



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

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The Coffee Shop Murders

Joeri Brinkmann Detective Stories

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Haarlem is a beautiful city with all the charm of Amsterdam yet none of the darker establishments that shame our tolerance and tarnish our history. The main square is the heart of us all in every sense, the residents of Haarlem I mean, of which one man in particular is a very proud and valuable member. Joeri Brinkmann is his name, detective Brinkmann, Regional Police Force, North Holland. The saviour of my soul, the reason I can sleep.

My daughter died in this safest of places and it was Joeri Brinkmann who brought everyone back from the edge. It started three years ago. June 24th 1981.

It was a bright summer's morning in the square, I sat with my wife Lucienne outside our favourite café, Brinkmann's by chance, no relation. Its ordered rows of small wicker chairs and round bamboo tables were reflected in the sepia glow of its plate glass windows and were shaded from the early morning light by the Sint Bavokerk, the beautiful cathedral to the westerly end of the square, and the full leaved branches of the sculpted chestnut trees that rustled in the light breeze, nature's parasol in local speak. He walked slowly

towards us, we didn't know him then. After the pleasantries of greeting, our hearts would be left on those seats and our lives would disintegrate.

My story however is not of grief, devastation, hate or revenge. It is one in celebration of the skills and abilities of this one man, this good man, this man of Haarlem.

My daughter Venda died while walking near this very square, three hundred metres from where we sat that day, outside what is now an ice cream parlour set in the former poor houses attached to the opposite side of the cathedral. She was hit, strangled, and left for dead by the assailant, a clear case of opportunist robbery according to the judiciary, though nothing like that had ever happened in this place before.

She had been to a party with her boyfriend, Jens but left after an argument with a girlfriend, Kathy. Jens was one of the first on the scene. His relationship with Venda was a good one, they loved each other, and he had already done the decent thing and asked me for her hand. Only myself, my wife, my son Rey and my brother Horst knew of her condition. My mother was still alive then, but she was ill and there was no reason to lower her opinion of Venda, or of our family, which telling her the truth would surely have done.

The police very quickly rounded up every vagrant and stray that blighted the streets around the railway and bus stations, and those who frequented the now popular coffee shops. Equally quickly one man, Paul Adamson, was charged with her murder. He was found with some of the contents of her handbag, purse, lipstick holder and key ring were traceable, and he later confessed under questioning. He was a hard drugs user, something the authorities wanted to stamp out. Paul Adamson appeared in the central court in

Amsterdam three months to the day after the death of my daughter and was convicted of her murder within two days, a unanimous verdict was returned and Paul was detained for sentencing, scheduled for one month later. We had an answer, however distasteful and somehow pitiful, we had closure.

Then came Joeri Brinkmann once again to our door, back from secondment in Rotterdam. He stood silent, staring at me, an apparition from that morning outside the café. He was mid-forties, tall, slim, upright in his stance and had a firm handshake, some would say excessively firm. When he spoke, it was slow and clear, he seldom seemed to blink, his concentration was total. His starched white shirt and black tie resembling the funeral dress of many of our friends, though his facial expression was no longer compassionate, his manner no more understanding.

‘We have the wrong man.’ His words punctured me. I stepped through the doorway and pushed him away. I couldn’t speak, I wanted to.., I wanted to hurt him as his words hurt me, and I wanted him to take it back.

‘You should not push a police officer sir, but I can understand, and I will accept your actions on this occasion. I have not come to this decision lightly and neither do I wish to prolong your suffering nor increase your anguish, but I have re-opened the enquiry as I believe that Paul Adamson did not in fact murder your daughter Venda.’

‘Get out of my house.’ I still regret those words. As he walked away, I called to him: ‘Are you going to find who did kill her?’ He nodded but didn’t speak, I could see his head still nodding as he rounded the corner.

My thoughts returned to the night she died, and the insomnia started again, every morning, 3am. Lucienne, my wife was as tolerant as anyone could have been but after some days, we decided that separate bedrooms was inevitable. Many couples who suffer catastrophic loss split up, but we tried, for the benefit of our son Rey as much as anything, to stay together, albeit not as man and wife anymore. Work was a challenge and I received one last warning after a missed delivery deadline to a major client. My relationship with the company would never recover but I stuck it out, there were no other jobs to go to.

