

## Prologue

While a new cramp surges through my body, I try to remember how long I have been lying here. The blindfold blocks any sight of light. I could be here for hours as well as a day. Is it evening already, night? The spasms give me a sign that my bladder is playing up harder and harder. I do not want to give them the pleasure of peeing my pants. After a new cramp I realise that I can't keep up that tough posture for long.

During yoga, I do this exercise where I put my hands behind my back. I then bend forward and stretch my hands upwards as far as I can. A great stretching exercise. Until I have to sit in this uncomfortable posture for hours, like now. Not bent forwards as far as usual. But still. It feels like my muscles have been protesting for hours.

I try another meditation exercise. When you do these exercises when you're not in so much pain, they seem so easy. Now they appear not to be easy at all. It does help to distract me. Now I'm no longer obsessed by pain alone.

'Back at it again Miranda', I start a new attempt. *I will away the pain from my shoulder muscles. First I move the pain to another part of my body, where I don't feel it as much. Then I move it to a place outside of my body, as far as possible.* It really takes all of my concentration. Just when I am fully focussed, a new cramp surges through my body. Goodbye concentration. And then there is the pain in my poor shoulder muscles. Two different kinds of pain ravaging my body, demand too much of my powers of concentration. I can't succeed in willing away the pain because of that. It does distract me. The lingering panic is less of a bother to me now.

It is told that Sartre once said that hell is here on earth. If I remember correctly, he meant the hell created by people around him. To me the situation I'm in pretty much resembles a part of hell. I am, however, determined not to let it get to me. Even though my current situation looks hopeless.

Just my luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yesterday evening - or was it this evening? - I walked to my car. All of a sudden I'm grabbed from behind. And from that moment onward I do not remember anything, until I was awoken by some heavy moaning; which turned out to be me. A heavy headache and a mouth as dry as a bone are the first things I notice. After that I realise that I can't see a thing. And to top it all off I find my hands are tied behind my back.

'Ah, there she is again', I hear a vicious voice saying: 'Nothing will happen to you, if you voluntarily tell us where the key to the safe is.'

I really have no clue as to what the woman is talking about. I stammer confusedly: 'Which key to what safe?' That question is rewarded with a blow to my head. So hard that my head starts spinning. Apparently there are two of them. At least I cannot imagine that that woman can strike that hard. In a panic I start to hyperventilate. I really don't know.

Surprised I hear a well-known voice. In spite of the fact that his voice is hoarse, I recognise it immediately. 'Leave her be', his husky voice sounds from somewhere in the back of the room. Despite my awkward situation my heart starts beating wildly. It annoys me that a criminal has such an influence on me. I must resemble a stupid gangster lover. 'The poor child really doesn't know what you are talking about', the familiar voice continues. 'Then it will be high time for you to give us the information we want, or this missy has come to her final hour here on earth', I hear her tell him.

I am still clueless when he tells her: 'There was no need for you to bring Miranda here for that. I would have given you the keys to the safe anyway. Not that it will do you any good. Did you really think that they're the only copy? It took me a while to understand how you did it. Of course I made several back-ups which I hid in different locations. But if that's the way you want it. The key is in the second drawer of my desk in a secret compartment. The compartment has the following code.'

I hear him mention a couple of numbers. 'The vault has its own code', and he recites a new batch of numbers. The gag is put back into my mouth. Then I feel that someone is being chained to my

handcuffs. The familiar man is now tied up behind me. I hear the woman say to him: 'Let's hope you haven't been handing out all those back-ups too eagerly. You should know by now that we can find out to whom you did. Just like we found this missy before you had the chance to tell her all about this. We are now going to get the originals and will find out who got a back-up besides us. In the meantime, you'll have to wait here until we return.'

I hear how the woman leaves the room. That last remark was a dumb one. As if I were able to get away from here. I still do not understand one iota of what is going on. Did the bad guys get in a row amongst themselves or is this a matter of rival gangs? And what do they want with me? Dejected, I try to make myself as comfortable as possible. I try to ignore the fact that, in spite of the pain, a twinge of delight surges through me every time I feel a pair of fingers caressing my hand.

