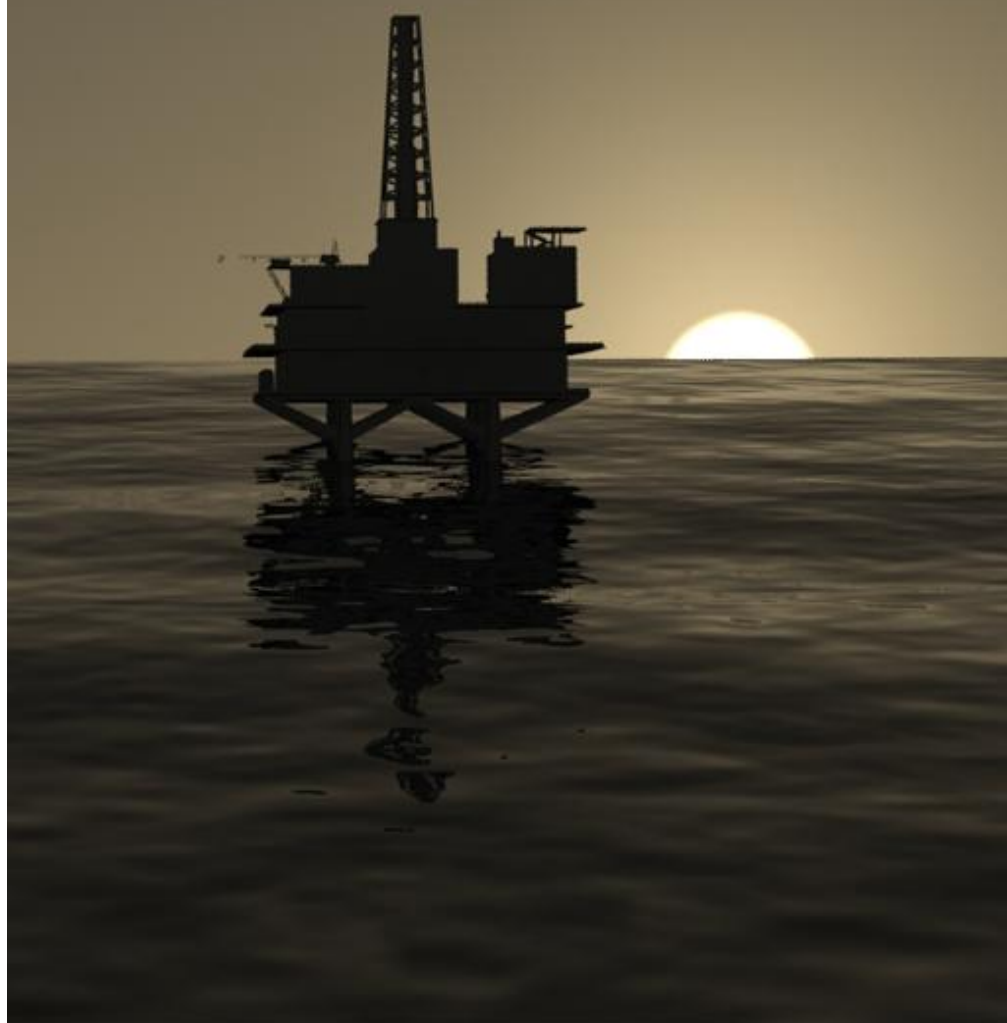


jan bee landman
One More Run



One More Run

a short science fiction story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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Angus MacDonald was anything but a sensitive man. Cool and reserved by nature, the bitter struggle to survive the horrors of the 21st century had calloused him deeply. In his early teens he had lost his parents and brothers. Left alone in a hostile world he had done whatever it took to survive, never mind how, following the winding path of opportunity with little care for others, picking friends and enemies for personal gain only.

Old Scotland had been one of the first countries to witness the working of the Formula, an uneasy but highly effective alliance among patriots, big business and organized crime that proved invincible all over the globe.

Lying about his age, Angus joined its Scottish chapter, the Celtic Liberation Army, when only 13. The CLA took over the country by seizing control of its natural resources, especially the offshore oil and gas fields. With simultaneous uprisings by the Irish and Welsh the CLA overran England in a matter of months. Angus quickly rose through the ranks, decorated again and again for uncommon valor, devotion to duty, unwavering efficiency and an utter disregard for danger.

