

jan bee landman
The Car Park



a short horror story

by

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To Harry Secombe a summer vacation with the wife and kids was always trying but when things kept going wrong, like they had today, it became a torment.

They had planned to rise early and overslept. The car wouldn't start and when it did, it burst one tire before it got out of the driveway and a second one twenty miles out. Lunch had left them all feeling sick. After a morning promise of warmth and sunshine, the sky drew a thick curtain of clouds and unleashed a steady, driving rain that had lasted all day.

We should never have gone to that stupid amusement park in the first place, Harry thought, as he gazed morosely through the windshield at the string of immovable taillights stretching away in the dusk ahead. Kiddies Wonderland indeed. It had been more like an open-air asylum with all the lunatics frantically trying to get indoors. Queues everywhere, endless waiting to get something to eat or drink. Lots of angry shoving and pushing, of course, and a tireless choir of wailing and whining kids. The thought that he might have spent the afternoon in his easy chair watching baseball was almost unbearable. Woe betides me, he thought, I'm wet, I'm cold, I hunger and thirst, my legs ache, I have developed a bitter mood and now we're stuck in this darned traffic jam to

boot.

"For pete's sake, Harry, are we going to be here for ever?" his wife suddenly snapped, giving him a start.

He felt his anger stirring.

"I don't know dear," he said patiently. "I didn't organize it, you know."

"Well, you picked this route."

He turned round slowly, in full control of his temper, as he had learned to be ever since that fateful night at her father's place when he realized he was capable of massacre if he ever lost it completely.

She was reclining massively in the back seat, with Annabel, their daughter, fast asleep by her side. In the dark he could only make out the pale contours of his wife's broad angular face, her dark eye cavities and tight-lipped mouth. Her deodorant was beginning to fail and the oily odor of her big body was unfolding. He had liked that smell once.

"Margaret," he said very softly. "Please. It's been a trying day. We've all had more than enough. Let's not take it out on each other."

"Well, it was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Yes dear. It was my idea. I'm very sorry my powers of clairvoyance failed me."

"HA-HA-HA! Very funny, Harry. Very funny."

He turned his eyes to the road again, pausing briefly to wink at his nine- year-old son, Brian, who sat beside him, looking about drowsily.

"We should never have gone by car anyway," Margaret said.

Harry stifled a sigh. It was hard to imagine that the aggressive mound of flesh in the back seat had once been Miss Rural County, as sweet as she was beautiful. But perhaps it was just as hard for her to imagine that her flabby, listless office manager had once been a handsome and ambitious quarterback. Being a rich man's daughter Margaret had expected to be a rich man's wife, as she would have been, if Harry had only swallowed her father's tyranny gracefully. Then he would have gone far in daddy's bank. But Harry had been anything but graceful. Caught between his own pride and the temptation of easy riches he had only managed an uneasy truce with his tyrant-in-law, which kept him near the bottom of the old man's payroll.

The jam lasted another hour before it finally melted away and they could speed on to the motel. It was full.

By now Harry had become too weary to anger.

The proprietor advised them to try Alphaville, a nearby

town. Medium-sized though it was, the place bustled like Manhattan on a late Friday afternoon. A large banner fluttered across the main street. Welcome Associated Hardware, it read.

"Just our luck," said Harry. "There's a convention or something going on."

They crept in and out of the busy streets, in futile search of a parking lot that was not full. Finally he reached an empty back street, with a lurid P-sign glowing in the distance. He pushed the throttle. At last.

The car park was conspicuously large and modern. There was an automatic ticket dispenser, raising a black-and-blue barrier when Harry took a card. With a sigh of relief he drove the car into the vast low-ceilinged hall. It was poorly lit, shedding faint glows over the closely packed automobiles. There was not a single free space on the first floor. So Harry followed the arrows and went up to the second floor. The size of the place surprised him. More surprisingly, the second story was also filled to capacity. He drove down again. There was also an underground level, but here it was the same. Not one single empty space.

Harry cursed. What was the matter with this place? Had the peoples of the world assembled here, or what?

"Why don't you park the bloody car?" asked Margaret.
"Surely there must be a place somewhere."

Harry gnashed his teeth, stopped the car and turned off the ignition. He had had it. He was simply going to sit here and wait for a miracle. He was not going to be driven insane. He took a cigarette from the glove compartment and set about lighting it.

Margaret stirred in the back. He felt her hair brush his cheek as she leant forward to look about. A waft of acrid, nauseating sweat filled his nostrils.

"Why are we standing here?" grated her voice just beside his ear. "For pete's sake, Harry. Do something. Let's get out and find a hotel."

Harry smiled.

