

jan bee landman

A Gruesome Beauty



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a short horror story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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After her divorce Jennifer had wanted to flee the apartment, but she could not, for reasons she did not quite understand. So she suffered its desolation alone. Often she would go and sit in the empty room that had been Greg's study, on a pouffe in front of the fireplace, to fantasize about intricate and miraculous happy endings.

There, one summer morning, she noticed the spider. It clung high to one of the white walls, brownish, not particularly large, an inch or so across, but it gave her goose pimples all the same. She loathed spiders. With their brisk and unpredictable movements and their long groping legs, there was something unspeakably evil about them.

Being in the same room with the creature made her uncomfortable and she was glad to be startled by the ring of the phone, which gave her an excuse to get out. She shut the door carefully behind her.

"Hello, honeybunch." Vera. "How goes?"

"Pretty much the same," said Jennifer.

"How about you and me forming a posse to hunt down some men tonight?"

"No Vera. I don't feel up to that yet."

"Oh Jen, you're becoming a nun. Y'know that? If you keep this up much longer you'll get all sorts of aberrations. Your heart will get fat and sloppy. Your body will shrivel. You'll break out in spots. And, worst of all, one evening you'll wake up singing at the top of your voice in some gospel choir. Is that what you want?"

Jennifer managed a faint giggle. "No, Vera. But I'm not ready yet."

"You'll never be if you keep this up."

"Just give me a little more time."

"I'll give you 24 hours."

"Vera!"

But Vera had hung up. Smiling, Jennifer put down the handset. Vera was a good sort, even if she was very nearly a hooker, wild and reckless, indulging in anything that pleased her. They had been buddies at college, keeping in touch over the years, mainly because Vera could not stand being alone and reached for the phone the moment she was in that predicament.

Her phone calls had helped Jennifer through many a long, lonely night. But still she was afraid to become too chummy again, for fear of being swept along by Vera's zest for fast living.

Sadly, Vera was about the only friend she had left. Right after the divorce old friends and acquaintances had made a lot of fuss over her. But not for long. Most people she had known were couples and after a few visits they had started to act strangely, the husbands warming toward her, while the wives chilled. The invitations had ebbed away and finally there were only a few embarrassing phone calls from husbands with flimsy excuses to come round to her apartment.

Days went by. She was fast losing her uphill battle against loneliness, growing more miserable and lethargic by the day. She would sleep till the early afternoon, mope about the house, watch TV, go shopping, come home again and start taking her cocktails ever earlier. Often she dropped into bed halfway through the evening, her head spinning.

She had forgotten all about the spider, but when she entered the study again, one week later, she was reminded of it and looked about, gasping with surprise when she

saw it in the same spot. The spider was several times larger. Its diameter was almost the size of a hockey puck. She clasped her hands and pressed them against her chest, frightened. Never had she seen a spider that size. It wasn't normal. No native spider grew so big. She recalled having read about such spiders travelling on banana boats. It might be poisonous. It certainly looked it.

As she watched, the spider moved, raising its head in her direction. Its eyes glittered. Holding her breath she back-pedalled to the door, half expecting the hideous creature to pounce upon her any moment. With a sudden turn she dashed out of the room, tripping over the threshold and falling to her knees in the hall. She scrambled up, slammed the door and threw her weight against it, as if she feared the spider might force it open.

While she stood panting, her heart drummed painfully. She felt faint. Such a horrible thing. Thank heavens it hadn't attacked. She staggered to the living room, poured herself a bourbon, which she drank in one gulp, and regained some of her composure. Then she realized that she was overreacting a bit. After all, creepy though it might be, the beast was still a tiny thing that she could crush with one stomp of her shoe. But the idea of killing it repelled her. She would never be able to do that. Swatting a mere fly was enough to sicken her and she recoiled at the thought of the crunch and splatter that such a big spider would make. So she decided to do nothing and just hope it would go away.

That night in bed she was kept awake by her thoughts of the little horror in the next room. She lay listening intently, straining her ears for the slightest sound and

occasionally imagined that she heard a faint rustle, as if someone were brushing the wall. Could it be the spider moving about? She shot an anxious look at the windows of her bedroom. Despite the hot summer night the windows were shut. She did not want to run the risk of that spider finding its way in here.