Once the English had been subdued, he was made Sheriff of Dumfries, Cumbria and Northumberland, where he meted out justice with all the brutality the times demanded. He became famous for his executions, which he turned into popular spectacles. Nothing personal. He never even watched. Just a job well done. At one fell swoop he got rid of the undesirables, offered a powerful deterrent to evildoers and gave the proles a

terrifyingly good time. The bloody English, who had spent so much of their history tormenting others, were the ideal subjects of refined torture. No true Celt could watch an Englisher suffer without a warm sense of satisfaction. And Angus was very good at devising ways to make them suffer for a long time.

People came from miles around to watch the events. It was a joyous outing for the whole family. Boisterous crowds flocked into the old sports stadiums, filling them to capacity. The atmosphere was always carnivalesque. Lots of snacks and booze, and community singing lustily performed by one and all, cruelly worded, urging the performers to crack their bones, shed their limbs and bleed to death. Most fun, of course, was derived from the howls and screams of the sufferers, which were echoed joyously by the spectators.

But the world changed almost by the year. When the country's resources began to dwindle, big business and organized crime slipped away. The crumbs of prosperity they had left behind while they took the cakes, also vanished. All that remained for the patriots was a broken, plundered country.

It had mattered little to Angus. He was bored with his executions anyway and tried his luck as a fisherman. This was in the midst of the thundering thirties when climate change was at its unpredictable worst. Crop failure and the devastation of livestock had made fish a vital commodity, but the coastal seas were all exhausted, forcing the fishing fleets out in the

oceans, where hurricanes made short work of them. Few survived. Angus enlisted on a state-owned harvester, a factory ship of gargantuan size, which gave it a better chance of surviving the angry seas than the smaller vessels, and could feed tens of thousands of people for months with a single haul. Still, it was extremely dangerous work, which was exactly what Angus wanted. He thrived and soon became commander of the vessel.

But now this, too, was coming to an end. Even the remotest shoals were being depleted. Their last trip had been a disaster. Bad weather had slowed them down so badly and consumed so much fuel that they had barely reached their fishing grounds before they had to turn back, not even earning enough to cover the cost of the trip. If they did not get fine weather on their next trip, it might be their last. And there was always the risk of the fuel tap being closed for ever. That was bound to happen any day now.

No surprise then that Angus was in a foul mood this late-winter morn, as he and his crew were returning through a cold and gray Aberdeen dawn, from an all-night binge in a local brothel, cynically named the House of the Setting Sun. They were all over the place, staggering, still very drunk. Twelve men, each armed with an antique Kalashnikov AK-47.

Ahead, embedded in the morning mist, like a highway to heaven, lay the main jetty, stretching out into sea as far as the

eye could see, leading to deeper water, where their mammoth factory ship lay.

"Is it me, or are those wretched whores getting uglier and older every time?" said able-bodied seaman Luther, a young, brawny brute, who only wore t-shirts, no matter how cold it was, to show off his muscles.

"I dunno, I don't much care what they look like," said old David Farquhart, the chief engineer, old and ruddy-faced, his big bulbous nose shading to purple.

"Mine took out her dentures," said another lad. "Not an inspiring sight, I warrant you."

"Better than having her bite off that quaint little object of yours."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're not exactly God's gift to women in that department."

"Or in any other department, for that matter," said the chief, with a chuckle.

"Fie, the granddad speaks. Why, it's a miracle you can even remember what we are talking about."

"Don't kid yourself, sonny, I can outfuck the lot of you any day," said the old-timer, grinning defiantly at the hoots and jeers that greeted his words.

Their banter annoyed Angus, but he kept quiet. They were right, of course, the supply of women was running low. The prostitutes were getting older and uglier and fewer all the time.

Although a diehard lecher himself, he had also found it hard to perform. It was rumored that the younger ones were being taken by marauding Clansmen, who were withdrawing into the Highlands, to try and eke out an existence there. Angus scowled. Fat chance. The Gulf Stream was bound to sputter again, as it had done several times this century, plunging the British Isles into arctic winters. No human could survive those on high grounds. He shrugged. What did he care anyway? He had worries of his own. The end of his fishing career was nigh. What then? There were few options left. The whole world was descending into a merciless war of survival. In many countries cannibalism had become the norm. That might offer fresh business opportunities, but even he shied away from those.

As usual he brought up the rear. His combat years had sharpened his senses acutely. He *felt* the presence of hostiles. A tingling in his scalp. None now. Too early, too cold. Dreariness reigned. A gray, chilly, soggy morn.

