

**2014**

# 1.

I am Niek.

I was once taught never to begin a text with the word “I”. But since this whole book is about me, I think avoiding it would be a little sanctimonious.

There have been times in which I really tried to be one of the cool guys. Aged 24, I had a house in one of the most expensive parts of Amsterdam, a nice car with a parking permit, a job in one of those impressive office towers, a brand new iPhone, a briefcase, and a custom-made suit with a tie. Oh, and a few years later, I even got myself a motorcycle.

Nowadays, I have to stick a tube in my willy a few times a day in order to pee. Although there are many other unpleasant daily pursuits that I could mention here, I thought it would be nice to state the one thing that immediately shows male readers the seriousness of the matter. Please, don't stop reading guys; I won't talk about it too much. And hey, there are quite a few nice women in this book. There's even sex too.

Cool guy plus motorcycle plus alcohol plus fatigue turned out to be a very unhealthy cocktail. Strangely enough, it wasn't bad enough to die from. Apparently I just had to drop down really hard, without actually dropping dead. A single-vehicle motorcycle accident in 2010 caused about 90% of my body to stop working. The upper 10% was very sad to realise this as I lay there on the street. And it still is sometimes.

But no, that's not due to the paraplegia it triggered. To be honest, I can totally live with that. I had the misfortune to end up with a syrinx too, a cavity within the spinal cord. This rare, unexpected little gift continuously threatens my few body

parts that still work perfectly: my arms and my head. Most people either survive an accident or die from it. It's as easy as that. No matter how hard the crash is, you can get back on your feet and get going again after survival. This syrxinx is something completely different though. It's a patient assassin.

Nevertheless, 2014 is currently coming to an end and I'm still wheeling through life. I can say I make the most out of this incapacitated time. It has now been four and a half years since the crash. Since then, I married my beautiful occupational therapist, knocked her up – I'm going to be a dad in a few months from now - and made money by the bucket loads. Or, at least, I made enough money to buy a van the A-Team would have envied if this were 1985.

I thought it would be nice to write a book about all of this. But this isn't one of those books in which I tell you exactly the way things work. This isn't a book in which I explain to you how religion, alternative healthcare, or some kind of guru rescued me. And I definitely won't say that everyone should experience a crash like mine. Believe me, this tube into your willy.... Ah well, I won't go into this.

Nonetheless, I can say that I live quite a brilliant life, in between taking my thirty-seven pills per day. And if I can have a life like that, despite the nonworking 90%, I'm not overly ambitious in saying that you could have it too, right? I hope that you can read between the lines and discover the way I achieved this. Maybe it will work out for you too. Maybe it won't, but then at least I hope you will have laughed a bit (if you're a man) or cried a bit (if you're a woman) or have done both (if you're somewhere in between) by the time you finish this book.

I can say that I'm happy. Not in an 'oh yeah, there's always some shit, but my life is quite nice actually' way, but I actually

mean it. I'm really happy. If you consider the fact that only the upper 10% of my body still works perfectly, you can definitely conclude that happiness is something that's in your head. Or at least that it's not necessarily something you can find in a big house or in a car (although I must say that my van is really nice). Nor does it come from your legs.

This is my story. It's partially written by Peter, too. I met him by chance. Peter is like a fifteen-years-older Niek, with legs that are still working. He's a good-time guy. He's an author and does something for TV. He even managed to get his hands on the phone number of the utterly beautiful Dutch actress Katja Schuurman because of the latter. The day he told me that, I knew we had a deal.

This is where my story starts. I have no idea where it will end. I consider every new day a gift and live by that. And I learn something new each day.

## 2.

What a nice coincidence. The day I started writing this book, sometime in November 2014, was also the day I learned a new word. At age 32, that doesn't often happen anymore. I would love to take a moment to tell you about it: it's called a hydrophilic nappy.

First, let me get something straight. This chapter might slightly bother some female readers. Especially the mums, or those who consider ironic jokes something bad. They'll think: 'See? He hasn't learned anything from his accident. Because if he had, he'd say nicer things about baby stores and about his pregnant wife.' But at the end of the day, I'm just being honest here. I'm truthful about what many men think, and, well, I'm trying to keep male readers interested too. But it's going to be all right, ladies. You'll soon realise that I have indeed really started to think about life and managed to make the right decisions. And not only the decisions I benefit from myself.

Kim and I are pregnancy shopping for the umpteenth time in one of those huge half-pink, half-blue stores where the average man wouldn't be caught dead. A girl with a super friendly face comes up to us and asks if she can help. Right before she answers, Kim sends me a look telling me to stay out of the very important issues about to be discussed.

'Yes, please,' Kim says.

'What exactly are you looking for?'

'Everything.'

This answer makes us the perfect customers. The salesgirl takes ample time in showing us every single thing a baby needs or might like. I manage to stay out of the way until she shows us the hydrophilic nappies. I can't resist:

'WHAT type of nappies?'

If Kim's looks could kill, she only needed a second to achieve

what the motorcycle accident failed to do. But the salesperson doesn't know me very well. She smiles and continues.

'A hydrophilic nappy! They are super soft and absorb much better. Nowadays almost everyone has them...'

