

jan bee landman

Emma





a short, literary, mainstream story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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The first time I saw Emma was in the Harbour Jazzclub. A place of profound melancholy. Sad hunting ground for older, despairing singles, where I had been relegated in my early forties. It was a large, old-fashioned dance hall, off the beaten track, so probably low-rent, always dimly lit, too big for its clientele, a bit shabby, with a whiff of bad plumbing always lingering in the background.

Its excessive size meant that apart from a few heydays a year, the place always looked half deserted, uninviting, more depressing than it need have been. Saturdays there would be dancing, to the live music of old-fashioned Dixieland bands. In the sixties we had been brainwashed to hate their kind of music, but for socializing it was a lot better than more modern and solitary convulsions.

That first meeting with Emma was on such a Saturday. A dismal one. Not many people. About fifty, mostly men, scattered throughout the large, gloomy hall, hanging at the long bars on both sides of the dance-floor, its far end bordered by a huge stage that dwarfed any performers between scarlet curtains rising into shady heights.

I was sitting at the back, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, contemplating an early night. The band had taken a break, its members stood at the bar clamoring for drinks.

I gazed at my fellow sufferers, middle-aged men like myself, all dressed up, nowhere to go but here, gazing into their glasses, drinking and smoking, wrapped up in their loneliness. We seldom spoke to one another. That was not why we were there. We meant business. We were rivals, enemies. On a sacred quest. The Holy Grail was a paltry bauble compared to our goal. Love. Happiness. The end of quiet desperation. Waiting for the kiss of a princess to awaken us from our living nightmare.

Suddenly I noticed some commotion at the other end of the bar, on the side of the dance floor. Fresh prey, apparently, judging by the sudden movement of men scurrying in that direction. I cursed myself. What was I doing way back anyway? First lesson of philandering: guard the entrances. Now I'd be too late. Still, I decided to take a closer look. A small mob had formed around three females. I took some heart,

perhaps it was not too late after all. Then I saw her. She was hard to miss. At least a head taller than the rest. Statuesque, erect, broad-shouldered. She had dark hair, half-long & curly, framing a pale face that was just being struck by the glow of a lightbeam, so that she was sharply highlit against the gloom behind her. Striking. A scene out of a carefully staged drama. Regal. A quiet, dignified beauty, Ingrid-Bergmanlike.

I was about ten meters away. She looked straight at me. I could not help smiling. She continued to look at me, but did not respond to my smile. Damn, I thought. Out. But at the same time I felt a violent spasm inside my chest. My heart took a leap. That rarely happened. I took it as a sign to press on. At moments like that I lose all restraint, become a loose canon, just rumble straight ahead. I muscled my way through the admiring throng, stomping on toes, elbowing diaphragms, apologizing profusely all the way, until I stood face to face with her.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Jan, and I would deem it a singular honour to dance with you."

She giggled softly.

"That's nice, but I've just said yes to this

gentleman." She tipped her head at a fat little man, with a bald head, who stood beaming beside her, as if he had just won her in a lottery.

"A dire mistake," I said, "He looks dangerous. I'll fight him for you, if you want."

She giggled again, sweetly, restrained.

"Don't be silly. You can be next."

I stood at the side of the dancefloor, trying not to watch her all the time. Neither she nor the little fat man was a good dancer. They seemed beginners, moving jerkily and often looking down at their feet. Now and then I saw one of them wince, trod upon, obviously. It gave me grim satisfaction. She was a full head taller than he. Our eyes met several times. But again she did not react. Her indifference baffled me.

I was completely obsessed with her. Entranced. Enchanted. Within a matter of minutes my universe had changed, all at once my existence revolved around her. I moved about, too restless not to, sipping my beer, taking nervous puffs from my cigarette. Tense as a coil. Completely smitten. Keenly reminded of the only other time this had happened, more than twenty years ago. Love at first sight. She



was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most attractive woman I had ever seen. And she was willing to dance with me. That could mean my salvation, my escape from this ghastly place, end to my loneliness, my misery. Reversal of fortunes. Total triumph. Reprieve. Mercy from above, after all.

A new life. But what if that little fatty managed to wriggle into her favor? Perhaps he was filthy rich. He would have several dances to work his evil on her. What then? How would I ever survive the agony of having to watch her slowly slip away before my very eyes? She seemed well on her way, devoting all her attention to the little man. Only between tunes did she allow her gaze to wander, not even pausing when she met mine, never smiling.

To my delight she allowed him only two dances. He escorted her back to her place. I saw him say something to her, causing her to briskly shake her head. He flinched, darkened, and staggered away like a stricken boxer. Evidently I was not alone in my plight. Slowly, in tune with my heavy heartbeat, I advanced. She turned, smiling the instant she recognized me.

"Ah, there you are. I was afraid you had left."

It left me speechless. How could she even think such a thing?

Ceremoniously I offered her my arm. She giggled again, curtsied before taking on my arm.

"You are a gentleman," she said.