She slept fitfully, dreaming of creepy-crawly things, and felt exhausted when she rose the following morning. Her first thought was of the spider. She went to listen at the door to the study. Nothing. Maybe it had left. Should she look? She stood in doubt for several minutes. Then she decided to take a peek. Very slowly, with her skin drawing tight, she pulled the door open, ready to slam it shut if the spider was anywhere near. The floor was empty, as was the ceiling. She took a step inside. There it was, again in almost the same spot, though it had changed its posture a bit, spreading out its thick and hairy legs, which made it look even bigger.

Jennifer took a few more hesitant steps into the room.

In the yellow morning sunlight she could see its eyes glitter, two large eyes with smaller ones on both sides. She gulped, feeling herself grow faint again, terrified and fascinated at the same time.

She took another small step. It was sitting in the middle of a patch of sunlight that brightened its colors: warm chestnut brown with vivid orange bands upon its legs and a kind of Maltese cross of the same orange hue on its back. The creature was undeniably beautiful for all its gruesomeness. She could clearly distinguish its features now: the eyes, with some kind of hairy appendage beneath them, suggested the face of an old bearded man without a nose. Jennifer shivered.

She was about to take one more step when, with startling brusqueness, it jumped at her. She recoiled screaming. The spider did not reach her, but swung back at the end of a thread connecting it to the wall and started to scamper down in a furious hurry. Jennifer rushed from the room, locking the door firmly behind her.

While she returned shakily to the living room, she cursed herself for being such a curious fool. What if it was poisonous? She might have gotten herself killed. She flopped down in an armchair and wondered whether an exterminating service would come for one spider. And why not? She took out the yellow pages but before she had found a number she stopped looking, realizing she could not find it in her heart to let them kill the creature. She had a genuine fondness for animals, even tolerating mice about the apartment, and if Greg hadn't disagreed, she would certainly have owned pets, a dog or a few cats. It would be unfair to let that spider die because she was such a squeamish female. She would simply not open the door to the study again. The creature would have to leave if it found nothing to eat.

The next day Jennifer let herself be talked into joining Vera for a night out. She enjoyed it. Vera was good company, lively and entertaining. She knew where to go and handled men with playful ease, attracting or repelling them as the situation demanded. Jennifer felt safe by her side.

Since their first outing was a success, they repeated it the next day, and the next. They went to shows, discotheques and parties and usually ended the evening with a couple of men at Vera's place for a final drink. Vera

would soon disappear into the bedroom with her escort, but not Jennifer. She let her man kiss and paw her a little, but never too much. Sex without love was alien to her. Nothing more than intimate wrestling with strangers. And she wanted more. She wanted to feel the ecstasy Greg had given, if all too rarely. But these new men had only physical fun to offer, which was better than nothing, of course, but not enough for Jennifer.

Their spree lasted five days. Then Jennifer returned home. The first thing she did was check on the spider, hoping it had left. She had mentioned its existence to Vera but she had not taken it seriously, advising a liberal dose of insecticide or a wallop with a broom.

Strangely, when she entered the study and saw the spider hanging, obviously dead, from a single thread attached to the ceiling, her relief was mixed with sadness. She did not understand why she felt this way, but she did. For several seconds she stood gazing at the limp and lifeless form that dangled to and fro in a draft, looking oddly deflated.

Maybe her sadness was caused by the utter futility of ending life, even as a humble spider, all alone in a deserted room.

Then she noticed something on the floor in the far corner of the room. Cautiously she moved closer. It looked like a tuft of gray fur. With her toe she touched it and saw, to her revulsion, that it was the empty shell of a mouse.

She turned around and drew back in fright, facing something that resembled a big, hairy hand slowly groping across the wall. She gave a violent shudder and darted from the room, forgetting in her hurry to close the door

behind her. She only realized this in the safety of the living room. So she had to return to close the door, which she did, shivering.

