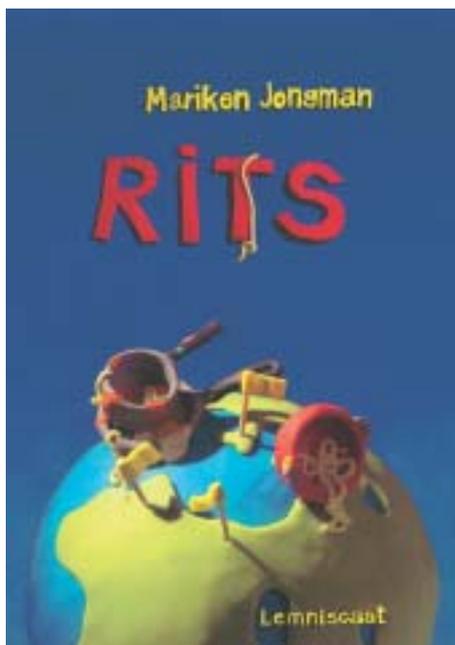


Touching and funny at the same time

Mariken Jongman

Rits



THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD RITS – actually Maurits – doesn't have it easy. His father is off travelling with his new girlfriend and his mother is so distraught that she's ended up in an institution. Rits is staying with his Uncle Corry, who spends his days drinking beer and reading angling magazines. Rits does his very best to introduce a little structure into his uncle's life, but that's no simple task.

Fortunately, Rits has his writing book, which he uses to describe his stay with Uncle Corry and the friendship he forms with Rietje and the – sometimes rather peculiar – members of her family, who he gets to know one by one.

At the same time, he worries about his unhappy mother and keeps hoping for a message from his father, who he hasn't heard anything from in a long time.

A notebook is different from a diary. It's similar, because it follows the calendar from day to day and is filled with words. But a notebook, Rits' notebook, begins with words and then carries on in pictures. Suddenly you're there with him and you're going through everything that Rits has gone through. You hear what people have said to him; you see what he's seen.

When you're reading the book, it's easy to forget that Rits is a fictional character. All the things that he writes down in his notebook and all the things that you feel, but don't read, make it seem as though Rits actually exists. A real boy of thirteen – and a nice one, too. Rits is a book that you simply have to finish even though it has no action-packed moments, a book that is funny in spite of the problems it discusses.

DIRK WEBER in *LEMNISCAATKRANT* 2005



Mariken Jongman (b. 1965) studied History in Groningen. For years, she has written songs and performed them on stage. Since 1997, she has acted and sung in youth-theatre productions, going on tours of schools and theatres. She writes the scripts for these productions herself. Rits is Jongman's debut as a children's author.

Rits is a funny book. The humour is not so much in the events as in the narrator's tone. It's humour that has its roots in the double meanings of language.

DAGBLAD VAN HET NOORDEN

A very successful debut: original, well written, funny and full of sharp observations. (...) Very few people write as well as Mariken Jongman in Rits.

NRC HANDELSBLAD



Foundation for
the Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464

NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam

TEL. 31 20 620 62 61

FAX +31 20 620 71 79

E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl

WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

PUBLISHING DETAILS

Rits

213 pp

Age: 10+

RIGHTS

Lemniscaat

Vijverlaan 48

NL - 3062 HL Rotterdam

The Netherlands

TEL. +31 10 206 29 29

FAX +31 10 414 15 60

WEBSITE www.lemniscaat.nl

Sample translation from

Rits by Mariken Jongman
(Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 2005)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

[pages 5–13]

Monday 4 July

For my birthday last year my mum and dad gave me a video camera and a notebook and pen. So that I could choose what I wanted to be, a writer or a filmmaker. ‘But what if I want to do something else?’ I asked.

‘What do you want to do, then?’ asked my mum.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Maybe work at a post-office.’

Seems like a nice job, sitting behind the counter and doing all sorts of stuff.

‘Fine then, I wish you all the best.’ (I could tell from the look on her face that she didn’t really mean it.)

She also once said that if I wanted to be a writer or a filmmaker when I grow up, then I’d do well to start straightaway. She gave me this concerned look and said that she wondered whether my childhood wasn’t perhaps a bit too happy.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

And here it comes. She said: ‘It’s useful for artists to have had an unhappy childhood.’

