

Pieter and Bill

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By Pia de Jong

In Amsterdam every morning at seven o'clock I walked to the bakery around the corner to buy bread. In front of the baker's shop, on a wooden bench, sat Pieter. He was a man of about sixty, though he might have been younger. Or older, for that matter. A fierce, bristling beard, worn shoes, and, above all, a loud voice, in which he commented on everything and everyone. "So, Pia" — he never forgot my name — "here you are again!"

Every morning, the same sentence. In this loud voice that echoed across the canal in that early hour. He always gave me the feeling that I must be overly busy. That I would be much better off sitting on a bench, watching the sunrise, just like he did.

"Hello, Pieter," I said in turn. "Good morning to you." Pieter walked his rounds from canal to canal — the Prinsengracht to the Keizersgracht, continuing to the Herengracht, and then back. He had his regular audience that he greeted with his custom-made, unchanging comments.

I never wondered where he slept. I just assumed that day and night he walked his rounds and, in between them, sat on that bench. Just as I believed, when I was in kindergarten, that my teacher lived in the classroom. When I'm back in the Netherlands, I always run into Pieter. He greets me as if I never left.

Every city I've ever lived in has its Pieter. When I was young, when we drove to my grandparents', we always passed a man who had taken it upon himself to direct traffic. Studded with colorful insignia upon a fine suit, he waved his arms in the air, gesturing wildly, but his face always serious. He was a fixed landmark on our route.

It did not take long before I saw Bill in Princeton. Gray beard, cap, and in his hand a broom. In the middle of Nassau Street, the divide between town and gown. On one side, there is the university, with its stately buildings and ambitious students with their grand plans for the future. On the other side, you can find restaurants, banks, and shops. Two worlds apart, even though they cannot live without each other.

The village green is called Palmer Square. Like any green, there is an ice cream shop, a deli and a magazine kiosk. A lawn with some trees, a sculpture, a few benches. On one of these benches Bill sits when he's finished sweeping. His broom beside him, like a faithful dog. Bill's task is to sweep Nassau Street's sidewalks clean and thoroughly well. He does so entirely at his own initiative. "Watch out, do not walk through the dirt pile," he says when I walk next to him. "Of course not," I say. He makes sure I do what I say.

Bill walks with a limp, and his right arm is partly paralyzed. Has he had an accident? Has he fought in Vietnam?

Passers-by from outside the city never know quite what to think of him. It strikes me that most people circle around him. As if he is the center of the world. and they are the outsiders. Children of course all know him. Bill just belongs there. Although he scares them, threatening with his broom when they ride bikes on the sidewalk.


The Pieters and Bills of this world have a strong sense of territory — and share it with all of us. When I have been away for a while, I am always reassured to return and see Bill with his broom on Nassau Street, at the center of his world, and now mine.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch novelist who moved from Amsterdam to Princeton in the summer of 2012 with her husband, Robbert Dijkgraaf, after he was named the director of the Institute for Advanced Study. She currently writes a weekly column for the Dutch newspaper NRC, called Flessenpost (Notes in a Bottle) about her life in the USA.

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