

# The boy who cast no shadow

by Thomas Olde Heuvelt

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*Born in 1983, Thomas Olde Heuvelt is the much praised Dutch author of five novels and many stories of the fantastic. His work contains elements of magic-realism, fantasy, horror and humor, and he is well-known in Holland for evoking strong emotional responses in readers - either laughter, crying, or terrible outbursts of violence. BBC Radio called Thomas (they couldn't pronounce his last name) "One of Europe's foremost talents in fantastic literature." He is the first Dutch author ever to be nominated for the Hugo Awards.*

My name is Look. You've probably heard about me in the papers or on TV. I'm the boy without a shadow. You can shine spotlights at me all you like, but it won't do you good. Physicists say I'm an evolutionary miracle. The Americans said I was a secret weapon, by the Russians that is, because they figured Al-Qaeda would be too dumb. Christians say I'm divine. Mom calls me an angel, but of the earthly variety. But I'm not. I'm just Look. I wish I knew what that meant.

It's something to do with my genes, they say, but they don't know what. Molecular structures and the effects of light, blah-blah-blah. I don't give a shit, 'cause they can't fix it

anyway. You won't find shadow under my chin, armpits or ribs, no matter how you illuminate me. They say it makes me look two-dimensional. I don't know what I look like because I have no reflection. My left hip bears a scar in the shape of a question mark. I got it when the midwife dropped me as she held me up in front of the mirror. Mom told me that only a floating umbilical cord was visible and that the midwife screamed, fleeing the room. The photos of the delivery showed a lot of *aaaw* and *coochie-coochie* but no baby. The only images ever captured of me are Mom's sonograms. They use sound, not light.

'You should be proud of your genes,' Mom and Dad always say. They're the founders of the Progressive Parish, a local political party that worships being different. Get-together: 'We just adopted a little Filipino.' 'No kidding! Our son is gay.' 'Really? Well, ours has no shadow.' Three-nil, nobody beats that. Mom does yoga and is Zen, and Dad would rather cook for the homeless than for us. Like a lot of bleeding hearts, their charity ends at home.

Until I was seven, they managed to keep me under wraps. But you don't have to be Einstein to figure it was bound to come out. One day two men in dark sunglasses snatched me from the class-room, bundled me into an armored car and stuck a needle into my arm. When I woke up I found myself at an army base in the United States, where a team of scientists and agents spent four months examining me. The first three weeks I claimed I was from Mars and that my goal was complete world domination, then they got extremely rude and started threatening me. I lost it when I woke up one morning to find that they had sliced a piece of skin from my butt to grow a culture. I told them to go fuck themselves, but that same week I was told I was of no use to them and got reunited with my parents. To compensate for our inconvenience we were offered a feature in *National Geographic*. First my parents flipped and considered legal action, but when they discovered that the men who had kidnapped me were in fact *above* the law and that the following media hype was a goldmine for the Progressive Parish's coffers they soon came round.

And me? I became a celebrity, thanks a bunch. On Oprah they wouldn't let me wear make-up 'cause they figured a floating, painted mask with no eyes or mouth would look too freaky on TV. Practical upshot: a completely invisible boy, which meant that everybody who wasn't actually in the studio just saw clothes moving and me picking up objects and standing behind an infrared machine to prove my existence. When Oprah asked how the scientists had treated me I responded: 'I think the government has no right to experiment with my ass.' That cost them three million in hush money, and still the accusations of sexual abuse came pouring in. Suckers.

One-all, you'd think. Not by a long shot. In the years that followed, our front yard was overrun by camera crews eager to catch a glimpse of me. Which is technically impossible. Twelve circuses and twenty-three freak shows including Ripley's offered astronomic amounts to exhibit me. I've been called a Saint 268 times and have 29,000,000 hits on *Google*, as many as Brad Pitt. Cool, Mom and Dad, being different. Until it's you who's different. Everybody knows who I am. Everybody, except me.

Splinter once said your dreams make you who you are. But I don't dream. Loads of people say this, but I really don't dream. To tell the truth, I don't even know what dreams are. The countless EEGs that I've had show that my brain performs absolutely zilch activity during REM sleep. They never found a link with my condition, but duh. I suppose that's why I have no friends, no feelings and no imagination. I lack a goal. I lack depth. Like I care.

I guess my only wish is to find my reflection. If I have no idea what my face looks like, how will I ever know who I am? And you know how saints and celebrities go. They get pinned on a cross, and while they watch the life seeping out people piss on their shadows.

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The arrival of Splinter Rozenberg changed everything.

I was fourteen by then and living a relatively quiet life. The hype had died down, as hypes do. We had moved a couple of times within our shit-hole town, and in exchange for a statement that I had *not* been abused during my stay in the US, two men in dark sunglasses were stationed in front of our house for a year, removing pilgrims and other freaks from our front yard.

Obviously all this had an effect on my school rep. I've got no friends, and because I'm tall I have a lot of nerve where others don't. They avoid me, which is exactly how I like it. Sometimes I beat up someone, not because I like it, but I'm helping an image along. And come on, it's not all that obvious, unless I'm in front of the mirror. I wear long sleeves. Only my face is a dead give-away. With the sun on my right, I look luminous on the left. Mom tried to hide the effect with make-up, but then I look like a drag-queen, so I don't think so.

Even Jord Hendriks lets me off the hook, confining to trash talk. On a good day I'm 'See-Thru'. On a bad day, it's 'Zero' or just 'Freak'. He says without a reflection I don't actually exist, except that my fuck-face hasn't figured out yet.

