

jan bee landman
Affection



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a short, literary, mainstream story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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Yvonne had always said that Willem was a great big softy, which I found hard to believe. He certainly did not look it. Willem Wallace was a Scotsman and groom at the riding school where I stabled my horse in the early 1970s. He looked like a brooding villain from a silent movie, tall, lanky and square-shouldered. His black, oily hair was plastered back to resemble a skull-cap. Although his face had regular features that almost made him handsome, this impression was ruined by dirt, dense stubbles and an eternal scowl. He always seemed bad-tempered, never smiled and seldom spoke. His clothes defied belief. Jeans so filthy that they would have stood up alone and tattered, grimy sweaters. He also smelled bad: a sourish body odor mixed with the aromas of dark tobacco, beer and horses. On top of all that he treated the customers with open contempt.

Not surprisingly, almost everyone at the riding school, including me, was afraid of him. Children panicked at his approach and scattered like sparrows in every direction. Grown-ups just pretended they were not there. Only newcomers made the mistake of asking him things. Then he would look at them in disgust as if they had farted, without responding,

until they repeated their request. Then he'd nod his head and simply continue what he was doing. If they asked him a third time, he'd walk away and disappear.

I could not understand how any business could afford to employ a man like him. His mere presence dampened the atmosphere. And although he never harmed anyone, I could not help feeling that this was only a matter of time. I began to synchronize my visits with times that he was out of sight. Usually in the afternoon, when he skulked off to a shed at the back of the riding hall, where nobody but the boss dared disturb him, and even then only in dire emergencies.

He also seemed to get drunk every night. Whenever I went riding in the evening, Willem would be at the bar, swilling beer, watching the riders with unmistakable disdain, repeatedly shaking his head at some imperfection on our part. When we had finished, and he had to unsaddle the hack horses, he would stagger about unsteadily, in a miasma of alcohol, unmistakably drunk.

In a way he was the cause of my getting to know

Yvonne. My horse developed a minor ailment, which meant that he had to receive medication three times a day. I had been told that I could only rely on the morning and evening doses being given (because Willem did those and, whatever his faults, he would never forget anything related to the welfare of horses). But at noon Willem was off duty and the horses depended for food and everything else on the volunteers, who were notoriously unreliable, not out of any ill-will but simply because they were too numerous, too chaotic, too young. So if I wanted to be sure, I'd have to do it myself. And that's what I did. Every lunch break I would race from the office to the riding school to dump a spoonful of powder on my horse's food before racing back again.

One day, when I was in the stall, the doorway was darkened by the huge form of Willem. He startled me, and for a brief moment I feared some kind of mischief. But he simply patted the horse on the rump.

"Giving medicine, I see," he said, in an unusually friendly voice.

"Er... er... yes," I stammered.

"That's good. Don't trust the little urchins, do you?"

"Well, "don't trust" is a bit harsh. They mean well,

but things often get in the way when you're young."

"Very true." A brief silence, which made me uncomfortable. What on earth was I to say?

He cleared his throat.

"I could do it," he said.

I almost passed out. That was about the last thing I had expected from the big, surly brute.

"Would you?"

"Sure, no problem.

"That would be wonderful. Save me a lot of time."

"Good, that's settled then" he said, instantly turning and shuffling off.

"Thanks a lot!" I shouted after him.

He did not respond.

I was so astonished by the event that I had to share it with someone. So, against my habit, I went into the canteen. This was a peculiar place. Although it was long and narrow, with a fully equipped bar next to the entrance, it had a homey atmosphere, like an oversized but cosy, old-fashioned living room, almost Victorian in its excess of furnishing. The floor was overcrowded with wooden tables and chairs, each table covered with a different kind of cloth, a big

white Martini ashtray and a little glass vase with flowers in varying states of bloom. One long side was glazed from ceiling to waistlevel, offering a view of the riding hall. The back wall had two doors, one leading to stands along the ring, the other to an office. Every square inch of the walls was covered with some object: pictures of horses, posters, pieces of tack, horseshoes, lamps with frilly shades, little, wall-mounted jukeboxes, a dart board. The place always had the same aroma of stale beer, tobacco smoke, hints of perfume and the oily odor of frying fat from the little kitchen behind the bar.