"No," he said. "I've had it. There's some kind of curse on this whole day and I'm no longer going along with it. Sooner or later someone's bound to leave and we'll have a parking space. There's no sense in driving circles till we run out of gas."

Margaret sank back again.

"Some vacation," she said. "I'll never know why you had to turn down daddy's offer to stay at the ranch."

Harry did not bother to react.

After several minutes had passed in silence, Margaret

rose again.

"C'mon, Harry. Do something, willya?"

"Like what?"

"Like finding a parking space, you moron."

At the same time Harry saw a man appear between the cars. He wore a thick navy blue sweater and a seaman's cap. Harry struck his horn. The man gave a start and came towards them. He had a jolly, red face and a fringe of white whiskers that looked like cotton wool. Santa Claus out of season.

Harry turned the window down.

"Good evening, you work here?"

"Sure do," the man said, grinning broadly. "You'll be looking for a place to park, I reckon."

"Right," said Harry.

"You from New York? I noticed the license plate."

"Yes," said Harry, not in the mood for small talk.

"Nice place. Too busy for me, though. Visiting relatives?"

"No, just passing through. Is there any place to park here?"

"Sure, follow me." He turned with an inviting gesture of his arm.

Harry started the car and allowed it to roll slowly along behind the attendant. The man led them on through long

lanes of parked cars till they reached another downward passage, but this one bore the sign "Private. No entry" and a rusty chain was strung across it. The man detached the chain and motioned that they could go down.

Harry pointed at the sign. The man waved his objection away. Oh, well, Harry thought, he is being paid to know, and drove down the passage. The slope was a lot steeper than the other ones, curving sharply. Although his car was in first gear Harry had to hold his foot on the brake to keep it from speeding up. He had expected another hall to open after the first winding, but the slope kept on spiraling down. After two more revolutions, the passage ahead became pitchblack. Harry switched on his headlights, amazed by the length of this runway.

"Gee, dad, it's spooky down here," said Brian.

Harry chuckled.

"Let's just hope there aren't any ghosts." he said.

"If there are I'll zap them with my gun," said Brian, waving a plastic revolver.

"That's my boy," said Harry. He wanted to say something more, but his attention was drawn by a sudden change in the color of the passage. Just ahead the dull gray concrete had been painted pale green, floor, walls, and ceiling, but with a strange slant, horizontal. In

surprise he applied some more pressure to the brakes just as he crossed the line between gray and green and the next moment he felt the car go out of control.

"Hold on!" he shouted.

The floor surface seemed to have turned to ice. The car slid into the far wall, with a horrible crunch of denting metal. Margaret screamed. Annabel began to cry. Harry turned at the wheel frantically. No use. The car kept on sliding, ever faster, banged into the wall again, careened off it, turning sideways, striking the other wall with its rear, shattering a taillight, before it righted itself and slithered further down. Harry repressed the impulse to close his eyes. The car banged once more into the left wall and suddenly shot straight ahead into a large, level-floored space, where it slid on to a slow halt.

Harry took a few very deep breaths. This was one day he would not forget in a hurry.

In the rear he could hear Margaret softly consoling Annabel. Brian was sitting tightlipped, clasping the rim of the dashboard and gazing about intently in the weird hall in which the only light came from the headlights of their car.

It was obviously another parking hall, but that was the only resemblance. For a start it was green, but not the

bright mossgreen of the passage, but dark bottlegreen, shining wetly. There were about two dozen other cars, but all in strange positions, like toys flung away by a bored giant. Two had overturned. They were all heavily dented, some rust-bitten, some also covered with green paint. Harry was struck dumb with amazement. What was this place?

He opened the door and was instantly overwhelmed by a dank, fetid odor of corruption that made him close the door again in a hurry.

"Jesus Christ," he mumbled, overcome by the strangeness of their situation. "Are we in the netherworld, or what?"

"What's the netherworld, dad?" asked Brian.

"Never mind, son. It'll be all right," he said, lighting another cigarette, hands atremble.

Margaret had comforted Annabel and leaned forward.

"Where, in the name of goodness, are we?"

"In some weird underground car park. But don't ask me anything else."

"Fine mess you've gotten us into again, Harry." said Margaret. "I hope you're satisfied. God! This is certainly the last time I'm going on vacation by car."

"We don't have the money to go by plane."

"Whose fault is that?"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't going into that again. He felt uneasy. This place did not make any sense. Why had that weirdo in the seaman's cap directed them here?

"Give me my jacket, Marge. I'll have a look around. You lot stay inside the car. Do you hear? Just in case."