So, I'm sitting here in my wheelchair, close to crying tears from laughter, wondering in what depressive mood some insane marketer was in when he invented this word. But the female duo quickly calls me to order. I'm shocked to hear every baby-minded person in the Netherlands uses these cloths. According to Kim, a childhood without hydrophilic nappies is a bad childhood, and the salesgirl vigorously agrees. Apparently even my mother-in-law is an advocate of stocking up on them. When you're living in the Netherlands and 30 weeks pregnant, a maternity care employee will come to your house to check your stockpile. But what if we haven't bought enough of them, I wonder... will we have our babies taken away? But at this point, I'm smart enough not to ask that question out loud.

I decide that my life has become a disaster. What has happened to the era of the cotton nappy? The time when babies didn't even have a crib but just slept in a drawer instead? Next to the hydrophilic cloths, we also must buy nappies containing the apparently super comfy PH87CS-ingredient. € 75 for five nappies is a bargain and we only want to buy the very best gear for our baby: a golden sales argument no one – and definitely no future dad – dares to call into question. They're even on sale so it's basically for free, Kim says. And since the designer cot is equipped with a self-calibrating rocking mode, € 2500 is a steal too. Okay, I may be in my full-denial, recalcitrant phase again, as happens with any other change in my life. But in this case it makes sense. I'm a man. I still consider breasts more of a sexual object than a food source. And al-

though Kim's body has already changed quite a bit in the past five months, my system is still the same. Just like my mind, I think. I'm definitely not a dad yet. Kim seems to think the babies could arrive as early as tomorrow, but we probably have at least four more months. That's like a full human life: plenty of time. I'll first start focussing on the new van arriving in January.

Customers like us can be found everywhere in the store. Over-excited women with baby bumps, followed by sad men a few steps behind. I somehow feel connected to these men, as if we're all going through the same pain while being lured into the lion's den. We pass a couple where the man looks even sadder than the average sufferer. Our eyes meet across and our women start talking to each other.

'When are you due?

'In twenty weeks.'

'How nice! We are having twins,' Kim proudly tells her. The man freezes and looks at me with pity. My story comforts him, knowing that I have to spend twice as much in this shop. Him and I continue walking with heads hung low until we see the finish line. Back in the car, Kim asks cheerfully: 'Well, that wasn't too bad, right?'

An hour later – and far poorer – I'm finally allowed to focus on our new van again. I sit on the couch and re-read the brochure.

'Did you know it has sprayed bumpers?

'Who cares.'

'And alloy wheels. Seventeen inch. To me, that seems much more important than all those weird baby tools.'

While saying this out loud, it feels like half of the world population has my back. But out of those 3.5 billion men, I'm the

only one married to Kim. This time she doesn't kill me with her looks, but sighs at this tremendous amount of masculine stupidity.

'A car needs to be black and have four wheels. That's all.' How can you not care about RN315-navigation and electrically folding side mirrors? This world has become truly weird. To make up for it, we spend the night at a Herman van Veen concert in the Carré theatre in Amsterdam. I can sense my late mother's presence in the building, which is nice. She came here quite often and loved the place. Once the show ends, we keep on applauding and Herman is nice enough to return to the podium another fifteen times. He leaps into the crowd and gives me a pat on the head. According to Kim, he does that because he thinks I'm retarded. I know better than that.

While watching the show, I manage to forget about the hydrophilic nappies for a while. I close my eyes and listen to the magic voice that brings me back to my childhood. My mummy is humming a few bars of Van Veen's *De Wolkentrappier*. Daddy is reading a car brochure on the couch. In fact, not much has changed. And that's the way it's supposed to be.



**2010**

### 3.

Don't worry; I won't bother you with long stories about my childhood. Therefore, you can conclude it was a nice one. It was, in fact, a perfect one. Yes, my dad occasionally slammed his fist on the table, but in my memories my family basically looked like those coffee commercials, the ones with smoked sausages and other breakfast foods that felt just like happiness. Seriously.

My infancy looked like this. Both of my parents are physiotherapists. They run a successful business together, and my mum also works as a teacher. Each Friday, my dad is the last to come home. The rest of us are already sitting at the table. Very charmingly (I know, you're wondering where I get that from) my father runs into the room carrying a huge bouquet of flowers. 'Flowers? For me?' my mum acts like she's surprised. As if thirty years of marriage haven't made her realise yet that he does this every Friday.

He kisses mum first and then us. We think our parents' kissing is disgusting. The food tastes delicious, which is something we tell our mother every day as if we're terrified she'll stop cooking if we don't.

There are six of us. I have one older brother, Jeroen. Together, we think we're invincible. Jeroen is clearly the oldest. We sometimes beat each other with sticks or bite one another, but we usually get along great. I'm a fantastic second child, followed by Yuna, the oldest of my younger sisters. Yuna and I are having a difficult time together – more so than with my other siblings. I'm a jerk and often bully her. Next in line is Kyra, also known as Minipinie. Clearly the youngest and most spoiled kid. She often jumps on our lap for a hug, even until she's old enough to move out of the house.

Daddy is like Chuck Norris. Or Superman. He can build

anything he wants. He single-handedly created his own electricity systems, built his own house, fixed the car himself and bolted a helicopter together. All at once. His business is a success and he has the body of a 25 year-old. He wears trainers and tight jeans to show off his bum so the ladies' hearts will race. He's very social, always around to talk through my problems, and is a great listener. He sails around half the world in his own boat, tans way too quickly, dares to cry but laughs more often, and enjoys life. He drinks two beers a day, sometimes three. I don't have to put him on a pedestal since he's already naturally attached to one anyway.

