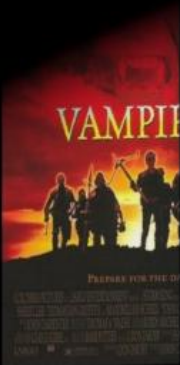


The Supermarket



Sale
Sale
Sale



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a short horror story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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A hectic Friday at the office had left Janet McGregor tense and irritable, with little comfort ahead. She had to take Valerie to her ballet lessons, hurry back home to make dinner, go out again to pick up Val and return to keep an eye on Bridget, who was having some kids over for a party. Burt would not be in till after ten. Trust him to pick his moments, she thought.

She smoked an angry cigarette as she let her car stutter along in the heavy afternoon traffic, shivering because the heater had not warmed up yet. Outside, the dull grey November day was slowly darkening.

Just when the cars started moving more freely and she sighed with relief, she remembered she still had some stuff to buy for Bridget's party. She swore.

Gilles was the only supermarket on her route. She had never been there before. She did not like the look of the place, although it was brandnew. It had a peculiar design, shaped like a slab of black marble, with sloping walls. It looked like a burial mound. As she turned into the parking lot, the bloodred neon logo on its front burned like a fiery scar in the dusk.

On the inside Gilles was like any other supermarket, vast, crowded and noisy, with muzak droning in the background. Janet just managed to beat an old lady to the last available cart and pushed it vigorously into the melee. Now what did she need? Crisps, cookies, a few bottles of Coke. She looked around at the unfamiliar layout. This was a nuisance.

As she paused to check the signs over the aisles, her shin was struck sharply by the cart of a young man with purple hair.

"You jerk!" she snapped, "Why don't you look where you're going?"

Visibly shocked by her fury the boy stammered an apology, but that did nothing for the pain gnawing at her shin. She dismissed him with an impatient shake of her head, sizzling with anger. Oh, get on with it, she thought, and looked up at the signs again. Suddenly a black veil seemed drawn over her eyes. A dizzy spell. She smothered a cry and grabbed the handle of her cart for support, but the cart rolled away from her and she fell full length to the ground. Oh, my god, she thought, I'm fainting. Oh no ... not like this, not here...

Seconds later she was surrounded by a throng of legs. Lying motionless in her first shock, heart aflutter, she realized she was all right. She scrambled to her feet, aided clumsily by a young, yellow co-ated shop assistant.

"You all right, lady?" he asked.

She nodded. The eager, curious faces in the background filled her with embarrassment and anger.

"Yes, yes. I just felt dizzy and that stupid cart rolled away. It's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Perhaps you'd better sit down somewhere?" said the young man, as the crowd broke up with mutterings of unholy disappointment.

No need, she wanted to say, but again a shadow passed before her eyes. So she nodded and allowed the young man to lead her away. He took her through a door and up

a narrow staircase to a higher office. He was very kind, pulled out a chair and asked whether she wanted a glass of water. She did.

Just after he had walked out the door, the third spell came. A much longer one than the two before. For some time there was only blackness and a slow receding of all sound. Then she saw clearly again. She gave a quick little shake with her head. She shouldn't get so mad. That caused it, of course. She had always fainted easily, especially as a young girl. She smiled at the memory. Those faints had come in very handy at times. She looked at her reflection in the glass panel of a cupboard. Despite her 35 years and two childbirths she was still a very attractive woman, slim and firm-breasted, her thick, honey-colored hair cut in a short, tomboyish style. Men still noticed her, as Martin, her assistant at the office, would vow. She carried on a playful flirtation with him. He had confessed his undying passion for her. She had responded by promising him pure bliss as soon as she had figured out the perfect way to murder her husband. But it was only in fun. She would not dream of playing around. She had seen what that had done to her friends.

She looked about. The office was a small cubicle, with two doors beside each other. Apart from the cupboard and her chair it contained only a metal desk, bearing a red phone, a stack of four lettertrays, also red, and two untidy piles of paper. The walls were bare and sickly yellow.

She checked her clothing. No harm done. Some spicks and specks. She raised her eyes again. The boy was taking his time. Surely he had not forgotten her? She really

wanted to get going again. She checked her watch. Five-thirty. She had to be home at six to get Valerie to class in time.

Fidgeting with the handle of her pocketbook she waited some more, but when the boy had not returned after another five minutes, she had had enough. She went to the door through which she thought she had entered, but it would not open, so she tried the other. This was right one, although the staircase seemed much longer than she remembered.

