

BAANTJER

DeKok
and the Geese
of Death

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

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‘I found the old man dead... stiff as a salted... eh, dead. He just fell over when I touched him. It was creepy... like moving through a nightmare. I just couldn’t believe he was gone.’

His face twitching, the young man gestured spasmodically with both hands, as if groping for something just out of reach.

‘It was eerie,’ he went on. ‘I’ve always been afraid somebody would die right in front of me someday.’

Inspector DeKok of the Amsterdam Municipal Police (Homicide) looked at Igor Stablinsky. There was an ironic smile around his mouth as he shook his head.

‘I don’t get a sense of fear from you,’ said DeKok.

The young man hesitated. His tongue licked his dry lips and a deep furrow appeared in his forehead.

‘You don’t get how this could be traumatic?’ asked Igor, uncertain about his own credibility. There was a hint of the martyr in his expression and in his voice.

DeKok looked at him evenly. Suddenly the old sleuth’s craggy face lost all expression.

‘You are hardly traumatized, Igor,’ he said with a cynical

undertone. ‘No, you are a cool one. You planned to crack Samuel Lion’s head open; you had just the right weapon, your crowbar. You had no worries – didn’t hesitate for more than a moment. Come on, the old man was dozing in his chair. His back was toward you, Igor. Even had he been awake, he wouldn’t have had any warning. He was too deaf to hear you.’

Igor Stablinsky leapt out of his chair.

‘I didn’t kill him,’ he shrilled. He leaned toward DeKok, his eyes bulging, the cords of his neck constricted. ‘You hear me? Are you listening? I didn’t kill him! Not me! The old man was already dead when I came in.’

DeKok regarded him with a mild smile. He was well aware, from previous interrogations, how tenacious Igor Stablinsky could be. Regardless of how damning the evidence, Stablinsky protested his innocence. If the vehemence of his lies convinced no one else, it strengthened his resolve.

DeKok sighed.

‘How many more times are you going to burden me with your version of the facts,’ he asked wearily. ‘Ten times? Twenty times? It is so tiresome, and I am so very tired. How about telling me the truth, just this one time?’

Igor Stablinsky pressed his lips together so as to avoid saying another word.

‘It’s the truth,’ he hissed finally.

A slight pause, then he continued in a calmer, almost normal, tone of voice.

‘The absolute, unaltered truth. I found the old man as stiff as a salted cod... as I said.’

He fell back into his chair.

‘What do you want to hear from me?’ he asked defiantly.

‘A lie? You really want me to tell you I spilled the old guy’s brains? Why? Why should I incriminate myself? For the further glory of Inspector DeKok?’

The old inspector sighed. His facial expression, like his posture, sagged a little.

‘My glory, as you call it, has nothing to do with it. Look around you – this look like a celebrity tea?’ Stablinsky bent close over DeKok’s desk.

‘Just what *is* in it for you?’ he demanded.

DeKok did not take his eyes from his opponent.

‘Aside from protecting the public, I’m here to serve justice.’

The young man gave the inspector a mocking look.

‘Justice... for who?’

DeKok did not answer. He rubbed his lined face with a flat hand while he looked at Stablinsky through spread fingers. He knew this guy was thirty-five years old, but the suspect looked considerably younger. He was almost handsome. The slightly hooked, sharply delineated nose suited the pale narrow face with its slightly protruding cheekbones. But his gray-blue, alert eyes stood a little too close together. Deep set and hooded, they gave a strange expression to the face. The look reminded one of a vulture, closely observing the death throws of its prey.

With another sigh DeKok opened one of the drawers in his desk and took out a blue painted crowbar. It was contained in a narrow bag of clear plastic. The open end of the bag was tied off with a piece of string. The knot of the string was sealed with a piece of lead on which the Shield of the City of Amsterdam was impressed by special pliers. This method of containment maintained the chain

of custody. It protected material evidence from incidental fingerprints, as well as preventing interference with any foreign matter on the object.

He placed the covered crowbar on the desk in front of him. He used a pencil to point at a few gray hairs and some blood on the surface of the tool.

