

The Virgin  
jan bee landman





a short, literary, mainstream story

by

Jan Bee Landman

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As always, Hans Martenglass awoke reluctantly, into a world of quiet desperation.

"Once more into the breach, dear friend, once more," he muttered and opened his eyes to the surprising sight of his bed covered in snow. It was not really sensational, not like being out in an Antarctic blizzard with Robert Falcon Scott or something, just a pretty veil of finely frozen waterlace, but snow all the same. Not the thing to expect inside the supposed safety of one's attic on a February morning late in the twentieth century.

Martenglass wondered if this might stir up some of the old fire within, enrage him to the point that he would speak sternly to his landlady, the negligent Mrs Brick, but soon realized that he could not be bothered. A few blobs of chemical goo would do just as nicely. He smiled to himself. Time was mellowing him, after all.

He lifted the blankets to look at his bedfellow, good old Capital Punishment, who was rolled up against his belly, still in his guise of a lilac-point siamese, raising a sleepy head, one ear dog-eared.

"Morning, old man," said Martenglass warmly. "It's that time again."

The cat yawned with abandon, displaying all the grim beauty of his pink maw and frosted teeth. The snap of his jaws gave him a startled look, but then he closed his eyes contentedly and started to purr. Martenglass stroked him. He loved that cat. Gods, how he loved him. While he stroked the cat's velvet head, he reflected on the countless moments of joy afforded him by that little, wayward creature. Boundless beauty, affection and companionship. What woman could even remotely approach it? Ah... women. There he went again. He growled softly, keenly aware of the power of his morning erection, straining like the foresail of a clipper running before a gale. He chose to ignore it. No point in dwelling on all his needs and wants at this early hour. Plenty of time for that later... suitably drunk. And yet ... He looked at the empty pillow beside his own. Round and fluffy, undented by any female head for many years. A mixed curse. After all, his women had always been more trouble than they were worth. And yet...

Now there was Klazien. At least, he thought there was. His memory did not serve him well. A late encounter in the depths of last Saturday night. He could not even recall precisely where. Close to the

red-light district, for sure, given the unholy hour. On his weekend ventures he always descended the social ladder with slow and inevitable steps. After starting in trendy places full of glitter, rousing music and classy, young women, rejections would force him down until he ended up in smelly old pubs, infested with drug addicts and elderly prostitutes. Not this time, though. Klazien had been quite presentable, he recalled, albeit vaguely. Long, wavy hair and a sumptuous body in flowing garments. Not a super model – there was just a little bit too much of her for that – but perfectly suitable for some direly needed sexual healing. This, alas, opened a fresh can of worms: Martenglass was nothing if not moral. He frowned upon much of his own doings, even though the modern rabble might applaud and even envy it. At core he was a man of ancient virtue. He believed in honor, duty, decency and loads of other obsolete oddities nowadays unmentionable outside low comedy.

He recoiled from using a woman for mere lust. But what choice had he? His sanity was fragile, madness never far away, a quick slide into evil broodings. At those times he often realized that the bloodiest maniacs must have started out in some semblance of

normalcy, slowly growing aware of the whispering demons within, getting acquainted, exchanging pleasantries, breeding mutual contempt, forbearance, fostering tolerance until the unthinkable began to be thought. Shadowy contemplations in the night, daunting yet titillating, curdling the blood, hardening the heart. Hans wanted to do the right thing. Not for gain or acclaim but simply because it was right.

He checked his diary. And true enough, it contained an entry for this very evening. Klazien at 20:00 hours, and an unfamiliar address.

"Avaunt," he shouted with some glee, throwing aside the bedclothes in a flurry of snow. "Up, up and away."

Capital Punishment uttered a soft protest.

"Meow," he said.

"Don't remind me, pal. I know. I know."

With great determination Martenglass swung his legs outside the bed and placed his feet firmly on the floor, right splash in the middle of a toe-deep puddle of slush. The shock almost made his eyes pop. It took him a full speechless minute to regain control of his heart, which had bolted like a runaway steam



hammer. When he could finally draw breath again, he looked down at the ice-logged water about his feet, so cold that it hurt. Momentary defeat. What to do? He could of course go howling mad. Throw a tantrum, get out his battle axe, ram a hole in the floor and calmly watch his troubles flow away. Right into the barren waste of Mrs Brick's lap, one floor down, if there was to be any justice at all. Martenglass wriggled his right-foot big toe; mournfully its black nail rose up among the little ice floes. A silent reminder that his personal hygiene left something to be desired. When he really could not think of any decent response to this calamity, Martenglass settled for his Oliver Hardy routine, gazing woefully into space before heaving a terrible sigh. Then he got up and waddled to the kitchen unit.

There his glance chanced upon his reflection in the mirror and he recoiled in disgust.

"It never rains ..." he muttered, but kept his eyes steadfastly aimed at the flabby face that returned his gaze.

"What an ugly little customer you are," he said.  
"Liquor-logged flesh drooping all over the place. Your

cheeks are beginning to sag, pal. A few more mid-thirty years and you'll look like an aged bloodhound."