Home is where we drink and eat cheese, but more importantly: where we have great conversations. After each visit home, I re-enter the big bad outside world understanding life again. When I'm twelve, I join in on my parents' adult conversations and I learn valuable lessons from them. When I'm sixteen, we talk about relationships. I fall in love with the girl of my dreams, Kristie. We are sleeping together until I'm twenty-one. I'm relieved I got enough sexual attention at that age. My dad often joked about it: 'You'd better have a small one that grows than a big one that remains little.' He couldn't have known that in just a few years I would end up with a small one refusing to grow. When I'm twenty-five and visit my warm and fuzzy family again, we talk about the meaning of life. They teach me the importance of the things we do and that I always have the opportunity to quit something and start something else. By the time I began working, I should have listened more to their advice.

I remember us going on holiday about twelve weeks per year. We'd travel in big, smelly cars that break down all the time, but, hey, my parents shouldn't have had four kids if they wanted their vehicles to keep running. Six weeks of camping in the summer, two weeks of skiing holidays, weekend sailing

trips... the vacations never seem to end. We go on even more trips than I mention here, but you get the idea.

I have friends too. Jelte has been one since primary school. We were the only two boys brave enough to jump from the highest diving board, and every girl is in love with us – or at least we think so. Therefore, we can do one of two things: we either become competitors or friends. We chose the latter. A third musketeer joins us in the first year of secondary education. His name is Niek too. It will take years before Peer finally completes our four-man circle of friends. At this point, I'm attending a hotel management school.

I'm always busy. I've been in a hurry since the day I was born, which happened too fast for my mum to change her tracksuit bottoms into something more appropriate. I'm the boy with the go-cart, skateboards, and scaffoldings, the boy who climbs out the window and jumps from trees. I often fall down, but never too hard. I also play water polo and do high-level ballroom dancing, two hobbies that demand completely different things from my body and don't match at all. At school, I'm the follower. I always really want to join the big boys. I secretly smoke cigarettes in the schoolyard and drink pints in a bar. I soon learn there's only one way to earn money if you aren't born with it – by working really hard. Aged fifteen, I land a job as a dishwasher in a pub. I work my way up to waiter, cook, host, and then manager, and work everywhere from bars and fish and chip shops to Grand Cafés and Michelin star restaurants. I love to entertain and surprise my guests, pouring my heart into working seven days a week, ending each night spending my hard-earned money in the same establishment. I decide to study high-level hotel management, and I turn out to be a great student. But again, I want to experience the bar from both sides, and I squander my student loan on drinks.

Throughout college, I try to do as much as possible in as little time as possible. I spend a year in Asia, one in Africa and another one in the United States. I go skiing and scuba diving, spending time at the beach and in the snow. I sometimes flirt with death, like in Colorado, where I try to impress my date by smashing a bottle of wine to open it but shred my tendons too. In Thailand, I want to amaze two Swedish girls and decide to jump through a flaming hoop, but land wrong and break multiple bones.

I'm more of a doer than a thinker, but throughout my studies, people tell me I'm talented too. I start to believe this when a consultancy firm called Young Coldfield offers me one of its traineeships for 'highly educated talented people'. I'm the first trainee in the history of the club with only a degree from a university of applied sciences, so I MUST be someone special. I get a nice starting salary and a company car. The other Niek and I decide to become flatmates and we find an apartment in a great neighbourhood in Amsterdam. It sucks that he earns even more and has an even bigger car than me but besides that, all the pieces seem to fit. I've got a briefcase, an iPhone, a suit, and a tie. I have a hardwood floor and a parking permit. I'm twenty-six years old and live the life I've always wanted.

But it just doesn't feel right. I can't explain it, but I can sense it. I'm seconded to another company and have to work as a project manager, but I don't care about 'projects' at all. I want a girlfriend but don't have one. I need peace and quiet, at least within myself, but don't have that either.

I sit on the couch for days, drinking cola and eating crisps. Curtains closed, lights low, TV on. I'm overweight. I don't feel successful enough. I don't make enough money and reach my overdraft limit every month. I'm not really doing what I want to do. Why can't I figure out what to do next? I'm a stereotypical member of the Choice Generation. We have it all, can do

everything we want, have plenty of opportunities. But how can we choose to be happy?

I go to work, but it doesn't feel like I'm there. I go to the pub, but long for home. I live in the city, but am looking for tranquillity. At this point, I'm simply lost. I don't know if I really need help, but as a child of two therapists, I search for treatment. I get hypnotherapy, reach a deep state of hypnosis and go back to my childhood. What I like about therapy is the fact that you always end up blaming your parents for everything. Great. Bye-bye perfect infancy. Daddy is a hero and maybe too much of a hero, I learn. I'm not as good as Chuck. No, I know this, but has anyone ever told me I had to be? I learn to tell my reflection each morning that I'm not a bad person. Awesome. Minor detail: I don't buy it.

One of the big advantages of working for Young Colfield is their effort to train young professionals. Because of this I have access to lots of personal development training and attend workshops. In one of them, my coach Kirsten asks me to draw my dream. Easy peasy, I think. I need only five minutes to draw a meadow, a sailing boat and a few cabins on the water. And myself, of course: without a project, but with people. That's the one thing I know for sure: I want to work with people, inspire them and coach them. I'm not sure what I can teach them and what my story is, but it's crystal clear that this is what I should be doing.

