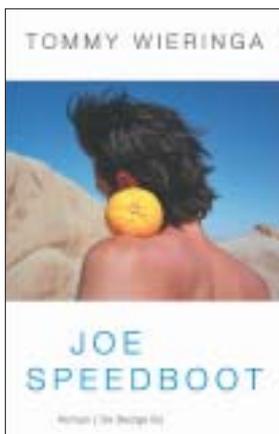


Phenomenally imaginative

Tommy Wieringa

Joe Speedboat



WITH HIS WHEELCHAIR-BOUND spastic narrator, Fransje Hermans, who can only speak in unintelligible grunts, Tommy Wieringa has succeeded in writing a dazzling novel whose every page sparkles with imagination, it is a splendid literary achievement. The story is driven by Joe Speedboat, friend and classmate of the narrator and, of course, his enterprising counterpart. A newcomer to the small community of Lomark, Joe Speedboat – a selfchosen name – continually startles the villagers out of their lethargy with his spectacular actions. Whether he's placing

bombs or building an aeroplane in order to spy on Mrs. Eilander, supposedly sunning herself in the nude in her back garden, Joe is a centrifugal force who manages to turn the immobile Fransje into a sportsman by having him participate in arm-wrestling contests.

'He wasn't so much a special guy as a force that was freed. You tingled expectantly in his presence – there was an energy that took form in his hands, in no particular order he conjured up bombs, race-mopeds, and aeroplanes, juggling them like a lighthearted magician. I had never met anyone for whom ideas led so naturally to action, on whom fear and convention had so little influence.' *Joe Speedboat* is also brilliant in showing the development of a close group of young people as they lose their innocence. A central role is reserved for Mrs. Eilander's daughter, the gorgeous PJ, who with her cascade of blond curls causes all the boys to lose their heads. They all fall in love with her, without realising who exactly they are dealing with. Fransje is the only one who does. A chaotic wedding party ensues which gets completely out of hand. It's Joe's doing. As the narrator Fransje says, all 'is show with him until the last minute.'

Joe Speedboat has everything that turns a novel into a unique experience: intriguing characters who come alive in a dazzling, tragic-comic story that is wonderfully told – Wieringa surprises the reader with beautiful images, striking descriptions, and magnificent details on every page. His imagination is phenomenal.



photo Roeland Fossen

In 1995 Tommy Wieringa (b. 1967) debuted with the novel *Domantique's manco*. His breakthrough came with *Alles over Tristan* ('All About Tristan', 2002), which was awarded the Halewijn prize and nominated for the AKO Literature Prize. Some critics believe that Wieringa stands an even better chance for this prize with *Joe Speedboat*. Wieringa publishes in *de Volkskrant*; he is also a columnist of *Spits* and writes travel reports for *Rails*, the Dutch railways magazine.

A book to fall in love with, right from the first page. It reminds one of the work of John Irving and Paul Auster. (...) With Joe Speedboat, Wieringa's authorship has reached full maturity. HET PAROOL

Wieringa has been admirably successful in making the world of these not-so-nice boys tangible. (...) He has an enormous sense of rhythm. His sentences never lose their intensity. It keeps on going, keeps on swinging. A cracker. TROUW

Joe Speedboat is the kind of book that you would prefer to finish in bed with a flashlight.

PASSIONATE



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An interview with Tommy Wieringa

‘Marquez in the polder’

by Hans Hoenjet

(*De Tijd*, June 10, 2005)

translated by Michiel Horn

Tommy Wieringa has scored a startling success with his novel *Joe Speedboat*, about a fantastic, bizarre world set in a Dutch river landscape.

‘I think there is a major affinity between a monk, a samurai and an author,’ novelist and columnist Tommy Wieringa (b. 1967) says in his renovated barn on the Vecht River. ‘All three are forms of self-chastisement and asceticism, a return to the holy core where silence reigns. They involve the same attempts at concentration. I see authorship in the same Spartan way.’ His overnight bag stands on the bench, still packed. Wieringa has just returned from a trip to Alexandria, in Egypt, where he is already doing research for his next book, in spite of the upheaval resulting from the astonishing success of his burlesque regional novel *Joe Speedboat*. The fifth printing has recently appeared, the film rights have been sold, and the German publishing firm Hansen has signed a contract for a translation.

Tommy Wieringa grew up partly in the tropics, partly in the Netherlands. At age two he left with his parents for Aruba, where his father had obtained a position teaching English and biology. Seven years later he returned by airplane in a plaster corset, because he and his bicycle had ended up under a Toyota. ‘We went to live in a new suburb in Oldenzaal, and after that in a farm in Geesteren,’ he said. ‘What a drama! My mother sent me to the Steiner Free School in Zutphen, because they had courses in woodworking and art appreciation. Those are clearly strong points in favour of a school like that, but the hidden agenda was distinctly racist. Blacks were thought to be good dancers because they are so midriff-oriented, so physical, and Westerners were thought to excel in reflection and scientific pursuits. It was a race theory in which the usefulness and value of races were deduced from just a few biological characteristics.

Rebelling against the Steiner ideology, Tommy was expelled from the Free School when he was seventeen. He completed his secondary education in Drenthe, and then studied history at Groningen University. Wieringa: ‘After five years I dropped it, because I found I had begun that course of study for the wrong reason. I was always fascinated by names like Stavanger, Isfahan, Nineveh, Dar es Salaam and Alexandria, because they unlocked worlds within my imagination.’ In the end he received a diploma from the School for Journalism in

Utrecht and turned to writing travel stories and columns for publications like *Rails*, *Spits*, and the *Volkskrant* weekly magazine.

He made his debut as a novelist by publishing *Dormantique's manco* and *Amok* with In de Knipscheer publishers. This autobiographical would have little resonance. 'There was a lot of unresolved anger about being uprooted in these books,' he says. 'The Free School, Aruba ..., the fault lines in my existence had to be sealed up.' Unhappy with his lack of success, he moved over to De Bezige Bij, where he tried another tack. Moreover, there he had the support of a well-oiled publicity machine. The tightly composed novel *All about Tristan* – about a biographer's Borges-like inquiry into the enigmatic life of a poet who shows a strong resemblance to Rimbaud – at once brought him the Halewijn Prize and a spot on the long list for the AKO Literature Prize. But he remained unknown to most of the reading public.

His real breakthrough finally came this spring with *Joe Speedboat*. All the way to Flanders, the reviews were wildly enthusiastic about this bold, poetic novel about a village near the Dutch-German border, somewhere in the area of the great rivers, where an asphalt factory, the local middle class and the Catholic church are the signposts in a world that has begun to drift. The protagonist is Frankie, a scrap metal dealer's son, who is run over by a rotary mower and ends up in a wheelchair as 'half human, half machine'. He is the silent chronicler of village life and fills notebooks with the good and ill fortune of the inhabitants.

'Marquez in the polder,' he concurs with a laugh when I point out to him the similarities between the Colombian Nobel Prize winner's mythical Macondo and his own enchanting Lomark, where the redeemer-like Joe Speedboat – who keeps his real name a deep secret – shakes the village up with a lot of noisy doings. He makes an airworthy airplane out of scrounged parts, trains Frankie for the arm-wrestling championships in Liege and Rostock, and takes part in the Paris-Dakar race in a souped-up shovel capable of doing 120 km/h. It is a novel that teems with striking images, sparkles with pleasure in telling stories. Wieringa excels in apt metaphors, gripping dialogue and poetic sentences.

'At first I had my doubts and wondered whether the reader would be able to identify with an immobile observer like the disabled Frankie,' he says. 'But it turned out to be easy for me, and to my pleasant surprise for others as well. Everyone knows that feeling of being closed off, taking part yet not taking part, the moment at parties when you feel miles away from others. That idea has become literal in Frankie, he has been sentenced to it.'