He gave himself a nasty little squeeze on the left cheek but the visage did not flinch. With a shrug of his shoulders Martenglass started to prepare his breakfast, in silence, waiting patiently for the direction his mind would take. One never knew. A sudden bright, world-shattering idea might come gurgling up out of the mental mire any moment. But not today, it didn't. Alas. The first thought to materialize was: O, heck, not another wicked winter Wednesday at the library.

"Damnation," he said.

Just then an idea popped up belatedly. He was not going. Not at once, anyhow. He would go riding first. One of the rare joys his father had bequeathed upon him. When Martenglass senior ended his tyrannical life in a bloodstained bed, he had left his son just enough ill-gotten gains to enable him to buy a horse, which Hans had done right after the funeral and now stabled in a riding school on the verge of the Kraling Wood. A horse of his own. The fulfilment of at least one lifelong ambition, however tiny. (Not that 1 out of 239 was anything to get flustered about, but a

complete blank had always been a distinct possibility, because most Martenglass ambitions were unfeasible without drastic changes in the physical laws presently known to science.) Inveterate romantic that he was, Martenglass had always dreamt of becoming a knight in shining armor. Some kind of Heavy-metal Ivanhoe. And a horse was the one indispensable attribute for the likes of them. Only serfs walked. Yet, this was just a minor consideration, a playful thought to bait the envious. In reality Martenglass had found that few creatures were easier to love than those big, dumb brutes. Their awesome power harnessed by inborn submissiveness and xenophobia in this, strangest of all worlds. Panic always a triggerhair away. Martenglass loved his horse, without really knowing why. It was nothing like the physical affection between Capital Punishment and him. Not once had he seen a glimmer of recognition in the beast's mournful brownglass eyes. Perhaps a mere question of mutual trust across the evolutionary chasm. When spooky things erupted on the scene (some madly barking dog, rattling bulldozer or flapping cloth) to frighten his powerful mount into a terrified bundle of backward scrambling nerves,

Martenglass need only give a pat on the muscle-bound neck and utter a few soothing words to calm the shaken brute. This, the animal's boundless confidence in him, tiny tot and basically ludicrous-looking manikin, produced the good, overgood feeling that he experienced on the back of the creature that could floor him at will and pound him into strawberry sludge in a matter of seconds.

At 9:26 Martenglass was busy saddling his horse and singing "Oh what a beautiful morning" at the top of his voice. Pale sunbeams slanted down diagonally from the roof lights like shafts of powdered ice, frosting every blade of straw they touched. Sparrows chirped among the rafters. The horses stood resigned in their boxes and the familiar scents of straw and manure caressed the Martenglass nostrils like cold smoke.

He heard a slight, scampering sound behind him. Expecting to see a mousie running for its life, Martenglass turned and found himself face to face with a young and timid girl, cast in such beauty that it stopped his breath. Exquisite she was; tall and willowy, her sleek hair dropping in a dark auburn veil

to her shoulders. In the lines of her face, soft and delicate, Martenglass read bewitching serenity till he saw her eyes, half hidden by the tatters of a brow-skimming fringe. Pallid blue, cool yet brooding, immovable, many years older than she seemed to be. For several slow heartbeats Martenglass stood robbed of locomotion and speech before he overcame his surprise.

"Hello there," he said. "Are you looking for someone?"

Her smile broke forth with such spontaneous ease that he found it hard to believe after the coolness of the eyes. Beauties like her were usually coated in a thin layer of flexible ice.

"No," she said. "Not someone. Something. A broom. Have you seen one?"

He had, and while she walked to the corner pointed out by him, he watched her in mute wonder. She appeared to be a new stablehand; at any rate she was dressed in the regular outfit: sweater, riding breeches, long socks in battered shoes but otherwise she looked like a lost mannequin, wandering about in a graceful daze. When she had taken up the broom (long slender fingers taking a firm hold, instantly jolting the

Martenglass heart, Freudian reminder of witches riding the phallus through tempestuous nights), she said goodbye cheerily and started to walk away.

Normally Martenglass would have left it at that (courtesy toward the lower classes should not be overdone and, she, being female, did embody the supreme danger) but the moment she walked away, languidly, with fluent even faintly catprowl grace, he felt a sudden and unbearable need to see the magic of her face once more.

He called out after her.

"Hey! Have you come to work here?"

She stopped, turned and came back, with the same supple, graceful gait, smiling again. Sunlight rubbed her hair, burnished it to a reddish bronze.

"Yes," she said. "This morning."

"Then I had better introduce myself outright. I'm Mr Martenglass."

She held out a long slender hand, which he shook with reverent caution.

"Anoushka."

"A beautiful name."

"Yes, I think so too," she said, without the faintest trace of arrogance.

Martenglass had forgotten his next line and could only grin stupidly.

"Well, I must be getting on with my work," she said, after waiting patiently whether there was more to come and walked away. Martenglass finished saddling his horse, climbed on and went outside for his ride through the snow-powdered wood.

Thus it began. Nothing spectacular, one might say. Not an event to be shouted from the roofs or to incite long, overwrought letters home. Just a stroke of lightning that flashed, blinded and was gone, but left Martenglass with the mystical vision of a burnt-out forest, a host of cindered trees, black skeletons that were sure to glow up in some eventual night. The dreamtrees of his youth, or so he believed, although any chimney-sweep would tell him it might take decades of dogged, psychoanalytical excavation to get to the bottom of such a thing.