"I try, madam, I try."

My feelings at that moment are hard to describe. I believe such moments are among the finest in life. Someone new. Someone really worthwhile. And the sudden, comforting conviction that the feeling is mutual, that this someone likes you, too, willing to give you a try.

I took her to the center of the dance floor. The place had been filling up. I hadn't noticed. When she turned to face me, I caught my breath. Up close, under the stronger light above the dance floor, her beauty became unreal. It felt as if I had stepped into another dimension. Celestial. This was how a goddess would look like. It was not just her features, gorgeous though they were, but the way she used them. She was naturally seductive. Even her most neutral expression had a brooding, erotic quality. She had

just a hint of overbite, which gave her lips a slight pout. Her eyes, warm and embracing, steadily focused. She instantly gave me the feeling that I was the only man in the place.

In strange contrast with her natural assets she seemed to have spent very little care on her appearance. She wore a flimsy summer dress, pale yellow with little brown flowers, that looked suspiciously like the kind of rag that my cleaning lady would wear on a really hot day. Her hair, black and curly, looked dull and wispy close-up, her make-up was primitive, mascara unevenly applied, scarlet lip gloss. It mattered nothing to me, but was out of character.

I could not help staring.

"What? What?" she asked, with sudden urgency, strangely insecure.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen." I said, with so much conviction that it did not sound as corny as it was.

She smiled.

"Thank you," she said, seemingly unimpressed. "A few months ago that remark would have spoiled everything. I would have thought you were making

fun of me."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because I always thought I was ugly."

"You can't be serious."

"I am. It was my husband. He always kept telling me how ugly I was."

"He must have been blind. You could go up for Miss Universe. And win."

She smiled.

"I'm hearing that kind of thing so often that I'm beginning to believe it."

I was dumb-founded.

"But how could you think differently. Surely you must have noticed men looking at you?"

She giggled.

"To be quite honest, I don't see all that much. I'm terribly short-sighted. I should be wearing glasses. "

"Ah, that explains a lot."

The music started.

"I must warn you I'm not very good," she said. "This is going to hurt."

"I don't mind."

"You're not a masochist, are you?"

"No."

"Good," she said and instantly trod on my foot.

I tried not to wince.

"Oops," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"I've only just started to take dancing lessons. My husband never wanted to take me anywhere."

"He sounds unpleasant."

She gave me a pensive look.

"Yes, he does, doesn't he?" she said, without any sign of resentment. "It's hard to believe now that I stayed married to him for 10 years."

"Why didn't you leave sooner?"

"I don't know. I'm just not very bright, I guess," she looked away, a bit sad. She seemed to mean it. "And I am easily seduced."

She had a lovely voice, soft and melodious, although she had a strong accent, typical of the worst part of town.

"You live here?" I asked

"Can't you tell? I know I've got this terrible accent, but I'm working on it. A bit like that movie with ... er .... what's her name. The skinny one. Pretty but

skinny."

"My Fair Lady?"

"Yeah. That's it. Only I haven't got a teacher."

"I can teach you."

She laughed.

"Perhaps."

Suddenly I saw her friends at the edge of the dance floor, coats on, one holding another coat. They beckoned at me.

"I think your friends want to leave."

She looked up, grimaced.

"Oh shucks. I forgot. Yeah. I've gotta go. Sorry about that. I'd rather stay. Can't be helped. Will you be here again, next week?"

"I will, if you are."

"Sure. See yah." She hurried away, leaving me in total confusion.

The shock of suddenly being without her felt like a splash of icewater. This was probably what it had been like to be forced out of the womb. In a stupor I wandered to the bar. I caught some envious glances from other men. Emma. Her name kept ringing through my skull. It seemed too good to be true.

Mercifully I clung to that thought. She had been like a dream, but not a dream. Those melt away within hours. She had been etched into my memory. I was going to see her again next week.

I went home. Normally I took a cab. Now I needed to walk, to lengthen the evening that I had met her, to preserve the way I was feeling. In love again, at last. Truly and deeply. It was early October. The night was chilly. Cloudless. No moon. Just a sprinkling of paltry city stars. I felt elated, although also a bit melancholy, lost and abandoned, but warm in the knowledge that there was hope. I had not felt like that for many years. I relished it.

I devoted the whole Sunday to thinking about her, lying on the couch, reliving the evening's events, like a video replaying again and again.

No week ever passed more slowly. Seven endless days filled with endless hours. I looked at the clock so often that it sometimes seemed that it had actually gone backward.

The next Saturday arrived. She had not mentioned a time but I was not taking any chances. So I was the first one to arrive at the Harbour Jazzclub. Sadly I was also the last one to leave. In between I sat on a barstool facing the door, watching the entrance all night long, getting very, very drunk. The doorman had to help me into my cab and at home I ended up wrapped around a toilet bowl in my own vomit.