I continued as lay-Preacher, but Lucienne became remote, she was losing her faith, we drifted, then we purposely sailed apart. Lucienne retired to her mother's while we considered the future. Rey fell back into his shell, returning to the difficult insular boy we coaxed through school and college. He split up with his girlfriend Nina and spent almost every waking hour in his room. I moved out of the family home, Lucienne returned from her mother's house to care for Rey. It all sounds, as it was, very sad.

I turned to the one thing I vowed never to do again and frequented the coffee shop on the outskirts, the other side of town where I was nameless. There I could lose myself and I did. Many early mornings I would awake, somewhere, park bench, grass verge, often being shaken by a concerned local or, on two occasions, by the transport police as I slept in the ornate waiting room of Haarlem station. My visits became more frequent, the release from reality a necessity for me.

Joeri Brinkmann knew of my situation and visited me on many occasions in the room I rented in a shared property in Rozenstraat,

near the station. Each time we talked about his investigation. It was a Thursday evening when he came again:

‘I’m getting closer to this, I only wish I could have been here for the initial investigation and I apologise for that. I now know that Venda did not leave the party at the time we originally thought, her boyfriend had either lied or been mistaken. The argument with Kathy was about him after all, it seems their relationship was more than he stated at the time. More importantly, I know that Paul Adamson was in possession of some of the contents of her handbag, but I just can’t understand why he would have kept them with him if he had killed her. I’m convinced that he did steal her bag, and now that his body is at last responding to medication and the drugs are lessening their hold on him, he may be looking at life differently. I fully expect him to retract his confession within the next few days. The one person that I’m still unclear about in terms of his exact whereabouts that evening though is your son Rey, how is he?’

My answer was not what Joeri wanted to hear. The fact that Rey had clammed up did not help. I beseeched him to go easy on the boy, he’d been through enough. Joeri said he would be sympathetic, but that police work was often of necessity, blunt. He would visit Lucienne the next day and speak with Rey. I had every confidence that Joeri Brinkmann would do exactly what he said, he would find the killer, but I also doubted that in doing so, he would provide me with any way of saving my family.

‘They do say that inhaling too much of that stuff you smoke affects your reasoning you know.’ He looked at me as a Father would their son.

‘It’s OK as long as it doesn’t affect anyone else, so I’m told.’ I said. A standard reply from social users and drunks and the line they are always given by do-gooders and help groups.

‘Define, ‘affect’ in your case then?’ His Words hurt me and he knew it. He’d made his point and he left without further comment. I’d go to my sister’s house in Hagen, I’d stay a few days, to think.

‘My husband Willem is a good man, but the death of our daughter Venda changed him. We grew apart, that’s all, I don’t know why. I still love him, but we just have nothing left to say’. Lucienne Gronkel wiped her eyes and the Detective passed her a crisp white handkerchief from his pocket.

‘I understand Mrs Gronkel and I am so sorry that I can’t leave you in peace with your grief, but an injustice has been done, and that injustice was to your daughter, she deserves to have the person who ended her life apprehended. I will do that, I promise.’ Joeri had seen many victims, grieving mothers and fathers, in his previous career in the Special Services Division of the Dutch army. There would be no acceptance of wrong-doing and his support for the innocent would be total. Venda Gronkel would be avenged, within the law or outside it, she would be avenged. This injustice isn’t tolerated in his city, the home that he loves, that he will defend to his last breath.

Rey was in his room, so Lucienne went to collect him, the almost vertical wooden stairs creaked her coming. When she reached the door it was already open, Rey stood like stone in the doorway.

‘What does he want me for?’ He snarled more than asked, his eyes focused on the floor.

‘He says he’s sorry to bother us.’

‘Is he?’ Rey pushed past Lucienne and slid down the stairs holding both hand rails, his feet only brushing the top of every second step. He hit the floor with a thud and Joeri spun round, the picture of Venda that he had lifted from the sideboard still in his hand. Rey stood in front of him, he said nothing, Lucienne joined them and offered to make a coffee. She left for the kitchen, Joeri pondered.

