

jan bee landman

The Canals
of Delft



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a horror story

by

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The cruel irony was that I would never drive if I had been drinking; my imagination was much too vivid to let me overlook the gruesome hazards. But on that fateful night, the first anniversary of our marriage, I just could not resist sharing a bottle of champagne on our happiness, because happy we were, Marlene and I, rapturously so.

She was 23 and I a few years older. To me she was the first and only one. Like an old-fashioned romantic I had always spurned superficial affairs, patiently awaiting my one true love. And she had come in the form of Marlene, young, witty, intelligent and stunningly beautiful. She was the embodiment of all my dreams, the perfection of my life. Until that night in December when, in a flash, it was all over. One moment we were sitting, slightly drunk and smiling, close together in the front seat of my warm Mercedes, the next moment I was alone on my back in the cold wet grass, unable to move, while big icy raindrops pelted my face under a pitchblack sky.

I did not see Marlene again. I was in the operating theater when she was buried.

Physically I recovered rapidly but emotionally I was a broken man. I had murdered Marlene, that was how I felt it. For a few drops of liquor I had destroyed the most

precious thing in my life.

Remorse is a terrible thing, impossible to imagine by those who have never felt its pangs, incomparable to any other human experience: a withering of all self-esteem, a blight upon the soul, like a burning cancer that throbs and preys on your peace of mind and hounds you and exhausts you and robs you of the very power to enjoy anything.

Like a split personality I labored through my days: one part of me a pitiful guilt-ridden shell of a man, the other part a malignant torturer that never stopped blaming the other half for something it would not knowingly have done for the world. There is little sense in dwelling on my anguish. Let it be enough that I was consumed by it and that it gradually wasted me away. Suicide seemed the only way out, but it was exactly my guilt that withheld me from doing away with my despicable existence. In some perverted way I enjoyed my misery, as the just deserts for my criminal stupidity. I did not end my life in order to punish myself all the longer.

But I could not bear to live in my familiar, memory-haunted surroundings, nor could I face my friends anymore. They despised me, I was sure of it, and quite rightly. At first I did not know where to go, but fortunately

- if such a word has a place in my life - my uncle Bertrand came to my aid. Apparently he had gone through something similar in his youth and he insisted on helping me. And so I came to live in the venerable old city of Delft. Not by choice, for it was much too near my home town and I would infinitely have preferred Christmas Island or a slowly melting iceberg in the mid-Atlantic, but my uncle had no real estate in those places, while he owned a large warehouse along one of the Delft canals. And in spite of its proximity there was much to say for Delft. It had always fascinated me, for even by European standards it was a very ancient town. Old chronicles mention it as early as the 11th century, when it sprang up on the banks of artificial waterways dug for inland shipping. As time went by the waterways were extended and linked until the town center became a maze of canals, spanned by arching bridges, their cobblestone quays adorned by lime trees and picturesque buildings: ornate medieval guildhouses with colorful shutters, proud gables of 17th century merchants' mansions and huge somber warehouses that bordered the water to enable the sailing ships to moor against their facades.

By the close of the twentieth century it still retained much of its old glory, despite the sacrilegious presence of

motorcars, electric lights and parking meters. To the casual tourist it was just another attractive landmark, but to a more sensitive soul it breathed a different atmosphere. In the dark water of the canals, that lay as still and inscrutable as it had in remote ages, such a person could still see the cruel grave of 16th century heretics and the home of the great little sailing ships that roamed the oceans pugnaciously in search of exotic goods and slaves. A small light behind some attic window in the depth of night would recall the times when Dutch alchemists worked their silent evils in secret. No number of swarming cars on the market square, between the dizzying tower of the Big Church and the stolid medieval town hall, could silence the echoes of howling witches that had once smoldered there at the stake.

My uncle's warehouse turned out to be a very dreary building of weathered brickwork, with tall, small-paned windows and large double doors on each of its three stories. It dated from 1697 and looked it, almost as if it had been abandoned in those days.

It was raining when I came in front of it for the first time, towards the close of a bitterly cold February day. The large front doors were padlocked and a small, weather-beaten and barely legible sign directed visitors to the side

entrance, which was located in a cramped alley, between the warehouse and an adjoining building; an alley so narrow that it would not have allowed two full-grown men to pass each other easily. Since the roofs almost met overhead daylight fell very sparingly in the alley and in the gloom I looked in vain for a bell at the door that was supposed to give access to my uncle's property.

I don't know what caused it, but as I stood there, long before anything bad had happened, an uncomfortable feeling crept up on me, an oppression that could not be explained away by the somberness of that narrow corridor that separated me from the everyday bustle of the town. Strangely ill at ease I looked about me, even though there was nothing to be seen that was in any way out of the ordinary: merely the old walls, wet and begrimed, a narrow verge of darkgreen moss at their feet, holes gaping among the bricks everywhere, a long rainpipe in which rainwater gurgled down softly, a door from which all paint had weathered away at the other end of the alley.

As I could not find any bell or knocker I started banging on the door with my fists. The sound echoed through the interior with a hollow resonance, emphasized by the silence in the alley where nothing stirred save the rain.

I was cold and wet and longing for shelter. My uncle had assured me that there would be someone to welcome me so I banged at the door with a vengeance.

It took at least five minutes before I heard a sign of life inside. I stopped my banging and waited. Again it took some time but at long last the door did open, slowly and with a grating screech.

My sense of oppression returned and grew stronger when I saw the short bulky figure that emerged from the impenetrable darkness within. He made a vaguely imbecile impression, with a large hairless head and bulging, widely-spaced eyes. His nose was flat and coarse, his mouth a straight lipless crack.

In spite of the obscure light in the alley it struck me that the man had a sickly pallid skin. His age was hard to guess but he surely was not younger than fifty.

With a hoarse voice he moodily asked what I wanted.

I told him, and his attitude changed at once, becoming slightly condescending, which was hardly an improvement over his initial gruffness.

With many gestures of his long skinny hands and incessant nods of his head he led me into the warehouse. I was not to heed the mess, he said, for the greater part of the place had not been used for decades. He himself lived

on the first floor, while Mr Bertrand only used the attic. During this explanation I noticed that the fellow seemed to suffer from an affliction of the lungs for after every so many words he gasped for breath like a landed fish, which hampered conversation severely. Walking was not his strong point either, for he ambled in a way that suggested painful blisters on the soles of his feet. Therefore it took quite some time to climb the broad, dust-clad and creaky stairs that led upwards through the dark warehouse. The atmosphere was dry and stuffy but still retained traces of the spicy aromas that former merchandise had left: a blend of cinnamon, coffee and tar.

The two upper floors were large, dark and cavernous storage rooms whose empty spaces were only broken by heavy pillars and empty racks silhouetted against the walls. The dirty windows hardly admitted any light.

After a long and tiresome climb we reached the top floor, partly used for the storage of furniture, which stood under sheets gray with dust and woven together by cobweb into grotesque shapes.

My host, whose name I never did manage to grasp clearly and whom I shall call Vultar for convenience sake, led me to a partition with a single door. Behind it lay my attic room, which offered a pleasant surprise, for in stark

contrast with the neglect I had so far seen, it looked quite tidy and clean. A broad dormer window presented a view of magnificent Old Dutch gables on the other side of the canal, the walls were clean and freshly painted, the furniture was ample: bed, desk, comfortable chairs, bookcase, fireplace and even a small range in a cooking niche.