How many hours ago did they bring me here? Judging from my bladder, quite a while. In spite of my filled bladder, I would die for a sip of water. All the while, my stomach grumbles like crazy. How long can one last without food or drink? I once heard that you can do without food for a long time, but your time is limited without something to drink.

My fantasy runs amok again. A frustrating habit of mine. What if they return in a couple of days? Or worse, not at all? Would my friends miss me? Would they be able to find me? I really don't have a clue as to where we are. And what if we were stuck here for a couple of days? How could I get something to drink? A repelling thought crosses my mind. Should I have to collect my urine to have some moisture in a few days as well? With relief I remember that saving urine is impossible. Luckily I don't have anything to put it in.

My best chance might be to escape. The cuffs are too tight, however, to move even a bit. On top of that, I am also tied to someone. To pull my legs through the cuffs will be impossible. That always looks really spectacular in the movies. Such an acrobatic act to get the cuffs in front of my body. I don't think I am that lithe. It would only fail miserably.

In the meantime, I hope that my kidnappers return soon. To the great relief of my on-the-brink-of-bursting bladder I might be allowed to go to the toilet. My painful shoulder and arm muscles are begging for a different position. At the same time I also hope they stay away for a while. When they return it could mean that it will be my final hour.

The panic strikes immediately when I hear a door slamming in the distance. 'Help, I don't want to die yet!' every fibre of my body screams. Then I feel a finger stroking mine soothingly. This sweet gesture causes my breathing to calm down.

My thoughts are on him again. I am surprised that he's here too. What does he do here? Were the police right after all? Apparently they need him, but why did they kidnap me then? I have got more questions than answers. Probably he's gagged just like me, because since those two have left, he hasn't said a word.

Ever since I noticed that he was with me, I feel a lot better. It's hard for me to acknowledge. He attracts me in an irresistible way. Even though he is a criminal.

They won't kill us both, will they? The fact that I'm blindfolded, relieves me at first. So far I haven't seen anyone. In the movies they blindfold someone when they don't want to be recognised. They will probably not want to kill me. Right?

Thunderstruck I think that the man behind me seems to know her. He gave her a back-up of something, didn't he? Doesn't that make them (ex) partners in crime? Did they have a falling out of some sorts? Or are those two of a rival gang? One that wants to take him for a ride? Is it their plan to kill him?

Apparently he knows who the woman is and is able to identify her. To her, he is a liability. An ice-cold shiver soars down my spine. He may be a criminal but I still find the idea that he will be dead soon a horrible one.

I'm getting gloomy about the situation I am in. My filled bladder, the blindfold and the cuffs do not help to see life from the sunny side. For years I have been nuts about self-help books. Often they

have one or the other solution for the most awkward situations. What would such a self-help guru recommend in this situation?

Immediately the following thought shoots through my mind: 'Remain in the here and now, for one suffers the most from the suffering that one fears and which never surfaces.'

That can be all too true right now. I do suffer from the fear that I will be killed by those two. If I survive, that fear has been in vain.

I have to make sure I do not think about what could happen. What do they say in all those books: 'Use all of your senses to remain in the here and now. Feel, hear, smell, etcetera.' Well, let's do this then. There's nothing better to do. Everything that distracts me from panicking, is a welcome bonus. Of course, it goes haywire immediately. What do you feel? Yeah, right, my bladder damn it. Neat trick to concentrate on what I am feeling right now. My arms are almost being dislocated. My bladder puts pressure onto internal organs of which I didn't even know they existed. On to the next sense.

Which sounds do you hear around you? The reassuring breathing of the man behind me slows down my up tempo breathing. This is going just fine, I gratifyingly think to myself. But then I hear a creak. Is there someone in the house? Are they coming for us now? Has my final hour come? The panic attacks start with full force again.

Then, I feel a comforting pinch in my hand. Or is it meant apologetic? Because slowly I feel my trousers wetting. A warm stream comes towards me from behind. It soaks my trousers. Instead of horror, I feel relief. Relief that I'm not the only one in need. Being wet already, I let go of my bladder muscles. I decide to skip the question 'What do you smell now?' for the time being.