‘Can we go back to your room Rey?’ Asked Joeri. ‘I was a young lad too once and I always found it difficult talking in front of Mum.’ Rey’s eyes never met Joeri’s and in one movement he turned to leap back up the stairs, two at a time. Joeri followed carefully, creaking as he went, his head bowed forward avoiding the low ceiling. He closed the bedroom door behind them.

‘Please sit-down Rey.’ The boy sat on a small chair in front of an old writing desk. Joeri noticed the clothes he was wearing, not exactly the latest in Eighties’ young men’s fashion. Joeri perched on the end of Rey’s bed.

‘What do you want?’ Rey’s attitude was harsh but not petulant. Joeri had seen this before and would normally rough it out of the boy instantly with a few well-chosen military style words, but he knew from Willem that Rey was not in a good place, so he took a deep breath and respected his Father’s wishes.

‘How well did you really know Jens?’

‘They asked me that before.’ It didn’t look to Joeri as if Rey was prepared to repeat his answer, so he felt it best to explain the question, to demonstrate his honesty and hopefully lessen the boy’s resistance.

‘We ask most things more than once Rey, it’s called continuity of evidence. Shock does funny things to the memory, I’m not trying to trick you.’ Rey was grey, obviously very troubled but Joeri suspected there was more to his silence than the educational and social issues he faced and ‘in many ways’ combatted in the past. He looked around the room. There were three crucifixes in all, two on the walls and one almost shrine-like on his small writing desk, unusual for a lad of his age, but faith was the way of millions in turmoil, and Rey may just be one more lost young soul needing guidance. There were two bibles and a prayer book laying by the bed.

‘You’ve got the man who did this so why are you still asking questions?’ Rey’s expression had changed and Joeri saw the loss that he had suffered clearly in his eyes, which at last reached Joeri’s.

‘There are some open questions that need answering I’m afraid. His conviction is’ at the moment, uncertain. Did you like Jens? Were you friends?’

‘No.’

Joeri waited for Rey to elaborate but his lips were tight shut. Nevertheless Joeri waited.

‘He wasn’t honest with my sister.’

‘Have you mentioned this before?’

‘No-one asked me.’ Rey was starting to breath more heavily. The sound of Lucienne slowly scaling the stairs caused Rey to stand and open the door.

‘I guessed you wanted some privacy Mr Brinkmann?, you could have said. Is everything OK Rey? I can stay if you’d rather I’m here?’ Rey shook his head and Lucienne stared her displeasure at Joeri through the diminishing gap as she pulled the door closed.

‘It’s nice to have a Mum who looks after you.’ Joeri’s comment was met with no emotion or comment. He continued: ‘Your sister was with child I understand?’ Nothing from Rey. ‘Did she tell you, or did he?’

‘He did.’ The words came with some venom.

‘What exactly did he say?’ Joeri reached into his pocket for his notebook. He saw that this alarmed Rey. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve an ageing memory, this helps that’s all.’ Rey slowly extended his arm to reach a book, he slid it across the desk and onto his lap, he left his hand upon it as he spoke.

‘He said that my sister was wicked and that she tricked him. That God would be his judge and that he’d been ordered to do the right thing. He said it wasn’t his fault and that I should pray that I never make the same mistake.’ Joeri noted every word. Rey’s hands had tightened around the small notebook.

‘What’s that?’ Joeri gestured towards the notebook, he smiled sympathetically so as to soften the meaning of his question. Rey held the book to his chest and his eyes filled with tears.

‘And you were here in your room that night, as you originally stated?’

‘yes.’

‘And your Mother corroborated that? She was here with you?’

Joeri took a mental picture of the scene, stood up and patted Rey on the shoulder. ‘I really am sorry for your loss Rey and I will find who did this.’ In Joeri’s standing position, Rey would have to look up to see him. The policeman’s experience had shown him how suspects react in almost every situation and giving them the option to avoid

your gaze was one of them. Though he was unsure if Rey's obvious social challenges would allow him the usual clarity.