Joe Speedboat takes place in the area of the great rivers, in a village peopled by rough, earthy beings, not the loutish figures we know from the classic regional novels, but people whose feet are rooted in the clay and who live with their heads in the clouds. Precisely because the adventures of his characters are so fantastic and bizarre, the author has taken great care that all the technical descriptions in his book are accurate and can be verified. For example, he visited the artist Joost

Conijn to consult him about the construction of an airplane, and he obtained information from a Swedish expert about the production of paper briquets.

Wieringa: 'I am not an academic writer and enjoy exploring the territory, spade in hand, as it were. When I heard from Joost Conijn that triangular construction is the airplane's basic principle, I was able to use that splendid coincidence. Reality is so much more mysterious, surprising and incomprehensible than anything you can think up, that I would shortchange my own work were I to rely on my imagination alone.'

Full of excitement, he talks about the asphalt-production process and the sample drilling that is carried out before a road is taken into use. 'Yes, and you really can soup up a shovel to 120 km/h, I did research on that,' he says. 'When you create a fantastic world, the work of fiction should not collapse because the facts are wrong. I am completely untechnical, for me it's like making up for what I missed in my childhood. I had a childhood more typical of a girl, complete with locked diaries and burning incense. As a boy I was a little animist, it has taken me until now to open my chemistry set.'

Coincidence plays an important role in Joe Speedboat's universe. One of Frankie's friends loses his life because a dog falls on him. The novel is crowded with various absurd events of this kind. 'I experience existence as an insane number of coincidences,' he says. 'And they are all meaningful. I read last week on the Internet that in Russia a lake had suddenly disappeared. Fantastic! People leave their homes and want to go fishing, and there is nothing left but a muddy bottom. I want to do justice to that rich variety, the kind of absurdities that occur in everyone's life.'

Compared with his previous book, this mischievous Bildungsroman is cheeky, frank and vital, the book of someone who has finally dared to open the floodgates of his imagination. For a long time Wieringa had strict convictions about literature in the manner of W.F. Hermans; even a sparrow's fall had to have consequences.

'I've removed all signposts, commands and prohibitions from my system, but I needed the discipline of *All About Tristan* to be able to manage that. Finally I dared to allow coincidence to enter. But okay, to become a good dancer you must first master all kinds of styles and techniques.'

He also had the daring to choose an imaginary village on the river as the scene for a present-day novel. In Wieringa's view, much of Dutch literature takes place in predictable settings that have been reproduced as carefully as possible.

'There's no adventure in that. My own life, too, needs to be as adventurous as possible. I want to explore the spaces of existence and literature. How in God's name do you give form to that freedom? In an interview about his two-volume book *Spheres*, Peter Sloterdijk wondered how we can construct a worthwhile existence among all these insane Christian guilt complexes. How can you be rich

in Alexandria, surrounded by poor people, knowing that you are blessed with a passport and a Visa card?’

Although you wouldn’t think so based on the rushingly written *Joe Speedboat*, Wieringa is a slow, reflective writer. He doesn’t work with flip charts or plot schemes, the manuscript has to grow organically. ‘I try to realise a mirage. At the outset all I’ve got is a sense of the course the book should take, and a few elements that can become fruitful. It takes time to start believing in a book yourself.’ Sometimes he gets stuck for long periods of time and gets into a panic, but then his intuition and self-confidence save him.

Critics like Pieter Steinz suspect that John Irving is his great model, but Wieringa begs to differ. Books about mythology, travel stories by Kapuscinski, novels by American regional writers such as John Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell, war reporting – these he reads gladly. But Irving as model? He simply hammers a good story together. That’s not Wieringa’s way: for him the language has to sing.

In the meantime he also realises that there is a lot of competition in the literary market. Representatives of De Bezige Bij who took to the road with his novel were initially able to register orders for no more than 457 copies. Via e-mails, he urged friends to ask book dealers if they would include *Joe Speedboat* in their stock. ‘Book dealers have to choose from among fifteen, sixteen hundred literary titles every year. How do you hack your way through that forest of special offers? There is a tendency to opt for the big names, for safety. The business of literature is demonic. Too many books are produced.’

He is well aware of the limited shelf life of literary fame. Nowadays he is constantly being invited for readings, interviews and other events. ‘Applause is deadly. If this had happened to me when I was 25, I would have become a sort of Sid Vicious and would have wrecked hotel rooms, then I wouldn’t have known what to do with all that energy. Everything in its own time. You can’t think that other people’s judgment really matters. If you start to believe in that... Identifying with what other people say about my work is a shaky foundation. That doesn’t alter the fact that I’ll be nervous when my collection of travel stories appears next year.’

Sample translation from

Joe Speedboat by Tommy Wieringa
(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005)

Translated by Michiel Horn

It is said that the samurai
has a twofold Way,
the pencil brush and the sword
– Miyamoto Musashi

Pencil brush

1

It's a warm spring, in my class at school they're praying for me because I've been in a coma for more than two hundred days. I've got bed sores all over my body and a condom catheter on my prick. This is the coma vigil state, the doctor explains to my parents: I've regained a limited responsiveness to my environment. It's a good thing, he says, that I am once again reacting to stimuli of pain and sound. Reacting to pain is unmistakably a sign of life.

They hang about my bed interminably, Dad, Mum, Dirk and Sam. I hear them as soon as they get out of the lift – a flock of sparrows that darkens the sky. They smell of oil and cheap tobacco, they've barely gone to the trouble of taking off their overalls. Hermans & Sons, for all your wrecking jobs. The lead-and-old-iron family. We take apart wrecked cars, factory machinery, industrial equipment, and the occasional pub interior when my brother Dirk gets into a tantrum. In Lomark he is banned almost everywhere, but he can still get into places in Westerveld. He's messing around with a girl over there. When he gets home he smells of synthetic violets. You've got to feel sorry for a bird like that.

Mostly they talk about the weather, the old refrain, business is slow and that's because of the weather, doesn't matter what kind of weather it is. Then they curse, first Dad, then Dirk and Sam. Dirk clears his nose and now he's got a gob of phlegm in his mouth. He doesn't know what to do with it, so he has to swallow it – and yes, there it goes.

But recently more is happening in Lomark than the weather. Since I went out of commission for a while, the Maandag family's step-gabled house has been wrecked by a removal van, and everybody gets scared witless every once in a while because of some huge explosion somewhere. These developments seem to have something to do with a boy named Joe Speedboat. He's newly arrived in Lomark, I haven't seen him yet.

I prick up my ears when they're talking about Joe Speedboat – he sounds like a winner if you ask me, but nobody asks me anything. They're sure that Speedboat is making the bombs. Not that they've ever caught him making one of those things, but before he came there were never any explosions in Lomark and now suddenly there are. For that reason. They're really pissed off about it, that I can tell you. Sometimes Mum says 'do be quiet, our Frankie may hear it', but they don't pay any attention.

– A quick smoke, Dad says.

That's not allowed in here.

– Is he really called Speedboat? asks Sam, who is two years older than me.

I don't have much to worry about from Sam.

– Nobody has Speedboat for a last name, says Dirk. With his big mouth. Dirk, the oldest. A bastard. I can tell you stories about him.

– Oh, that boy has just lost his dad, Mum says. Can't you let him be?

Dirk snorts.

– Speedboat ... retarded ...

It actually gives me an itch, the kind it would feel good to scratch. Joe Speedboat, what a gas.

Weeks later, the world and I are on our backs, breathless, the world because of the heat and I because of unhappiness. And Mum is crying. With happiness for once.

– Oh, you're back, my little man, you're back!