Her heart was all aflutter when she staggered back to the living room, and she did not stop shaking until she had taken a few swigs from a bottle of bourbon. Giant spiders, no less. The gods had really turned against her, it seemed. But where did those horrors come from? And the size of them! As far as she could recall this one had been monstrous, bigger even than those tarantulas seen in horror movies. But maybe it was just her imagination playing tricks on her. She had not stopped to examine it closely. The mere thought gave her the shivers again. No doubt she had exaggerated its size. But it was not small, that was for sure. And where had it come from? She froze. What if there were more? They might be all over the apartment! She cast a few nervous glances about. Fortunately the living room was soberly furnished, affording few hideouts for giant spiders. Jennifer hated the clutter of furniture. So there was only a massive white leather couch, a matching armchair, her TV set and a few ornaments, while everything else was built into the walls.

Unwittingly she had been holding her breath and by the time she had searched the living room she was panting. She realized she was making too much of this thing. All she had to do was phone the exterminators and she would be rid of the beasts. But she still shrank back from doing so. She preferred to wait just a little longer. Meanwhile she had to make sure that the rest of the apartment was safe. Armed with a broom she scoured all the other rooms and found nothing. So, if she just kept the study locked and managed to control her morbid curiosity everything would

work itself out.

The next evening she went out with Vera again. She had meant to tell her about the spiders, but somehow did not get round to it. They went to the hottest disco in town, in full battledress, as Vera called the barest of her gowns. At the disco she introduced Jennifer to Jake "The Ripper", the local deejay, and for the first time since her divorce Jennifer felt something stir within when she saw his eyes focus on her in spellbound admiration. He was very good-looking in a teutonic sort of way, tall and blond, very macho and a bit pushy but courteous and attentive and with eyes that melted her. He made her forget all about the spiders and ten rapturous days later she surrendered to his charm, at Vera's place.

When she awoke blissfully the next morning, he had already left, leaving a note for her to meet him at the disco that night. She went, unsuspecting, but one look told her that the fire had left his eyes and she knew she had been stalked and brought down like mere prey. She left at once, drifting home in a daze of self-pity.

Warm August evening. A bloodshot sky. The apartment was a mess, neglected for almost two weeks. Dirty dishes cluttered the kitchen sink, the fridge was empty. In the living room the odor of peaches rotting in their bowl soured the air.

She lay down on the couch, weary and cold sober. Another man, another failure, she thought. Is this how it's going to be from now on? Alone or hunted for sport? How could he have been so mean, so calculating? So much trouble for just a little sex. And her believing in love again.

She burst into tears. Why did life have to be so murky? All she had ever wanted from it was just an ordinary existence, a loving husband, a few kids eventually, nothing fancy. But maybe that was really asking a lot.

"Oh Greg," she whimpered, unintentionally, startled at the chasm it opened. She pursed her lips. No, she wasn't going to cry over him again. He had not treated her right either. She had never thought it out, but somewhere in her memory, like unopened letters, lay all the pieces of a sordid jigsaw puzzle: all the little black lies, the feeble excuses, contradictions, improbable coincidences. Greg had been a smooth talker, always managing to argue his way out of jams. But there had been too many explanations. She had never wanted to know and even now she shied away from fitting together the pieces that would turn lovable, incompatible Greg into something very akin to this Jake the Ripper character.

Feeling exhausted she was just dozing off, when she heard a strange sound, a kind of patter, like raindrops striking a window pane. It came from the hall. She opened her eyes and looked, stifling a scream, for there, crawling out of the shadows, appeared the dreaded form of the spider. Bigger again, the size of a dinner plate. With slow, deliberate movements it came toward her. It was attacking! Her breath failed while she watched in helpless fascination how it ambled closer and closer. She had a vague recollection from books and movies that she should remain still, and she did, although it took a terrific effort with the hairy confusion of legs groping toward her. She prayed that the beast would stop, but it did not. It kept coming and as it approached the lower end of the couch it disappeared from her line of sight. Pressing her body

deeper into the cushions, she waited breathlessly. Suddenly it leapt into sight, landing on the lower armrest of the couch.

