



# Splinter Chabot

## *CONFETTI RAIN*

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*CONFETTI RAIN* is a disarming and moving story about a boy named Wobie who grows up in a friendly and safe environment. Like in a fairy-tale world. Once at school, he discovers that some people would rather see his enthusiasm caged, that certain clothes are only intended for girls, and that love is more complicated than drawing a little heart. On the basis of three defining encounters during his youth, Wobie comes to know more and more about himself. As he grows older, he slowly but steadily discovers that he is different from his brothers, different from his classmates, different from the person he thought he was. Different from the person he wanted to be. A grey mist slowly begins to creep into his life, and he starts to discover what he first ignored, then feared, but finally celebrated. This is a diary of that struggle and journey. *CONFETTI RAIN* is not only a wonderful story to read but also an important book in which different generations will recognize themselves and one that different generations will be touched by.

### **Praise for *CONFETTI RAIN*:**

'Publishing a debut novel on your 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, reaping praise from all sides and then sitting for months in the bestseller list: not every writer can do it. Splinter Chabot managed to, thanks to his unmistakable talent. In *CONFETTI RAIN* he beautifully describes how difficult it is to come out, even when growing up in a tolerant family.'  
*Trouw*

'Here too Chabot takes matters into his own hands, by showing how, with a powerful conviction and the support of those around you, you can still follow your own path.'  
*NRC Handelsblad*

**Splinter Chabot** is a TV presenter, political junkie and born optimist. He read political science and theatre studies at the University of Amsterdam. Although the narrator in *CONFETTI RAIN* is called Wobie, it is an autobiographical story of Chabot's coming-out and the way that led to it. In a Dutch television programme, Chabot revealed that even though his parents were open-minded, he still struggled with his sexuality and even had suicidal thoughts.



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Sample translation by Michele Hutchinson

## Foreword

A political pamphlet – that's what I'd resolved to write. I'd offer a youthful perspective on climate change, sustainability, globalization, digitization, technology. I'd be the voice of a new generation. But that's not what this story has become.

Something else emerged. When I started typing, I found I could only write about one thing. There is a glowing light in William Turner's paintings, as though he has captured the sun and this story glowed in me just as powerfully. In the end, the only thing I could get out of my ringed fingers was this book. It is a portrait of Wobie, of his struggle, his vulnerability, his doubts. It depicts the inner journey he made, an inner journey that took him for miles without even having to take a step. A journey that is also my own.

It has become a story about being different, about the difference between choosing to be different and being forced to be different. That's where the essence lies. Even if everyone around you is fine with what you do or the way you are – with you being different – you still struggle enormously if it is not what you chose for yourself.

This is an account of that struggle. It is for those who are struggling themselves, but perhaps, more than anything else, for the young people who have yet to start their search or are still in the middle of it and would like to read about it - secretly or not. I think doubts, vulnerabilities and inner turmoil deserve more attention than they are currently given.

Those who are different advance a society and give it colour. We must embrace people who are different, who dare to go against the grain. They give a society wings. They are able to break its invisible chains, rules and laws.

Perhaps this is a political story after all, its subject matter being what a society needs in order for people to properly co-exist: freedom. Freedom to be who you really are deep down – in all of our colours, facets and diversity.

I'm Wobie. My world is filled with glitter and confetti. Christmas lights flicker inside my head, though sometimes there's a short circuit. As a child I thought the world was wonderful, as an adult I still do. I skip and jump. I love cheerfulness and colour. But it's also been a long search and a long journey, despite having the support of those around me. But before I set off on my journey of discovery, I was given the chance to enjoy my childhood. My world was small, I didn't know the world beyond my close environment, just as the world didn't yet know me.