Vultar began to explain matters of practical interest, but since I wanted to be alone I cut him short and gently coaxed him to the door. There he dawdled and started a rambling discourse about the dangers of Delft by night. Students and foreign laborers seemed to be making the streets unsafe, so I had better stay inside at night.

Now, in the unobstructed light of day, it appeared how singular he really looked. His oversized head, with a sharply receding chin, did not show the slightest trace of hair growth. The skin had a waxen pallor and was heavily crinkled, like an old banknote. Loose, flabby cheeks formed deep overlapping folds on either side of his mouth. Very striking, too, were his darkbrown eyes, as said bulging and widely set, but also blemished by a yellow discoloration of the white. Altogether he made a distinctly sinister impression.

When he had finished his warning, I thanked him cordially for his sound advice and immediately made it very clear that it happened to be my firm intention to go out at night. I made him believe that my physician had prescribed nocturnal walks for my health and he went off sorely disappointed.

I can be brief about my first months in Delft. I led the life of a hermit. I slept in the daytime, did my translating work in the evening and roamed the dormant town during the night. I avoided contact with my fellow men wherever possible. I did not want to see, hear or be near them. Fortunately I was just engaged on the translation of a bulky volume about cost control, so I could easily isolate myself from the others. Every three weeks I went to the supermarket for purchases and on rare occasions I went out at night a little earlier than usual, just before the snack-bars closed, to eat something tasty. Otherwise I lived on crackers, dairy products and canned food. In fact it was not living at all, but rather a feeble struggle with my past and my guilt. Each day again, each hour that I was not working, I relived that fatal night in my mind, those few hours in which I had thrown away my happiness for a few gulps of champagne. I could not live it down; the pain

was too great. I had to find some redeeming fact somewhere. So I kept on asking myself the same questions over and over again. Had it truly and only been my fault? Had I really drunk that much? Could it not just have been an accident? Please? I searched and I searched but the verdict never changed: I was and remained guilty.

On top of it all I tortured myself in a morbid way by looking at photographs of Marlene. She had been very photogenic, almost more beautiful on paper than in true life. That explained why I had a stack of pictures of her, refined instruments of torture, to which I subjected myself every day like some masochistic freak. Oh God, how I suffered. Exquisitely, and more, infinitely more than I ever saw anyone else suffer. This may sound like a corny expression of self-pity but even now I still believe that at the time I was among the most wretched creatures on this planet. I had murdered her. Her, for whom I would have laid down my life without a moment's thought. It was cruel beyond words.

The only bearable moments came when I was engrossed in my work and during my nocturnal walks. Those began to mean more and more to me. Every night, mostly at one o'clock or thereabouts, I would descend through the sepulchral darkness of the warehouse to the side door.

Strangely enough, my original oppression always returned briefly in the alley, but as soon as I as I walked out of it, into the peaceful streets along the canals, a sense of freedom replaced the gloom.

I could wander through the desolate town for hours, aimlessly, along the many canals and the old houses that had seen centuries come and go, their gables outlined against the night, and then I would be soothed by the quietude that was but rarely disturbed by a solitary motorcar or cyclist.

On those occasions I could make peace with myself, especially if there weren't any clouds and the stars glittered overhead in cold uncaring beauty, mapping out such a vastness of space and time that they dwarfed my being, and hence my worries, into insignificance. Then I could believe that one day I would find forgiveness for my sins.

One night, in the middle of summer, I went through a deep depression. That evening I had been unable to translate more than a hundred words, foundering in my sorrow. Half in tears I left the warehouse, withdrawn inside the turned-up collar of my raincoat although it had not rained for days.

As was my custom I wandered along the canals, at the very edge of the quays, in a rather childish effort to slip accidentally and be put of my misery in that way. But of course I never slipped.

On a small bridge that spanned the Old Delft canal, opposite the Old Church that leaned forwards massively and darkly against the star-studded sky, I stopped to reminisce a while, gazing into the water that lay below me without a ripple. Everything was quite silent. It was a Monday or Tuesday night, I did not keep track, but at any rate a weekday night, which meant that there were few people about.

I was standing on the bridge and gazed into the water, recalling a similar night in Amsterdam, when Marlene and I had stood on just such a bridge together.

I cannot say how long I stood there, maybe I dozed away a little, I often did, but suddenly I started. Just in front of me, under the surface of the water, something had stirred. Now that I looked more closely, there was nothing to see. I supposed it had been a fish and looked away again. A little further down the canal there were three ducks, floating about in silence. My glance just passed them when all of a sudden one went under with a loud plunge while the two others jumped from the water instantly and flew off with

rushing wingbeat. In astonishment I stared at the spot where the duck had disappeared; except for a few expanding rings on the water there was nothing to be seen. I waited a while for the animal to rise again, but it did not. Nor did I expect it to, for the manner in which the bird had gone under had been quite abnormal, as if the bottom had dropped away under it, or as if it had been pulled down forcibly, by a rat perhaps, although I could not imagine that a rat would be able to pull a full-grown duck under water.

Pondering this problem I returned home. It pleased me that at long last I was occupied by something else than my grief-laden past and although I had practically forgotten the incident the following day, a spell seemed to have been broken. I had passed the nadir and little by little I regained some interest in everyday life, in the warehouse, for instance, which I had not given a second look in all the months that I had lived there, and more particularly in my obnoxious fellow tenant , Vultar. It struck me now that he led a remarkable life, withdrawn almost invisibly and inaudibly in his quarters on the first floor. Hardly ever did I hear any sign of life behind his door. No radio, no television, no company. Neither did I ever hear or see him go out. This made it all the more surprising that I often

received no answer when I knocked on his door for some domestic problem, such as a clogged drain or a power failure, which was a recurring nuisance on the top floor. In those cases I could only assume that he was asleep.

The few times that I met him usually came unexpectedly. He had the unpleasant habit of suddenly opening his door as I was going by, as though he had been waiting to ambush me. It always gave me a start, not in the last place because I just could not get used to his appearance: that bald skull, those staring eyes, that slit of a mouth.

One August evening I needed him badly. The power supply had failed me again and it was absolutely imperative that I finished some pages to send a manuscript to my publishers the next day.

Outside the night was in turmoil; rain clattered against the window panes, a thunderstorm was running wild over the town. In utter blindness I had groped my way down, sometimes helped by flashes of lightning that made the warehouse leap out of darkness and cast it back with a peal of thunder. After a nerve-racking descent I reached the hall. There desolation reigned as usual but a stripe of light shone under the door of the Vultar's room; obviously the power failure had not affected the lower floor.

I knocked at the door and waited patiently for it to be opened. Nothing happened. I knocked again and fumbled at the latch, which suddenly sprang open. I waited for my host to appear, but he did not. I hesitated, thinking that Vultar would not want me to enter uninvited, but this was an emergency: I simply had to have light. So I overcame my reluctance and stepped into the room, halted at once by the scene awaiting me. I had expected a sordid mess, but instead I found an impressively furnished study, filled with costly furniture, none of which could be younger than a century. Bookcases lined the walls to the ceiling, fine lamps provided a warm golden lighting. There was a chesterfield of the finest leather, Persian carpets on a parquet floor and, as piece de resistance, a massive nutwood desk, littered with papers, books and a very professional-looking microscope. I walked up to the desk slowly. A large, antique tome with red morocco binding and copper locks lay open. I gave it a closer look and discovered to my amazement that it was written in an exotic language, with unfamiliar characters wriggling across the paper like delirious worms. It looked Arabic, but I could not say for sure. How about that, I thought. Who would have credited that creep of a Vultar with such erudition?