He wondered whether many places on earth offered the same hopeless desolation as the north eastern coast of Greater Scotland. The energy boom had become a distant, ever more hateful memory. The remnants of its excess covered the landscape like cenotaphs. Monumental wastes of metal stretched away for miles in confusions of pipes and tubes and tanks and fences and machinery, rust-bitten, corroded, often blackened by fire.

Aberdeen was a ghost town, sinking ever deeper into oblivion. Rubble for the greater part, laid low by the battering of storms and burrowing of frosts. A lawless place, inhabited only by military personnel and outlaws, resembling some Wild East, a frontier town in reverse. Whole neighborhoods were devoid of humans. Some had been so for decades and were being reclaimed by nature. Grass was breaking through pavements, weeds thrived everywhere, and trees were beginning to uproot buildings. Wildlife was still rare, though. Too much toxins in the soil, the water, and the air. Eastern winds still brought rogue clouds of evil vapors from burning wells that had turned the North Sea into a Styxian pool of death.

The decent folks had been whittled away by all the plagues of the Age of Reckoning. The once so lively harbor had become a scrapyard, clogged with ships that no longer had anywhere to go. Ferries, freighters, trawlers, yachts and all sorts of auxiliary vessels and containers lay huddled together, rusting and rotting, producing pitiful screeches and groans as their hulls were jostled by the rising and falling tides.

Even the birds had vanished. Most glaringly missed were the majestic herring gulls that once sat so proudly on every vantage point, raising the skies with their strident calls. Angus had always felt a strange sense of kinship with those big, beautiful, stern-eyed birds when they escorted his fishing vessels in and out of port. Now only the white stains of their droppings marked the places where they had sat. When the last fish had

been taken from the Northern Seas, the birds also disappeared, probably to die in fruitless searches of empty waters, but perhaps, Angus had imagined in a rare attack of empathy, to find refuge on some remote Atlantic island whose rocks still offered sanctuary to some leftover schools of fish.

They reached the jetty. The silence was eerie. Even the sea was completely still, a slab of glossy black marble, veined with gaudy greens and reds that suggested all kinds of chemical wastes and toxins. A few trips ago a boatswain had fallen in and died within less than a minute before he could be dragged out. To be on the safe side, they had left him in his squalid seaman's grave.

Even the air tasted wrong, sourishly sweet,

The men sauntered along wearily. None spoke. Their shuffled footsteps were the only sounds to be heard.

After half a mile the fog began to unveil a curious structure straight ahead. A sort of triumphal arch, about four stories high, which straddled the jetty like a medieval gatehouse. In the days when ships had lined the quays on both sides, the building had contained the bustling offices of all the trades involved in shipping. Now it was deserted, bleak and grimy, though strangely intact, still fully furnished, with posters fading on the walls, desks laden with papers, utensils, retro typewriters and coffee cups, as if the workers had interrupted their work and never returned, an ominous reminder that

nobody ever came here, not even thieves, unless they absolutely had to.

Without pausing the men walked through the archway, farther out to sea, deeper into the fog.

After they had passed the second building, just as desolate as the first, the third one showed a sign of life: a single lighted window on the second floor. This was the office of East Caledonian Oil, the last government fuel agency, serving the handful of warships and coast guards still in operation, and their own Atlantic Harvester, as the last of the fishermen licensed to sail.

As they approached the building, the towering hulk of their ship loomed up hazily in the background. Almost three times as high as the gatehouse, its rust-brown hulk resembled a sandstone cliff.

Urbain Bauernfeind, the last ship's agent of the North Eastern territories, was fast asleep behind his desk when Angus entered. He was a portly, bald-headed little man, in a tattered, pin-striped suit, sitting bolt upright, clasped hands on his potbelly, chin on his chest, snoring softly.

In no mood for niceties Angus gave the desk a kick, which made Urbain jump up in alarm and gaze at Angus in mute horror for several seconds before breaking into a grin.

"Ah, skipper," he said. "I had expected you sooner. The early bird, you know. Your vessel has been refueled. You're ready to go."

He put his small, chubby hands on a single piece of paper that lay before him on the desktop, and swiveled it around 180°. The loading slip. Angus gave it a cursory glance and froze. 15,000 metric tons? That was less than 50 days. He could not reach any fishing grounds on that.

"Why haven't you filled me up?"

Urbain hiccupped.