Anoushka. At any rate he had come away with her name. That was something. Not a lot by modern standards. But better than nothing. A name. Powerful taboo, once, a name. And, again, one never knew. Martenglass wondered if he alone possessed the sense to distinguish between progress and chronology.

Anoushka. It was a splendid name to keep handy, just in case some suicidal urge would come to haunt him again.

Sauntering home that evening through the dusk, Martenglass felt a great need of comfort. A good, strapping housewife who would hug him in her portly arms and stroke his head and say: "Cheer up, Hansje, everything's going to be fine". And this performed in such a way that he might believe it. Ach, the idea alone was enough to make his eyes water. Nobody loved him. This he felt keenly. Mrs Sugarysyrup, his superior at the library had spoken very unfeelingly about the lack of respect he displayed to the general public. True, he had not made himself popular with a female who wore a little dead fox around her neck. But, surely, it had not been all that bad. He had only suggested some gentle torture until she lost what little sense she had. After all, the said cave woman had more to fear on the Day of Reckoning, had she not? What did people expect of him? Meekness in the face of Mrs Beelzebub?

While he slouched along the façades, he felt the weight of his existence again press down on his



vertebrae like a rucksack full of bricks. Why could nobody see that he really was not such a bad guy? Perhaps he should call in an advertising agency. But no, those folks were not to be envied either, those artistic blends of Doktor Goebbels and any old hooker.

The sky above Martenglass was ultramarine. Flecks of snow fluttered down like drowsy little moths. Nearly all the windows were lit in winter scenes of domestic bliss that would have warmed other hearts but only clawed at his. Still, he had one straw to cling to, this night. Klazien. Oh, Klazien, be miraculous, surprise friend and foe, shame the unbelievers, be good, be willing, he thought, grinning feebly, in the certainty that he could not, by any stretch of his flexible imagination, foresee Klazien cause anything but galloping despair.

The penultimate street was a so-called "singel", a street with an ornamental moat in the middle, icefree, a black abyss between the facades so richly decorated with 17th-century Dutch Masters. The streetlamps only managed to cast pale ghosts of light upon the

water. And nevertheless, life stirred there. Ducks floated there, softly cackling among themselves. One of them broke into a peal of derisive quacking. Ever growing was the Martenglass conviction that they, the downtrodden of this earth, knew more, much more, than he, the creator's apprentice, of the eventual outcome of all this.

Two hours later, despite all his skepticism, Martenglass hurried up the stairwell of the early-postwar apartment building that Klazien inhabited. After allowing himself a short breathing spell he pressed the bell button. The door was torn open at once. Klazien in the doorway, radiant as a springtime bride. Martenglass recoiled two steps. How now? A sudden change of form? An Ovidian Metamorphosis? Her hair, flowing strands of roebrown satin only Saturday, hung in tatters and seemed to have been dipped in whitewash, while her broad hips made cruel demands on the textile of a pair of jeans that one would barely condone on the sweaty posteriors of a cotton-picking tramp.

"Hi, Hans," she said, sensuously puckering her lips for a kiss.

With his vocal cords stunned, Martenglass stood for no less than thirty seconds battling his rising anger. But when he finally spoke, his voice still shuddered with rightful wrath.

"What kind of tomfoolery is this?" he said. "Art thou female, person?"

Klazien gasped for breath.

Martenglass caught sight of the bouquet of red roses he was holding. With a growl that would have done a grizzly proud he flung the bouquet to the floor, kicked it against the wall and started to perform an Irish jig upon it. Klazien retired behind the door, leaving a chink to peer through. When the flowers had been ground to a bloody pulp, Martenglass realized that he was, perhaps, making somewhat of a fool of himself. He stopped dancing, cleared his throat and addressed Klazien sternly.

"Madam, what gives you the ungodly impudence to approach me in this clown's outfit? Methinks, monkeys in drag belong in a circus. Perhaps you labor under the delusion that my invitation concerned a bricklaying contest? A night of rust-chipping inside a mammoth tanker? Creative claywork? You abominable sheman! Trouserling! This is an affront.

You have seen the last of me, unwife. I wish you à Dieu."

Brusquely he turned and descended the stairs with measured step.

Outside, in the sobering black of the February night, his fury still simmered like molten tar. He scanned the surroundings for something to vent his feelings on. Luck struck. An old-timer Citroen 2CV was parked in the street. A white one, with all kinds of insulting stickers of ducks on the rear, begging to be vandalized. Sorely tempted to rip it apart with his bare hands Martenglass glowered at the monster. He took a few ominous steps, then decided on inaction.

It had started to snow again, with big silent flakes that clung to the eyelashes. This is how I grow old, he thought, experiences are strung together and leave me behind, sadder but none the wiser.