Slowly the monster crawled down the armrest. Jennifer almost fainted when its cold paws touched her bare feet. It began to move up her legs. Fear began to strangle her. She was constantly on the point of leaping up in a wild panic, but she kept reminding herself that she must not move. Stifling a sob she watched the monster clamber across her knees, one set of paws to each knee. Now she could clearly distinguish its face, unspeakably horrid with the two large gleaming eyes. For the first time she noticed that the two extremities of its beardlike appendage were each provided with a scythe-like fang. Its face was that of an evil, noseless gnome.

Her head started to swim. Any moment she expected to feel a redhot stab of pain but it did not come. Having reached her belly the creature finally halted, raised its loathsome head and *looked* at her. It made her sick. Her stomach heaved and she only just managed to force back her nausea. She wanted to close her eyes, look away, anything, but she could not, as if she were hypnotized by the two glossy eyes. Green they were, like the water of a stagnant pond, but occasionally they flickered and turned to brown. Apart from its eight legs it also had two smaller limbs, which it held before its face and waved in nervous, fluttering motions, like palsied hands.

Suddenly it lifted its two front legs to a vertical position until they stood erect, grotesque antennae, and its body began to sway from side to side.

In a daze Jennifer watched the spider's eerie ritual, which seemed to go on forever. Finally it put its legs down

again and lowered its body upon her belly. Through the flimsy fabric of her dress she could actually feel the roundness of its belly, the warmth of its body.

She swallowed and tried to catch her breath without moving. The spider did not move either. It just sat there, on her belly, with its flickering eyes fixed upon her.

Very slowly her fear lost some of its urgency. The beast did not seem to have any aggressive intentions. What did it want? What went on in that horror's mind? Mind? Did spiders have minds? She began to breathe more freely, yet remained very careful not to move, which was not easy. After a while her body hurt all over.

Then the spider brusquely raised its front legs again, repeated its weird ritual and backed away. Tears of gratitude and relief streamed down Jennifer's cheeks as she felt it descend her legs and watched it crawl away across the parquet floor. She waited until she heard it go into the study, jumped up, stumbled after it and closed the door with a slam that made the windows rattle. She almost became hysterical, weeping violently. She felt terribly unclean, as if every spot of her body has been soiled by that disgusting thing. She needed a bath or a shower, but not here. She phoned Vera, making some excuse about a faulty water supply and raced over in a cab. Again some irrational urge made her say nothing about the spider to her friend.

She had a long hot soak in Vera's bath, but still shivered whenever she recalled the ordeal she had been through. There could be no two ways about it now. The monster would have to go. She'd phone the exterminators first thing in the morning.

But she did not. She just could not let the beast die for her cowardice. But she would make damn certain from now on that the door remained locked. She persisted in this intention for two full days and nights. The nights were the worst, because she could hear her unwanted guest scamper across the walls. In vain, of course, for the study was not a place where much food was likely to be found.

On the third day she bought a book on spiders. It had nothing to say about the giant species, but she did learn that what she had taken for another dead spider had been its molted skin and that the ritual with the front legs was a subdued version of its courtship display. Apparently the monster wanted to be friends with her. This made her feel bad about abandoning it to its fate. Perhaps she should let the exterminators do their thing, after all. Now it would be slowly starving to death, which seemed a worse end by far.

On the fourth day she decided to take a look. She was convinced that the creature would not harm her, not after the easy chance it had had on that memorable evening.

The spider sat in a corner of the room, very still. For a moment she thought it had already died, but then it raised its front legs, albeit very faintly and moved them from side to side. There was a touching quality about that gesture, almost like a greeting. Jennifer smiled wryly, feeling sorry for the brute. It appeared to have shriveled somewhat since the last time.

She left the room thinking about ways of feeding it. She could feed it mice, but this revolted her, as it meant substituting one cruelty for another. No, she could not do that. But what then?

She went to the kitchen to prepare some breakfast. As she took out the cheese, the idea struck her. She could

leave out food to attract the mice. That seemed fair enough. If the spider managed to catch them, it would be entitled to eat them; if not, it would die. Nature taking its course. She unwrapped the cheese, cut it into cubes and threw them into the room.

