe in black leather: leather pants, leather jackets, leather caps, high leather boots. Some of them had handcuffs swinging from their belts, others were wearing crotchless pants. The walls were decorated with whips and chains and grisly-looking tools that resembled medieval instruments of torture. I turned around and went back out. Vincent’s only comment, after peeking through the door, was that he wasn’t dressed properly for the leather scene.

We went into a café across the street instead. Vincent insisted on sitting by the window. He ordered a beer. I asked him if he thought it was a good idea to mix alcohol with the DDI, but he assured me that one beer couldn’t do any harm. Vincent stared as a macho leather freak went into the bar across the way. I supposed he was curious about what was going on inside.

He asked me if I'd ever been in a darkroom. Deliberately pretending to misunderstand him, I told him that I went into one almost every day to develop my photographs. Not that kind of darkroom, he explained, but the gay kind that's pitch black inside. He used to frequent them a lot, he said, though never when I was in the country, because one time he'd felt an inhaler in someone's pocket, a Ventolin, the same kind I used for my asthma. He hadn't been able to get out of there fast enough.

Vincent in a darkroom, where men search for other men in artificial darkness designed to heighten the excitement. The whole setup reminded me of those black velvet boxes in children's museums that you stick your hands into and try to guess what you're touching. Except that in Vincent's case some guy would be unbuttoning his shirt and caressing his nipples, and a hand would be grabbing his ass, weighing the flesh like a butcher before giving it a slap. A man (the same one, or were there two men, or even three?) would be unzipping Vincent's pants and massaging his balls. When the lights went on, everyone would freeze, like in the game of Statues, where the players have to remain in the same position when the person who is It turns around. I tried to imagine Vincent, standing there among those frozen statues with his hand pressed to a man's crotch. My crotch? I shivered. We didn't go bar-hopping that night. It was too late for the two of us to go cruising.

We also set off in search of adventure in Spain. The esplanade in Sitges was well-lit, but the beach a few feet below it was not, so there was a steady flow of men. From the vantage point of our bench, Vincent and I watched them come and go and commented on their activities. All of a sudden Vincent burst into song:

What's the weather like now in The Hague?

Overcast with a good chance of rain?

What's the weather like up there today?

Are they wrapped in their coats and their scarves?

Has it rained all this week?

Is it blustery and bleak?

Has the wind blown the people away?

Has the winter set in like a plague?

What's the weather like now in The Hague?

Did I remember the song? Of course I did! Still, I was amazed that he knew the entire second stanza by heart. We sang it together while the "beachcombers," some of whom were still buttoning their flies, glanced at us in surprise.

That's when Vincent told me his secret: He had a friend named Peter, a black-haired man from Friesland, whom he'd met at a bar in The Hague. They'd slept together during the first months of their relationship, but for the last three years had merely been friends.

Peter was thirty-eight, worked for Child Protection Services in The Hague and was going to night school to get a degree in social work. He'd been married twice, having realized only later in life that he was gay. He lived near the Haagse Bos, a park he went to frequently to walk his dog, a basset hound.

I felt honored that Vincent had confided in me, but wondered how important this man was to him. It seemed that he and Peter saw each other on a regular basis. Every once in a while they went out together

to the rougher sort of gay bars, since neither of them liked “flaming queens.”

Who on earth was this man? Who would willingly befriend Vincent? Or was he one of Peter’s social-work projects?

In a shop on Berlin’s Kurfürstendamm, Vincent leafed through a book on reincarnation.

“Do you believe in that stuff?” I asked him.

“Coming back in another life? God, I hope not!”

“What do you think happens after death?”

“No idea. And you?”

“Me neither. But I think that we can’t lose. If there’s no afterlife, we won’t notice, and if there is, we’ll take it from there. It’ll be a big adventure.”

“Adventure, my ass.”

“I want a funeral with lots of music and flowers. And nobody dressed in black. What about you?”

“I couldn’t care less. After all, I won’t be there.”

“It’s funny, the way your own funeral leaves you cold.”

Vincent grinned at my unintentional pun. As we strolled on through Berlin, he suggested that whichever of us died first should give the other a sign from the hereafter. But we both wondered how that would work. Vincent pondered the question for a while, as if he were looking for a practical solution to an everyday problem.

“I’ll know a sign when I see it,” I said, but the words were hardly out of my mouth before I realized my mistake. Luckily, Vincent hadn’t

noticed. He was too busy thinking about signs. A knock on the wall, a voice in the night, a mark on a sheet of paper—all of them smacked so much of haunted English castles that before long we were giggling like schoolboys.

“If someone came up with a new drug that would keep us from dying, or at any rate not from AIDS, what would you do?”

Instantly, the smile vanished from Vincent’s face. He looked as if I’d hit him.

“God forbid such a thing should happen,” he said. “I’d jump out a window.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course not. But stop asking such stupid questions. Hey, it’s about time we had some Kaffee mit Kuchen.”

So we went to a Konditorei, where I treated Vincent to apple pie, slathered in whipped cream.

Between trips, Vincent and I phoned each other at regular intervals. “The strangest thing happened yesterday,” he told me once. “I went into a department store to buy some wine glasses for my guests, and all of a sudden I started to cry. There wasn’t a chair in sight, so I sat down on a display of coffee mugs for a few moments, until it was all over. Weird, huh?”

I didn’t know what to say. Vincent had cried.

And I hadn’t been there to comfort him.

As Vincent’s condition deteriorated further, I came to see him more

often. One night, before his appointment with the specialist, we drew up a list of symptoms: nausea, aching muscles, fever, night sweats, thrush, headaches, weak legs, itchiness all over, and fatigue—particularly fatigue.

I called a taxi. Vincent wanted to go in his slippers, pajama bottoms and a sweater, but it was freezing outside. I helped him put on a winter coat, pulled a wooly brown cap over his head and wrapped the scarf that Anna had knit for him around his neck.

There he sat in the overheated waiting room like a dressed-up snowman. My mother's dictum had always been that you should take off your outer garments when you went inside, as otherwise you wouldn't be warm enough when you went back out, so I helped Vincent struggle out of his coat.

The doctor was distant and gruff. She asked about his symptoms. Vincent pulled the crumpled list out of his pocket and read it to her as if he were naming the ingredients for a stew. She told him that his symptoms were par for the course and promised to prescribe an ointment for the itch and pills for the thrush.

She asked Vincent to get undressed. He still had a good body: broad shoulders, a small waist. It was just his legs that were too thin. The doctor tapped his chest and palpated his lymph glands, which were slightly swollen. She checked his feet and legs for signs of Kaposi sarcoma—a form of skin cancer that frequently occurs in HIV patients. The least Vincent could have done was to clip his toenails.

I asked her if the results of Vincent's T4 count had come in, but she said she didn't attach much importance to them at the moment. When I insisted, she leafed through a stack of papers. His count turned

out to be ten. Jesus! A couple of months ago it had still been eighty. Vincent merely raised his eyebrows.

Once we were back outside, I asked if he wanted to go to a movie. I liked to reward myself after a doctor's appointment by doing something fun, but Vincent said he didn't want to go to a movie. Apparently he thought I had only suggested it to avoid having to talk to him. Nor was he in the mood for Japanese food, he didn't feel up to coffee, a museum would be too tiring, and canal rides made him sick to his stomach. I couldn't even get him to go to the zoo. All he wanted to do was to go home.

"Why don't you run around the block or something, Eric? After all, you're as healthy as a horse."

"Damn it, Vincent, I've come all the way from Paris to take you to the doctor."

"Did I ask you to?"

"You phoned me and said you thought it would be nice if someone went with you."

"Someone, yeah, but not necessarily you."

"Who else?"

"Somebody, anybody, it doesn't matter who."

I would have walked off except that he was clutching my sleeve to keep from slipping on the icy sidewalk. So we shuffled over to the taxi stand together instead.

Vincent clambered out of bed before I could pick up the phone. It was Peter, calling to say he wouldn't be able to come over next Sunday. He



asked Vincent to say hello to me.

Despite the numerous days I'd spent with my brother in recent months, I still hadn't met Peter. Was it a coincidence that our visits never overlapped? Or was Vincent deliberately keeping us apart, like a skilled courtesan?

Vincent did tell me that Peter had done his homework at his apartment the week before, while he was resting. I tried to imagine the scene: Vincent lying under the blankets in his bathrobe, with the bedroom door open to the living room while Peter bent over his books in the sparse light of the ceiling lamp. Each one in his own space. Apart, and yet together.

I heard Vincent call me, but by the time I got to his bedroom, it was too late. He was standing by his bed, bent slightly forward, his legs wide apart and his arms away from his sides, like a seasick sailor who had failed to reach the railing in time. Watery light-brown poop dribbled down his pajama legs and onto the floor. I removed his pajamas and threw them in the washer along with the soiled sheets. Vincent kept standing there in a daze, as if he didn't understand what had just happened. Meanwhile I scrubbed his legs with disinfectant soap until he yelled at me to stop.

Where had all the poop come from? Vincent hadn't eaten in five days. Or had he sneaked into the kitchen at night?

I put clean sheets on the bed and dressed him in a pair of red-and-blue pajamas with "Monte Carlo Racing Team" emblazoned across the chest.

"Okay, Eric. Now do you think I ought to be hospitalized?" He'd

been begging to be admitted for weeks.

"Yes, Vincent, it's time."

Dr. de Kort asked him when he'd last taken his meds. Vincent shrugged.

"When, Mr. Brautichem?"

"Six weeks ago."

"You must never, ever, stop taking the antibiotics without consulting us first. Now you see why."

Dr. de Kort strode out of the hospital room.

"A difficult man," Vincent said.

By the time I reached the hall, the doctor had vanished. I slammed my hand against the wall in frustration. The sound echoed down the corridor. The white tiles felt cold beneath my hand and shone with a relentless glare. I saw myself reflected in one of them—round head, round glasses, round mouth—everything in that white square was round.

I was sick and tired of Vincent's games. I would tell him that if he lied to me one more time he'd have to deal with everything on his own, because I had better things to do with my time. I looked through the porthole in his door. There he lay, a baby bird fallen out of the nest, his neck at an odd angle on the oversized pillow, his eyes sunk deep into their sockets, his cheekbones etched sharply in his thin, unshaven face.

I opened the door and sat down by the bed. "You're right, Vincent. Dr. de Kort *is* a difficult man."

I hear Vincent's name being called. Or is it mine? Dr. de Kort is standing in the doorway. He asks if I have a moment and invites me into his cramped office.

Six stools are arranged in a circle, like an abandoned game of musical chairs. A hockey stick juts out of an overnight bag in the corner, a photograph of Rotterdam adorns the wall, a few diagrams have been tacked to a sheet of cardboard. One of them is dangling from a pushpin. A tiny desk is covered with stacks of files. Is Vincent's one of them?

Dr. de Kort gestures for me to sit down. He fetches a chair for himself and places it next to mine. I notice how young he is, not much older than Vincent, probably around thirty, dressed in beige corduroy pants and dark-brown brogues. His blond hair curls a little over the mandarin collar of his lab coat. This is a man whose life has been as smooth and unblemished as the skin on his suntanned arms, a man who could certainly be considered "casual but respectable."

He is concerned about Vincent's health. Apparently Vincent is not responding to the medications. Dr. de Kort switches on the wall-mounted light box and holds up an x-ray of Vincent's brain, using his pen to point to what looks like half a walnut. The toxoplasmosis has spread significantly and led to meningitis. His pen circles the part of the walnut that seems to be enveloped in cotton candy—a thick mist shrouding the landscape of a distant planet. For years I've thought that Vincent should have his head examined, but this wasn't what I meant.