'Rey?' He noted Rey's reaction with interest and wrote it down when he cleared the street.

The weekend passed peacefully but his Monday morning was brutally awoken with a message from the Governor. The cells in Haarlem prison were not a place in which the discerning visitor would wish to spend time, Joeri hated the place. He showed his police ID to the gate master and was allowed, following a brief low-level body search, to enter. He was met at the inner fence by prison officer Johannes Mareike.

'How the hell has this happened?' Joeri held back from shouting his anger at the man who was attempting an apology but making a bad job of it.

'We don't know how he got the needle, another prisoner maybe, there's no way of knowing.' Johannes Mareike seemed genuinely sorry for Paul Adamson. 'He knew what he was doing though. He hit the artery bang-on and bundled up the bed clothes so we wouldn't see the blood. Then he simply bled out overnight. No-one knew until breakfast call.'

'You know he was vulnerable?'

'Yes, I'd heard' said Johannes.

'And he had no visitors at all?'

'He had no-one in Haarlem, poor man, came from Delft originally, God fearing chap by all accounts. The vicar said that he wanted to stop the drugs and drink and that he was repentant for his sins.'

'You let a potential murderer attend the prison chapel?'

‘No of course not. It’s against the rules.’

‘So worse, you let the vicar visit him alone in his cell?’

‘No, the vicar came for the service yesterday morning and I talked to him afterwards, that’s all.’ Joeri was becoming agitated and was fast losing his patience.

‘I’ll spell it out for you. You’ve just told me that the vicar told you that the deceased was repentant for his sins. My question to you, and it’s a fairly simple question, is when did the prisoner see the vicar in order for the vicar to know this? Got it?’

‘There’s no need to be like that.’ Johannes tried to stop the questioning and walk away.

‘Stop! Sir, there is every need, now tell me.’ Johannes turned and, to Joeri, lowered his head in shame. He lifted it then spoke clearly but quietly.

‘He said he just needed five minutes, that the prisoner was a believer and a good man but that he’d lost his way in life. He said the prisoner should be cleansed. He’s a vicar for God’s sake, what harm could it do?’ Joeri helped Johannes answer his own question with a knowing look and left the prison by the front gate. As he walked towards the canal he looked up and saw the spire of the Sint Bavokerk in the distance. The gold cross standing proudly on top of the crown bell tower, glinting brightly in the morning light, and he wondered what he would find there.

The doors of the church were on the South side. Joeri chose to walk past the poor houses that were nestled into the North side of this enormous edifice, between the buttresses that supported its huge walls. It was outside the last of these, the one that was now an ice-cream parlour, that poor Venda lost her life. She was found on

the wooden seat where children usually sat consuming their ices, her young life sacrificed to something or someone unknown, for now. He pushed the small access door open and entered the church, as expected it was quiet with the normal chill that concentrated the thoughts of the worshippers. The Knave drew his eyes along the flagstone floor and up to the ornate wooden carved choir screens that he had, on many happy occasions, sang behind. He turned to look back at the vast organ pipes that from here framed the entrance, he could hear and feel their power from memory. He turned again and in front of him now was a lonely figure dressed in black, kneeling before the alter. His leather shoes signalled his presence as he continued to walk forward. The figure turned.

‘Hello Joeri, long time.’

‘Morning Father, something we need to discuss is there?’ Father Florian stood and rubbed his knees, smoothing out his cassock. He was a jolly man with a permanent red face that normally spread your lips to an involuntary smile no matter what your mood.

‘Um, not sure, do we? Always nice to see you dear boy in any case, the choir’s not the same without you. Baritones are rare.’ He seemed sincere, which put Joeri on the back foot.

‘Your visit to the prison yesterday, something you want to tell me?’

‘Ah, confession time I’m afraid. One shouldn’t let the persuasive powers of the fairer sex sway one I know but, in this case, the draw of the cream puff overcame the needs of the repentant I’m afraid. I went to the women’s guild service, the prison Sunday Service was, for once, without the main man and under the guidance of another, in this case the Dean in waiting. The Bishop of course was here. Is

there a problem?' Joeri's brain was racing and the thought that had haunted him from the very outset loomed large in the stained-glass window.