As I looked about with growing awe, I noticed that an unpleasant odor pervaded the room: a smell that vaguely resembled rotten fish. I blamed it on the glass jars that took up the space of books on some shelves of the bookcase and contained all kinds of fetal monstrosities.

I felt ill at ease and would gladly have left, but I did so need that damned light.

Apart from the door by which I had entered, three other doors opened on to the room. I tried them all. The first one gave access to a cupboard full of clothes smelling very moldy. The second door stuck, forcing me to put my full weight against it. When it finally gave way, it revealed utter darkness and only after prolonged peering some steps that descended to a body of water, a flooded cellar, I supposed. It baffled me a little, but I did not feel like giving it much thought.

Resolutely walked to the third door and opened it. Here lay a spacious room, with large basins that looked like aquariums along the walls. The space itself was not lighted but a pale neon light burned over each basin.

Hesitantly I stepped into the room. Where the heck could that Vultar be? I had not heard him go out and that was an event difficult to miss, considering the horrible squeak of the side door.

My feeling of uneasiness grew, bordering on fear. There was something sinister about my host and these rooms. I slowly walked up to one of the basins. I do not know what ailed me but I really had to force myself to take the last few steps. Maybe it was a premonition that made me halt again and again. I don't know. At any rate it seemed to take ages before I finally stood before the first aquarium. It looked well-tended: large, clean and half-filled with clear water that harbored green plants and rocks. On top there was a small motor that pumped bubbling air into the water through a transparent tube.

I bent over to gaze into the water. Guppies or other - equally common-looking - little fish inhabited the basin, by no means the tropical wonders I had expected. Slightly disappointed I was about to straighten myself when my eyes were attracted by another basin-dweller sitting on top of a rock: a kind of frog, small, buttery yellow, with its protruding eyes fixed upon me. I stiffened. Why the hell would anyone put a frog in an aquarium? I walked to the next basin and found the same thing. Another yellow frog, this time floating just below the surface of the water, with the same drab little fish below him. There was something odd about the amphibian, something in the proportions of its limbs that struck me as decidedly unpleasant. Of

course I had not the faintest knowledge of frogs, so it did not mean much, but I received the absurd impression that the body of the beast displayed typical human proportions.

At the third basin I got lucky, if that's the word, for I saw one of the creatures hunt. With a few explosive thrusts of its hind-limbs it swam towards a fish, grabbed it with its paws, which were provided with sharp little nails, brought its wriggling victim to its mouth and, without surfacing, started to gnaw at it, tainting the water with ribbons of blood that coiled and dissolved like thin smoke. It was a most revolting sight that prompted me to leave at once. Hastily I trotted through Vultar's room and clambered up the stairs as fast as I could.

Once upstairs, in the darkness of my room, with the thunder still booming in the distance and the rain pattering upon my window, I was strangely excited for several minutes. I could not explain it, but the atmosphere in Vultar's quarters had shocked me deeply; taken together, the things I had seen gave me the conviction that I had stumbled upon something that I had better forget. And that was exactly what I did. The following day I threw myself upon my work and banned my host and his peculiar doings from my mind. A few uneventful weeks went by, and my life plodded along in its dreary rut.

Then came the day on which Vultar fell from the stairs. I was just thumbing through a dictionary when an eerie, almost inhuman scream shattered the silence. Of course I ran down to look at once and found Vultar, weeping and cursing in agony, at the bottom of the stairs. His first reaction to my appearance was remarkable to say the least, for he hissed furiously that I was to leave him alone. But the moment I started to climb the stairs again, he called me back. With a sugary voice he asked me to help him to his room, which I did, if reluctantly on account of his weird behavior and the revulsion I had of him anyway.

In his room he became quite maudlin. But he would not hear of doctors. He could manage on his own, although there was one thing he wanted me to do: his shopping. His voice even got a slight tremor as he begged me to get fish for him every day, freshly caught, alive if at all possible. He would reward me liberally. Of course I did not believe much of the reward bit, but I did not see how I could refuse.

And so a fairly amicable relationship developed between the bizarre old man and me. A relationship that hardly appealed to me but seemed to please him no end. Especially when he was drunk, which was often, he

became very chummy. On such occasions he would beseech me to come down and share a nightcap with him. He then often became tearful and spoke in riddles, complaining about the distant past when they were still powerful and the seas still so safe and clean that he did not have to waste his life as a nanny. I just let him ramble on, and asked as few questions as possible, because even the smallest query launched him upon an incoherent narrative of not less than a quarter of an hour. I was convinced that he was crazy.

One evening, when he had drunk more than usual he insisted on showing me what he called his children, which I immediately understood to be the frogs.

"Aren't they splendid?" he cried. "Hale they are, not a spot of poison. You can bet your life they'll grow into big strapping fellows. Thanks to old uncle Vultar."

Chuckling to himself he limped along the basins, calling out pet names to each frog, which reacted with amazing alertness.

Another thing that struck me was that the animals had grown considerably since I had last seen them. The smallest was certainly bigger than a common toad, while the biggest had the size of a large tomcat, an ugly, hairless, pale yellow tomcat.

"Will they be getting any bigger?" I asked, suppressing a slight tremor in my voice as I looked at the largest specimen that was sitting motionless on its rock, with a partly consumed fish in paws that looked uncannily like human hands. Its eyes, large and bulging and possessing a lurid glow were fixed attentively on Vultar.

"Bigger?" exclaimed my host, with a nervous kind of giggle. "Bigger? Just you wait!"

He started to walk towards a door that I had not noticed before, beyond the largest basin, but halfway there he stopped in his track, coughed, giggled again and turned back.

"Er, yes," he mumbled. "Yes, they might, just a little. But this is all for now. They need to eat in peace and quiet."

I seized my chance and went straight to my room, where I was haunted for days by the recollection of the horrible creatures. Those frogs seemed to possess a primordial brutality. But it was mainly the way in which they had stared at Vultar that gave me the shivers. There was some kind of understanding between the ogres and the strange little man that seemed most unnatural. I decided to evade him as much as possible. He was getting on my nerves with those "children" of his. Fortunately this intention was

easy to carry out, because Vultar got less time for me. As before the accident I saw little of him and the rare occasions on which we met always found him in a hurry. In retrospect this is no wonder, but at the time I had not the slightest suspicion of the frightful events that were developing.

I came across the first indication of those horrors a few weeks later, one rainy night in the middle of October. I had gone into town a little earlier than usual and had eaten some french fries and a hamburger at a neighborhood snackbar.

A little past midnight I was sauntering across the market square. There was a faint breeze. The moon was full and radiantly white, with fleecy clouds sliding underneath it like transparent ice-floes. Black, monumental and spiky the tower of the Big Church stabbed into the gray-dappled darkness of the sky.

An unbelievably peaceful atmosphere prevailed in town. The music from the bars sounded muffled, there was little traffic and even the students kept their voices down. Everything was so quiet that the old facades could fancy themselves centuries back.

I wandered about in a pensive mood, melancholy but not unhappy for all that, filled with a mild acceptance of

the ultimate sadness that seemed to be the balance of my life now. As always, I leaned upon many a bridge railing and enjoyed the play of reflections in the canal waters. The moon was exceptionally enchanting that night, slow and sensuous in the mirror of the water like a woman swaying her hips. There were no ducks anymore. I supposed it had gotten too cold for them.