After this, in so many respects, memorable day, little happened in the life of Hans Martenglass for many months. Throughout the spring and a bit of summer he dwelt mainly in a backroom of his brain, which he

furnished with knowledge of medieval warfare, toying with the idea to write a historical novel. He hankered for the middle ages. The days that men were still permitted to meet death in its true form: the apocalyptic horseman swooshing his scythe. At least they had known the privilege of being hacked to pieces awares, growling, snarling, lashing out with a broadsword, kicking to the very end and not, like his father, drugged so senseless that the wretch did not even know what he was doing when he crossed the finish line.

His studies left Martenglass little time to do any riding, but the few times he saw the girl Anoushka, there would be the faintest suggestion of distant thunder claps and lightning flickers. He was always overcome with admiration, teetering on the brink of reverence. He caught himself red-eyed in the act of looking forward to seeing her again, to feast his eyes on the being of beauty that she was. Occasionally he would have a chat with her. She was nineteen, almost half his age. Still a child. She might have been his daughter.

It started slowly, covertly, a sweet poison stealthily

administered. The image of her majestic face would linger in his mind. First a couple of minutes, then all the way home, and finally in his dreams. She did not play any leading part in them, neither lusting bedlass nor frostlipped maiden. She simply figured as a walk-on somewhere in the background, gazing at him broodingly between the ragged strands of her long, chestnut hair. Martenglass in control. He enjoyed her appearance, her presence. The feeling she gave him might be compared to the joy that sensitive natures derive from gazing at a full, creamy moon. But slowly the wheels of fate unlocked, swung forward and began to roll. Martenglass under a vague impression that she, Anoushka, was deliberately seeking his company whenever he was at the riding school. Not that he really believed it. He did not consider himself a likable person, so it was always hard for him to imagine that other people could like him. But then, they did not know him like he did. They had not, drunkenly, in the hollowness of winter nights, lighted only by the fickle flame of his self-disgust, ventured down into the catacombs of his lecherous soul. No. Among his own admirers Martenglass was not to be found. Still, Anoushka seemed to like him. And, of

course, he did not object, but it did create the need to adopt an unequivocal attitude, he thought, remote from creating any false impressions. After much soul-searching and many alcoholic midnight babbles to Capital Punishment he finally opted for the role of the reliable elder brother: cordial and helpful, laconic and sophisticated, but above all: aloof, by all means aloof. And that was how she seemed to accept him. Their talks grew in length and frequency but remained on the surface: small about the topics of their weekends.

She merrily out with girlfriends, to a movie or disco, looking at and listening to humans, films à la *Kramer versus Kramer*, records of Abba & Bowie, an occasional tale of Daphne Dumaaurier, and horses, horses and more horses.

He grimly out alone, stalking vulnerable women in public places; desolation and unwanted drunkenness, music of Beethoven and Queensryche, films of Akira Kurosawa, meaty prose and Chansons de Geste and horses.

Isn't this nice, Martenglass would think, at times,

such a decent friendship between mature man and adolescent girl. He should have known better. Nothing endures on this side of the cosmic fence.

One day in July she got into an argument with her boss. Angrily she stamped out of the riding school, into the pouring rain, coatless. Martenglass felt the urge to follow her, but it seemed improper, so he did not give in to it. But when he left, some fifteen minutes later, he saw her sitting small on a hillock in the middle of the exercise field. The rain was still humming down relentlessly. Propriety counted for nothing now. This here was an emergency.

Martenglass went up to her, feeling strangely manipulated by forces beyond his control. She was moping, her pallid-pink lips in a moody yet sensual pout, her hair dripping along her face.

"Oh, boy," he said. "A poisonous lily of the field."

She managed a wry little smile.

"It's not as bad as all that."

"You shouldn't be out in the rain like this. You'll catch your death of cold."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"So what?"



"So quite a lot."

"Nobody cares what happens to me anyway." she said, wiping some wet strands of hair from her eyes.

"My, my, we are feeling sorry for ourselves today."

"Not at all. It's the simple truth. Apart from you nobody gives a damn about me around here." She cast him a hard, expectant look. His heart missed a beat. Sudden discomfort.

"Don't exaggerate." he said weakly.

She lowered her eyes, shrugged her shoulders again and pulled a stalk of grass from the ground.

"It's the way it is."

"Please go inside, there's a good little girl. If only to please me."

She looked up, a vague smile about her lips, a diamond glitter in her eyes.

"All right. But only to please you."

He helped her up. She stumbled, fell against him and retained that pose several seconds longer than necessary before she sauntered away. Her riding breeches clung so tightly to her lithe body that the edges of her briefs stood out like thin welts.

Martenglass gasped for air. The taste of sodden grass stuck to his tongue. A Great Blue Heron passed

overhead, winging languid and black against the pall of clouds, and uttered a raucous, ill-boding call. It made Martenglass realize that it hurt him to see this girl walk away.

"See you tomorrow," he called out.

She looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes were orbs of blue fire behind the soaked strands of her hair, like predators behind bars.

"Bye-ey" she sang.

Walking to his car, Martenglass could feel his heart hammer out a loud and deliberate drumroll. He felt tense and confused. What the heck was happening to him now? Apart from you nobody gives a damn, she had said. Those words kept tumbling through his mind. Her expectant eyes were branded in his memory. Expectant? Why? Expectant of what? What had she meant? Had she meant anything at all?