There was usually a radio on, tuned to some popular music station, softly. But that day the volume had been turned up. A love song blared through the room and somewhere behind the bar a female voice was crooning along, quite melodiously.

*I can't survive,
stay alive,
without your love.*

It sounded heartfelt. I wanted to be quiet and listen, but stumbled over a bar stool, which instantly made a

young girl pop up behind the bar, with a wealth of long and honey-colored hair swirling about a flustered face, as she dashed to the radio to turn down the volume.

"Oops, sorry about that," she said, blushing fiercely behind the veil of her hair, keeping her eyes down.

"Don't be," I said. "I enjoyed your singing."

"That is a very sarcastic thing to say."

"No I mean it."

"Then you must be tone-deaf," she said, with a suppressed giggle, "I know that I am."

I smiled.

"Could I have a glass of sherry?"

"Righto," she said and set about her task.

I watched her with growing interest. She was young and very small, about five feet, but obviously not a child anymore. Very lively, with brisk movements, tossing her hair out of her face with little shakes of her head.

"Are you new here?" I asked.

She turned my way, right in front of me, looking straight into my eyes, only the bar between us, a yard perhaps. I could smell a sweet, orangy fragrance. With both hands, fingers outspread, she brushed

back her hair, revealing all of her face. It gave me a little jolt. Not that she was beautiful – eyes too small, nose a bit awry and her mouth rather big – but her lively and cheerful features made her irresistibly pretty. Somewhere inside I felt something stir that I had not felt for a very long time. I was 35, a great commercial success, and very unhappily married.

"O no, I'm not new," she said. "Not really. I was a customer, sort of, and now I am an employee, sort of."

"Ah," I said, puzzled.

"I'm not making any sense, am I?"

"Not entirely."

"That's me. Muddle, muddle, muddle. Anyhows, here's your sherry."

She placed the glass in front of me.

"Why the booze?" she asked. "I've never seen you drink in the daytime before."

I looked up, surprised that she seemed to know that much about me. She was intently rubbing the drainboard with a rag, avoiding my gaze.

"I had a bit of a shock," I said. "Willem offered to give my horse medicine."

She looked up, eyebrows arched in surprise.

"What's so shocking about that?"

"Well, you know... Willem."

She chuckled.

"Aha. I see. You obviously *don't* know Willem. Well, Mr Landman, take it from me that Willem is kindest, warm-heartedest softie you'll ever meet."

I was speechless.

She nodded firmly.

"No kidding. He is."

"He sure knows how to hide it."

"Things aren't always what they seem."

"That's true enough. Give me an example."

"Well for one thing, this whole business would collapse without Willem. He works from seven to twelve. Seven days a week."

"Not in the afternoon."

"No. He takes a few hours off, but that's when he looks after his rabbits. He breeds them. For the money. But mostly for their company. He also stays nights if there something wrong with a horse or when a mare's expecting. He knows more about horses than anyone I know, vets included. And also he looks out for us, apprentices. He'll stand up to anyone if he thinks it's the right thing to do."

Just then the door opened and a stammering little face asked Yvonne to come and help. She ran off at once, leaving me in a bit of a daze. It had been a long time that I had enjoyed someone's company as much as hers. Although I was already late for the office, I waited a little longer, hoping for her to return. She did not, so I left.

I did not have much of a life just then. Work all week, social commitments with my frosty wife during the weekends. In fact, riding my horse was the only genuine pleasure I had. And now suddenly this lovely little girl had appeared. I made some discreet enquiries, learned that she was only 17, still in high school, left to her own devices by uncaring parents, mad about horses, working part-time at the riding-school, but only paid in free rides and snacks. Thursday morning was her shift behind the bar.

Next Thursday I was back. In the meantime I had thought about her a lot, but not seriously. After all, she was hardly more than a child. I could not imagine starting anything with her.

Still, when I did not see her moped in the parking lot, my mood darkened, to brighten instantly when I saw the honey-colored shock of her hair, just sinking from view behind the bar as I entered the canteen.

"I wish I wasn't so infernally clumsy," I heard her mutter, apparently to another girl who was sitting at the other end of the bar, largely hidden behind a newspaper.