He struggled into his jacket and opened the door. Again the foul stink of rottenness was overpowering. He stepped out, instantly lost his footing and came down hard on his buttocks. Inside the car he could hear the sarcastic giggle of Margaret. An icy wetness penetrated the seat of his pants. As his hands sought support they almost disappeared into slippery, slimy goo. It felt like the bottom of a pond.

With great caution Harry got up, holding on to the door while his feet kept sliding away beneath him. When he had finally reached an upward stance, he looked about. Everything behind the car was steeped in blackness. In front the headlights cast a lurid glow through the low and deep vault. He decided to take a look at the other cars first.

Slipping and sliding, falling down repeatedly Harry set out. It took him several minutes to cross the twenty odd yards to the battered Buick that was nearest. It was

empty. He looked about again.

There was a deep silence, only broken by the faint trickle of water here and there. Behind him the two glaring lamps of his own car, their beams brushing the obscure silhouettes of other cars to his left and right, scattered across the floor. Everything dank, dismal green. He knelt down and studied the floor. Algae and weeds. That's what the green stuff was. Indeed like the bottom of a pond, or rather the bottom of the sea. That figured. They were near the sea. But then..... His heart missed a beat. This vault had to be below sea level. The algae and weeds testified that it was flooded frequently. With each tide, no doubt.... He cast a quick glance at the ceiling. It was overgrown too, so there could be no doubt that this whole space would be submerged. He began to feel very uncomfortable. This was not a healthy place to be. He groped for his cigarettes. He had none on him. They were still in the car. He wrung his hands nervously, while he looked at a small Volkswagen ahead. Slowly he made his way towards it, getting a bit used to the slippery surface. As he approached he thought he saw someone inside the car, but could not imagine that to be true. With a last slide he reached the door and peered in through the grimy window. A ghastly, white and bloated face gazed back at

him with a lifeless grin. Horrified he drew back. This was terrible. The person inside the car had been drowned. But why hadn't he tried to get out? Perhaps he had been unconscious. Yes, of course. That had to be the answer, but all the same a sickening fear crept into him.

A sudden bellow made him swirl round so fast that he went flat on his back. As he frantically tried to get up, he realized it had been the horn of his own car. The family was getting impatient. But he was too shocked to be annoyed. He hurried back.

Margaret was sitting bolt upright and gazed at him expectantly.

"Well? What are you fiddling about for? Get us out of this place."

"That's what I intend to do," he said, dropping into his seat and grabbing his cigarettes with trembling hands.

"What's the matter dad, why are you shivering?" asked Brian.

"Give me a moment son, will you. This is trouble. We've got to be very calm." He took out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling deeply. It steadied him a little.

"All right," he said, amazed at his own cool. "This is it. We are in a cellar that appears to be flooded when the tide comes in. I suppose this was meant to be the fourth story

of this car park, but the sea made it impossible to use. Why the man upstairs directed us here is beyond me. Perhaps he's an idiot. Perhaps he likes to play pranks on people. We can't hope to get up the slope we came down. It's too slippery. But if this is indeed part of the car park there should be stairs somewhere. So all we have to do is find those and we're out."

It sounded simple enough. So why didn't he believe it himself?

"But what if the tide comes in?" asked Margaret. And for the first time in years there was no edge of sarcasm to her voice. It moved him more than he had expected.

"I don't think that will happen for some while," he said gently. "The surface is still soaking wet. I reckon the tide has just gone out. So that should give us plenty of time."

He looked at his wife and kids, feeling strangely mellowed towards them. The wide-eyed fear on Margaret's face almost made her young again. Annabel for once did not whine and whimper. She seemed mercifully unable to grasp the situation. Brian put on an impressive show of courage. How he loved that boy. He clenched his teeth.

"C'mon team," he said airily. "Let's get some stuff out of the boot. We'll need dry clothes, flashlights."

"Your gun, dad!" said Brian.

Harry grinned.

"If we had brought it along, son."

They clambered out of the car and got their stuff.

Brian was really getting into it.

"This is exciting dad," he said. "It's a real adventure.

Wait till I tell Bruce and the other guys about this."

Harry grinned sourly. He hoped they would live to tell anyone, but it was just as well that Brian took it in this spirit. There would be time enough for despair.

"They'll be mighty jealous," he said.

"That's for sure."

"Okay, here's what we do. We split up in two teams and search the walls that are lit by the car, working from opposite sides. If we don't find anything

I'll turn the car around and we can try the rest. Be careful. If you feel you're slipping, just let go. Don't try to break your fall by using your arms. That's the way to get broken bones. And whatever you do: don't go near the other cars."

"Why not dad?" asked Brian.

"Because I say so. Now git. You team up with your mother. I'll take Annabel. Hang this flashlight on your belt, but don't use it till you have to."