She had not come. Nor any of her friends. I tried a few more Saturdays. In vain. That smarted. Seriously. And the hurt lasted amazingly long for such a brief encounter. But a few months later, round about Christmas, I finally stopped thinking about her.

The very next week, at a New Year's Eve party, I was greeted by a vaguely familiar woman. Such events always unsettle me. I had this minor fear that my drunken promiscuity would sooner or later bring me face to face with a woman whom I had slept with but did not recognize. That had to be unbearably awkward. I thought the fatal moment had arrived and rattled my brain trying to place her. She was a stern-looking female. Not beautiful but handsome in a cool,



dominant way. Like a strict school-mistress. Bony features, hooded eyes, blonde hair drawn tightly back into a bun in the nape of the neck. Obviously not someone to trifle with. And certainly not the kind of woman I'd try to seduce.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" she asked.

I confessed sheepishly.

"I was with Emma," she said, with a chilly smile, "that night in the Harbour Jazzclub."

My relief was instantly dampened by the recollection of Emma's no-show.

"Ah, right."

"You still don't remember, do you? Well, I'm not surprised. You only had eyes for her."

I nodded.

"You really liked her, didn't you?"

"That's an understatement."

She smiled again, a little less cold.

"Good. She's a real friend of mine. And I wouldn't be talking to you if I thought otherwise. My name's Gwyn, by the way."

She held out a small, graceful hand. I squeezed it gently.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"A dry martini would be nice."

I ordered it, my mind in a whirl. The fire within had not died. The ember was bursting into flame. Sparks everywhere.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Not too good." She also talked like a school mistress. Just a fraction more slowly and more distinctly than normal people.

Her words startled me.

"What's wrong? Nothing serious I hope."

She closed her eyes briefly, as if tired.

"No, nothing like that. Her life's just a mess. Her husband is being a nuisance. That asshole kept her as dependent as he possibly could. Now she's having a hard time being on her own. Her sweet and trusting nature doesn't help much either."

"Anything I can do?"

She gave me a hard, inquisitive look, then grinned, nodding to herself, as she reached for her glass.

"I can see what she likes about you," she said, taking a big gulp, "But no, the only thing you can do, is leave her alone, for the time being. Just be patient. You're way ahead. Your time will come."

I could not believe my ears.

"Does she really like me?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake. Do I look like an agony aunt? I just wanted to make sure that you're no threat to her."

Something in her tone sobered me.

I gazed at her.

She outstared me. There was concrete in her eyes.

"I am not a pleasant foe," she said. "Emma means a lot to me. We grew up together. For years I had to watch her get hurt without being able to interfere because she loved the man hurting her. Now it's different. But that doesn't concern you." She grabbed the glass emptied it. Suddenly bent over and gave me a quick, astonishing kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks for caring," she said and away she was.

The fire had rekindled but it did not last. For a few weeks I managed to keep it going, but when I neither heard nor saw anything of Emma or her friend I had no choice but move on.

Almost a year later, a busy Saturday night at the Jazzclub. Little had changed for me. Still on the outside looking in. Since Emma there had been some

few-night stands. Nothing remotely serious. I was hanging at the bar, again contemplating an early night, as usual, when I was tapped on the shoulder.

A vaguely familiar woman stood behind me, giving me a dark look.

"Again, you don't recognize me, do you?"

I had not, but did then.

"Sure I do, you're Emma's friend. Gwyn."

She grinned, a bit sourly.

"Good for you. She's here. And I think she could use your company."

My heart leapt. *Emma!* I looked around.

"No, she's in a booth, at the back."

A bit nervous I set out. The booths at the back were a kind of no go area. Neutral territory. Sanctuary. Females were safe from unsolicited attention there. Not surprisingly the section was nearly always deserted. Now, too. Only in the farthest, shadiest booth could a female figure be made out. She seemed lost in thought, oblivious of my approach. In a gracefully raised hand she held a cigarette, burned down to about a third, the long gray pellet of ash about to drop off. She did not notice me to the very last, looked up startled, face tense, strained, but

broke into a beaming smile the moment she recognized me and jumped up.

"Hans!" she exclaimed, spoiling the moment.

"Jan, actually." I said.

"Oh dear. So sorry."

"Don't be. You can call me anything."

She giggled. But it sounded different than I remembered. Harsh. Mirthless.

She sank back into the seat, and to my astonishment tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"Oh damn," she muttered, turning her face away, rummaging in her handbag. "Don't look. I'm a mess. Give me a minute."

I did, feeling unreal. My heart was pounding. She was every bit as beautiful as I remembered. More so. This time I would not let her get away. But what about these tears?

She took several minutes, but finally she turned and looked at me. Her eyelids were a bit swollen, making her eyes smallish, but for the rest she was too beautiful to be true.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I did not mean to break our appointment, last year, but I couldn't help it and I did not have your number. So I could not

phone. How are you?"

I shrugged.

"Could be better, could be worse. You?"

She grimaced.

"Really terrible," she said. "I've just been dumped by my boyfriend and I can't handle it. Hence the tears."