"Where do we go from here?"

"At the moment we're giving your brother the maximum dose of two types of antibiotics. We won't know for sure whether they're doing the job until Monday. At that point I'll contact the specialist."

"Can't you contact him now?"

"It's Friday afternoon."

Dr. de Kort studies his fingernails.

"Meanwhile we've given orders for the immediate family to be notified."

My stomach lurches into my throat, like it does when an airplane unexpectedly hits an air pocket.

"Of course we can't say anything for sure, but we don't want to take any risks." He flashes me an apologetic smile.

I am dumbfounded. They're waiting calmly until Monday, they're unable to assess the situation fully, but they're already warning the family? The whole situation is preposterous. Why has this young whippersnapper been foisted off on us? I want to wipe that smile off his smug face, wrap my hands around his tanned throat and force him to eat his words.

Then I notice that he keeps crossing his legs nervously, like a schoolboy. I see him stretch his neck, as if to free himself from my imaginary grip. He keeps rolling his ballpoint back and forth between his fingers, like a kid practicing a magic trick. It's not Dr. de Kort's fault. I release my fanciful hold on his throat.

"What are Vincent's chances?"

"It's hard to say. If the antibiotics take effect, he might pull through."

“And otherwise?”

“Then it will probably be over fairly soon.”

Fairly soon. How soon is “soon”? I don’t dare ask.

“But as I already told you, I can’t say anything with certainty.”

Who can? This conversation is like something out of a nightmare, one in which you wake up with a pounding heart and think that it really must be happening because you can still hear the voices and see the images, even though some part of you realizes you were dreaming. It’s that kind of conversation, except in reverse, because this one really *is* happening. My knee is almost touching Dr. de Kort’s wide-ribbed corduroys, his prep-school accent is still ringing in my ears, the x-ray of that shriveled walnut is still clipped to the light box. But it can’t be real, it has to be a dream.

“Can Vincent feel anything?”

“The toxoplasmosis is probably making your brother feel a bit dopey, as if there’s a wall between him and the world.”

“Can he hear anything through that wall?”

“We know from experience that even when people are in a coma, they can sometimes hear what’s being said.”

“What should I be doing?”

“You could hold his hand, stroke his cheek.”

Is Dr. de Kort actually blushing, or does he only seem to be? I can imagine Vincent saying, “Holding hands, stroking cheeks—not my thing.” He doesn’t like physical contact. He stiffens whenever you touch him.

“Is he in pain?”

“I don’t think so, but the moment we notice any pain, we’ll start administering morphine.”

“But how will we know he’s in pain if he isn’t responding to outside stimuli?”

“Well, yes, that is always a problem.” There’s a rustle of corduroy as he re-crosses his legs. “If you have any more questions, you can always ask me. We prefer to have one person representing the family, rather than everyone taking turns.”

“Thank you, Dr. Corduroy.”

“It’s de Kort. Dr. de Kort.”

I walk slowly back to Vincent’s room. If you have any questions... I have hundreds. The most urgent is: What should I be hoping for? That Vincent will pull through this round? That they’ll patch him up so he can come back in a few months with a new infection? Still, he might have a reasonable amount of time left. We’d be able to talk to each other. He could tell me what he’d been thinking about while he was lying in his hospital bed, and whether he wanted me to hold his hand and stroke his cheek.

Would I believe him, or would it be like it always is, with Vincent saying one thing one moment and swearing the exact opposite the next?

Should I be hoping it’ll all be over soon? But then what? He’d no longer be here. How am I supposed to imagine Vincent’s absence? How the hell can I picture an eternally absent Vincent?

I couldn’t help remembering the trip that Vincent and I took to Lisbon. One day we went to see the Moorish castle in Sintra. We started to walk up the hill to the castle, but Vincent was huffing and puffing

so hard that we had to stop. He urged me to go on without him, so I did. As I neared the top, I looked back. He was sitting on a stone well beneath a tree, looking pale and thin in his rugged leather jacket. He kicked at a pile of autumn leaves, like a sulky child. I wanted to run down the hill and hug him, but I forced myself to keep going until I reached the tower.

I took dozens of pictures, wanting Vincent to be able to see what I saw. Yet it was impossible to capture the raw beauty of those green hills as they faded imperceptibly into the Atlantic Ocean. I could hint at it by using filters to enhance the color, or I could try to emphasize the lines, but I would never be able to portray the vastness of it all.

Vincent was anxious to know what I had seen, to find out if it had been worth the effort. He begged me to tell him every detail. I lied and told him that the view was like every other view he'd ever seen.

After I'd developed the pictures, I couldn't decide whether to send them to him. Would I be doing him a favor? Would he enjoy seeing what he had missed?

Last week I finally decided to stick them in the mail. The photos were no doubt in his apartment, waiting for him.

I trudged dejectedly back to Vincent's room. While I'd been talking to the doctor, a feeding tube had been inserted in his nose. This is how they administered his food and medications, but it gave him the hiccups. His body kept jerking spasmodically, as if he were getting electroshock therapy.

I stood by the bed. Vincent raised his hand. My heart skipped a beat: He recognized me! But no, he slowly brought his hand to his jaw

and touched it tentatively, as if he'd just had a tooth filled and wanted to make sure it was still there because the anesthetic hadn't yet worn off. His fingers slid upward in slow motion and stopped when they reached the nasal tube. Was it bothering him? His body convulsed once more as the hiccups struck again.

"Eric," he said to me once, "if you could choose between signing up for five more years, knowing that you'd kick the bucket at the end of that time, or taking your chances the way things are now, which would you choose?"

"I don't know. How about you?"

"I'd sign on the dotted line. What if they could guarantee you ten years?"

"Ten years? That seems forever! But what if eight years from now they come up with a combination of drugs that allows AIDS to be treated as easily as diabetes? In that case every seropositive person in the world would be cheering except me. I would have sentenced myself to death for a few years of certainty."

"Lighten up, Eric, it's just a game. And a pretty stupid one at that. Okay, now it's your turn to pick a topic."

I stared into his eyes, seeing the tiny gray flecks in the pale blue irises, the round and dark pupils. I wished that every inch of me could disappear into those orbs, that every look of mine could keep Vincent from slipping away. As long as I kept my eyes focused on him, he couldn't die.

While I was in my first year of high school, a photographer came to our house one day to take a family portrait. He was a small man who hid his flapping ears and bald head behind a huge camera with a shiny flash attachment. Every time he changed the bulb, Vinny squeezed his eyes shut and put his fingers in his ears.

Mama was wearing the beige designer dress that she and I had bought together. The couturier had told her that she had “a queenly back.” Mama had blushed; I thought he was sucking up.

She was also wearing the triple-strand pearl necklace with the diamond clasp that Dad had recently given her. Hadn’t her suspicions been aroused when he’d started showering her with furs and jewelry? Dad carefully rearranged the necklace, like an overeager window dresser, so that the costly clasp would show up better in the picture.

My mother was seated in her usual spot on the red sofa, with a book in her lap. She hated being photographed. Vinny was seated on one side of her, I on the other. I started to put my arm around her, for the sake of the picture, but she shrugged me off, the way you would a fly that was annoying you. Dad was standing a few feet away, busily staging the scene for the perfect photograph. The only person missing from the family portrait turned out to be Dad himself.

Later that day, I was looking for a poem that I could recite at school. My mother reached into the bookcase and took out a slender volume:

*The Last Verses* by Jacqueline van der Waals. The pale-blue cover was frayed, the pages yellowed. Mama explained that the book had been given to her during the war by her now deceased brother, who had been a writer. She leafed through it and stopped when she came to a poem she considered suitable. “Now That I Know” was about a woman who had been told she had cancer, and “even though we scrupulously avoided the hateful word,” she was still able to enjoy the “sweetness and beauty of all things.”

It was a lovely poem, I thought, but I was puzzled. Was this my mother’s way of letting me know that she knew she had cancer? And that she knew I knew? I was about to broach the subject—I nearly asked her if that’s why she liked strolling through the garden by herself, or lying in her deck chair beneath the linden tree—when it occurred to me that it might be a coincidence. What if she simply liked the poem because of the words, the rhythm, the rhyme? What if she really didn’t know she had cancer? So I told her that the language was too old-fashioned—“the air was redolent and reminiscent of incense-saturated soutanes”—and that something more modern might lend itself better to a school recitation. Mama concluded that I might be too young to understand the poem and that it would perhaps be better to wait until I was older.

I was exhausted all the time, but couldn’t sleep at night. During the day I was quiet and withdrawn. My mother suggested that if I couldn’t talk to her about whatever was bothering me, I might consider discussing it with our family doctor. So I went to see Dr. Hoogewegen.

“Isn’t it time she was told?”

“Told what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That she has cancer. That she’s dying.” For the first time in two and a half years, I had said the words aloud. The doctor put his arm around my shoulder.

“How do you think it feels to know you have to leave your children behind?”

Dreadful, I thought. So I never brought up the subject again, and every night I took one of the sleeping pills the doctor had prescribed for me.

One day when I was nearly fifteen, I went into my mother’s room while she was out shopping. She had purchased a strong box in which to store her medication safely. That afternoon the box wasn’t locked. I took one pill from each of the eight pink boxes, two from the six blue boxes and a handful of pills from a glass tube. Then I swallowed them all.

For three days my life hung in the balance. The first thing I smelled when I regained consciousness was Mama’s Arpège. She had applied it lavishly in hopes that it would snap me out of my coma. She was wearing the red Chanel suit that I liked because it made her look chic. My mother had succeeded in luring me back to life.

Many people came to see me in the hospital: relatives, friends, teachers. One of my teachers asked me if I had wanted to leave my brother alone to fend for himself. Of course not. The thought had never crossed my mind when I was swallowing those pills. I hadn’t been thinking of anything at all. I’d simply wanted to lay down the burden I’d been carrying for so long.

At school, my social-studies teacher—a priest—called me a

“spoiled rich kid” who needed a good mental spanking. I tried to imagine the scene. Me bent over his knee, with him spanking me, first on one mental buttock—swish, swash, swack—and then the other?

Our domestic told me that my mother was appalled at the thought that I had taken her pills. I didn’t understand what was so appalling. Was it because I had stolen into her room and violated her privacy—as I had a few years ago, although I’d borrowed her Arpège then rather than her pills? Or was it because I had indirectly made her complicit by using her pills—the way a father could be considered complicit if his son used his hunting rifle to put a bullet through his head?

Should I have taken my own pills?

Dad wept at my bedside. Why had I wanted to take my own life? There was no way I could tell him that it was because of the secrecy, the need for silence, which had taken Mama away from me long before she was dead.

He told me that had deliberately not told my mother just how critically ill I had been, but Mama had a different story. Three weeks later, after I’d been released from the hospital, she insisted on giving me a bath. Hospital patients were not washed thoroughly enough, in her opinion. I felt uncomfortable with her carefully sponging my shoulders as I sat in the lukewarm water, but she told me then that she had known all along just how seriously ill I had been, because she had heard Dad weeping softly into his pillow every night.

I could picture it: my parents lying with their backs to each other on their own side of the bed, unable to share their grief.

Vinny ran to meet me when I came shuffling up the driveway after

my stay in the hospital. He kissed me and said I should never go away again, because he'd been bored stiff on his own. Did I feel like going horseback riding with him? He promised to hold both arms around my waist and to gallop enthusiastically on his sandstone horse.