He exaggerates, if you ask me. If I'm supposed to believe the stories I'm no oil painting, but it's not as bad as all that. Lots of artists, including my grandpa, have made

impressions of what I look like. None of the drawings look alike, and none of them really suit me. The charcoal drawing on the cover of *People* I can't take seriously for starters, because it creates the illusion of shadow. Some show a boy with a broad, roughly hewn face. Mom says Grandpa's is the best likeness. But Grandpa also did a portrait of Mom that sort of makes her look like a man instead of a woman – so much for Mom's opinion.

Too bad that Jord Hendriks is such an incredible dick. The other kids are afraid of him. I think he's hot. I mean, just look at that body in the locker room before P.E., holy fuck!

Of course that's about the last thing you'd say to him, if you know what's good for you. One disorder is more than enough, trust me. Mom and Dad would love it, and that's exactly why I won't tell them. They'd drag me to lunatic parades and conferences on tolerance by the Progressive Parish, and then the whole media circus would start all over again, so no. The Internet is no good either. It's easy to click *Yes, I am 18 or over*, but chat-rooms kick me 'cause I'm supposedly too scared to show myself on webcam.

Oh, well. The thought of Jord Hendriks putting his mouth to better use and my right hand offer plenty of release for a healthy boy like me, exclamation mark smiley face.

Splinter was new in class, so I was old news. Thanks in part to his mom, Mrs. Rozenberg, who had made the unforgivable mistake of accompanying him to school the first day to explain all about his condition. I remember them standing there, side by side, Mrs. Rozenberg like she was lecturing some rugrats and Splinter staring glassy-eyed into the room. Splinter always stared at things glassy-eyed. That's because his eyes were made of glass. As was the rest of his body. It's one of those funny little accidents you get in certain gene pools. Polished, he was a perfect mirror. He had some flexibility and was able to move his limbs, but slo-mo, like Neil Armstrong on the moon. Facial expressions were a difficult story.

Mrs. Rosenberg, all flesh and blood, told us to think of him as a china cabinet, which wasn't all that far from the truth. He wasn't allowed to play games during recess or P.E. A well-aimed football would surely kill him. Jack-assing was out of the question. When we heard an old bag like her say that, we screamed with laughter. Mrs. Rozenberg was delighted, thinking she was cool. Splinter knew he was doomed.

From day one Jord Hendriks and his friends put him under siege. Paperclips, coins, biro springs and ballpoint pens were fired at him in a game of finding out which part of the body to aim for to get the opening notes of *Man in the Mirror*. 'Your dick, okay?' Splinter said when the teacher had left the classroom. 'Will you please stop now? It's dangerous what you're doing.'

Whoops, that only made things worse. Splinter knew how fragile he was, and that paperclips and coins would probably cause no permanent damage. But accidents will happen and when Jord launched a biro that scratched his neck, he grassed on him.

Big whoops. Suspensions aren't forever. After some third-year kid acting on Jord's instructions concocted a story to lure the shop teacher out of the classroom, Jord took Splinter under his arm and put him on the workbench. Splinter screamed. Not with pain – he didn't have nerves – but to catch a teacher's attention. He didn't put up a struggle, because he knew that any wrong move would break him in two.

'I've always wanted to be a glassblower, shitbag,' Jord said, as he ignited the Bunsen burner. 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land will have the crookedest dick of 'em all?'

Three or four boys formed a cordon around them to keep the softies away. The rest of the class smirked or pretended not to notice. Me? I was glad it wasn't me lying there.

Jord stopped at Splinter's left pinky. He heated the tip and squeezed it with a pair of pliers, so Splinter would never need another spoon to stir his tea. Then one of Jord's mates sounded the alarm about Splinter having a welding accident and all that. Anyone who blabbed, we were told, would suffer the same fate, glass or no glass.

I was convinced that Jord wouldn't get away with this. But he did. Feel free to dismiss it as schoolyard law. We give each other hell and we cover each other's backs – a matter of self-preservation. Bubbles of deceit and lies will burst sooner or later. But that's too easy. Time has taught me that we live in a world full of Jord Hendrikses, a world that thrives on the destruction of its rare wonders and where people live under a blanket of smog, the stench of sameness.

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Why I felt attracted to Splinter?

He was the only person in my life who understood me. He was looking for a glimmer of happiness, which no-one was prepared to give him. And let's face it, how could he ever discover himself when all he saw in his skin was the outside world reflected?

'Dad says I should look for happiness within,' Splinter once said to me, during one of the many afternoons in his room. 'But then I'll never find it, unless I smash myself to pieces. A glass cousin of mine threw himself off the roof to see if it was true, but the chimney sweep didn't find anything of importance among the shards. So what am I supposed to do?'

‘Well, you gotta break some eggs, to make an omelette,’ I grinned, but the joke failed to disguise the sadness in my voice.

Splinter felt attracted to me because I was the only one who actually saw *him* when I looked at him and not myself. One time Mrs. Rozenberg rushed in, right before she was due at a reception. She placed Splinter in front of her, squinted into his face, tousled her hair until she was happy and ran out again. People always looked ugly at Splinter, ’cause people happen to find themselves ugly in the mirror. Splinter took that personally. With me, it wasn’t there. If I looked ugly at him, he knew that I was in a rotten mood. If I laughed at him, he knew my laugh was meant for him.