Kirsten is surprised by my speed. Apparently not many people have such a clear idea about their dreams. She takes a thoughtful look at my drawing and finally asks me: 'Hey Niek, what are you currently doing to make your dream come true?'

It's an obvious question. You have a dream, you're quite good at drawing it, and so what's next? At that point, on that chair, in the big townhouse that houses the consultancy firm,

I realise I don't even have a plan. Night after night, I take off my suit, open a beer, have a seat, and wait for the next day, the next unwanted meeting, and the next project to come. No matter how logical the question, it hits me really hard. I lose it; I can't talk to anyone anymore and quit the training. I fail. I drive home in a daze and call Peer, who has become a close friend in a short amount of time. And he proves how great of a friend he is.

'Peer, something is wrong.'

'And you're only discovering this now?'

'I just don't get it anymore and I don't even know where to find it.' I explain what happened during the training earlier that day. How I don't understand myself anymore.

'Niek, no one has understood you lately.' Even in a situation like this, Peer knows how to make me laugh. 'Is it money? We'll give you access to our savings account. Don't you like your job? Then quit! Don't you like your house? Move in with us. Are you unhappy with yourself? Then why won't you change it?'

Wow, I think. If this is all possible, I can finally make a decision I truly feel good about again.

That night, we hang out at a bar and he encourages me to live with him and his girlfriend Daniëlle for a while, in a town called Bussum. To leave the city, the expensive apartment, and the forty bars per square kilometre. A few days later, I move in. Not much later I decide to quit my job. With a heavy heart I inform my chef during a conference I organised myself. It's one of my projects. To my great surprise, she understands and congratulates me on making this decision all by myself.

That night in Bussum, I enter the backyard carrying a suit and a bunch of ties. Daniëlle asks me what I'm going to do. I tell her I want to finalise my short career as a super talent with an

appropriate ending. Peer understands and starts a fire in the fire pit. With two cold beers waiting for us on the garden table, I throw the first tie in the fire. The fabric crackles and the smoke is blue. Not great quality. Daan (Daniëlle's nickname) hollers from the window: the smell is unbearable. Peer and I are both in deep thought, enjoying the flames. I solemnly promise myself not to wear a suit or tie ever again.

I'm broke and still don't have a plan, but today I already feel better than yesterday. I start my first course in neuro-linguistic programming. I decide to stay in Bussum for a while, and apply for a job as an operations manager for a hospitality business in a beautiful area full of lakes. I can't fulfil my desire to coach there, but it's on the water, there are sailing boats everywhere, and a job in hospitality is a step in the right direction. I get the job and buy a motorcycle to celebrate. It gives me a rush, but not for long. If anyone would take a good look at this situation, he'd see I'm starting to behave like I was in Amsterdam again: I buy something to prove I'm doing absolutely fine.

Coach Kirsten gave me a present: my first crash. It wasn't good enough though. The motor can do better.



## 4.

The company I work for owns a lovely terrace on the water. It's packed day after day in summer. Sailors, bicyclers, and people visiting the nearby beach come for drinks and food from dawn till dusk. We are even famous on a national level: we are mentioned in the Dutch 2010 Terrace Top 100. We are going to hear our exact ranking this afternoon, during a big award ceremony at beach resort Scheveningen.

It promises to be a beautiful sunny day. My boss and two supervisors depart for the show, and we're all excited. Going to the beach on a sunny day isn't bad at all. We think we're serious candidates for the number one ranking. I leave my motorcycle at work and hitch a ride with my boss.

I bought another gadget recently - a brand new phone. Minutes before we arrive in Scheveningen, I notice the battery level is already low. It's crazy how little power these things have.

I assume Peer has to work today. He and Daan run a popular restaurant in Amsterdam, so I guess he can pick me up from work tonight and bring me back to Bussum, which means I can leave my motorcycle at the restaurant and have a few drinks today. I send him a text message, but he's having a day off and thinks he'll be sleeping already by the time I arrive back at work after the ceremony. 'No problem,' I reply. 'I'll be fine, I'll arrange something else.'

I drink a few beers during the award ceremony that afternoon. It's five o'clock somewhere, so I'm allowed to. My boss is the bar man and doesn't touch a drop because he is going to bring us home. It turns out we're ranked #69, which results in a few very masculine jokes. We then celebrate our small success having drinks in a famous local bar.

We don't get home before midnight. My two colleagues get

wasted and pass out in the backseat. I'm not as drunk and chat with my boss. I tell him I'm considering a holiday to South Africa, but conceal my plan to go there for an entire year. I spent quite a lot of time there during my studies, learned scuba diving, and worked there as a diving instructor. That's the way I would like to live my life. Scuba diving for college credits wasn't bad to begin with, but the combination of water, nature, and a simple life still makes me smile each time I think back to it. And more importantly, it enabled me to teach people something that made them happy.

Overall, my South African dream is close to the drawing that confused me just a few months before. Last time I visited South Africa I fell in love with the country, its people, and its nature. Serge, my Belgian buddy, is still living there. I envy him. And well, what have I got to lose? I know I'm currently finding my way back to the right road again: I'm living in a town, working on the water. But I'm not there yet. I haven't found enough peace and quiet yet. I don't have a girlfriend or any kids. Why wouldn't I go back to South Africa? I even still have the immigration forms.

