



AWARD-WINNING INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

MY EPIC FALL FROM
CYCLING SUPERSTARDOM
TO DOPING DEAD END

DESCENT

THOMAS DEKKER

AS TOLD TO THIJS ZONNEVELD

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CONTENTS

1	In the Hotel.....	1
2	Dead Ordinary.....	3
3	Love at First Sight.....	7
4	First Call.....	11
5	Junior Camp.....	15
6	The Commitment.....	21
7	First Shot.....	31
8	Jacques the Manager.....	37
9	Initiation.....	41
10	A Boost for the Worlds.....	45
11	The Coach.....	55
12	The Territory.....	61
13	Your Blood Is Your Blood.....	65
14	No Worries.....	71
15	One Is Not Enough.....	77
16	Stepping Up.....	83
17	A Hippie in Love.....	89
18	The 2007 Tour de France.....	95

19	It's You, Not Me.....	103
20	Trickier Than You'd Think.....	109
21	Doing Without.....	121
22	Positively Positive.....	133
23	Give Them Nothing.....	135
24	Falling.....	139
25	Wiped Out.....	145
26	Lifeline.....	153
27	Cards on the Table.....	161
28	Ashes and Embers.....	171
29	Adrift.....	175
30	The Stupidest Idea Ever.....	179
31	The Attempt.....	183
32	Big Talk, Small Talk, No Talk.....	191
33	A Turn of the Tables.....	195
34	The Story of My Descent.....	203
	<i>Epilogue</i>	209
	<i>About the Coauthor</i>	213

1

IN THE HOTEL

IT'S A THOUSAND SHADES OF DARK. The curtains are drawn, the door is locked. The only light is the dim glow of the bedside lamp. Shadows creep across the carpet and up the wall. The picture hanging there is the kind you find in countless hotel rooms—an anonymous print of some flower.

I'm lying on the bed in my jogging pants and T-shirt. I haven't even bothered to take off my shoes. A thick needle is sticking out of my arm, attached to a drip. My blood runs dark red through the plastic tube. Slowly it fills the bag that's sitting on a digital scale on the floor.

In the corner of the room, far from the light, a man is sitting in a chair. His foot bobs up and down as he jots something in his diary. Every few minutes he glances at the scale. I met him for the first time half an hour ago in the hotel lobby. He introduced

himself as Dr. Fuentes. Beige trousers, checked shirt, and a face that is instantly forgotten. He smells of cigarette smoke. We have barely spoken a word to each other. His English is basic and my Spanish nonexistent.

I don't think he even knows who I am. Not that it matters.

I haven't come here to talk.

I stare at the blood in the bag. It's as if it isn't mine. As if it isn't even real. I thought it would be different, the first time, that I would be excited, nervous—like a kid stealing candy from the corner shop. But there is no thrill, no jangling nerves. This is a simple transaction. Doping is business. It just happens to be one you need to hide from as many people as possible.

Fifteen minutes go by, and Dr. Fuentes gets out of his chair. He removes the needle from my arm and wipes away the blood with a cotton ball. He holds out a Sharpie and says in a thick Spanish accent, "I give you number. Twenty-four. Two four. You must write here." He points to the bag of blood. I sit up, take the marker, and write the number on the bag. He nods and says, "We are done."

I pull my tracksuit top over my T-shirt and shake his hand. He opens the door and mumbles something indecipherable. I step into the hallway—the light is so bright it hurts my eyes.

The door clicks shut behind me.

There's no way back from here.

2

DEAD ORDINARY

I GREW UP IN AN ORDINARY FAMILY in an ordinary house on an ordinary street in a small town by the name of Dirkshorn. It's slap-bang in the middle of the pan-flat landscape of northern Holland, little more than a dot on the map: 12 streets, a church, a supermarket, a football club, and a fish-and-chip takeout. A carnival comes to Dirkshorn once a year. That aside, nothing ever happens.