Excellent news, of course, but I had to hide my joy.

"O, that's too bad," I said.

"You can leave if you want," she said. "I understand. I'm no fun like this."

"I don't want to leave you at all. I am glad to see you."

She smiled, sadly.

"Have you ever been dumped?"

"Sure."

"What did you do?"

"Suffer."

"And then?"

"Suffer some more. You wait till time does its work."

She took a very deep breath.

"I've never felt like this before. It's horrible. I can't sleep, I can't eat. I just smoke and drink and feel

awful.

"How long has it been?"

"24 hours."

"Wow, that's fresh. And back on the warpath so soon?"

She gave me a wide-eyed look of bafflement.

"Warpath?"

"Looking for a replacement?"

She shook her head, smiling faintly.

"No, nothing like that. I just could not bear staying at home."

"Is it that bad?"

She nodded, her eyes glistening.

"Perhaps a dance will cheer you up. You can stomp on my feet as much as you like."

She giggled.

"That's sweet. But I'm a much better dancer now. I've been taking lessons."

"Great. Why don't you show me?"

"I don't know... Oh well. All right."

We went to the floor. She had changed dramatically. In a subtle way, but a lot. Her hair was in a much better state, full and shiny, almost shoulder length, cascading around her head in thick,

loose curls. Her face was perfectly made up, but for the tearful smudges. She was even wearing a very up-market scent. The music started. She snuggled up to me.

"Please hold me tight," she said.

I did. Her dancing had indeed improved. We moved smoothly, pain-free. We did not speak. I loved it. I always felt the need to talk, believing it to be my only strength. Now I could just quietly enjoy her physical presence. The warmth of her body, which fitted almost perfectly against mine. We were like matching pieces of a jigsaw. Occasionally I felt the little signs of her sorrow, a tenseness, a tremor. I heard her snuffle, stifle a sob. Then I'd tighten my hold a little, stroke her back gently. At the end of the first dance she looked at me. She had light eyes. I could not make out the color in the twilight.

"I'm sorry to be such a bore," she said.

"Don't be silly. It's okay. I'm enjoying this."

"You're only saying that."

"No, I'm not."

"You *are* a masochist."

I smiled.

"Whatever."



We danced some more.

"Tell me something," she asked after a while.

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything."

"Well, there's this new theory in thermodynamics ..."

She kicked my shin, very gently.

"Something about yourself."

"Ah. Well, there was this highly amusing event when two pals and myself almost got shot for trying to get into a girls' dormitory."

"That's more like it."

"The main problem was that we were so drunk and noisy that we could be heard coming a mile away. We kept tripping over each other and cursing at the tops of our voices. Fortunately the teacher in charge was hard of hearing. But even he took notice when George wanted to wake the girls by throwing a pebble at their window but picked up a brick that not only shattered the glass but also set off an alarm and about twenty dogs in the neighbourhood."

She laughed. For the first time that evening I heard some genuine mirth in her voice. Encouraged I embarked on a one-man show to cheer her up. I failed

miserably. All my proven jokes flopped, some even causing a sob rather than a chuckle. I fell silent. She did not seem to mind, tightly wedged against me, her head on my shoulder.

After a while the music suddenly stopped and the lights went on. Always a traumatic moment in this realm of shadows, filled with creatures of the dark. Bright lights are no friends to oldtimers. Except for Emma, however. Any light would flatter her. Even now, eyes small with sorrow, pale-faced, cheeks strangely smudged, she seemed drowsy rather than tired, almost relaxed and voluptuous.

"Hello there," she said, with a sweet, caressive smile.

"Hello yourself."

"That was so nice," she said. "You almost made me forget."

"Great."

"I really don't know why you put up with me like this."

I said nothing, led her back to her seat. The place was closing.

I walked her to her car. It was cold, dry and windless. Suddenly I realized how thin our bond was.

A thread. I knew hardly anything about her.

"Here we are," she said, stopping at a little red sportscar. Quite an expensive one, I believed. It made me realize that I did not even know what kind of work she did.

"I'm so grateful," she said. "I don't know how I would have gotten through this evening without you."

"My pleasure."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true."

She sighed.

"Oh God, it's all coming back." she said, in a tremulous voice.

"Don't worry, it'll pass," I said. I took a deep breath. The moment of truth.

"Will I see you again?" I asked.

"Of course," she said, matter-of-factly. "But not just now. This makes me feel guilty. You deserve better."

I bit my tongue. Any word might be too much. I searched my pockets for a pen. Usually I forgot to bring one, but not this time.

"Let me give you my number," I said. "You can phone me whenever you like. Even if you just need someone to talk to."

She took the scrap of paper.

"I'll phone," she said, "But not until I'm over this."

"Any time," I said.