I had no idea what she was on about.

Mum laughed. ‘Only joking,’ she said.

At the time I didn’t think any more of it, but now... Could that be it? Might they have gone away to help me have an unhappy childhood? Well, it’s going to work if I have to stay here with Uncle Corry much longer.

I've got no idea where the pen got to. This is the first time I've used the notebook, but I filmed three things with the video camera last year. I had a quick look at the recordings again this morning and they're not bad:

- 1 Next-door's cat doing a poo in our garden. Zoomed in on the pile of poo.
- 2 Next-door's cat running away with the cheese from my sandwich.
- 3 Next-door's cat hitting next-door's dog (that's the best one).

Looking back, it might have been a better idea to film my parents.

The reasons I'm writing in my notebook now:

- 1 because Uncle Corry doesn't have a computer,
- 2 because Uncle Corry doesn't have anything nice at all,
- 3 because there's absolutely nothing to do here otherwise.

I could go and do some filming, but what of? A film about Uncle Corry lying on the settee? I don't think anyone would want to watch that. I certainly wouldn't anyway. I could go and film outside, but I don't trust the people round here. Before you know it, they'll have run off with your camera.

This morning I decided that enough was enough. I'd been sitting in my 'bedroom' for almost two whole days (it's more like a junk room, with piles of old magazines all over the place; I now know everything that there is to know about angling and anglers). I've got bread and jam and cheap fizzy pop coming out of my ears. Uncle Corry was lying all over the settee in his favourite position again. I asked him for a bit of money so I could do the shopping.

'Go and get a job,' he said, without looking up from his *Angling and Anglers*.

A job? I'm only thirteen! I told him that, but he answered that he already had three jobs when he was my age. I'm curious about what they might have been. I've not seen him do a stroke of work all the time I've been here.

'I need to eat fruit and vegetables,' I said.

'What for?' asked Uncle Corry.

'For the vitamins,' I said.

‘Why?’

Why, hmmm, I don’t really know. I’m going to look it up. That’s if there’s a library somewhere around here (not much chance of that).

Evening (after dinner) (tin of baked beans)

I hadn’t gone more than two steps out of the door when...

‘Hey!’

There was a girl sitting on the big red car parked outside the front door. And she wasn’t a little girl either.

I looked around, but she was obviously talking to me because she shouted: ‘Yes, you there. In the weird jacket. Come here.’

Weird jacket?

I took a step towards her.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’m... err... staying with... someone.’

‘What kind of someone?’

‘An uncle.’

She laughed so much that the car shook. ‘That barmy Dirkzwager from number 286! Is he your uncle?’

I felt my face glowing. It’s no fun admitting that Uncle Corry’s your uncle.

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Well, he’s my mum’s brother. But. . .’

‘No, dumbo. Why are you staying there?’

I ask you! Like I need permission or something? Who on earth did she think she was? The (dodgy) neighbourhood watch?

‘I just am,’ I said.

‘So where are your mum and dad?’

I took a good look at the girl. She was pretty big, but she had this funny little face. It was all round. A bit like one of those porcelain dolls. Her face didn’t really fit in with the rest of her body.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘You know, somewhere. I’m looking for a library,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘I want to look something up.’

‘Why don’t you ask me? I know everything. And if I don’t know, I make it up.’

Where are your parents?’

‘They’re... they’ve gone missing.’

‘What do you mean, missing?’

‘Well, they were on this survival trek. In the interior of... Booloo-Boolistan, you know. And suddenly they just disappeared.’

‘The interior of Booloo-Boolistan? Where’s that then?’

‘Somewhere in Africa. Or Asia, I’m not exactly sure.’

‘I don’t believe a word of it. You’re making it up. I like you.’ She took a ten-euro note out of her pocket and waved it in the air. ‘It’s my dad’s birthday tomorrow.

What shall I get him?’

‘Err... well, I don’t know what your dad...’

‘I already know. Come on.’

She jumped off the car and dragged me to a tobacconist’s a little way along the street. ‘I want the best cigars you’ve got!’ she shouted, before we’d even got into the shop properly.