'I take it you have many Dean's in waiting of the parish but that you accepted the offer of one in particular, out of the goodness of your heart, yes?' Joeri's eyes pinned to the face of the innocent vicar. 'You are indeed a good policeman. I agree It's unusual but not unethical, especially when it's accompanied with the reasons he offered us, and I had the Bishop's blessing in doing so.'

'Never mind that, where is he?' After Florian had answered him, Joeri turned and walked back up the knave, he imagined Carmina Burana booming from the choir and the organ as he walked, his head filled with anger and regret in equal measure.

Lucienne was making Bitteballen in the small kitchen of their home, Rey's favourite, Venda's too, small balls of meat and potato, covered in bread crumbs. She sang a lullaby as she popped the first one into the pan of oil, her tears fizzed as they dropped in.

Rey read Exodus 20:13 as he sat at his desk and tried to make sense of the letter resting on his bed. The crucifixes, once kissed before sleep, were smashed on the floor, the prayer book pages littering the bed.

In Lucienne's bedroom the scene was similar, no shrine, no crucifix intact, the bibles splayed on the cobble stones of the road below, causing cyclists to wonder from whence they'd come?

And now back to the story from Willem Gronkel: In my own words, the truth:

I looked up as I rode past my former home that morning, my wheel hitting the spine of the bible, I managed to stay on and keep going, a holy confirmation that the letters had arrived. The glockenspiel of the Sint Bavokerk cathedral chimed its welcoming tune in the near distance, my cycle ran silent and smooth over the cobbled streets, no feeling. I rode to the church, he was there. He sat on the bench outside the ice cream parlour, waiting for me. I pulled up and lent my cycle on the wall of the opposite building. He stood and shook my hand as I reached the seat, my knuckles cracking under the pressure.

‘I was so close to being ordained.’ I said. Joeri’s eyes were boring holes in me. His disgust written across his whole self.

‘Paul Adamson was a victim, not a criminal.’ Joeri’s words for the first time were toxic with emotion.

‘I didn’t kill him.’

‘You didn’t have to, you just needed to facilitate for him. Did he thank you?’

‘Yes, he did, he wanted to go to God after all.’ My thoughts went back to the cell, to the whimpering mess I found who was convinced he did kill Venda, who admitted as much, who needed a reason to repent for his sorry life. I merely offered him a tool with which to do so. The choice was his, but it was a choice that suited us both.

‘And you thought that Paul Adamson dying before retraction of his confession would end things?’

‘Yes, but I was wrong, and I’m now prepared to pay my debt to society. You have found me now. I didn’t mean to kill her but the shame she bought on my family was unbearable to my faith, to my God. The death of Paul Adamson is the least of my reasons to repent.

Shall we go?’ Joeri led me to a waiting police transport vehicle. I looked up at the crown bell tower of the Sint Bavokerk, then over to the seats and tables outside Brinkmann’s café, and the door slammed shut in front of me.

Lucienne burned the letter as I instructed her to do. Rey, good boy, never showed her his copy and he also destroyed it before Joeri came to the door to give them the terrible news. They both held their faith, in me. Rey printed Exodus 20:13 and has it framed on his bedroom wall, his sentence would be worse than mine, his personal issues would however be recognised and treated as an illness in future. He will receive help.

Detective Joeri Brinkmann expertly re-crafted all the evidence for the prosecution in the posthumous sentencing of Paul Adamson for the murder of Venda Gronkel. The original verdict was upheld, and sentence recorded.

He then laid out the case in the death in captivity of convicted murderer Paul Adamson, which led to my conviction of manslaughter under diminished responsibility. His last words accompanied by a glance and a nod towards the dock that pledged his confidence to me and to Rey for all time.

The worshipping community was rocked by the outcome and prayers were said for me on a Sunday in Sint Bavokerk. Father Florian visits me regularly.

I am committed to a mental institution for a period no less than 10 years and for the first time since the death of my daughter, I can sleep.