After the incident in the rain, seriousness sprang up in their talks, like a tough weed among fragile blossoms. Although silent and withdrawn by nature she started to unveil the precious little secrets of her life to him. Her lonely childhood in a big, empty

mansion, oft forsaken by parents who chased Cultural Experience with the zeal of bounty hunters, true high-browsers, hankering to be deeply moved by the empty lamentations of make-believers while their little daughter wandered through a deserted home. Finally she found refuge at a riding school, among ponies and horses, where she could feel needed and safe. Her beauty had soon become a bane to her. Too hot a fire for this tepid world, she drew to her window many a fiery but all too cold-hearted boy, who would always want more than she was ready to give.

"Why can boys never stay nice?" she once asked Martenglass, referring to their amorous inclinations.

"Perhaps because the species could not survive on boys staying nice." said Martenglass.

"I hate it," she said, with unwonted vehemence. "I just want to have a good time. But they always want more. You can't go out with a boy without him pawing you before the evening is half gone."

"You shouldn't have been so beautiful then." Martenglass said, smiling gently while he caressed her indignant face with his gaze.

"That's not my fault is it?"

"You might consider plastic surgery."

She bumped him with her shoulder.

"Idiot."

He laughed. So did she. Briefly they stood uprooted, alone together, glances entangled, lips relaxed and willing to caress. Martenglass was the first to lower his eyes.

"Well, I'd better saddle my horse," he said.

"I'd better get back to work," she said, a trifle too airily.

"Don't overdo it."

She laughed.

"Have nice ride."

Anoushka enjoyed listening. Well, then she had come to the right man. Martenglass prattled on and on, amusing her with anecdotes from his eventful past. She took a special interest in his love life. And again she was in luck. If love be war, Martenglass bore as many decorations as scars. He could relate of glittering triumphs but also of gloomy days under the high heels of a heartless oppressor. And so, one day, they came to the tenderest of subjects. A Monday morning it was, at the end of August. Peace reigned inside the riding school. There were restless clouds

abroad, causing the sunlight to flicker like a stuttering neon tube. Martenglass was grooming his horse, Anoushka was sweeping the stable. Sunlight fluttered around in the dust she raised.

They had finished a pleasant chat some minutes before. All of a sudden Martenglass noticed something odd about the silent, lanky girl. She was no longer sweeping, but stood motionless beside her broom, scraping a foot through the straw, like a restive mare.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

She jerked her shoulders a little.

"I want to ask you something but I'm afraid you'll think me silly."

"Ask me whatever you want."

"You're not to laugh."

"Cross my heart and hope to be struck by lightning where I stand."

She giggled, gave a tug with her head, sweeping the dark hairveil across her left shoulder, and looked straight into his face, with those luminescent eyes of hers.

"What I want to know ..." she began bravely but gradually lost control of her voice as it rapidly lost

force and volume "... er ... what's it like ... I mean ... the first time?"

The grooming Martenglass hand stuck like a windshield wiper.

"The first time?"

She lowered her eyes, blushing.

"You know. When a boy and a girl do it ... for the first time ..."

She fell silent, studied her left foot while she scraped the floor with it. The bay-colored curtain had fallen, hiding her face.

Martenglass stammering:

"Do you mean to say that you never ..."

She nodded, without looking up.

Aah! Martenglass benumbed. A single sunbeam flashed through the window at that very moment, bordering Anoushka's hair with a golden trim. In the lightshaft a sparrow fluttered above her head for several seconds. From the depths of the stable the first ponderous tones of the Canon of Pachelbel came rolling on. Emotion, deep, warm and tingling, melted the Martenglass heart. This is she, he heard a voice mutter in the background. The virgin, the saintly one, the patient one. The devout mistress. The path

through paradise. The untrodden snow. The silent mirror lake. The purity of a dewdrop on moss.

Far did he have to extend his chest to suck enough air into his lungs.

She looked up, with a moody little twist to her mouth.

"Why don't you say something. Is it that stupid?"

"Stupid? But no, my dear Noush, anything but. I'm only flabbergasted. Such a beautiful girl like you. This being 1999 A.D. I thought virgins had long become extinct, or at any rate hooted down. Off to a brothel with them, on a tumbrel, to teach them manners. The unison of ardent lovers discarded in favor of genital fumbling with strangers. Travesties of love. Churlish lust. Monkeys and goats, wasn't that Othello's saying? Intimacy? What intimacy? The body freely loaned as an urinal to the first prick that raises its head. Oh times, oh mores."

Martenglass had sunk down on a bale of straw, shaking his head. (Sure, he made no denials, he too had not remained untainted by the venereal epidemic that had raged through the world since the nineteen sixties. Often enough he had gagged at the recollection of things he had done in alcoholic vapors.

But nevertheless. His shame had been genuine. A deep, splitting realization of unworthiness. It was quite different for many).

The girl stood watching him in wonderment, head slightly tilted, lower lip lax so that the sun brushed a moist gloss upon it. Martenglass looked up, bemused, and scratched his head. Anoushka burst into laughter.

"The way you carry on sometimes. You're really nuts, do you know that?"

"Thanks."

"But nicely so."

He laughed too. And, for a brief spell, fleeting as a rainbow, their glances struck a bridge between their eyes. Then a pack of kids came in to jostle one another noisily before the box of a pony.