They separated.

With his daughter's little hand clutching his, he felt a strange mixture of pride and sadness. It was uncanny. For ten years he had lived the life of a passive, hen-pecked husband. Now he suddenly was the undisputed chieftain of his little tribe. He had never realized how much they meant to him.

"I'm scared, daddy," said Annabel.

"Don't be, honey. We are only a bit lost. It won't take long. I'll get you out of here."

"I know you will, daddy, but I'm still scared."

He bit his lower lip, glad to be distracted by the side wall looming up before them.

"Here we are. Now you help me, y'hear. Look carefully for a door."

"Can I hold the light, daddy?"

"Sure you can. But don't drop it."

He placed the flashlight in her waiting hands and she dropped it at once. He stifled a curse as he went down on his knees to recover it. Luckily it was not broken.

"Is it too heavy for you?" he asked.

"No, it slipped."

"Okay, try again. But hold tight now."

Slowly they started to walk through the gloom, while Annabel shone a wobbly lightbeam along the wall. Harry

shot a glance at the ghostly scene behind them. Their car stood outlined like a black beetle against the slightly brighter far wall. Its headlamps swept the space in front of it, harshly illuminating the scattered cars among the pillars and casting long shadows. He could not see Brian and Margaret, but their voices rang out occasionally, loud yet indistinct in the echoing vault.

Whenever they came near a car, Harry made sure that Annabel would not give it a closer look. He saw several other forms behind the windows. It bode little good for their search. Surely those others must also have tried to get out. In vain, obviously. He tried not to think about that too much.

After what seemed to have been a trek of several hours, a gleeful shout from the other side swept his fears away.

"Found it dad!" shouted Brian.

As fast as he could he slithered and slipped his way across the floor, dragging Annabel along, nearly ecstatic at the thought that they might be out of here in a matter of minutes.

His hopes crashed the moment he saw the door. It was iron, its handle broken off, its hinges formless chunks of rust. There was no way to open it without a crow bar. He always had one in the boot somewhere but he distinctly

remembered taking it out to make room for their luggage.

"Oh shit," he mumbled under his breath.

"It can't be opened, can it?" said Margaret, softly.

She looked utterly defeated. The tight-lipped smirk that always gave her a cynical expression, was gone. She looked gentle in her fear and weariness. Her flowery dress was smudged and wet from falling down and clung to her ample body. She still looked rather impressive, suddenly reminding him of Sophia Loren in some beach movie. Statuesque. They should really have tried harder to keep the fire burning. If only she would get rid of those twenty pounds of fat. But then, she said the same of his beer belly.

"Dad!" Brian suddenly shouted. "I've got an idea! We brought the dinghy, didn't we?"

"Sure,"

"Well, that's it. When the water comes, we simply get into the dinghy and float up the passage."

Baffled he looked at the radiant face of his son. The boy was right. The water would certainly not be violent in here. It would just rise. A great surge of relief swept through him. He laughed out loud.

"Of course!" he shouted. "Son of a gun! You're a marvel. Why didn't I think of that? C'mon. Let's go and get it

ready."

"Maybe we should try to look for another exit?" asked Margaret.

He stopped. Maybe.

"No, it's too risky. We run the risk of breaking something every time we fall. Let's just get comfortable and wait for the water."

They returned to the car, changed clothes and got inside again, trying to act cheerful.

After a while Annabel gave a violent start.

"Oh, look," she cried, "There's a creepy light over there."

They all turned to look.

Indeed a light had appeared in a far corner of the vault, outside the range of the headlamps. A pale greenish drop that seemed to float from side to side.

Harry took a deep breath. Now what? Perhaps someone had come to look for them? But no. They wouldn't be using such a weird little light. It really looked creepy.

"Christ, Harry, what can that be?" whispered Margaret.

"Nothing much. Perhaps just piece of phosphorescent stuff. I'll go and see. Hand me one of the flashlights, Brian."

"Can I come too, dad?"

"No son, you stay with your mother and Annabel."

He got out of the car and started to plod warily towards the light. Without really knowing why, he did not switch on his flashlight. You never knew. As he approached the green speck, a second one suddenly popped up beside it. He halted, straining his ears. Nothing at first, but after a few seconds he heard some faint gurgles. He bit his lower lip. There was water nearby. He tensed. Careful. He wouldn't want to fall into some hole. He removed the flashlight from his belt, took a deep breath and switched it on. It revealed a stretch of floor and, only a few yards ahead, the black aperture of another runway, filled with water. And there, dangling from what seemed to be two fishing rods, hung the drops of green light. Harry shook his head in disbelief. He felt an impulse to laugh at the weirdness of those things. But there was something about them that dampened his amusement. He suddenly realized that they had lured him here. If he had not had a flashlight he would have walked straight into that hole. Could it be that this was the idea? Something down there waiting for him to fall into the water? A tremor passed through his body. Fear took hold of him again. Very cautiously he inched his way forward till he reached the edge of the slope.