But I was still too weak. I had to get my strength back first, which is why Mama spent all day in the kitchen, fixing me toast-ed-cheese-and-pineapple sandwiches. She stood at the counter with one hand supporting her aching back, while her smock bulged out over her bloated stomach.

I wasn't the least bit hungry, but I tried to eat as many toast-ed-cheese sandwiches as I could. I needed to get well fast, because I had a lot to make up for.

## 10

Two years later, in the fall of 1971, the weather was relatively mild. Mama, Vinny and I had gone outside for a walk. She had draped a salmon-colored jacket over her shoulders, and I was holding her arm, because she had difficulty walking. Vinny was moseying along behind.

Our neighbor was standing in her front yard. "So when are you due?" she asked, her beady eyes gleaming with curiosity as she leaned over her bare hedge.

"Oh, no, I'm not pregnant," Mama said, then turned to me as we slowly retraced our steps. "Oh Lord, have I gotten that fat?"

"Absolutely not!" I said furiously. "That old witch is crazy!"

It was the last time Mama ever went outside.

The house was quieter than usual. Mama was now bedridden. Dad was sitting downstairs watching TV. I gave him a goodnight kiss and went upstairs. At the top of staircase, I noticed that the door to Vinny's room was open. Mama was standing by his bed.

She leaned down, very slowly, and planted a kiss on Vinny's forehead. Then she stood there for a while, one hand clutching the headboard and the other holding the wall for support. She no longer had the strength to straighten up. I knew I ought to help her, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. She wouldn't want me to see her like this, it would only embarrass her, so I hurried into my room.

I was standing at the bottom of the spiral staircase, looking at the white pant legs backing down the stairs, one step at a time. I could see the lower end of the stretcher, where the leather strap had been buckled tightly over the blanket to keep Mama from escaping.

The stretcher was cautiously lowered down the stairs. First I saw her hands, holding a crumpled tissue, and then her arms, her wool sweater. Before she reached the bottom step, I turned around and fled into the back yard, so she couldn't see me looking at her in all her helplessness.

Because I was fifteen, Dad said I could visit Mama in the hospital. Vinny was nine and considered too young. So I went by myself, on the tram.

Mama looked pale and spoke so softly that I could barely hear her. I sat beside her and tried to think of something to say. Luckily a nurse came in just then and noticed that Mama's bedspread was getting raggedy. When the nurse told her that they'd give her a new one next week, Mama whispered that she hoped she wouldn't be here then.

I was only allowed to stay for five minutes, so I wouldn't tire her. As I was leaving, she said, "You'll take good care of Vincent, won't you?"

Outside, the snow was falling softly on the wet streets.

Vinny and I heard Dad's car pull into the garage. We waited in the kitchen for him to come give us a hug. But he went directly upstairs. We followed him up the spiral staircase, but he locked the bedroom door before we got that far. Vinny and I sat down on the steps and waited, our arms crossed, for the door to open.

Suddenly, we heard an anguished cry, as if someone was being sucked into quicksand. Vinny looked at me, his eyes round with shock and uncertainty. Without a word, the two of us raced down the stairs and resumed our seats at the table. Fifteen minutes later, Dad came into the kitchen with red-rimmed eyes, as if he had a cold. That night he joined us for dinner.

On my next visit to the hospital, my mother's breathing had become labored and erratic. She seemed to be gasping for air. Dad told me that it would be okay for me to hold her hand. I looked at Mama's freckled fingers, her pink nail polish, her diamond ring, the gold link bracelet around her wrist. I hesitantly put my hand over hers—the first time I'd done that— but she instantly pulled her hand away. I knew it, a voice inside me said, she doesn't want me to hold her hand. But, another voice said, she didn't know it was your hand, she probably thought it was a fly.

My father and I stayed by her bedside for a long time. Then all of a sudden she exhaled and didn't inhale again. Her breathing had stopped, as if it was meant to be this way.

Dad clutched me tightly. I stared at the hairs on his bald pate. Three were parted to the right, one to the left.

"Mama isn't coming back, Vinny. She's in heaven now."

He tore himself out of my arms. "It's not my fault, I didn't do it, I was playing outside all afternoon."

He rushed upstairs to his room. I went up after him, but he'd already locked the door. I knocked, softly at first, then harder. Finally I pounded on it and called his name, but still he didn't open the door.



Dad was sitting downstairs in his leather chair with his hands over his face. I thought he would never stop crying.

The night before the funeral, we had chicken, French fries and applesauce for dinner. When Vinny saw all his favorites, his lower lip began to tremble. He couldn't bear the thought of eating the food we normally ate on his birthday. This wasn't a time for celebration. After all, Mama had just died. He got up and left the table.

Dad said to leave him alone, that Vinny would eventually come back without any prompting. Fifteen minutes later, he slid back into his seat and started picking at his French fries, scowling all the while.

Dad had arranged for Vinny and me to go to the mortuary so we could bid our mother a final farewell. We were instructed to put on our Sunday best. Vinny wore the gray jacket with the velvet collar that he and Mama had shopped for together, the one she told him made him look like a prince. Dad had bought an elegant dark coat and bowler hat. The salesman had been startled when my father had told him it was for his wife's funeral. Dad had given me permission to buy a black coat too, as long as it was big enough for me to grow into and get a decent amount of wear from it.

We drove to the mortuary in the Cadillac and hesitantly entered the viewing room. Horrified, Vinny pointed at the coffin. That wasn't Mama! I didn't say anything, but I knew what he meant: The wax doll lying there with its sunken eyes and drooping jaw didn't bear the slightest resemblance to our mother.

There were hundreds of people at the cemetery. Some were standing on the grass between the gravestones; one of two were even standing on top. The coffin was heaped with lilies, roses and wreaths tied with silk memorial ribbons. Earlier that morning, Vinny and I had bought a bouquet of white freesias. I sniffed them before placing them on the coffin.

The three of us headed up the procession behind the bier: Dad on one side in his overcoat and bowler, me on the other in my extra-large coat and Vinny in the middle. Relatives, friends and business acquaintances followed behind. The men were dressed in dark suits and black ties, the women in wool suits and black stockings. Some wore a black veil.

The coffin was lowered into the dark hole while the priest intoned the usual "Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes," after which the mourners were requested to throw a spadeful of sand on the coffin. My father went first, tossing the sand with a solemn gesture. Then it was my turn. I emptied the spade with a rapid flick of my wrist and turned to pass it to Vinny, but he had disappeared. Heads turned this way and that, looking for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. One of the aunties, in a large black hat, finally took the spade from me and emptied its contents into the open grave.

We found Vinny after the crowd had dispersed. He had gone off to another part of the churchyard, where he was busily inspecting the trees. He was also sucking his thumb—a habit he still hadn't kicked.

My mother was gone, and yet I still had the feeling I was trespassing on forbidden ground when I opened her closet. I fingered the silk dresses,

sniffed the suits and breathed in my mother's heady smell, in hopes that it would make me cry. It didn't.

I looked in her dresser and found two packages: one with my name on it, and one with Vinny's. She usually went on a trip with my father at this time of year, and she always brought back presents. This time she'd purchased them before she left. Vinny's package, which was long, narrow and heavy, turned out to be a telescope. I ripped the paper off my present. It was Jacqueline van der Waals's *Last Verses*. The inscription in dark-blue ink on the flyleaf read: "For Fien on her twentieth birthday, March 15, 1944. Your brother Ben." Below it was a small stripe made by a ballpoint pen. Had it been her pen? Had she started to write me an inscription?

I leafed through her engagement diary. The weeks after her death were filled with various notes and appointments. I couldn't tell who the appointments were with or what she was supposed to be doing on those days. Her hand had trembled so much toward the end that her writing had become illegible. Life had seeped out of the alphabet. The letters were no longer able to stand on their own.

My mother had clearly wanted to keep going. Even when she could barely write anymore, she had made an appointment for the following week, and the week after that. It was her way of trying to prolong the time she had left. Her scrawled notes were proof of the despair she'd managed to hide from us for four long years; proof of her nearly superhuman effort to cling to life despite the shaking of her feeble hands; proof of her fear that death would catch up with her if she lay down her pen and that she would have to leave the three of us behind.

I couldn't bear the thought of her struggle behind the sound-proofed door, or the fact that I hadn't been able to hear her. I snapped the engagement diary shut and tossed it in the wastepaper basket.

Soon after the funeral, Dad left on a business trip to Hamburg. We no longer had a live-in domestic, but only a woman who came from nine to four. The rest of the time I was alone with Vinny. Every day we would bake an apple pie. For dinner we'd eat hot dogs and—mindful of our health—a bowl of applesauce. We played records in the living room, danced through the house to the beat of Petula Clark's "Downtown," and belted out such songs as "Wouldn't It Be Lovely?" and "With a Little Bit of Luck" from our favorite musical.

Vinny liked to peer through his new telescope before going to bed. He thought Mama had given it to him so he could look for her in heaven. I didn't know whether to encourage him in this fantasy or not. He could look all he liked, but he would never find her.

I preferred to read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. One night we sat on Vinny's bed, and he leaned his head on my shoulder while I read to him: "To promise not to do a thing is the surest way in the world to make a body want to go and do that very thing." Vinny had fallen asleep. I pulled the covers up to his chin and tiptoed out of the room. Before switching off the light, I took one last look at his blond curly head.

My father put an ad in the newspaper: "Widower seeks genteel lady to care for two boys aged nine and fifteen." Genteel ladies of every stripe responded to the ad. Ladies in fur coats, ladies in miniskirts and

platform shoes, ladies in velour pants and riding boots—all applied, but none stayed long. One youthful candidate with dark eyes and a plunging neckline grabbed my hand and asked me if my father could ever love her. And I thought they were supposed to be taking care of Vinny and me!

One middle-aged lady in a suit departed in a huff on her first night after my father had turned away from her, where she was seated on the sofa sipping her tea with her pinkie in the air, to watch the nightly news on TV. She was followed by Mrs. Groen, who hated getting mud on her silver shoes, by Miss Slot, who suffered from migraines, by “Call Me Els,” who was homesick for her mother after only three days, and by Miss Tuinman, who was willing to stay but got booted out after a week when my father found ten empty sherry bottles under her bed.

After a while we entered an era without any “ladies.” Vincent and I were delighted. Dad fried the steaks, I made the salad and Vincent set the table in his usual slapdash way. We continued to sing “With a Little Bit of Luck” and dance to “Downtown.”

One day in 1972, a year after Mama had died, Dad came home from the office earlier than usual and announced that we were going to pick Vinny up from school. He was wearing his navy-blue suit and nicest tie, with a matching handkerchief in his breast pocket, and carrying a small white box with a red ribbon. A present for Vinny?

He parked outside the school gate and told me to wait in the car. He ran his hand over his sparse hair and straightened his tie. Before long a cheerful Vinny came trotting out and told me that Dad was talking to his teacher, but would be back soon. Miss Janssen was

twenty-seven and had blond hair and dimples in her cheeks when she smiled. She had also been Vinny’s first-grade teacher.

We waited patiently in the backseat of the Cadillac. It took so long that Vinny began to wonder if they were discussing his report card. Half an hour later, Dad emerged from the building—without the white box. He scooted behind the wheel with a look of satisfaction on his face. Vinny hesitantly asked what the teacher had said.

What she’d said was that she would like to go out to dinner with Dad on Friday. Dad started the car. Vinny squeezed his lips tight, narrowed his eyes into slits and didn’t say another word for the rest of the day.