## Chapter 1 Miranda

Oh no. With a forceful jerk, I demolish the zipper of my favourite suitcase. As always I tried to stuff too much into my worn down case. It finally gives up. A bit saddened, I think of all the journeys on which it accompanied me. Our first trip together was trekking through Sri Lanka. In the streets of Colombo, the wheels got stuck in the slits of the road, of course. In the jungle I had to carry it myself as well. Of course I hadn't realised that these tiny wheels do not turn so easily in the loose sand and on tree roots.

My little suitcase is fed up with it now. Dismayed, I look at the tongue of the zipper that's resting in my hand now. All of a sudden, panic takes hold of me. In six hours my friends will be on my doorstep to go to the airport together. Where can I get a suitcase at eleven in the evening? To add to the disaster, my phone starts ringing. 'Mama' by Heintje blasts through my apartment. Because of that I know that it's my mother on the other side who wants to give me some last minute advice. My mum's a dear but sometimes it's a bit of a bother that she doesn't seem to understand that, at twenty-eight, I can pull my own weight. Today it's my lucky day that she does remember me. When I agitatedly tell her that my suitcase just broke down she immediately offers me one of hers. Luckily she only lives a ten minute drive away and I hurry to her in my delivery van.

I park my car in the driveway behind my father's colossus (for my own convenience, I go under the assumption that he doesn't have to go away tonight). Hurriedly, I rush in, thanks to my duplicate key. Shouting at my mother, I greet my father in the meantime who's reading the paper in the living room. I can't make out what he's mumbling to me because I am already moving on to find my mother. She walks into the hallway from the kitchen while drying her hands. 'Hear, hear, what a ruckus', she says while shaking her head. 'Where's the fire?' she adds smiling.

When I'm in a hurry I'm not really in the mood for quiet and mild humour. Irritated I ask about the suitcase. Naturally, my mother knows me longer than this and keeps her calm in spite of my moping. 'Come with me to the storeroom, so you can see for yourself which one you want to take along.'

Together, we dive into the storeroom to see if there's a small, not too heavy, brightly coloured suitcase and on wheels of course, waiting there for me.

'Miranda, don't get sentimental now', I address myself firmly. 'Be glad that you have a suitcase whatsoever.'

Disappointed, I look at the pile of dull, black, enormous suitcases. Too big, too big, too big. In my mind I disregard them one by one. I already checked in and filled in that I'm only carrying some light hand-luggage. What were the dimensions my suitcase had to meet? I call to my father if it's alright that I use his computer to look up the measurements. And Murphy's law seems to strike again.

My tough-luck day began this morning with sour whipped cream. Did I mention the fact that I have a catering business for pastries together with the most wonderful pastry chef and businessman François Mercure? No, well here you are then. Pastry is my greatest passion and François is almost as good at baking as I am. Besides baking, I discovered that I love to teach others how to make bonbons, cupcakes or cakes. It is no wonder that the greater part of the week I am occupied with workshops for children's parties, bachelor parties, friends clubs etc. François and I did not only develop an extremely fine going working relationship, besides that he has been my dearest friend ever since nursery. Before you get something into your heads, François has been happy with Lucas for many years now.

So to finish my story, this morning all the whipped cream had turned sour! Our new intern, not the cleverest according to me, had put the containers with whipped cream in the supply closet instead of in the fridge. Right beside the central heating isn't the smartest place, of course. And then on my way to the wholesaler it turned out they were doing some road-works again. Only one open lane