"I think we had better continue our talk elsewhere," said Martenglass.

"Yes," said Anoushka. "I can take my lunch break now."

"What about going for pancakes?" asked Martenglass, on an impulse that he regretted instantly. This could be interpreted as an obtrusion. But his fear was quickly dispelled.



"Great!" Anoushka said with obvious delight. "Just let me change my shoes." And off she went.

Martenglass stayed behind in a pensive mood. This thing was going in a different direction than he had imagined. As everything always did, in fact. Growth and decline. Eternal motion. Nothing ever settled down for the merest fraction of a second. Even in a block of concrete there was uncontrollable fidgeting and shivering. Molecules, atoms, everything was moving frantically about. This inevitably led to the two basic queries of modern life:

1) What the hell do we think we are doing?

2) Where the hell do we think we are going?

Martenglass chuckled and shook his head. Bizarre chemical reactions were taking place in his system.

The pancake house known as the Suckling Sow lay about three hundred paces from the riding school in the Kraling Wood. Martenglass had once paced it off in a particularly listless mood. While Anoushka and he walked there, they both smiled uneasily. It's almost like feeling happy, Martenglass thought, with a furtive glance at the young, beautiful and friendly face beside him.

The wood was clamorous; a cool breeze rummaged through the dry and weary August leafage. A herd of tattered clouds, grays and whites, stampeded across the paleblue sky.

"I kind of like this weather," said Anoushka. "So fresh."

"Yes," said Martenglass. He really felt different, which could spell little good.

The Suckling Sow was a sturdy wooden shed with small windows. On the inside the woodwork was stained darkbrown. The curtains were checkered red and white in an attempt to create a rustic old-Dutch atmosphere. Black frying pans dangled from the ceiling. The acoustics were terrible: harsh and resounding. A broad counter separated the seating area from the kitchen behind it. Somewhere a radio was mumbling a soft ballad. For the rest the place looked deserted, not a soul in sight.

Martenglass led Anoushka to a table in the back. There they sat down, facing each other, separated by a wooden tabletop full of veins and knots. Anoushka had her back to a window displaying the shimmering leaves of a birch outside.

Embarrassment had risen between them like a forbidding specter. They could hardly look at each other. Martenglass did not want to broach the subject before they had their refreshments, but nobody appeared. So he just blurted out the question.

"What made you ask me a thing like that?" he asked.

She smiled gently, a slight tremor at the left corner of her mouth.

"I don't know. Simply because I felt I could."

"Seems more of a question for girlfriends."

"That's just it. Ilse, my best friend, always puts on this song and dance about how horrible it was ... Is it? Surely you must know."

His memory fell open like a shoebox filled with old, faded photographs.

"Yes, I do," he said softly. "Only from the other side, of course." he added, by way of a joke, which she did not heed, face tense with solemn attention. For the first time since he knew her he wished she were not so beautiful. He felt very uncomfortable in this role of makeshift sexual educator.

"Well? What was it like?" she asked.

"Awful," said Martenglass. "Especially with the first two. Nervous and awkward, tremors and giggles, bodies tense, eyes furtive ... doubts, scruples, manhood wilting, sorely taxed by ineptly handled condoms. Nope. Actually, it was more like a clumsy exercise in mutual first aid than an act of simmering passion."

"Must it be like that?"

"I guess not. Things were a little better with the third one. But I had more experience then."

"What about the pain?"

"It differed. Marina almost passed out. That was a scare. She behaved as if I had knifed her in the belly. I can still picture myself, lying on top of her, a loving but very uncouth lad of nineteen, astonished and sobered by her shriek, while she wriggled out from under me, moaning, and staggered out of the bedroom bent over, both hands between her legs. I must add, though, that Marina had a weak constitution to begin with. I never knew the day that she did not complain about some part of her anatomy."

"Was it never good?"

"Sure. With Suzanne, the last one. I wasn't so clumsy then. I went about things very cautiously. It was a matter of biting the bullet and everything turned up roses in the end." He grinned sheepishly, but Anoushka's face remained solemn.

"So it depends on the boy?"

"Yeah, I suppose it does. Technique plays its part." Again he grinned to hide his embarrassment. "The first two girls I bedded were deeply to be pitied. By jove, a mad stallion would seem tame in comparison. I hardly knew where I was going. So I just battered away with a vengeance. Deep shame could I feel on that count. But, what the heck. I didn't know any better."

Anoushka looked at him pensively.

"Gosh," she said softly.

Breathtaking she was, so fresh and innocent that Martenglass suddenly felt a dirty old man. Rightly so. Could he deny it? Did he dare? Her eyes gazed into his, motionless. She trusted him like her older brother. If only he were. He sighed, weak-fleshed, keenly aware that he could not be trusted with such innocence, glad to be safely in a public place.

Party time at the riding school canteen. Martenglass in tuxedo. Anoushka in a white, clinging evening dress in which her slim body was outlined like a birch in its bark, terrifyingly beautiful to a mortal as Martenglass all too much was. Drunk with admiration he underwent her existence from a safe distance. She enraptured him. It was almost as if he saw her in slow motion. Everything but her escaped his notice. He observed her like an exhausted predator his frolicking prey. She hung around her peers, danced with young guys a few times. Then she came to him.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she asked, laughing, the long dark fringe of hair almost touching her eyelashes.