The hours passed and my mood did not change. Maybe I was happy in a mournful sort of way, at any rate I came to believe that my sorrows would fade eventually.

At about half past two I was on the high bridge that arches over the Old Delft canal. A nearby lamppost cast the shadow of the bridge and me on the surface of the water. With my eyes I followed the languid motions of the yellow leaves floating in the canal, when, as many weeks before, I thought I saw something move in the water. I bent over the railing a little, narrowing my eyes. Then I saw something that made me recoil in violent horror. It was a human face, of a corpse, I thought at first, but corpses do not move, while this apparition disappeared from sight almost at once.

Dumbfounded I stood in the night. A breeze wrinkled the water and made me shiver with cold. The whole stupor of sweet melancholy fell away from me and I stood stone-

sober wondering whether I should do anything, warn the police for instance. But that idea did not appeal to me very much. They were sure to laugh and ask me all kinds of irksome questions. So I decided to wait and see. Slowly I started to pace along the quay, my eyes fixed upon the water. I felt uncomfortable. The breeze moved the trees and the grotesque shadows of their partly denuded branches danced upon the pavement and the surface of the water like clawing ghosts.

I just could not understand what I had seen. Surely corpses did not move at great speed under water? There was no current here. But what else could it have been?

For twenty minutes at least I walked up and down along the canal. I saw nothing out of the ordinary. In the end I convinced myself that it had been a figment of my imagination. After all, that was quite possible, certainly for a dreamer like myself. This explanation satisfied me rather easily and I hurried home as if released.

A week later a local character named Old Pete disappeared without a trace. The police assumed that the old eccentric had lost his footing under the influence of liquor, fell in the canal and was drowned. But this did not explain why his body was never recovered.

I did consider reporting what I had seen the week before but decided against it. After all, Old Pete had still been alive at the time.

Two days later a similar thing happened. This time it was a nineteen year old student. For a wager he had jumped from the Bible Bridge in the dead of night and never surfaced again. The police was at a loss. Neither dredging nor diving had brought the body to light. A tasteless joke was suspected, but exhaustive questioning of the boy's friends had not turned up anything in that way.

When I read this news item my thoughts were driven into a most unlikely direction. With my own eyes I had seen a duck disappear rather oddly, a little later an old man went and now a student. Could it be that these weird events were in any way connected with the apparition I had seen in the water? Could it be that there lurked some unspeakable danger in the water of the picturesque canals? I could not even begin to believe it. This was 1980. Monsters no longer existed. Not in Loch Ness, so certainly not in the canals of Delft. Still, I began to look upon the water with different eyes. While I had always balanced on the outer edge of the quays before I now made sure that I

had several yards to spare between my feet and the edge of the embankment. Quite rightly, as it turned out.

A cool, windstill, cloudless night at the beginning of November, far past midnight. Delft was asleep, but I was unable to. There are days that seem carbon copies of those gone by and

I had just struggled through one of them; it had drawn me cruelly back to the previous year when life had still been so full of joy and promise and hope.

I went through another deep valley of darkness. Forgotten was all the excitement about mysterious disappearances, gone my fear for the water. I roamed among the silent gables as before, with tear-logged eyes and death in my heart.

This night I was not the only one abroad. Just in front of the Old Church, at the bottom of a few steps that descended to the motionless water sat an angler. I could not understand what could make a man go and sit fishing in the dead of night in the middle of a town, but then he would probably not understand what drove me through the deserted streets. In some funny way I felt akin to him and even waved as I passed him on the opposite side of the canal. On a nearby bridge I stopped to watch him for a

moment. But then, with startling suddenness, my mood changed; I stared at the water and immediately my bitter grief was replaced by fear. Eerily still and silent the water shone like an evil black eye, reflecting the new moon as a sharp sickle. A breath-taking menace seemed to emanate from it.

I recalled the vague form I had seen slide past below me, many days ago. This time it must really have been a foreboding, or maybe I had seen something during my walk without realizing it, but suddenly I felt I had to warn the angler. He would take me for a madman, this was certain, but I felt it had to be done no matter what. I straightened myself to call out, but froze in my movement. Just underneath the angler's dangling feet, in the shadow of the embankment I saw the surface of the water break: a head appeared, pale and round and naked like a skull. I tried to scream but my throat felt clogged. The angler too, seemed to notice something, for he bent over to look down. At the same time two naked arms shot out, grabbed the man's legs and dragged him down with incredible force. His abortive scream was stifled by the loud plunge he went under with.

Trembling all over I stared dumbly at the expanding rings of water. My legs seemed to have palsied, wobbling

under the weight of me. With both hands I had to cling to the railing of the bridge to keep from falling. Then my fear whipped me away. Like a hunted beast I tore back to the warehouse, skirting the walls. Not once did I dare slow down, not once did I dare look at the water.

A few minutes later I had reached the top of the alley, where I stopped to catch my breath. I was still trembling uncontrollably, racked by fear and revulsion. I thought I was losing my mind, imagining things unimaginable, sinister delusions that could only lead to hysteria and madness, for in the split second that the head appeared above water I had seen the glimpse of an atrocious face, a face that opened its mouth in a wide grin full of long spiky fangs. But that was not the worst part of it: I had also recognized something in the face: a likeness. During my frantic flight I had not had time to consider it, but now, facing the narrow chasm of darkness, it returned to me in fierce clarity. The likeness had been Vultar's!!

Instinctively I backed away a little from the entrance to the alley, then giggled nervously. What rubbish. That old cripple could never be the monster. It was unthinkable. All the same I decided not to go in entirely unprepared. Looking about I saw that the pavement had been broken up a few houses further down. I went there, found an iron

bar among the piles of sand and returned to the alley armed with that. Its weight gave me a sense of power and self-confidence. An unfamiliar grimness came over me. Recalling it now I can only believe that the horrible event had robbed me of my senses. Any sane person would have gone to the police, but I clasped the bar and marched into the alley. Maybe some inner devil made me fancy that this was my chance of redeeming myself for Marlene. I don't know. I was crazy. Straight through that black void I walked to the door, opened it and strode into the warehouse. With another few steps I stood in front of Vultar's door, which I threw open like an avenging angel, my bar ready to strike.

But the very next moment it fell from my hands and I went through my knees from pure fright. Inside the room, at the door that I knew to lead to the flooded cellar, Vultar stood bent over. He was fully dressed and pulling up the angler's body from the dark cellar. But what made me scramble up the stairs with a scream that must have been audible for miles around was the repulsive creature that clung to the corpse. A man-sized monstrosity, yellow as butter, dripping wet, neither frog nor human but something in between that chewed upon a chunk of raw, bloody meat.

In sheer panic I reached my room, locked the door, pushed some pieces of furniture against it, collected everything that could even remotely be used as a weapon and paced the floor, almost gibbering with fear. Any moment I expected to hear footsteps on the stairs. Vultar and his child, or maybe more than one; after all, he did have many aquariums. In my anguish I considered climbing from the window but since the rear of the warehouse skirted the canal, the risk of falling into the water robbed me of any desire to perform acrobatics.

I even thought about committing suicide there and then: everything seemed better than falling prey to Vultar's horrible ogres. But I stalled. The urge to live is strong and rarely more so than in times of danger. So I continued to pace up and down, a long breadknife in one hand, a hammer in the other. I would sell my life dearly.