"We all wish you weren't," said the girl, a chubby, red-haired lass, who caught sight of me and uttered a cheerful greeting.

"Morning, sir."

This made Yvonne spiral into a standing position, hair swirling. For a split second she looked at me, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, a picture of innocent wonder. It gave me a tingling sensation, a bit like stubbing my elbow.

I smiled.

"Good morning ladies."

Yvonne lowered her head a little so that her hair hung before her face.

"Good morning, Mr Landman," she said. "Sherry?"

"No, coffee will do."

"Righto," she said and began to rummage about in search of something. She kept her head in such a position that her hair remained before her face.

"Why are you hiding behind your hair?" I asked.

"That's because I don't want to frighten you."

I frowned.

"How's that?"

"I have a hideously disfigured face. It would turn your stomach."

"Really?"

She giggled.

"No, not really, but I do have a skin disease. My brother says it's leprosy, but so far nothing has fallen off yet." She dangled her hands before her face to demonstrate this. "So I guess it's not really leprosy."

"No I guess not."

"It's very disfiguring, though, my skin disease. That's also the main reason why I cannot get a boyfriend."

"Surely it cannot be that bad."

"Oh but it is. I break out in horrible brown spots. Well, two of them. One here, right smack in the middle of my forehead." She parted her hair to show me. There was nothing there but pale, smooth skin.

"I see nothing." I said.

"Of course you don't," she said. "It's not active just now. It only happens when I am very tired and excited."

"But you just said that you were disfigured."

"And so I am. I have a pimple."

"A pimple?"

"Yes, a pimple. A big one. A huge one. A Himalaya-size pimple."

"That's some pimple."

"Yup, it's the curse of my life. I'll never get a boyfriend."

"Can I see it?"

"Only if you show me yours."

"I haven't got a pimple."

"Well, that's that then. Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"Coffee would be nice."

"O darn, I forgot."

"Muddle, muddle, muddle," said the girl at the other end of the counter.

"Very funny," said Yvonne, suddenly stopping and turning back from the coffee machine, empty-handed.

"I've got something to tell you."

"Really?"

"Yup. It's about Willem. He was in fine form the other day."

The redhead chimed in.

"You can say that again."

"This is what happened." Yvonne hopped on to a bar stool behind the bar. "You know that Willem is not very keen about ponies."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, he isn't. He calls them freaky little midgets and refuses to have anything to do with them, unless of course there's something wrong with them and then he goes and molly-coddles them. Yesterday he caught a youngster teasing Miss Marples. So he picks up this lad, carries him out of the riding school, holding him way out in front of him, like a bundle of wet hay and drops him into the canal." She burst into laughter. "You should have heard the kid holler. I laughed so hard, I almost fainted."

"Wow," I said.

"No, there's more. Half an hour later the boy's father appears, to complain. Willem throws him into the canal as well. *And* an innocent bystander who said something. He'd probably have done the same

with the policemen who followed later, if the boss had not kept him out of sight."

I laughed, more at her delight than at the story, amusing though it was.

Suddenly she slapped her forehead.

"Darn! Forgot your coffee again."

She ran to the coffee machine and finally came back with the beverage, rubbing her forehead.

"Almost knocked myself out there," she said.

I grinned, offering her a cigarette.

"No thanks. I don't feel so good."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know."

The girl at the far end of the bar looked up from her paper.

"Perhaps you're not getting enough sex," she said.

"It says here in the paper that it is very bad for your health not to have enough sex."

"Ah," said Yvonne. "That explains everything. What do you think? Should I have sex?"

"I don't really know. But if you think it will do you good, you should."

"Easier said than done. I can't get a boyfriend. Nobody will have me, what with my skin disease and

pimples and all. Anyhows, I don't believe in sex before marriage."

"Very sensible."

"But I don't believe in marriage either. So I've dug myself quite a hole there." She burst out laughing.

She cocked her head a little, gazing at me pensively, pursing her lips.

"You don't look like someone who has actually had sex. You seem more of a nudge-nudge, wink-wink type of person to me."

"Say no more," I said, taking my cue from the Monty Python sketch she was referring to.

