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Ventoux

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I

My name is Bart Hoffman. Actually it's Johannes Albertus Hoffman—Hoffman as in Dustin, with a double *f* and one *n*. I was born almost fifty years ago in Zutphen, a town on a river in the easternmost part of Holland. My father was the head of a Christian primary school.

I'm a crime correspondent with a national newspaper—I belong to the generation of student dropouts who found their way into journalism. A guy I knew from studying Dutch wrote the occasional piece for the arts page of a big daily. He heard that they were looking for someone in the sports section to type in the results on Sunday morning. When they were short-handed, I was occasionally allowed to go to an unimportant football match. Writing came quite easily to me, and when they were looking for a reporter, I put in for it and got the job.

It was painless, packing in my studies. I didn't like the other students. I didn't like all the hot air they talked about Dutch writers like Reve and Lucebert, or Chomsky's generative grammar. I was the only person in my year who read *Football International*. The fact that I could effortlessly recite the first five minutes of the TV commentary of the 1974 World Cup Final, a fantastic ready-made artwork, made no impression on my fellow students. Long before it came into vogue, I had a very good imitation of Johan Cruyff in my repertoire, but they didn't even recognize it.

After two years, the paper's cycling reporter retired and I was able to take over from him. In the spring I followed the peloton and reported first on the Paris-Nice or the Tirreno-Adriatico

and then on the classics, and in the summer I went to the Tour de France.

During the day I would drive slightly behind the peloton and afterward talk to the racers. Then I would type up a piece, and in the evening go out with colleagues to a good restaurant to talk over the race and life in general. I couldn't imagine a better existence, and I was always sorry in the autumn when, after the world championship, Paris-Tours, and the Giro di Lombardia, it was over for another five months.

When I was 24, the week after Holland became European football champion, I moved in with Hinke. She was beautiful, and had the white skin and the clear, challenging Nordic eyes. She could easily put her long legs behind her neck, since she had done gymnastics from an early age. I was in love and thought she was a very nice person, but that was before I had awakened a less nice side in her.

On the fourth birthday of our daughter Anna, in 1995, she gave me a choice. I could choose between fatherhood and the nomadic existence of a cycling correspondent. In the case of the former, she would continue to be a part of my life, and in the latter, she would disappear from it and take my daughter with her. I chose to become a real father.

I went to the editor-in-chief and explained my situation. A month earlier, our crime correspondent had died of a heart attack. The editor-in-chief asked if I knew anything about crime and justice.

'I've been a cycling correspondent and I've read *Crime and Punishment*,' I replied, more or less as a joke.

'Okay, then you're the man we need. Congratulations.'

When I turned 40, I stopped smoking, got my old Batavus out of the shed, and began cleaning it up. It was, may I say, one of my better decisions. On the bike I began slowly but surely to realize that you can go right, but also left. That you can always take the same route, but you can also choose a different one. That things sometimes happen to you, but that you can do something for yourself. Anyway, it was another five years before we got divorced. Anna was 18 by then, and there was no longer any reason for Hinke and me to stay together.

Since I've been alone again, I've lived in a spacious flat in the centre of Alkmaar. I once moved to the town because I found Amsterdam too big and the people too noisy and far too full of themselves, and now I don't want to leave. The flat is sparsely furnished, but that doesn't bother me. Everything I need is there, and I like space around me.

I know every metre of cyclable road between Den Helder and Purmerend. On the bike you think time is standing still, or at least that it is no threat at all. The bike protects you from despair.

Anna has bought a Bianchi—she was well brought up. Not a German racing bike via the Internet, not some new American racer, but an Italian classic make. She knows who Coppi and Bartali were, and likes the Giro better than the Tour.

'Brilliant colour,' I said, when she brought it to show me. 'Nice sea-green.'

'Celeste, it's called.'

Never knew that; you have to be a cycling woman for that.

'La Dama Bianca,' I said.

'Giulia Occhini.'

'The doctor?'

‘Locatelli. Enrico.’

‘In?’

‘Varano Borghi.’

‘On...’

‘Lago Comabbio.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Never existed, it’s the tears of *dottore* Locatelli, mixed with the sweat of Fausto Coppi.’

‘And the love juices of Giulia Occhini.’

She started roaring with laughter. ‘Bart! The child is here!’

The latter was a quote from her mother. I immediately saw the tent before me, on the Italian campsite, the rickety table with the breakfast on it and Anna’s conspiratorial smile.

‘Passion or betrayal?’

‘Passion. If she hadn’t gone with Fausto it would have been betrayal.’

‘Very good.’

‘Bart! You’re making the child completely amoral! Of course it was betrayal.’

It was one of our set dialogues. We had about ten of them, and both of us knew our lines perfectly. This one was extra special. On a holiday trip when she was 10 we rode to Varano Borghi, not so far from Lago Maggiore, to see where Giulia came from. I had just seen a play called *Fausto and Giulia* and wanted to know whether there was anything to be found in the village that evoked the most famous love story in sport.

There was nothing. I asked a passer-by if he knew where *dottore* Locatelli’s old house had been, but he shrugged his shoulders.