Then she went to Vera. They had a double date with two Canadians for an afternoon at the races, followed by a garden party. Unfortunately they quarreled with the men and ended up together at Vera's apartment, drunk and rather moody.

The night was hot. Through wide open windows the muted grumble of midnight traffic drifted indoors on the warm breath of darkness. Vera had slipped out of her dress and was only wearing a small black-laced bra and slip, while she lolled on the couch, her bleached hair tousled all about her head. She had a way of moving her long legs and arms in a lazy, voluptuous grace.

"Gee, I'm glad you're around, Jenny," she said. "Alone on nights like this I always feel like jumping out of the window or something."

"Don't be silly."

"It's true, I'm telling you. I detest being alone. I'd prefer any man's company to my own. Well...almost."

"Not if they hurt you," said Jennifer, thinking back to the cold indifference in Jake's face.

"You mustn't let them."

"How do you do that?"

"Easy. Never love them. That's all. Treat love like a common cold. Take a few painkillers and stay in bed till the fever passes."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Well, you should, certainly after the things Greg did to

you."

"You mustn't say that. Even if it didn't work out in the end, it was good while it lasted."

Vera blinked as if slapped in the face, and gazed at Jennifer incredulously.

"It was what?"

Confused by Vera's sudden vehemence, Jennifer started to stammer.

"Well...er..g-g-good. We loved each other. Greg was a good husband..... faithful...it was just his work...er...and my...er..."

"Oh Jenny," said Vera, turning away her face.

Jennifer fell silent, a bit scared. What had she said? Greg?

"What's wrong Vera?"

When her friend turned her face toward her again, her eyes were glistening.

"You mean to say you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

Vera closed her eyes and shook her head vigorously.

"No. Forget it."

Jennifer felt her heart twitch.

"Please, Vera. Is there something I should know about Greg?"

Vera smiled wearily. "Maybe. But I'm not going to be the one to tell you." She uttered a mirthless little laugh. "And I can't imagine you don't know it yourself if you think hard enough."

"Tell me, Vera, please."

"No, honey. You'd hate me for telling. And I don't want you to hate me."

Vera rose from the couch, came over to Jennifer and

kissed her warmly on the forehead.

"I'm going to bed," she said and hurried from the room.

Left alone with her thoughts Jennifer stared at the ground. Reluctantly she began to piece the jigsaw together. Sad little fragments they were: a string of broken dreams. The times he did not come home for dinner, the evenings she spent alone in front of the TV, often wearing her finest dress, in a vain hope that he might yet be in time to take her out, the long, sleepless nights in the empty bed. So many weekends lost to his business. She smiled bitterly. Business indeed. What a sucker she had been. And that from the very, very beginning.

She rose and went to stand at the open window. The city was growing dark. The buildings rose solid and black among the glowing maze of street lights. The few remaining illuminated windows all spoke of excesses of joy and sorrow.

"Damn you, Gregory Ferguson," she whispered.

She closed the window, pressed her forehead against the glass and allowed a few tears to slide down her cheek before she wiped them away, certain this time that she would never to cry for him again.

While she stood vacantly watching an old gibbous moon slide through a patch of flimsy clouds, the spider entered her thoughts. She wondered if it had caught any mice. In spite of everything she hoped so. She smiled. Imagine being courted by a gigantic spider. She left the window and sauntered to her bed in Vera's guestroom.

The next morning Vera behaved a bit awkwardly, but when Jennifer had kissed her and said she understood, they became two giggling sophomores again, planning new victories in the battle against the other sex.

"Always err on the safe side, honey," said Vera. "Go for the ones you like but don't like too much."

And that was exactly what Jennifer did that night, when she accepted the attentions of a Michael Flint from Houston. He was a tall, dark-haired, athletic man in his late thirties, with a long bony face. He looked like a badman from a western of the fifties, villainous but cleancut and handsome. He seemed to fall for her in a big way and although she kept reminding herself of male perfidity in general, she could not help feeling bad about leading him on.