She broke into another peal of laughter, which was very infectious. I could not help laughing along.

"You a Python fan, too?" she asked.

"I sure am."

She gave her head a shake, tossing her hair out of her face. It gave me a little jolt. Again it struck me how pretty she was. I could not help staring. Slowly the smile faded from her lips. She looked at me quizzically.

"What?" she asked.

"There's no pimple."

She began to smile, but stopped again.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Nobody has ever looked at me like that."

"I don't think I've ever looked at anyone like this."

"Well, stop it, you're making me nervous."

"Okay," I said, lowering my gaze. I suddenly felt my heart beating inside my chest, very loudly. I had to take a deep breath. Fortunately Yvonne and the paper-reading girl got into a heated argument about the best way to get sex. I quickly drank my coffee and left.

Two weeks later she had a nasty fall from a horse while I was there. I volunteered to take her to a hospital for a check-up. It turned out she only had a mild concussion. I took her to my apartment, a small penthouse that I rented to avoid daily commuting during the working week. As she lay on the couch, slumbering, I sat beside her on the floor, gazing at her, strangely mesmerized. I stroked her forehead, where indeed a brown spot had appeared, but not disfiguring at all, more like a big freckle. As I stroked her hair, I felt myself falling in love with her. And

when she awoke and smiled the moment she saw me, I could not help but kiss her.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, "It just happened."

She smiled again.

"Fair enough."

I gave her another kiss and our affair began. A wonderful, richly tapestried, wildly exciting affair, but also heart-wrenching, because at that point in time there was no way we could become a couple. She was only 17, I was 35 and inextricably married. It seemed madness but we could not help ourselves. We were, in cruel irony, made for each other, sharing a deep love for animals, a passion for horse-riding, a genuine desire to love and profound need to be loved. We laughed at the same jokes and wept at the same movies. We had wonderful evenings out. Dinners in posh restaurants, where she shocked the straight-laced waiters with her lack of table manners and mollified them with her merriment. There would be wild dancing in discos, fierce battles at pinball machines, a slap-up supper of junk food in a cafeteria and always a soppy finale in some nightclub, dancing close together, slightly drunk and very lustful. And

although she could look embarrassingly young, making me feel almost a pedophile, sexually she was much more active than I was. Her lascivious eagerness was so exciting that I could never get enough of her. She turned into the love of my life.

We had agreed that she would never phone me at work. So, when she did just that, three weeks before Christmas, to say "please come at once", in a tense, little voice, I realized it was serious. Without bothering to make up any excuse, I simply announced my departure and went. During my drive, through heavy snowfall in a gathering dusk, I forced myself to act as calmly as possible, although my mind was in a whirl. A troupe of disasters paraded before my mind's eye, ranging from another fall from a horse to fire, pregnancy, rape or some fatal disease. The sheer volume of these chaotic thoughts numbed me and I managed to suppress the urge to drive as fast as I could.

Fifteen minutes later I reached the riding school. A strangely atmospheric scenery awaited me, tranquil and Christmassy. It had been snowing steadily for

over an hour and our part of the world was covered with a downy white layer, several inches deep. As I got out of the car, the snowfall was just abating. A few last big flakes fluttered around me, mothlike. The dusk cloaked everything in a lustreless, grayish blue. The collection of buildings that made up the riding school lay at the bottom of a gentle slope, huddled together under the blanket of snow. Above the main entrance stood a Christmas tree, sprinkled with lights that shone with harsh, white glitters in the gloom. It was freezing cold, a scent of woodsmoke in the air. I noticed a police car in the parking lot, a big white Chevy, freshly parked, judging by the sharp tracks in the snow, and its bare metal shiny between the dull contours of snowbound automobiles on either side.

Across a white and slippery slope I slithered to the door, tense, dreading whatever awaited me. Peace reigned in the stable. The horses stood munching. I was greeted by the familiar odors of hay, manure and horse sweat mixed with the petroleum from the big black stove in the saddle room. The large sliding door to the riding hall was half open. The hall was fully lit but empty.

I hurried into the canteen. On first sight everything

seemed normal. A few trainees were sitting together at a table, the radio was softly playing Christmas carols. Then I saw Yvonne. She was in the centre of the group, head lowered upon her crossed arms, sobbing.

