

Connected

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1 Jakobus

Sixteen-year-old Jakkie was pulling the hair of his sister, Jolande, who was two years older, but also two heads shorter. She playfully whisked away his hands, then held them so he could not bring them closer again. There was a time she would have come running to her dad or have bitten Jakkie's fingers with her sharp little teeth, depending on how vindictive she felt. Their eyes locked, their teeth flashed playfully, and without warning, by instantaneous and unspoken agreement, the game stopped.

"Bye, Dad," they chimed.

"Enjoy the service," Jakobus said to his children as they hopped onto the telemetro.

Jakobus turned around and headed back to the now empty little flat. Within moments his children would be at the megachurch in the heart of Cape Town and they would not be home for some two, perhaps three, hours. This was his time to himself. In the morning he had attended a small Dutch Reformed service. In a building once built for a thousand people there were fewer than fifty; they would sell the building soon. The Dutch Reformed church, like the Afrikaans language, was functionally extinct.

Jakobus put on a CD: an old-fashioned thing, played on an old-fashioned player, with old-fashioned Afrikaans words. Then he got out a Klipwerf, coke and a tumbler; he vaguely knew he would not be awake when his children arrived.

An annoying jingle informed him his ex-wife was calling. Unlike many of the younger generation with implants that seemed to directly connect their minds he still had the option of ignoring the call unnoticed. He let it ring and put away the coke, poured a tumbler of brandy. He thought of his wedding ring and hers, wrapped in a cloth, tossed into the back of a cupboard. They were dusty and vivid in his mind's eye, the gold plating peeling off. He downed the tumbler, numbing the thoughts of rings and Janet, and her "wives".

Perhaps an hour later the jingle started up again and Jakobus answered, unthinkingly. "Whaaat?"

"Jakobus, it's Janet, can we talk?"

"I'm a little... busy right now."

"Busy drinking?"

"Busy, Janet. Send my greetings to your better two thirds."

"Fuck it, Jako, I don't want to fight now. Are the children there?"

"They're at church."

"Not at your church?"

"No, the new one with the fancy shit." He leaned against the wall, pressed the cool glass to his forehead, took another sip.

"You do realise it's basically just a big psych party, right?"

"It's been good for them. They're getting along."

"It's not the church, they're just growing up. They're getting more mature."

"What do you want, Janet?"

"I want them to come with Hermien, Ashley and me on our next little trip. To Robben Island."

"That pleasure resort for the rich who aren't interested in actual history?"

"Jako, are you –"

"It's a disgrace. They mustn't think it's OK."

"Jako, it's just a harmless little holiday."

"No, Janet. That's it."

"Jako, you're being unreasonable."

"Oh, I'm being unreasonable, expecting my children to see good values. And I was unreasonable... wanting them to grow up... in a normal family. Unreasonable... to want you to keep your commitments," he shouted, out of breath.

"I said I didn't want to fight."

"Well, you started a fight."

"I am going to hang up now. I'll call again in the week."

When Jakobus woke, his head pounding, it was dark. His empty tumbler was on the table and he was on the couch. Someone had draped a blanket over him. He walked past Jolande's room; the door was open and he entered (he insisted his children were not to lock their doors and they did not have keys). His daughter was breathing heavily, rhythmically. Her sleep seemed agitated and sweat was breaking out on her forehead, though she had no fever. He kissed her forehead and hoped her dreams were not too troubling.

He went to Jakkie's room next and found his son's sleep to be similarly discomposed. There was a misty light in the room, coming from a device next his son's bed, some new toy Jakobus had not noticed before. The blue-grey light and the breezy sound of the device made it seem like his son was in some sort of spell. Jakobus stepped into the hall again, listened to the breathing of his children, like spectres haunting their rooms, and oddly synchronised. His head pounded again, reminding him to put on the painlim and go to bed.

Some weeks later Jakobus's life shattered for the second time.