Every day she has lit a candle for me and she really thinks it has helped. In my class they think they did the trick with their prayers. Even that two-faced Quincy Hansen went along, like I ever would have wanted to turn up in *his* prayers. Not that I'm allowed out of bed, or even to go home. Wouldn't even be possible. They still have to do tests on my spine, because the way things are now, I can only move my right arm.

– That's just enough to jack off, says Dirk.

For now I can also forget about talking.

– There's never much came out of it anyway, says Sam.

He looks whether Dirk will laugh at that, but *he* laughs only at his own jokes.

He might as well, because no one else will.

– Boys! my mother says warningly.

This is how matters stand: me, Frankie Hermans, just one functioning arm with forty kilos of immovable flesh attached. I've been in better shape. But Mum's ecstatic; she would have been grateful for just one ear – provided it was listening, natch.

I've got to get out of here as soon as possible. They're driving me crazy with all that hanging about my bed and that nattering about business and the weather. Did I ask for it? Well then.

2

I've become a year older while I was sleeping, they celebrated my birthday in hospital. Mum tells me about the cake with fourteen candles that they ate at my bedside. My sleep lasted about 220 days, and with the start of my rehabilitation added to that it's been about ten months by the time I'm allowed to go home.

It's the middle of June. The miracle of my resurrection – as Mum stubbornly calls it – exerts great pressure on family life. I've got to be fed, cleaned and moved. Thank you one and all, but I can't get even those words out.

One day my brothers take me along to the fair, because Mum insists on it. Sam is pushing the wheelchair, the air outdoors embraces me like an old friend. The world looks like it has changed during my absence. It looks washed clean, like the Pope is coming to visit or something.

Sam pushes me hastily along the streets, he doesn't want us to be held up by people asking questions about me. I hear the summer fair. The screaming, the rapid patter of the barkers, the clang of the gongs when you hit the target – the sound says it all. It says hurray for the fair.

Dirk is walking a piece ahead of us. His back shows shame. He goes into Zonstraat, past De Zon café, Sam and me following him. The fair recedes, I still hear only the peaks and valleys of the sound. So not to the fair. I turn my head to look at Sam, who is rushing me along the streets at race speed. We reach the outskirts of the village, at Hoving's old farm. There we stop. Dirk has already gone through the garden gate. I haven't been here for a long time.

– Help me for a minute! Sam shouts.

The vehicle's tyres won't pass through the tall grass, mixed with sorrel and poppies. Dirk helps and together they tug the wheelchair through the garden of Rinus Hoving, who's dead. His farm is unoccupied and as long as the heirs continue to quarrel about its disposition nothing will be done with it. They lift me into the house through the back door. The red tiles are covered with a carpet of dust. I see footprints. They push me through the kitchen, along the corridor

into the large living room, and they park me behind the sliding glass doors of the spare room.

– Put him by the window, Dirk says. Then he'll have something to look at.

– Put him by the window yourself.

Sam begins to have doubts. Not Dirk. He never doubts, he's too stupid for that.

– We really can't do this, Sam says.

– He's got only himself to blame. No way I'm getting into the Hully Gully ride with him even if she thinks so.

She, that's Mum. Not that Dirk has any respect for her position, but she has a mighty instrument at her disposal, Dad's hand. Sam's face comes into focus.

– We'll be right back, Frankie, in an hour maybe.

Then they're gone.

This is unreal, dumped like a bunch of firewood in a condemned house. Just so you know what to expect from them. I already thought as much, I was simply waiting for the facts. Facts are not as bad as suspicions. The fact is that I've come to a complete stop in a dark house that is breathing on my neck. And that my view is a windowsill covered with dead bluebottles, spiders' webs, and dust. My fears are on high alert, you can't fool them, they're wide awake. And there they are, all at the same time they are screaming like nobody's business. Wild animals! Pedophiles! Things! In a word, panic. But for how long can you keep being afraid when nothing happens? Slowly it becomes an uncomfortable feeling, and then if there is still nothing happening you laugh at yourself. But there *was* a sound! I swear there was, a door that slammed shut, something that fell ... I turn my head, which takes so much effort that I'm groaning like a retard. Like having to uproot a tree with your forehead. *There*, in the doorway ...

– Hello, says the shape who's standing there.

A boy's voice. I look into the light coming from the kitchen, and see only his silhouette against the doorway. He comes towards me. A boy, just a boy thank God. He stands before me and observes me unabashedly. His glance slides along

the footrests that my feet have been jammed into, the blue seat – genuine leatherette, sir –, the silver-coloured tubes and on the right-hand side, the steering lever with the wooden handle you can use to turn the front wheels and to apply muscle power to the rear wheels, so that you can propel yourself forward in this thing. Bought to grow into, you could say. But a nifty set of wheels, always been stored indoors, you know the story. They say that someday I'll be able to get around in it by myself, but the way things are now, I can't even get a fly off my forehead.

– Hello, the boy says again. Can't you speak?

A brown head of hair and clear eyes. A pudding-bowl hair cut. He turns and looks out the window. Hoving's garden: clumps of red clover, nettles, and the poppies that love to be looked at but are so insulted when you pick them that they wither on the spot.

– They parked you here, eh? the boy says with his gaze fixed on Lomark.

The highest seats of the big wheel appear above the houses. He nods.

– I've heard about you. You're one of the Hermans clan, who own the wrecking shop. They say the Virgin Mary worked a miracle in your case. I see little sign of it, if you don't mind me saying so. If this is a miracle, what does punishment look like?

He nods like he agrees with himself.

– My name's Joe, he says then, Joe Speedboat. I've just come to live here. We live on the Achterom, you know the place?

Wide hands, short fingers. Wide feet too, on which he stands like a samurai, about which I happen to know the odd thing, the samurai. About the *seppuku*, the way of dying to save your honour, in which you stick a short sword into your belly and cut it open from bottom left to top right. From the length of the cut you can see how brave someone was. But that was not the topic.

I can see what pisses Dirk off, it radiates from Joe like light: he's not afraid. Joe Speedboat, bomber, walking wake-up call – with your cutoffs and your crazy old leather sandals. Where have you been all this time?

– I just have to go get something, he says.

He disappears from my field of vision and I hear him go upstairs somewhere in the house, followed by footsteps overhead. Has he got his workshop up there? For those bombs and such? Speedboat's control room? When he comes down again, he's got a washing machine dial and two Eveready 9-volt batteries in his hands. He sits down on the windowsill and with furrowed brow connects the battery terminals. Then he attaches a trigger to the dial and sets the dial to zero. Suddenly he looks up.

– We had bad luck when we were moving, he says earnestly. An accident. That's when my father got killed.

Then he bends over his work again.

The first time Lomark heard about Joe and his family was when that Scania drove into the monumental step-gabled facade of the Maandag family home on Brugstraat. Buried almost to the back end in the front room, where son Christof was sitting in front of the telly with a video game. When it happened, he didn't move from the spot. After a while, the first thing he saw was a headlight that stabbed through the cloud of dust and rubble like an angry eye. Only gradually did he realise that a lorry was standing there in his house. All that time you heard nothing except the poing-poing of the little ball that was bouncing around on the screen.

A man's upper body was draped over the grille of the Scania. His arms hung down limply, a scarecrow fallen from the heavens. His lower body was still in the cabin and he was dead, that much was clear. But there was still life up there; the right-hand door swung open slowly and Chris saw a boy of about twelve or thirteen climb down. He wore a gold-coloured shirt, plus fours, and sandals on his feet. His appearance suggested that his parents weren't all there, and he looked around the room unmoved while white plaster settled on his head and shoulders.

– Hello, Christof said, the joystick still in his hand.

The other boy shook his head like he was thinking something odd.