"I don't know anyone to dance with," he said, with a lump in his throat.

She tilted her head a bit.

"How about me?"

"Would you want me to?"

"Of course, you idiot."

They danced. Martenglass like a zombie. He wanted to keep her at a distance, but it just would not work. She slid toward him magnetically. And even when

they danced apart, her eyes embraced him. Two sparkling blue stars in a morning twilight. Her laughing mouth promised him everything. He could not believe it, nor did he want to.

When the band took a break, he led her to the bar. There she stood very close to him. Still and demure. She hardly spoke, but the smile never left her lips.

"Nice," she said. "Like this, with you." Her hand briefly stroked his upper arm.

Vaguely Martenglass was aware of questioning looks around him. For shame: the old wolf and the stable virgin. There were giggles from her workmates. But she was unshakable, shamelessly frank in her choice. Martenglass talked with other men in tuxedos without knowing what they were talking about. He only felt the occasional pressure of Anoushka's breasts against his upper arm. At times she rested her head on his shoulder for a few seconds.

During the next dance he suddenly found himself kissing her cheek. Her lips instantly shifted to his mouth for a long, famished kiss. Mountain water to a desert tongue. Balm to a blistering burn. Yes, it even reminded him of a mother's kiss on a grazed little knee or a telephone that rings just after all hope has

fled. Martenglass out of control. Without a word he led her away, outside, to his car. She did not speak either. In the car she encircled him. Her hand rested in his lap for a moment, where few signs of brotherly affection remained. She uttered a deep sigh as she felt his erection and cuddled closer to him.

In a daze Martenglass started the car and drove off. On his lips burned the question whether she realized what she was doing, but he knew what her answer would be: you idiot. And that was exactly what he was.

Never could Martenglass have imagined that so much tenderness still lingered in his mortal remains. He unveiled her cautiously as if she were a crystal-frail sculpture. She seemed drugged, her smoldering eyes half closed, mouth a fount of joyful whimpers. He took her, carefully as a painter of miniatures, holding his breath, the brush hovering over the canvas, pausing at the slightest tremor of her wonderful face. The pain he had to cause her touched him so deeply that he could hardly bear it. Fortunately it did not take long. Her eyes glistened when his pubic hairs touched hers.



"You couldn't possibly be sweeter," she whispered and started to move, clumsily but with abandon.

Long and tenderly Martenglass had made love to Anoushka. Now she was asleep, on her back on his green quilt, a purple Loony Tunes towel between her thighs, right arm extended along her body, left hand with a gracefully arched wrist on her belly. Her face, streaked by strands of wet hair, looked paler than usual, with some reddish blots around her mouth, where his stubbles had scraped the skin.

The man himself sat on a stool beside the bed and tried to control his runaway emotions. Overjoyed, he could not stop grinning. It was making his face hurt, yet sweetly so.

Anoushka. Here! On his sordid attic where loneliness had held its brutal sway for so very long. Was this the beginning of the end of being alone? Hard to believe. And yet, the living proof lay before his eyes. Sweet, strange, quiet Anoushka. A creator's dream, apart from that silly towel. Most beautiful, no, most delightful creature he had ever known. And he had made love to her, as first and only one, so that now, according to ancient custom, she was his. For

ever.

He sank to his knees beside the bed, clasped his hands together like a devotee, entranced by the one who had given him so much. His very own angel. He stretched out a hand and brushed the hair from her face with floating fingertips. She uttered a small, contented sigh. Martenglass clenched his teeth. Gods! Now they were abroad. He no longer doubted their existence. He felt them present everywhere, looking down with warm smiles upon the effect of this rare boon. His eyes began to tingle. Who was he to deserve this?

He rose, unsteady and naked, and wandered away from the bed, to the open window, where the warm breath of night caressed his face. The opposite facade was all darkness. Only somewhere down below did a light burn behind two misted windows. Soft guitar music drifted up from there, a faint trickling of tones, like a mouse dancing on the strings.

A strange, soothing calm descended upon him. All tremors were stilled, as were his doubts and fears and aches, and those nasty little irks that frustration breeds.

All was well. Home at last. He tried to recall when he had felt so good. He never had. This was where he had always wanted to be.

He looked back over his shoulder. The only lamp in his attic cast a cone of light on the bed and bathed Anoushka's body in a pallid glow on the emerald green quilt, like a sculpture of living marble on a lawn, a Celtic princess on a moss-clad, sacrificial stone.

Martenglass smiled, moved an easy chair to the window, grabbed a bottle of malt whisky, called for Capital Punishment and settled down to savor the moment.

Time ceased to matter. He sat in his chair, smiling, taking little, tepid sips from the bottle, while he stroked his purring cat. He did little thinking. No need. Everything made sense. He had a future again, still vague and hazy, like a summer morning mist, but glowing with all the promise of a golden dawn. This happiness would last a lifetime, he knew for certain.