It regained quiet under me and slowly I regained some courage and a faint hope that they too had been startled. Maybe they thought that I had somehow raised the alarm compelling them to flee. I wanted to believe this so badly that I almost did, especially after the passage of a full hour.

But alas, less than five minutes later I heard the sound I had dreaded so much: a footfall on the stairs. Nervously I

rummaged through the stack of tools and found a small hand-axe and took that instead of the hammer. I would go down fighting, assuming of course that the sight of that ghastly creature would not paralyze me completely.

With bated breath I listened to the approaching danger. I recognized the tread of Vultar's dragging feet, but nothing else. Was he coming alone or was the monster inaudible?

It took ages before Vultar was upstairs, but finally I heard his footsteps halt outside my door.

"John?" said his wheezing voice. "John? Don't trifle with me boy. I know you're there... Listen, I understand you are shocked, but you must listen ... I'll explain.... open up..."

"No," I yelled. "You damned murderer. Get out of here."

"John, be sensible, boy. I'm alone, all alone... a defenceless old man... You can best me with one hand. In heaven's name.... boy...don't make things worse than they are. You think I want all of this?... open up. They're asleep now. If they knew I was here, things would not look good. Will you please open up?"

His words, stuttered out laboriously and interspersed with breathing spells had a calming effect on me: he did sound desperate and sincere. My indecision did not last long. I seemed to have little choice. Apart from talking to

my host I could only shout for help, but that might bring the monster running and I would be killed long before anyone could come to my aid. But if Vultar was sincere he might be able to help me. If not, it made little difference whether I faced this thing now or later.

I decided to take my chances, shifted the furniture and opened the door, prepared for anything. But one look proved I had little to fear. Vultar was indeed alone and looking so weary and stricken that he resembled a hunchback, supporting himself with one hand against the doorpost, gasping for breath. When he had limped inside, I locked the door behind him and motioned with the axe that he could sit down. From a safe distance I looked at him with open disgust.

"Don't look at me like that, John," he panted. "I don't deserve your contempt. I'm but a pawn, a powerless victim, just like you."

"But you raised it, didn't you? Damn it, you're to blame for all of this."

"Cht. Not so loud. They'll hear us."

"They? So there's more than one?"

He nodded, oily tears rolling from his eyes.

"It's gotten out of hand," he sobbed. "This wasn't meant to be."

"What wasn't? What the hell are you talking about? What's the meaning of all this?" It took all my self-control not to shout.

"You ever hear of Cthulhu?" he asked. "Or of Dagon?" I shook my head.

He grinned bitterly. Only now did I realize how much he resembled his frog spawn, with his pale hairless head, those strange eyes and his rigid, lipless mouth. No wonder I had seen his likeness in the angler's attacker.

"All right," he said. "I won't tell you much. The less you know the better." He fell silent and took several deep rattling breaths. "Let it suffice that man is not the only intelligent form of life on earth. They are not even the mightiest, even if they think so. In distant lonely places, in shapes you cannot begin to imagine, live the offspring of the Elder Gods. Their power is beyond your comprehension. But they don't use it. The time is not yet right. A century is but a second to them, the existence of mankind nothing but a fleeting phase, brief as the life of a fruitfly. They sleep; in the highest mountains, the densest forests, at the bottoms of the oceans. When left in peace they do no harm, but unfortunately man could not give them peace. He toyed with forces he could not master, such as nuclear energy and chemicals, leaving poisonous

wastes that penetrated even the deepest troughs of the ocean. And although the children of Dagon are passing powerful they must nevertheless obey the laws of the life-forms they assume. Your poisons made them ill. Their bodies died and their souls had to seek other abodes. This bothered them, and so I was ordered to make them immune, to give them bodies resistant to the poisons with which your kind pollute the seas."

Having exhausted his breath he stopped like one suffocating and sat on my bed straining for air with long, wheezing gasps.

I stood looking at him in amazement. I had heard, listened and understood, but I could not believe, despite the monsters. My disbelief must have been written all over my face, for when Vultar recovered his breath again, he shook his head at me. .

"Don't sneer, John," he whispered. "Don't sneer. You are a worm beside the Sons of Dagon.

"And you? Are you one of those sons?"

He made a soft, gurgling sound, a travesty of his usual giggle.

"Not quite. I'm a bastard, a half-caste. Fruit of levity or maybe design. Who can tell? My life has passed in the shadows of the Elder Gods. In spine-tingling nightmares I

was given my task. I had to breed new bodies. I have been trying to do so for dozens of years. Now I have succeeded. But they are too strong for me. I cannot master them. They must be taken to sea. Only I don't know how. They are ravenous with hunger. At times I fear for my own life."

He wrung his hands. I laid aside my axe. It was obvious that I had very little to fear from this desperate old man.

"So?" I asked, amazingly calm, suddenly convinced that I could use this Vultar to my own ends.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I just don't know. They are famished. They've eaten all the smaller ones. Another 24 hours and nothing can stop them."

"Take them to sea then."

"But how? How?! I'm a recluse. I know nothing of practical things. For more than thirty years my life has been of aquariums, poisonous cultures, mutations, breeding basins. How can I take seven bloodthirsty children to sea. They can't live outside water for more than fifteen minutes."

"I can help you," I said, bluffing of course for I had not the faintest idea nor the slightest inclination.

Vultar looked at me pathetically.

"You can?"

I nodded.

"Sure. But I'll have to go out of here."

Vultar's face dropped. He gave me a long, suspicious look.

"Don't get any clever ideas, boy," he hissed menacingly. "You may outsmart me, but not them. They'll always know where to find you."

I grinned bravely, even though his words chilled my blood. "Why should I want to outsmart them? I've seen what they can do. I don't want to end like that."

Still he did not seem to trust me, stared broodingly into my face for a while and then nodded slowly.

"All right then. What can you do?"

"Er I, er....I thought we might...." Cold sweat broke from my pores, while my brain worked feverishly. I had to think of something or all was lost. Then it dawned on me: a tank truck full of water. Easy. I suggested it and the old man jumped for joy.

"Superb," he cried. "Good, go and get one at once." I smiled.

"In the middle of the night?"

"What the hell? It's a matter of life and death."

I shrugged my shoulders and started collecting some papers. Vultar stopped me.

"Don't bother about that. Hurry, before they wake up."

Tugging at my sleeve he drew me to the door, I unlocked it and he led the way down wielding a pocket lamp that cast a narrow tremulous beam of light through the dense darkness. The descent frayed my nerves. All the way down I heard stealthy creakings about me and every time I expected a frogman to leap from the dark. But we reached the hall without any problems.

The side exit looked like heaven's door to me. Once I had reached that, I would be safe. It would take a lot more than a monstrous frog to find me anywhere near Delft in one hour's time.

I shook Vultar's hand, which was icy cold, and turned towards the door for the last few steps and deliverance, when the door of Vultar's room crashed open. My heart all but stopped. In the doorway thronged four of the horrors, their eyes bulging from their pale heads, their broad jaws agape and revealing their fangs dripping with froth. They uttered unearthly groans.

Vultar opposed them seemingly unafraid and spoke to them in unintelligible sounds. Cowering behind his back I awaited the outcome, almost stifled by my fear, cursing myself for leaving the axe behind. Fortunately Vultar managed to quieten his creeps: slobbering and growling softly they withdrew.