‘We don’t sell tobacco products to individuals under sixteen,’ said the man behind the counter.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ She slammed the ten-euro note down onto the counter. ‘Do I look as though I’m going to smoke those stinky things myself?’

The man looked confused for a moment. He could hardly say yes, she did look like that, so he said ‘The best cigars cost more than ten euros, young lady. A lot more. You could get five good ones for that, but not the best ones, not by a long shot.’

‘Are they nice and fat?’

‘They’re certainly not thin.’

‘Are they big?’

‘They’re certainly not small.’

‘I’ll take them then. And make sure you pack them up nicely.’

When we finally got back outside – it took a while before she was happy with the cigar man’s wrapping skills – she said: ‘What’s your name?’

‘Rits. It’s Maurits actually. But everyone calls me Rits.’

‘Rits? You must be crackers!’ she laughed. (Like I’ve never heard that one before!) ‘My name’s Rietje.’ She dragged me off down the street again. ‘That’s where I live,’ she said, pointing out a house that looked just like Uncle Corry’s house and all the other houses in the street. ‘With my dad.’

I didn’t dare ask where her mum was.

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Come round this evening. Then you can meet my dad as well.’

‘Err... I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

I couldn’t come up with anything good on the spot. ‘I’ve got to go to the library,’ I said.

‘It’ll be closed this evening, dumbo,’ she said. ‘Come round at eight.’

It’s now twelve minutes to eight.

I hope she doesn’t keep going on about my mum and dad. I don’t want ANYONE to know about that (except for Uncle Corry, but I couldn’t do anything about that, he had to know) (And Steven and his parents, but that couldn’t be helped) (Oh, and of course there’s Old Bolly as well) (Hmmm, that’s already a whole lot of people).

22.02:

Rietje’s dad is really nice. I wish I could stay with them instead of with Uncle Corry. I’m going to bed now. I’m shattered. Library tomorrow morning.

Tuesday 5 July

I've found out some information. The woman from the library was really nice. She took me to the medicine section (numbers 601 to 613) and the domestic science section (number 628). Maybe Uncle Corry should take a look at the domestic science section some time as well. They've got stacks of interesting books there, about removing stains, for example, and about beautiful kitchens and stylish living. He really could use some tips. And they also had a whole pile of books about vitamins and what you need them for. My head was spinning. There are a lot more vitamins than I thought.

What I read didn't sound too good. For example (I copied this down): 'Vitamin C is needed for resistance to infections and stress, for growth and for the respiratory system.' And a bit further on: 'In the most severe cases, a lack of vitamin C can result in scurvy.'

Scurvy! That really did give me a fright. What does scurvy do to you? It sounds like the kind of thing that makes everything fester and rot and go stinky. Perhaps Uncle Corry's already got scurvy, because he smells really odd. Like there's something rotting.

So I went back to the library lady and asked if she had a book about scurvy, with pictures if possible. She took me to the section with the medical books and asked what I needed it for. 'Is it for a talk?' Hello?! A talk? In the holidays? Yeah, right! I'm going to do a talk on scurvy just for the fun of it. 'No, it's for my uncle,' I said. 'He's probably got scurvy. And I might have it too.'

'Scurvy? Really? How come?' she asked. The woman can't be very bright. She's certainly nice, but she's not very bright. 'Because we don't eat any vitamins,' I explained, patiently. 'It's mainly a vitamin C deficiency that we're suffering from. Uncle Corry doesn't like vitamins. Just food out of tins and fizzy pop and stuff.'

The library lady went away. I opened up the book, but before I'd read a word there was an old lady standing in front of me. 'I've seen you before,' she said. I didn't feel like talking, so I just said: 'Mmm, probably.'

'Don't you live opposite? With Cor Dirkzwager?'

‘Err... well, yes, but...’

‘I thought I’d seen you there. Yesterday. And the day before. You were just popping out to the park, weren’t you? For a little walk. You came back really quickly. It’s a nice park, isn’t it? I live at number 295, just across the way from you.’

Unbelievable! The old-lady police are keeping an eye on me, patrolling behind their net curtains!

‘What’s your name?’

‘Maurits.’ I wanted her to go away so I could read the book, but she didn’t know when to stop. She must have felt like a chat. Old people often get lonely.

‘That Cor really doesn’t seem the type to be looking after a child,’ she said. ‘Is everything going well?’