A year after he’d set off for the school with a box of Belgian chocolates under his arm, my father married Vinny’s teacher, Anna Janssen.

My eyes sting from keeping them glued to Vincent's face for so many hours. He looks right through me, as if I'm a sheet of glass.

I open the curtains. The fog has lifted, and the city is fading into the evening light. I see two familiar figures nearing the hospital: one walking with a firm tread, his back straight as an arrow; the other with her arm through his, doing her best to keep up with his long strides.

I tell Vincent that Dad and Anna are on their way, then switch on the bedside lamp and the fixture above the sink. The dim light inside now matches that outside.

Vincent's IV gurgles like a magic potion over a searing flame. I hear a faint noise through the wall of the room next door—the low hum of a dialogue. I can make out the differences in rhythm and pitch, but not the words. Is that how Vincent hears me: distant, muffled, hard to understand?

I hear my father's shoes squeaking down the corridor, along with his cough and the rapid click of Anna's high heels.

Dad taps on the open door. Both he and Anna are out of breath. Dad has on his usual dark suit and silk tie, though he's forgotten the pocket handkerchief. Anna is dressed in her gardening outfit and a hastily flung-on jacket that doesn't match the pants. There are traces of dirt underneath her fingernails.

She walks straight over to Vincent's bed and gives him a kiss. His eyes release their hold on the indicator light and begin to flick nervously

back and forth, like those of a caged animal. Dad kisses Vincent, then gestures for me to join him in the corridor, where he asks me what the doctor has said. I give him a brief summary, which he doesn't find satisfactory.

“What were the doctor's exact words?”

“That we'd know more about Vincent's chances on Monday.”

“But what's the prognosis?”

“Dr. de Kort told me that he can't say anything with certainty.”

“Then there's still hope!”

It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

We go back in, and I fetch a chair for my father and place it next to the bed. Anna stands on the other side. Dad takes Vincent's hand and brings it to his lips. Anna reaches across the bed and takes my father's other hand.

The hours went by slowly. The light in the corridor had been dimmed, all of the rooms were dark, and the night nurse was reading a gossip magazine in the kitchenette. Anna and I sat by the bed; my father had gone off to rest. Vincent tossed and turned, tugging at the IV tube attached to his hand. His eyes flicked back and forth again, as if searching the room for a possible attacker.

Anna straightened the sheets. “Go to sleep, Vincent. We're right here.” She sat down again beside me. “Is this really the end?”

“I don't know, Anna. I don't even know what I should be hoping for.”

“Maybe it's better this way. He doesn't want to keep going, which

I can certainly imagine. Who has he got to live for?”

“Me. He has me, doesn’t he?”

“That’s not enough, Eric.”

“You may be right. I wasn’t thinking of Vincent when Mama was sick either. When he was so little and needed me.”

“This must be extra hard on you. Seeing him like this must make you think of what your own future might be.”

“But he and I are different. I faithfully swallow my 200 mg of AZT every eight hours; he refuses to take his meds. I eat leafy vegetables and grains until they’re coming out of my ears; Vincent eats French fries and Mars bars. I go to bed at eleven every night; Vincent doesn’t hit the sack until three A.M. Besides, I’m convinced that by the time the AZT stops being effective, a new drug will have been discovered to take its place.”

What I didn’t tell Anna was that I was constantly making calculations in the margins of a newspaper or on a paper napkin in a café. Like a miser counting his coins, I calculated the minimum number of years I had left. If my T4 count plunged to zero in the coming months—which wasn’t very likely—I could come down with my first infection. The average life expectancy of a person diagnosed with AIDS was three years. (Actually, I was fudging a bit here: The official survival time was eighteen months, but because some AIDS patients had managed to live for four years, I preferred to use a rough average.) Anyway, within three and a half years, scientists would no doubt have developed a new drug that would prolong the lives of AIDS patients, which meant that I had at least four years, maybe even five.

I found this thought reassuring, and every time my results were

good, I added another three months to my five-year estimate. If things went on like this, the list of my T4 results, which my father kept track of in his appointment book, would get even longer. If I was lucky, he might even have to start a new page someday.

Every so often, however, I was assailed by doubts. Especially in the middle of the night. A sudden flash of anxiety would leave me shaking like a leaf. I pictured myself lying in a hospital bed, much like Vincent was now, in the yellow glare of the fluorescent light, with no one to comfort me. Lying in that cold steel-frame bed without Tom seemed worse than death itself.

Vincent suddenly cried out in panic. Anna and I leapt up and took his hands in ours. His breathing gradually returned to normal. The two of us stood on either side of his bed until morning, when the day shift arrived to give him a sponge bath.

Marjolein arrived a few hours later carrying a leather schoolbag and a plaid suitcase. My father had phoned her this morning, just as she was about to set off for school, and she had immediately hopped on a train. Beneath her navy-blue coat, she was still wearing her school uniform: a gray sweater, white blouse and gray pleated skirt so long that it nearly touched her socks.

Anna led Marjolein over to Vincent’s bed. She turned pale at the sight of her stepbrother lying there with startled, wide-open eyes that showed no sign of recognition.

Her mother told her that it would be all right for her to kiss Vincent. Marjolein leaned forward warily and stretched out her neck until her lips merely grazed Vincent’s cheek. Her kiss was gentle and

cautious, as if she was afraid he was made of dust and would blow away at the slightest touch. Then she took off her coat, draped it over the back of a chair, took a textbook out of her schoolbag, placed it on the empty chair in the corner and knelt in front of it, like a nun worshipping the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Anna left to buy a few things to cheer up the room. Marjolein and I continued our vigil in silence. While she read her book, I kept my eye on Vincent. At one point he raised his trembling hand to his nasal tube.

“What are you studying, Marjolein?” I asked.

“Latin. I’ve got an exam next week.”

“Isn’t it hard to concentrate?”

“Not really.” She smiled bashfully and lowered her eyes.

“Are things going okay at school?”

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

“Are you still writing poems?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever let anybody read them?”

“No! And I never will!” She returned to her textbook, with her chin cupped in her hands.

Anna came back from her shopping with two plants: a ficus and a mini-palm tree. She had bought plants rather than flowers, she explained as she placed a pot on either side of Vincent’s bed, because they last longer. Then she reached into a plastic bag and pulled out a package of green and orange paper streamers—the only colors she could find. We

draped them over the curtain rails and arranged the chairs in a circle around Vincent’s bed. It was if we were sitting in a small theater—the modern kind that believes in audience participation. Vincent, lying in his tall hospital bed against a backdrop of white curtains and garish streamers, was the stage, while the four of us, waiting anxiously for our parts to begin, constituted the audience.

Anna opened her wallet, removing a deckle-edged black-and-white photograph and pinning it to the wall behind the monitor. It was a picture of Vincent, taken when he was a toddler. His head barely cleared the top of the playpen, but he was smiling at his beaming father, who was balancing a rubber ball on his forefinger. I didn’t know my father could do that.

Dad and I had made a quick trip to the newsstand in the reception area to lay in a supply of papers, weekly magazines and candy bars, and then gone back to Vincent’s room.

“Gee Dad, that was just like old times. Remember when Vincent and I used to go shopping with you on Saturday mornings? First we bought magazines, then a bouquet of freesias for Mama. Our last stop was the drugstore. We thought you had money to burn, because you used to buy four Mars bars, three Bounty’s and a bag of licorice—all at once. Did you eat them all at once too?”

“Heavens no! I spread them out over the week, eating a little bit every day.”

“You used to give us our allowance right there in the store. Vincent and I usually spent it on bubble gum. Bazooka Joe—pink gum with a comic strip inside the wrapper. Remember the woman who

worked in the drugstore? The one who was lame?”

“No, not really.”

“No? She had this funny little limp.” I turned to my brother. “How about you, Vincent. Do you remember her?”

Vincent’s eyes were focused once more on the indicator light. A dull ache started up in the back of my head. Before long, I wouldn’t have anyone to swap memories with. When Vincent went, part of my past, part of myself, would go with him.

My memory had a tendency to leave me in the lurch. It was selective, sketchy and thoroughly unreliable. I couldn’t control it. Even the images I consciously tried to hang onto eventually slipped out of my grasp. Perhaps that was why I had become a photographer.

Sometimes when Vincent and I were together—sitting at a sidewalk café, laughing at a pun or a funny accent or a crazy woman passing by—during those rare moments when he and I connected, I would mentally focus my camera and press the button. How much of any particular moment could I remember now? At this point all I knew was that I was determined not to forget it. The moment itself had been eclipsed by my effort to save it from oblivion.

Why were my memories so sketchy? Why were some parts missing? For example, I could clearly remember one winter evening when I was about eight years old. It was dark out, and Vincent had already gone to bed. Dad hadn’t come home yet. The living room was enveloped in a rosy glow from the lamp on the sideboard. My mother lay down on the sofa and slid a pillow beneath her aching back. She was tired, so she sent me to my room.

As I crawled into bed, I suddenly felt sorry for my mother. She looked so sad, lying there all by herself on the sofa. Not wanting her to be alone, I hurried downstairs to comfort her. She pushed herself up on her elbow and told me that she no longer felt the least bit tired, that there was no need for me to feel sorry for her, and that I should scoot right back to bed. As I stood beside her in my oversized flannel PJ’s, my mother suddenly threw her arm around me. Did she also kiss my forehead? I don’t know.

It was such a vivid memory, and yet I couldn’t be sure. Had I made up that last part because she hadn’t kissed me and the thought of her coldness was more than I could bear? Or had I blocked it out because she had kissed me and the feeling of loss evoked by that memory was too painful? Had I tossed out the good memories, like I had in the aftermath of her death, when I had ripped up all the cards and letters she had ever sent me? Or did I find the idea of a distant mother less painful than that of a mother whose warmth I could no longer feel? I wondered if my memories were based on my subconscious wishes. Perhaps I should regard them as mere vignettes, loaded with symbolic meaning. Or did I select my memories to reflect my present thinking, the way a dictator rewrote his country’s history books?

Here in Vincent’s hospital room, I was also trying to hold on to every second. I wanted to remember every detail: Vincent’s face, the bruises on his arm from the IV needles, the way he plucked at the bedspread. I saw the instrument panel with its power outlets, the metal nightstand with its half-empty plastic cup, the Annie M.G. Schmidt book, the box of tissues. I took in the pale-yellow curtains, my tulips between the two windowpanes. Like an octopus, I tried to wrap my tentacles around

everything I saw, but before an hour had gone by, half the images had already escaped my clutches.

It was like the memory game we used to play as children. You had sixty seconds to look at a variety of objects on a table, then they were covered up and you had to recall as many as you could. I closed my eyes: a vase of tulips, a plastic cup, a book, a rumpled bedspread, Vincent's face... What else? There had been at least thirty objects, so why couldn't I remember more? I knew I had seen them all. Perhaps I had been given too little time. What had happened to all my moments with Vincent when I had mentally clicked my camera? They must have been lying like a shipwreck at the bottom of my muddied memory: my very own little Titanic.

Dad lowered his newspaper. "Statistically speaking, the chance of having two cases of AIDS in one family must be rather small. So why has it happened to us?"

"There's no point in thinking about it, Edgar. It's just the way things are."

Dad stared vacantly into space. "How the hell can it have happened?"

Marjolein changed out of her uniform and into a pair of tight pants and a sweater outlining her breasts. She was definitely not a little girl anymore. She sat down beside me.

"What was Vincent like, Eric?"