"Go!" Vultar hissed at me.

He did not have to repeat it. With one leap I was at the door, tore it open and dashed outside. I had gone three streets before I dared stop to catch my breath. The town resembled a fairy-tale. I could not imagine that this was the setting of a nightmare.

The crazy ignorance of the ordinary world filled me with a moment's anger: why the hell should all this be happening to me? Why could the others lie snoring safe and stupid in their beds? But there was no time to dwell on that. I had to get away, and fast, to the highway, at any rate beyond the rings of canals that still encircled me so ominously. I started to run again.

After my first sense of relief, fear returned, bigger and uglier than ever. The water was not more than ten yards away. How could I know they were not following me, just below that smooth mirror of liquid silence.

In my excitement I ran to the market square. There wasn't any water there, and beyond it I could take the Long Dyke to the provincial channel and then on to the highway and safety. They would never be able to follow me that far. I would phone the police from the other end of the country.

Panting, with stitches in my sides, I ran across the market square, along the church towards the East End canal. Under my breath I begged for the appearance of a patrol car, but in vain of course. The bridge spanning the East End canal loomed up before me. I accelerated and then heard the sound I had dreaded: water splashing near the bridge. I slowed down, my eyes veering frantically from left to right. I was not mistaken: on either side of the bridge dark shapes materialized on the quay, shapes with broad torsos and long skinny legs. I turned and ran back, convinced that they would not follow, but when I cast a hasty glance over my shoulder I saw that they were following, and fast, with long, athletic bounds, gaining on me rapidly. A scream swelled in my throat, but a silly sense of pride made me suppress it. I ran back to the market square. Fifteen minutes, only fifteen minutes, I kept thinking. Behind me I could hear the patter of their webbed feet as they struck the pavement like lashing whips. I was doomed. My heart pounded so violently that it ached. Forgetting my pride I now tried to scream out my agony but, straining for air, I was no longer able to.

I ran in the direction of the Volders canal, realized at the very last moment that there it would be utterly impossible to evade the water and dashed back to the

market square again, barely missing my pursuers. I zigzagged between the parked cars. The footsteps behind me grew louder and louder. My lead less than ten yards. Prodded by my fear I squeezed everything from my tiring body. I ran past the steps of the town hall. Canals surrounded me on all sides, everywhere they would be waiting for me. I stormed to an arbitrary door, banged my fists against it, uttered a feeble scream but could not wait for someone to open. The frogs were upon me. I turned, braced myself and charged in a wild Kamikaze attack straight at the two horrors that were already stretching out their bony hands at me. My charge took them by surprise and I managed to dash between them, although their claws ripped my coat and tore strips of flesh from my shoulder. The pain gave me the strength to accelerate once more. And as the air burned in my lungs and the houses began to quiver before my eyes, I heard my pursuers fall behind and stop. A wave of joy overwhelmed me. I had shaken them. I slowed down to an exhausted stumble and looked back to see the two fiends make off at a trot past the town hall.

Like a drunk I staggered on across the market square, so utterly out of breath that I thought I would die after all. With my last ounce of strength I wandered up the Long

Dyke again. I was spent; my feet still moved but it was no longer my doing. As in a daze I saw the bridge approach. I reached it, my body aching with the desire to fall down, but still I pushed on. Then everything started to spin. I took a few more wobbly steps and had almost crossed the bridge when I heard something stirring underneath it again. The liquid sounds of a body emerging from the water reached my ears like a sentence of death. From all sides I heard the ominous patter of webbed feet on the pavement. I stood tottering. There was a rumbling somewhere, as of distant thunder, just before bony hands took hold of me. Unable to resist I gave up and let myself be dragged along by the arms and legs. Something cut into my shoulder and sent waves of pain running through my body.

While the cobbled stones slid by under me, a few inches from my face, I wondered whether there might, after all, be an answer to the question of death, and thought of the word Marlene. Then the pavement suddenly disappeared from under me. I lost consciousness the moment I touched the water.

I woke up in hell, or so it seemed, eye to eye with Vultar and his slaving monsters.

"Johnny, oh, Johnny," said my host grimly. "How could you be so stupid? That was a hell of a dumb thing to do. I did so warn you."

I shrugged my shoulders, regretting it instantly, because the left one hurt viciously.

"John, stop playing the fool. They'll rip you apart. You don't know what you're doing. Listen to me."

I did not. I felt doomed, I was in pain. My whole left shoulder seemed to be falling apart. The scent of blood clogged my nostrils. I just wanted the whole thing to be over and done with. Still, the words of Vultar, who was getting beside himself with excitement, started to get through to me.

"John, for heaven's sake. Will you listen? You're the only chance we have. And when I say we I mean all of us. The children, you myself, other people. The fate of hundreds, thousands, perhaps even more depends on you. Damn it. Control yourself, you snot-nosed weakling."

His last word touched an open nerve. I rose a little, noticing for the first time that I was in Vultar's study, on his chesterfield. The children, all seven of them, thronged around me. The stench of rotten fish was overpowering.

The moment that I righted myself a little, the monsters advanced as one and only a shout by Vultar stopped them from attacking me.

Thirty minutes later I was walking in the streets again, in clean clothes and with my shoulder in a tightly applied dressing, but this time Vultar was at my side, prodding the barrel of a pistol into me, while I knew for certain that his seven children were swimming along in the adjoining canal.

There was no way to turn. Tamely I let myself be escorted to a telephone booth. There I called my uncle Bertrand out of bed, which may have been my rescue for I cannot imagine that he would otherwise have taken my request seriously. Now I managed to convince him that my life's happiness depended on the earliest possible arrival of a tank truck filled with water.

I could have wept when he surrendered.

"All right, John," he grunted. "I'll do it, but if this is some kind of silly joke of yours, personally come down and break a couple of your bones."

"Right, uncle. It's no joke."

"Okay. Where can I reach you?"

"Well....uh....at the warehouse, but there's no phone there."

"Never mind. I'll take care of this. You'll just have to wait."

Suddenly I realized I should make some allusion to the horrible truth, say something clever that would make him suspicious and alert the authorities, but I could not think of anything.

"Uncle?" I began, hesitantly.

Vultar rammed the barrel of his pistol into my stomach, hissing savagely.

"Yeah?" said my uncle.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it, sonny."

I was still feverishly thinking, when Vultar tore the receiver from my hand and hung up. Without a word he walked me back to the warehouse and locked me in an empty closet on the second floor.

It took until three in the afternoon before an articulated tank truck – canary yellow with COOK'S HAULAGE in crimson lettering on the sides - stopped in front of the warehouse and set the building shaking to its foundations with the heavy drone of its idling diesel engine.

By standing on my toes, I could just look out through a grimy little window, and saw a broad-shouldered driver swing down from his lofty cabin like a chimpanzee. He wore a darkblue sweater and a faded pair of jeans, and had freshly tattooed anchors on both his lower arms.

Vultar hobbled up to him hastily. They had a heated discussion while cars queued up honking impatiently behind the truck. This made not the slightest impression on the driver, who only interrupted his discussion now and then to make obscene gestures at the waiting queue. Finally the two men appeared to have reached some agreement, for the driver clambered back into the cabin, while Vultar moved out of my sight, obviously to open the large front doors.