– Who are you? Christof had asked.

– My name's Joe, the boy said, Joe Speedboat.

And so, like a meteorite, he came into our village, where we have a river that floods in the winter, an established grapevine along which rumours are spread, and a cock in the village coat of arms, the cock who a thousand years ago or thereabouts chased a band of Vikings away from the gates of Lomark while our forefathers were in church, *praying*, for God's sake. 'It was the cock who showed pluck,' we say around here. Something that keeps out something else, that's our symbol. But Joe came sailing in with such violence that nothing could have resisted him.

The accident made him into half an orphan, because the man draped over the shattered windshield of the lorry was his father. His mother lay unconscious in the cabin, his younger sister India was looking at the soles of her father's shoes. Christof and Joe looked at each other like beings from different galaxies – Joe stranded with his space ship and Christof extending his hand to make the first contact. Here was something that would free him from the oppressive immobility of the village, where the cock was the only one to show pluck, that hateful bird you encountered everywhere, on the doors of the fire engines, on the gable of the town hall, and in bronze on the market square. The cock was carted around town in carnival parades, it crowed at you from decorative tiles next to dozens of front doors, and was incarnated at the cake shop as 'cockie', a bloody awful cake, sandy and covered with flakes of muesli. On dressers, mantelpieces and window sills you saw glass cocks, ceramic cocks and stained-glass cocks; oil paintings of cocks hung on the walls. Where that cock is concerned, our creativity knows no bounds.

Joe feasted his eyes in the house where fate (read: a steering error combined with a speed exceeding the maximum permitted in town) had catapulted him. In his house, the old place they had left for the one in Lomark, there were no oil

paintings on the wall, with grave faces that looked at you like you had swiped something. And since you had always swiped something or other, those faces would always look that way, so you didn't need to be afraid of them, but really should nod at them in a friendly way and say 'come on, boys, try smiling for once'.

He also thought the chandelier was beautiful, just like the antique drinks cart that carried Egon Maandag's crystal decanters, filled with single malt whiskies from Loch Lomond to Talisker. At Joe's they only had bulbous bottles of elderberry wine, deep purple and homemade, with water seals that rumbled like a gastric patient. That wine was always either not quite ready yet or just beyond it. 'It *is* an unusual flavour, don't you agree, dear?' (His mother to his father, never the other way around.) After that they drank manfully, only to flush the rotgut through the toilet a day later, because their hangovers were more like the near-death experiences of Russian meths drinkers than anything else.

Joe heard later that he had landed in the drawing room of the Maandag clan, the most important family in Lomark, the owners of the asphalt factory down by the river. Egon Maandag had twenty-five men working for him in the plant, as well as a domestic servant and sometimes an au pair, always from a different foreign country.

And Joe kept looking around.

Christof later said he looked around that way so as not have to see the dead man hanging over the windshield. When he took his eyes off Christof and his surroundings, he finally looked back at his father. He stretched out his hand and laid it on the back of the bleeding head. Very carefully he caressed his hair and said something that Christof didn't understand, he shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the hole that the lorry had made in the wall. He climbed over the rubble, out into the sun. He walked down Brugstraat to the winter dyke, climbed over it and walked towards the river. Nervous heifers were grazing in the forelands; clumps of dry grass that resembled the flaxen beards of Vikings hung from the barbed wire, left over after the winter's floods. Joe reached the summer

dyke and the ferry beyond. On the ferry he sat down by the railing, hung his legs overboard and did not look up when Piet Honing emerged from the wheelhouse to collect money for the crossing.

That Joe became friends with Christof was just as inevitable as fish on Friday. It began with that gaze of Christof's. He looked *greedily* at the white-dusted boy from the moving van. Behind Joe, daylight passed through the pulverised outer wall into the drawing room and filled the space with a zooming spring day. Christof had never seen anything like that. The image of the boy in that flood of light filled him with the desire to throw off his old life. But that wasn't the way Christof was, and he would never be that way. He was too nervous for that and much too hesitant. In his wish to be just like the boy in the lorry, there was something of that kind of envy that makes your teeth ache and gives you the vampire-like inclination to suck the life out of somebody.

The moving-van accident formed them. It reinforced the stoic in Joe and called up something elderly in Christof, something anxious. If Joe wanted to build an airplane, Christof would say: 'Shouldn't you repair your luggage rack first?' If Joe knocked together some apparatus he could use to replace the Sunday radio broadcasts of the Evangelical Community – 'Radio God' as it was popularly known – with speed metal played backwards, and at that very moment, by coincidence, the monthly test of the civil defence alarm on the roof of the Rabobank building sounded, for Christof this was a sign that jamming radio signals was an ill-omened enterprise. For Joe it meant it was noon and he was hungry.

*

Joe is celebrating our meeting with a prize bomb, that's the way I see it. That very same night after we met in Hoving's farmhouse: all of Lomark sits straight up in bed. It's a beauty. Dogs bark; the lights go on in some houses but not in

most, and people gather in little groups out in the street. Joe's name is on everybody's lips. Lying in my bed, I smirk like crazy.

A few men go to check things out. He has blown up a transformer station. The fair is without juice now, and so are quite a few houses.

The moon is licking the bars of my bed. I exercise my arm.

3

I can move again. Hard to believe, but with that wheelchair I can go straight ahead and I can turn. I move it by pulling on the lever and pushing it away from me. ATMP: Ahead Through Muscle Power. Otherwise I'm as spastic as anything, sometimes things fly through the air when I try to get hold of them, but in the interval between muscle spasms I can manage the odd thing. I've got to exercise a lot. I've been going to school for a month now, because there's nothing wrong with my head, even though I still can't talk. I had to start where I had left off, third form in the secondary school, so I'm now in the same class as Joe and Christof.

Braking is the hardest part, especially when I go down from the dyke to the forelands along the Lange Nek, that goes much too fast. The Everything's-Going-to-Hell-Men on the dyke look at me. They're almost always seated on their bench, bicycles parked in the rack next to it. They see everything, these stiff old market gardeners, most of whom went through the Second World War. I don't return their gaze, I don't like them.

Fire fighters are taking on water from the Gat van Betlehem, the asphalt plant's sandpit. The men wear dark overalls and white T-shirts, heavy arms protruding from them. Even over here I can hear them laugh about fire-fighters' jokes, because sound carries well over water. One of the fire fighters sees me and waves. Retard.

Above my head the poplars are rustling, in the meadow to the right of the Lange Nek about ten dwarf horses are wandering about in the tall grass. They're drinking green water from a bathtub near the barbed wire. I think they may belong to Wet Rinus. He's been fined for animal neglect more than once.

Then there's Bethlehem Asphalt, Egon Maandag's factory. Mining shovels take bites out of the hills of rocks scattered on the property. In the evening the plant can be seen from far away as an orange air bubble, when a lot of maintenance is carried out on the roads the work goes on around the clock.

Bethlehem Asphalt is the cork that Lomark floats on, they say, and every family gives the factory its first-born son.

I'm soaking with sweat and my arm is aching, but now I'm almost at the river. I can already see the two large willows on the other side, and the ferry halfway. Piet Honing always says: 'The ferry is a continuation of the road by other means', and that is meant as a joke. Ever since I stopped being able to walk, I've been allowed on free of charge. That's got something to do with me knowing death as well as life, Piet said once, but he hasn't explained how that is exactly. After that first time, he hasn't asked Joe for a single penny either.

Piet reaches the other side, the bow door ramp scrapes along the concrete of the terminal. In the middle of the river a cruise ship floats downstream, you can hear the music and the tinkling of the glasses from here. The guests lean elegantly against the railing. Can you be envious of the smooth way a river boat floats? Two foaming little waves rise at the bow, like they were painted on it. Upstream is Germany, where the hills are, with hot air balloons above them. Hot air balloons are okay. Everybody thinks so. By the way, did you know that those funny things that float in and out of view if you stare at something are bits of albumen on your eyeballs?