‘Oh, yes,’ I said. ‘Fantastic.’

‘I heard what you were just saying about the scurvy. That doesn’t really sound very good.’

‘Oh, but apart from that everything’s fantastic.’ I bent so far over the book that my nose touched the page.

The net-curtain police stayed there for a little while. I could feel her looking at me, but fortunately she was keeping her mouth shut now.

I copied out a section about scurvy and read it to Uncle Corry:

‘Caused by a lack of vitamin C. The first symptoms are irritability (Uncle Corry’s really irritable!), pain upon movement (that’s why he’s always lying on the settee!), bleeding – including bleeding of the gums – and purplish spots on the skin. At a later stage, the teeth become loose, the patient suffers heart palpitations and lesions may occur on the limbs.’

Uncle Corry didn’t look very impressed, but VICTORY: he did give me twenty euros. So I’m off to do the shopping in a bit.

But first I’m going to take a good look in the mirror. It wouldn’t surprise me if I’ve got purplish spots. I’ve had a feel of my teeth. They’re not all that loose yet.

Oh yes, when I was at the library I looked at the atlas as well. In the interior of Africa is the Democratic Republic of Congo. That's a really big country.

[pages 72–80]

Then Rietje suddenly began talking about something else. ‘So where are your parents really?’ she asked.

Oh great! That’s just what I’d been waiting for!

‘And don’t start on about the interior of Africa, because you know no one believes that.’

I clamped my mouth shut. She doesn’t need to know everything about me.

‘Well? You know everything about my parents now. So tell me something about yours. Where are they?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘What do you mean, I don’t know?’

‘Somewhere in India, I think. But I’m not sure.’

‘Stop making up stories.’

‘It’s true.’

‘How come?’

‘The last postcard from my dad came from India. That was over a month ago. He could be somewhere completely different by now.’ (Maybe even in the Netherlands, I thought afterwards, maybe he’s looking for me.)

‘What’s he doing there?’

‘All sorts.’

‘Sailing?’

I REALLY didn’t want to talk about it, but Rietje can be ever so pushy. So I gave her the short version and told her that he’d handed in his notice at work and decided to go travelling. I didn’t tell her (or Tineke) the stuff about the girlfriend and that. I think Rietje thinks he’s there with my mum and I’ll leave it like that. She doesn’t have to know everything.

Anyway, I also thought it was a good chance to ask her about something that had been bugging me for a while. She’s always chewing my ear off about something or other, so it’s only fair that I get to ask her something. ‘Don’t you have any girlie friends?’ I asked.

‘Course I do.’

‘So where are they?’

‘One of them’s just moved and one’s on holiday. Why?’

‘I was wondering, well, I think it’s a bit odd that...’

‘That what?’

‘That day when you went to buy cigars for your dad. You took me to the shop with you. And then I had to go to your house that same evening. Why was that? You didn’t even know me.’

‘You know.’

‘You know what?’

‘I was bored.’

That’s great. So it wasn’t because she thought I was nice or anything, but because she was bored.

‘I really was bored out of my brain.’

Go on. Make it even worse.

‘Karin had just moved house, Lisa had gone on holiday. I didn’t have anything to do.’

‘Haven’t you got any hobbies or anything?’

‘Course I have, loads of them. Like swimming. But it’s not so much fun on your own. And you get pretty bored listening to CDs or reading books all day.’

So you just go and pluck a Rits from the street then. Sometimes I don’t like that Rietje at all. But of course I wasn’t going to say that to her. I don’t want to fall out with her, not so soon before the wedding, or she might go and cause trouble with her aunt and then they’ll fire me.

And now I’m going to try to get some sleep. Tomorrow’s an important day. My first day as an official filmmaker!

Sunday 17 July (evening)

Phew, what a bunch of stress-heads. Especially that Gea. If the whole family’s like that, I really don’t know whether I feel like carrying on with that film about Rietje’s mum. It’s just as well Piet’s a calm type (but he’s not really family, just by

marriage). Piet is Rietje's uncle. He usually films everything there is to be filmed in the family, but he's got a sprained ankle.