After she had opened the door at the bottom of the stairs, she paused in surprise. Something had changed in the supermarket. For a moment she did not know what. Then she noticed the silence. A deep, breathless silence. No muzak, no voices or footsteps, no rattle of cart wheels. She did not see anyone either. Not that this was very strange because her view only covered a single aisle, a narrow ravine with wine bottles stacked on one side and boxes of washing powder on the other. It could be a coincidence that nobody walked there. The silence was a different matter. She checked her watch again. Twenty to six. This had to be right because she had left the office at five. She started to walk. Her low heels struck the tiles sharply and the sounds seemed to scamper away like living things. Quite unpleasant. Janet felt ill at ease. Where was everybody? Perhaps there had been a fire drill or something. Alarmed at the thought she sniffed the air. There was a tang of bitterness, but nothing to suggest burning.

She walked on, reaching an intersection. Empty aisles stretched away on four sides. How could that be? It was late afternoon. But wait.... Who said it was still afternoon? If it were six in the morning, this desolation was possible. Perhaps she had been out for much longer than she had thought. If the boy had forgotten her and nobody else had come to that office, they could simply have closed shop without knowing of her presence. But why had they left all the lights on? That was not normal, was it?

She walked on, quickly at first, in and out of the aisles. But no matter which way she turned she saw no exit. She grew annoyed. What a nuisance. Locked up in a supermarket in the middle of the night. At any rate she need not go hungry. She smiled. She could make herself a banquet. Why not? They owed her as much. She was just wondering whether she should really have a go, when she realized that she was not hungry at all. This, too, wasn't normal. It made no sense if she had not eaten since yesterday's lunch. Her unease turned to anxiety. Something was wrong here. Very wrong. She wanted out. Burt and the kids would be worried sick over her absence. The silence was getting on her nerves. She had to find a way out. But how? She stood in the middle of an intersection. Empty lanes yawned at her from four sides. She felt goose pimples crawl up her arms. This was becoming creepy. The emptiness, the silence. She was breathing heavily. Scared.

"Don't be silly," she muttered and managed to shake her unease. Think, she thought. What about a night watchman? Perhaps he would hear her if she shouted.

"Hello!" she called out. "Hello! Anyone there?" Her voice was not loud but in the stillness it sounded like a frantic shriek that startled her. Still she kept on calling out for a while. In vain. Everything remained silent and empty. She shook her head. She was stuck here for a couple of hours at least. Oh shit. She pursed her lips in anger. Then she remembered the phone in the office. Of course. She chuckled. How stupid of her. She looked about. Now where was that office? Near the detergents and the wine. Shouldn't be hard. She hurried along the racks, but could not find the aisle to the office. She kept ending up in the same spot. Exasperating. Not a door anywhere. The place was a darned maze. She became hot and flustered. Drops of perspiration slid down her face.

"Darn it all," she muttered. What now? Nothing really. Wait and see. There was no other choice. With a deep sigh she gave up. She just had to make the best of it. Her mouth was dry. She could do with a drink. She grinned wryly. No problem. She remembered just having passed a dairy department and sauntered back. On her way she looked along the racks. She was among the condiments. Unintentionally her glance struck a pot with a weird legend. Adder's fork, it read. She stopped. Adder's fork? ADDER'S FORK?!

She walked up to the display and took hold of the jar. No mistake. The label read Adder's Fork. Behind the glass she saw flat black stems, split at one end. With a groan of revulsion she returned the jar to the shelf. She looked at the next row of jars. Gall of Goat, the label said. She giggled nervously. This was weird. Who would buy stuff

like that? She looked further. Eye of Newt, Tongue of Dog, Lizard's Leg.

"Oh, come on," she muttered. This wasn't for real. It had to be some kind of joke. She looked up at the legend over the rack. The Black Kitchen, it read. She shrugged her shoulders. They were really plumbing the depths of bad taste here.

She walked on to the dairy display. It looked different from what she remembered. There seemed to be much more choice. She took out a carton of milk and began to tug at it, while she looked at the other cartons. Buttermilk, Yoghurt, Wolves' Milk. On seeing the last beverage, she gasped but when she saw Baboon's Blood and Mummy Juice in the next rows, it gave her such a shiver that the carton slipped from her hands and burst open on the floor with a wet crunch. She took no notice. In horror she stared at an even grislier assortment beside the Mummy Juice: four different kinds of Human Blood. The cartons were black, adorned with scarlet lettering: A, B, AB or O. She shook her head. No. This was impossible. This was no longer a joke. Despite the tremors in her legs, she bravely walked to the cartons of Human Blood and ripped one open.

In a thick jet the red liquid gulped out, over her hands, spreading the sickly, unmistakable smell of blood. Janet closed her eyes. She'd gladly faint now. She flung the carton back in the display and turned around. Her heart was beating so fast that it ached. She had to get out. No matter how. She did not know what all this meant but it had to be gruesome. Hurriedly she started trotting through

the empty aisles. Again and again she was struck by other strange merchandise. What she had mistaken for garden tools appeared to be all kinds of medieval instruments of torture, though not dulled and darkened by time but with the cold glint of newly forged steel. She saw packs of Wool of Bat, Howlet's Wing and Hemlock Roots. Large tins of sulphur and saltpeter. A magazine stand with lugubrious magazines, their covers crawling with monsters, living dead, vampires, werewolves and rotting corpses in all kinds of bloodcurdling situations.