Back at work, we have one last drink at the bar with floor manager Dax who has been working all night. After my colleagues leave, Dax and I decide to stay a little longer. We chat while closing the bar and even in the parking lot. After we've been standing outside for a while, I suddenly feel a weird shiver down my spine.

'Oh man, it's colder than I thought it'd be.'

'It is, isn't it? It's seven or eight degrees lower than yesterday. You can really tell.'

The floor manager yawns. It's been a long day for him too.

'I'm exhausted. Can I drive you home?'

'No way. It would be way too much of a detour for you. Just go home, I'll call a taxi.'

He gives me one of those awkward semi-hugs – a common farewell practice between men – and gets into his car. I grab my new phone and push the wrong button twice before finally finding the number of a taxi service. This device was the impulse buy of the week, I realise. It has nearly run out of battery – there's only 20% left – and the lady who answers the phone doesn't make things any better. There are no free taxis, she says. She tries to help out by mentioning a competing company that might still have cabs available.

I'm ready to call it a day though. It's getting really cold. I'm tired. It was busy today and it has been for weeks. How much beer did I drink – five or six glasses? That was a few hours ago though. Doesn't the effect of a beer wear off in an hour and a half?

I look at my motorcycle standing lonely in the parking lot. I'm nine kilometres away from home. That's ninety minutes of walking at a forced march. I know for sure that's definitely not going to happen. I didn't bring my motorcycle gear, but my helmet is hanging from the handlebars.

Ten minutes. Ten minutes on a road I could drive blindfolded.

I grab my key.

## 5.

July 20th, 2010, 1.14 a.m.

Dear friends of Niek,

As most of you have already heard, Niek was involved in a motorcycle accident Thursday night. We are sending you this e-mail to update you about the situation and Niek's health. We want to tell you what has happened, what it means for now, and what's next.

On Thursday night, Niek was driving from Kortenhoef to his house in Bussum when he got in a single vehicle accident. He was banged up pretty hard, but was able to call the emergency number himself. Very early in the morning, he was brought to the AMC hospital in Amsterdam. Thorough examinations have shown Niek has high paraplegia and a badly damaged leg and shoulder. He is paralyzed from his chest down in terms of both sensibility and motor function. Doctors say a significant recovery for his nervous system is impossible. The other injuries can recover if he undergoes intensive rest. The CT scan shows his brain and his arms are functioning properly. Niek clearly hasn't lost his rebellious streak; just before his back surgery, he asked a nurse if he could please get two beautiful boobs for himself since they'd be working on his body anyway...

In both the short and long term, Niek, his family, and friends are going through many changes. We are hopeful he will leave intensive care after the weekend to continue his recovery in a regular surgery unit.

The doctors will discuss transferring him to a rehabilitation

facility. Since his situation is very new and fragile, it's important Niek gets enough rest to recover physically and to realise what has happened. At this very moment, he is in denial, but he will soon start understanding what's going on little by little.

Mail, flowers, and visits are not possible right now as he's still in intensive care. His family asks you to be patient until he is moved to the regular care unit and has gotten at least part of his strength back.

Furthermore, we are amazed to see all of your expressions of sympathy and well-wishes. This has already been a great comfort for the Van den Adel family, and they want to thank all of you. We kindly request you to continue supporting Niek and his family now and further down the road, however you can.

As soon as we know more about Niek's health, possible hospital visitation, or anything else, we will inform you via his email address. If you have any questions, please give one of us a call.

Wishing you the best of luck,

Peer, Niek, Jelte

## 6.

I open my eyes and don't know where I am. It's dark and I'm looking at the stars. Where the hell am I? When I try to sit up I groan in pain. It feels like a huge bolt of lightning is burning right through me. That's the only thing I can feel: my legs don't function. Not at all.

I don't know why I don't know where I am. I'm really trying to think.

It's cold here. It's cold and wet. I feel water in my neck. No, it's not water, but something else. It feels like syrup. I try to look up to see what it is, but it hurts too much. Everything hurts, even breathing and thinking. It feels as if someone is poking needles into my body.

Finally, a moment of clarity: the syrup is blood. I must be covered with blood. No one is ever covered with syrup. And if I'm covered in blood, it must be mine, because there's no one else here. And if it's mine, something bad has just happened. Something bad has happened to me. But who am I, anyway?

Slowly, a picture comes back. I'm thinking in very short sentences. My name is Niek. I'm Leo and Tre's son. I remember what they look like. I can see the house I grew up in. It was a nice place. For just a moment, I'm smiling a little bit. My whole body yells at me and tells me it wants to sleep, to stay away from the pain. I pass out.

I open my eyes again. I'm nauseous. I can see the stars shining high above me. Who am I? What am I doing here, laying on my back? All my memories seem to have vanished. I can only breathe shallow breaths because even the smallest movement causes great pain.

Yet again, I wake up. 'Hello?' I try to shout but all that

comes out is gentle whispers. No one can hear this. There's no power in it. I can't do anything else but look up. I then realise I'm on my own. No one knows I'm here. This insight cuts right through me. It's just the stars, the darkness, and me. I have never felt so lonely. I start counting the stars to avoid a panic attack. I try to recognise constellations and make up new ones to calm down and allow myself to start thinking about a next step.

Despite the pain I manage to turn my head to the side. I see I'm lying in a pool of blood. A pool of blood on the tarmac. The asphalt looks weird up close. It seems so smooth when driving on the road, but it's actually really granular. I pet the asphalt. Apparently my hand still listens to me.