Finally, weary with bliss and drowsed by whiskey, he went in search of a place beside the sleeping girl, very careful not to disturb her, legs dangling outside the bed.

His first sensation when he broke through the cobwebs of sleep was the smile on his face: upper teeth on an outstretched lower lip. It gave him a start. This had been unknown since childhood. Had his mind finally collapsed? Or did this morning cheer have a reasonable cause? Had - no snickering please - something good happened? He drew his eyelids apart. An early sun cast the customary yellow, sloping quadrangle on the floor but this time the patch of light was partly filled by a bent silhouette. His glance flew toward its origin. Anoushka. Ah! He remembered. A flash of joy shot through his body. At last, he thought. He stretched his limbs languidly and sat up, grinning like an ape.

His young bride sat on the stool at the window, clad in a T-shirt and riding breeches, both his. She was busy putting on a riding boot.

"Noush?" he said softly.

She looked up, eyes pursed against the light.

"Hello Mr Martenglass," she said cheerfully.

Avalanche, whiplash or lightning could not have struck a crueller blow. Mister Martenglass? *MISTER?* He gasped.

"I'm borrowing your riding togs," said Anoushka airily. "You don't mind, do you? I have to go to the riding school and I can't very well go in my evening dress."

"But..." said Martenglass, without an inkling what else to say. What was this? Riding school? Now? There was so much to discuss. Eternal loyalty, ceremony, honeymoon, number of kids, et cetera.

Meanwhile Anoushka had put on one of the boots.

"A bit big," she said. "But good enough." She started on the second one.

"But Noush," muttered Martenglass. "Surely you don't have to go NOW?"

Without heeding his words, grunting softly, the girl also worked her second leg into a riding boot.

"There. Done. Could you drive me down?" She rose to her feet.

"But ..." said Martenglass, numb with amazement.

Her face was hid in shadow, her torso was engulfed by the copper sunlight. The wide T-shirt camouflaged her form, although her taut nipples stood out visibly in the fabric. Martenglass at an utter loss. I love you, he thought, I love you infinitely. Marry me. Today. Right now.

She approached, out of the sun. Her face darkened on seeing his dismay.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't understand," said Martenglass.

She laughed.

"It's not that difficult. I have to go to work."

Her face had skipped the night. This was how she had looked at him before, before she had lain bolted to him, a creature of sighs and squirms and lewd caresses. Surely, this could not be happening?

"But what about us?" he stammered.

Taken aback, a little suspicious even, she looked at him.

"But what about us?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Now I'm the one who doesn't understand."

"Last night!" exclaimed Martenglass, as the world rolled away from under him. Nothing but chaos embraced him now.

She smiled.

"Oh, yes. I'm very grateful to you for that."

"Grateful?" whispered Martenglass hoarsely.

"Grateful?"

"Yes. Now I'm no longer afraid. You've been a great

help."

Martenglass felt his blood thicken and slow down. Suddenly he knew again who he was. A loser in his thirties who smoked too much and drank too much and kept himself going with faint illusions of future fame and fortune.

"What's the matter?" Anoushka asked. "You look gray as a ghost. Aren't you feeling well?"

"No," said Martenglass. "I'm feeling rather sick."

"Gosh, what a shame."

Martenglass collapsed on his back with a thud. Have me put out of my misery, he thought, now! He looked straight up into the darkness between the rafters of his attic. Don't think, he thought, just don't think. All will be well then.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"No. Nothing," said Martenglass, closing his eyes, fully aware that the sight of her would rip him apart like wet paper.

"Time," he said. "That's all. You can take my car, if you want."

"I haven't got my licence yet."

"Oh."

"I'll take a street car. Is there really nothing I can

do for you?"

"No. More's the pity."

"All right. I must be off. I'll be seeing you at the riding school."

"Yes," said Martenglass. He still kept his eyes tightly shut. She came to the bed, bent over and kissed him on the mouth. A caress so vain that it did not inspire the slightest urge to move his lips. He heard her hesitate near the bed for a few seconds.

"I'm really very grateful," she said.

"You're welcome." he said.

He remained motionless listening how she descended the stairs, had some trouble opening the outer door, finally succeeded, stepped outside and closed the door behind her. He also heard her footfall rebound from the pavement for dozens of yards. Then the sounds she made melted into the daily morning streetnoise.

Immovable he lay upon his bed. His stomach was already aflame. It's not fair, he thought. Capital Punishment emerged from under the bed. His nails tapped on the floor. With one leap he was on the pillow. Martenglass moved his arm and the animal



nestled himself in his armpit, purring, his velvet head against his master's cheek. Martenglass turned on his side, pulled up his knees, embraced the cat tightly and gave him a kiss on his cold, moist nose.

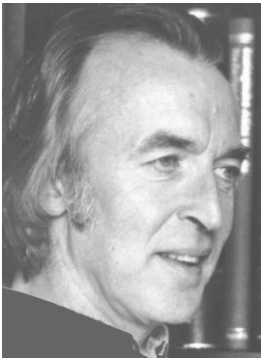
"Oh Capital, my dear, beloved Capital. Rejoice at not being human."

His desperate heart was still circulating blood, but the first hair cracks were beginning to develop. With trembling lower lip he braced himself.



**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.