"It's hard to say. Just when I think I've figured him out, he goes and does something totally unexpected. It's like he hides certain parts

of himself. You never get the whole picture."

"I didn't really get to know him, and now it's too late."

All the more reason for me to tell her that I was seropositive, I concluded. I would tell her today.

"It's funny how certain memories suddenly pop into your head," Anna mused. "Do you remember the time your mother came to school to tell me that Vincent wanted me to kiss him? I told her I would, but I had to think up a pretext, since a teacher can't kiss a pupil for no reason. So one day I asked him to stay behind after the other kids had gone home. I told him that he could erase the blackboard. He did it very conscientiously, with slow, solemn swipes. He had to stand on his tiptoes to reach the top and bend his knees to do the bottom, but he erased that board until it was clean as a whistle and he was covered in chalk dust. I rewarded him with a kiss. Oddly enough, I don't remember how he reacted."

"I do. When he got home, he proudly told me that his teacher had kissed him. He didn't tell me he'd had to earn that kiss. Neither of us knew that Mama had gone to school to talk to you."

"It was brave of her to do that, to ask the teacher to kiss her son."

"Mama was like that: fearful but brave."

"What do you suppose he's thinking about?"

"Talk to him, Edgar."

"But he can't hear me."

"Yes he can. Just talk to him."



But Dad retreated behind his newspaper again, while Anna moistened Vincent's chapped lips.

Marjolein went downstairs to get some coffee.

"Anna, I'd like to tell her."

"Not now. She has an exam next week."

"Well then, after her exam. I can't go on pretending everything's hunky-dory."

Anna sighed. "Well, at least wait until after her finals. She's having a hard enough time dealing with Vincent."

"What if it slips out by mistake? Or she hears it from somebody else?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Shh, here she comes now."

My father handed me the paper. He had put a checkmark next to an article about a new AIDS drug.

"Who knows, Vincent might live long enough to benefit from it."

"Even if he does live that long, Dad, he won't take the pills."

"He will if I make him."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"By pinching his nose shut. He'll have to swallow them then."

"Edgar, you can't make somebody want to do something."

"Yes you can. He's got to take his meds."

Yesterday I bought a bottle of Arpège. The saleswoman told me I was in luck, because it was the last one. It seemed there wasn't much demand for it these days.

I carefully lifted it out of its box. The drawing of a knight was still on the cover, although when I examined it more closely, I could see that it was actually of a woman and a little girl. I sprinkled a few drops on Vincent's hospital gown, surely enough to make him recognize the smell. Unfortunately, there was no reaction. Vincent's gaze never left the green light on the monitor.

Dad looked up from his paper. "Hey, your mother's favorite!"

"Um, it smells good," Marjolein said. "May I have some too?"

I dabbed a little on her wrists and behind her ears, then handed her the bottle. "Keep it. I don't need it anymore."

"Thanks, Eric."

"You know, Marjolein, there's something I haven't told you."

My father lowered his paper. Anna froze in the middle of straightening Vincent's blanket. Marjolein stared at me with eyes as big as saucers.

"Vincent and I..." My heart was racing like mad, so I took a deep breath. "Vincent and I used to sneak into our mother's room and douse ourselves with this perfume."

"So what? I borrow my mother's perfume when I'm going out, even though she doesn't like me to. Right, Mom?"

Anna plucked a piece of lint from the blanket and didn't reply. Dad ducked back behind his paper.

"Now that I've got my own, I won't have to use Mom's anymore."

It's so sweet of you." Marjolein blew me a kiss.

"Yes, so sweet," Anna echoed. "Thank you."

## 12

Anna stares at the mixture of liquid food and antibiotics in the upside-down bottle on Vincent's IV stand. It flows, one drop at a time, into the IV tube with the tight rhythm of a jazz tune. "Do you remember how much trouble Vincent had taking pills when he was a kid?" she asks. "No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't get him to swallow a single one."

"Now that you mention it, I do!" I exclaim. "How stupid of me, how could I have forgotten?" I suddenly remember a scene I hadn't thought about for years.

Vinny had been sitting at the table, scowling because Koosje, our domestic helper, had announced that he couldn't get up until he'd swallowed his cod-liver pill. Before going upstairs to rest, my mother had asked her to make sure he took his pill.

Koosje handed him a glass of buttermilk. He drank it in one gulp, then opened his mouth wide: The round yellow capsule was stuck to the roof of his mouth. Vinny was glowing with pride, as if he'd just performed a magic trick. Koosje was not amused. She ordered him to swallow the darn thing instantly. Vinny gagged, his eyes filled with tears and he spit out the pill. The shiny capsule landed next to the crusts of his Wonder Bread sandwich—Vinny didn't like crusts either. For three long hours, he sat in silence by his plate. When Mama came downstairs and realized that her strategy had failed, she came up with another plan. She went out and bought a bottle of cod-liver oil and mixed a spoonful of it into the glass of freshly squeezed orange juice

that Vinny and I had to drink every day.

Only now does it occur to me that I should have done something similar with his AZT. It is available in syrup form, because so many children are HIV positive. I could have also arranged for the hospital to administer his other meds through an IV.

“You know,” I say to Anna, “I should have realized that the reason he didn’t take his meds was because he can’t swallow pills.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“Either way, I should have offered him an alternative.”

I could kick myself for not thinking of it earlier.

Vincent tried to cough up some phlegm, but ended up gasping for air, like a fish out of water. Anna positioned herself next to the bed, as if to cheer him on, the way she used to do at his hockey games. I breathed with him—in and out, in and out—mentally trying to expel the mucus from his lungs, but he continued to make the same choking sounds.

Anna suggested asking the nurse to suction out the mucus. When a red-headed nurse wheeled in a machine that strongly resembled a vacuum cleaner, I averted my eyes.

Anna stayed by the bed, Marjolein frowned and bent even deeper over her book, my father sat down across from me with the newspaper spread wide. I tried to read the headlines, but my brain didn’t seem to be working. All I saw was a paper shield, two hands, eight fingers and dozens of little black hairs curling around a thick gold wedding band.

The nurse spoke softly to Vincent and switched on the machine. I heard a whirr and then a loud slurp. Vincent moaned. His moan was

so muffled that it sounded like he had a burlap bag over his head. Oh god, Vincent was being suffocated! He needed me, but I didn’t dare go to him. I couldn’t even bring myself to look at him. So I concentrated on the headlines instead, reading the words one syllable at a time: Mid-dle-East-peace-ne-go-ti-a-tions-hit-a-snap-Mid-dle-East-peace-ne-go-ti-a-tions-Mid-dle-East-peace-p-e-a-c-e...

Then all was still, except for the hum of Vincent’s monitor, the drip of the IV and the rustle of Dad’s newspaper.

Anna and the nurse laid Vincent back down. Anna patted his arm, which was still trembling.

Dad jumped up from his chair. “Nurse, the IV bottle is nearly empty. My son needs a new one.”

“This was his last feeding for today, sir. He gets half a liter of liquid food four times a day.”

“He needs more, to build up his strength.”

The nurse looked Dad directly in the eye. “Perhaps you’d like to talk to Dr. de Kort. I believe he’s in his office. Shall I take you there?”

“Please do.”

My father followed her out the door.

Dad came back fairly quickly and motioned for Anna and me to join him in the corridor. He cleared his throat—always a sign that he wanted to give himself more time to arrange his thoughts, decide on his strategy or choose his words more carefully. Whenever we heard his “ahem,” we knew he was getting ready to make an important announcement.

“According to Dr. de Kort, Vincent has a theoretical chance of

pulling through. I've ordered him to do all that he can to save Vincent's life."

"There's no point, Edgar."

"Don't say that, Anna." There was a pause. "Eric, I keep thinking back to when your mother was ill. The doctors told me that she wouldn't live for more than a few weeks. As it turned out, she had four fairly good years after that. We have to make sure that Vincent pulls through this."

"So he can get sick all over again?"

"As long as there's life, there's hope. According to an article in today's paper, researchers at Harvard University have come up with a combination of drugs that keeps the virus from reproducing itself. We need to keep Vincent going until this medication is made available."

"Edgar, it's time to let Vincent go."

"How can I let go of my own child?"

Dad went back into the room, sat down by the bed and took Vincent's hand in his. "Vincent, it's me, your father," he said loudly, as if he were talking through a bad phone connection. "Vincent," he said again, softer this time.

All of a sudden Vincent said in a clear voice, as if he had regained consciousness, as if this had all been a game: "Dad!"

My father's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, Vincent. I'm your father, and I always will be."

During the last few days, the Brautichem family had settled itself firmly into its new home: the hospital. Vincent's dimly lit room was our house,

the corridor our street, the nook by the elevator where the patients sat and chatted on a torn imitation-leather couch was our café. Our biggest outing was going downstairs to the noisy cafeteria to grab a bite to eat or to buy a paper or a candy bar.

My father and I went out to stretch our legs. Dad paced up and down the corridor with his hands behind his back. He cleared his throat. "Your mother never knew she had cancer. I don't know if I did the right thing by not telling her."

I looked at his shoulders, now slightly stooped. I felt like throwing my arms around him.

"Once again I'm powerless," Dad continued. "Position and wealth mean nothing now. If only I could buy my way out of this!"

"That's not how it works."

"There's nothing I can do to help him. That's the worst part. Nothing!" His words echoed down the corridor.

"The best thing you can do for him now is to let him go."

"Do you mean that?"

"He's already said goodbye."

Dad nodded. I didn't know if he was nodding because he agreed with me or because he thought I had given up before the battle had even begun.

"How I wish I could go with him part of the way!" he exclaimed. He stopped pacing. "Though I'd want to come back again!"

At the elevator, we turned and retraced our steps, walking down the long corridor in silence until we reached the door with the nameplate that bore our name.

“Doesn’t Vincent have any friends?” Anna asked. “There must be somebody who should be informed.”

“He has one friend, a man named Peter. Peter de Lier. I don’t have his phone number.”

“Well, try to find it. You really ought to phone him.”

“What if Vincent wouldn’t want me to?”

“We have to give his friend Peter a chance to say goodbye.”

I turned to Vincent. “Do you want me to ask Peter to come here? Close your eyes if you’d like to see him.”

Vincent’s gaze didn’t waver from the monitor. Then, just when I was about to stand up, he blinked.

“You see, Eric! He does want to see Peter!” Anna exclaimed.

She may be right, but I wasn’t so sure. It could have been a mere reflex. Maybe he’d gotten something in his eye. But I went out into the corridor to make the call anyway. I dialed the number for Information, only to be told that “There are five customers ahead of you... There are three customers ahead of you... There is one customer ahead of you...”

Minutes later I heard Peter’s deep voice. I explained the situation and told him that we didn’t know if Vincent wanted to have visitors since he was unable to talk, but before I could even ask him to come, Peter said he’d be right there. If all went well, he’d be here within the hour.

At last I was going to meet my brother’s secret friend! Vincent hadn’t managed to keep us apart forever. I headed for the men’s room, where I quickly washed my face and combed my hair.

There was a knock. The four of us simultaneously turned our heads toward the sound. Standing in the doorway was a tall thin man with dark hair, dark eyes and a mustache. He had on a blue overcoat with a red plaid scarf. When he said hello, I recognized his voice as the one I'd heard on the phone.

Peter shook hands with each of us in turn and knew who we were before we even had a chance to introduce ourselves. Then he took off his coat and strode over to the bed. He picked up Vincent's hand with perfect ease, as if he'd done it a million times. He spoke to Vincent directly, not at all fazed by the possibility that Vincent couldn't hear him.

