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Translated by David Colmer

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The Man on the Bridge

A man is painting the railings of a bridge. More precisely: the steel railings that flank the cycle paths over the bridge. It's actually two bridges one after the other across the IJ, Amsterdam Bridge and Schellingwoude Bridge.

The man starts on the city side, on the right of the ramp that leads up to Amsterdam Bridge, and continues in the direction of the traffic.

The uprights, the rail, the horizontal bars – everything gets a new coat.

He paints steadily, slowly ascending the bridge, slowly coming down off it, following the curve of the road. After reaching the end of the first bridge, he pushes his cart with painting supplies across Zeeburg Island before starting again on the railings of the ramp that leads up to Schellingwoude Bridge, slowly ascending that bridge too, slowly coming down off it and finally reaching the end of the long exit to North Amsterdam.

At this point he crosses the road and starts on the railings on the other side, heading back over the two bridges to the city.

By the time he's finished that side too, it's taken so long that he can start all over again. And he crosses the road to the cycle path on the other side and starts again.

He keeps going like that, year after year.

He gets paid for it; it's his job. This has been the arrangement for years. He didn't complete his university degree (philosophy – who bothered to complete a degree like that in the eighties?), became unemployed and stayed unemployed until the council found a place for him in the department that maintained the city's bridges and locks. After he'd been working there for a few years, they told him that the man who did the Schellingwoude bridges was retiring and would he like to succeed him?

He remembered that, as a student, when he still went on long bike rides, he'd sometimes seen a man painting the cycle-path railings. It had seemed like the most calming job in the world, but he'd never thought of him while working for the council and he'd never heard anyone mention him. It turned out that the maintenance of the cycle-path railings for the two bridges was precisely attuned to the tempo of one man working a seven-day fortnight.

He said yes immediately. He knew why they had thought of him: he was a loner, he didn't have much contact with his colleagues or anyone else for that matter.

And so he began that slow eternal oscillation, year after year after year.

He often sees the same people passing by: commuters, cyclists on day trips, joggers, hikers. After a while he started recognising individuals and patterns. Some people get off their bikes or stop for a chat. He's not keen on that. 'You were probably thinking you hadn't seen me for a few weeks but I was sick, I was...' He nods now and then in the hope they'll eventually stop of their own accord.

At the end of the day he pushes the cart of painting gear back home. He lives in the Indies neighbourhood, quite close to the south side of the bridge, in a small flat crammed with books. At night he sits in his chair under the lamp to read novels and stories. As long as it's made up.

Sometimes someone who knows him from before passes by. A fellow philosophy student, for instance. He still remembers a few nicknames: Ponytail, Hunger Striker, The Pope. But he hasn't kept in touch with anyone. In all these years he's never met up with any of them. Even as a student he didn't really know anyone.

Recently a number 37 bus stopped suddenly next to where he was working. The doors opened and the driver – a small, stocky woman – bent sideways to stare at him without letting go of the wheel.

To his own surprise he recognised her at once. It was Ponytail.

'Hollander!' she cried. 'Rob Hollander! Right?' He nodded.

She shouted something he couldn't make out. Then the doors closed and the bus drove on.

Ponytail had once thumped him.

After that he looked up whenever the 37 passed but he never saw her silhouette behind the wheel again. Maybe passengers had complained, or there was a centre that tracked the movement of all buses and fired her after they'd seen her stop for no reason on one of the Schellingwoude bridges.

Newspapers knew how to find him too. Years ago a journalist from *Het Parool* came by. A few days later he found the paper on his doormat with the interview in the supplement. 'The man who paints the bridge.' Afterwards people passing by said hello to him more often and used his name, as that had been included in the article.

Clearly, he doesn't have anything against journalists. Once he'd even thought about going into journalism himself – he used to read so many dailies and weeklies to keep up to date, to belong. He could have done it, plenty of dropouts ended up as journalists. Sometimes he wonders what happened to the other students in his year. One's a bus driver, but the rest? If one of them has become a journalist they haven't, as far as he knows, bothered to do the rather obvious article about the fate of their fellow students in the intervening decades.

A month after the piece in *Het Parool,* a journalist from *Tubantia*, the paper they read in the area he's from, showed up at the bridge. She'd tracked him down through the *Parool* article. This was something different, closer to home. She wanted to talk to him about what she called the Rijssen Vigilanteism.

'They examined you, didn't they? At the time, and didn't find anything.'

He'd carried on painting without a word. It wasn't like he was on the bridge for daily consultations.