"What's going on?" I asked. Hearing my voice Yvonne immediately jumped up and flung herself into my arms. She was shivering, clung to me like a frightened child. I stroked her hair and consoled her as best I could and after a few minutes she calmed down enough to talk.

"A nightmare," she said, chattering, as if with cold. "Willem told me not to look, but you know me. I had to." She closed her eyes, two big teardrops formed in the corners and slid down her cheeks, already smudged with mascara. She sniffled.

"I've never seen anything like it. Blood everywhere. And his head ... like a smashed tomato. Pulp. Just pulp. Oh God," she gagged, pushed me away and dashed out of the room.

I stood aghast.

"What was that all about?"

"It's Willem," said one of the other girls. "He's killed Richard Smit."

I staggered.

"Killed him?"

"Like a madman."

"Yeah, he caught him beating Lady Macbeth and just flipped."

"Beat his brains out."

"Literally."

I felt my knees wobble and had to sit down.

"That's terrible," I said. "And now what?"

"The police is here, in the office," the girl tilted her head at the door in the far wall.

"Willem called them himself," she added.

Yvonne returned, looking a mess, sickly white, rednosed, eyes swollen and almost closed.

She sat down quietly beside me, took one of my hands in hers and held it tightly.

A few minutes later the door to the office opened. Two uniformed police officers appeared, Willem behind them followed by two men in plainclothes, detectives apparently, and the boss, very subdued. A hush fell over the company. Willem looked his usual self, apart from uncommonly big stains on his sweater, some red smears on his face, and the handcuffs on his wrists. He walked erect, looking at

nobody in particular, until he passed us. Then his eyes sought out Yvonne and he winked at her, making her burst into tears again. Willem stopped. One of the uniforms tried to edge him on, but Willem eyed him so ominously that he backed off. Gently the big man laid a hand on Yvonne's head.

"Don't cry, lassie. It's all right. Take care of Lady, will you?"

She looked up at him through her tears, nodding fiercely.

"I will," she blubbered.

"That's my girl." He turned and followed the policemen out of the door.

The radio was still softly playing Christmas carols. A choir was singing: "On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me..."

"Please take me home," Yvonne said.

She was very quiet in the car. I imagined that she was still overcome with the horror of the event. Darkness had fallen. It was snowing hard again. Visibility was down to a few metres, slowing traffic down to a crawl.

When we approached her parent's house, she stirred.

"I want to stay with you," she said.

This was not part of our elaborate ritual to keep our relationship discreet. But it mattered nothing just then. I turned the car and drove back into the city.

At the apartment she seemed to regain her composure, even began to smile faintly.

We sat down on the couch, both with a large sherry.

"Don't you think it weird for Willem to go berserk like that?" she asked.

"Well, I'm not surprised he killed someone."

"No. Me neither, but it's the way he's did it. I've never seen him lose control before."

I looked at her. My love. This little girl, now so serious, touchingly so.

"Abuse of horses always infuriated him." I said.

"I know. But I've seen him furious before. So have you. Remember the knifing?"

I did. One evening a drunken motorcycle thug had wandered into the riding school, terrorizing everyone in the canteen at knife-point. Willem stood up to him. He had been a boxer in his youth, quite good, apparently. But the motorcyclist stabbed him immediately, driving the blade deep into his stomach.

Willem uttered a soft groan and then threw a single punch – one crunching jab – and the knifeman collapsed into a corner, vomiting teeth and blood into his lap. Calmly Willem walked to the bar and sank upon a stool.

"One beer," he said, "and an ambulance."

"Remember how great that was?" Yvonne asked.

"I do. But what's the connection?"

"Well, that's Willem. He never did more than he had to. I just can't see him beating up a corpse. Besides, he hates the sight of blood."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she uttered a small, mirthless giggle "That's also why he doesn't slaughter his rabbits himself. He just can't. He has to ask someone else to do it for him. He really is a great big softie, you know."

"I don't think Richard would agree."

She shrugged.

"Who cares about him? That asshole got what he asked for. Serves him right for always pestering poor Lady." Her face turned grim, lips pursed. "He grabbed me once. Tried to rape me. Willem dragged him away."