She opened her mouth to speak, but suddenly swirled round and dashed to her car, fumbling for her keys, head lowered. A few seconds later her little convertible leapt away with a mighty growl, into the silence of the empty town. I stood and listened to the lonely roar, winding its way through the streets, fading steadily, as it moved further and further away from me, till it was suddenly gone. I was keenly aware that I might never see her again. I felt passing strange. Physically exhausted, because I had really done my very best. Some gladness at having seen her again. But most of all I felt gloomy and forlorn, convinced that things would go as they had gone the year before. I'd probably not see her again any time soon. Everything else seemed inconceivable. I'd be 43 in a few weeks time. I had always thought I'd be settled by then, married to a good wife, with two pleasant kids. It had not happened. I was alone. And, worst of all, I had not even come close.

She phoned two days later.

"Are you busy?"

"Not at all," I said, brushing aside an urgent translation on my desk.

She began to sob.

"I feel so terrible," she moaned. "I don't know what to do. Nothing ever hurt so bad."

"Any special reason?"

"I phoned him."

"O dear."

"Yeah, I know, but I could not help myself."

"What happened?"

"He cut me short, said he had no time. Just hung up on me." She began to weep, with sharp intakes of air.

I knew nothing to say. Just sat there, listening to her agony.

She began to talk, more to herself than me.

Wondering aloud. I listened, sympathized. The old familiar tale. The slow spiralling descent from summits of joy into valleys of sorrow.

"I just don't understand. How can things so right go so wrong?"

"It happens."

"Is that all there is to it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But why did he say he would love me for ever?  
Was it just a lie?"

"Perhaps not. Perhaps he believed it when he said it."

"Did you ever lie about things like this."

"No. I don't think I ever said I love you to anyone without meaning it."

"No you wouldn't. But this hurts so much. I always thought it was just a saying. Love hurts. But it's real pain. I've never felt anything like it and I break bones easily."

She told me her tale. It took more than an hour. I did my best to listen, but often I only heard her voice, the sad melody of her lament. She had a lovely voice, even more so in the throes of despair, softened by her grief, swathed in sadness. She enchanted me, drawing me into love. That made it a strange experience. On the one hand the magic of her voice, her confidence. On the other hand her adoration of another man.

When she had told her tale, her voice changed a little, regained some vigor.

"God, I must be boring you silly," she suddenly said. "And you don't even know me. You must be a saint or something."

I laughed.

"Not really. I just like you, that's all."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. This has done me a world of good. I feel a lot better now."

"Great."

"I don't know what to say now. It seems odd just to say goodbye."

"Why don't you let me take you out to dinner?"

"Because I don't want to bore you with my problems."

"That's no excuse. How about Saturday?"

She remained silent.

"I really feel guilty about this."

"Don't. I'm asking for it, aren't I?"

"Well, if you put it that way. Okay. Saturday. Where?"

A few very strange days followed. I was seriously in love, and yet able to remain detached. I had been around long enough to know that fresh breakups like hers could heal any moment.

She was at her very best. Radiant. Hair thick and glossy. Long, striking coat, made of patches of leather of different colors. Very carefully made up, although I could see some telltale signs of weeping

We went to a Greek restaurant, which combined good food with good live music. I knew the manager and could influence the repertoire.

It was late September, early in the evening, sun low and casting a brass yellow light. Leandros came out of the cloakroom with a coat hanger. I stood behind Emma and lifted the leather coat from her shoulders. Leandros reacted like a cartoon character. Jaw dropping, eyes bulging. As I stepped back I saw the cause for his reaction. Emma was almost naked. The smallest of tube dresses, black wool, only just covered her torso. She turned to me, smiling sweetly, picture of innocence. The fabric reached from halfway down her breasts, which were smallish but defiantly round, to an inch below her crotch above very long, very



shapely legs. She should have looked cheap and vulgar, but did not. She looked sensational. Perfect. Angelic. Her long, shapely legs were simply too beautiful to hide.

"Wow, you look fabulous."

She smiled proudly.

"For you."

She took my arm and we walked into the restaurant. It was full of people talking, rather loudly. As we made our way down the aisle between the tables, the hubhub died away rapidly. At the sight of Emma I saw men gasp and women scowl. Almost instantly all eyes turned to me, mystified, wondering. I could almost see the thought balloons above their heads "What's that nerd doing beside that super model?" I know it's shallow, but it made me feel great, like some famous rock star.

During dinner she began to talk about Brad, her lost love, again. It was an almost exact repeat of the telephone conversation earlier that week. I was beginning to get heartily sick of Brad. But her beauty and her sweetness, so genuine, demure and intimate, outweighed everything else.

She was wonderful, obviously hurting badly, and

yet doing her utmost to be pleasant. I had been with lots of beautiful women in my time. Their toxic spell my gravest bane. Most of them were always checking the surroundings, making sure that they were attracting enough attention, only half there. Emma did nothing of the sort. She only had eyes for me. And what eyes they were. A bit small, but warm and caressive, embracing. A deep, rich green, with little flecks of bronze.

After dinner I wanted to take her to a nightclub.

"Can't we go to your place? I don't want to be among other people."