We worked really well this afternoon and Piet said that it's going to be a nice video when he's finished with it. It's really handy, that editing thing of his. You can use it to cut and paste all the pictures and put them in different places and play around with them. You can do all kinds of things with it, even edit together pictures from different films. But you can see a clear difference – the pictures I took are a much nicer colour than Dirk's. Piet said so too.

I don't think those people have much artistic sensitivity. All they want is the bog-standard stuff. But it's boring filming the bride and groom the WHOLE time with the registrar just rattling on about this and that.

And so I said to Gea: 'Look, I really don't get it. You thought that film of the old lady with that wheelie-walker thing was much too long. You said it was boring. There should be more action, you said.'

And she started screaming at me hysterically, calling me a stupid idiot and saying that she was even more stupid than me because she'd got me to do the filming (she said a lot of other things as well).

Well, I ask you! Is it really me? Does any of the stuff she said make sense? One moment she's saying one thing, the next she's saying something else. And incidentally: I did get the bit where they say 'I do'. I can clearly hear them both saying it. What does it matter if you can't see them for a moment? You get to see them for long enough otherwise, just like that boring registrar.

But anyway, Piet put one of Dirk's bits of film over that part. He only had to do it because they made such a palaver about it. But you can see these weird differences in the colour. And Dirk was filming them from behind as well, which means you can only see their backs. I thought my pictures were a lot nicer (birds in the trees outside, tight zoom in on Eva's face) (Eva = Rietje's cousin). What is nice is that you can see me for a moment in Dirk's pictures. You can see me filming.

Rietje thought it was a good film. She killed herself laughing when she saw it (I showed her some of the good bits, yesterday evening, in the camera, without any sound). Rietje obviously has a better understanding of that kind of thing.

What am I supposed to do if people don't have any taste? It all began with the wedding dress. Looking back, maybe it wasn't all that bright of me. But I just hadn't thought that if I whispered something to Rietje while I was filming that my voice would be recorded as well (Piet's already taken it out though. You can't hear me any more, there's a tune instead). But she really did look like a big cream puff! (Piet said the same this afternoon, he agreed with me.)

Anyway, there was a lot more, too much to write it all down. In any case, it's nice of Piet to help. Even though it means that the film's going to be a lot less beautiful and a lot more boring. If those people really do want it as ugly and dull as possible, then so be it. I hope that the recording (Piet says it's called a 'shot') of the cloakroom stays in. I think that's a really good one, with all the coats and umbrellas. Piet says that that kind of shot isn't really necessary in a wedding film, and certainly not for that long.

Whatever Gea says, I really think that I've got talent as a filmmaker. Piet thought I had some good ideas too. He did say that some of the ideas weren't really suitable for a wedding video and he gave me some good tips. For example, he said that people would rather see faces in that kind of film than legs and feet the whole time. (It wasn't the whole time, it was just quarter of an hour.) That's why I thought it was so good, you know, not so bog standard. And if you film from the floor, you can go under tables and that, and then people don't see you. And then they talk completely differently from the way they talk when they can see you filming.

You should have seen Gea's face when she heard some of the conversations in the film! (So I don't really think my comment about the cream puff was all that bad in fact.)

Rietje keeps being really pathetic. She reckons I fancy Eva. Eva's her cousin. It's completely untrue (that I fancy Eva, I mean – she really is Rietje's cousin). She's really nice, but I don't fancy her or anything. She just looked better to film than most

of the other people at the party and I wanted to make a good video. Not a boring one full of old people.

She's just being childish. Rietje is sometimes really immature. That's when you can tell that she's four months younger than me.

Uncle Corry's back with the chips.

Five past nine:

I'm not sure that chips are really any good for you. Uncle Corry says they are – he says they're potatoes and that potatoes are good for you. But they always say they're not good for you and that they give you spots. At home, Mum sometimes goes out for chips as well, on a Sunday. She says that you just shouldn't eat them every day, but that it doesn't do any harm every now and then.

I'm a bit worried about the spots. It only occurred to me when I'd already finished the chips. I just looked in the mirror to check, but I couldn't see anything yet.