Deep silence. The black sheet of water, the rods

motionless like reed stalks. Harry shone his light at their bases. He could not make out anything underwater. He leaned slightly forward, careful to keep his balance. He thought he saw movement below the rods. A big dark form. In sudden panic he tried to withdraw. Then the water exploded. With a shriek Harry flung himself back, dropping his flashlight. There were two tremendous clangs, beartraps snapping to, and the noise of large bodies furiously plunging and splashing around in the water.

All atremble Harry crawled away from the passage. His heart thumped in his throat. His fear almost robbed him of his powers of locomotion. Like a lame crab he squirmed through the slime, groping for his fallen light. In the distance he heard Margaret screaming his name. His mind refused to work. He could not accept what he had seen. There had only been a split second between the water's eruption and the fall of his flashlight. But the glimpse of the hideous forms he had seen in that brief moment, stood branded in his memory. Vague and blurred, but all the more terrible for that. An enormous head, inkblue, with bulbous milky eyes, suddenly opening into a maw bristling with transparent fangs.

He moaned softly, shivering, trying to get to his feet,

slipping, and crawling further on hands and knees. The roar of a car engine erupted. Margaret was apparently trying to come to his rescue, but the high-pitched whine of wheels spinning made it clear that she was not going to succeed. Too much throttle. He looked back at the passage. The lights were there again. Only now there were three.

"Jesus," he mumbled. Now he understood why some people had preferred to stay in the car to be drowned. Everything seemed better than those things. When he realized they were not following him, he calmed down somewhat and began to walk back to the car, rubbing the flashlight dry on the sleeve of his coat. Anglerfish, he thought. They existed in the deep seas. But they were only little fellows. How could they have reached this size? It was incredible.

Then a chilling thought struck him. What if they had been brought down here for those monsters? He recalled the little friendly chat by that rundown Santa Claus. His remark on the out-of-state license plates. His question about relatives. There could be little doubt. He had lured them down here on purpose. Food! That's what they were! Nobody would ever know, because nobody was likely to look for them down here.

From afar he heard Margaret shout.

"You all right? Harry? What happened?"

He covered the remaining distance in a daze and dropped heavily into the driver's seat. Margaret and Brian beset him with questions.

"All right, all right," he said. "Take it easy. There's more trouble. Brian's idea is out. There's some dangerous creatures out there. Huge fishes. If the water rises they'll come in. We can't use the dinghy. We'll have to get out some other way."

"Oh god, oh god," moaned Margaret. "We're lost, aren't we? Lost!"

Harry grabbed a handful of her flabby arm.

"Margaret! Steady. Think of the kids. This is no time for hysterics. We've got to stay calm. It's our only chance. We'll get out. I promise you. I'll think of something."

He started the car again. The floor had dried up a little, so the wheels got some grip and Harry managed to swing the vehicle around and slither it towards the slope. He made two efforts to get it up, but it just would not move. He switched off the ignition. The green plane rose mockingly before them. He propped his head in his hands and tried to think. His mind seemed numb. He got out of the car and made an attempt to scramble up the slope. In

vain. As he had known all along the stuff was too slippery. He tried to scrape it away. No use. All they needed was a narrow track. But how? Burn it? It was wet, it wouldn't burn. Gasoline! He always had a jerrycan in the back. He paused. It was worth a try. The fuel itself would burn despite the moisture underneath.

He ran back to the car, dragged out a jerrycan, splashed some gasoline on the slope, set fire to it and after a few minutes he could set his foot on the blackened spot without slipping. It worked! He chuckled gleefully, so excited that he almost wept. He returned to the car and emptied the booth, searching for other materials that might be of use. All he could find was some rope and tent pegs. He checked his watch. They had been in here for over three hours. He had no possibility of knowing when the tide would come in, but he reckoned there was still plenty of time.

He explained his plan to Margaret, who was strangely subdued and meek, almost like the sweet, young cheerleader he had fallen in love with. When he had finished explaining, they all nodded.

"But I'll need some help. Brian? How about it? Do you think you can help me?"

The boy's tearful face lit up.

"Sure dad. I'll help."

"Good boy. And you Annabel, don't give your mom any trouble, do you hear? Everything's going to be fine. It may take some time, but we'll get out." He set off with Brian bravely toting the can of gasoline.