I took her home. We sat on a couch. Side by side, drinking white wine, smoking cigarettes and listening to classic love songs. I had tried classical music but she did not want that. It made her think of funerals, she said. She felt like sob songs, as she called them.

I was just in the middle of some uplifting tale about the healing power of broken hearts, when she suddenly said "O, to hell with all this talk," flung her arms around my neck and began to plaster my face with kisses.

I was stunned. Literally. Almost paralyzed. She

went wild, wriggling herself against me, dragging me down upon her, moaning and growling, moving so ferociously that we rolled from the couch to the ground. There she climbed on top of me, and before I knew what was happening, she had opened my trousers, dragged out my tool, instantly erect, and impaled herself on it. All this within a matter of seconds and without any doing on my part. In total bewilderment I looked up at her flushed face, hair tousled, mouth lax and lascivious, eyes closed, enraptured. She moved her crotch in wonderful ways, slowly, tightly,

She opened her eyes a little, drowsy, yet hungering.

"Oh, I need this," she said, softly. "Is it also good for you?" Her face assumed a sudden, anxious expression, like a little kid caught in some mischief.

I smiled.

"Very much."

"Oh, good." She closed her eyes again and began to ride me, hands flat on my chest. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Not unpleasant but certainly not very pleasant either. She seemed to be wholly self-absorbed. Out of reach. I could have been a robot, for all she seemed to care.

Within minutes she had an orgasm. Collapsed on top of me, her lips against my cheek.

"God, I needed that," she muttered. "Take me to bed, I want to sleep with you."

I took her. She fell asleep at once. So I got out again and returned to the sitting room to collect my senses. This had been the kind of event that my friends and I had fantasized about as schoolboys, but now that it had happened, it had left me in a mild shock. I had never been so much out of control, realizing, to my bewilderment, that it would have been called rape if our sexes had been reversed. But one drink and two cigarettes later I was perfectly contented with my lot. I returned to the bedroom and got into bed beside her, watching her sleep until I dropped off.

Next morning she kissed me awake.

"Make love to me," was the first thing she said. "Please."

I did. This time it was magic. She was superb. We moved in perfect harmony.

Formally, that was the beginning of our affair. Brad was instantly forgotten. A week later she announced

pensively that he had phoned and that it had not meant a thing to her.

"Isn't that strange? Without you I would have been ecstatic. Now he was just a nuisance. Poor sod, he just couldn't understand that he didn't matter anymore. Sad, really."

I looked at her in disbelief. Not a sign of triumph or gloating.

She was a delightful companion, easy-going, laid-back, undemanding, never complaining, never nagging. She left all appointments to me. Always willing to come or stay away. She had only two wishes: not going to certain public places to avoid men from her past and never meeting on Mondays because she needed those for herself; her chore days, she called them. For the rest almost anything was okay with her.

She was sweeter than any other female I had ever known. She often brought me presents. Nice ones. Thoughtful ones. Very expensive ones. Fashionable shaving lotions, malt whiskeys, silk ties in patterns and colors I liked. She always gave them awkwardly, embarrassed almost, a bit shy, eyes down, kind of

thrusting the parcel into my hands and turning away before I could say anything.

We had a few magical weeks, being together as much as we could. All weekends, from Friday afternoon till Monday morning. In bed mostly, entranced by each other, intensely aware of the powerful spell that bound us, being in love, loving and being loved, released from famine into this place of plenty, abundance of emotions, everything just right, infinite indulgence both ways, take anything you want, as much as you want, a sense that this was our destiny, everything new and wonderful, every kiss a blessing, as we breathed each other's breath, stargazing into each other's eyes, locked in sweat-soaked skins, all tenderness and hunger, pure intimacy, completely at ease, as if we had been together for years, while we alternated brutal sex and languid conversation.

Sex with her was sublime. The moment we touched the bed, the known universe disappeared. Infinity took over. Ecstasy, wild and sweet, rough yet tender. Her exquisite face forever changing into fleeting expressions of lust and delight, girlish adoration, joy,

but also darker shades of emotion, unfathomable, better not attempted, hungry, lustful, her kisses sometimes flocks of gentle creatures, at other times swarms of ravenous ones.

It was surreal. Although very much a participant, I was also strangely an outsider, onlooker because I could not help watching her. Her beauty only intensified by her passion. Her sweetly gorgeous face, perfect body, abandon. Nothing more wonderful than to have her riding on top of me, like the first time, her hands on my chest, head lowered, bounded by her raven curls, breasts bouncing proudly, face flushed, mouth panting, eyes languid, sweat dripping all over me. To watch her enjoying herself enjoying me was almost unbearably good. Yet, her total abandon also made it a bit of a lonely experience. In a way I was also glad when it ended and we would lie, satisfied and exhausted, just talking.

She told me about herself. Woeful tales. Her self-destructive taste in men, almost as if she sought out those who would treat her worst, the many ills she had suffered at their hands.