Uncle Corry says that he's trying to find a job, but that it's difficult, with that back of his. He can't forget construction work (the doctor told him so). I said that maybe he could go sailing and take yachts from one place to another, but he didn't think much of that idea. It was impossible with his back, he said, running around all day heaving ropes and tying them up, and on top of that you needed, like, a hundred certificates (is that right? I'll have to ask Jaap). And he didn't think much of the idea anyway, all that water and the same view every day. I don't know why that's a problem – he has the same view from his settee every day and I don't hear him complaining about that.

I'm a bit tired. The past few days have been rather busy, with all the filming and whatnot. I'm going to bed early. Tomorrow morning we're going swimming (I hope that it doesn't rain this time and that the water's a bit warmer).

Monday 18 July

(ten past five in the morning!)

I can't sleep. I've been awake for over an hour. I wish the birds outside would shut that twittering up! Why are there birds in town anyway? Why can't they just clear off to a wood or something, somewhere where they won't cause a nuisance. I don't go and trumpet around underneath their trees and wake them up, do I?

I don't know Old Bolly's number. How can I get hold of it? I'm worried about our house. When I went to Uncle Corry's, Old Bolly said I shouldn't worry, that she'd water the plants and that. But what about the rent? Who's paying it? What'll happen if the rent doesn't get paid? And the other bills? I want to go to the house. There might be a postcard from Dad. She said that she'd forward my post, but she might have forgotten. Or maybe she's lost Uncle Corry's address. I haven't had anything yet. Why wouldn't Dad send a postcard? Soon the rent won't have been paid and there'll be other people living there, people who will pay the rent. And Dad'll come home and the other people will be living there, so he'll go round to Old Bolly's to ask where I am and she'll be away, or dead. She's ancient. Does Dad even remember where Corry lives? He doesn't know anything about where Mum is and all that, so he can't phone her to ask.

I'm going to phone Mum.

They said it was still too early. I said it was important. They asked what the problem was. I couldn't think of anything that quickly, so I said I couldn't sleep. They said that I should call back in a couple of hours. I felt tears welling up, but I didn't cry. Maybe that's precisely what I should have done. Maybe they'd have brought her to the phone then.

Nobody's said anything else about the 25 euros. If I had it, I could go by train. I'm going to ask Arend about it. I don't think it's fair if they don't give me the 25 euros.

If I don't get it, I'm going to ask Corry for some money. And then I'll pay him back later. I don't feel like going swimming.

± 4 o'clock:

We went swimming.

I called again at nine o'clock, but she was doing something and really couldn't come to the phone, they said. They told me to call back later. Or they could tell her to call me when she was done. 'OK then,' I said. But then I remembered that I was going swimming and that she'd be bound to call when I wasn't there, so I said: 'Never mind, I'll call back later.'

Then I called Tineke. She wasn't in yet (at work).

After that I went to Rietje's and we went swimming. She said she thought I was a bit quiet. I said I hadn't slept very well because of the stupid birds.

Fortunately, the weather was good, but I still thought the water was cold.

We talked about our film. Actually, Rietje did most of the talking. I don't feel much like making the film any more. Rietje's acting like it's all her film. She's coming up with all these ideas. I didn't feel like coming up with anything. She's already thought of a title as well: Anneke. I reckon I could probably come up with a much better title, but I don't feel like it.

I just phoned Tineke again. She was in. I'm going to see her tomorrow morning.

My mum hasn't called. I'm not going to phone again today. I don't feel like it right now.

[pages 125–131]

Later:

Maybe I'd better not say anything. Not yet, at least. Otherwise he might say he doesn't want to. I'll just tell him on Friday evening, right before he goes out to the bar. Then he won't have any time to get angry or to say that he doesn't want to.

Evening:

I'm finding it hard to act normally with him. He's starting to notice. He asked me: 'Why are you smirking like that? Is something up?' I didn't even know I was smirking! I'm going over to Rietje's in a moment – I want to know precisely what they said (we couldn't talk about it in detail on the phone, because Corry was there. I said: I'll come round this evening).

Wednesday 3August

I'm going to have to tell him sooner. Today, in fact. He's going to have buy new clothes and go to the hairdresser's and that. Rietje says it'll be a flop if he doesn't. That Petra looks really good. And when someone looks really good, they usually prefer to go out with someone else who looks really good.