During Splinter’s first few months at school – between summer and Christmas – I hadn’t exchanged more than five words with him; no more than with any other of my classmates to be precise. If I had to take a leak during recess I would go to the Boys room in the old part of the school to avoid any smart-ass remarks or frightened freshman. Around here, there were only echoes in the hallway. To get there you had to cross the foyer by the assistant principal’s office, where just before Christmas he had put up an enormous tree.

That day a voice made me jump: ‘Err... could you give me a hand?’

I looked around, didn’t see a thing.

‘Up here.’

Then I saw. It was Splinter. They’d stripped him to his boxers, sprayed him with red paint and put him up in the tree amongst the other balls.

‘Holy fuck,’ I said. ‘What happened to you?’

‘Jord Hendriks,’ he shrugged. What else? ‘Worst thing is that the assistant principal has already walked by three times without noticing me.’

I’d never really took much interest in Splinter, had always thought of him as a bit of a goofball. Now, semi-naked, I got my first proper look at him. His chest rose and fell smoothly with each breath. I’d never realized that he *could* breathe. I noticed the silver garland tied around his neck like a noose, that would have strangled any other kid.

‘Hey, aren’t you that boy that has no shadow?’ Splinter asked with that peculiar, crystal voice of his.

Lying, with all those Christmas lights, seemed pointless. ‘Yup, hullo.’

‘Cool! I saw that item on the Discovery Channel about you. I thought that theory about light-transmitting cells was totally awesome.’

I didn’t say a word.

‘You’re famous, man. I mean, everybody’s talking about you. You wanna come over to my place sometime? My dad’s got an ultraviolet lamp. We could do experiments.’

So I did have feelings: I pitied him, for his naiveté. Splinter just stared at me with those sparkling eyes and said: ‘Shit. You’re even more fuckup up than me.’

I looked at him dangling up in that tree and held my tongue.

‘Look, I need to take a leak,’ I said.

‘Would you... would you mind helping me down?’

For a split second I hesitated, then grabbed a chair and pushed it towards the tree.

‘Careful,’ Splinter said, as I clambered up on the chair and pine-needles stuck in my arms. ‘Drop me and I’m dead.’

He wrapped his arms around my neck. Although I should have been prepared, it still gave me goose bumps. The touch of something so far out, so alien, filled me with both revulsion and curiosity. He was unnaturally cold and didn’t weigh a thing. I didn’t even dare grab hold of him, scared he would crack. Splinter was sensitive about my reservations and said: ‘That’s it, I’ve got you. You can release me now.’

So I did, and even now I come back to that moment, how casually he trusted me with his life, and without all the psycho-babble I put it down to the fact that he had no choice. But in these few seconds it took me to lift him from the tree and put him on the ground a tremor went through his glass body that made me so acutely aware of the fragility of life that it rattled me big-time. That’s when I understood just how precarious the things are that you take for granted. As soon as his feet touched the ground I got my hands off him as if I’d burned myself on a hot stove.

‘Wow, thanks man,’ he said and pulled the tinsel from his neck. ‘If I’d still been up there after the bell they’d have serenaded me with Christmas carols. You’ve spared me the humiliation.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ I muttered, ill at ease. On a whim I added: ‘Good luck.’

I was halfway down the corridor when I heard his xylophone footsteps coming after me. I turned around and saw Splinter, barefoot and with a bundle of clothes in his arms.

‘I just wanted to say if there’s anything I can do for you... I owe you one.’

‘That’s okay.’ I pushed open the swing doors to the Boys room. Just in time I realized that I’d almost let them slam into his face. So I waited and held the doors for him. I did it grudgingly. The guy got under my skin. He’d touched a nerve with those glass fingers of his, which had upset the normal state of affairs. I didn’t like it when the normal state of affairs got upset.

‘Could you turn on the tap for me?’ he asked with a twinkle. ‘I can’t put any pressure with my hands.’

I did as he asked. Splinter began to wipe the red paint off his face with tissues. It sounded like rubbing your wet finger across a window. While I was washing my hands he looked curiously at the absence of my reflection in the mirror. I reckon he didn’t know whether to comment. Finally he took the plunge and asked: ‘How do you fix your hair?’

After a moment’s hesitation I answered. ‘My mother. And if you tell anyone I’ll smash you with a baseball bat. There’s a reason I keep it short. Normally I wear a beanie. But fucking rules in this school...’

‘I hear you,’ he said. ‘Wanna hear something? My arms aren’t flexible enough to reach everywhere. I’m fourteen for fuck’s sake and my mom’s still washing me.’

‘Even your...’

He shrugged, looking embarrassed.

We stared at each other sheepishly and then burst out laughing. Right then we’d become friends. At our age you thought the depths of your own hell are the darkest; Splinter proved it could be worse. A little self-reflection ain’t a bad thing. Splinter was all reflection. Seeing him wash his face in front of the mirror made my head spin. A mirror in a mirror in a mirror, an optical illusion of infinity. That’s friendship. You give and you take, even if you have nothing to give.

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We spent our time talking and watching TV in our rooms or fishing on the canal. In many ways Splinter and I were completely different. He had ideas, he had interests, he had dreams – everything I had not. His greatest interest was the sea and his greatest dream was to become a captain in the navy. That’s how I got to know Splinter: unworldly, naïve, full of ideas and fantasies.

Sad thing was that we both knew his dreams would never come true. I often wondered how he could remain such a positive attitude with his condition. Death was just a door away for a nine-pound boy made of mirrored glass. He was born a victim. ‘And that was a Caesarean,’ he told me. ‘Imagine the bloodbath if there’d been contractions. I would have exploded in my mom’s birth canal.’