# Chapter 3

It was my birthday. I was turning six. The house slept but I was wide awake. From his eyes I could see that Tiger was wishing me a happy birthday. I lay waiting for the light in the hall to go on. After that the bathroom light would go on and Mum or Dad's head would poke around the door – and then my birthday would have begun for the rest of the world too. Or at least for the rest of this household. I couldn't wait. Whenever there was a birthday we were allowed to hang streamers and balloons. There was singing and candles to be blown out. Confetti floated through the air. I wished there was a birthday every day so that every day could be special, and every day could be filled with decorations.

The first light went on. The second light went on. The door opened. Dad's head came around the corner, harder to recognize than usual because his glasses were missing. 'Happy birthday to you...!' Dad was feeling enthusiastic too, that much was clear. Wide awake, I leapt from my bed and accompanied him. When it was your birthday you were fetched to join Mum and Dad in the big bedroom with the big soft bed they slept in. We were never allowed to get into that bed. You could either sit on the edge, or stay standing, but getting into the bed was not an option. Except when it was your birthday, then everything was different. You were allowed to get into bed, in the middle, the centre of attention. Mum on the right, Dad and the

left and the birthday boy safely between them. I enjoyed clambering over the blankets, the duvet, the pillows. It was like floating on an endless expanse of clouds.

My youngest brother had got up and come with us. He was just as happy as I was. He was secretly hoping for lots of toys so that we could play with them together after school. My other brothers had got up too and stood around the bed. The presents were at the foot end. Beautifully wrapped as usual, it was a serious business for my mother, as though the wrapped presents had a party to go to too. Some were wrapped in glittery paper, some had butterflies or flowers stuck to them, others were decorated with big bows. A gala of gifts. I recognized some of the wrapping paper and decorations – Mum liked to recycle paper and ribbons she thought were pretty.

Before I was allowed to unwrap the presents, they sang *happy birthday* to me with heartfelt conviction, even though no one could really sing. I looked at Dad, at Mum, it was my birthday. Today I could allow my imagination and thoughts free rein. Today everything was happy and cheerful. Today the sun would shine inside the house, and outside, even if the sun decided not to come out.

Among all the presents of all shapes and sizes, there was a small rectangular gift. Mum had gone to town on the decorations: it had glitter and plastic gems, a ribbon and a butterfly. She usually restricted herself to just one adornment but this one had them all, as though it was extra special. A gift that was extra important, first among equals.

I unwrapped it, excited but, above all, incredibly curious. What had Mum and Dad put inside this wrapping? My tiny fingers carefully tore open the paper. I couldn't wait but didn't hurry because I was enjoying the anticipation so much. A

sheet of cardboard was slowly revealed. When I turned it over, I saw what I had been given. I continued to look at it, without speaking. The present was wonderful.

It was a piece of cardboard with all kinds of plastic stick-on earrings and plastic rings. Silver, pink, with glitter and sparkles. Some of them were shaped like animals, like a seahorse or a starfish. Others were circles and squares. I was overjoyed, I held it up and glanced at my brothers. Look!

After unwrapping the presents, I got dressed as fast as I could. I wanted to return to my special gift. Clean as a whistle and wearing my best clothes, I picked up the sheet and went to the bathroom mirror. It was though I'd been waiting endlessly for this moment. I took the first set and stuck them to my earlobes. There they were. I could see my decorated self in the mirror, with two silver plastic earrings, as though they'd always belonged there. Now it was truly my birthday, both inside and out.

I went down to the first floor, ready for my birthday breakfast. Our dining table was a massive professional table-tennis table. We didn't know how our parents had come by it, but we'd been eating at it for years. It was gigantic, the six of us could easily sit around it. In the middle there was a carnival of candles. I sat down on my birthday throne.

After breakfast, my little brother and I were walked to school by our dad, each of us holding a hand. My father's hand was a gentle one, in which my own fingers were safely captured. It was a hand that brought me safely to school on days like this. He let go when we reached the playground. In the classroom I was allowed to sit on the high stool, it was like being at the top of a lighthouse, and they sang happy

birthday. Then I handed out treats; Mum had decorated a large basket with ribbons and filled it with chocolates.