She dated him a couple of times but held out whenever it came to inviting him over to her place.

Vera got furious with her.

"You need the experience, stupid. Look at it as therapy. Like going to an analyst, whatever, but do it."

Finally, on their fourth date, she pushed the invitation past her lips. He accepted greedily and by now she had become so wary that she did not miss the glint of triumph in his eyes. You bastard, she thought, you almost had me fooled there.

She felt strangely lascivious as she cuddled up to Mr Flint on the couch. Her head was light as candy floss, her blood syrupy and warm. And yet, when his hands began to stray, something rebelled inside her and she warded them off. He was reasonable about it at first, but after suffering her third rebuke, he lost his temper. With a start he rose, went over to the record player, turned up the volume and came for her menacingly. She smiled. There was no need for this. What a pitiful goat he was. She surrendered meekly when he dragged her to the floor, enjoying his roughness, although she put up a feeble show of

resistance. If anyone was being forced it was Mr Flint.

Then, just as he was about to lower himself upon her, the expression on his face changed from violent lust to bewilderment. His lips twitched and a sudden scream broke from them. She lay bewildered. Was he having a stroke or what? Then he collapsed on top of her, his head limp on her shoulder. She lifted her own head a little and saw, on the man's back, outlined against the light, the large bristling form of the spider, its fangs buried deep into her assailant. She fainted.

When she came to she was still lying under the man's body but the spider had gone and the record player had fallen silent. She pushed the body aside, scrambled to her knees and looked about. The monster was nowhere in sight. She uttered a heavy sigh and returned her glance to Mr Flint. He looked odd, uncommonly pale, his cheeks fallen in and wrinkled. His eyes were partly closed, only revealing a sliver of white. Jennifer reached out a hand and placed it on his forehead. Cool, motionless, dead.

She shuddered and remained on her knees beside the corpse, dazed, unable to think. She sat without moving for several minutes before she snapped out of it and sprang to her feet in sudden agitation. She had to do something. Call the police. As she went over to the phone she wondered what to say. My giant spider has just killed my lover? How would that sound? What on earth would they think? She picked up the handset. Maybe they would hold her responsible. Christ, she might even be jailed. She dropped the handset back into its cradle.

"Easy now, Jen," she said. "Think this over. Let's not do anything rash here."

She decided to search the man's pockets and found papers that showed he was no Michael Flint from Houston at all, but a Waldemar Dobrowski from Corpus Christi, which infuriated her to the point that she almost kicked him. It also filled her with uncommon determination. She wasn't going to jail for a bum like that.

She paced the room, fidgeting nervously with her ring, rubbing and revolving it till her finger smarted. She had to get rid of the body. But how? A river? Yes, a river would be a good place. But how to do it unseen?

"Oh, what's the use?" she suddenly moaned, collapsing on to her couch. They would get her anyway. She might as well turn herself in. With tears of despair filling her eyes, she gazed at the dead man. He lay on his back, his legs crossed at the ankles and his head tilted backwards. A dark liquid was trickling from a corner of his mouth. Was that normal for a corpse? Could it be a sign of lingering life? But then she remembered that spiders injected digestive enzymes into their victims to dissolve their insides into a juice that they could suck out. It made her feel sick and she had to breathe very hard to keep from vomiting.

She rose again and returned to the phone. She would call Vera. Or should she? No, better not. Vera was sure to be angry because she had not been told about the weird growth of the spider. Christ, what a mess.

Jennifer poured herself a stiff bourbon and wandered to the study. The door was wide open and a strange smell wafted from its cavernous darkness, a bit sweetish, a bit sour, like tainted meat.

When Jennifer switched on the light, she saw that the spider was in its corner, instantly raising its legs in its

usual greeting. It had grown considerably, its body as big as that of a medium-sized dog, its legs easily spanning the diameter of a truck tire. Apparently it had just molted, for its previous skin hung over it, revolving slowly from a thick thread attached to the ceiling. Jennifer experienced a brief spasm of fear as she entered the room, but it was just a feeble thrill. She knew the creature would not harm her, ever. The floor was littered with empty pelts of mice and splattered with star-shaped white stains, spider's excrement, she supposed. She would have to put something down.