He began with small talk: how cold it was outside, how the drive took longer than expected because of the icy roads, how well his exam had gone, how busy he was at work, the problems he was having with his lover, who had gone to Tenerife for a few weeks. Then he got down to business. "Vin, I want to thank you for all the wonderful times we've had together. Do you remember the time we had the beach all to ourselves because nobody else would brave the storm? And the time we went bicycling on the heath? And the time you brought me roses for my birthday? That was last year. Big white petals, just starting to unfurl. They lasted for two whole weeks. And the wooden chest we bought at the flea market? Do you remember that? I put a coat of varnish on it last week and moved it over by the window, to the right of the couch. You know the one I mean? I'll think back to all those wonderful times

with pleasure, Vin."

Peter's easy intimacy made me re-evaluate my relationship with Vincent. Why didn't I think of Vincent as my buddy, my bosom friend, my adviser? Maybe it was because I was always mothering him. I cleaned his apartment, drew up his shopping lists, paid his newspaper subscriptions, bought his overcoats. I realized now that I had been trying to make myself indispensable. Why? Because when all was said and done, I was the one who couldn't do without him. As long as he needed me, Vincent wouldn't abandon me.

Peter sat down and politely turned his attention to the rest of us. We were surprised to learn that up until last year Vincent had come to his apartment every Friday. Vincent had told him that he was a low on cash, so Peter had suggested that he could earn a little money by taking over some of his household chores.

"Vincent cleaned your apartment?" Anna asked in disbelief, then furiously stirred her tea. "Was he any good at it?"

"Excellent. He kept it spick and span. After giving the place a thorough going-over, he'd spend the night."

"Vincent scrubbed your toilet in exchange for a night with you?"

"No, it wasn't like that. I practically had to boot him out in the morning. He would've stayed the entire weekend, except that I had a lot of stuff to do, like catching up on my correspondence, doing my homework, writing reports."

My father asked Peter what line of work he was in, and Peter explained that he was a social worker. His job consisted of finding suitable foster homes for children who had been removed from parental

custody.

Then Peter asked my father what he did for a living. Imagine asking my father such a question! Dad gamely launched into a detailed account of his projects, the office buildings he buys and sells, the steel factories, the foreign business interests, the ships, the banks. Suddenly he was no longer sitting at his dying son's bedside, but was back in his own comfortable world.

Peter asked Marjolein if she still enjoyed playing hockey and whether she had won any horseback-riding prizes lately. At every new question, Marjolein blushed all over again.

After that he said it was time for him to leave, because he still had a lot of work to do. But first he went over to Vincent, once more addressing him directly: "I don't know if we'll ever see each other again, Vin, but I'll be thinking of you." He kissed him gently on the mouth.

I walked Peter to the elevator. "Did he ever talk about me?"

"Sure, he used to tell me about the trips the two of you took together."

That wasn't what I meant.

"I begged Vincent to tell your father and Anna that he's gay. I wanted to help him come out of the closet."

"Didn't Vincent tell you that being gay isn't a taboo in our family? My father and Anna are perfectly okay with my homosexuality."

"Maybe Vincent couldn't accept his own homosexuality."

I promised Peter to keep him informed. He pecked my cheeks with the customary three kisses and stepped into the elevator.

"What a nice man that Peter is!" Anna said, after I'd gone back

to the room. "Vincent was lucky to have him as a friend." My father nodded. It was oddly reassuring to know—in retrospect—that they had been friends.

Vincent's eyes are now closed for the first time. He shut them a moment ago when Anna dabbed his forehead with a damp washcloth. He's also started to breathe heavily and laboriously through his mouth. My father is sitting by the bed, adding up numbers in his appointment book.

A nurse comes in with a huge syringe. My god, I hope she's not going to jab the thing in Vincent's arm! I leap up, but before I can stop her, she casually empties the syringe into the IV. My father closes his appointment book, but keeps his finger in the page he was working on. "Is that morphine?"

The nurse nods.

"Does that mean he won't be feeling any more pain?"

"Yes. The morphine will make him sink into an even deeper sleep."

"The thing is, I've already lost my wife." Dad says this as if everyone is allotted a certain amount of grief in his life and he's already had his share. As if the nurse is going to say "Well, in that case, there's been a misunderstanding. Somebody else should be occupying this bed. Get up and go home, Vincent."

Instead, she lays a comforting hand on his arm. After she leaves, he opens his appointment book and goes back to his numbers.

Anna takes out her knitting and slides her chair closer to the nightlight on Vincent's bed so she can see better.

"What are you making?" I ask her.

"A cap to go with Vincent's scarf. I started it last year, but never finished. This is the first quiet moment I've had for ages."

Marjolein lowers her book. I note that she's on the same page as yesterday.

"We're all here!" she exclaims. "Daddy, Mama, Eric, Vincent and me. Vincent can't talk, of course, but he's here."

"It's all so unreal," I say. "We know that he probably won't be with us for much longer, but he's with us now, and that's all that matters."

Anna pauses a moment to stare reflectively at Vincent, then resumes her knitting. The click-click-click of the needles echoes the drip-drip-drip of the IV.

Marjolein and I took the elevator down to the reception area. The only person there was the Buddha-like Chinese man, who didn't seem to have moved an inch in the last two days, but watched over us like a statue. Most of the lights had been turned off in the cafeteria, because it was going to close in ten minutes. Marjolein and I bought some soup and sandwiches and sat down at one of the plastic tables. The beach umbrellas looked more out of place than ever, not to mention that in this poor light their bold orange color had become a dispiriting brown. The utter failure of this phony attempt at gaiety made the room even more depressing.

After we had hastily gulped down our tomato soup and sweaty cheese sandwiches, Marjolein took a sheet of lined paper out of her pocket and asked me if I'd like to read the poem she had written last night. When I said that I'd like nothing better, she handed me the poem:



## The Imperfect Past

my brother  
is a puzzle  
with lots of empty spaces  
all I have are  
scattered pieces  
no matter how hard I push  
and pull and press  
I can't fit them together

it is now too late  
the puzzle will remain  
a mystery  
a sketch  
unfinished  
a chance  
missed  
the picture  
in pieces  
my heart  
broken

I looked at the round girlish handwriting on the lined paper, torn carelessly out of a school notebook. She was so young and innocent. How could I go on betraying her trust? How could I not respond to her cry for help? I couldn't decide whether I would be harming her more by telling her I was seropositive or by not telling her. What if I told her now and she couldn't handle the news?

"You probably think my poem stinks."

"On the contrary, I think it's beautiful. Did it take you long to write it?"

"No, I wrote it in one sitting."

"Marjolein, I promise you that someday you and I will find the missing the pieces of the puzzle. Both mine and Vincent's."

"Oh, I hope so! I'd like that."

I squeezed her to my chest and pressed my lips to her forehead. It not only allowed me to comfort her, but also kept me from blurting out my news.

Vincent's breathing had become erratic. One moment he was panting, and the next he was breathing so slowly that you thought he must have forgotten how and was trying to figure it out.

"I wish it would stop, but not be all over," Marjolein said.

"I know what you mean," I replied. "I want it to end fast too, and yet at the same time, I hope the end will never come. It's as if there are two people inside of me, squabbling and refuting each other's arguments at every turn."

"Which is why it's good that we aren't allowed to make that

decision,” Anna said.

“All we can do now is wait,” my father concluded, with his hand resting on Vincent’s hand. He’d put aside his newspaper an hour ago and hadn’t pulled out his appointment book either.

“We’ll just have to make the best of it,” Anna said.

Another platitude. Or was it the result of mature thinking? Maybe this was what happened after a lifetime of ups and downs. You discovered that most clichés were true.

“I’m exhausted,” I said. “I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“Why don’t you go rest in Vincent’s apartment? It’s closer than the hotel. We’ll call you if anything happens.”

I wondered if I should ask Vincent’s permission or simply tell him I was going to his apartment. What if he objected? There was no way for him to tell me.

I went over to the narrow closet, reached into his coat pocket and took out his keys. “I’ll be back soon, Vincent,” I said cheerily and planted a kiss on the side of his head, just above the ear.

I wanted to call Tom, but the pay phone in the corridor was being used by an elderly woman who yelled excitedly into the horn that they could all go to sleep now, because Daddy had been taken off the critical list. For the first time in my life, I wished I were someone else. I longed to be the gray-haired lady in the purple coat and hand-knit cap whose heart was filled with relief.

When I finally got through to Tom, I told him that I had no idea how long this was going to drag on, but that there was no need for him

to come here yet. He said he was worried about me. Was I tiring myself out? I promised to get some rest.

On my way to the apartment—a short ten-minute walk—I thought about Vincent and Peter’s relationship, wondering what Vincent was like when they were together and whether he behaved in the same way with Peter as he did with us. Was he sullen and grumpy? Bored and determined not to enjoy himself? Or was he happy and excited, the way he was during our trips, pleased as Punch to be on a plane and clamoring for the window seat.

I gathered that Peter and he used to go cruising together in The Hague, walking through the dark alleys and deserted squares at 3:00 A.M. They also took walks together on the beach, Peter with his plaid scarf blowing in the wind and Vincent striding along with his coat collar turned up and his cheeks flushed from the cold. What on earth did they talk about? The men they’d picked up in bars the night before, the pork chops they had to buy for dinner, Vincent’s indignation at Anna’s meddling, Peter’s problems with his lover? I couldn’t imagine Vincent advising him. Was he even capable of giving tactful and sensible advice?

Did they laugh a lot together? Did Peter also know every song from “My Fair Lady” by heart?

I arrived at Vincent's high-rise to find a week's worth of newspapers sticking out of his mailbox. The first thing I saw when I got it open were the pictures of Portugal that I'd finally decided to send him. The rest of the mail consisted of bank statements, letters imprinted with the hospital's logo, a note from Vincent's GP and a yellow envelope, which I tore open immediately. It turned out to be a dunning letter for an armchair that Vincent had purchased a year ago. The furniture store threatened to instigate legal proceedings if the bill wasn't paid by the fifteenth of the month. There were other dunning letters as well, and yet I could see from the bank statement that Vincent had more than forty thousand guilders in his account.

Why hadn't he paid his bills? I was inclined to chalk it up to apathy. Maybe his illness had sapped his energy. Or maybe he had deliberately screwed things up so that someone would come to his rescue. I remembered playing on the beach with him one time when he was about three. He'd jumped into a deep hole dug by the people next to us and hadn't been able to climb back out. After a while, he began to cry. Naturally I was the one who'd saved him from his predicament.

I waited for the elevator to open. Vincent had once timed it and told me that it could go from the first to the thirtieth floor—where he lived—in fifteen seconds flat. Assuming, of course, that it didn't stop along the way. Tonight I shot right to the top with no stops.

I tiptoed into the apartment, as if I were afraid of waking

someone up. As I groped for the light switch, my fingers glided over the ridges in the textured wallpaper. The carpet felt soft beneath my shoes.

I had been in this apartment countless times during the last few months, but Vincent had always been there. I realized for the first time tonight how empty it was. The unpaid armchair—its blue-and-white stripes covered with spots—was positioned in the middle of the room, in front of a huge TV. The remote control had been carelessly abandoned on the floor beside it, looking like a magic wand that Vincent had waved to transform the clouds above Holland into the sunny skies above the Italian boot.