instead of three makes the traffic crawl. I was so much in thought that I completely missed my junction and had to reroute at the same snail's pace. All in all it took a twenty minute ride to last for an hour and a half. Just as I spotted a parking space close to the entrance in the crowded parking lot and I wanted to slip into it, this indecently massive SUV storms from the other side at high speed into 'my' spot. Just as I was about to ventilate my outrage, I saw the driver jumping out of his car and sprint inside. Sure enough there wasn't one free space left now. I couldn't escape the fact that I had to park in the second parking lot at the other side of the street. More delays. Upon returning to the shop I noticed that my intern has tried to be of help by glazing all the cakes beautifully. My heart sank into my boots as I saw that he also started to decorate the first five birthday cakes. *Kongratulations* blares out to me. It didn't get any better when I tried to make a C out of the K. To make matters worse, the file containing the VAT administration 'disappeared' just before I wanted to send it to our accountant. Thankfully I have an external back-up, but it took me another hour, before I located the manual and understood how to find files in this back-up. Hours later than planned I finally arrived home at nine o'clock. Instead of relaxing in bath with some wine, after a nice evening meal, while preparing for my holidays with the girls tomorrow. I am now in my mother's storeroom after a quick bite to eat, correction, in my father's study at the computer, which, how could it be any other way, is turned off and has to be booted again. Sleepy-headed (he must have fallen asleep in front of the Tele) my father comes to type his passwords and I wait, impatiently, until the computer is ready for use.

Well, if I have to wait, at least it gives me some time to chat with my father. Attentively, he asks about my friends, whom he knows, just like me, since nursery and some since highschool. Kim Castello, my friend ever since we were dropped off by our mothers at the crèche two times a week to play in the kitchen together. I do not know for sure if that is where the base was laid for my passion to bake cakes and for her work as a facilities manager, but I do know that we never lost sight of each other since.

Veronique Vasal, whom we thought was extremely cool when she walked into our class room as a first year with her head covered in shawls and brightly coloured extensions. Till this very day she always has the newest hairstyles, which isn't that odd when you are the owner of a thriving chain of hair fashion salons.

But an extra special place is reserved by my father, like all of us, for Jessica Catz. Jessica who wears her plus size with flair and charms everyone with her luscious smile. Jessica who has been an inextricable part of our little group ever since the field trip to Rome in the second year of the Gymnasium, when she rescued Kim, who still comes across as modest and timid, from the claws of Margaret.

Every class has its bitch, or better still, a bitch with a clique of admiring, mimicking bitches around her. You can ignore them, but often they spew their vicious remarks out loudly. Most of all, they like to pick on the ones who do not reply to them. In our class Kim was one of them. And no matter how much Veronique and I tried to cheer her up and scolded back at them, we noticed how Kim withdrew even more. Until Jessica concerned herself about Kim's fate as well as that of others and most of all her own fate. Her robust posture was a repetitive invitation to spiteful remarks. Jessica, however, always had witty reprisal, which boomeranged the mockery back at Margaret and co.

In Rome, the game was on in full swing. It seemed as if they were deliberately following Kim. She couldn't take a step (and so we couldn't, either) without hearing a snide remark. Until this day, we still don't know exactly what Jessica said to Margaret. We do know that since that day, the mocking of the weaker in our class had ceased. Not long after that Margaret moved house and we saw Kim blossom to become the confident woman she is today. A woman who, despite her fragile posture, knows how to radiate authority. To us, Jessica is part of our little group since that trip and despite of her busy job as a paediatrician, she is always present at our regular get-togethers.

And, we are inseparable since those days. Not only do we get together on an almost weekly basis,

but we also go away together on weekend trips, or for several weeks, and we share a passion for (sometimes very obscure) music, detective novels and series and bad luck in love too. Tomorrow, we are going to Gran Canaria for a week, to enjoy, like Kim can put into words so eloquently, ‘sun, beaches, booze and good looking hunks.’

I’ve got it here, I hear my father say. 55 by 40 by 20 centimetres. And armed with these measurements, I make for the storeroom and look discouraged at all the suitcases, which are all a tad bigger.

In thought my mother says: ‘Wait a moment’, and disappears to my father’s study. To return promptly with my father’s job travel case. It’s a real businessman thing, but well, better to have something than nothing at all. I don’t have to take along that much and I think everything will fit in nicely. Instead of a laptop, my e-reader; instead of pencils, my lipsticks and little bottles of make-up remover, shampoo etcetera. (first in a plastic bag in my coat pocket until I have passed customs, saves weight as well) a pair of high heeled sandals and a pair of low heeled sandals, flip-flops, my bikini, underwear, tops, a sun dress; I’ll be wearing a pair of trousers, my boots and a cardigan. OK, it’s possible and, after a big hug, I leave for home again. I do not know that this suitcase will cause me so much misery in the future .

