

# *Joe Speedboat*

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Translated from the Dutch  
by Sam Garrett



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For Rutger Boots



It is said that the samurai  
travels a twofold Way,  
that of the brush and that of the sword.

**MIYAMOTO MUSASHI**



*Brush*



**I**t's been a warm spring. At school they're praying for me, because I've been out of it for more than two hundred days. I've got bedsores all over my body and a condom catheter taped to my flute. This, the doctor tells my parents, is the phase of the 'coma vigil': I've regained limited receptivity to my surroundings. He says I've started reacting to stimuli, pain and noise, and that's good news. Reacting to pain is a definite sign that you're alive.

They hang around my bed the whole time, Pa, Ma, Dirk and Sam. I can hear them as soon as they get out of the lift – a swarm of starlings darkening the sky. They smell of oil and stale tobacco; they've barely bothered to change out of their overalls. HERMANS & SONS, FOR ALL YOUR DEMOLITION NEEDS. Scrap is our middle name.

We demolish wrecked cars, industrial equipment and the occasional café interior, if my brother Dirk happens to be feeling pumped up. Dirk has been barred from almost every bar, shop and inn in Lomark, but not in Westerveld, not yet. He's got a girl over there. He comes home smelling of chemical violets. All you can do is feel sorry for her.

What the Hermanses talk about mostly is the weather, the same old song and dance; business is slow and the weather's to

blame, no matter what the weather's like. They swear and shake their heads, first Pa, then Dirk, then Sam. Dirk clears his sinuses loudly, now he has a gob of snot in his mouth. He doesn't know where to go with it, the only thing left to do is swallow – and, bloop, there it goes.

Lately, though, there's been more to talk about in Lomark than just the weather. While I was out cold, a runaway moving van wrecked the Maandags' step-gabled house, and huge explosions off in the distance are causing the whole town to shit itself with a certain regularity. This all has to do, it seems, with someone by the name of Joe Speedboat. He's new in Lomark; I've never met him.

Whenever they start talking about Joe Speedboat, though, I prick up my ears – he sounds like a good guy if you ask me, but then no one asks me. They're sure Speedboat is the one making the bombs. Not that they've ever caught him at it, but there were never any explosions before he came, and now suddenly there are. Case closed. It's got them pretty pissed off, let me tell you. Sometimes Ma says, 'Hush now, Frankie might hear you,' but they don't pay her any mind.

'Just pop out for smoke,' Pa says.

You're not allowed to do that in here.

'Is that really his name, Speedboat?' asks Sam, my brother, two years my elder.

Sam's never the one I have to worry about.

'Nobody's name is *really* Speedboat,' says Dirk. With that big mouth of his.

Dirk, the firstborn. A real bastard. I could tell you things about him.

'Ach, the boy's just lost his father,' says Ma. 'Let him be.'

Dirk sniffs loudly.

'Speedboat, of all the stupid...'

It makes me itch, a nice kind of itch, the kind you can't help scratching. Joe Speedboat. Well I'll be damned.

Weeks later, the world and I are both still flat on our backs and breathless, the world because of the heat, me because of the accident. And Ma's crying. From happiness this time, for a change.

'Oh, he's back again. Sweetheart, there you are.'

She burned a candle for me every day and actually thinks that helped. In class they think *they're* the ones who did it, with their praying. Even that hypocrite Quincy Hansen joined in on it... as though I'd ever be caught dead in *his* prayers. Not that I can get out of bed or anything. I couldn't if I tried. They've still got to run tests on my spinal column; at the moment, all I can move is my right arm.

'Just enough to choke the chicken,' says Dirk.

I can't talk yet either.

'Not a whole lot ever came out anyway,' says Sam.

He looks over at Dirk to see if he's laughing, but Dirk laughs only at his own jokes. He doesn't have much choice: no one else will.

'Boys!' my mother warns.

So this is how things stand: I, Frankie Hermans, one good arm attached to forty kilos of dead meat. I've been in better situations. But Ma's tickled pink; she'd have been thankful for one good ear – as long as it listened to her, of course.

I have to get out of this place. They're driving me nuts, hanging around my bed, grousing about business and the weather. Did I ask for this? I'm telling you.