A few moments later an earthquake seemed to hit the building, as the massive vehicle rolled inside: the floors started to tremble, the windows rattled, the walls groaned and the stench of diesel fumes wafted up in stifling quantities.

I was able to follow the events through a crack in the floor. The driver jumped from his cabin again and climbed on top of the tank itself. He had left the engine running, so that the trembling, rattling and groaning of the warehouse continued without abatement. Nimbly the driver balanced

towards the man-hole and set about opening the cover. For one foolish moment I hoped he would be left unharmed, but as soon as Vultar had closed the big doors and twilight returned to the hall, I saw shadows slide closer everywhere in the semidarkness.

The driver pulled up the cover and slid down the bulging side of the tank. He landed just in front of a frog. I had expected that he would fight like a baited bear, but he just stood there without moving. Looking straight down upon him, I could not see the expression on his face, only that he pressed his back tightly against the tank wall. Not until the monsters had enclosed him from all sides, did he make an effort to defend himself. His left fist shot out and struck an attacker in the middle of its face, but almost simultaneously its maw opened and slammed like a trap on the man's wrist. It made a few chomping motions and to my revulsion I saw how the arm, minus the hand, shot loose and splattered the attackers with blood spouting from the stump. Sickened I shut my eyes for a few seconds. When I opened them again, Vultar had pushed his way among his children and, shouting at the top of his voice, beckoned them to mount the tank, which they did, taking along the feebly resisting man as if he were nothing but an over-sized ragdoll. Within seconds they had stuffed

him onto the manhole and followed themselves. Vultar closed the cover behind the last one.

I felt weak with horror, trying hard not to think of the fate of the man inside the tank. It was too ghastly.

Vultar disappeared from sight, while I continued to stare, half in a stupor, at the yellow side of the tank on which the driver's blood had left dark smudges. I realized how non-existent my own chances were of getting out of this thing alive.

Vultar came to fetch me, and in a state close to shock I let him lead me to the truck. I climbed into the cab, acquainted myself with the controls and stupidly obeyed the orders that Vultar gave me. I had all but resigned myself to inevitable doom. In my thoughts nothing but visions of death: gaping frogmouths, bristling fangs, showers of blood.

Mechanically I maneuvered the cumbersome vehicle out of Delft, on to the highway. To the sea, Vultar had said. But I had no idea how to get there, so I just drove on at a guess.

There was a strange smell in the cabin. The stench of oil and rotten fish mixed with a sweet fragrance coming from a little bunch of delicate flowers that stood trembling in a vase stuck to the windscreen. The broad rim of the fascia

was littered with the belongings of the unfortunate driver: a pouch of dark tobacco, a lighter, a rolled-up newspaper, empty candy wrappers.

I felt as though I were already dying. On this fine crispy afternoon in November, with the sun sinking in the sky, a yellow throb of flames in a pale and smudgy atmosphere. I could not have more than an hour to live. But maybe it was all for the best, anyhow.

Vultar kept his pistol aimed at me. Occasionally the thought crossed my mind that I should jump him: simply let go of the wheel and lash out. A bullet seemed infinitely better than falling into the claws of his hellspawn. But I felt weak and harmless as in a bad dream, so I kept on driving, past the Hague, direction Amsterdam, I knew not where to.

"Aren't we going the wrong way?" Vultar shouted after a while.

I shook my head.

"I know a good spot near Ymuiden," I lied. "There they can jump straight into the sea from the quay."

He seemed satisfied with that.

"By the way," I said casually. "Is that door properly closed?" He turned his head to look. At once I struck. With all the strength left in me I rammed a fist behind his ear.

He banged his forehead against the side window and dropped the pistol. Before he could rise, I leant over him, threw open the door at his side, withdrew my legs from under the fascia and started to kick, lying backwards against my own door, as violently as I could. He made a desperate effort to hold on, but my feet struck him everywhere, on his hands, against his chest, in the middle of his revolting face. While I kicked I kept my hands at the wheel and one eye on the road. Suddenly it was over. The seat beside me was empty, the door clattered a few times and closed with a bang. I resumed my normal position behind the wheel and got the crawling truck going again.

Salvation! It took some time before the full meaning of it dawned on me. I was free. Safe. I could just park this damned truck along the road and leave it. But I did not. Why? I could not say. Recklessness I guess. A side-effect of the boundless sense of triumph that flowed through me. I was drunk with bravery. Having defeated a mortal enemy I was now a power to be reckoned with.

I drove on for a little while and then maneuvered the car into a parking site to give the matter some thought. I had to get rid of those creeps, but not in the sea. I would destroy them.

If I had possessed a smidgen of common sense, I would have gone to the police at once. At that junction I could have done it without any fear of disbelief, for I had the living proof with me. But no, I did not. I had become a hero and heroes don't go to the police or anyone else; they handle their own problems.

I remembered Vultar's words that his children could not go without water for more than fifteen minutes. That made things rather easy. All I needed to do was let the water escape. Of course the easiest method would have been to use the pumping plant of the truck itself, but I had no idea how it worked. So I examined the car from all sides for another possibility, a bit nervous in spite of my victory because I could clearly hear the monsters stirring inside the tank.

At last I found what I sought: a drain tap. I opened it and a thin but strong jet rushed out. Intensely satisfied I climbed back into the cabin. Now it was merely a matter of time.

At the next self serve station I filled the diesel tank, got myself something to eat and drink and prepared for a long trip. It seemed wise to seek lonelier regions, but since it would take hours before the tank was empty, I decided to drive in a wide arc by way of Utrecht, Arnhem, Apeldoorn

and Harderwyk to the lonely wastes of the newly reclaimed Flevopolder.

I was in raptures, King of the Road. Beside my seat I had found a crumpled baseball cap and crowned with that, a roll-your-own in a corner of my mouth, a local pop station blasting on the radio, I thundered along the highways, through the fading afternoon, a bloodless sunset, dusk and eventually darkness.

By then I had arrived in the desolation of the Flevopolder. All alone I drove along the deserted dikes, nothing in front of me save the stripes on the tarmac and the road markings on either side, red reflectors left, white ones right, beyond those the vast chasms of darkness, the unbroken tracts of tall grasses and reeds that had sprung up on the reclaimed seabed and far, far away, the orange-colored lights of the main roads, spanning the horizon.

With a broad grin I reflected on the tall tales of Vultar, the devil take him, about the elder gods who were so powerful. I found it a capital joke, me driving the descendants of great sea gods to their doom across land that had once formed the bottom of the ocean. Where was their omnipotence now?

Time passed. I only stopped now and then to check whether the water was still running. I did so at about

eleven, on a parking site along the fairly busy Oostvaarder Dike, which formed the boundary between polder and sea. When I opened the door a gusty, bone-chilling wind flew in my face. Bitingly cold it was, but not altogether unpleasant, as a welcome change from the warm and stuffy atmosphere in the cabin. I decided to stay outside for a few minutes to revigorate my drowsy self, shivering as I looked out across the inhospitable expanse of Lake Ysselmeer, the inland sea that had once gutted half the country but was now dammed up and being reclaimed piecemeal. Still it was an impressive body of water, splashing noisily beyond the black shore, stretching away, drab and hazy, to a faint indistinct horizon on which the lights of the farther shore glowed like a string of fallen planets. The sky was a crystal clear dome bejeweled with more stars than I had ever seen. Of the constellations I recognized but one: Orion, the hunter and that only because Marlene had once lived in a street that was named after it. Seeing its familiar shape reminded me of the first time I went to call on her: hanging about in that dreary suburban Orion Street, waiting for the hour of my date to strike, a barbarian Hun at the outer frontier of the Roman empire, me and Marlene.