In the meantime it is long past midnight and I cram my stuff in my borrowed suitcase. Under the shower I check in my mind if I have forgotten anything; I’ve got my tickets, my passport, travel insurance, credit card and cash money. If I have forgotten anything, I could just go and buy it. While I can’t lose the feeling that I have forgotten something, I drift into a restless sleep three hours before my friends will appear at my doorstep.

## Chapter 2 Marc

Cleverly done, that it is. With a deep sigh, Marc Lutz turns around in his executive chair. Whichever way he looks at the numbers, they don't add up. For days he has been busy figuring out where the discrepancies can be attributed to. During the stock-taking, vast amounts of stock appear to be missing. Both at several branches here as well as at partners elsewhere in Europe. The accountants are having problems figuring it out too, because apparently everything looks fine. They did, however, come up with a joint strategy on how to dive in deeper into the books to find out where the discrepancies are. He asked his good friend Josh Dudok, a renowned business lawyer, for advice about the legal aspects of the inquiry. Marc wants to prevent the collecting of unlawful evidence. At first he's trying to find out where the problem is himself, after all he has access everywhere and he knows each and everyone in the organisation.

A detective agency specialised in fraud can always be brought in if necessary. What bugs him the most, is that he doesn't know too well whom inside the organisation he can trust at the moment. The thought of a rotten egg within the organisation is what worries him the most. A fraud so ingenious can only be done by someone at the top level or, at least, be done with the cooperation of someone at the top level. And that means that one of his colleagues, one of the people he trusted unconditionally until recently, must be involved. Most of them are not only colleagues but most of all good friends.

He notices that he is not only worried, but also angry. Outraged, not because of the missing stock, but because someone broke his trust. He has been ill-tempered these last days. The tiniest little thing may ignite his anger. That reminds him that he has to arrange a bouquet or something like that for his secretary, who is on the receiving end of those moods most of the time lately. But his thoughts are so absorbed by the unrest that one of his friends might be involved, that he forgets this idea instantaneously.

It does worry him, however, that his anger keeps him from looking at the numbers objectively and distantly. Therefore he calls himself into line. It doesn't do him any good to keep it going through his head and wallow in his anger. That is not functional, certainly not in these busy times.

He gets a grip on himself and forces himself to think about the steps he wants to take and must take to handle the investigations as structured as possible.

He will have to check if the fraud is being done at the small partners or at the umbrella corporations instead. He hopes that if it is done at the smaller distributing firms, possible fraud will be easier to track because of their small scale operations. To demarcate the investigations area it is also important to know if the embezzlement takes place abroad or in the Netherlands. Tomorrow, he will fly to Las Palmas to do a book check at one of the smaller business partners abroad.

However, before being stuck abroad he wants to set the gears in motion here in the Netherlands as well. Since his full schedule doesn't allow for anything more, he wants to start this process at the local wholesaler in his own town.

A knock on the door brings him back from his ponderings. Monica, his secretary, enters the room to discuss his travelling arrangements. His annoyance acts up when he hears that she couldn't succeed to book a business class ticket on a direct flight because of the holiday rush. He is now faced with the choice of flying via Madrid with a total flight time of nine hours or directly in a holiday flight in five hours' time. He can book two seats in the front row with extra leg space. Well, these five hours can be overcome. At least he'll have enough space to do some work. With good headphones and his favourite music he will probably be able to shield himself off well enough.

It's a good thing his secretary knows how labour-intensive his days will be. She made sure that the five star hotel has an extensive fitness department and a spa complex with an indoor swimming pool. To blow off some steam, he can do some physical exercise as well. She promises him to put all the papers on his desk later.

In deep thought, he walks to his car and while he drives away, the different scenarios keep on haunting his mind. Darned, they are also doing road work. While the traffic crawls on slowly, he forgets he wanted to turn his temper down and in the meantime he is as vexed as hell about this extra delay.

Upon finally arriving at the wholesalers', he spots a parking space at the overcrowded parking lot from the corner of his eye. Only by turning sharply and swiftly he can park his car there. Hurried, he grabs his briefcase and without further ado, he rushes out of his car, on his way to his appointment with the local management.