‘Look, Igor,’ he said patiently. ‘The blood evidence alone will leave no doubt old Sam was killed with this crowbar.’ He cocked his head and one eyebrow at the suspect. ‘The crowbar is yours, is it not, Igor,’ he added.

The young man closed his eyes for a moment. Then he opened them slowly.

‘Not my property,’ he growled. ‘I have never seen the crowbar before. How many times do I have to repeat myself?’

DeKok sighed again, as if bored. He searched in a stack of reports on the corner of his desk.

‘Here,’ he continued, unperturbed. ‘I have a statement from a Mrs. Brooyman, Samuel Lion’s housekeeper. According to her statement she was in bed in the room next door and thought she heard a thud. Startled, she rose immediately, and threw on a robe. When she opened the door of the living room she saw you bending over Samuel Lion’s body. You looked up, paused for a moment, and then fled through the open window.’

Stablinsky shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’m sure that’s correct,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to rehash it. I know about that statement. I even admitted I was there.’

DeKok did not break stride. He continued, ignoring the interruption.

‘In light of our previous experiences with you and the

clever manipulations of your lawyer, we made absolutely sure to get a positive identification from the line-up. The witness picked you out of four different groups of men, all your size and build. That's four lineup's.'

There was a hint of admiration in DeKok's voice as he glanced from the report to the suspect.

'Mrs. Brooyman was positive... adamant. She swore a mistake was out of the question – she would recognize *you* out of thousands.'

Stablinsky fidgeted in his chair, but DeKok ignored it. 'And I'm not surprised,' he said, '... once somebody has seen that vulture face of yours, they're not likely to forget it.'

Suddenly an angry light sparked in Stablinsky's eyes.

'That's an insult, DeKok,' he spat out. 'I don't have to take it! There's no need to get personal. What's my face got to do with it? You don't hear me saying your face belongs on some punchy, over-the-hill boxer... some sleep-deprived geezer who's on a perpetual binge.'

The inspector laughed heartily.

'You're right, Igor,' he admitted. 'I'm sorry. There was no need to get personal. "Vulture face" is such an unrefined term. Maybe it was a cheap shot.' He made an apologetic gesture. 'But you have only yourself to blame. Your insistent denial is enough to try the patience of a saint. I have never claimed saintliness. You can keep on saying that white is black, or vice versa, but repeating a lie doesn't make it true. I just want to talk to you, Igor. But your attitude makes it impossible to have a normal conversation.'

DeKok paused and put the report back on the stack.

'Personally,' he went on in a reasonable tone of voice, 'I'm convinced you savagely murdered Samuel Lion. I am

equally sure you brutalized the widow Linshot seventeen months ago. While the ink dried on her death certificate, you took off with the old lady's savings.'

Stablinsky smirked.

'It's on you. You're the one who let me walk, Inspector.'

DeKok nodded slowly.

'Lack of evidence,' he admitted, regret in his voice. 'It wouldn't have served your interests to confess. In fact, it would have been senseless. A confession or guilty plea would likely result in you spending the prime of your life in prison. At the time you had no reputation as a violent perpetrator. Your record was clean, so to speak, other than misdemeanors.'

DeKok smiled ruefully.

'All we knew about you was that you weren't a player. You'd committed a few minor burglaries, preferring to target homes of the elderly. We had nothing to link you to murder in a Court of Law.'

DeKok fell silent and took a deep breath.

'But this time,' he said, 'this time it's different. Now I have clear, concrete evidence; no judge in Holland, no matter how lenient, will let you off. That's why contradiction is useless. On the contrary, it's merely foolish.'

Stablinsky's voice began to get shrill again.

'I decide what's foolish,' he said defiantly.

DeKok pursed his lips and shook his head.

'It was foolish to bash in the head of a defenseless old man – ruthless and messy. Samuel Lion's murder was the act of a maniac, a mental case.'

Again Stablinsky jumped to his feet.

'When is this going to stop? How long are you going to

keep this up?’ He screamed, foam on his lips. ‘I know my rights.’ He brought his right hand to his lips, licked the tips of his fingers, then raised his hand. ‘I am swearing to you, DeKok, I am no murderer. On my mother’s grave I did *not* kill that old man.’