Trembling all over Janet stood before them. She clasped her pocketbook against her chest, as if it could still her thumping heart. She almost sobbed with fear. What kind of shop was this? What manner of people shopped here? And where were they?

I'm cracking up, she thought. There must be an explanation for this. It can't be what it seems to be. I must stay calm. Calm. There must be a way out of this maze. I must be methodical.

She spotted packets of rice on a nearby shelf. She grabbed a big one, opened it and started to walk, dropping grains as she went along.

It became a long, long trek. She did her best to ignore her surroundings as much as possible and kept her eyes to the tiles. She only faltered at the meat department. Something drew her glance to the ice boxes. The meat looked different. She told herself she did not want to know but curiosity prevailed. Reluctantly she went closer. One look was enough. In the box, neatly wrapped in cellophane, like chicken legs, was a stack of human

hands. Retching she turned away. She could not stand much more of this. Then she steadied herself, pursing her lips. No, damn it, she'd get out of this. She resumed her trek and finally saw the cash registers.

A squeal of delight escaped her. She could see the glass doors of the exit. Dropping the packet of rice she ran. But as she approached the door, she stopped. Utter darkness reigned outside. She walked up to the glass and looked out. There was nothing behind the glass that resembled a town by night. Just a black hole, in which she could discern the vague outline of a tunnel with earthen walls. Utterly baffled she looked around. There was a sign with opening hours near the door.

We are open from one hour after sunset till one hour before sunrise.

In disbelief she stared at the sign. What kind of opening hours were that? But wait.... the place was obviously closed. So it could not be six in the morning. The sun rose at about eight. The place would be open. So, it still had to be evening. Finally it struck her. She was on a wrong floor! That explained the length of the staircase. She was in a cellar. A horrible, horrible cellar in which subterranean customers came to shop for implements of torture and adder's tongue.

Janet shook her head, slowly at first, but ever faster till she thought she would never be able to stop again. This was too much. She sank to her knees and started to sob. She could not go on. She did not know what all this meant

but she felt it embodied frightful danger. Fatal. Horrible things were going to happen to her here. She would never see Burt and the kids again. She was sure of it.

Time went by. She knew not how much. Wearily she wondered why this was happening to her. So far life had been kind to her. Health, a good marriage, fine kids, a satisfying job. Her wedding anniversary was next month. Burt had booked a lodge in the mountains. Honeymoon number five, lassie, he had said, always kidding her about her scottish background. He was such a nice guy, really. It would have been so wonderful..... would?

"Christ!" she exclaimed. She sounded as if she were dead already.

Come on, lass, she thought, Pull yourself together. All it takes is finding that darned door again. Her train of thought was rudely interrupted. The light was going down. In alarm she raised her head. Now what? The hall became dusky. What could it mean? She clenched her teeth. She wanted out. She wanted to live.

Slowly she got up. The light had faded to twilight. She also heard something. A few soft scratches, like a gramophone needle hitting the first grooves. And it was. Mournful violins began dragging out a dance funebre. Again Janet tensed her jaws. She wanted to be strong. But the near darkness and the somber music unnerved her. At her back she felt the black hole from which the customers would come to this ghoulish store. She hardly dared think what kind of customers they were. At any rate drinkers of mummy juice and human blood. A violent shudder racked

her. She had to get out. To the office. There lay her only hope. And she had to be quiet. She felt nothing like meeting the person who had dimmed the light and played funeral music. She took off her shoes, picked up the packet of rice and started to steal along the dark corridors. There were few aisles she had not been. Finally she reached the last one, but a stack of cans barred its far end. In the faint light she could just make out their legend. Baby Livers. She turned and froze in shock. At the far end of the aisle a figure had appeared. She could only make out his silhouette, but that was horrid enough. A small, barrel chested hunchback with long, dangling arms. He uttered a howl and came running for her with strange, hopscotch leaps. Briefly she felt paralyzed with fear. Then she moved. She quickly wriggled into her shoes and ran into a side corridor, back towards the exit. The dwarf followed, shouting unintelligible abuse. Fortunately she had no trouble staying ahead of him. But where could she go? Into that tunnel? Seemed like she would have to. There was no other option. She ran as fast as she could, slipping as she turned corners, and reached the cash registers. Gasping for breath, she looked around for something to break the window. A shopping-cart. She ran to a nested column of them, janked at the first. It stuck. In the store she heard the hunchback scamper about. He seemed to have lost her. That gave her some time. She took a deep breath. Stay calm, she kept reminding herself and managed to calm down enough to wriggle the cart loose. She took a few steps back to have a good run in. She would plunge through the window cart and all. She

took a deep breath, braced herself and froze. Something had moved in the tunnel. A deep chill entered her spine. Figures were detaching themselves from the dark. Customers. Drinkers of human blood and mummy juice. That route was barred too.