The shortest route is through the warehouse and he hurries between the racks in the direction of the offices. He can barely jump aside when a fork-lift truck rushes towards him at full speed honking like mad. The following actions go so fast that it looks like he's watching a movie instead of it happening for real. He watches the driver jump into a side lane, just before the fork-lift crashes into a rack filled with bottles specialised beers. While the chinking of broken bottles resounds in his ears, he watches the pallets on top of the rack wobble and fall to the ground in an ear-shattering noise.

Unbelieving he stares at the enormous havoc. It was a close shave for he could have been underneath that mess. If he hadn't been right next to a side lane, he would have been unable to go anywhere and would have ended up lying there amidst the shards. It seems that no one got hurt despite the mess. He does hear how the pale-faced fork-lift driver keeps on repeating, like a broken record, 'the brakes, the brakes, the brakes jammed. The brakes, the brakes, the brakes jammed, the brakes....'

It's getting crowded with oncoming co-workers and customers. The alarmed and severely shocked management team comes to look at the havoc. More and more co-workers come to watch what happened with their own eyes. After the involved employees have been taken care of, the labour inspectorate has been warned and the area of the accident has been taped off, business continues as usual. In no less than ten minutes it seems as though nothing happened at all.

Because of this delay the meeting takes longer than expected. Afterwards Marc discusses the events of the day with David Marshall, manager of the wholesaler and one of his best friends. 'I'm glad that nobody was injured', David sighs relieved. 'Was I able to help you any further today?'

'Fortunately you did, even though I still haven't got the foggiest of what's going on', Marc admits. 'Well, rather you than me', David states, before they talk over about how Dian is doing. Dian has started her own company dealing in fair-trade made designer bags out of trash a few years ago.

After some Celebs were willing to use her bags in public, her company is doing great. She recently went to several developing countries to see if she can expand her collection with matching umbrellas and jewellery. 'When you're back from the Canaries, you should really come for dinner, so you can take a look at her newest collection', David invites him. 'My pleasure', Marc replies. 'I look forward to Dian's wonderful food.' With those words they say goodbye for that day.

It's past ten o'clock when Marc finally heads home that night. Just in time he remembers that he has to collect his tickets at the office. Exhausted when he comes home that night, he still has to pack his suitcase before hitting the shower. With only three hours of sleep left, he falls asleep completely done.



## Chapter 3 Tim

Triggered by pushing the enter button, the printer starts rattling and Tim Melchior leans back satisfied. His last report of the stack with which he has been busy all evening. The paperwork always piles up. It wouldn't feel right to him if he had to start his holidays with a backlog. That's why he hasn't taken in any new cases these last two days. It feels right, that all loose ends are tied up. He puts the print-out in the case file, puts away his service weapon and baton and walks over to the exit to punch out. His colleague, Peter, wishes him a happy holidays and, feeling relaxed, he walks to his car.

On his way he stops to get a Kebab roll and at home he sprawls into a chair in front of the TV. It's a good thing he packed his suitcase yesterday. The programs on TV can't really catch his attention and he decides to go to the pub on the corner. The frosty cold outside does feel quite bitter. He can barely imagine that he'll be lying comfortably on the beach in the sun tomorrow afternoon. For now, he only feels the cold. He pushes the door of the pub open and a cosy warmth welcomes him. Although it isn't crowded on this Tuesday weeknight, he does spot a few familiar faces. 'A beer?' Henk asks him and before he can confirm, Henk starts to tap. He sits down at the bar and greets the people next to him.

'A day off tomorrow?' Erik asks attentively. Boasting a bit, he tells that he is on holiday since one hour and thirty-four minutes. Only for one week, but just long enough to get away from everything. The others congratulate him on his holiday with envy. They think that they deserve a round for that and Tim agrees wholeheartedly. 'This one's on me, Henk, and have one yourself as well', he calls out.