I must have fallen from my motorcycle, but can't remember anything about it. There's something behind the pool of blood and the asphalt. It's getting a bit more visible. It's a car. I use every ounce of strength to turn my head towards the other side. Another car. Apparently I ended up in between two parked cars, perfectly invisible in the unlikely event of someone passing by. Lucky me.

'What am I doing here?' I whisper. Nobody answers.

The pain doesn't fade. A large part of my body seems to be dead: it doesn't react to any brain signal. I'm more alone than ever before. There aren't any sounds, lights, or people walking their dogs here in the middle of the night. I begin to panic and realise I need to scream for help again. I try, but only hear myself whispering and experience even more pain. I can feel myself passing out again. Sleep means no pain, which is something I'm looking forward to. Dying is basically sleeping forever.

Speaking of death: I have already died of embarrassment. I was drinking. I now remember: I was tired, I had been drinking, I waved my colleagues farewell and didn't arrange a taxi. I

took the motorcycle and everything that just happened is my own fault.

Good job, Niek. This is where all your dreams end.

I'm scared. I'm afraid of the pain that is still getting worse and I'm afraid of dying, which might happen soon. Looking back at it, I don't know if it was a deliberate choice at that point, but I made a decision. I. Am. Not. Going. To. Die. Every millimetre of movement causes a grenade to blow within my body, but after 75 minutes I have finally managed to take off my helmet and take my cell phone out of my pocket. I remember a phone number. 0.6.5.1.5.7... The digits keep on running through my mind. I recall an image of my childhood, my family home, and my parents. I remember my dad having his first mobile phone and asking my brother, sisters, and me to learn his phone number by heart. We are sitting at the kitchen table, repeating it endlessly. I might have forgotten the vocabulary lists I learned in school years ago already, but I can still recall the digits and whisper them without a single error. Someone has to call my dad. And I know whom.

I manage to bring my phone to my head, dial emergency number 112, and switch to speaker mode. A very friendly lady answers and I'm afraid she won't believe me. 'Localise my phone,' I whisper. I doubt if it's really possible since I've only seen it in police television dramas. I pass out again.

When I regain consciousness, the lady is still on the line. She wants to know where I am and what happened. I tell her my name is Niek and ask her to call my dad Leo. I whisper his phone number, but she doesn't seem the least interested in my father. She wants to know where I am. That's the most important detail, she says. And she wants me to stay conscious. I can't. The battery sign on my phone is red. It says it's 7%. I guess that's bad. I end the call and pass out.

Moments later I wake up and manage to make a second



call. Again, a woman answers. Maybe she's the same one. I'm happy she doesn't sound mad, but gives orders instead. She tells me not to move my head, but I have to because I need to throw up. I turn my head and mix my blood with stomach contents. It feels good and brings me a bit more mental clarity. How long have I been here? Why isn't anyone here? I turn my head once again and suddenly I have what I think is a great idea. A license plate. I manage to pass on one of the license plate numbers. The friendly lady tells me I'm in the countryside and my phone is hard to locate. Police are searching in a big area but they're coming. They're really coming, she says, seconds before I enter a state of unconsciousness that feels more and more attractive.

I wake up to light and the sound of sirens. By now, it seems hours later. There are sirens, lights flashing, car doors opening and slamming. A male voice is telling someone I'm 'more dead than alive'. If this is true, I might not have a choice between live and death at all. I might still die after all. It feels unfair after all the waiting. Someone kneels down and grabs my wrist. The male police officer starts stabilising my neck. It sucks, because there's no way I can escape from the pain. I want to get rid of it, I whisper to the officer. The ambulance is coming, he answers. Suddenly, a few men load me onto a gurney. I'm in an ambulance. I get an IV drip with morphine in my arm. I've never felt something so wonderful in my body. I should get it more often in the future. And there could still be a future, as far as I'm concerned. I. Am. Not. Going. To. Die.

I'm in an intensive care unit. Someone is talking to me. My parents, who were sailing the East Sea somewhere between Finland and Sweden, have been informed. They booked the very first flight to Amsterdam. Since my brother and other sister didn't answer, my youngest sister got the terrible phone call

first; You have to come to the AMC hospital in Amsterdam ASAP, Niek had an accident. When I can finally look around, I see my brother and sisters next to my bed. They are crying, I think, but the morphine has clouded my vision.

Apparently I laid on the tarmac for about three hours and forty-five minutes, covered in blood, looking at the stars, before I was found. I was frostbitten and, indeed, more dead than alive. My accident caused a pneumothorax, two clavicle fractures, and my leg was almost ripped off. A cerebral contusion is distorting my memory, my sight, and the way I process information. Yet it's this night, July 15th to the 16th, 2010, in which I made the most important decision in my life.

I decided my story isn't over yet.