Sadness crept up on me, but I forced it back, this was not the time for it. I went round to the drain tap and checked the water. It appeared to be running as powerful as ever. I rose and turned to walk back to the cabin, when a mighty crash, like a clap of thunder, startled me. It came from the inside of the tank. Suddenly all fear returned. My loneliness attacked me like a cramp. Unable to move I stared at the dike beyond the parking site, where a few cars roared past in file. The lights of their headlamps flashed painfully in my eyes. When they had passed, a new pair of lights appeared in the distance. Maybe I had better get help, maybe the tank wall would not be strong enough. Oh, God, the mere thought made me shiver. Reluctantly I turned my eyes to the dark bulk of the tank. I could distinctly hear that there was much excitement inside: splashing, spattering, grunting. Then, nerve-racking, there was another blow against the tank wall, followed by a terrific roar, first of one voice, but soon complemented by others, until an awesome seven-voice chorus rang out from the tank, vaguely resembling wolf howls but much more raucous and menacing.

This had to be the beginning of the end, I thought, but without a trace of the satisfaction I had expected. I felt terribly small and lost, alone in the darkness, beside that

great expanse of restless water and those horrors in the tank. I hurried back to my cabin and drove off, tearing straight through a wooden fence that separated the parking lot from the road. I turned up the volume of my radio as high as it would go, but it could not drown out the roaring. There was a kind of rhythm to it, and it did not sound right, not at all like a death howl, but more like a song, an incantation, superhuman, macabre, unnerving.

Vultar's words came back to me. You can't outsmart them, he had said. They'll always get you. What if he had been right? I started to cast nervous looks over my shoulder, through the rear window, which gave a view of the tank, black against the star-blanché sky. Was I imagining things or did I really see the manhole cover move? I moaned softly to myself.

"Oh God, let them die, please let them die."

But they did not die. The howling stopped and instead heavy blows began to batter the tank. Immeasurably powerful, for with every blow the trailer veered aside.

I panicked. They were going to break out, which meant as much as certain death to me. I had to do something, but what? I was driving along the water. If I stopped the car and they did break out they could easily overtake me in the water. First of all I had to get more inland. There I

could stop and run, for they would certainly not follow me away from their essential element.

At maximum speed, whimpering softly, I tore along the dike, with the trailer all but bouncing behind me, forcing me to jerk at the wheel till my hands burned and the muscles of my arms ached as if stretched beyond endurance.

When, a little later, I looked over my shoulder for the umpteenth time I felt my blood freeze. This time there was no doubt: the manhole cover was rising. I grew frantic, kicking the accelerator down, jabbing at the horn so that it bellowed like a nervous cow. I cursed and sobbed and knew that all was lost. A horrible death was inevitable. And that after all my efforts. I looked round again. Three silhouettes were already crouching on top of the tank.

I shouted curses at the top of my voice and pressed down the accelerator so violently that my whole leg trembled with the exertions. Again I looked. There were now four and they were inching forward. In the dark I could not clearly see but the first one seemed ready to jump across to the roof of the truck. Then, in a flash of inspiration, I released the accelerator and rammed my other foot on the brake. I almost went through the windscreen myself, but that mattered little. The important

thing was that my would-be attackers lost their balance and, screaming hellishly, fell from the tank. One even flew over the cabin and landed in front of me on the carriageway, badly fractured but still alive. Rarely, if ever, did I have a more sensual feeling of joy than when the truck gave a little jolt while crushing the brute. I whooped for joy, even if I knew that I was not safe yet. There were three more behind me. Looking round I saw another emerging from the man-hole. I waited until it was all the way out and braked again. This time it did not work. He clung to the tank like a fly. Sweat broke out all over me. I accelerated, braked, accelerated again. It did not seem to bother the creature in the least and it continued to creep forward slowly.

I was approaching a turn-off that would take me inland. Without braking, tilting dangerously, and with tires screeching, I rumbled through the curve. All went well until I came out of it, then the trailer started to swerve uncontrollably, dragging the truck with it. Again and again we went from shoulder to shoulder before I managed to control it. For a moment I hoped that these antics had been enough to shake off my unwelcome passenger, but it was still there and closer than before. If it could make its leap I was done for. It would pluck me from my cabin like

a snail from its house. I had to do something. Then the gun came to my mind. The pistol! Where was it? It had to be somewhere on the floor. All but forgetting about the road I groped about for the weapon feverishly.

Then a dull thud announced the arrival of the monster on the cabin roof. I yelled, let go of the wheel and threw myself on the floor, head between my arms. The radio was playing an old Rolling Stones hit: Route 66, louder and louder as the sound of the decelerating engine started to wane. Overhead I could hear the scuffling of a big body. My heart raced so madly I thought it would break.

I glanced aside at the window of the door. Behind it there appeared the silhouette of a smooth round head, a hand, its claws curved like scimitars. The window was shattered with one blow and a long arm reached inside. I made myself as small as possible, eyes tightly closed, praying for a quick end. The thought of fighting did not even occur to me, but when the steely fingers closed upon my ankle I could not help struggling and pressed down the accelerator in doing so. Instantly the car picked up speed again, crashed into something that gave way and plunged down at a steep angle, bouncing madly.

It did not take long, but all the same I was pounded black and blue between the bench and the dashboard,

while the claw remained locked upon my ankle. Finally a thunderous crash stopped us, freeing my ankle and leaving a ghostly silence.

I dared not move. In my stomach there was a strange warmth that could only be caused by a wound; thick sweetish blood filled my mouth; my arms I no longer felt.

For a long time it remained silent, except for the wind which whistled shrilly among the twisted metal. Then voices became audible, hoarse and excited, stuttering out alien staccatos. Sickly I waited for the return of those unyielding claws, but they did not come. Nothing at all happened. The voices faded into the distance and were not heard again. I was left in a wind-swept darkness and silence, broken occasionally by the cry of a bird.

It lasted for a quarter of an hour, I guess, maybe a little longer, before I heard the beautiful sound of two men talking in very low Amsterdam slang.

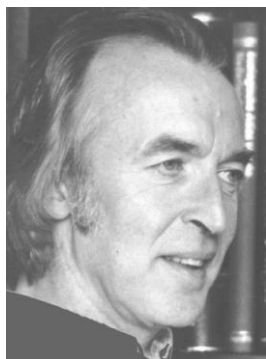
Of course I told the police the whole truth. At first they were furious. Later they only smiled. The social worker and the psychiatrists talked along with me, it is true, but I know they did not believe me either. How could they? The remains of Vultar and his children had vanished without a trace.

On account of my mental disorder, as it was called, I only got eighteen months for the murders of Old Pete, the student, the midnight angler, Vultar and the driver of Cook's Haulage.

As soon as I have served my prison term I am to be confined to a high-security asylum until I have been cured of my delusions, so I reckon I'll be a prisoner for the rest of my life. Not that I mind very much. After all, there's nothing left for me on the outside anyway. Here I've got everything I need: lodgings, food, drink, the photographs of Marlene, who smiles at me tenderly, brings me beautiful dreams and even talks to me now and then. Besides, there are times, especially on cloudless nights, as I look out across a neighboring canal, when I am only too glad to have bars in front of my window.

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.