"How could you not notice they were using a psych connector?" Janet shouted. The other patients and families of patients took little notice.

"I didn't know it was a psych connector," Jakobus protested, pleaded. He turned toward the vending machine, then turned the other way, weakly attempted to signal a passing nurse.

"It's been on the news. Some kids have really been addled. Adults too. Why didn't you warn them? I told you that church was a fucking bad idea. Church has always been fucking bad for everyone."

"Calm down, Janet," Ashley said. "Jako didn't know. It doesn't help to blame him now." She had placed her hand on Janet's shoulder and was slowly massaging it. "Is it true you found them naked?"

Jakobus nodded.

"Do you think they...?" Hermien asked.

"Surely not...," Janet said.

"God knows, you and Ashley have been setting a fine example." Jakobus dropped the words like a grenade, then left to find a toilet and his composure.

2 Jakkie and Jolande

There was the usual sermon, delivered in more or less the traditional sense, with inefficient, sometimes crackling, loudspeakers. Pastor Mills wanted concentration. It was not the clarity of the message, but the orientation of the listener that was important. But worship was something different, adapted from new genre of psych music, made possible by the subcranial implants that fed both images and sound directly to the brain. Worship was a mass experience, a thousand voices – songs, prayers, prophetic images, and tongues – channelled directly to your awareness. Your voice, your mind, joining the choir. Everything was strictly controlled: you only shared what you wanted to share, voluntarily; there was no fear of a lack of privacy. Although, as Pastor Mills had said in the sermon, *God knows your secret thoughts*.

Jakkie and Jolande stood together in the large hall, facing the worship leaders. They played instruments, but the sound fed only into the implant network. To an unconnected observer all would be silent, except for the occasional audible exultation that slipped through. The siblings clasped their hands and lifted them in the air, their eyes closed, beatific expressions on their faces. Others soon joined, forming rows of worshippers, hands clasped and raised in the air, declaring the victory of Christ.

"The settings you need are written here. Adjust them with caution," Gerard said. He handed Jakkie a small non-descript box and a note. They were in the psych-control room of the church. Gerard was an assistant technician and it was his responsibility to shut down the equipment after the service. "So are you planning an underground psych party?" he asked.

"Nope. Personal use only."

"But it's useless with just one... oh wait, is there a girl?"

Jakkie smiled, looked down at the box.

"There is a girl! And she's adventurous. Who?" Gerard asked.

"Not your concern."

"Alright. Just be careful, OK. And don't let this come back to me. I'll lose my licence forever. Don't let your pastor's-*witbroodjie* sister find out."

"She won't be a problem, I promise," Jakkie said, a glint in his eye.

"Is the problem physical?" Jolande asked Pastor Mills rhetorically. "If it is, then modern technology has removed it. We have contraception and even cloning. There are no more deformities.

"Is the problem emotional?" she continued. "Well, if so then it should be a problem also in cases of adoption. And it isn't.

"Is the problem social?" she pressed on. "Society changes. It has changed. Look at my mother, happily married to two other women."

"One of your mother's wives is her own sister, correct?" Pastor Mills asked when Jolande had finished her monologue. They were in his office.

"Yes."

"And you love them?"

"Yes."

"How did you and Jakkie feel when your mother married her new wives?"

"I was furious."

"Do you think perhaps that what you're feeling is just a way of trying to process your mother's decision? That perhaps you want to justify it and thus avoid your anger?"

"I am not angry anymore. And I did not come to you for psychoanalysis; you are not my psychologist. I came for your spiritual advice. Do you think God will reject me? Reject us?"

"God will never reject you as long as you accept Him, no matter your actions. But I think it far more likely that God has another partner in mind for you and that you need only wait for him, or her, to come into your life."

"But is it wrong?"

"I think you are probably the best person to answer that question. Pray. Why not fast for a period? God will answer."