**I** grew a year older in my sleep, they celebrated my birthday in the hospital. Ma tells me about the cake with fourteen candles that they scooped around my bed. My sleep lasted about 220 days and, counting the first few weeks of rehab, I'm going home now for the first time in ten months.

It's the middle of June. The miracle of my resurrection – as Ma insists on calling it – puts a lot of pressure on life at home. I have to be fed, cleaned and pushed around. Thank you all very much, but the words just won't cross my lips.

One day my brothers take me to the fair, because Ma makes them. Sam pushes the wheelchair cart; the fresh air hugs me like an old friend. While I was gone the world seems to have changed. It looks scrubbed, as though the Pope were coming to visit or something. Sam pushes me down the street in a hurry, he doesn't want people stopping him to ask questions about me. I can hear the noise of the summer fair. The shrieks, the fast patter of the carnies, the ringing of the alarm bells when you hit the mark – the noise says it all. It says hooray for the fair.

Dirk's walking out in front of us. His back is ashamed to be here. He turns into Zonstraat and passes the Sun Café, with Sam and me bringing up the rear. The fair is fading. All I can hear now are the peaks and valleys of sound. Looks like we're not going to the fair. I turn my head to look at Sam, who's

ramming me down the street at racetrack speed. At the edge of the village we get to the old Hoving place. That's where we stop. Dirk is already opening the garden gate. I haven't been out here for a long time.

'Gimme a hand, wouldya?!' Sam shouts.

The cart won't roll through the high grass full of burdock and poppies. Dirk comes back, the two of them wring the cart through Rinus Hoving's garden, the garden of the late Rinus Hoving. His farm is deserted, and as long as the heirs keep fighting about what to do with it that's the way it will stay. They pick me up, cart and all, and carry me in through the pantry door. The red floor tiles are covered in a carpet of dust. I can see footprints in it. They roll me through the kitchen and down the hall, then park me in front of the sliding glass doors to the sitting room.

'Put him over by the window,' Dirk says. 'So he's got something to look at.'

'Put him over by the window yourself.'

Sam is having his doubts. Dirk's not. Dirk doesn't have doubts; he's too dumb for that.

'We can't really do this,' Sam says.

'It's his own damn fault. If she thinks I'm taking him on the Tilt-a-Whirl, she can think again.'

'She', that's Ma. Not that Dirk has any respect for her, but she has a powerful instrument at her disposal: Pa's right hand. Sam's head moves into view.

'We'll be right back, Frankie. In an hour or so.'

Then they're gone.

This is just great, dropped in some dump like a bundle of dry twigs. At least you know what you can expect from them. I'd figured something like this, I was just waiting for the facts. Facts aren't nearly as bad as suspicions. The fact of the matter is

that I find myself in a darkened house that's breathing down the back of my neck. And that my view consists of a windowsill covered in dead flies, spider webs and dust balls. My fears all have one eye open now, you can't fool them, they're wide awake. And there they are, shouting to beat the band. Critters! Child molesters! Things! In a word: panic. But how long can a person stay scared if nothing happens? It starts feeling kind of weird, and when nothing keeps on happening all you can do is laugh at yourself. But wait a minute, there, that really *was* a sound! I swear, I heard a door slam, something falling over... I turn my head, which takes so much effort that I groan like some retard. Like pushing over a tree with your forehead. And there, standing in the doorway...

'Hello,' says the figure.

A boy's voice. I stare into the light coming from the kitchen behind him, and all I can see is his silhouette in the doorway. He comes over. A boy, thank God it's just a boy. He walks around in front of me and takes a long, unembarrassed look. His gaze takes in the steel braces clamped to my feet, the cart's blue upholstery (genuine leatherette, my good man), the silver tubes and the wooden lever on my right, used to steer the front wheels and propel the back wheel by sheer force of the human arm. Bought 'to grow into', after a manner of speaking. It's a real peach, never left the garage except on Sundays, you know the spiel. They say I'll be able to move around in it myself someday, but for the time being I can't even knock a fly off my own forehead.