## 7.

From Jeroen, Kyra and Yuna van den Adel's diary:

*Friday, July 16th*

*They say the motorcycle accident caused paralysis from three centimetres below the nipple line down. Niek tells us he lost all feeling in his legs. 'I already knew something was wrong.' This afternoon, he underwent spinal surgery. Our brother made us laugh once again; he wasn't allowed to drink anything before surgery, but quenched his extreme thirst by sucking all the water out of the sponges we use to wash him while smiling naughtily.*

*Saturday, July 17th*

*'Niek?' nurse Helen asked. 'Would you like to self-administer your morphine intake?' Long silence. 'Niek, are you still there?' 'Yes, I'm taking it into consideration. Our chef Tom says it's best to do everything yourself. I think that's the case here too.'*

*Sunday, July 18th*

*He was delirious.*

*'Dad, we are finished it.'*

*'What? The two of us?'*

*'Yes, the football match. We won. Yuna was there too.'*

*'I'm sure she was rubbish.'*

*'True. Jeroen, mummy and Kyra are there too.'*

*'Who scored?'*

*'I did, obviously.'*

*Monday, July 19th*

*Niek: 'I will be the coolest disabled person ever. I will grow a*

*beard and smoke a pipe. And I will finally get a dog.'*  
*Also: 'Hey dad, I can finally move my toes again.' It is only a spasm, but he thinks it's hilarious.*

*Tuesday, July 20th*

*Niek hasn't slept very well. His parents leaving at night scares him. He is confused, cold, and feels very alone. Waking up doesn't feel good with an oxygen tube in his nose, his body stapled together, ten sensors attached to his body. Finally Jeroen was allowed to sleep over and they watched the Tour de France in the nurse's station until 1 a.m.*

*Wednesday, July 21st*

*'You are allowed to eat something again. What would you like to have?'*

*'I'll have the lukewarm risotto with blue cheese, please.'*

*Thursday, July 22nd*

*Niek was having a terrible day. He was suffering excruciating pain while waking up. It scores a 9.5, he says. The maximum pain score is a 10, which means it's unbearable. Doctors took pictures of his arm and back again.*

*In the afternoon, Niek said he's accomplished a few impressive things since his accident. 'I took my mobile phone out of my left pocket using my right arm. I was wearing tight jeans. I even dialled 112 with my new phone, which is a super inconvenient device.'*

*Friday, July 23rd*

*The accident happened exactly one week ago. Niek drove his wheelchair into the hallway. He was anxious and in pain, but did it anyway. Our family had arranged a huge breakfast on the ground floor. He left his unit for the very first time and drove there all by himself. We put on Vivaldi music and set the*

*table with linen, coffee, fresh juice, croissants, and eggs. Other visitors and patients in the hallway looked at us weird, but we didn't care. For a little while, life was good.*

*Saturday, July 24th*

*This afternoon sucked. Niek was confused, probably caused by the combination of his old and new medication. He was hallucinating for a very long time. He didn't recognise mum and asked who she was. Afterwards, realizing he was muddled made him feel sad.*

*Thom was visiting. A good first cry after all.*

*Then the best part of the day; he went down in his wheelchair and bumped into a group of Niek fans surprised to see their big bear downstairs again.*

*Very tired afterwards.*

## 8.

Of course I'm tired. While in the hospital, I do way too much. I want way too much.

Today is the first day after my collarbone surgery. I was happy to wake up without pain this morning. Waking up is followed by a long procedure of wound care, getting washed, breakfast, and wheelchair activities. It's crazy to realise how quickly this gets normal. Twelve days ago I was still at work, running from table to table and from kitchen to terrace. I now consider it 'normal' to have a nurse switching on the light at 8.30 a.m., opening the curtains, wishing me a good morning, and cleaning up my poop as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Okay, maybe for her it is. Everyday I'm still surprised by the fact my lower body isn't working anymore. My neck still feels stiff, as if it's strapped. Later on I hear the doctors have used a huge amount of steel to support my spinal cord. When looking down during wound care, I can see a huge part of my left leg is gone. The remaining part looks disgusting. The wounds on my arms, hands, and back aren't making things any better either.

Things are starting to work out between my wheelchair and me. Two days ago, I covered some distance for the very first time. Earlier today I used all the energy I had to wheel my way through the building twice. The staff looked impressed. It was a good start of the day. But I had used up all my energy and went back to bed.

Two days ago, I woke up having a weird conversation. 'Daniëlle, you still need to clean table nine and table thirteen...'

'Niek, it's me, Helen. The nurse.'

‘Oh, and please don’t forget table twenty-three.’

‘You’re in hospital Niek, don’t you remember?’

Apparently I even spent the last few minutes of my sleep working. But looking at short-haired blonde Helen makes me happy, just like – if not more – the prospect of taking a shower with the shower stretcher for the very first time. Imagine you haven’t taken a shower in nearly two weeks but are soon being parked in a too small bathroom with two young nurses soaping you from head to toe. I was right in between them, hot water pouring down on me, when I suddenly heard myself say: ‘Long live paraplegia.’ It wasn’t the best time to tell them I’m still single though.

I notice how people’s eyes often meet after I tell them something like this. I know what they’re thinking: ‘The poor guy hasn’t fully realized it yet’. Or: ‘It will hit him all at once.’ Or: ‘The more positive he is right now, the more negative he’ll eventually be.’ I must admit that not everyone thinks like this. I started blogging immediately after the accident and I’ve been getting dozens of positive comments, especially from people saying my attitude energises them. Family and friends comment on my blog and so do acquaintances, people I’ve met only once, and even complete strangers who stumbled across my website. Yet some people think I’m supposed to feel more miserable. I’ve come to realise not everyone would have a positive attitude like mine, but I choose to look at the bright side. I know I’m facing a rough ride, but I don’t need to dwell on it the whole time, do I? I’m sleeping with lemons in my bed, Buddha is hanging on the wall, and I’ve got a few magic rocks in my cupboard. I’ve been given homeopathic medication, received thousands of postcards wishing me all the best, and the people around me are giving me way too much positive energy. I keep on defending my approach, although I maybe shouldn’t have to. This isn’t the end of the world. There’s still a

whole life ahead of me. I can compensate my leg malfunctioning with my hands. My head is still working, and I shouldn't forget I'm pretty good looking. I tell myself this all the time – maybe even a bit too often.