It was slow and nerve-racking work, in constant danger of slipping. He would pour some gasoline on a rag, wet a patch of about one square yard and set fire to it. The upward draft kept the flames away from him. After a few minutes the gas had burnt itself out and he could move up. In silence they labored on, creeping up yard by yard, mostly in utter darkness, because they had to save the batteries of their flashlights. Whenever Harry found a crack in the concrete he would ram a tent peg into it to offer a firmer foothold and when he came upon a drain grating he made a sling out of rope as a handstrap, realizing that Margaret would have one hell of a struggle to get her heavy body up the incline.

After two hours Harry guessed they had covered about two thirds of the distance.

Then Brian uttered the words Harry had dreaded.

"The can's almost empty, dad." he said softly.

Harry tried to place his foot on an unburnt spot. It slipped. Damn. What now? Drenched in sweat, panting,

exhausted, Harry felt ready to give up. Without gasoline they were stuck. But wait. There should still be gasoline in the tank of the car. All he needed was a hose to suck it out. He did not have a regular one but he could get one from the engine.

"You stay up here. Don't move." he told Brian. "I'm going back to get gas from the car."

He hurried down, careful to tread only on the blackened patches.

Five minutes later he was up again, toting a full jerrycan.

They labored on. After another hour Brian spotted a difference in the darkness ahead and when Harry swung the lightbeam up the slope, he saw the gorgeous edge of gray concrete. Almost there. He heaved a sigh. They were really going to make it.

That was when Margaret's voice rang out.

"Harry!"

He chilled as he heard the fear in her voice.

"Yes, Margaret. What is it?"

"I hear something strange. Can you come down please? Something's happening."

He went. As he reached the floor his eyes sought out the three dangling light drops towards the rear. They were

there, bobbing excitedly up and down. Margaret stood beside the car, pale, shivering. Harry also heard it. A faint, lisping sound, soft crackling as a distant fire. He knew at once. The water was coming in!

"It's the water, isn't it?" said Margaret.

He nodded.

"Oh, Harry, are we going to make it? Please say we'll make it."

She reached out her arms at him, pleadingly. He held her briefly.

"We'll just have to," he said, kissing her temple. "Come quick, get Annabel. We're going up."

When they came to the slope, Margaret uttered a moan.

"Oh, Harry, you know I can never get up that."

"You'll have to, Margaret. There's no other way. C'mon. Try. There's handstraps further up. Tent pegs. You'll be all right. Annabel can go ahead. Then me. Then you."

He hung his flashlight on his daughter's belt and playfully she bounded a little way up the slope. Harry joined her and they both waited for Margaret to follow.

She was hopeless. She tried desperately, but her weight proved too much. After three steps she lost her balance and rolled down, shrieking. Annabel started to cry. Harry swore under his breath.

"You hurt, Margaret?" he asked.

"No, but I can't do it. It's no use." She was sitting at the bottom of the slope in the green slush, looking completely forlorn.

Harry clasped Annabel in his arms.

"Listen, honey. This is no time to cry. We've got to help mommie. You run up the slope to your brother. Ask him for the rope and his flashlight and bring them back to me. Do you think you can do that?"

With tears dripping down her face Annabel nodded. He switched on her flashlight and she skipped up the slope like a monkey.

When she returned she was smiling.

"Brian's making a fire, daddy," she said.

Damn the boy, Harry thought, the little brat is burning the weed on his own. But then he realized that they might need every second they could get. So he did not say anything.

He told Annabel to go back to her brother, hung the light on his belt and hurried down to Margaret, who was weeping softly. When his feet touched the floor, they sent up a spray of water. It was rising pretty fast.

"Oh, Harry, I feel so ashamed," moaned Margaret, "I've been such a bitch all these years and now I'm the one

who's really messing everything up. Why don't you just leave me here and go on with the kids?"

"Don't talk rubbish. We are all getting out. Here tie this round your waist." He helped her. As they walked back to the slope, their feet splashed in the rising water.

Harry clambered up ahead till he reached the first grating. He tied the other end of the rope to it.

"C'mon Margaret. Hold on to the rope and walk up. There's nothing to it."

He waited breathlessly. Surely she would manage? He crept down a little. Against the dying glow of his headlights, he saw Margaret's dark bulk as she worked her way up, clumsily as a bear.

"Attagirl," shouted Harry. "You're doing fine."

When she reached him, she was wheezing and her face gleamed with sweat.

"Oh, Harry, this is killing me."

"Never. Now grab this grating here. I'll move up and tie the rope to the next one. Don't move till I shout."

He cast a last look behind him, startled by the discovery that the water had already risen above the weeds, reflecting the faint headlights like a mirror. Nervously Harry scrambled up the slope. His hands shook uncontrollably as he tied the rope.