It was the end of February; people were still talking about the Eleven Cities Skating Race, but she had already done a few circuits. She pointed to the kilometre counter: 195 kilometres. 'Four times. Not bad, is it? And alone, you know, you've got to allow for that. Average 26.1.' We made a date for two days later. I was looking forward to it—cycling together is friendship, love and togetherness, all in one.

We rode west. At Egmond we went into the dunes. Rays of sunshine were drawing the cold out of the ground. 'Take it easy, Dad,' shouted Anna. 'I'm still not properly in shape.'

She was talking like a pro in the early spring. I held back, rode alongside her, and gave her a push in the back. 'You're pedalling too hard! All women pedal too hard. It's because they're always toiling along on those crazy Granny bikes. You must keep it supple. Change gears more lightly.' She did as I said. I put my hands on the handlebars and just for a moment touched happiness.

In a café in Bakkum, a handsome lad served us coffee. Anna had taken her jacket off and he looked at her jersey.

'Suits you,' he said.

'Thank you,' she said, and gave him a heavenly smile.

'Bottoms suit you too.' She waved him away with a casual gesture.

I drank a mouthful of coffee and looked at her. 'Strange things are happening, Anna,' I said.

'*Very* strange things are happening. In America, a panther walked into a house on a new estate and fell asleep on the sofa. I read it this morning on...'

'With me. With my life.'

'Oh. What kind of strange things?'

'Well, first I see my old friend André in court.'

'Is he a judge?'

'No.'

'A lawyer?'

'No, he's a criminal.'

'Christ. And is he your friend? Will he have to go to jail?'

'No, acquitted due to lack of evidence.'

'Lucky. For him, that is. And what else, in the way of odd things?'

'A little later I read that my friend Joost has been nominated for the Spinoza Prize.'

'What does he do?'

'He's a brilliant physicist. At least that was what the paper said.'

'Oh. Don't know the prize.'

'Kind of Dutch Nobel Prize, you could say.'

'Funny friends you've got. And the other one, what's his name...'

'David. From the travel agency. He doesn't count for the moment, because I still see him regularly and he calls me twice a week.'

'But what kind of strange stuff is going on then?'

'Everything is coming back.'

She looked at me thoughtfully. 'I don't find it that strange, I think. These things happen. Chance.'

'There were two other friends,' I said. 'Or rather, a friend and a girlfriend, Peter and Laura.'

Now she raised her eyebrows. 'And have they turned up, too?'

'No.'

I waved to the waiter and ordered two more coffees. I hesi-

tated whether to tell her the story, and decided not to. The day was too beautiful.

‘Or are they dead?’ she asked.

I had come across André at the beginning of 2012, in the dossier of a coke case in which ‘senior civil servants and other prominent people’ were possibly involved. I heard myself saying, ‘Hey, André.’

I went to the trial and waited until the accused came in. André had shaved his head. He looked sharp, in a suit that had undoubtedly cost more than my entire wardrobe. His eyes scanned those present. I saw from a barely perceptible nod of his head that he recognized me. I think he knew I would be there before he had seen me.

A few weeks later he was acquitted. André looked at me more openly now and smiled. Undoubtedly he had also read my look and interpreted it accurately: good work, a result, well done, man.

A week later I read an article about Professor Joost M. Walvoort and his work on string theory. He was a nominee for the Spinoza Prize, worth one and a half million euros. ‘A tidy sum, which you can really do something with as a researcher,’ said Joost in the paper. I knew exactly how he had said that and how he had looked—a mixture of nonchalance and smugness.

I looked for Joost’s name on the website of Leiden University. ‘Prof. J.M. Walvoort (Joost),’ it said. ‘Theoretical Physics.’ I could see from the accompanying photo that the years had not left any excessively deep marks. He was looking confidently into the lens, with that slightly mocking expression.

I keyed in the number and he answered immediately.

'Bart here.'

'Hey Pol, you again?' As if I had him on the line for the fourth time that day. On the bike Joost called me Pol, because the sound of it suggested Flemish cycling aces. He was Tuur.

'I thought: I should give Joost a call.'

'Great. How's things then? Prick still completely in order?'

That's the nice thing about old friendships. The fact that you ring up after twenty-five years and your scholarly friend inquires first of all about the health of your prick.

'Exceptional,' I replied.

'Good. Shall we go for a few beers again?'

'That's why I'm calling you.'

'Nice. Just say when.'

I mentioned a date.

'Fine. In Amsterdam where you are or in Leiden where I am? Or don't you live in Amsterdam anymore? Alkmaar? Then let's do it on my patch in Leiden. Huis De Bijlen, do you know it? Eight o'clock. We'll have a bite to eat first. Nice!'

With him it was no sooner said than done, and he took control, as if he had rung me or had at least been on the point of doing so.

'Right,' I said. 'It'll be nice to see you again, Joost.' I hadn't changed a bit either, immediately ready to accept Joost's leading role.

'Okay. If you like you can sleep over. Bags of room.'

He still had that slight Amsterdam accent.

I didn't say that three days before our date, I was due to go cycling with André.