He often speculated about his death, no matter how much it brought me down. ‘It’s a miracle that I’ve even made it this far,’ he said. ‘I mean, my cousin tripped on the doorstep



when he was eleven and fell to pieces, and another was caught by the wind when she was four and splattered against a tree. I'm the longest-living mirror boy in the family. The chances of me graduating are slim and none.'

'No surprise, with your choice of friends,' I said. 'I heard that Jord's planning to dump you in the bottle bank.'

He gave me the glass finger and I pretended to whack him; you know how these things go.

Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg were overly protective. They wouldn't allow Splinter to do anything besides reading and fishing. His mom made him go about in hand-knitted clothes: triple jumpers, beanies, scarves, mittens, anything soft. His dad insisted on taking him to school every morning, even after a sleepover at my place. It really bummed him out.

'It's okay, Dad, we can walk. The way Mom's wrapped me up I'd survive the Niagara Falls.'

But Mr. Rozenberg wouldn't budge. 'Far too dangerous,' he said. 'Especially with that road by the tennis courts. You know what happened to Uncle Henk.'

'I'm not allowed to do anything,' Splinter said when the car pulled up outside school, his shoulders hanging. 'And he's right, I *can't* do anything. A little arm wrestling will crush me. I'll never be able to join the navy.'

Jack-assing was out of the question, quoting Ma Rozenberg. I thought she spoiled the fun. I mean, Splinter wanted so much. Why deny such a one the rare moments that make life worth living?

So when I'd spent the afternoon racing along a country lane in a go-kart borrowed off our neighbors (they were on holiday and technically speaking hadn't given me permission, but not refused it either) and he timidly asked if he could have a go, I couldn't refuse. I ran home to fetch rope and cushions. I tied his hands to the wheel, his legs to the frame and his torso to the seat, so that he couldn't blow it and tumble out. Everywhere his body touched the kart I stuffed cushions.

Splinter stepped on it and off he went. His body jerked about like a dummy. For an instant I was afraid I'd made the biggest mistake of my life, that he'd be catapulted out of the kart and shatter into a million crystals. But it held. His screaming laughter rang out above the throbbing petrol engine and over the fields.

It was a moment I'll never forget. Splinter was ecstatic, and you know what? I got tears in my eyes. Call me a sissy, I don't give a fuck. For the first time in my life I felt something other than indifference going through my veins. It felt like I'd done something that

mattered. I might not know what I looked like, but I'd given somebody a spark of happiness. Whenever I think back of Splinter, this is how I see him: tied up in his kart and covered in cushions, his face illuminated by a watery spring sun reflecting off the visor of his helmet. He was one of a kind, trust me. He even had it in him to blow up the sun.

Finally, he got back, and I was applauding like a madman. 'Wow Schumacher! You were fucking faster than the speed of light, you freak!'

When I yanked the helmet off his head he threw me a dazed smile. 'That was by far the sickest thing I've ever done.'

'You did it!'

'Yeah, only it didn't go all right,' he said calmly.

'What's that, man, you –'

'Seriously. Have a look at my neck, something's not quite right.'

Suddenly I got scared. I did as he asked. Initially everything seemed fine; then I saw. Just above his collarbone and the neck of his T-shirt. A tiny star.

'Fuck.'

'It was a pebble, I think. I heard it bounce off.' He frowned and turned his head from left to right as if he'd pulled a muscle. Then we heard a crack. His eyes widened and my heart sank. The star had gotten bigger and small veins had appeared in the glass.

'Freeze,' I said as I began to untie the ropes with trembling hands. I choked back panic, cursing myself. What was I thinking? I should never have let him have a go on that thing. But Splinter disagreed and took my hand, forcing me to look him in the eyes. He wouldn't have missed it for the world, he said, and would be eternally grateful, no matter what.

I rushed him to the ER. The attending doctor didn't know glass, so after a phone call he summoned us to his car. I thought he was taking us to the Amphia hospital. Instead we pulled up in front of Auto Glass.

'Sweet Jesus on a stick,' the mechanic said at the sight of Splinter. 'We've had someone come in with a glass mannequin before, but they were turned away.'

The operation was done in no time, although I was shitting bricks as I watched the mechanic's rough hands seal the star-shaped crack. He polished Splinter's neck with something that sounded like a dentist's drill. The man did a first rate job: it didn't leave a trace. When the mechanic broached the issue of money, Splinter explained that he wasn't entitled to any healthcare insurance and that his parents would kill him if they found out what happened.

The mechanic shrugged and said: ‘Oh, bloody hell.’ In fact I believe he was genuinely touched. ‘You spend your whole life waiting for a chance to resuscitate someone and save a life. And then you come along.’

‘Don’t even think about heart massage,’ Splinter said.

That evening we ate at my place. ‘The two of you are having a little too much fun for my taste,’ Mom said as she was serving dinner. Splinter and I looked at each other and bit our lips. He’d promised to carve me up if I told anyone where he’d been repaired; that indignity was just *too* great. We’d been plagued by erratic laughter all afternoon. My parents were cool with it, just glad that I wasn’t a complete sociopath.

‘Say, Splinter,’ Dad said, ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’

‘A mirror,’ I said before Splinter had a chance to open his mouth.

‘Look!’ Mom said. ‘You don’t joke about that. You ought to know.’