In any case, they've got a date. Uncle Corry doesn't know about it yet, but Petra does. (Petra is a friend of Eva's mum, she went to the zoo with us) (Oh, I've already written about that, oh well, doesn't matter). Petra's good points:

- She's not married (she was, but not any more).
- She hasn't got a boyfriend (she did have, but not any more).
- She would like to have a boyfriend or a husband again.
- She can cook.

(Eva knew all of this – I asked her all about Petra when we went swimming on Sunday.)

So it should work out well. If everything goes ok between her and Uncle Corry, then I won't need to worry about him soon not having anyone here to cook for him. She'll be able to do it for him.

We had to do it all by quite a roundabout route. Rietje called Eva and Eva called Petra. Petra didn't want to at first. She said that she didn't like 'blind dates'. ('Blind dates' has got nothing to do with being blind – it just means a date with someone you've never seen before. So you do keep your eyes open during the date and you don't have to put a coat over your head or anything.)

It was already tricky enough, by the way. It took me a great deal of effort to persuade Rietje to persuade Eva to persuade Petra. Rietje thinks Uncle Corry's a weirdo. She said: 'We can't do it to the poor woman. You can't do that to anyone.' I told her that Uncle Corry was really nice and not all that weird at all, but then Rietje made me list all of Corry's good points, so that she could write them down.

'He likes fishing,' I said.

She didn't think that was much of a good point. She didn't write it down.

'He likes good food,' I said.

She didn't think that was a good point either. I said that it was a good point – what happens if one person likes good food and the other doesn't? Then there's no point in being a good cook. Eating's very important.

'Alright, go on then,' said Rietje. She wrote it down.

'He likes watching TV,' I said.

She didn't think that was a good point either. I said that it was a good point, because it's fun watching TV together. Just imagine one person likes watching telly and the other doesn't – what do you do? But she didn't want to put it on the list.

'He likes drinking beer,' I said. 'He goes to the bar every Friday evening. And sometimes on the other evenings too.'

'Oh, just stop it!' said Rietje. 'You're just saying stupid or boring things. Tell me something good about him or I'll stop writing.'

‘He’s really nice,’ I said. ‘He takes care of his family when his family’s got problems.’

‘Is he taking care of you, then?’ asked Rietje. ‘I think it’s more like you taking care of him. You cook; he doesn’t do anything.’

‘He’s calm. That’s a good quality.’

Fortunately, she wrote that down.

‘He’s good at telling stories.’ I was thinking of his story about the brown beans. ‘He tells me all kinds of things.’

She wrote that down too. Now I was on a roll. I told her a whole load of good things about him:

- he reads a lot (only in *Angling and Anglers*, but I didn’t add that);
- he’s good at listening and talking (at least, recently he’s not been not listening and not talking the entire time);
- he does a lot of sport (angling’s a sport too);
- he’s generous (biscuit-tin money);
- he’s got a sense of humour (to be fair, it’s not a very good sense of humour, but he does at least laugh from time to time);
- he’s very popular and has a lot of friends (at the bar. I haven’t met any of them, but I didn’t add that.);
- he’s very sociable (otherwise he wouldn’t go to the bar).

Now we had a whole list full of good points.

‘Good,’ said Rietje. ‘But you have to make sure that he does something about the way he looks. He really does look a state. She’ll run a mile if she sees him like that.’

Rietje phoned the list through to Eva and then Eva called Petra. Petra didn’t want to at first, but then she said she’d give it a shot. ‘Oh, go on then,’ Rietje said that Eva had said that Petra had said, ‘but if it doesn’t work out, I’m leaving after five minutes.’ So now she’s coming on Friday evening to the WunderBar, the bar that Uncle Corry always goes to.

I'm hatching a plan to get him to buy some new clothes and go to the hairdresser's. It really would be a lot easier if 'blind dates' did mean that you keep your eyes closed during the date, or put a coat over your head.

Evening:

Had pasta spirals (or whatever they're called, those twisty ones).

I said: 'Shouldn't you go to the hairdresser's?'

'Why?' he asked.

'And buy some new clothes?'

'Why?'

'Oh, no reason, you know. It's just nice.'

'What do you mean? Is there something wrong with the way I look?'