The basket slowly emptied. I was allowed to take the remaining chocolates and a big birthday card with animals on it to the other teachers. In exchange for a chocolate, they'd write something nice on the card. It slowly became a roadmap of kind words, stickers and colourful drawings. I felt truly special on my special day.

In the break we played hide and seek. Some of the older boys seemed to be laughing, loudly. Some were even doubled over. What were they laughing at so hard? I wondered. It wasn't that strange to be playing hide and seek at our age, a game they clearly thought themselves too old for.

When I took a better look at them, I saw that they were pointing. They were pointing at us, my group of friends, at the children who had already been found. But when I looked even more carefully, I realized that they were all staring at me. Could they see it was my birthday? I didn't get it and studied my shoes. Had I forgotten to tie my laces? Maybe they thought I didn't have my shoelace badge yet. No, there was a lovely neat bow, like a kiss. I tried to figure out what could be so funny and looked at their fingers. They were pointing at me. I followed the fingers. Yes, I was right, they were pointing at me, but not just at me, they were pointing at my face. They pointed at my ears, as though there as something odd there, something abnormal, outrageous.



My fingers fumbled for my ears. I felt what they saw and knew immediately why they were laughing. The silver stick-on earrings. My silver earrings. I took them off immediately and hid them in my pocket.

After school, when we'd walked home with Dad, I immediately went up the two flights of stairs to my bedroom. I looked for the piece of cardboard among the other presents on my bed. I cut it up with a pair of scissors into the various pairs of earrings and put them one by one in sealed envelopes.

The next day I took the envelopes to school and handed them out to the girls in the classes above mine.

More and more things turned out to be wrong. When we were playing dressing up at friend's houses or at school, I wasn't supposed to pick the princess dress, even if the prince's costume was boring, not much more than a cape and a wooden sword. At least a dress had sequins and different fabrics, lace and colourful trimmings. Now that was pretty. But the older I got, the more people gave me funny looks when I wore something like that.

For years, my father had taken me to school in the most festive of outfits: princess dresses, a monkey suit, colourful, glittering crowns and hats on my head. It had never been a problem but slowly but surely it became something to be ashamed of. There were invisible laws that dictated what was normal and what wasn't. My parents had been able to protect me from them for a long time but now they couldn't. I was just like my classmates, maybe slightly more interested in cheerful things, but

apart from that the same. And still the princess dresses slowly disappeared from my life.

In the meantime, at primary school, I was unruly and bounced off the walls. Years later, when I ran into my teacher from the third year, Anneke, she said I'd been restless. Cheerful, but restless. And she'd figured out a way to keep that under control. She'd gone into the crafts section of a shop and bought some packets of sequins, fake gems and plastic diamonds. She'd brought them all to school and put a few in her drawer. 'You sat at the front of the class with your table against my desk. If you got too unruly or restless, I'd give you a stern look. Sometimes that would work and you'd calm down.'

I knew why. I was in love with her. I had written her love letters and given her presents. I'd even bought chocolates for her on Valentine's Day. I tried my hardest for her. She'd explained to me that it was impossible. I still had so much to learn and she already had a husband and children. She was much too old for me but she could be my teacher. 'My favourite teacher?' I'd asked. 'Yes!' she'd replied. I remember crying in the playground on the last day of that school year. I clutched at her leg. 'Don't worry, all your friends are going with you to the next class. You'll see them all after the summer holidays.' She didn't understand that this wasn't the reason I was crying. I was inconsolable because she wasn't coming with us to the fourth year.