After toasting, Henk sets the Music Quiz box on the bar. There is some loud moaning, but hey, everyone knows that there is always something special happening in this pub. The music quiz is one of them. Henk, being a real music fanatic, is the one that participates most enthusiastically of all. Although he has the answers, being the quiz master, he always waits to turn the cards until the answers have been given. He gets too much fun out of getting the answer right himself. The most peculiar thing about the quiz is the fact that Henk has expanded the questions with assignments that vary from 'dance the Letkiss' till 'sing the next song.' The moaning is meant for this part of the quiz. However, when everybody is sincere about it, this is the part with which everyone has the most fun. Time really flies in those moments.

When Gerda adds splendour to her song and dance by giving a roaring performance and Harrie acts out the song that has to be guessed by racing through the pub on a Solex, it's high time for Tim to go. A lot later than planned. He was at least that smart to switch to cola after the first beer, otherwise he wouldn't be allowed to drive to the airport in a while.

After a heart-warming goodbye from the other customers in the pub, he heads for home. When he sets his alarm he notices he has only three hours of sleep left. I will sleep on the beach then, he thinks, before sinking into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 4 Miranda

*I tear around the corner on my bike and hit a beam in the road (where the hell did that come from?). I am being catapulted and end up in the middle of a pile of whipped cream. I am licking my way through the mash until I, to my joy, end up at a divine body. How lucky I am to find this body under this glorious white stuff. Keenly I lick my way to the top (it seems a bit inappropriate to immediately go down on a stranger). Mmmmmmmmmmm this body looks really hot and it tastes heavenly. To be honest I am really curious for ... While my hormones try to direct me downwards, I suddenly hear alarm bells ringing and, in disgust, I look into the face of the prick that had to steal away my parking space for no reason this afternoon. I do not know how to get away from him as fast as possible. How is it possible that such a jerk can have such a nice body? The butterflies in my stomach are gone in a heartbeat and vaguely I hear Catapult's 'Let your hair hang down' blasting in the background.*

What does Veronique want from me now, goes through my mind, while slowly it is dawning upon me that I am dreaming. The alarm bells are real, they are my doorbell, and the music is my mobile phone's ring tone. Dizzily, I answer my phone and hear Veronique bellow in my ear: 'Twerp, we are at your door, where are you?' Tripping over my flip-flops, I hurry out of bed, bump my toe and, after a cry of pain, I limp to the door shouting into the phone: 'Sorry, I'm coming.'

Now I know which important thing I forgot. I forgot to set my alarm! Luckily, I had a shower only three hours before, my clothes are at the ready, as well as a bottle of breakfast fruit (I wouldn't get anything else down this early). In the meantime, Veronique and Jessica are circling around me. 'How is it possible that you oversleep while I couldn't close my eyes at all?' Veronique cries out indignantly. Still groggy because of the sudden disturbance of sleep, I falter back to the bathroom with my painful toe in order to wake myself with a splash of cold water. Not that it really helps, but some toothpaste and a comb through my untamed manes does help me feel a bit refreshed.

With a shock, I realise that I have a plane to catch and the adrenaline that rushes through my veins finally gets me into gear. I dress myself in a hurry, grab my suitcase, and check my papers again. I hurry to the kitchen, yes, I did turn off the gas, on to the bathroom, oh that's right, I didn't take a shower so of course the shower isn't running, to the bedroom to check if the window is closed, back to the bathroom, was that tap closed or wasn't it and then Jessica and Veronique intervene and drag me out of the house to the car, where Kim is already waiting for us.

I put my suitcase in the trunk of Kim's spacey SUV and join Veronique in the backseat, while Jessica gets into the shotgun seat. 'What took you so long?' Kim grunts mopingly. 'Now we have to hurry to be in time.'

The moment I want to apologise, Veronique starts shaking with laughter. 'What's the matter now?' Jessica asks looking back. Veronique is only able to point in my direction. Now Jessica starts to laugh as well. I, still groggy, look behind me to see what's going on. This brings out new laughter. Slowly, it dawns upon me that I am the object of this hilarity. I shrug and shake my head, while in the meantime these two ladies howl with laughter and I reach for my head to end up with my clean panties in my hand. Slowly, I begin to realise what's going on. My panties had been lying ready on my top. In my hurry to get dressed, I had pulled them over my head together with my top where they got stuck. Sleepy headed as I was, I hadn't noticed I was still wearing my sleeping panties (luckily still reasonably clean after only three hours of sleep). Now I understand where this hilarity comes from. A little bit of extra sleep in the car is out of the question after this wardrobe malfunction.