"Why oh why," he muttered. "That is a good question, aye, a pertinent question. It cannot be said that your cup overfloweth. No, that would be a monstrous lie. Monstrous." He giggled. "I'm thinking of taking a swim, an afterdinner swim. The kind your mamma always warned you against. Whaddaya say? Wanna join me?"

He gazed at Angus, squinting, extending his head somewhat. "I don't like you very much, MacDonald," he said. "Never did."

"I couldn't care less," said Angus, truthfully. "Where's my fuel?"

"See, that's exactly why I don't like you. You're not sociable. Not sociable at all. No chit-chat, no small talk." He shook his head and pretended to be stifling a sob. "That's all I wanted from life. A bit of social intercourse. A friendly word here and there. A pat on the head. A little kiss from a bonny wee lass."

"Where's my fuel?"

"Angus, Angus, Angus. Although I like you not, I have blessed you with all the fuel there was. You, most ungrateful of

men, are now the proud possessor of the very last drops in the Northern Realm. "

Angus wanted to say something more, but stopped and only sighed. Why bother? As he turned to go, Urbain uttered a plaintive moan.

"What about me?"

Angus stopped and turned round.

"What about you?"

"Where am I to go?"

"Suit yourself."

"You know I wouldn't last a day out there."

"Yeah, I know."

"Can I come with you?"

"You're not up to it."

Urbain smiled weakly, nodded slowly.

"No, I guess not. Manual labor never was my thing. Do me a favor?"

"It depends. What?"

"Shoot me."

"Fair enough. You sure?"

Urbain nodded again, eyes almost closed.

"Make it nice and quick," he said

"If that's what you want."

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

Smiling faintly at the joke, Angus drew his revolver.

Urbain looked down at the gun. His face seemed to be melting, cheeks sagging, lower lip drooping. He gave Angus a furtive little look and closed his eyes completely.

"Ready?" Angus asked.

"Aye."

Angus squeezed the trigger. The shot was deafening. Urbain's face tensed ever so slightly, as if he had felt a twinge somewhere. The bullet had been perfectly placed, right into his heart, killing him instantly. Angus grabbed a handful of Urbain's shirt and guided his falling body into the chair behind him. Then he let go. The man slumped forward, head between his knees. Without a second look Angus left the office.

On board Angus slipped into his formal role without effort. Although a sailor among sailors on shore, he was skipper on board, the master, the old man, absolute monarch of the realm. He believed in military law and expected total discipline on duty. Rules were rules. Period. Any breach was heinous, no matter how trivial its subject.

Angus washed and shaved, and put on his uniform. A fresh, pale-blue shirt, navy-blue necktie and sharply ironed trousers, black leather belt with his revolver, and a short, black leather jacket, with officer's stripes on the sleeves and the red and green tartan of his clan on the shoulders.

When he was almost finished, a very pale, pimply young man appeared at his door. The sparks, message in hand.

"Bad news sir."

Angus took the piece of paper. It was from HQ. The north was to be abandoned. The crew were discharged with immediate effect. Honorably but without a penny to show for it. They could report in London for reassignment, if any jobs existed.

"Shit," said Angus.

"My thought exactly, sir," said the radioman.

"None of your cheek, sailor."

"No sir. Thank you sir."

"Get out."

He sank down on a stool. The end. No surprise. He had more or less expected this. Oh well.

He gathered the whole crew in the ship's saloon. In a few terse sentences he explained the situation. Not enough fuel to reach their fishing grounds. No orders from above. Out of work. Out of money.

The men were dumbfounded.

"Not enough fuel?"

"What the hell do we do now?"

"Where do we go?"

"We can still reach any port on the islands and a few on the continent."

"But which? Hamburg? Rotterdam? Antwerp?"

"Calais perhaps?"

"And what the blazes are we going to do there?"

"A whole lot, if we had fish to barter."

"Well, we don't, do we?"

"Nope."

The chief engineer had not spoken, which was unlike him. He was always a bit of a ringleader. Now he just sat, brooding, on a stool at the rear, elbow on knee, big, hairy fist propping up his chin. Angus cast him a few looks. The old sea dog seemed in a trance.

"Why so quiet, chief?"

The old man looked up, frowning.

"Pondering, sir, only pondering."

The others fell silent. The old sailor seemed prey to a strange solemnity.

"Pondering, no less. Sounds heavy."

Dave nodded.