The cardboard box the TV had come in, now hidden beneath a red Christmas cloth, served as a table. For a sofa, there was a stretcher with a blanket thrown across it. There was also a folding chair for guests and a tall standing lamp. His wobbly desk was piled high with unopened letters. On top of the stack was a list of phone numbers—first mine, then Peter's, then his doctor's. The mega-map I'd given him for his birthday had been dumped in a corner; we'd never gotten around to hanging it up. The kitchen was empty, unused. He didn't even have a dishrack.

The bedroom was sparsely furnished as well. His bed was adjustable, so that he could elevate his head or his feet at the push of a button, but there wasn't a dresser or a wardrobe; instead, he kept his clothes in the kitchen cupboards, along with his meager supply of utensils. The few towels he owned were kept in a white plastic cart, like the ones hairdressers used for curlers and hairbrushes.

I suspected that his apartment looked a lot like those of a

refugee—someone from Cambodia or Eritrea who ended up in an unfamiliar place and made little effort to build a new life, because the sojourn was expected to be brief. Why bother to buy a lamp or hang up a poster if your situation was only temporary? The awful truth was that fixing up your living space was an admission of defeat, since it implied that you would be in exile longer than you ever thought possible.

I opened drawers and rifled through Vincent's things, hoping to find something that would shed more light on his life. It made me feel as guilty as I had when I was ten years old, rummaging through the sideboard in search of bonbons. My mother used to keep them in a hand-painted candy dish with a leafy blue-and-white motif on the lid. She warned me that the bonbons were reserved for guests, but we rarely had guests. I always crammed them into my mouth as fast as I could. I told myself that it didn't count if I ate them quickly, hoping that my mother wouldn't find out. But she always did. Mothers always knew what their children were up to because they were equipped with special radar that worked in a mysterious way that was downright creepy. It was like the eye of God—you couldn't get away from it, no matter how hard you tried. I knew I'd get caught, but I went on ransacking the drawers for the candy dish anyway. My craving for bonbons was stronger than my fear of punishment.

In one of Vincent's drawers I found a bundle of yellowed envelopes. One of them was addressed in my handwriting, which used to be round, fancy and full of curlicues, but is now hurried, spiky and nearly illegible. The bundle contained six letters that I had written to Vincent during the fourteen years I'd lived in the Philippines. Vincent had saved six of my letters! I'm embarrassed to think that I hadn't saved even one of his.

In these letters I talked about my work as a photojournalist, the new house Tom and I had moved into, my travels, the people I had met. Every letter ended with the same questions: What are you up to now, Vincent? How's life treating you in Wageningen—or Ghent, Hilversum, Amsterdam, Leiden, Rotterdam? Do you have any friends? How's your love life?

At first he used to answer my letters, though not my questions. His letters were—not surprisingly—always about the weather. One time, though, he had described his new-found interest in the occult: astrology, numerology and parapsychology. But later, when I tried to talk about the zodiac or his telepathic talents, he dismissed it as a lot of hooey that he hadn't believed in for ages.

After a while, he didn't even bother to write back. My letters were shots in the dark. I had no idea if they ever reached him. In one I wrote in desperation: "Vincent, where are you?"

The last letter I sent him from the Philippines was in response to the thank-you note he wrote after staying with us in the summer of 1988. I said that I was pleased that he'd enjoyed himself so much, but was sorry that the heat had prevented him from doing more. "By the way, what did you mean 'If only I had a Tom of my own?' I'm sure you could find someone to cook and clean for you at a reasonable price. I'll ask my friends back home if they know of a good cleaner for you." Not once had it occurred to me that he hadn't been referring to Tom's waiting on him hand and foot, but rather that he might have meant "If only I had a boyfriend of my own." Instead, I had responded with my usual combination of organizational fervor and high-handed paternalism. How many other hints had I failed to pick up on?

In the same drawer I also came across a card in my father's linear handwriting, in which every word resembled a building with an indestructible roof:

Dear Vincent,

It's difficult to find a suitable present for your birthday, so I've ordered the bank to deposit five-hundred guilders in your account. Please feel free to spend the money however you wish.

Happy birthday,

Your father

Underneath the card I found an old photo, one I had never seen before. Mama is in the driveway, holding Vincent in her arms, with her cheek pressed against his. Vincent, wearing his red overalls and sandals, looks both apprehensive and embarrassed. My father, standing off to the side, is dressed in a canary-yellow sweater, navy-blue cotton slacks and dark glasses, which make him look as glamorous as an Italian movie star.

The picture may have been new to me, but I knew exactly when it had been taken: six months before my mother died. She had been too worn out that summer to go with us to Noordwijk, so a babysitter had been hired to take her place, a Miss van Dam, who had a sharp tongue and hated the beach because she didn't like getting sand in her patent-leather pumps. We had been about to set off in Dad's car. The snapshot had been taken when we were saying goodbye.

I had been part of this scene, and yet I felt as though I was seeing it for the first time, because it didn't jive with my memory. I could have sworn my father always wore dark suits.

It was hard for me to look at the picture. Mama was holding Vincent so tightly that it seemed as if she never wanted to let him go.

What had she done after she had waved us off, after the Cadillac had driven out of sight? She must have walked back up driveway, though to her it must have seemed like climbing a hill. Perhaps she had turned when she reached the door, hoping to see the car pull up again so we could fetch a forgotten item. Anything to give her a few more minutes with her family, another chance to press her cheek against Vincent's. But we hadn't gone back; by then we were barreling down the road. She must have sat on the chair in the hall to catch her breath, then picked her book up from the sideboard and slowly mounted the stairs to her room, closing the soundproofed door out of habit, since we weren't there to disturb her afternoon nap.

Had Vincent been saving that picture all these years? Or had one of the aunts send it to him recently?

Vincent and I had been walking down the street one day when he'd said to me out of the blue: "For a long time, I didn't think Mama was dead." He had then looked at me expectantly, as if hoping I would deny it.

"But that's normal, Vincent. At first it didn't seem real to me either."

He'd shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the wet pavement. "I mean that for a *really* long time, I thought she'd come back."

"How long?"

“Years. Until I was seventeen, maybe a little older. Sometimes I’d suddenly see her in church, wearing her fur coat. Or walking down the street. A few times I saw her going up an escalator in a department store. But whenever I ran after her, she disappeared. I always got there too late.”

“Why did you think she’d left us?”

“I dunno. Jeez, Eric, what a dumb question!”

He angrily yanked up the zipper of his jacket.

I put the photograph back in the drawer and got undressed, dropping my clothes on the floor next to a stack of Vincent’s sweaters and shirts. It was eleven o’clock. I set the alarm for six-thirty and switched off the light. When I pulled the sheet up over me, it smelled of Vincent: a combination of baby powder and rancid butter.

The phone rings. At first, groping for my glasses and glancing at the alarm clock, I don’t know where I am. But even before I pick up the phone, I know why it’s ringing.

I call a taxi, get dressed, run Vincent’s brush through my hair and rinse my mouth—I draw the line at using his toothbrush. My body is going through its usual morning routine at an unusual hour. It seems to be leading its own life, independently of my mind, which refuses to believe the inevitable.

The taxi has arrived. I fling on my coat and check the pocket to make sure Vincent’s keys are still there, switch off the light and shut the door behind me. The diesel engine is idling noisily at the curb in February’s cold night air, and clouds come out of my mouth when I tell the driver the address. I sit in the front, which I don’t normally do. The driver doesn’t talk. I am also silent. The phone call’s urgent message, “Get here as fast as you can, Vincent’s breathing has almost stopped,” keeps running through my head.

The shutter has been pulled down over the flower stand, the revolving door in the main hospital entrance is locked. I press a red button marked “For Emergency Only.” It takes a while for the door to be opened.

The cafeteria is dark, the umbrellas have been let down and the plastic chairs placed on top of the tables. The giant clock is lit up like a full moon at the end of the corridor. The hands form a straight line: a black horizon.

I now know the route by heart: Take the elevator to the fourth floor, turn left, walk down the long linoleum-lined corridor, then turn right and stop when you've almost reached the end.

The red-headed nurse is standing outside the door to Vincent's room. "You do realize that your brother is dead, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you," I say politely.

My brother is dead—a statement I've never heard before. It sounds unbelievable, untrue.

The paper streamers have been taken down, and the tubes and catheter have disappeared, along with the urine bag and IV. For the first time, there's total silence in Vincent's room.

Vincent himself has been propped up on the pillows with his hands folded neatly on his chest. He seems to be asleep, yet it's an unnatural kind of sleep. His face is drained of color, so pale that he almost seems to be radiating light: Venus on a clear winter night. As I near the bed, I notice that the corners of his mouth are turned up in a smile: Vincent is intensely happy. It's been ages since I've seen him looking so peaceful and relaxed.

I kiss his forehead, which is still warm, and breathe in the familiar smell of his hair. Then I kiss his closed eyes and run my hand down his cheek, his chin, his aquiline nose. Vincent can no longer push me away.

Suddenly I'm hit by an excruciating wave of pain. My abdomen feels like it's being ripped open without an anesthetic. The raging torrent sweeps up everything in its path, washing away doubt, shattering all hope, carrying me along in its rushing waters. I am drowning in its

swift currents. I scream and clutch frantically at the air in an attempt to find something to grab onto, but there is only emptiness. I rock back and forth, with my arms across my chest, trying to rock the sadness to sleep.

If only I could turn the clock back a few hours to when we were all clustered around Vincent's bed, to when he had still been breathing. He'd had to fight for every breath, but at least he'd been breathing.

I ask only one thing. Not that he will open his eyes or talk or move, but that he will breathe again. Even if it's just one breath: in and out. That's all I ask. But if the film can't be rewound, make it stop here. Let me stay here with Vincent forever.

I lay my cheek against his. He's already starting to get cold.

But the film doesn't stop. The reel keeps spinning inexorably on and on. One thing leads to another, one death leads to another. I now have zero customers ahead of me. It's my turn, but I don't want to go. I can't go yet. The floodgates burst again. I didn't realize I could shed so many tears.

My father, Anna and Marjolein enter the room. They have been out phoning the aunties. Dad sits down on the other side of the bed and lays in his head on Vincent's hands, as if asking for his blessing. He weeps inwardly, stifling his sobs. Behind him is the picture of the beaming father balancing a rubber ball on his finger to entertain the smiling boy in the playpen.

"How did it go at the end, Anna?"

"Quietly, gently. He simply stopped breathing. And then it was all over."

As if it were meant to be that way.

Marjolein throws her arms around me. “I’m so glad I still have you,” she says tearfully. I wipe the tears from her cheeks with the back of my hand, but they keep falling.

The red-headed nurse comes in with another nurse I haven’t seen before. They have come to lay out Vincent’s body.

That’s such a horrible expression. It’s an ordinary enough verb, the kind you use when you’re getting ready for a trip. You “lay out” all the items you think you might need, then pack them in your suitcase. Except that now this shirt, those shoes and that shaving kit are never going to be used again, and your suitcase is going to remain at its final destination forever.

My father and Anna went to their hotel to sleep. Marjolein and I decided to stay and help the nurses wash Vincent.

The nurse had placed a basin of water on the nightstand. I picked up a washcloth and dipped it in the water. “Isn’t it too cold for him?” I asked, but got no answer. Well, of course it wasn’t. Still, I was surprised that Vincent hadn’t shivered and stretched his back when I ran the washcloth down his spine. Even when he was little, he was sensitive to the cold. He used to hold his body so stiffly when he was taking a bath that it was as heavy and inflexible as it was now. My hand moved in slow swipes from his shoulder blades to his waist, as if I were erasing a blackboard. I swished the washcloth up and down, up and down, and when I was through with his shoulders and back, I started all over again. Not because it was necessary, but because it gave me another chance to hold him, to touch his body, to feel his skin, if only through a

washcloth. Meanwhile Marjolein was dabbing at his arms and armpits with such concentration that the tip of her tongue was clamped between her lips. It was the first time Marjolein and I had ever done anything together.