My parents are ordinary too. Bart and Marja. Salt of the earth, you might say. Mom works as a swimming pool attendant in the next town. Dad is a baggage handler at Schiphol Airport. Five mornings a week for 30 years he's been getting up at 4:30 to head for Amsterdam, lunch box crammed with sandwiches, to lug other people's suitcases from one place to another. Dinner is on the table at 5:30 every evening; Dad does the cooking. Standard Dutch fare for the most part: cauliflower, meat, and potatoes. On Sundays we'd

always get something from Joep's takeout. My folks earn enough to make ends meet, and they take good care of what they own. I spent my whole childhood whizzing around on secondhand roller skates. They were good enough.

I have a loving mother. The kind who has orange juice and biscuits waiting for you when you come home from school. In her whole life she has only been really angry with me once, when I was very little. I can't even remember what I'd done to upset her.

My father is a typical northerner. The strong, silent type—verging on gruff, even—but he has a big heart and wears it firmly on his sleeve. He's not afraid to speak his mind, but he seldom has to; what he's thinking is written on his face. More often than not he's in good spirits, but when his lip starts to tremble, you know there's a storm brewing. His face is sometimes etched with lines, a sign that he's worried and no stranger to worrying. It wouldn't surprise me if most of his worries have been about me. I think at times he wishes he could still hold on to me the way he used to when we'd cycle over to see Grandma when I was a kid: one hand resting on the back of my neck to stop me falling and keep me on the straight and narrow.

My sister is named Floortje. She's two years younger than me. We have always got along well. We were playmates all through childhood and happily spent entire days in each other's company. On weekends, when Mom and Dad were sleeping in, we'd creep downstairs in the cold, dark house and snuggle up under a blanket on the couch to watch cartoons.

As a boy I was always outdoors. When I wasn't knocking a ball around on the empty lot around the corner or over by the noise barrier along the main road, you could find me playing soldiers or swimming in a lake or the outdoor pool along the way. I was a member of the tennis club, the football club, the skating club. Lack of talent didn't stop me being fanatical about all three. I played for FC Dirkshorn and made my way through the junior ranks from the Fs to the Ds. Granddad used to come and watch me play every week, and he'd give me a guilder if I scored. Sometimes I was so eager to impress him I would charge right through the defender. If we lost, I was in a foul mood. It was the same with every sport. I could fly into a rage if things didn't go my way. All the same, I knew better than to throw a tantrum. If I had hurled my racket to the ground when I lost at tennis, Dad would have marched onto the court and dragged me off by the hair.

I went to school in Dirkshorn. There were only eight children in my class all the way through junior high. Our favorite playground game was marbles. I was determined to have more than anyone else. Sometimes I sold my marbles to the other kids—and then proceeded to win them back again. I must have earned hundreds of guilders that way. I saved it all up for later, to fulfill my dream of buying a flashy car. I have no idea where it comes from, my love of material things. Not from my parents, that's for sure. My sister has no appetite for bling either.

Our summer vacations were much like everyone else's. Mom and Dad in the front seat of the car, Floortje and me in the back

with currant buns, Fruittella, and comic books to keep us quiet. Most years we went camping in France, to campsites with a swimming pool, a ping-pong table, and those toilets you had to squat over. It was either that or Center Parcs or Gran Dorado: a couple of weeks in a holiday bungalow that was exactly the same as the one next to it and the one next to that and the hundreds of others that filled the park.

One thing's for sure: I was never one of those troubled kids who are destined to go off the rails from an early age. Our parents showered us with love. Our house wasn't a place of fighting or endless arguments. If anything, we were the opposite of a problem family.

My boyhood can be summed up in a single word: ordinary.

Make that two: dead ordinary.

ABOUT THE COAUTHOR

Thijs Zonneveld is a Dutch sports journalist and a former professional cyclist. He covers the sport of cycling for Rotterdam's leading newspaper, *AD Algemeen Dagblad*. He also delivers commentary for Dutch public television. In 2016, he received the award for Best Dutch Sports Journalist for *Descent*.

A BRUTAL PORTRAIT OF LIFE AT THE TOP

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In this fast-paced, tell-all memoir, Dekker delivers a page-turning tear through one man’s rise, fall, and redemption during cycling’s EPO-fueled boom years. And Dekker is not alone: He names those who fell with him and those who aided his downfall. Yet he blames no one but himself.

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