'Why does an eight-year-old boy go into the forest alone in the dark? I've spoken to Gertjan Aalderink and Gertjan Baan. They were in your class at school, weren't they? They said they saw you go into the forest. They were too scared themselves.'

He'd dipped his brush in the paint once more.

'Don't you remember anything?' She shouldn't have asked that question. Now he could answer that he really didn't remember a thing about it. 'How old was I? Exactly – you just said – eight, nine. It's a long time ago.'

He hasn’t forgotten a thing.

That’s why he reads everything he can get his hands on, as long as it’s made up.

He sits under the lamp and wants to be made up. He is a story. With a beginning and an end. First the beginning.

FIVE ATTEMPTS TO TAKE G.B.J. HILTERMANN BACK HOME

And we start here: Rijssen in the 1970s, a Sunday afternoon.

Sunday afternoon in Rijssen in the seventies in a religious family, my God.

Afternoons that dragged on forever. Despite being slow to get started. First the church service in the morning, then coffee, after that hot dinner – often it was already three o'clock by the time the table was cleared and the dishes washed and wiped, but still they dragged on forever.

Aren't you going to say something about G.B.J. Hiltermann, who discussed the state of the world on the radio every Sunday afternoon at one p.m. in that peculiar voice that always reminded you of boiled potatoes with gravy? How you and your mother always had to keep quiet because your father wanted to listen?

No, fuck G.B.J. Hiltermann. This isn't that kind of story, one with ironic nostalgia and things like that.

You know, once I'd left home and was living in Amsterdam, I always passed Hiltermann's house on Prinsengracht on my way to the main branch of the public library. That was in the early eighties and I was – how old? – nineteen, twenty. At the time Hiltermann was living in a stately canal house in a row of virtually identical stately canal houses. Stone steps up to a dark-green door, 'canal green' I learnt later. The name was written on the door in elegant white letters with curlicues. *Hiltermann*. No initials, no title. Looking up from the street through the first-floor window, you could just make out the edge of an imposing desk. He never used it. At least not while I was walking past.

And I passed by often, having little else to do in those days. The library was a place of refuge, a haven where I never found what I needed. Still, it had to be there on the shelves somewhere, the book that had been waiting for me all that time. I didn't know yet that the whole building was the sanctuary, that it itself was what mattered, that I'd already found what I needed the moment I entered the library and walked towards the stairwell, past the lockers and the toilets that always gave off a smell of shit and cleaning products – one smell never able to banish the other, as if they both came out of the same spray can.

Next to the stairs was the entrance to the reading room, where in those days you were still allowed to smoke and where I read the weeklies. If I came across something striking, I jotted it down in a notebook. The building dated from the seventies, with lots of bare concrete and carpet tiles on the floor. At the time I found it boring, but in retrospect, appealing. Now it's an expensive hotel and nothing about the interior will be the same, let alone that you'd be allowed to smoke there.

Walking home from the library I must have passed G.B.J. Hiltermann's again, but I don't remember that at all, as if that canal house only existed on the way there, as if I am still in the library, as if – and now I catch my breath because I can't remember a single walk home, not one – as if I always stayed there, every time I walked there, filling the entire library, to this day, even now it's a hotel.

As mentioned, I never saw G.B.J. Hiltermann while passing; the office chair at his impressive desk was always empty. From that chair he would have had a magnificent view out over the

canal, which might have been why he never sat there, the view distracting him too much from his work. But even though I never saw him, the building still reminded me of those Sunday afternoons in the seventies when my father listened to the radio, first the news and then Hiltermann's *State of the World*. In ten minutes he reviewed the whole world, all the names that had featured on the news too – President Nixon, Moshe Dayan, Biafra, Bangladesh, Leonid Brezhnev, Chancellor Brandt, Le Duc Tho, Henry Kissinger. One after the other, all the latest developments, all the new or old flashpoints considered by a man who knew the score and shared that knowledge with his listeners with that characteristic voice of his: both rushed and mature, deeply resonant but soaring and, through all those contradictions, grown a little hoarse.

My father in the sunshine on the green leather couch. It was the glory days of big windows and walk-through living rooms and I was sitting in the sun too on one of the matching armchairs. The sun still used to shine in through the windows back then – when did it stop doing that? – never, of course. I know that too. I've lived in flats that didn't get any direct sun, that's why, and I'm bigger now, it's harder for the sun to capture my whole body in one go; no, that can't be it. I don't know what it is. I just never feel as warm as I used to.

