

BAANTJER

DeKok
and the Death
of a Clown

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

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‘I’m not a swindler.’

Inspector DeKok of the renowned police station at Amsterdam’s Warmoes Street gazed at the man in front of him with a searching look.

‘Why do you say that?’ he asked sharply. ‘I haven’t accused you of anything, least of all swindling.’

The man nervously played with the buttons of his pearlgray waistcoat. The inspector’s cool observation made him restless.

‘I... eh, I expect you’ll have a lot of questions once I tell you my story.’

DeKok nodded calmly.

‘That’s my job,’ he said soothingly. ‘But you would have no chance to be heard, should I assume you came to the police just to tell a fraudulent story.’

The man gave DeKok a grateful look.

‘The thing is, my situation is somewhat ridiculous. It stretches even my imagination. That’s what makes me so insecure. It is as though I blacked out for a time.’

DeKok’s eyebrows rippled briefly. The man did not notice.

‘Have you had an accident? Have you been unconscious?’

The man shrugged.

‘A few years ago I hurt my head in a car accident. But I’ve long since healed. My recollection of the incident is vague. There weren’t any noticeable aftereffects.’ He shook his head. ‘This is something else entirely... an inexplicable gap in *time*.’ He took off his glasses and polished them with his necktie. Then he rubbed the corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. ‘During this lost time my life spun out of control.’

DeKok leaned forward. His elbows rested on the desk. There was an expression of friendly understanding on his face. He could muster considerable patience.

‘Let’s recapitulate,’ he said, as if it were a treat. ‘You are Julius Vlaanderen, fifty-five years old, and a real estate broker. Well off?’

‘Reasonably.’

DeKok smiled.

‘Not to worry. I don’t work for the Inland Revenue.’

The broker hesitated only a moment.

‘I own the building along Gentleman’s Canal. I have a retreat, a small chalet in Switzerland, and a few other properties. There is also a valuable collection of antique jewelry. Collecting is my hobby.’ It sounded apologetic.

‘And part of your jewelry collection is missing?’

‘Exactly.’

‘You estimate the missing pieces have a value of about one million?’

‘It would come to about a million Euros, yes.’

‘Gone from your safe?’

‘Yes.’

‘There isn’t the slightest sign of a break-in?’

‘That’s right.’

DeKok continued steadily.

‘You say you’re the only one with a key to the safe and the only person who knows the combination?’

Mr. Vlaanderen sighed deeply.

‘My attorney keeps a spare key. He also has a sealed envelope with the combination inside. You understand... in case anything happens to me. Although I felt it was unnecessary, upon the insistence of my son, Maurice, I asked my lawyer if everything was still intact.’

‘And?’

‘He assured me everything in his office was undisturbed – the envelope and the key are in his safe. They have not been moved, or touched.’

‘What’s the name of your lawyer?’

‘Waarden.’

DeKok pulled out his lower lip and let it plop back. It was a vulgar gesture and made an unpleasant sound. It was one of DeKok’s least endearing habits. He was blissfully unaware.

‘So you are completely at a loss to explain the disappearance of the jewelry from your safe?’

The broker was dispirited.

‘I can think of no plausible possible scenario,’ he said. ‘This particular collection of jewelry was only in my house a few days. I recently acquired the pieces. I was delighted to get them. Last Saturday I made a formal inventory. My son was present, to assist with the inventory process. Once we finished I placed the collection in the safe. Afterward I recall closing and locking the safe, as usual. Since Saturday the key has not been out of my possession. Besides,’ he added, ‘the key is useless without the combination.’

DeKok remained silent. Without embarrassment he stud-

ied the broker closely. He scrutinized, but with a professional eye. No one could have read his expression, but no detail escaped him. The inspector's non-committal stare usually made the guilty squirm with discomfort. But Vlaanderen was composed, having told his story twice.

DeKok looked at a handsome man, considering his age. His face was symmetrical, sharply delineated, accentuated by a sharp chin. His dark-blond hair was lightly gray at the temples. The coat and waistcoat reminded DeKok of Dr. Koning, the coroner. Both men appeared to have stepped out of a period film. In Vlaanderen's case it was not the outfit. His suit was formal, but a modern cut. Perhaps it was the way he carries himself, thought DeKok. Vlaanderen also lacked the absent-minded, dreamy look in the eyes of the coroner. His steel-blue eyes were sharp and alert.

'The jewels were already insured?'

The broker waved a hand with an irritated gesture.

'Of course I had them insured as the ink dried on the bill of sale. But what do you think the insurance company will say when I approach them with my story?'

DeKok smiled.

'Question marks?'

Vlaanderen nodded emphatically.

'Exactly. The story sounds like a clumsy attempt at fraud. In any event, the contract excuses the company from paying any unsubstantiated claim of theft. I'll have to double check that with my attorney.' He shook his head. There was a sad look on his face. 'I don't expect financial relief. My only chance is the hope you will be able to find the jewelry and/or the thief. All I can offer is my inventory, with a detailed description of each piece. Most are unique and easily recognizable.'