Her words gave me a sting of anger.

"You're kidding."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, it's not really such a big deal. You'd be surprised how many of these respectable owners try to grab us stable girls. But that's not important. There's something fishy about all this."

She sank into a dark muse, nibbling at her fingernails.

In some dark and twisted way her gravity made me amorous, rousing my desire to make love to her. Just as I placed a hand on her thigh, she started. Her eyes widened.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed, "Oh my God." She clapped her hands against her cheeks. "Oh my sweet god."

She jumped up and began to pace up and down.

"He didn't do it. I'm certain. She did. He's protecting her."

Half stunned by her sudden outburst, I did not have a clue what she was talking about.

"Don't you see? That fool Richard must have gone too far. I've seen him whip her in the stable. Poor Lady would try to go through the wall. It must have

been something like that. He was beating her and she must have kicked him. Willem found the corpse and smashed his skull to hide the wound."

"Are you trying to tell me that Willem is going to jail to protect a horse?"

"Yup."

I uttered a contemptuous snort.

"I don't believe it. I'm also mad about my horse but there are limits."

"Not for Willem, not with Lady Macbeth. She's his little girl. He's loony about her. He raised her by hand because she was orphaned as a foal. When she took ill, I've seen him sitting beside her for hours with a flyswatter to keep the flies away. He's fonder of that horse than many parents of their children. Oh my God! This is great. Willem's not a murderer at all." She did a silly little dance out of sheer delight.

I did not believe her. But she remained adamant, swearing that she would stake anything on Willem's innocence.

After a few minutes her mood took another swing. Her face darkened.

"What's wrong?" I asked, "Doubts after all?"

"No," she said. "I'm just wondering if we should not

do something. Warn the police, tell others. We can't just let him rot in jail for something he did not do, can we?"

"Yes we can. In the highly unlikely event that you are right, he would probably take it very hard if you interfered. Besides, I don't think anyone would believe you. And Willem would never admit it. So what's the point?"

She thought for a moment and nodded.

"You're right. It would be useless. But it's so infuriating. I just know I'm right."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not."

"Wanna bet?"

"Sure."

"A 100 to 1?"

"Whatever."

We made the bet, to be decided when Willem got out of jail and she would ask him about the deed in my presence.

She stayed at my apartment that night and we made love, but things were never the same after that day.

The event changed Yvonne, took away some of her sparkle, her ebullience, joy of life. She became more thoughtful, less carefree, and – worst of all – she began to rebel against our arrangement. It had always been understood that – barring miracles – I would never be able to leave my wife. Not because I did not want to, but because there were too many entanglements and complications, social and professional. I would have to plunge headlong into so many abysses that it was impossible that I'd ever emerge from them unwrecked. Yvonne knew. I knew. It had never been a matter of discussion. And even now, when the only thing that could have saved us would have been some closer kind of relationship, she never suggested that I should leave my wife. She just wanted out.

It was hard, on both of us. I went through some of the worst months of my life, aching for her, desperately lonely in my loveless marriage, hoping against hope that some day this little wayward girl would change her mind. But she did not. She moved on, went a bit wild, started seeing other men, right before my eyes. And that was more than I could bear. I moved my

horse to another riding school, so that I need not see her with others. That helped, eventually. Time slowly did its destructive work. I got over her, at least enough to get on with my life. But when she phoned one day, asking to see me, her voice struck me to the core. I trembled so badly on the way to our meeting place, that I had to stop at a pub for a large whisky to steady my nerves. When I saw her, time reversed. There was a brief spell of confusion. Four years had turned her from a little girl into a young woman. But it took only a few minutes for me to see no difference. Everything about her was so familiar, so reliable.

"See Monty Python last night?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Yeah, But it's not the same, laughing alone."

She smiled, wistfully.

It turned out she only wanted money. The riding school was doing poorly and the boss had to sell some horses, among them Lady Macbeth, which he had bought from the dead man's widow. Willem, still in prison, could not afford her and Yvonne only had half. Would I lend her the rest?

"No," I said, "I'll give it to you."

Her mouth fell open.

"Really?"