"That it is. Life or death, really."

"Tell us."

The chief stroked the top of his head. He still had most of his hair, but closely cropped, a whitish sheen. He uttered a deep sigh and righted himself, looking straight at Angus.

"I know where we can find fish, about a hundred miles from here," he said.

From anyone else such a wild claim would have met with derision. Not now.

"Are you serious?" Angus asked.

The old man nodded. His eyes glistened. He spoke with an unusually soft, raspy voice.

"There's a national marine park nearby. Orkney. It's pretty much unspoiled. I had a nephew on a destroyer patrolling it. The old man was a bit of a greeny, a weirdo. He took the ordinance seriously. Kept everyone out, bar the locals, shot to kill."

"Sounds ominous."

"Not anymore. They were wrecked a few weeks ago.... The park is unprotected now."

The other men burst out into cheers, outshouting each other in their eagerness to get going.

Angus grinned broadly.

This meant a whole new lease of life. The park would probably yield a full hold, more than they had known for years. They would be filthily rich.

"But that's best news I've heard in donkey's years. So why so glum, Dave?"

"I was born there."

"And?"

"If we take the fish, the people die."

Hoots of derision from the others.

Angus shrugged his shoulders.

"Just a matter of time anyway."

"We don't know that."

"We do if we choose to."

The other man looked hard at him. Unflinching, Angus looked back.

The chief pushed out his lower lip and shook his head in mild disdain. This stung Angus, but only slightly. He had never claimed to be a saint. Still, the chief had come as close to being his friend as Angus had ever allowed anyone to come. His good opinion meant something.

"We won't take everything," Angus said.

The chief rose, gave him a milder look, infinitely sad.

"It's no matter. They'll probably not survive another bad winter anyway."

"Right!" Angus exclaimed. "C'mon men, let's get this fat old lady going."

The others bustled off, leaving Angus alone. He should have been ecstatic. A full load would bring them untold wealth. No telling how high the prices might rise in the coming weeks. All his problems solved. Why, he might even be able to buy some property, settle down. Get a bevy of pretty, young females. Replenish his stocks of whiskies and cigars.

And yet. The prospect stirred nothing inside. No pleasant feelings, no anticipation, no relief. This baffled him, but not enough to really matter. He shrugged it off, and turned to the business of running the ship.

As usual it took a fair amount of cursing and tinkering to get everything working, so it was not until the depth of night that they were on their way. The huge hulk had been fast once. Close to 30 knots. Now it seldom went above 12. Not only to save fuel but also to prevent it from falling apart. It was old and poorly maintained, pummeled by far too many hurricanes.

The night was dark and foggy. Angus stood on the bridge and looked out across the vast, empty plane of the deck, eerily illuminated by tall cones of light that lined both sides and waxed and waned with the swirling banks of fog. The deck had originally been coated green, but the surface was now dappled with blackened rust. It was more than 300 meters long but only visible for about 50 now.

Angus ordered the second mate to sound the horn, a frantic mournful sound, like the last roar of a dying bull. Their radar had been out for years. Good seamanship demanded a crawl, but he could not be bothered. They went at 10 knots. If they collided with anything afloat they'd never notice anyway.

He wondered, dispassionately, how many ships they had overrun throughout the years. Dozens, at least. After a trip there would often be fresh dents in the bow, smudges of paint, and local rumors of some vessel gone missing. It was never mentioned officially. The Harvester's work was too important to be jeopardized by such trifles.

Once the ship was steadily on course, Angus went to his personal refuge, on the roof of the wheelhouse. It was a small, rectangular deck, with an open railing that offered a free view all around. In the middle stood a single deckchair with small, first-aid cabinet beside it.

Bone-weary from two sleepless nights he all but staggered to the chair, wiped the moisture from the wood and collapsed into it. Closing his eyes he fell asleep at once.

When he awoke a few hours later, shivering slightly, the fog had gone. They were at sea under a clear sky. It was dawn, just before sunrise. A cool breeze wafted in his face. Its briny smell was almost right, but not quite; it was still laced with the sourness of chemicals. The waters were dark blue, crestless, rolling in long smooth waves but still littered with floes of waste. On the eastern horizon a dark plume of smoke rose like an inverted cone, thinning and fanning out into a blur of black lace across the blue sky.