Could Vincent see us? Was his soul hovering above his body, as the anthroposophists would have us believe? Was it the same Vincent, or a completely different one—a wise Vincent, smiling at the sight of the four of us washing him with such care? I looked up, but saw only the nightlight and the hook-up for the IV.

The nurse also washed his penis, pulling back the foreskin and cleaning the glans with a washcloth. Although she was very gentle, my own genitals shrank, and I instinctively pressed my thighs together. The other nurse spread Vincent’s butt cheeks and inserted a cork in his anus, explaining that people’s intestines sometimes kept on working after death. I could picture the funeral now: There’s a smelly fart, and the mourners suspect everyone except the guilty man himself.

The nurses straightened out Vincent’s limbs and laid him back down with his hands on top of the clean sheets. We were done.

Marjolein started gathering up her belongings. I planted a kiss on the side of Vincent’s neck and ruffled his hair. Marjolein kissed his cheek.

She suggested going to his apartment together tomorrow to pick out Vincent’s burial clothes, but I already knew what I wanted him to wear: the green sweater I’d bought him in exchange for his AZT pills. When he hadn’t been able to put up with the side effects any longer, he’d handed me what was left of his blue boxes and suggested that I buy him a nice gift. A few pills had been missing from every box, as if



they were bonbons that he'd discarded after one or two bites.

Vincent gave me the pills that had failed to prolong his life, but had already prolonged mine. In return, I gave him the sweater he was about to be buried in.

It was beginning to get light outside. I put my arm around Marjolein's shoulder and she put hers around my waist, and we stayed entwined like that all the way to the hotel. A casual passerby might easily have mistaken us for lovers coming back from a night on the town.

"Vincent died last night at two-thirty-five," I informed Peter. I still couldn't believe I was saying such a thing. The words "Vincent" and "died" didn't seem to go together.

"I'll miss him," Peter said after a short pause. "I'll miss him a lot."

I explained where the funeral would be held and offered him my condolences.

Now I would never be able to tell Vincent how much I approved of his boyfriend, though that word seemed strange in connection with Vincent. But there was an even stranger combination of words that from now on would always be linked together: Vincent is dead.

Dad, Anna and I met the next day to discuss the funeral. "We've got a problem," Dad said, then cleared his throat. "Each of the aunties has told me, independently of the others, that Vincent wanted to be buried next to his mother. But there's only room in the grave for two more people: Anna and myself. Hopefully not for years to come!"

"If those are Vincent's wishes," Anna said, "I'll find myself another plot."

You'd think they were talking about renting lounge chairs for a day at the beach. But my father was anxious to settle the matter, so he and Anna set off for the cemetery to see what could be done. Once he got his teeth into a problem, Dad didn't let go.

Marjolein and I had been detailed to meet with the funeral director. He turned out to be a tall, thin man who licked his lips at the end of every sentence, as if he could hardly wait for the funeral to begin. She and I had written the text for the obituary and death notices: "We are sad to announce the passing of our son, brother and brother-in-law, who was taken from us at an early age after a lingering illness." The word "brother-in-law" in this case referred to Tom, but I couldn't decide if our names should be printed on one line or two.

"Have these persons been united in, uh, holy matrimony?" the funeral director inquired.

"Well, I don't know if you'd call it 'holy.'"

"Is it an officially recognized marriage?" he asked sternly. Joking was evidently taboo.

"No."

"Then the names should go on two lines. When two people have been officially wed," he said, licking his lips even faster, "their names are always printed on one line. But if they're, uh, living together, their names are put on two lines. According to the proper etiquette, that is."

Marjolein was bent over the sample fonts and color charts so that she could pick out the right shade of black for the border on the

funeral cards. She decided on Chanel gray. When she looked up to see if I approved, I noticed that her eyes were exactly the same color.

The next order of business was to pick out a coffin. We knew straightaway what kind of coffin we wanted: a plain unvarnished box, made out of the same kind of light wood that could be found in modern, airy interiors.

We turned down the funeral director's offer of limousines and told him we wanted only one large funeral wreath, which Anna would be providing. She had decided to use pink flowers, so that Vincent would finally be "coming out."

The funeral director had one last question. What did we want served after the round of condolences: cookies or cake? Neither, we informed him. We wanted apple pie, with gobs of whipped cream. Vincent adored whipped cream.

Somehow, Vincent's shoes had gone missing. In the kitchen cupboard in his apartment I found a pair of gray pants and a green-striped shirt that fortunately matched the sweater. But where were Vincent's shoes? Even though the coffin was half open, you couldn't bury him in his socks, could you?

I couldn't help thinking of a recurring nightmare of mine, in which I'm being presented to the queen. Just as I'm about to bow, I notice that my feet are bare. I could sink through the floor in embarrassment.

So I set off to buy a pair of shoes for Vincent. "What size?" the salesgirl asked and looked down at my feet.

"I'm not sure. They're for someone who isn't able to come to the

store."

"He can always return them if they don't fit."

I selected a pair of large brown suede shoes with thick rubber soles, the kind Vincent always wears. Used to wear.

The cheery salesgirl wished me luck. I've never really understood what salespeople mean by that. Were they hoping that hordes of men or women would suddenly find you irresistible? That your life would improve drastically thanks to your new rubber-soled shoes? The one thing they didn't mean was that they hoped you'd found the perfect shoes to be buried in.

Dad had solved our problem: This morning he bought a plot with enough room for us all, including Tom and Marjolein's future partner.

For the time being, Vincent will be placed in Mama's grave. Later on both of them will be transferred to the new plot, where the entire family will be laid to rest. Hopefully not for years to come.

We went to the funeral home to say our final farewell to Vincent. He was no longer the sleeping prince of a few days ago. Instead, he looked like a bargain-basement window dummy. His skin had dried out and been covered with a thick layer of powder, his mouth was lopsided, and his cheeks were as sunken as those of a deflated doll.

A moment before the coffin was closed, Marjolein furtively slipped something into it. As the shadow of the closing lid crossed over Vincent's face, I saw a crumpled sheet of lined paper by his pillow.

We had turbulent weather on the day of the funeral: The wind blew, the clouds raced across the sky, the sun ducked behind the clouds, it rained, the sun came out again, then went back into hiding—all within a few minutes. The elements seemed upset by Vincent's death. Or was he sending me a sign?

Inside the church, I couldn't help thinking of Vincent's baptism. Beams of red, blue and green light had shone through the stained-glass windows while his godmother had held him over the font. He hadn't uttered a peep when the cold water was poured over his head.

For his first Communion, he had worn a navy-blue suit with a red bowtie. It was the first time he'd ever worn long pants. The flame of his candle had sputtered as he strode toward the altar. When it was Vincent's turn to receive the sacrament from the bishop, he managed to take his thumb out of his mouth just in the nick of time.

The coffin, covered with a spray of pink roses, was now lying in front of that same altar. His godmother sobbed quietly into her handkerchief as the choir launched into a Gregorian chant. Anna read a parable from the Bible, Marjolein played a Bach sonata on her violin and I read the eulogy I had written yesterday. My voice broke as I neared the end and addressed Vincent directly, as if he could actually hear me: "You are now in that infinite, timeless cosmos that you always found so exciting. You are free now, but we will keep you in our hearts forever."

The wooden kneeler still hurt my knees, though they were no longer bare.

After the service, the five of us threaded our way through the crowd of mourners gathered outside the church. My father reached the black Cadillac first and turned to see if we had followed. His eyes fell on the rose-covered coffin by the wall, waiting all by itself for the undertaker to back up the hearse and lift it inside. I comforted Dad, Tom comforted me, and Anna and Marjolein threw their arms around the three of us. We clung to each other like the passengers of a sinking ship who had managed—against all odds—to survive their ordeal.

At the graveyard, I looked up and saw a watery patch of blue between the clouds. As the coffin was lifted onto the shoulders of the pallbearers, a sunbeam lit up the pale wood. The charcoal-gray top hats bobbed solemnly up and down as they walked in lockstep toward the grave. The gravel crunched beneath their feet.

There must be a mistake, a voice within me cried. They're carrying the coffin in the wrong direction! It ought to be moving *away* from that black hole, toward the gate and out into the city, to Vincent's apartment.

But there had been no mistake, and the coffin was lowered into the grave. After a separation of more than twenty years, Mama and Vincent were finally reunited.

Each of us was now expected to throw a flower on the coffin. Peter held out a bucket of pink tulips. For a moment, he reminded me of the flower-seller in the stand by the hospital—except that Peter wasn't wearing a baseball cap.

On the way to the condolence room, we ran into another funeral procession, with a small number of mourners. One of the women looked

vaguely familiar. She had on a purple coat and a hand-knit cap, but I couldn't quite place her.

So many people were waiting to offer their condolences that the line extended all the way out the door. Anna's friends wiped away their runny mascara, Marjolein's classmates wept big tears, my friends were worried and upset, my father's business acquaintances looked ill at ease. Various aunts, uncles and cousins had also come, though they hadn't seen Vincent in years.

A dark-haired woman with tiny eyes took my hands in hers. "I saw the obituary in yesterday's paper," she said. "It's such a shame. Vinny was a beautiful page boy."

"And you were a beautiful bride, Koosje. It's good of you to come."

Marjolein and I chatted with the guests. As we went from table to table, she slipped her arm through mine.

"Why don't you come stay with us this summer, after your exams?" I asked.

Her eyes lit up, and she smiled so broadly that I could see her dimples. "Can I really? I'd like that!"

"Then it's a deal."

I had the feeling that someone was missing, until it dawned on me that the missing person was the reason we were sitting here eating soup, sandwiches and apple pie. We were all gathered here in honor of Vincent. And he didn't even have to come.

"It all went so fast," I remarked to Peter.

"Eighteen months. That's more or less the average."

"Fifteen months since he was diagnosed. If only he'd taken his meds and put up more of a fight, he might have—"

Peter interrupted. "But he didn't want to. Vin wasn't a fighter."

We exchanged addresses and phone numbers. I'd like to keep in touch with him. It'd be a way of letting me hold on to something that was important to Vincent. I had inherited a friend.

I'm all by myself now in the hotel room. Tom has taken the luggage downstairs, because our plane leaves in an hour. I sit down at the desk, pick up the phone and dial Vincent's number. Part of me knows he's not going to answer, but another part of me thinks that none of this has happened, that Vincent is going to pick up the phone and shout "Ha, gotcha!" How can I possibly think such a thing? After all, I touched his body when it was almost cold, I saw his corpse in the funeral home, I was there when the coffin was closed, I threw a tulip—a gay tulip—on his grave. I saw it all with my own eyes, and yet I still can't believe it. I'm still hoping to hear his voice again, if only for a second.

Suddenly I do hear his voice: "You've reached Vincent Brautichem's answering machine. I'm not home just now, but you can leave a message after the beep."

I dial again and hang up before the beep. Then again. And again. Finally, after I've dialed and hung up at least a dozen times, I leave him a message. My voice sounds hoarse but unwavering as I tell Vincent the one thing I was never able to tell him during his lifetime: how much I loved him.

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