Now it was getting dangerous. I couldn't say 'yes', of course, because he might have got angry and then the whole plan would have failed. For the plan to work, he needed to be in a good mood. But I couldn't say 'no' either, because then he'd think that he looked fine and wouldn't change anything. I had to think of something between yes and no. But I couldn't come up with a word that was between yes and no. So I said: 'Err... yes and no, somewhere in between.'

'What d'you mean, yes and no, somewhere in between?'

'Well, it could be better,' I said. 'It's not a nothing, but it's not full marks either. It's a sort of... six.'

'A six?'

'A six minus. You know, the sort of mark you get when it's not really bad, but it's not very good either. Wouldn't you rather be a ten?'

Uncle Corry had just stuffed his mouth full of pasta spirals. There was a bit of sauce on his chin. He stopped chewing and looked at me.

'Wah? Uh-en?'

'Yes, a ten,' I said (I've become a bit of an expert at understanding Uncle Corry with his mouth full).

'Wha-or?' He started chewing again. I waited until he'd swallowed.

'Girls prefer tens. They like tens better than six minuses.'

‘Girls? What d’you mean, girls? What are you talking about?’

‘Well, women then, you know. A six minus is fine, but they only get really, really happy about a ten. So happy that they start jumping up and down.’

He put down his spoon. (Uncle Corry eats everything with a spoon, not a fork. He thinks forks are fiddly.) ‘What exactly do you mean?’ he asked. He screwed up his eyes.

I started to feel more and more uncomfortable. I wish I hadn’t started the whole thing. It was a rubbish plan. It was never going to work. Why was I sticking my nose in? Why should I care whether he had a wife or not or whether he was eating properly? What had I got to do with it? It was none of my business. But I couldn’t go back now.

‘Err, it’s like this... I thought: maybe you would like a wife. Or a girlfriend. Someone to cook for you and stuff. That’d be nice, eh?’

‘And?’ His eyes were still screwed up and he was staring right at me. I was going to have to give him a really good story, that much was clear.

‘Well, you’re always on your own,’ I said. ‘Not now, because I’m here. But you are otherwise. Don’t you think it would be nice to have a wife? Or a girlfriend?’

Everything went silent for a moment. His eyes went back to normal. He looked down at his plate. ‘Err... well, I don’t know. It’s nice and peaceful the way it is. Women just chew your ears off all the time with their nagging.’

‘Not all of them,’ I said. ‘There are women who don’t chew your ears off. I know a whole load.’

‘Like who?’

‘Petra, for example. She never nags and she’s really nice.’

‘Petra? Who’s Petra?’

‘Petra’s a woman.’

‘That much I’ve gathered. Why Petra? Where’d that come from?’

‘She’d like to meet you.’

Uncle Corry clutched onto the table. I think that was sensible, because, from the look on his face, he would have toppled over otherwise, taking the table and everything else with him. ‘Eh? What? But who is she? And how... what?’

‘She’s really nice-looking. Nice hair, nice clothes. And it made me think that maybe you could do with a bit nicer hair and a bit nicer clothes. I’m sure she’d like that.’

‘But how...? Eh? And what...’

She’s coming to the bar on Friday evening. So you’ve got enough time to go to the hairdresser’s and that.’

‘Friday? Eh?’

My plate was empty. I thought it might be a good idea to clear off for a while. ‘I’m going to Rietje’s,’ I said and stood up.

‘Come back,’ I heard him shouting after me. ‘What about the...’ I slammed the front door behind me.

When I got home I tried to sneak down the corridor to my room really quietly. But the living-room door flew open and he grabbed me by the collar. ‘I’m having none of it,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’ve cooked up, but I’m having none of it. You just make sure that she stays away. Have you lost your mind?!’

Bah. So now I’ve got to phone Rietje tomorrow and tell her to phone Eva and tell her to phone Petra and tell her that it’s all off.

I don’t understand why Corry’s being so difficult. Instead of being happy that I’m sorting something out for him! He never does anything himself. I’ve had enough. I’m not going to do anything else for him. We can both take care of ourselves.

Thursday 4 August (half ten in the morning)

It’s back on! It’s worked!

We’re going into town in a bit (hairdresser’s, clothes!). He doesn’t want to go by himself, so I’ve got to go with him.

Just gave Rietje a quick call to tell her to phone Eva and tell her to phone Petra to say that it’s at a different bar, tomorrow.