‘Oh, but he’s right you know,’ Splinter said innocently. ‘Sounds cool to me, hanging in a department store, nicely framed. Any other job and I’ll break anyway.’

I sang: ‘Auto Glass repair, Auto Glass replace...’

We roared with laughter. Mom shook her head and said: ‘Hopeless. Sometimes I just don’t get the two of you.’

No, she didn’t get the two of us. The reason is simple, and that’s something that parents just don’t understand. When Jord Hendriks & Co take the piss out of you, it’s a drag. When the world treats you like a sickness, it’s embarrassing. But when your parents treat you like you’re made of glass, it leaves permanent damage. Splinter and I needed each other. We needed to take the piss out of each other, to have a good laugh at ourselves. If you weren’t laughing, you’d be crying.

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That spring Splinter got miserable. I don’t know if the go-kart incident had anything to do with it or whether it was just puberty. The sudden change caught me off-guard. He’d always been upbeat. Overnight, his eyes glazed over. Sometimes I worried that he might follow in the footsteps of that cousin of his, the one who’d gone to look for happiness within.

‘What’s the point of it all?’ he said, as we were lying by the canal; me with my hands locked behind my head, my elbows up in the air; he with his arms half-stretched alongside his body as he couldn’t bend them any further. I knew what Splinter meant: everything. The murmuring water, the dragonflies, the brilliant sunshine. He meant life.

We'd played Ghost Ship for a while; me the ghost, he the ship. It was a game we'd sometimes do. Splinter would undress and lie down in the canal. In the reflecting water he was virtually invisible. I would stand beside an old fisherman who'd nodded off and stare into space. Splinter would then tug at the bait to wake them. First they would see their reflection in the water, then me, then *not* me in the water. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Next thing I would point like a zombie at the canal, as Splinter rose from the water and hauled himself ashore, groaning *The Grudge*-style.

They always run off screaming. It's *the* way to get hold of rods or bait.

'My grandpa took me to the sea once,' Splinter said. 'My parents went nuts when they found out. I never stayed at grandpa's again. But you know, I had the time of my life. That's what they didn't get. We stayed until after sunset to see the sun sink into the sea. Did you know that the sun actually sinks into the sea? I'd kill to see that again.'

'Then I know where you ought to go,' I said. 'Mom and Dad sometimes rent this cottage in Portugal. There's no place where the sun sinks into the sea like over there.'

Splinter didn't say a thing; didn't have to. We were both thinking the same. He'd never get to see that sun and that sea. Sure, there was danger in any wobbly cobblestone, smashed tennis ball or sweeping branch. But what about his parents? If you ask me, they were the biggest threat of all. The uneasy atmosphere was so strong you could taste it. You could hear the awkward silences. Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg were blind to their son's dreams. In their efforts to protect him, they neglected his happiness. I understood they were afraid to say good-bye, but fearing his death they forgot to let him live.

That's when I got the idea.

'You wanna chase that sun?'

He sat up and looked at me. 'To... Portugal, you mean?'

I grinned. 'You and me, buddy.'

'My parents...'

'Fuck your parents. Wanna see that sun or what?'

'As in... running away?'

'Nah, we'll be back.'

His eyes began to shine. 'Can we go out to sea if we do?'

'Whatever you like, man. It's your party!'

Splinter laughed. 'Fuck. Let's do it.'

More was said, but that was the gist of it. I drew the plan: 'Tomorrow. Go to school, but skip class and wait behind the bike shed so your parents won't know you're gone until

late afternoon. It will give us a head-start. Leave your books home and take some clothes. I'll take care of the rest.'

He held out his hand. I squeezed it and his knuckles clinked. The only thing that made my smile waver was the touch of his maimed teaspoon finger.

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Jord Hendriks entered the Boys room just before the first period bell. The door to the rear cubicle was outside the range of the mirror where he began fixing his hair, and he didn't notice that it was ajar. I had taken off my t-shirt so my reflection wouldn't betray me and tiptoed up to him until I was close enough to smell his shampoo. Jord was bleating some rap crap, with no rhythm or melody, ruffling his hair. Without a moment's hesitation I grabbed his left pinky and planted my other hand firmly on his hip – just for fun.

Jord actually squealed; it was almost comical. He jerked and knocked the pot of gel to the floor. 'Jesus!'

He turned round, red as a brick. I'd scared the shit out of the poor kid. His eyes fell on my half-naked body and he said: 'What the fuck are you doing, faggot?'

'Looks crystal clear to me,' I said. 'Holding up a mirror.' And with that I neatly broke his pinky. The crack sounded satisfying, but no more satisfying than the touch of his body against my skin had been.

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We boarded the train in Roosendaal and changed in Antwerp for the high-speed Thalys to Paris. Flying was no option, because then we could be traced. Out on the streets, we had nothing to fear. I was world-famous, but nobody knew what I looked like. Folks like Splinter were rare, but hey, looks don't kill. We paid for the train tickets with the Progressive Parish's credit card, which I'd swiped from Dad's wallet. I also withdrew the maximum amount with his debit card, before he found out and had everything blocked.

As soon as we crossed the border Splinter's reservations vanished. He gazed out the windows for hours with a running commentary on everything he saw: grain silos, different colored number plates, how the cows looked different in France. We played cards for fifty euro notes.

At the Gare du Nord we ate slices of pizza and considered what was up next. Splinter said he wanted to go all the way. He wanted adventure. He dumped his woollen jumper in the trash and swapped it for a t-shirt from a kiosk that read: *Live Dangerously*.