Piet drops the barrier, pulls up the ramp and tugs at the throttle lever. He leaves the shore and the whole sad affair bobs over this way. The threadbare Total flags ripple in the breeze. Piet raises his hand because he knows that I'm watching.

Behind the hills and the hot air balloons, it is getting dark. The cruise ship has disappeared around the bend, going God knows where. It seems like those ships are always floating downstream and the ones carrying freight always go in the other direction, towards Germany, chugging laboriously against the current.

Piet moors the ferry, comes ashore, he says: 'So, lad...' He takes my wheelchair by the handles and pushes me on to the ferry. I don't like being pushed, but let that go. He puts me next to a sign advertising a special sale of road salt and brooms.

The evening rolls up the day like a newspaper. I smell oil and water. We pitch our way to the other side where a car is flashing its lights. Darkness falls from the willow branches on the cows lying under them. Cows are idiotic, they always stand there kind of dreaming about nothing. No, give me horses, when they're standing still it looks like they're at least thinking about something, really thinking profoundly about some horse problem, while cows look at us the way the heavens do: big and black and empty.

Some people are deathly afraid on this little ferry, the way it pitches and lurches. Water sometimes washes over the deck, but you mustn't let that worry you. It's just that it's been in use ever since 1928 and was actually built for a calm canal and not for a river with all its quirks. Dad says: 'That thing is a menace to public health. It should have gone to Hermans and Sons long ago.' Like he gives a damn about public health if it doesn't bring him any profit. But Piet keeps his ship in service no matter what the cost, even if it's little more than a wheelhouse with a metal plate you can barely fit six cars on.

If you ask him, Piet will explain that it's a cable ferry that was motorised when the inland ships became ever faster; it became too dangerous to cross the river using only the current. Because that's what a cable ferry does. It's attached to three old sloops, the anchor points, that are moored upstream. The last of them is firmly attached to the bottom with an enormous anchor. The ferry is attached to the end of that sling. The ferry swings over the water, like the metal pine cone that forms the end of a pendulum. When you take in one winch and let the other go, the current looks after getting the thing to the other side, but these days Piet also uses the engine, because otherwise he'll get plowed under by one of those inland shipping monsters. Sometimes Piet suffers damage when ships go over the cables between the anchor points. Then he can't sail for a day because of repairs.

He comes out of the wheelhouse.

– A beautiful evening, lad.

A gush of drool spills from my mouth as I look up at him. I've got litres of that stuff. I could keep goldfish in it. An inland freighter heads our way, loaded with big piles of sand.

– We ought to fix things up a bit, Piet sighs. Just like in the old days, we used to have a smart waiting room, you could get coffee and a piece of cake while you were waiting. They stood around the stove when it was cold, waiting until I was there. But the bridge and highway made a quick end to that. And look at it now. But just wait until the highways are packed, then we'll be able to show them who's got the fastest connection here.

He's been a bit mournful recently. The inland freighter passes by. The hatches are open, mountains of sand tower from the hold, like serrations on a dragon's back. A floating hill landscape bound for Germany. No wonder this country is so flat when you export the hills.

In the sky I see *one* cloud in the form of a shoe. Who's there, I ask myself. Who is there? Do you understand?

4

Joe told no one his real name, not even Christof who had become his best friend. That his last name was really Ratzinger we knew, but his given name was a secret.

Normally, when you're given a name you don't know any better, that's what your name is and you don't go whining about it. You've got nothing to say about it, you are your name, your name is you, together you're one, after your death your name lives on for a bit in the heads of a few people, fades on your tombstone and that was that. But Joe was unhappy about it. We're talking now about the time before he lived in Lomark. He knew that with his real name he would never be able to become what he wanted to be. With a name like that you could never be anyone else. You might as well have a disease that you couldn't go out of the house with. It was a mistake, he was born into the wrong name. He was about ten years old when he decided that he would get rid of that name, a name like a clubfoot. He would be called Speedboat. How he hit on that he didn't know, but Speedboat fit him to a T. He didn't have a first name yet but that didn't bother him, that would come automatically, as long as he already had the last name.

He didn't have to wait long for his first name. One day as he walked past a scaffold, with one of those long, wide chutes through which they throw rubble into a container, Joe – who at that moment didn't have that name yet – got dust in his eyes and stopped to rub them. A radio covered in dust and paint splatters stood on the scaffold, and at that moment his first name emerged from it. As happy as a kid recognizing his mother in a crowd, he first heard the sound of his name on that radio: Joe. In the song 'Hey Joe' by Jimi Hendrix: 'Hey Joe, where you goin' with that gun in your hand / Hey Joe, I said where ya goin' with that gun in your hand / I'm goin' down to shoot my old lady now / You know I caught her messin' 'round with another man.'

Joe. Joe Speedboat. With a name like that you could face the world.

Joe found his destiny in the small front garden of the house on the Achterom. It was early in the spring, after their first winter in Lomark. I was still recovering in the hospital at the time, Joe was raking dead leaves into piles; bright, cold light spilled over the decayed remains of the seasons. From under the leaves emerged brownish yellow grass and transparent snail shells. From the direction of Westerveld came a sound – of something that was tearing, something that hurt. It came in waves that quickly increased in size. A young poplar tree rustled nervously. Joe clutched the rake to his chest and stood waiting in the classic resting pose of parks employees.

Then he saw them: seven gleaming Opel Mantas, black as the night, with tailpipes that belched fire and smoke. At the wheels sat testosterone-charged young men with inbred faces. Cigarette smoke drifted out of the open windows, they rested their left arms loosely on the doors, and Joe looked in amazement at the procession that went past like a slow-moving thunderstorm. He dropped the rake and clapped his hands over his ears. The tailpipes gleamed like trumpets, the world seemed to be seared by the all-consuming din when the lads stepped on the accelerator with the clutch disengaged, just to let everybody know that they existed, so that no one could doubt it, because whatever does not reverberate does not exist.

It was Joe's first lesson in kinetics, in the beauty of motion, powered by the internal combustion engine.

The parade left a bubble of silence behind, and in that silence Joe heard his mother's voice through the open window: 'Arseholes!'

Regina Ratzinger (whoever called her 'Mrs Speedboat' by mistake was amicably but unmistakably set straight) wore out her back in the morning as housekeeper to the Tabak family and gave herself elbow tendinitis in the afternoon trying to supply the entire village with knitted sweaters. These sweaters were of exceptional quality, a fact that ultimately turned against her, because since the

sweaters turned out to be indestructible, when the saturation point was reached she hardly sold any more. People explained the momentary success of her sweaters in part by the striking representations of cocks that she conjured on to the fronts of the sweaters with fine yarn.

The house was full of baskets of wool, which attracted moths. Moth traps hung at strategic locations, sticky pieces of cardboard smelling of moth sex. Sometimes you heard Regina Ratzinger yell: ‘Moth! Moth!’, followed by a loud slap, India who said: ‘Ah, how sad,’ and Joe who chuckled.

It drove Christof crazy that he didn’t know Joe’s real name. One day he went to Regina Ratzinger.

– Mrs Speed... sorry, Mrs Ratzinger, what is Joe’s *real* name?

– I’m not allowed to say that, Christof.

– But *why* not? I won’t tell anyone else...

– Because Joe doesn’t want it. He thinks everyone should have one secret in his life, no matter how big or how small. Sorry, Stuffy, I can’t help you.