Her husband had been a nasty piece of work, humbling her as much as he could. Towards the end

of their marriage, tired of her, uncaring, he once offered her as a toy to his boss, horrifying a righteous family man. It cost him the promotion he had hoped to gain by pimping her. Later he bullied her into wife-swapping. This, too, backfired when on the first night, her partner proved a delight, his a disaster. He just abandoned her after that, knowing full well how hard it was on her, dependent as she was.

She sought solace in the arms of others, with dire results. Her desperation repelled rather than attracted. The men were happy to use her marvellous body but little else. One even allowed three of his friends to rape her on the night he broke up with her.

She told her stories with a strange detachment, a kind of melancholy wonder at the wickedness of men, as if it concerned someone else.

In the evenings we went out to dinner, pleasantly surfeited with each other, weary with a long day's love-making, all smiles, knowing. I enjoyed showing her off, she enjoyed being shown off.

It should have been perfect. She was any man's dream and yet... yet...

Somehow I could not love her as deeply as I wanted



to. I liked her immensely, I was certainly madly in love with her. But somehow I could not lift myself to the next level. The real, profound, dragon-slaying, blizzard-braving, all-enduring feeling was just not there. Sometimes, after an entrancing evening with a fine dinner, nightclub dancing and passionate sex she seemed everything I could ever want, but never could I bring myself to say the words. It baffled me. I blamed it on my years of loneliness, fully expecting to get there in the end.

Pim was a friend, not really close but genuine. I trust few people, but I trusted him. He was a bit of a rogue. A rascal, the sort that women adore. He took advantage of that adoration, quite literally, allowing them to pay for his extravagant tastes. Like many men with ample experience of women, he had little respect for them.

One day, in a bar, when I was bragging to him about Emma, he suddenly became very uneasy. His eyes avoided mine and he looked like a guilty little boy.

"What's up with you?" I asked.

He grimaced.

"Hopefully nothing, but did you say she never comes on Monday?"

"Yeah, that's right. Never on Mondays"

He was still not looking me in the eye.

"And ... er ... how's she for money?"

I tensed. His question touched a moot spot.

"Okay, I guess."

Finally he looked at me. There was an unfamiliar glint in his eyes. His habitual smile had gone.

"More than you'd expect?"

I nodded, reluctantly.

"Yep, she only works half days as a telephone operator but she's got a flashy little sports car, expensive clothes, buys me stuff."

"Oh dear. That's not good."

"Why? Perhaps she's inherited it."

"I fear not. The Mondays are the clue. I hate telling you this, but Monday is prime time for prostitutes."

His words were like a slap in the face. Anger surged inside me. I felt like wringing his neck but was instantly reminded of an episode of Starsky and Hutch, where Starsky discovered that Hutch's beloved girlfriend was a hooker. I only cursed.

Pim studied his glass.

"It might be a coincidence," I said.

"It might," he said. "But then again, it might not. On the other hand, does it matter?"

"What kind of idiot question is that?"

"Well, it only matters if you are serious about her. Are you?"

"I don't really know."

"Then you have a problem."

"Jesus," I exclaimed, so loudly that people looked up. I ordered a double whisky. "What am I going to do?"

"It depends. If you're serious, you'll have to make sure. If you're not, you can simply use her as a freebie. She's probably very good in bed. Hookers always are when they care about you."

"How do you know these things?"

He grinned, but not at all in his normal, winning way.

"I've had girls working for me. Quite accidentally, I must add. I meet so many women that there are always hookers among them. When they offer to pay for my company, I cannot find it in my heart to refuse."

"You're too kind."

"I know, I'm a softie."

"Jesus," I exclaimed again. Shocked, not knowing what to think or feel.

"Do you want to know for sure?" Pim asked.

"Of course."

"I can ask around. It's not a big world. Gotta name?"

I told him and two days later he phoned.

"Sorry, mate. No surprises. She's an escort all right. Part-time and independent. Up-market. Freelances for the better agencies. And ... I know where she'll be Monday next."

"Tell me."

It was the Savoy. Dinner at eight. Not surprisingly one of the places where she had not wanted to go with me.

I decided to do this the hard way. I wanted to make absolutely sure. Knowing how short-sighted she was, it would not be hard to remain unrecognized.

Unable to face her in the meantime I made some petty excuse for the weekend. She sounded genuinely disappointed.

"I'll miss you," she said. It made me feel bad, in lots of ways.

Again time slowed down almost unbearably. I hated what I was going to do. It seemed treasonous, betrayal, even if she was the unfaithful one.

Monday came. Instead of my usual contact lenses I put on an old pair of spectacles, plastered my hair back and put on a suit that she had never seen. That should do it.

I went in at ten past eight, blood throbbing in my veins. I spotted her at once, facing me, sharing a table with a man, whom I could only see from behind. He was fat, gray-haired, balding. I felt kicked in the belly. For a brief spell I was unable to move, totally confused. A waiter came up to me.

"You all right, sir?"