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

A tanned face with clear eyes. Hair cut in a Prince Valiant fringe. He turns around and looks out the window. Hoving's garden: heads of red clover, stinging nettles and the lovely poppy, so pleased to be seen but so insulted when picked that she withers in your hand.

‘They dumped you here, didn’t they?’ the boy says, his gaze fixed on Lomark.

The top of the Ferris wheel is sticking out above the houses. He nods.

‘I’ve heard about you. You’re a Hermans, from the wrecking yard. They say Mother Mary worked a blessing on you. It doesn’t look like it to me, though, if you’ll excuse my saying so. I mean, if this is a blessing, what’s punishment look like? Right?’

He nods, like he’s in full agreement with himself.

‘My name’s Joe Speedboat,’ he says. ‘I just moved here. We live on Achterom, you know where that is?’

Broad hands, stubby fingers. Broad feet, too, which he stands on like a samurai. That’s something I happen to know about, samurai. About *seppuku*, too, the Way of Dying to preserve your honour, when you stick a short sword in your guts and pull it up, from bottom left to top right. You could tell how brave someone was from the length of the cut. But I’m digressing.

I can see what it is that pisses Dirk off. It radiates off him: he’s completely unafraid. Joe Speedboat, planter of bombs, ruiner of slumbers – with your cut-off jeans and your nutty dried-out leather sandals. Where have you been so long?

‘Wait a minute, I need to get something,’ he says.

He leaves the viewfinder and I hear him going up the stairs somewhere in the house, then footsteps above my head. Is that where he has his workshop? For his bombs and things? Speedboat’s Control Room? When he comes back down he’s carrying a washing-machine timer and two Black Cat batteries. He sits down on the windowsill, frowns in concentration, and hooks up the poles of the batteries. Then he attaches a little metal rod to the clock and sets the timer to zero. Suddenly he looks up.

‘We had problems while we were moving,’ he says earnestly. ‘An accident. That’s when my father died.’

Then he goes back to what he was doing.

The first time Lomark heard of Joe and his family was when the Scania crashed through the ancestral gabled home of the Maandag family on Brugstraat. All the way up to its ass in the front room, where son Christof was sitting in front of the tube playing a video game. He never flinched. When he finally looked up the first thing he saw was a headlight poking like an angry eye through the whirl of dust and debris. Then it gradually dawned on him that there was a truck in his house. The only sound the whole time was the *toing-toing* of the video ball bouncing across the screen.

Hanging down over the grille of the Scania was the torso of a man, his arms dangling limply like a scarecrow fallen from heaven. The man’s lower body was pinned inside the cab and he was dead, clear enough. But there was still movement inside: the door on the passenger side of the cab swung open slowly and the boy Christof saw climbing down was roughly his age, twelve or thirteen. He was wearing a gold lamé shirt, sandals and a pair of knickerbockers. Your parents would have to be slightly bonkers to dress you like that, but he just peered around the room matter-of-factly, the mortar swirling down onto his head and shoulders.

‘Hello,’ Christof said, the joystick still in his hand.

The other boy shook his head, as though something peculiar had occurred to him.

‘Who are you?’ was all Christof asked him then.

‘My name’s Joe,’ the boy said. ‘Joe Speedboat.’

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And so he came like a meteorite into our village, with its river that floods its banks in winter, its permanent web along which gossip scuttles, and its rooster, the rooster in our coat of arms, the same rooster that chased a band of Vikings from Lomark's gates a thousand years ago or so while our ancestors were in the church praying, for Christ's sake. 'It was the cock that showed its pluck,' we say around here. Something that keeps something else at arm's length, that's our symbol. But Joe came roaring in with such force that nothing could have stopped him.

The accident had left him a partial orphan; the man hanging out the windshield of the truck was his father. His mother was lying unconscious in the cab, his little sister India was staring at the soles of her father's shoes. Christof and Joe looked at each other like creatures from different galaxies – Joe stranded in his spaceship, Christof holding out his hand to make the historic first contact. Here was something that would free him from the leaden immobility of this village, where the only thing that showed any pluck was the cock, that hateful animal you ran into everywhere: on the doors of the fire engines, above the entrance to the town hall and in bronze on the market square. The rooster that was pulled around on a float during Carnival parades, that crowed at you from decorative roofing tiles beside dozens of front doors and whose incarnation at the local *patisserie* was the 'Cocky' (a crumbly dog biscuit strewn with granola flakes). On sideboards, mantelpieces and windowsills you found glass roosters, ceramic roosters and stained-glass roosters; oil-painted roosters hung on the walls. When it comes to that cock, our creativity knows no bounds.