Angus leaned over to open his first-aid box. It contained his malt whiskies and Havanas and an antique tape deck, with days of opera, Mozart mostly, but also Beethoven and Bizet. He knew most lyrics by heart and often sang along, at the very top of his voice, to the dismay of his crew. This day he preferred silence. He just took out a fine crystal tumbler, a bottle of 50-year-old Glenfiddich and poured himself a full glass.

Getting ever so slightly drunk was his favorite pastime. He was a master at dosing his liquor. He started out with two or three swigs to blur the edges and once he had reached a stage of mild intoxication he could maintain it indefinitely by taking exactly the right little sips, as he savored the aroma of his cigar and tried to empty his mind completely. He often came close, but not today. Somber thoughts kept popping up. He tried to cheer himself by thinking of the wealth ahead, but failed. There wasn't really anything that he wanted very much anymore. He was in his fifties, unsure even of his true age. He had seen most things many times over. Life was becoming tedious. Last night was no exception. Even the hookers no longer roused him the way they used to do.

"Why bother?" he muttered to himself. In spite of his cynicism he had learned that money could not get the things that really mattered. His weariness returned and he fell asleep again.

When he awoke for the second time, he did not immediately know where he was. There was land abreast, quite close, a mile or so, sharply lit by the early, pale winter's sun. Mouse-gray rocks rose from the white fringe of the breaking sea, bearing a landscape of green planes at various angles, with a mountain range rising darkly in the background. Only then did he realize that it had to be one of the Orkneys. The sight unsettled him, reminding him in many ways of his birthplace, the Isle of Skye,

on the west coast of Scotland. Home. He hadn't been there since his youth. Some forty years ago. As he looked at the land, vaguely moved, memories came.

The final week with his family. The recollection of those happy days had never faded, no matter how often they had receded to the back of his mind, sometimes for many months. When they returned, they always emerged vividly, like brightly colored pictures.

Life had already become harsh in those days, his father out of work, the common luxuries going one by one. His dad had been an extraordinary man, a simple carpenter but highly respected by all, easy-going, cheerful, kind and gentle yet indomitable, doggedly upbeat, always finding ways to raise everybody's spirits.

Angus did not remember his mother as clearly, little more than a face, mild, smiling and also a wee bit sad.

He had been really close to his brothers, Duncan and Craig, in a rough-and-tumble sort of way, always horsing around, with a hint of roguery, often playing pranks on one another, devising cunning plans to blame their own mischiefs on one of the others, but never with malice, true friends at bottom, always looking out for each other when it mattered.

On the fatal day he had become the victim of a prank slightly more odious than usual. He had clumsily broken some prize possession of Craig's, and Craig wanted to get back at him. It

was the day of an annual fair, something the whole family had been looking forward to for weeks. Craig locked him in the barn, just before they were to leave. They went without him. It was a dirty trick. And it was one of the few times in his life that Angus had lost control of his temper. When he was freed by the postman and found that he had been left behind, he went berserk. He wrecked his brother's room and spent the rest of the day cursing his whole family. When later, in the evening, the news came that they had been killed in an accident, the sudden swing from fury to crushing grief had been impossible to handle. Within days he had fled the Isle to join the CLA, never to return. He did not even know what had happened to the family home.

Time for work. Angus uttered a moody little grunt. He did not feel like working. Weariness still weighed him down. To make matters worse, he had also already drunk too much. His reluctance all but paralyzed him. He felt unable to move. He did not even try, convinced that it would be useless anyway.

He gazed at the land. On one of the cliffs a solitary figure had appeared, a woman, judging by the long, fluttering skirts she wore. A small black dog was jumping around her. She seemed to be looking in his direction. Dark curls danced around her head. After having stood motionless for a minute or so, she raised a hand and waved. Hesitantly Angus raised his hand, too, and waved back. This made the woman wave even wilder.

He smiled, gave one last sweep of his arm, and stopped. The woman also stopped waving and moved away. When she had disappeared from view the rocks seemed more desolate than before.

He took another gulp from his whiskey. This was all wrong. He had little patience with deep thinking, least of all about morals and ethics and rights and wrongs. He had always thought those things luxuries he could not afford. He did what it took. He had to live. His only livelihood was here. Simple matter of struggle for survival. But somehow it had stopped being simple.

He gave another grunt, took a deep breath and forced himself to his feet. As he turned to leave, he was startled by the sight of a few big birds sitting quietly on the stern railing behind him. Gulls. Herring Gulls. He grinned broadly. How about that? Not extinct, after all. It pleased him immensely.