It was late when we hitched a ride. A scrawny Frenchman with dark glasses and an express delivery van stopped for us. Through the open window he said: 'Where to, boys? You name it and I'll take you.'

'How about Spain?'

He promised to take us to the border. Cities gave way to sloping fields. I wondered if my parents had found the note on my pillow. *Don't worry, I'll be back*. When you tell your parents 'don't worry' it's a sure sign that they will, but luckily mine were fairly level-headed. No doubt Splinter's parents would have warned the police the minute he hadn't come home from school anyway, and my parents can put two and two together.

For the first time it dawned on me that I hadn't just done it for Splinter. Running away, I mean. It was an adventure, but it was also something bigger than that. Splinter was looking for the sea. I was looking for myself.

When I woke up we were north of Bordeaux, and it was dark.

We spent the night by the side of a gravel path, not far from the motorway. Wild blueberries grew along the shoulder. Splinter was exhausted and fell asleep in the truck; the delivery man and I sat outside watching shadows drift across the farmland. He talked about his job, about his wife and kids, and then said that he wanted to blow me for his pains. I let him do it. I leaned on my elbows, my head thrown back. I watched the world upside-down and in this position I listened to the crickets until I came. It wasn't how I'd always imagined it would be. It meant more. It meant nothing.

When he sat up I told him that it was my turn. First he didn't get my drift, and when he did, he protested. But my fingers had already found his belt buckle and soon my lips pressed against the warmth within.

'Er... hang on... what you're doing now can get me in big trouble.'

I looked at him like he was nuts and said: 'What *you* were doing earlier can get you in big trouble too.'

The delivery man groaned and grunted and tugged at my hair when he came, which hurt. His sperm tasted like tears and made me sad, but I still swallowed. And all this time the driver never mentioned the fact that the moonlight fell right through me. Perhaps he hadn't even noticed.

His hands trembled as he smoked a cigarette and let me have a drag too. It was disgusting. Then he gathered up his stuff, pulled a drowsy Splinter out of the truck and sped off. We had to walk all the way back to the motorway.

Three days later we reached our destination in Portugal. The second night we'd spent in a haystack and the third outdoors near a gas station. The truck driver had warned us about scorpions, but we didn't see any.

Our destination was called Espelho de Agua, because legend has it that the sun and the sea are at their most beautiful there. At least one person knew the legend, and that was me. At least one person knew it was true. Espelho de Agua is on the west coast of the Algarve, and it smells of almond blossom, eucalyptus and thyme, a heady scent that fills the air and reminded me of the times I'd been there with my parents. It's a shame Splinter had no sense of smell. It adds so much.

We bought figs and freshly baked *bolinhas* at the market and wandered the village streets for a while. An old glassblower who was smoking in front of his shop fell to his knees and cried at the sight of Splinter. I smiled. That's what the reunion of Geppetto and Pinocchio must have been like. When the man touched his glass face and arms Splinter glittered with pride. The glassblower spoke just as much English as we did Portuguese, that is, not a word, but he insisted on showing us round his workshop. It was so jam-packed with all manner of glass objects that I felt like a stilt-walker in a room full of air bubbles.

Geppetto found it hard to let go and watched us till we got to the end of the street. He had caught a glimpse of a miracle. Tomorrow he'd think that it had all been a dream.

\*

You didn't see the sea until the very end.

The narrow path wound through a sweltering pine forest, and then all of a sudden it was there, calm and infallible and bright green, until it blurred and merged with the horizon. At first Splinter smiled, so delighted that I thought his face would split in two. Then his smile faded, leaving only awe. I saw the sun's glare on the water reflected in his face.

'It's bigger,' he said, as simple as that. 'Bigger.'

We found a spot on the orange cliffs, far from the children playing football and sunbathing tourists. I fashioned our clothes and backpacks into a little bed on the barren soil. Then I stripped naked and lay down. After a moment's hesitation Splinter followed my lead.

Not because of the heat or to get a tan, but because he could. Given the chance to be free, you take it. Splinter was here now, shrugging off the last constraints of home.

I tan quickly. Whichever way I lie, the front and back always tan simultaneously.

‘I read somewhere there’s birds flying more than 6,000 miles non-stop across the Pacific,’ Splinter said, staring at the horizon. ‘From Alaska all the way down to the warm islands at the equator. They don’t take time to rest, eat or drink. They just fly on, for nine days. They know exactly where they’re going. I bet I could do the same. In a rowing boat, I mean, if I hit the right current. No one can go without food as long as me. Besides, I know the way. I know all about the sea.’

‘Yeah, and half-way there you’ll be swallowed by a blue whale,’ I said without opening my eyes.

‘I always wondered why Geppetto was looking for Pinocchio at sea, when the whale gobbled him up,’ Splinter said. ‘It doesn’t make sense. The movie never explains.’

‘Send a complaint to Disney. Oh, and apply for a role in the sequel while you’re at it.’

Somewhere, a seagull cried.

Splinter rose on one elbow and said: ‘That glassblower was the first person in the world who ever thought I was beautiful.’

‘That’s because he was senile.’

‘Fuck off. Seriously. I’ve never kissed anyone, you know. How can a girl ever like me?’

‘Try a glassblower,’ I joked.

But Splinter was serious. ‘Look at me. Nobody finds me attractive. And I can’t blame them.’

I glanced over his body and shrugged. His body was all right, nothing special. There was only one problem. It was made of glass.