"Oh, no," she groaned.

"Oh, yes!" said a croaking voice behind her.

The dwarf stood in front of the cash register. A monstrosity, with an incredibly wide chest. A face so emaciated that it resembled a naked skull. He came for her like an ape, his long hairy arms swinging from left to right.

In a reflex Janet turned the cart and charged. It took him by surprise. She struck him right in the midriff. He keeled over backwards. With a single leap Janet vaulted over him and plunged back into the darkness of the store. No use, she thought. No use whatever. You've had it. They're coming and there's no place to run. In wild panic she ran among the shelves. The first customers had arrived. She heard mutterings, drowned by the incoherent howls of the hunchback, but she also heard the word "day person" and quite soon footsteps, approaching from all sides. Scores of them. She was done for. Breathless, her blood throbbing through her temples, she reached the final aisle again. The dead end. She turned round, panting. All other corridors were filling up with ominous silhouettes.

"There she is!"

She drew back. There they came. Forms and shapes she only knew from nightmares, mercifully obscured by the

dark. Suddenly she lost all control. Screeching like a gull she plunged into the stack of cans at the end of the corridor. They went flying everywhere, with loud clatters. She clawed through the pile, throwing handfuls behind her. Each moment she feared to be grabbed by her ankles but it did not happen. She reached the other side, and there, like a mirage, lay the aisle with the wine bottles and detergents, and the beautiful door at the end. She took a final spurt, janked open the door and clambered up the stairs on her hands and knees. In the office a new spell of dizziness overcame her. She only just managed to reach the chair and dropped into it senselessly.

When she came to the young man was on his knees before her, glass of water in his hand.

"Lady? Lady?"

Stupefied she looked at him

"Where am I?" she mumbled. She did not know. Only that something terrible had happened to her. But what?

The boy smiled.

"You are in the office of the supermarket. You passed out. I got you some water. I'm sorry it took me so terribly long. My boss got in the way."

She wanted to take the glass, but her hand trembled so badly that she could not. The supermarket! Those frightful products. The hunchback. The drinkers of blood and mummy juice. A dream? Impossible. It had all seemed too real for that. She cast a wary glance at the door she had just come out of, fearing it would fly open and unleash those monsters. Her eyes returned to the face of the boy.

He was looking at her blandly. His everyday expression sobered her. Could dreams seem so real?

"Shall I get you a cab?"

"No, thanks. My car's outside."

She rose, walked to the door. She must have imagined it, incredible though it seemed.

"This way, lady," said the young man, while he opened the other door for her, a puzzled look on his face. She hesitated, shrugged her shoulders and went down the stairs, which now seemed much shorter again. What did that mean? She could not think straight anymore. The boy lagged behind. There was some noise from the office. Her hand trembled when she opened the door at the bottom. To her delight she was greeted by the uproar of a fiercely lit, crowded supermarket. She gasped with relief. Still, she felt far from secure. She had no interest in shopping anymore. She only wanted to get out. Home. Behind her the boy shouted for her to wait, but she bolted, running as fast as she could, elbowing her way through the queue at the cash registers, and burst out into the parking lot.

Only there did she recover a bit. The evening was cold, dry and dark. She leaned against a lamppost, panting. What a nightmare. She wiped her forehead. It was damp with perspiration.

I must be cracking up, she thought. I work too hard. Burt was right. She was a suitable case for Workalcoholics Anonymous.

Then she felt something heavy in one of the large pockets of her overcoat. A can. She took it out. Baby Livers. Each separate hair on her head pricked into her

scalp. Oh God. It had been true. All of it. She had to warn the police. Right away.

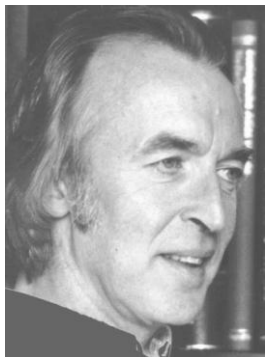
The hand closed on her wrist like a trap. She screamed. The young man stood beside her, his face no longer blank but menacing. He displayed a set of ugly teeth.

"Shoplifting is an offence, lady," he said loudly.

Another assistant grabbed her right upper arm. Together they dragged her along. She began to scream and wriggle. Passers-by stopped to look, smiles of righteous glee on their faces. The men dragged her to the side of the building. There stood a truck, engine running. A black one. With red letters, bloodred letters: A, B, AB & O.

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