Christof was named after his grandfather, who was depicted on one of the paintings in the house on Brugstraat; immortalised against a background of classical ruins, he looked out on the drawing room that had been destroyed by the lorry. When Regina called him ‘Stuffy’, Christof decided he would be called Johnny, Johnny Maandag. And that was absolutely a good name, at least if you didn’t know that he was really called Christof and had changed his name to copy Joe Speedboat.

That name never went anywhere. Only Joe used it for a while, no one else did.

During the holidays Christof stayed almost uninterruptedly at Joe’s place, where far more things were allowed. They always rode together on one bicycle, Christof standing on the rear carrier of Joe’s bike, straight up like some Korean circus performer, on the way to Spar supermarket for a bottle of pop or the Phoenix Snack Bar for some chips. One day they came by the damaged house on Brugstraat, which was shielded by scaffolding and plastic sheets. The house was being restored to be sold afterwards because Egon Maandag said he wouldn’t be

able to have a single restful night there after the accident with the lorry. He was having a villa built for him on a heightened piece of land outside Lomark, so that he would keep dry even when the water rose. This time he emerged from the front door through the plastic and looked in amazement at his son, who was standing on the rear carrier.

– Hi, Christof said.

– Hello Christof, said his father, and those were, I believe the only words they exchanged that summer.

Joe and Christof ate chips often. The girl in Phoenix Snack Bar had a pretty face and was very tubby.

– What'll it be today, gentlemen?

– One extra large chips with the works, and two forks, said Christof. And would you happen to know why this place is called Phoenix?

The girl shook her head.

– It's a mythical bird that rises from its own ashes, said Christof. Rather odd that you don't know that.

– Oh, sorry, the girl said.

She looked around with interest as if she saw something that hadn't been there before.

– Was it last seen here or something, she then asked, that the place has this name?

– Yes, Joe said earnestly, it had its nest right here.

Chips were cooking in the oil, in the window a bluebottle was mourning the last of its days. The girl lifted the chips from the oil and shook them dry, while Joe and Christof stared at her mighty rear end, shaking in rhythmic accompaniment. There was something enticing to it. She sprinkled salt on the chips and tossed them, then added diced onions, mayonnaise and satay sauce. Joe and Christof took careful notice of her phenomenal hams.

– One chips with the works for Mr Christof, she said.

– His name is Johnny, said Joe. Can I have more mayonnaise?

5

Because of the accident I've lost a year, and now I'm in the third form with students I hardly know. It's true that I'm the oldest, but if you put me on my feet I'd also be the shortest.

On the first day of school Verhoeven, our Dutch teacher, asked what we had done during the summer vacation.

– And you, Joe, he asked halfway through, what have you done during the last few weeks.

– Waited, sir.

– What were you waiting for?

– For school to begin, sir.

Finally I've got every opportunity to be around him. But one morning Joe asks Mr Beintema whether he can go to the loo for a moment. Soon afterwards we hear a thunderous bang somewhere in the building.

– Joe, Christof says softly.

That silly bugger has been tinkering with a bomb while he's on the bog. His hand half gone, a trail of blood from the loo to outside and the headmaster who runs after him. Joe tries to make himself scarce like a wounded rat, but the headmaster catches him up halfway through the school yard and starts cursing him, not even funny. Joe really isn't listening because he collapses like someone pulled the rug out from under him. An ambulance shows up, there's a whole lot of things going on around it, and we don't see Joe for a while. He did a lot of damage to himself with that failed bomb.

The class is slowly getting used to my presence. I don't have to take part in oral exams because every answer takes an hour and even then nobody understands. It's all very tiring.

It's deeply embarrassing that I still can't pee by myself, and one way or another it's happened that Engel Eleveld helps me with it. Engel is a strange person. He's the kind of boy you don't notice for years, almost like he is

invisible, until you suddenly do see him and conceive a desperate feeling of friendship for him.

Engel himself offered to help me, I don't know how he got the information about my specific needs, but every bit of help is welcome. We go to the loo together, he strips my trousers off and hangs my prick in the urinal that I've always got with me, strapped to the side of my wheelchair. The first few times I want to die, not so much when he puts my dick in the reservoir, but when he washes out the urinal in the basin. Funny enough no one acts odd about this to Engel, that he's my pee-buddy, at least I've never heard anything about it.

Maybe you're asking yourself how it works with shitting, whether Engel helps me with that, too. Of course not! Shitting I do at home. Mum helps me with that. I don't tolerate anyone else behind my hole.

After the explosion, the toilet door at school has been put back on its hinges and the caretaker says to everyone who cares to hear it (no one, actually, but he keeps on saying it anyway) that he's never gone through anything like this before. What interests me is what it was that Joe really wanted to explode. Or who.

When Joe returns – hand bandaged, stitches in his head – no one asks him about it. It's like no one wants to talk about it. Very odd, like they would rather not know that Joe committed a blunder. It doesn't fit him. For my part I notice how much I'd like him to give the world a swift kick, because if there's anyone who can do that, it is him.

When he gets back Joe is rather quiet for a while, and Christof guards him. When Joe takes off the bandage in class, with everybody there, Christof keeps the curious at a distance at first.

– Joe, he says in a worried tone, isn't that dangerous?

– Danger is where you don't expect it, Joe mutters, and unwinds the bandage even further.

He comes up to me and holds his hand before my eyes.

– Look, Frankie, that's what stupidity looks like.

My stomach turns over. His left hand is a kind of fleshy fantasy in yellow, green, and pink, loosely held together with about three hundred stitches. He's missing his little finger and his ring finger.

– Sheesh, Joe, Engel Eleveld says in a small voice.

Heleen van Paridon retches but doesn't lose her lunch.

– A bit of fresh air and it'll be fine, Joe says.

– Did you set off other bombs too? Quincy Hansen asks, that dickhead I'm once again in a class with because he has failed for a second time. I would sooner tell my secrets to a snake than to Quincy Hansen.

– Don't ask me, says Joe.

– You did! Heleen van Paridon shouts.

She's fairly aggressive if you ask me.

– Not true, Christof says with the innocence of a saint.

Very good, never admit anything. A kind of row gets going, which quickly begins to bore Joe so that he gets up and walks away.

– Who *did* do it, in that case?! Heleen shouts after him. Frankie, I suppose.

Joe turns and looks at me, then at Heleen.

– Frankie can do more than you think, he says.

Then he's gone, Christof following him. They all look at me. I'm blowing spit bubbles, they're laughing. Go ahead, laugh, laughing is healthy.

6

I can't take part in anything. Impossible. I do take care always to keep moving, cruising and spying: the one-armed bandit with his bionic eyes. Nothing escapes him, he feasts his eyes. He swallows the world the way an anaconda swallows a suckling pig. If you can't join them, eat them, how do you like that. Up hill, down dale, through rain and through shine, foaming at the mouth. Or he waits in his chariot, with a poncho when it's bad weather, a sou'wester on his head when the storm tears at your shutters, or with a Hawaii shirt in the melting sun. Have no fear, The Eyes stand on guard.

I saw Joe and Christof go to the river, I creep after them like a snail. It grinds where the lever transfers energy to the wheel. Not that I'm forcing myself on Joe and Christof, that would look very different. More active. I can't get beyond the borders set by the asphalt, and so I owe a vote of thanks to Bethlehem Asphalt. Joe had his tackle box on the carrier and Christof on the crossbar. They often sit there on the shore.

The thistles are shedding, farmers are turning hay, and the gulls are enjoying a feast. The summer is now overripe. I can go in two different directions, left past the sandpit and between the maize fields to the river, or right, along the Lange Nek between the poplars to the ferry. I take a chance and go left, along the country road behind the Gat van Betlehem. The factory gets all its sand from that excavation. Nobody knows how deep it is, but even in the hottest part of summer the water is icy, so that tells you something.