There were four of them. Two adults, pure white, with cool-gray wings, two juveniles, creamy with brownish spots. A family, perhaps. He felt a sudden chill, reminded of his own kin. Impossible notions, wild and primitive, flitted through his mind. Life beyond death, spirits returning in other forms. He shook his head briskly. Nonsense. And yet the presence of the animals touched him deeply. Just four birds.

What were they to him? A lot, somehow. He had imagined them all gone. But here they were. Back from the dead. It made

perfect sense, come to think of it, with the marine park surrounding the Orkneys. Life giving life.

And he had come to bring death. To take away their last chance of survival. Fie.

He looked at the birds. The juveniles were preening themselves. The older ones were watching him, holding their heads sideways, each keeping one big, golden eye trained on him. In a sudden, inexplicable urge he flailed his arms at them. They just spread their wings and drifted upwards, without any visible effort. Slowly they veered away and headed for the coast. The juveniles began to chase each other, seemingly at play. The adults just floated. Angus watched them till they blended with the pale blue sky. He imagined he heard one of them utter its plaintive, staccato yelp in the distance, but he wasn't sure.

He lowered his gaze at the island. He could make out a few scattered houses. Thin strands of smoke rose from the chimneys, creamy dots of sheep were scattered across the fields. He also smelt the freshness of the air. The scent of the sea untainted by any trace of chemical refuse. How many people lived here anyway? He did not even know. Hundreds? Thousands? The latter, probably. Suddenly it struck him that he held their fate in his hands.

"Damn," he muttered. Once the Squids were released, their tentacles would slither all around the shores and suck away all marine life they found.

"Damn," he muttered again.

He rose, a bit unsteadily and made his way down to the bridge. Instead of the mate the ship boy stood behind the wheel, bleary-eyed and stifling a yawn.

"Where's the second mate?" Angus asked.

"With the others. They're patching up the Squids. Some problem with the sensors."

"Are they all at it?"

"Yes sir, all except me, and the chief of, course. He's in the engine room."

"Right," said Angus. Opportunity, someone had once told him, had been a god somewhere, in ancient Rome or Greece. Apt, he thought, very apt.

"Go and join them. The sooner we get those damned things working, the sooner we'll be rich. I'll take the helm."

When the boy had left, Angus turned to a monitor suspended from the ceiling. The screen was out, but the sound still worked. He raised the chief.

"Skipper?" Old Dave's voice sounded a bit slurred, also the worse for whiskey, no doubt.

"I've changed my mind," Angus said. "What would you say if we tried to find some fish up north?"

It remained quiet for several long seconds.

"Are you serious, sir?" the chief finally asked, in a curiously smothered voice.

"Never more."

"That's great, sir. Absolutely great."

"How fast can you get the old lady to go?"

"Full speed? About 20 knots. But not for long, of course."

"Fall apart, will she?"

"Crumble like a piece of cake, sir. I guarantee it."

"Excellent. Get going."

"What about the others?"

"Just lock the watertight compartments. That'll take care of them."

"Righto, sir. And sir... "

"Yes Dave?"

"Best damned order you ever gave."

He knew no response to that, so he merely uttered a kind of grunt.

He switched off the monitor and checked his revolver, just in case. He did feel rather good about himself. After he had put the ship on automatic, he returned to his refuge on the roof, where he settled down with the finest Havana he could find and a brimful glass. No point in sobriety now. He meant to get as drunk as he possibly could.

"No point in letting such a fine malt go to waste," he muttered, chuckling at his own joke.

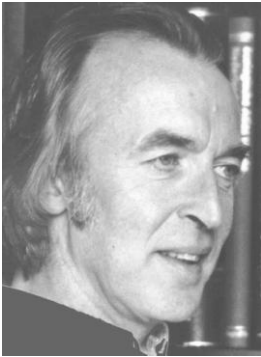
The Harvester was picking up speed. He felt the ship beginning to tremble underneath him. About to die, he thought, without any strength of feeling. It meant little to him. Never had. Not after the accident anyhow. Nothing had ever really

mattered since then. That was also the source of his so-called bravery. Indifference rather than courage.

He lit his cigar and took a deep draw. Aah. The spicy smoke filled his lungs. This was very good. He lay back in the deckchair, eyes open but not focused. He smiled. It should not be too hard to empty his mind completely now. Bound for eternal peace. Going home. At last.

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 some research for a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative short stories.