Joe looked around in amazement at this house into which Fate (read: faulty steersmanship aggravated by violating the speed limit in a residential zone) had tossed him. In the house where he'd grown up, the one they had traded in for the house

in Lomark, there were no oil-painted portraits staring at you gravely from the walls, as though you'd stolen something. And of course you'd always stolen something, which meant those faces would always keep looking like that so that you didn't have to be afraid, just give them a friendly nod and say, 'Come, come, boys, a little smile wouldn't hurt.'

The chandelier was real nice too, he thought, as was the antique refreshment trolley bearing Egon Maandag's crystal decanters filled with whiskeys of provenances from Loch Lomond to Talisker. At Joe's place all they had were squat bottles of elderberry wine, deep purple and homemade with a water seal that bubbled and belched like a gastric patient. The wine was always either not quite ripe or just a tad past its prime. 'But the flavour is really quite special, isn't it, love?' (his mother speaking to his father, never the other way around). After which they would guzzle manfully, only to flush the rotgut down the toilet the very next day; the hangovers it produced resembled nothing so much as the near-death experiences of Russian rubbing-alcohol drinkers.

Later Joe would find out that he had landed in the salon of the Maandag clan, the most important family in Lomark, owners of the asphalt plant by the river. Egon Maandag employed twenty-five men at his factory, not to mention a housemaid and at times an au pair from yet another land beyond the dykes.

Joe just stood and stared around.

Later Christof said he did that in order not to have to see the dead man hanging from the windshield. When he finally took his eyes off Christof and his surroundings, he turned and looked at his father. He reached out his hand and laid it on the back of the man's blood-smeared head. He stroked his hair gently and said something Christof couldn't make out. His

shoulders shook, then he walked over to the hole the truck had knocked in the front wall. Climbing over the rubble he stepped outside, into sunlight. He walked down Brugstraat to the winter dyke, climbed over it and made for the river. Heifers were gambolling in the washlands; wilted grass left behind by winter floods hung from the barbed wire like flaxen Viking beards. Joe reached the summer dyke and the ferryboat jetty behind. Once on board he climbed up onto the railing, his legs dangling over the water, and didn't even look up when Piet Honing came out of the pilothouse to collect his fare.

That Joe and Christof would become friends was as inevitable as fish on Friday. It started with that gleam in Christof's eye when he looked so greedily at the powder-covered boy who emerged from the moving van. Sunlight poured into the salon through the shattered wall behind Joe, filling the room with the hum of a spring day. Christof had never seen anything like it. The image of the boy against that flood of light filled him with a longing to cast off his old life.

But Christof wasn't like that, and never would be. He was too skittish for that, and too much a doubter. In his longing to be just like the boy from the truck there was also the kind of envy that makes your canines ache, the vampirish urge to suck the life right out of someone.

The accident with the moving van formed them. It reinforced the stoic in Joe, and brought out something oldish in Christof, something worrisome. If Joe talked about building an airplane, Christof would say, 'Shouldn't you fix your bike first?' If the monthly air-raid sirens went off atop the bank at the very moment Joe had finished knocking together equipment that allowed him to hijack the Sunday broadcast of the evangelical community – 'Radio God', as the locals call it – and replace it

with speed metal played backwards, that for Christof was a signal that building jamming stations was a bad idea. For Joe it meant that it was twelve o'clock, time for lunch.

Joe celebrated our first meeting with a doozy of a bomb, that's how I see it. The very same evening, after we had met at Hoving's farm: *tout* Lomark, straight up in bed. It's a gift. Dogs bark, lights go on, people crowd together in the street. Joe's name is on everyone's lips. In bed I lie grinning from ear to ear.

A couple of men go out for a look-see. He's blown up an electrical substation. Now the fair has no juice, and a whole lot of houses don't either.

The moon licks at the bars of my bed. I exercise my arm.