Behind the Gat is where it happens, they come here from the village on mopeds when the sun goes down, to kiss and so on. You see the evidence lying about, dime bags, fag ends, empty lighters, condoms.

In winter everything's under water here, that's why the road is full of holes. In spring, when the water's gone, they dump rubble and ground-up bricks in the holes, but that doesn't make it really smooth.

Swarms of sparrows rise up out of the maize when I come by, groaning from the stitch in my arm and shoulder, because it's like trying to push a dead horse back home with just one arm. I'm not looking for sympathy, but that's simply how it is. Dirk damn well won't grease my wheelchair, no matter how often Mum tells him to do it. He'd rather go over to his nasty friends with whom he acts out dirty little fantasies. Torturing things and such. He's a bad piece of work, that one. They already put him in a home for a while because he had tied Roelie Tabak to a tree and stuck twigs into her. When he came back it was worse, but now he hides it. Keep an eye on that bastard.

The sun burns my neck. There are signs all around the sandpit:
DANGEROUS AREA – LANDSLIDES POSSIBLE. A huge crow sits on one of those posts, a mean old monster that sounds like an old barn door. There was a landslide two years ago, one night in the autumn, and the road to the ferry was suddenly gone. Simply vanished. It turned out that Bethlehem Asphalt's suction dredgers had been working in one place for too long, so the pit had begun to fill itself with sand from the surrounding area. That's bound to happen when you dig a deep hole, then the sand begins to roll, as it were, towards the deepest spot. It's called sand hunger. But the Gat van Betlehem was so deep that there was too little sand to keep it filled, so that everything around it began to shift, but it had to come from somewhere. A whole section of the shoreline and the Lange Nek slipped into the water, followed by a whole bunch of trees. That's a weird sight, when you come by in the morning and there's no more road. The gas and electricity lines lay there uncovered, trees and light standards had fallen over. But now it's safe, they say, they don't dredge in one spot for such a long time any more. If you believe it.

The maize to the left and right of the gravel path is tall, the cobs are almost bursting out of their husks. Posts always lean sideways here because whatever you straighten in the summer becomes crooked again in winter. The road is a metre-and-a-half wide, maize leaves whisper *keep pulling, Frankie!* and I'm going into a stupor, hauling myself along. This arm is wearing out far too

quickly; in a while it'll be finished and I'll be up shit creek. The maize stretches its fingers out to me in encouragement. Frankie who separates the waters to escape his enemies – the sea of green closes behind him... *go, Frankie, go!*
Fingers of maize push him forward – *you're almost there!*

The summer dyke is a gentle, broad slope. If Joe and Christof are not behind it, I'll have come all this way for nothing. I reach the top of the summer dyke, my arm is almost falling off. Down below is a narrow beach, as yellow as the fungus on Dad's big toe. Swans float around in the lee of a groyne, where there is scarcely any current. At the end of the groyne there are two backs, capturing signals from the water with long antennas: Joe and Christof.

I haven't been here for a long time, by the waterside, the dyke and the meadows that are gleaming with thick grass. Where they have just mowed it's as pale as the skin of a head that's just been shaved. On the next groyne over, there are hundreds of lapwings. Joe has caught something, he pulls a glistening fish from the water, Christof hops anxiously around it.

Actually, I should have been Joe's friend. Christof is no good as a friend for him, he's too cautious. I've got the feeling that he holds Joe back. He's a brake on Joe, and that's not as it should be, Joe has to be able to take on speed until he flies. My accident came too soon, it has messed up the course of events. I should have been sitting there next to him, not Christof.

The wind at my back cools me down a bit, I was so sweaty that I almost flowed out of my wheelchair. Now Christof sees me, because he suddenly stands still, nudges Joe and points. They thought they were alone, so now they have an air of being caught in the act. The lapwings all take flight at the same time and fly over the river with careless wingbeats. I've heard about the English who flew high above over the river with their bombers, headed for Germany where they were going to knock everything flat. Flak guns were positioned on the river shore here, but against that sun-darkening swarm nothing was of any help.

A lot of things took place around here at that time. I'm talking about what happened to the Eleveld family. They were one of the largest families in Lomark. Their first turn came in September 1944. They were all together in some kind of air-raid shelter under the walnut tree near the ferry, when an allied bomb that was actually intended for the flak gun on the other side fell on them. One bomb, twenty-two Elevelds dead all at once. The rest of the family went to Lomark because they hoped they would be safe there. Not good, because a week later it rained bombs on Lomark itself and they got the second direct hit, right on the roof. The children came downstairs carrying their guts in their arms: 'Daddy, look.' They died right there. Then there were just three Elevelds left. They went to the city, where they came under German mortar fire during the last month of the war. Two of them lost their life as a result, so that at the end of the war only Hendrik Eleveld was left, who was called Henk the Hat. Henk the Hat had a son, Willem, who is the father of Engel Eleveld.

It strikes me as a weird story, fate against the Elevelds: 27-0 or something like that. But okay, if you see Engel you think of that invisible procession behind him who are remembered every year at the war monument.

Joe and Christof come over to me, I pull the brake tight.

– He's following us around, I hear Christof say.

– Hi Frankie, Joe says when they're standing in front of me. Did you come all by yourself?

– Look at that, says Christof, just like a horse with foam at its mouth.

He laughs, Joe comes nearer and takes my arm. With his left hand, because the right hand is still an unsightly mess from the bomb.

– What have you come to do, Frankie?

Then his eyes open wide.

– Holy shit, feel that.

Christof feels my arm.

– Has he got concrete in it or something? he asks.

Christof raises his eyebrows so high that he looks like an owl. The way they're reacting strikes me as a bit exaggerated, it's not that big a deal. I'm blushing.

– He's blushing, says Christof.

– May I? Joe asks.

He rolls my sleeve up above my biceps and whistles softly between his teeth.

– What a monster.

Christof gives him a strange look, he doesn't understand things like this all that well. Actually, I hadn't really noticed myself how big that arm is.

– Especially when you see his body alongside it, Christof says.

He *is* right, because it looks like all my growth during the last few months has gone to my arm, it looks like the arm of a grownup with all those bumps and veins everywhere. The arm of a gorilla, if I say so myself. Joe begins to laugh and shouts like a circus director: 'Ladies and gentlemen, heeere he is ... Frank the Arm!'

Frank the Arm! Yes! Christof shrugs his shoulders, the defeat he suffered over his change of name is still fresh in his memory. Sunlight sparkles on the frame of his spectacles and he narrows his eyes a bit. Who does he look like? I can't think of it. Maybe someone from a history book, but I've read so many recently that I don't know which one. I'm going to have to look it up.

– All the same, I think he's following us around, says Christof.

Like I'm not allowed to go wherever I want.

– He's allowed to go where he wants, says Joe.

– Are you following us around, Frankie? Christof asks.

I shake my head violently.

– You see, says Joe, nothing's the matter. Bye Frankie.

They return to their fishing rods and don't look back again. They cast their lines and then sit motionless on the basalt. I'm burning with curiosity to know what they're talking about. Or are they just sitting there, looking over the water a bit and keeping their mouths shut? I want to know these things. It's lonely here.

7

An animal helps to ward off loneliness. Not all animals. For example, rabbits are no use at all, they're pretty dopey. And dogs irritate the hell out of me. I wanted a jackdaw, one of those small crows with silvery necks and milk-blue eyes. Jackdaws are sweet, and their sound, more than that of crows or rooks, resembles human speech. Especially in the evening, when a colony of them alighted in the chestnuts along the Bleiburg, and they chattered with each other until it was dark. Then you heard the occasional caw only when one of them fell from a branch. Besides, jackdaws really keep themselves clean. You see them sometimes at a shallow puddle in the meadow; they keep bending forward so that the water flows over their back and wings, just as long as it takes until they're clean.