‘Surely there must be some glass girls?’

‘Have you seen any? Besides, I’m not hot for glass. I fancy skin.’

A grin appeared on my face. ‘You know, I’ve always wondered. Can you...?’ I simulated jerking off with my hand.

‘Oh sure,’ Splinter said promptly. ‘I’m made of glass, but I’m anatomically correct. Good thing I can’t exert much pressure, so there’s no need to worry about squeezing something.’



I roared with laughter and rolled onto my stomach. Something stirred; fucking puberty. I thought about asking what he squirted, cum or molten glass. I didn't – some things are better left to the imagination.

Early evening a breeze picked up, drying the sweat on my body. That was nice. We played blackjack waiting for the sun to set. Splinter kicked my ass. I had just dealt a new hand when a gust of wind picked up the cards and blew them off the cliffs. Without a word, we watched hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades flutter to the west. The low sun transformed the ocean into a bright, orange mirror.

'You see that?' Splinter whispered. 'That's where we're sailing tomorrow. I want to touch the sun as it sinks into the sea.'

I could have said something, but didn't need to. There, where the playing cards were drifting away, was Splinter's heart. You could see the magic lure of the sea reflected on his body. I think that moment I somehow knew that I wouldn't be taking Splinter back home. Perhaps I'd known it all along. But then why did I keep thinking: *what about me?*

'See how it mirrors? That's where I belong. There everything is just like me. There I won't have to worry about what I can and can't do.'

'Surely it's not that bad,' I suggested, but I knew better.

'Everybody looks at me like I'm some kind of freak,' Splinter said. 'I'll never have a girlfriend. It's too dangerous. I don't even know what it feels like to be touched. A simple hug is too much, even for my parents. All they do is look at me. They never touch, afraid of breaking something.'

I didn't say a word, wished he hadn't told me that.

'I dream about it a lot, you know. I mean, about what it's like to undress a girl. To have my arms around her and feel her skin against mine.'

'But I thought you didn't feel anything, technically speaking?'

'I may not have nerves, I do have feelings,' Splinter said. He went quiet. 'Maybe... no. Maybe I just want to know what it's like to be incredibly close to someone.'

Then I did something that I had never thought of before. I did it on the spur of the moment, and maybe I wouldn't have done it if I *had* given it some thought, but it was all I could do right then. I turned towards him and wrapped my arm around his waist. I pulled him towards me. He gasped but didn't stop me when I rolled over on my back and carefully lifted him on top. The gap between our bodies closed. Splinter's eyes widened, orange crystals in the setting sun. I don't know if I'll ever be able to evoke the sensation of that glass body against mine. What struck me most was how infinitely fragile it felt.

My hands were on his back.

Splinter's fingers were on my shoulders.

He was incredibly close.

'I didn't realize...'

'If you tell anyone I'll smash you to pieces.'

He grinned and said: 'Faggot.'

I saw the ground where we lay reflected in his face, not me. But when I breathed out his lips misted up, proof of my existence.

While behind us the miracle of Espelho de Agua unfolded, he kissed me. Splinter was the second person to discover the legend was true. The legend of the sun and the sea. Our tongues found each other while my hands caressed his gleaming back, and when our teeth touched it sounded as the tinkling of a wine glass. Splinter cried, warm tears of molten glass that rolled down my cheeks. After they solidified I plucked them off. I still have them, cones of mirrored glass. I'm glad they're tears of happiness, not of sorrow. I keep them as mementoes.

And so the sun sank into the sea.

I can't remember exactly how it happened. What I do recall is that we were both excited and that I felt his heart beat like mad in his chest. It pounded like a pestle in a glass mortar. Perhaps it pounded so hard that it split his back – I like to pretend it did. But I think I just held him too tight. My only consolation is that I can say in all honesty that I killed him with love, not anything else.

We just lay there, staring at each other in shock while the crack faded in our ears. It had sounded like a football smashing into safety glass: it didn't shatter, but formed a spider's web. A dent. I felt his back. It began on his shoulder blades and ran along the muscles of his spine all the way down to the small of his back.

'Oops,' Splinter said.

I carefully slid him off me. When I set eyes on the damage my gut tightened into a knot.

'No,' I said. 'Fuck, no, no, no!'

I guess I panicked. I put my fingers on his back, withdrew them, ran my hands through my hair. Worst thing was that the spider's web *moved*, up and down to the rhythm of his breathing. I could see the chunks of glass chafing together.

‘How bad is it?’ Splinter asked calmly. How could he be so calm? I jumped to my feet, told him to stay where he was, not to move, that I would go and get the glassblower, that I would be back in a flash. The more I said, the less sense I made.

Splinter grabbed my wrist. ‘There’s no point.’

I was stunned. ‘What the fuck, there’s no point?’ But I knew and tears welled up.

‘There’s nothing I don’t know about glass, Look. If the damage is any bigger than a large coin, replacement is the only option. And replacement is no option for me.’

‘Of course it is, he could blow another layer on top of it, fuck if I know!’

I said more, a lot more, but what I said was blubbered out by my sobbing. Splinter tried to get up. A square of glass, less than half an inch across, fell in. We both heard it clink as it bounced off glass organs and slid down the hollow of his leg. There was no doubt about it. Splinter was damaged beyond repair and any movement would make it worse. He would break in two. Maybe he had twenty-four hours to live. Maybe less.

‘It was bound to happen, Look,’ he said. ‘You think I don’t know that? It’s not your fault. It could have happened anytime.’