July 29th is a historical day, at least in my humble opinion. I'm finally able to use the computer by myself, and type a blog lying on my back. Publishing blogs by dictating the texts to friends and family was nice, but this is more fun. It takes time and the result isn't free of typing errors, but now that I'm typing again I want to take the opportunity to personally thank my support system. They really mean so much to me. So I write:

If I would have known before the accident how you guys feel about me, I would have become an arrogant so-and-so – and I probably wouldn't have been single for this long. I can't thank you enough, and I hope to show my gratitude to all of you soon.

My current status: I'm free of tubes, YAHOO! This means I only have to take 36 pills a day, besides the other 14 my mum has brought me. Magnesium, morphine, vitamin A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, and much more – bon appétit. The pain has eased up and I enjoy my surroundings more despite my blurred vision. I got prism glasses, these big plastic things with two weird valves on the front side. They look ridiculous and my friends think they're hilarious. The fact that even the doctors now holler 'Wow!' at me prove what a great hospital room this is, and I can already transfer to rehab by the end of next week!

I woke up feeling bad today, boohoo. Why isn't my lower body functioning anymore? And why am I still surprised by it, morning after morning? My confidence regarding women wasn't much to begin with and paraplegia isn't helping either. How will I ever find a girlfriend, which is off limits for me now, what



will my life look like without one, etc. etc. It always takes me a while to remove this little angry man from my head. Today I did so by thinking back at your postcards and friendly comments.

Again, this blog post revokes dozens of comments from friends, family, and acquaintances I know only vaguely. My 10-year-old nephew Kjell sent me the cutest one:

Hi Niek  
 This piece is quite nice to read  
 But what about the angry little man  
 I don't understand it  
 Is it a devil?  
 Is it a troll?  
 Is it a thief?  
 And regarding your girlfrind (the way you write it)  
 I think you will soon find one  
 Girls won't say no to a nice man like you  
 Also, how are you and can you sleep a little better already?  
 I hope you will soon be transferred to rehab  
 This Tuesday, I'm going to Camping Ursa Major!!  
 I'll send you a postcard  
 I wish you well!!!

Hugs and kisses, your favourite nephew KJELL

Kjell makes me smile. I re-read my post and he is right: I wrote 'girlfrind' instead of 'girlfriend'. 10-year-olds are always straight talkers, so if he says I'll find love, it's the truth. He makes me wonder; I sometimes talk about two little men and their voices in my head, telling me positive or negative things. But whether the bad one is a devil, a troll or a thief... maybe he's all three of them. Although I may be overestimating the trolls then.

I see plenty of reasons to stay positive. The consequences of paraplegia are huge, but clear. There are a lot of things you can't do anymore, but it takes very little time to understand the extent of the damage. You spend three to four months convalescing to figure out the best alternatives for everything you're not able to do anymore. From that point on you continue your life in the best possible way. You can make things very difficult, or you can decide not to. If I'm lucky, I'm only hospitalised for two and a half weeks. The medical staff had estimated 'two to five weeks'. No poor performance.

I try to tell my three new resolutions to anyone who is thinking I still have my head in the sand. I've had all the time in the world to create a list of things I want to change. Pay extra attention to the first one:

1. I'll always be honest with myself and the rest of the world.
2. I won't label anything as weird anymore.
3. I'm going to chase my dreams.

A crash like mine has a very negative impact on your body but can do great things for your mind. I'm going to chase my dreams. In a wheelchair.

## 9.

Well, this is not what I dreamed of.

I maintained my positive attitude for three weeks. Most of the time I was cheerful and optimistic. Today the pessimists get what they wanted. Today, Saturday, August 7th, I start writing my blog with a headline no one can misinterpret:

Today sucks!

When I woke up this morning the pain in my neck and spine was killing me. My arms feel so cramped and I'm spasming uncontrollably. I threw out my guests. All of my roommates are visiting their families so I don't have much company. Today is the first official shitty day after the crash.

'Do you feel bad being disabled?' Jeroen asked me this morning. I don't think I am, but I'm in a great deal of pain. And I feel guilty, because I think I only have myself to blame. I was out of bed way too long yesterday and finished the day drinking beer with another rehab patient. I also tell Jeroen I have finally realised the Spice Girls are torn apart forever. I try to keep things as light as possible for him.

Yet I consider my regression a good reason to take a close look at my medication. I examine them in detail, figure out their purpose and discover they could easily tranquilise a wild horse if used all together. Then why am I still in pain? I'm worried there's more going on in my body – more than I currently know about.

The next day I start my blog post writing 'I'm back' and it really feels that way. I woke up in good mood. I feel much

better and I'm so happy yesterday is done. That day was a wake-up call for me to face the facts. I have to be careful with my energy. I'll have to train myself, watch my diet and get in better mental shape. Luckily there's someone who can help me with the latter: Thom.