I knew where a bunch of them were. Every spring they nested in a couple of half-dead trees around a pool, a small lake that had been left behind after the dyke had broken through there some time long ago. Those used to be enormous disasters in olden days, dyke breakthroughs, in which lots of people drowned. At the location of the breakthrough, water swirled in and washed out a deep hole behind the dyke. Later the new dyke was laid around a pool like that, which is why dykes often have sharp bends in them.

The jackdaws make their nests in cracks and cavities in the trees around the pool, and on a Wednesday afternoon I make it clear to Sam that he should get a nestling for me.

– Okay, Sam said.

He walked behind me with one hand on the chair and talked a blue streak about Sam-style inanities. Sometimes I think he's brain damaged.

I looked out over the forelands where the river water had withdrawn behind the summer dyke. The trees out there had dark feet from which you could see how high the water had been that winter. Above the trees I saw black dots. I was just a bit excited. I would have liked to be a jackdaw too because they're faithful;

a pair of jackdaws always stay together and if you get hold of a jackdaw when it's young it'll attach itself to you in the same way. But you have to get hold of it early.

– Do I have to go up there? Sam said when we got to the trees.

He spluttered for a while but finally clambered down the dyke on his hands and feet. He came to a halt at a tree that had low branches, stood there for a while, looking up until he saw a jackdaw fly up that had its nest there. He began to climb. The birds flew restlessly around the tree tops, they already knew this was bad news. I was cold, winter still hovered between the warmer layers of spring air. It was already twilight and you had to strain to see things in the distance. It seemed like the trees around the pool had been poisoned, they were just about dead and some of them were already gradually shedding their bark, so that they stood there cold and naked. Sam had reached a branch one third of the way up the tree and was clumsily climbing higher. He had definitely not been at the head of the queue when intelligence and agility were handed out. To be honest, he had only one good he was rather kind, at least if kindness is a quality and not an aberration, caused by absence of the type of cruelty that kept someone like Dirk going.

Sam was just a metre below the nest when he suddenly stopped moving. I narrowed my eyes to slits but couldn't properly see what was the matter. After a little while I heard him screaming things with a lot of fucking in them. He had panicked. It was a very bad spot to get into a panic. Something like that makes me really furious. He hung there motionless between earth and sky, and I sat fixed to the road, so that there was nothing for it but to ride back to the village, get help and hope that he managed to hold on up there. I moved as fast as I could. For quite some time I heard the cries of alarm from the jackdaws that circled poor Sam.

I rode back into the village via the Achterom. Joe lived in the first house. The lights were on, the place radiated light and heat like a greenhouse. I banged hard on the front door with my fist, India opened. She was clearly surprised to see me.

Up to that point I hadn't had the chance to look her over closely, but now I could see that she was quite good-looking, even though at the time she was still very young. What I mainly saw was that at a certain age she would be beautiful in an unusual way, and that until that day men would look at her impatiently, like a farmer in the spring looks at the delicate green of his crops that have just barely broken through the ground. India was built differently than her brother, much more slender, but she had the same clear gaze.

– What can I do for you, she asked at last.

I swallowed the thick mucus that had collected in my mouth during the race into the village and raised my head.

– UH-UH-DJOE, I bellowed.

– Joe? She asked. You're looking for Joe?

– UH-YESSS.

I sounded like Chewbacca, that hairball from *Star Wars*. India walked into the house and left the door open. It seemed like there was a blast furnace inside, it was so warm and bright. It produced the same glow as the space heater in our bathroom. 'Shut the door!' somebody yelled, probably whoever was paying the bills.

– Joe, someone for you! shouted India.

Her parents had called her that because she had been conceived in India, something Joe told me later. Her second name was Laksimi. According to the Hindus she was a goddess who brought happiness and wisdom. I know nothing about Hindus, only about samurai and a few other things besides. Joe's parents were married in India because they had a spiritual tie to that country. During the wedding ceremony they both had a terrible case of the trots. While the lotus blossoms descended on them from above, the diarrhoea trickled down their legs. During the sitar concert in honour of the happy couple, a weeping Regina Ratzinger sat shitting on the toilet.

I heard Joe come thundering down the stairs. Then he stood before me, in excellent spirits as it seemed.

– Spit it out, Frankie.

I looked up at him silently.

– Okay, what’s up and how are you going to make it clear to me.

With violent gestures I pointed towards the dyke and motioned that he must come with me.

Lassie the clever collie.

– Let me get my shoes on, Joe said.

He was pushing me. His hands were charged with energy. It was the hour that everything turns blue, metallic blue, when all colour withdraws from things and makes them blue and hard and dim before they slowly sink away into darkness.

– Is it far off? Joe asked.

I pointed ahead and Joe began a tale about the wonders of modern physics, which he had become very interested in at that time. He had a gift for monologue, did Joe.

Somewhere halfway he stopped suddenly and said: ‘What’s this?’ He pointed at the protective tube that held my telescope. I had been given it by Mum, who understood that by *looking* at things, I could banish the depressing thoughts about my handicaps. The telescope hung from the side of my wheelchair and was part of my slowly growing arsenal. Joe unscrewed the cap from the tube, and the telescope slid into his hand.

– Wow, he said, and brought the telescope up to his left eye.

He could easily see the other side of the river and the houses behind the dyke over there. I had a gem of a telescope, the Kowa 823 with a 20-60 zoom eye piece and a 32x wide angle.

– That’s what you do, you look at us, he said as he lowered the thing. But what you’re thinking remains a secret.

He aimed the telescope at me like a pointer. Shame flashed across my face, the observer was observed, I, who thought myself invisible because no one ever paid me more than half a minute’s attention, had not escaped his gaze. A feeling

of gratitude choked me up – I was observed, and that by the only person in the whole world by whom I wanted to be seen ...

– So now what’s the matter?

Could I help it, I was simply moved.

I motioned that we had to go on, Sam could fall from that tree at any moment. But when we got to the pool I didn’t see him. Wildly I looked all around the trees, but nowhere did he lie moaning with a broken back or his leg bent in a weird way. Calm seemed to have returned to the jackdaw community. Maybe Sam did manage to get down on his own steam and had walked home through the meadows. And I still didn’t have a jackdaw.

Next to me stood Joe, who understood nothing of it. I pulled at his sleeve and he bent over me.

– What are we doing?

With my hand I imitated a wingbeat as best I could – you could just as easily have taken it for a front loader or a biting Pac-man figure – and pointed at the trees. Joe looked at the birds that flew back and forth and the darkening sky behind it, and then said: ‘Am I to understand that you want a little jackdaw?’

I grimaced like an ape.

– I’ve got to get a bird out of its nest, is that why we’re here?

He shook his head but slid down the bank without further protest, climbed the tree as agile as a ninja, and was down again almost at once. In his hand he held a hunched-up chick. The little animal had nervously flashing eyes and a flat, broad beak. From its skin, red and bluish in colour, immature feathers protruded at irregular intervals, alternating with a greasy down. It was the ugliest thing I had seen in a long time.

– You want this? Joe asked incredulously.

He put the animal down in my lap and carefully folded my hand around it.

– Watch out with that strong claw of yours.

The jackdaw felt warm and a bit clammy, and in spite of its small size, gave the impression of being one big beating heart that boomed in the palm of my hand.

– Well, Joe said, shrugging his shoulders, everyone’s got to have something to pet.

He took the handles of the chair and turned me in the direction of Lomark. I held the little jackdaw carefully enclosed in my hand. He would become my Eyes at Great Height and be called Wednesday, after the day that I got him. It began to rain gently. I was very happy.