But that’s not how it felt, not to me; it was my fault and tears poured down my cheeks. Splinter draped his glass arms around me and held me in a clumsy embrace while I burrowed my face in his neck.

‘It’s okay,’ he comforted. ‘I found out. It doesn’t matter when you die. What matters is that you live before you do.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ I whispered, inconsolable. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘I want you to stay here with me tonight. I’d just like to be incredibly close for a bit longer.’

So we lay down and I held him in my arms as the last light faded in the west. I cried continuously, repeating over and over how sorry I was. Splinter said I wasn’t to blame, that for the first time in his life he’d been genuinely happy. My eyes got all swollen and sticky and sore. In the end I guess I cried myself to sleep, a restless sleep, full of dreams I couldn’t remember. Did I say dreams? Yeah. I dreamt. Sometime in the middle of the night I woke up because Splinter blew his cooling breath on my eyelids. I think he sensed I was having nightmares.

\*

When I woke up again it was getting light.

I jumped up. Splinter was gone. I looked around, called out his name, got no response. His things were still there, though. I scanned the beach below and was alarmed to see the tide coming in. Maybe I was afraid that he'd jumped, that somewhere down there I'd discover a heap of shards, but I didn't see anything. I called his name again and then I heard him.

He staggered out of the forest, pulling a battered wooden cart covered with a ragged old blanket. I was shocked to see the state he was in. His skin had lost its lustre, was no longer reflective. He was worn out. No, dying.

'I did it,' he croaked. 'If I walk very stiffly, hardly anything breaks off, and the glassblower put some bandage on my back. Now I'll hold a bit longer.'

But when he took another step I heard the splinters rattling in the hollows of his feet. I rushed to his aid and took the cart from him. When I lifted the blanket, I saw it held a glass fishing boat, just big enough to fit it. I looked at Splinter.

'I'm finished, Look. I get sicker all the time. I wanna see if I can pull it off. I've got all day to row to the horizon. I wanna see if I can touch the sun when it sinks into the sea tonight.'

We looked at each other for a long time. I kept trying to say something, don't know what, but my voice had given out. Finally I managed to utter a single word. It was the only time I've ever begged someone.

'Please,' I said.

'But I'm the one to say please,' Splinter smiled. 'I need you. To push me off.'

What went through my mind as I pulled him in the cart, over that narrow path winding down to the beach? About a million voices in my head were telling me to turn around, yelling that it wasn't fair and why was this happening to me? But I buried it all inside, deep down where nobody could ever reach.

The sun wasn't up yet and save for a lone jogger, it was quiet on the beach. Splinter showed me a video camera wrapped up in the blanket. 'Give that to my parents. It has a message. For you too.'

Next I put him in the glass fishing boat and pulled him across the tide line. I was up to my waist in the water. The sea was smooth here, slick and oily, like a mirror. The boat was very well crafted, the work of an artist. Geppetto had even fitted it with glass oars.

I held him in my arms for a long time. Then I let go, I let him go. He took the oars and started rowing, slowly and concentrated, careful not to break his back. He looked back once. The first few rays of sunshine cast a faint glow on his body, and his lips formed a single word. That word was *thanks*.

I waded back to the beach and watched him disappear, saw him grow smaller, a glittering speck on a glittering ocean. Like this, I stared for hours. The beach filled with day-trippers. People squabbled over trivialities, children cried over nothing. I felt drained. Eventually I clambered back up the cliffs. When I reached our stuff, I thought I caught a few more glimpses of the boat, but it was probably just a trick of light. Still, I didn't leave.

I wanted to see if he'd pull it off.

I wanted to see if he could touch the sun.

\*

I was detained at Faro Airport. Not because they recognized me from some description, but because the X-rays at security fell right through me. Descriptions don't come any better than that. They questioned me in a small holding cell. I wobbled in my chair, couldn't find a comfortable position. I was pissed off because I missed my flight, which had cost me four hundred euros last-minute. The Portuguese official was pissed off because he had a lousy job. After he'd been in contact with the Dutch police, he asked me if I knew anything about Splinter Rozenberg's disappearance. I tried not to cry and kept my mouth shut, said I wouldn't say a word until I'd spoken to his parents. At that he got all worked up and banged both fists on the table.

'Talk to me, you glass-eyed monkey!' he yelled in broken English.

I flew off the handle: 'You don't know shit about glass.'

'Did he die?'

'No,' I said. 'He lived.'

They must have searched my luggage, but they didn't find the tape or the glass cones. I'd wrapped them in something soft and hid them in a dark place; you guess where. And so I was escorted back to the Netherlands and reunited with my parents.

A lot more happened, none of which is really relevant. What is relevant is that watching Splinter's video message made Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg realize that his dream had come true. Splinter told them not to be sad for him. I saw very little of it. Tears blurred my vision when I heard his voice. I thought about how I'd sat there on the beach that long afternoon, plagued by doubts whether I'd done the right thing to let him go. Whether I should have joined him. But I also remembered how the sun had finally set, the ocean a brilliant mirror of orange light. Then I'd known. You make your final journey alone.

Afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Rozenberg came to me and asked: 'Did he do it? Was he happy, in the end?'

'Yes,' I said. 'He touched the sun.'

I wish there were more, that I could give you a happier ending. But there isn't one. Who am I? My name is Look.

Somewhere in Portugal, scanning the waves with his binoculars each night, there's an old glassblower. And every so often, I believe, he espies a blue whale.