I nodded, afraid to use my voice, which might give me away.

I sat down, facing her direction but needing several minutes before I dared to look. I cursed myself. This was obviously a disastrous idea. Shortcut to hell.

The whole situation took on a dreamlike quality. She was behaving exactly the same way she did to me. I don't know what I had expected. Something

else, at any rate. Some kind of professional detachment, but there was nothing of the kind. Everything was the same. She was always a terrific listener, holding her head at a slight tilt, suggesting rapt attention. She seemed to savor every word, gazing attentively into your eyes, so as to miss no tacit meaning, with faint, very subtle expressions, the arching of an eyebrow, the slightest of nods, an understanding smile. All of this was there, right before me, only separated by a dozen metres or so, bestowed on a stranger. A customer. It gnawed at my insides. If I had possessed a grain of sense I would have left, but somehow I could not tear myself away, mesmerized by her beauty, hoping for ... what? I know not. Some kind of salvation from this total collapse of any future there might have been between us. The end of a world. When they left, I saw him place a chubby, wedding-ringed hand on her buttock and squeeze. It made me gag. I had to take a few big gulps of air not to throw up. Jealousy engulfed me. Never in my life did I come so close to murder. Her, him, both. I was sick with anger.

She came the day after. Unexpectedly. When the bell

rang I thought it was the mailman.

"Don't be mad at me," she begged, "I just couldn't wait any longer" And she was all over me with her cool, fragrant hair, feverish kisses, moaning softly. Once again I was at a loss, taken completely by surprise. In a way it was good, prevented me from going into some clumsy ritual of confrontation. Now I was too amazed to react.

We had sex. I had some trouble performing, reminded of that chubby hand with the wedding-ring, but she quickly made me forget.

"I'm growing so fond of you," she said afterwards, lying naked beside me, all sweaty, black curls clinging like wet question marks to her forehead, in all her natural, seductive glory, tugging playfully at the hairs on my chest. "It frightens me. I promised myself never to depend on a man again... "

"Very wise."

"But I think I could trust myself with you. You're different."

"I don't know about that."

She gave me strange look, sad, wistful, demure.

"Do you think I'm a dope?"

"No. What makes you say that?"

"Well, you being so clever, with your writing and being a translator and things."

I shrugged.

"Anyone can write and I'm only a translator because I had a British mother. Little merit there."

"Still, I am a bit of nitwit."

"Okay with me. Clever women are tiresome, always trying to prove how clever they are."

"That makes me glad I'm not clever."

I could not go on.

Pim thought it madness.

"Are you insane? She's worth a fortune. You're slaying the goose with the golden eggs. What does it matter? Nearly all women are unfaithful. Believe me, I know, I've slept with scores of so-called faithful wives. She's just professional about it. Same difference. Play your cards right and you'll never need to work again. She's worth a fortune."

I declined.

She wasn't hard to get rid of, never complaining or arguing whenever her ardent desire to see me was met with some lame excuse from me. Nothing but a



sad little expression of regret that always shamed me deeply, as did the warmth of her parting "love you".

Her phone calls became shorter, and sadder, and finally petered out.

A few months later we met again in the Jazzclub. She had a new friend, she said. A wonderful, wonderful man. Still, she went home with me, stayed the night, naked in my bed. She was as passionate as ever, only refusing to allow me inside her. That would be cheating on her new friend, she said, so earnestly that it almost made me cry.

A year later she phoned me one last time.

"Hi, it's me, Emma."

"Hi sweetie," I said, unthinking.

She remained very quiet, giving me time to compose myself, raise my defences.

"How are you?" I finally asked

"I'm getting married next week."

Weird effect: her news stung to the bone, yet came as a relief.

"Wow. That's wonderful. Anyone I know?"

"No, but he's a lot like you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Silence again. Why was she phoning? Why now? I did not understand.

"We had good times, you and me, didn't we?" she asked softly, almost beseechingly.

"We sure did."

"Especially in bed," she said, with a little giggle.

"Your doing," I said, truthfully.

"Did you love me?"

"Yes."

She kept silent, seemingly waiting. I had the idea, idiotic perhaps, that I only needed to ask and she'd call the whole thing off.

"Gotta go," she said.

"Be very happy," I said.

"I'll try."

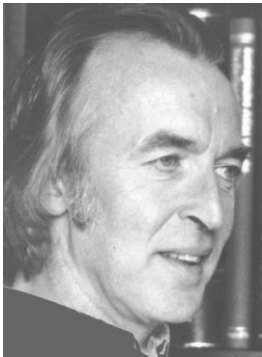
After that I saw her once more. In a department store, drawn to her by simply following the looks of every man in sight.

She wore her famous patchwork leather coat, hanging open to reveal a clinging scarlet dress. Her infinite legs were sheathed in black nylon. She was with a

man who did, indeed, vaguely resemble me, same build, same type of face. The main difference was that he looked about ten times happier than I had ever felt.

**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 researching and writing a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative fiction.