'But it didn't always work,' Anneke continued, 'and that's why I had to invent new methods. Your parents and I had agreed we'd fill in a little book. You'd take it home every day from school and vice versa. I wrote what had happened at school, and then your parents would write how things were at home.' I can still remember standing at her desk on occasion, watching as she wrote. If I'd been too boisterous, it was recorded there. I would feel the joy flooding out of my body because when Dad read it, he'd tell me off. There would be no biscuits with my glass of squash when I got home. No TV that evening. Straight to my room. My whole day would be rainy and dark if Anneke wrote that I'd been trouble. Or that I'd picked a fight in the playground. Even before the school day was over, I'd know I had a problem. I'd spend the rest of the day attempting to put things right, but it never really worked. I might be able to turn something from the category *very, very naughty and wrong* into *very naughty and wrong*, but that didn't lighten the punishment at home.

Now I wanted to apologize to my teacher. 'Sorry,' I blurted out. Anneke looked at me. I saw her trying to figure out why I was apologizing. 'Sorry for all the trouble I made. I must have been a disaster to have had in your class.'

She began to smile, as only she could, showing her teeth to the world. I loved her smile, I still do. 'Oh no, sweetheart, don't be so silly!' Her words made me feel like that cheeky little boy again. Anneke had magicked me back to the third year, to the time when I thought I knew everything but turned out to know so incredibly little. The time when she taught me to write, when I learned to read, to sit still. And it was wonderful to be that small child again for a moment. Cut free from visible and

invisible rules, cut free from everything taught to me later. I suddenly felt like I was back in the classroom, with her in front of the class, having everything explained to me. I fell a little bit in love with her again.

‘No, dear! You were quite restless but I liked it. I really did! It was exuberance that made you restless, not naughtiness. I had to find ways of keeping you a little bit under control for the rest of the class, but I enjoyed it. I haven’t come across so much cheer in one person since!’ I couldn’t help blushing when she said that. ‘If you got a bit unruly and didn’t want to listen or wait until the other children in the class had finished their sums, I’d have you push your table to the wall. Past my desk, under the blackboard.’ I can still remember that. It was always alienating. You’d break off from the class and cross over into the teacher’s territory. You ended up behind them, without a view, staring at the white wall. I remember deliberately getting myself moved forward sometimes so that I was against the wall, while the teacher was explaining something. Then I’d very slowly turn around, slowly turn in my chair, away from the wall and into the eyes of all my classmates. But the class knew that the hilarity would be even greater if they continued to sit quietly and didn’t start laughing right away. Once I’d turned around completely, I’d begin to pull faces. Or I’d nod emphatically as the teacher explained something. I knew it would work, the children would laugh. Ultimately, I’d have to pay for it with a disappointed look from Anneke, but sometimes it was worth it.

‘But once you were sitting there, against the wall, it wasn’t always enough,’ my teacher continued. ‘One day I discovered that if you were sitting there and I gave you a plastic diamond to stick on the wall, or a glittery star, or a pink sticker,

anything you could stick on the wall, you could turn a lack of a view into a view and you'd become calm. The longer you stayed calm, the more gemstones, diamonds and stickers I gave you. It worked amazingly well. I could give you anything that glittered or shone and the restlessness would seep out of you and you'd focus on everything you'd stuck to the wall.'

I can still remember loving the things she give me, they were special and beautiful. I wanted to secretly take them home and stick them to my bedroom wall, or to Tiger. I'd even wanted to stick them to my skin because anything that glittered or shone made everything colourful and happy.

## Chapter 28

The summer holidays were over and I was on my way to bed. I'd just given Mum a kiss, after which she'd asked me whether everything was alright.

'Yes,' I'd replied before going upstairs. I climbed the second set of stairs and saw Dad sitting in his study. Words were raining from his keyboard.

'I'm off to bed, Dad.' He turned around. 'That's good, son. Sleep well.' He got up from his desk to give me a kiss.

'Is everything OK?' he, too, asked. I looked at him. It felt as though Mum and Dad had caught me doing something naughty. I was worried they might have found something on the computer. I hoped they'd still love me, whoever or whatever I was.

'I might be needing a few more hugs,' I said cautiously.

'No problem, son. Night, night. I love you.'