"Yes," I said, reaching for my notebook. "Where do I send it?"

She looked at me, pensively, with a hint of suspicion.

"It's not some kind of bribe, is it?"

"No. What do you take me for?"

"Then I'm speechless."

"That would be a first."

She laughed and gave me a bank account number.

I jotted it down and put the notebook back into my pocket.

"What'll you have?" I asked.

"I can't stay."

I winced. Up to that point some hope had been budding inside me. All at once it was blighted.

I cast her a beseeching look.

She looked away.

"Please don't ..." She lowered her eyes, made a sniffing sound. "Darn," she said. "I thought I was past this."

She jumped up.

"I must go. I really must. I'm awfully grateful. I really am. You're great. I'll never forget." She lowered her head and ran away.

I just sat there, lost, empty, sad beyond words. I ordered another whisky. Tears would trickle down my cheek now and then, for everyone to see. I did not care, just sat there in a daze of sorrow, sipping my whisky, reminiscing, in a strangely masochistic and somehow comforting ritual of mourning.

Predictably, that brief encounter flung me right back to where we had parted, many years ago. I had to go through getting over her all over again.

Two years later we were together once more. On the day of Willem's release from jail.

We were to meet him at her place, a small cottage in the country, where she kept Lady Macbeth and her foal, just a few weeks old. The house was owned by her latest friend, another much older man who yearned to be her husband but whom she could only see as a convenient companion. He was a lawyer and at work that day.

"A sugar daddy, to be honest. Awfully nice but also awfully boring. I'm making an effort but it's only a matter of time."

We were in the kitchen of the cottage, a meticulously restored farmhouse, full of antiques and every imaginable modern convenience.

It was a sweltering summer's day, but the kitchen was kept cool by inaudible air-conditioning. I felt strange being there. Willem meant little to me. His murder of Richard was a remote thing of the past. But I had not been able to resist the opportunity of seeing Yvonne.

The first few minutes had been very uncomfortable. She had not changed since our previous meeting. Neither had I. There was still a very strong attraction between us. Fortunately Willem broke the spell by phoning that he was on his way.

"Only a few minutes more," she said. "And then we'll know."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then we must not do anything to antagonize him," she said and burst into her old, familiar laugh.

When a carefully groomed gentleman in a pinstriped suit stepped out of the taxi, I had to look twice before recognizing Willem. He looked like an elder statesman. Yvonne ran out and flung her arms around him. He reacted awkwardly, motionless at first, with his arms limp along his sides, then lifting them and placing his big hands clumsily on her shoulders. She dragged him towards the house. I waited with some trepidation. I had never met a convicted killer before.

When he saw me, his expression remained the same, neither pleased nor displeased. I held out my hand.

"Hello Willem, you're looking very well."

He shook my hand with an unexpectedly gentle grip.

"Hello Mr Landman," he said, in exactly the same manner as he would have done six years ago.

Yvonne was practically jumping up and down with excitement.

"Please Willem, I've been telling Jan all these years that you didn't kill that bastard. Was I right?"

Willem almost smiled. His lips remained tightly closed but a few smile lines appeared around his eyes and his cheeks bulged ever so slightly.

"I knew you knew," he said.

"Yes!" Yvonne punched the air, she beamed at me.

"See! What did I tell you?"

I gazed at Willem in disbelief.

He was calm, relaxed, more so than I had ever seen him.

"Are you saying that you spent six years in prison for that horse?" I asked.

"Aye."

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"But it's insane."

"Really? Is affection such a stranger to you, Mr Landman?"

I went purple.

"Of course not, but a horse...."

"That horse was worthier of affection than many people I can mention. If I had done nothing, she might have been sent to the knacker's. I could not let that happen. She did not even mean to harm the fool. I saw it happen. He tripped, fell against her hooves,

as it were."

"Wow," I said.

"Besides, prison was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Really?" Yvonne shouted, all agog. I had not seen her so lively since the old days.

"Aye, I did some studying. I'm a qualified book-keeper now. I even got a job for a very rich gentleman whom I met in jail. I can afford to keep Lady and the little one myself. And besides, you'd be surprised how nice people are to a homicidal maniac."

We all laughed.