'Shhh!' my father said loudly and with unexpected venom when you talked over Hiltermann, as if he was listening to a matter of life and death, as if no one but G.B.J. Hiltermann could tell him what was really happening in the world, despite his reading two newspapers every day, *Trouw* and the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*.

He was a high-school history teacher, his desire to follow world news was self-evident, but listening to the radio on a Sunday was anything but. On the Day of the Lord a lot of people from our church kept the radio switched off, some didn't even own one. But my father was less strict; we hadn't always belonged to the church. Yes, I had, but not my parents. They'd led a worldly life before moving to the Bible Belt and they had never given up their habit of listening to the radio on Sundays.

So that was what I pictured in the 1980s when I walked past Hiltermann's house as a twenty-something: the downstairs interior of the house on Van Opstallstraat in Rijssen where my parents no longer lived, even then. And that was what I heard: Hiltermann's strange, familiar voice, my father's *Shhh!* and all those names – Watergate, Golda Meir, Anwar Sadat.

My regularly walking past his house was a not a big deal, more something to bring up casually when I went to visit my parents. 'When I go to the library, I always walk past G.B.J. Hiltermann's house.' Why say something like that to your father as an adult? To reinforce the bond; to please him; to link your world to his. 'Hiltermann!' my father would exclaim. 'Is it a nice house? Do you ever see him standing at the window?' No, never.

I did bump into him on the street once, but that was years later. It must have been the late or mid-nineties, when his career was over. To be precise, it wasn't on the street, but on a bridge – the bridge over the Amstel near the Amstel Hotel, High Bridge I think it's called. Yes, that's right, High Bridge. I just looked it up: designed by Willem Springer in the Parisian style, ten arches for passing boats.

It was a bare, grey afternoon. I was on my way home, coming from the Frederiksplein side of the bridge. Had I been to the library on Prinsengracht? Yes, let's assume I had. Then I can remember walking home from the library at least once.

At the time I was living in the Czar Peter neighbourhood. After crossing the Amstel on High Bridge I only needed to follow Sarphatistraat. I was on foot, I walked everywhere. I liked walking, bikes always got stolen straight away. Sarphatistraat might not have been the most beautiful street in all of Europe, but it was pleasant to walk along, wide with stately homes and lots of shade. Halfway you came to the square with Muiden Gate, then there were the long, low barracks from the Napoleonic era, later renovated as an apartment complex. Then I was almost home. Across the road you could still catch a glimpse of the zoo, sometimes you heard the sea lions barking. At the end of Sarphatistraat, just before the intersection with the windmill, was the Albert Heijn where I did my daily shopping.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I was crossing High Bridge in the direction of the Amstel Hotel. G.B.J. Hiltermann was standing halfway across the bridge with his back to the sandstone balustrade. Behind him the grey sky, the grey water of the Amstel, the white painted wood of the locks in front of Carré. He had grown older, even older than he'd been before, but that imposing head that always recalled a potato was immediately recognisable. As a child I had already had that association with potatoes, but that seems implausible given that I had no idea what Hiltermann looked like; my associating him with potatoes with gravy must have been because my mother was usually cooking or about to start cooking when G.B.J. began his clarification of world events. Although it is possible that the Evangelical Broadcasting Network sometimes including a photo of him in their TV and radio guide. What was it called again? Oh, yeah, *Vision.*

I'm being a bit long-winded about it, I think. This could all be much more to the point, but I have to get it down properly. Soon we'll move on to the business with the time machine and you'll need to be able to follow it all.

G.B.J. Hiltermann was standing at the midpoint of the bridge with that head of his but without his characteristically probing expression. Instead he was peering at his surroundings with searching eyes, but the searching seemed to be turned inwards, giving him the anxious, innocent look of someone who doesn't quite get it anymore. He was wearing a dressing gown and tartan slippers. Above his bare ankles you could just see the hem of his blue-and-white-striped pyjamas. He was standing there like someone who has walked downstairs to pick the morning newspaper up off the mat while the coffee trickles through the filter.

Except his canal house was a good mile away. It was like the front door had slammed shut behind him with such a bang that it had blown him to a different location. He was looking for an explanation, a solution, clarification.

He looked at me, our eyes met but without contact, as if I didn't really exist. I know which day it was, 13 November, 1998; it's in the diary I still kept at the time.

Hiltermann in slippers on High Bridge.

That was all, nothing about the shame I must have felt. Or did that only develop gradually in the days that followed, when I crossed the bridge again?

I should have spoken to him. I should have asked him if everything was OK. If necessary I should have taken him back home. After all, I knew where he lived. I should have been prepared to take him home if that was necessary.

Instead I walked on.