Because I am wide awake now, I decide to tell about my wonderful dream which progressed into a nightmare. Although all four of us are more or less unwanted bachelorettes, we can, probably because we have to do without, completely swoon over a good-looking guy. Last year, a real hunk moved in diagonally across from Jessica's and we almost lick our lips each time he appears on his

roof terrace. We resemble those office women in the cola commercial who gather by the window each time a stud shows up.

Well, we too yearn for our moments of pleasure and yes, fair is fair, a greater part of our oncoming holiday will probably be spent making comments on all the men passing by while we are on a terrace enjoying a tasty cocktail. I'm lucky that in this moment I don't know that this holiday will elapse quite differently from what we are imagining.

But before I give all the details of my dream, I first have to unveil my parking drama to my friends. What I love about my friends is that I know in advance that they will fully sympathise with me and indeed, the moment I tell them how the prick shoots into 'my' parking space, my friends moan as loudly as I do and I sense their vicarious anger. After we have calmed down, I continue to tell them about my dream.

I make them enjoy my crazy ride on my bike, my tumble through the air and then tell them graphically: 'Imagine you land in the middle of a mountain of delicious whipped cream and I don't mean the canned one but the cream you whip yourself, the firm and sweet kind, and that you feel that inside that mountain of whipped cream there is something firm, muscular and meaty.' Telling it now, I feel the shivers of pleasure racing through my body again, I feel my nipples harden and how they long to be touched, but I caution myself to calm down. Next I tell them how, in my dream, I begin licking and how I enjoy the lovely taste of whipped cream. Licking that firm body isn't bad either. What I find particularly tantalising is the tension. The tension about what (kind of) delightful creature will emerge from under that whipped cream.

While telling this, I all at once notice how dreams seem so unrealistic when you are awake, for one moment you are riding your bike down the lane in warm sun rays (while it's the heart of winter now) and the next you are lying naked on an overgrown road-side on top of a man who is just as naked. Fortunately, we do not have to think about logic now.

'How big was he really?' Veronique cries out, being the 'naughtiest' of the four of us and who doesn't shun to say what's what concerning sex. Compared to her, I often feel timid, certainly when I remember that, even in my dreams, I am afraid to go for the best piece. Even in my dreams I let the chance to enjoy myself boundlessly pass by. How I would love to have the daring that Veronique possesses to take matters into my own hands (sniggering I laugh about this coincidental play of words). Even now I stagger with a fiery red head, that that question is not the most important one. Which, in turn, makes the other three laugh out loud sarcastically. And to be honest, they are right, of course. I was as curious as hell, so why did I have to be so decent in my dreams? When you finally have the chance to go on exploring without fear of STD's ...

'Just let her finish the story', Jessica says, who notices that my thoughts tend to stray from the story again. With lots of details I tell about how wonderfully that body tasted. After what, to be exactly? A bit salty but spicy too, a bit earthly and tantalizing on the tongue, nice and warm. My mouth literally starts to water, when I remember that taste. Certainly when I remember how lovely that body felt in my dreams. Hard and yet soft simultaneously, how his nipples hardened under my tongue, how the muscles on his chest and in his arms slightly began to tremble, how I felt his heart beating and how I felt his breathing interchange from shallow to deep, how his breath stroke my skin and again I get goose bumps when remembering it.

My peace of mind might benefit from the fact that I have arrived, both in my story as well as in my dream, at the disclosure of the face. I gladly notice that my friends think it is just as much an anti-climax as I do when there is such a jerk behind such glorious muscles.

'Was that prick a hunk in real life as well?' Kim asks. 'Come to think of it, I wouldn't really know. He was gone so fast and I was so outraged about it that I can't really remember what his body looked like', I stammer.

Before more questions arrive, Kim cries out happily: 'What luck, they just removed the road block.'

Before us we just see the car hauling those orange things away.  
In the meantime, we are approaching Eindhoven. Luckily, it's not so crowded on the road at night so we can make up for the lost time. Just as I want to say that we are making progress, the car starts to sway.