"Aren't you dying to see Lady?" Yvonne asked. "I'd have thought you could not wait."

Willem lowered his eyes.

"Aye," he muttered. "Aye. Anon. You wouldn't have a wee dram a whisky, now would you?"

Yvonne jumped up.

"Of course," she cried. "Stupid me, I forgot."

She ran to the sideboard and grabbed a bottle standing there, wrapped in gift paper.

"Here," she said, "A homecoming present."

"Ach, you shouldn't," said Willem. "I ought to be giving you gifts."

He opened it.

"Glenfiddich, my favorite." He said, looking at Yvonne warmly.

He poured himself half a glass and emptied it in one gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, spoiling the impression of being a gentleman.

"To be quite honest, I'm a wee bit scared. What if she does not recognize me?"

"She will."

"I'm not so sure. She's only a horse."

I gasped at that.

"But you said she was so special."

He looked at me, always a few degrees cooler than the warm looks he gave Yvonne.

"She is," he said, "But she's still only a horse."

We went. Willem lagging a bit behind. It was a sweltering hot summer's day. Insects were buzzing everywhere. The air was heavy with the scent of freshly mown grass. We turned a corner. Lady Macbeth was at the far end of a long, narrow field, grazing, dazzlingly white against a backdrop of a shady pinewood. Her foal was lying outstretched beside her, barely visible.

When we came in sight the mare raised her head, ears pricked, and looked in our direction. I held my breath. Would she recognize Willem? We were far off. The eyesight of horses is not particularly keen. After a few seconds she lowered her head to resume grazing.

I looked at Willem. He stood gazing at the horse in the distance. His eyes were almost closed. I saw him swallow hard, and shake his head.

"Oh Willem, I am so sorry," said Yvonne.

"It's nae matter," said Willem, softly.

His words were instantly greeted with a shrill whinny from afar. The horse stood fully erect, gazing in our direction. The foal had jumped up beside her. Then the mare came into motion. She took a few hesitant steps and began to trot, tail raised, flowing majestically behind her as she broke into a gallop, her foal gamboling along.

"Ach, my wee lass," I heard Willem mutter, and he, too, was running.

Yvonne and I stayed behind.

Willem clambered over a wooden fence, clumsily, tearing a trouser leg with a loud rip, but he paid it no heed and hit the ground running. For a moment I thought horse and man would collide. But she came

to a standstill right in front of him, and they stood almost nose to nose. Willem stroked her forehead. She nuzzled the lapels of his suit. He was talking to her, softly, inaudibly. It was a scene of almost unbearable intimacy. I looked away, at Yvonne.

She stood spellbound, two big tears clinging to her lower eyelashes. I reached out an arm to put it around her but she stepped aside, stinging me to the core.

"Yvonne?"

She did not react, seemingly mesmerized by the scene before her. Her tears were dripping freely now. She lowered her head, dropping the veil of her hair before her face.

"Please go away," she said.

"But ...,"

"Don't ... Just go. Please."

Not understanding, deflated and hurt, I had to swallow a few times before I spoke.

"But surely"

"Just go away," she said. Without sparing me a glance she turned, and ran off, back to the house.

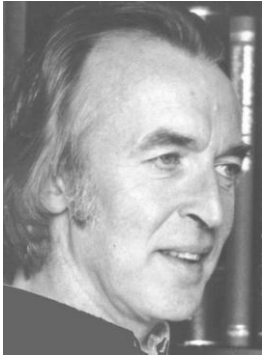
An overwhelming sense of loss bore down on me. This

was the end, I knew. There could no way back from this. I staggered to my car, sank into the driver's seat.

While I was sitting there, wondering what to do with the rest of my life, Willem came into view, some twenty feet away. He was walking along buoyantly, almost skipping, sporting a great big, bare-toothed smile. My envy almost suffocated me. I waited until he had disappeared before starting the car.

About the author:

Jan Bee Landman was born in Middelburg, the



Netherlands, on January 13, 1948, from a French/Scottish mother and a Dutch father. He studied English, became a teacher and translator, wrote many short stories and retired from the big city to the countryside in 1997 to

devote himself mainly to his three horses and to research and write a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative fiction.