DeKok pulled the list in front of him and silently read it. The descriptions were indeed very detailed, reflecting Vlaanderen's love, interest, and appreciation of the pieces. It also showed that Vlaanderen was more than a knowledgeable collector. He was a true connoisseur of period jewelry. Some of the descriptions approached the lyrical.

'How long have you been collecting antique jewelry?'

'I started very young, as long as I can remember.'

DeKok tapped the list.

'Do you have photos or drawings of the newest additions?'

'I can get those for you.'

DeKok put the list aside.

'Does Maurice live with you?'

'Yes, until the end of this year. He's soon to marry.'

'Any other people live in the house?'

Vlaanderen shook his head.

'I have a few servants, but none who live in and none who work weekends.'

DeKok held his head to one side.

'What about... eh,... your wife?'

Vlaanderen spread his hands.

'We divorced more than eight years ago. My wife had an affair. She and her young friend now live in Paris.' He gave DeKok a tired smile. 'Since the affair, which caused me a lot of sorrow, I have avoided steady entanglements.'

'Have you a girlfriend?'

'I date casually.'

'And last weekend?'

The broker hesitated. He waited long seconds before he finally spoke.

'Indeed,' he said hesitantly. 'My companion arrived Satur-

day evening, before dinner. She left early Sunday morning.'

'And on Monday morning you discovered the theft?'

'Yes.'

DeKok leaned back in his chair. His brain was working overtime, trying to discern some truth regarding the strange disappearance. Suddenly he leaned forward.

'Mr. Vlaanderen, do you talk in your sleep?'

After the broker left, DeKok handed the list of vanishing jewelry to his assistant, friend, and partner, Detective Dick Vledder. The two were virtually inseparable and made an excellent team. Vledder's youth, stamina, enthusiasm, and administrative strengths complemented DeKok's experience and unshakeable steadiness. Both possessed intimate knowledge of Amsterdam, in the case of the senior inspector, the seamier sides of the Dutch capitol. Vledder's ability to turn out flawless reports offset his partner's reluctance to bog either down in the paper chase. DeKok counted on Vledder's discretion, often saying, 'Please put this on the telex and make sure the descriptions are included. Just say that the pictures will come later.' Vledder often saved them both from his partner's vocal contempt for the police bureaucracy.

The brilliant, outspoken Inspector DeKok was decidedly eccentric. He had reluctantly entered the twentieth century, never mind the twenty-first. He still spoke of the 'telex,' although it had long since been replaced by faxes and computers. He still regretted the loss of handheld telephones with operators to make the connections. He would never, he often said, get used to push-button phones and automatic dialing. Self-sufficient by nature he deplored lack of personal touch

and accountability. He trenchantly refused to speak with any answering machine.

Vledder hesitated and stared at the list.

‘You want to pursue this little drama?’ he asked, disbelief in his tone of voice.

DeKok looked surprised.

‘Why wouldn’t we?’

‘Well,’ said Vledder, ‘we’re Homicide.’

‘What does that have to do with anything? The man came to see us, so it’s our case.’

‘But shouldn’t we turn it over to one of the other guys?’

‘Why should we? We don’t have a homicide to investigate and we’re police officers. A possible crime has been reported by a responsible citizen and we’ll investigate.’

Vledder grinned.

‘There’s no crime! So the jewelry supposedly vanished. How does a thief steal jewelry from a safe nobody can crack?’

DeKok rubbed the bridge of his nose with his pinky finger.

‘Who says,’ he continued in a low tone, ‘nobody got the safe open?’

Vledder sank down in his chair and raised his hands over his head. Then he lowered them with a gesture of exasperation.

‘But you heard what Vlaanderen said. He’s the only one with a key and he’s the only one who knows the combination.’ He paused for a moment before he continued. ‘The only possibility is he robbed himself,’ he concluded.

‘Why?’

‘He wanted the insurance money.’

DeKok shook his head.

‘If Vlaanderen set out to defraud the insurance company,’

he explained patiently, 'he could certainly rig a burglary... complete with clear evidence of a break-in. He could have done it in such a way it would look like an outside job. For a time, at least, he could probably bring us along with manufactured evidence. Then he'd have an outside chance of swindling the insurance company. Let's face it. He knows his absurd story will never wash with the dullest cop or insurance investigator. Don't forget, most insurance adjustors are ex-cops, or have equivalent training.'

DeKok looked at Vledder while he rummaged in a drawer. He found a peppermint and popped it in his mouth.

'And I agree with Vlaanderen,' he continued. 'If he brings this story to the insurance company, no way will the company pay the claim. Except for a long-established relationship, why would they take his word at face value? Regardless of the presence or absence of a liability clause, he's got nothing.'

'But you do?'

'What?'