"C'mon Margaret! Climb!"

She came, puffing and grunting. Behind her he saw the black plane of water follow. It was rising at astonishing speed.

"Come on Margaret, Come on!"

She tried, fiercely. Her face was flushed scarlet. Inch by inch she dragged her body up. But all the while the water kept pace.

When they had reached the third grating, about halfway up, Margaret refused to continue.

"I can't," she panted. "I simply can't. I must take a rest."

Harry stood just above her. About four yards down the black surface shone ominously, nibbling away at the green walls. The hall had been flooded completely by now. Harry wondered how long it would take the Anglerfish to find them here. He supposed they were still at a safe distance from the water even if they came, but he could not know for sure. Perhaps they could leap up high enough to grab them. His heart began to race in wild fear.

"You've got to go on, Margaret. You've got to. Please. Do it for the kids."

She nodded wearily.

"All right. String me up."

As he turned to go, her voice stopped him.

"Harry...."

He looked back and directed the beam of the flashlight towards her face. It looked unusually mild, almost serene.

"I just want to say that I'm sorry for a lot of things."

He smiled.

"So am I, dear. So am I."

They both smiled, sadly, knowingly.

"If we get out...." she began, but he interrupted her quickly.

"Don't say it. Outside everything will be different again."

"I know, but it'll never be how it was and ..."

A soft liquid sound cut her short. They both looked behind. A green light had popped up, dangling above the water at the end of a white stalk.

Margaret uttered a low moan.

"Easy," said Harry, in a whisper. "I'm going up. When I give a tug, you climb for all you're worth."

In his despair he almost forgot where he was. He leapt up the slope without thinking. He had often wished Margaret gone, but now he wanted nothing but to save her. They had loved once. Perhaps they could love again.

This time he did not tie the rope to the grating, just slung it through and started to drag her up. The next two stages were covered with the speed of desperation and

when they came in view of Brian and Annabel, the water was out of sight. The kids were clinging miserably to each other in the dark. Their flashlight had burned itself out. Brian's face was black, his hair singed. He started to sob.

"The flames won't go away anymore, dad," he said.

Harry understood at once. The water had shut off the draft. They were stuck. Only three yards of slippery surface separated them from safety. Those three yards had to be burned. The only solution was to fire them despite the absence of a good draft and go down a bit while it burned.

He called the kids down, explained his plan and hurried up to pour gasoline on the untreated spot. Lighting it, he scampered back as quickly as he could, followed by ribbons of flame. Margaret and the kids were clinging together against the wall. Behind them the water had come into sight again. The heavy stench of burning gasoline filled the space, poisoning the air, consuming oxygen, till all four were gasping. Just as Harry began to fear that he had used too much fuel and they might be suffocated, the flames died away. Harry hurried upwards across the smoking patch, ignoring the heat under his feet and used his momentum to jump across the last strip of green. He landed on the concrete. Safe! Joy leapt inside

him, but there was no time to relish it.

"Brian, Annabel. Come up here. Quick. As fast as you can. Help me pull mommie up."

They came like pale kittens bounding from the dark. Annabel missed her footing at the last jump, but Harry managed to grasp her arm before she slid back.

He quickly slung the rope through the next grating and began to tug. With agonizing slowness he heard Margaret struggle up. Harry did not dare shout encouragement for fear of the Anglerfish. Inch by inch he drew the rope in. If only she had not been so heavy. If only he had been in shape. Occasionally he heard her groan, stumble, slip. At long last she appeared round the bend. But the water was close behind her. Three yards at most.

"For god's sake, Margaret. Give it some more."

She shook her head wearily.

"Yes, you can. You're almost there. Now come on."

Behind her, in the dark, two green lights swung eerily from side to side. Harry tried to remember how far the beasts had jumped from the water when he encountered them first. Two yards perhaps. So they still had one to spare, but the water was rising faster than Margaret was. Much faster. He hung backwards, clinging to the rope with bleeding hands, trying to muster up some extra strength

from his exhausted body, but she had to do the climbing herself. And she couldn't. The lights came closer. Then one of the stalks shuddered. Harry uttered a scream. One Anglerfish jumped. Like some hellish truck grille its fanged maw rushed at the struggling form of Margaret. Harry closed his eyes in horror. He heard the jaws clang shut, Margaret's howl, a terrific splash of water and the next moment a big, wet body bumped into him. He opened his eyes. Margaret!

She was incoherent with fear. Blubbering and weeping she clung to him as he dragged her away.

"I felt it," she whispered after regaining some of her composure. "I felt it. A bump. Something cold and hard. I just leapt. Oh God, I might have fallen back into the water."