Jakkie and Jolande strode toward the telemetro. He nodded, indicating he had the connector.

"What did he say?"

"It's up to us. But I think he'd much rather we didn't."

"You didn't tell him about this, right?" He gestured to the box.

"Of course not. In fact he thinks it's just me, all unrequited and shy, in love with my overly smart little brother."

"It will only be our minds. It will be like getting to know each other better, without lies, and no barriers. That can't be wrong."

"But it can be dangerous. Are you sure you know what to do? Are you sure you want to do it?"

"It was your idea."

"That's why I'm asking."

"I'm sure."

He took her hand and they stepped onto the telemetro. Moments later they were in front of the door to their apartment. Inside they found their father, passed out on the couch, an empty bottle of brandy nearby.

"You go set it up," Jolande whispered and proceeded to fetch a blanket for their father. "I love you, Pappa. And I'm sorry you won't understand," she said barely audibly to his unconscious form.

"Where are we?" Jolande asked.

"We need to agree on that first. Something we know already will be most vivid."

"My room then."

They found themselves standing in front of Jolande's bed. It was the same room that she knew, but subtly different. There were two chairs there where there was but one in reality, one of them somehow indistinct. The phantom chair went unnoticed, however, as the siblings fixated on each other. Jolande was dressed in a sleek black paint-on dress, a scandalous but popular form of attire for teenagers at underground parties and bawdy celebrities. It simultaneously hid and revealed every possible curvature. Jakkie was dressed more or less as always: in a holoshirt depicting Northstar, the popular psychcomic character. He did, however, seem a little more muscular and a little less lanky than his physical counterpart.

"We can do anything here..." Jolande said. She could feel Jakkie's attraction palpably, as if it was part of the imagined air around them.

"No one will know and no one can judge," he replied and moved toward her.

"You two seem tired," their father asked the next morning, yawning widely, a large cup of coffee in his hand.

"No. We slept well," Jolande replied. "I slept well," she amended. The two siblings exchanged delighted smiles.

"So, was it like... did you..." Jolande asked incoherently, in a whisper, when their father had gone to get dressed.

"Was it what?"

"Was it like having a wet dream?" Jolande asked expectantly. Jakkie blushed self-consciously.

"I think it was for me," Jolande said, setting Jakkie at ease.

"Girls have those?"

Jolande nodded and smiled impishly.

"It's too risky," Jolande said and pushed Jakkie off.

"We can find a way."

"I said no. We stick to the connector."

"You think it would be wrong, don't you?"

"Isn't that what we were taught?"

"Because we're brother and sister?"

"No. Not because we're brother and sister. I've told you that doesn't matter."

"It only matters if someone finds out, right. Do you really think it matters what way we did it? Before God and before people, it's the same."

"I know. But I want to tell dad first, somehow. Get married. It's too soon."

Jakkie's anger dissipated. He took his sister's hand. "Dad will never understand," he said.

"Can you still drop some of the barriers?" she asked.

"Yes, of course. Like I said, it would allow us to sense deeper thoughts from each another, know each other's minds completely. But you were against it earlier."

"Because of the risk. Do you think you can do it safely?"

"Yes."

"Then do it."

At a café looking over the smog-covered table mountain a man sat drinking coffee. He distractedly waved over the waiter to order a scone. A part of his attention went to the news psych-stream which had an interesting story: a boy and girl, siblings, had been involved in a psych connector accident.

"'Incest' is such a vile word," one commentator said. "The stigma attached to consensual familial sexual relationships is what drove this young couple to this radical form of expressing their love, in secret. And it nearly cost them their lives."

This was followed by a priest lamenting the sad accident and the sexually confused state of an increasingly godless society that led to it, which in turn was followed by a heated discussion about the use of and control of psych connectors.

"In China president Xi Long has announced official recognition of homosexual unions," the anchor narrated, starting the next story. "This is a major move in the world's largest economy, hailed as a victory for human rights."