'You do take his word unequivocally?'

DeKok nodded slowly.

'I see no reason to doubt his word, no matter how far-fetched his story. The mere fact Julius Vlaanderen had the courage to approach us with such a sketchy story speaks to his trustworthiness.'

Vledder shook his head thoughtfully.

'Every day,' he said, 'the police are inundated by people with idiotic stories.'

'Vlaanderen is not an idiot... not a sensation seeker. He is not the type who seeks out notoriety. On the contrary, I think he's an intelligent, good man.'

Vledder grinned his disbelief.

‘Come on. He’s not all that good,’ Vledder smirked. ‘He dates *casually*? He later admitted to engaging his Saturday night companion from some escort service. He recalled only her first name, Clarisse, and the considerable sum he paid for her services.’

DeKok did not react. He did not feel like pursuing a fruitless discussion about the broker’s ethics. Regardless of anything else, the broker’s carefully prepared inventory convinced him the jewelry existed. He reasoned the collection had to be somewhere.

The question was, where?

DeKok knew they’d entered a race against time. Professionals on both sides of the law know antique jewelry falling into the wrong hands is soon disassembled, piece by piece. Experts deftly lift the stones from their unique settings. Next they melt the settings down. The stones and metal may leave the country. Certain distinctive stones and cuts can be traced, but not without difficulty. Their intrinsic value, even in an altered condition, makes the enterprise highly profitable.

He had not told the broker of that possibility because he felt the mere thought would be unbearable to an avid collector. To him the jewelry was irreplaceable.

DeKok looked at Vledder who continued to stare at the list.

‘We have to try and identify the companion, Clarisse. Perhaps you can contact the Vice Squad and see if they have anything on her?’

Vledder nodded and DeKok watched him make a note of it. There was no Vice Squad in the station house. DeKok reflected on that anomaly. Warmoes Street Station was on the edge of the Red Light District. The district encompassed

the old inner city of Amsterdam. It was a virtual labyrinth of narrow streets, small canals, quaint bridges, dark, narrow alleys, unexpected squares, and architectural wonders. This centuries-old neighborhood awakened to its business day at dusk. The streets offered an array of eating and drinking establishments. Exotic, often beautiful women and well-heeled pimps abounded. Endless streams of the sex-starved and the obsessed found their way to this hub. Locals mixed with busloads of international tourists. It was a nightly carnival, unlike any in the world. Vice certainly existed elsewhere in the world. The crucial difference was the remarkable tolerance of the Dutch. The district indulged her patrons in exchange for a hefty return on investment. Gratification was a commodity, not an occasion for raised eyebrows. It was clean on the surface because savvy investors kept up appearances.

Location made the old police station at Warmoes Street the busiest police station in Northern Europe. The hundreds of thousands of visitors to the district created both problems, and opportunities. Crimes ranged from petty and opportunistic to calculated and brutal. Bar patrons complained of watered or spiked drinks. Barkeeps complained of being stiffed. Bar fights erupted in their establishments. Pickpockets (many of them prostitutes) and muggers stalked the unwary. Then there was the occasional murder. But the station did not have a Vice Squad.

‘I also think,’ continued DeKok, ‘we should have a little talk with Maurice, the son.’

Vledder looked up from his notes.

‘So, you’re determined to pursue the case?’

DeKok merely nodded and pointed at the list.

‘I would hurry with the telex. Every minute counts.’

Vledder sighed his acceptance.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘but it’s an odd job for homicide detectives.’

DeKok ignored the remark. Vledder was just as aware as he was that there was no real Homicide Squad in the Amsterdam Municipal Police. The homicide detail for the entire city of Amsterdam was smaller than that in a single New York police station. Homicide detectives were spread out. He and Vledder *were* Homicide at Warmoes Street. Additional one- and two-person teams were spread out over half the remaining station houses in the city, and there was a relatively large detail at headquarters to assist individual teams. The rest, such as crime scene investigators, the crime lab, and the various pathological services had to be shared by all the different branches, such as Narcotics and, even, the Traffic Police.

Fortunately there were few murders in Amsterdam, so it was natural the small homicide teams would do other police work. Vledder had been spoiled, if you could call it that thought DeKok, by a recent string of homicide cases in their jurisdiction. There had been about twenty cases in a relatively short period of time. True, some of the cases had involved multiple victims, but it was still a small number for such a large city, particularly considering its augmented population of more than ten million visitors per year.

Vledder had just saved his completed report to disk when the phone rang. He picked it up. DeKok watched his face as the young man spoke.

Vledder paled. After a while he replaced the receiver.

‘Well, you can forget about vanishing jewelry,’ said Vledder.

‘How is that?’ asked DeKok, suspecting the answer.

'We have a dead clown.'

'A clown? As in a circus clown?'

'Yes,' answered Vledder, getting out of his chair.

'Where?' asked DeKok, following his example.

'At the bottom of Criers' Tower.'

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