Slowly she sauntered to her pouffe before the fireplace and sat down. She felt drowsy, unreal, as if she were a ghost revisiting a former haunt. A chill of indifference descended upon her as she thought of Flint-alias-Dobrowski. She realized that she did not care a damn about his death as long as it did not get her into trouble. She had learned her lesson now. Vera was right. Men weren't worth any tears. Their so-called love was just a declaration of war, with the women being enemies as well as spoils. What a rosy-eyed sucker she had been. But those times were past. No more Mrs Nice Girl from now on. In future she would be the one who did the exploiting, the taking, the hurting. Reflected by a window pane she saw her angelic face assume an arrogant, malevolent expression before she turned her eyes into the black pit of the fireplace.

After a while she heard the slow tapping of the spider's feet as it approached. It stopped just beside her, standing almost two feet high now, like a sturdy, many-legged bulldog. The light cast a metallic sheen over its chestnut hairs, its eyes shone like balls of bottlegreen glass and it

waved its palps in a languid motion before its face.

Almost without thinking Jennifer stretched out a hand to stroke the creature's head, pleasantly surprised by the soft, silken quality of its fur.

"I guess you're the only male I can trust now," she said with a shaky smile.

In response the spider swayed sluggishly from side to side and all at once Jennifer knew what to do with the corpse.

A couple of nerve-ridden days went by. She did not dare leave the house for more than a few minutes, because she would always imagine all kinds of accidents that would make her neighbors or the super enter her apartment and find the spider and the dead man. So she stayed indoors, only venturing out for the barest necessities. Luckily Vera happened to be tied up in some heavier-than-usual affair, which made it easy to avoid her. Meanwhile the spider did a great job at disposing of the body. Its digestive enzymes proved powerful enough to dissolve even the human bones. So, one week later Waldemar Dobrowski was little more than the male counterpart of a deflated sex doll.

All Jennifer need do now was roll him up like a blanket, stuff him into a garbage bag and drop him down the waste disposal chute. She burned his papers, threw all his personal belongings such as his wallet and watch over the side of the ferry and she was rid of every tangible link between her and Mr Dobrowski. She even took the trouble of rubbing clean everything he might have touched. But she need not have bothered, because nobody ever came to inquire after him.

Now she was ready for her new life. She even considered

it an advantage that Vera was occupied for a while, enabling her to venture out all by herself. For the first time in many years she felt the mistress of her own fate again.

Brian McCulloch was nineteen. A charming kid but very inexperienced and clumsy in bed. When he asked how it had been after a disappointing first bout, Jennifer gave him a reassuring smile.

"Terrific, darling, really sensational. But I do need a drink now. Be a dear and get me a bourbon."

"Anything you say, my love."

"There's a bottle in the next room."

Eager as a puppy he rose from the sheets.

When she saw his tanned, muscular body again in the flood of lamplight she felt a slight urge to call him back. He was such a **nice** boy. But it could not be helped. Her pet was starving and she would find someone else soon enough. In quiet suspense she listened to his footfall as he walked to the study, opened the door and groped for the switch.

His scream was muffled by the violent thud of his body against the floor. Jennifer sighed and stretched her legs in languid relaxation. She felt drowsy and was just beginning to slumber away, when she was roused by the heavy tromp of eight enormous spider feet.

The creature loomed up beside the bed, its front legs erect like broomsticks, blood dripping from its scimitar fangs.

She took a deep breath and, with an imperceptible shiver, stretched out a hand to stroke its head.

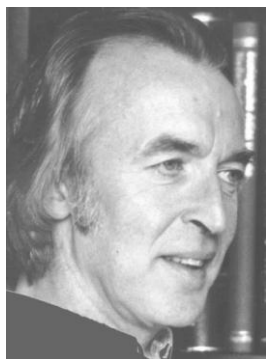
"Good boy," she said. "Now go and enjoy your supper."

The beast ambled backwards out of the room again. The

smile lingered on Jennifer's face. She'd have to invite Greg over one of these days.

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.