She slumped to the ground.

Annabel and Brian approached gingerly.

"What's wrong with mommie, dad?" asked Brian.

Harry grinned, inhaling in gulps of air. He had never been so tired in all his life, but never so elated either. They had made it.

"Nothing's wrong, son. We're safe. We made it." He drew his kids towards him and held them in a tight embrace.

"We made it."

They sat around Margaret in the dusk of his rapidly waning flashlight for a couple of minutes, smiling, yet casting uneasy glances now and then at the two drops of greenish light that still glowed below them.

"What do we do now?" Margaret asked after a while.

"I think the sheriff will be mighty interested to hear our tale," Harry said.

"He sure would," said a sharp voice behind them. They turned and looked into a blinding light that erupted in their faces.

"Only... he'll never know, will he? How the hell did y'all get out of there? Pretty clever, I must say. It's never been done before." Harry recognized the voice of the would-be Santa Claus.

He clenched his fists. No! This was too much. They weren't going to be stopped now. He tensed. He was going to rush the bastard.

"Don't try it mister. I've got a gun pointed right at your gut. You're going back. All of you. Right now. Git up."

Slowly they got to their feet.

"Start walking."

Harry felt like a zombie. He wanted to do something but he felt so weary, so numb, his brain dull with despair. This could not be happening, not after all they had gone

through.

"Come on!" shouted the man. "Get going." He moved toward them. Harry forced himself to think. He had to do something. Fast or never. Time was just about up. Yes. Time. He had to buy time, somehow create a diversion. Almost without thinking he put his heel down on Annabel's foot, hard. She broke into hysterical squeals of pain.

The lightbeam wavered.

"Shut that brat up."

Margaret stepped back to comfort the crying child. Harry moved behind her. For once he was glad she was so big. He quickly took the now burnt-out flashlight from his belt, held it in his right hand, his one-time throwing arm. In his other hand he took his keys, careful not to jingle them. He knew what to do. He hadn't thrown a ball in years, but his accuracy had once been called deadly. If only it would prove so now. He felt the strange mixture of confidence and fear he had known so often on the football field when a big play was desperately needed. Somehow it pumped new vigor into his exhausted body. Their assailant remained ominously silent while Margaret calmed Annabel. When the child had finally stopped sobbing, the man uttered a sneering chuckle.

"All right," he said "Down we go."

Harry tossed the keys from behind Margaret's broad back. They made a sharp clatter against the wall beside their assailant and the beam of light swept toward the sound. Instantly Harry threw the flashlight, cringing in suspense.

There was a sharp thud and a groan of pain. On the money! The man's light fell to the floor and went out. In wild elation Harry rushed forward, only to be greeted by the flash and thunder of a gun shot.

He flung himself to the ground. Hell no. He jumped up again, made two giant strides and blundered into a small chubby body. The man. He lashed out with both hands, stinging his knuckles on bone. The man dragged him down and together they started to roll down the slope. This was it. The end. Harry groped madly for some hold. The man was cursing, firing wild shots. Somewhere in the dark Harry heard Margaret screaming his name. At any rate I've saved them, he thought. Just then his hands chanced on the rope. He grasped it so tightly that his fingernails dug into the palms of his hands. Sickeningly, the rope slipped a little, but then it stuck. Harry held on, with the man clutching at his trouser legs. Harry kicked with all his might. The hands let go. With an ungodly, wavering yell,

the man dropped away. There was a loud splash and the noise of large bodies plunging and splashing around in water. Then all became silent again.

"Harry?" Margaret's voice, soft, tremulous, full of genuine anxiety. His wife.

"Yes, Margaret. I'm still here."

He laughed, a bit shakily, but with a profound sense of relief. He struggled to his feet and scrambled up the slope.

"Come," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They hurried away. The poorly-lit car park seemed a glittering palace now.

"I hope this has cured you of car holidays," Margaret said, as they walked among the rows of parked cars.

"No," he replied, with a chill in his voice. "No, Margaret, I'm afraid it hasn't."

She stopped to give him an inquiring look.

For a moment they stood eye to eye, both tense, both waiting.

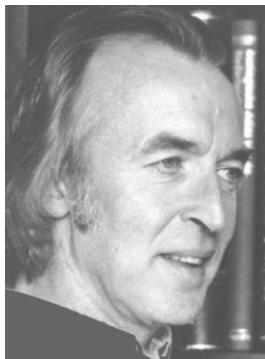
Then Margaret smiled.

"No," she said. "I guess it hasn't."

They both chuckled. Harry took Annabel's hand, Margaret took Brian's and they made their way to the exit.

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

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