He shrugged his shoulders. It was a nonchalant gesture. ‘I’m not impressed,’ he stated calmly. He looked up at Stablinsky. ‘As *my* old mother used to say: “Who swears easily, lies easily.”’ He pointed at the chair in front of his desk. ‘Sit down, Igor,’ he said sternly with a hint of irritation in his voice. ‘You’re getting on my nerves.’

Reluctantly, Stablinsky regained his seat. DeKok rummaged briefly in his desk drawer and held up a small, brown-leather book. It was an engagement calendar.

‘In addition to the statement from Mrs. Brooyman and the crowbar with the hair and blood of the victim, guess what? I also ran across this agenda while searching your home. It was in the inside pocket of one of your sportcoats.’

DeKok opened the little book and rifled the pages.

‘In here,’ he continued, ‘I found a number of names and addresses. Among them were the names and addresses of Mrs. Linshot and that of Samuel Lion. I presume you have a reasonable explanation for that?’

Stablinsky moved in his chair.

‘Those are simply the names and addresses of acquaintances.’

It even sounded lame to Stablinsky. DeKok smiled to himself.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I, for one, am glad I don’t belong to your circle of acquaintances. Some have a tendency to come to unfortunate ends.’

He flipped some pages, looking for the right one.

'We checked the list, you see, my partner Vledder and I. You might say we checked it twice.' he grinned without mirth. 'Those who are still alive, are all people of means... *older* people of means.' he glanced at the young man.

'What is your plan, Igor?' he inquired gently. 'Were you going to try and wipe them out at your leisure? What exactly is your problem... do you have a special hatred for rich old people?'

Igor Stablinsky answered sullenly.

'There is no plan. I repeat, I am no murderer.'

'Do you mind if I feel compelled to differ with you?'

'I have nothing against old people.'

DeKok grinned again without a trace of pleasure.

'Unless, of course, they're worth a bundle.'

Stablinsky looked sharply at the man on the other side of the desk. His cheeks were turning red and his steely eyes narrowed as if to hide a murderous gleam.

DeKok placed the agenda on the desk and leaned back in his chair. There was a pensive look on his face.

'What strikes me as more than coincidence,' he said slowly, thoughtfully, 'is the fact both victims... Mrs. Linshot and Old Sam... were approached from behind by their assailant or assailants.' He cocked his head at Stablinsky. His stare captured the eyes of the young man. 'I'd lay odds you don't have the guts to let even a frail victim look you in the eyes.'

A phone rang on the credenza behind DeKok's desk. The old inspector shoved the agenda back in the drawer and turned his chair halfway to pick up the phone. The moment he brought the phone to his ear, a piercing cry cut through the background noise.

‘DeKok!’

It was Vledder’s voice.

DeKok turned facing the desk. In an instant he realized the danger. He bent to the side, simultaneously pushing himself away from the desk. The casters on the chair did the rest, rolling him out of harm’s way. The phone smacked the floor in the process.

With a deafening crash the crowbar, still in its plastic bag, hit the edge of the desk, inches from where DeKok’s head had been. As Vledder wrestled Stablinsky, DeKok picked up the phone and yelled into the mouthpiece.

‘Hold, please,’ he said loudly.

He held the phone as a few officers from neighboring desks helped drag Stablinsky toward the door of the large detective room. Then he continued the phone conversation, struggling to control a slight tremble in his voice.

After Igor Stablinsky, yelling and screaming, had been led away by a couple of uniformed constables, DeKok replaced the phone on the credenza. He was ashen and looked shaken. His hand traveled over the desktop. The metal edge of the desk had a big dent. He looked at Vledder’s worried face.

‘Thanks, my boy,’ he said quietly.

‘I just happened to come in,’ smiled the young inspector.

‘I was careless,’ admitted DeKok. ‘I shouldn’t have left that crowbar in plain view. And I should never have interviewed him without cuffs.’ He smiled briefly. ‘... sorry I didn’t wait for you.’ He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His heart again beat normally. He smiled again as he looked at Vledder.

‘Maybe now we can remove this credenza thing *and* the

phone from behind my desk. It is too much of a distraction. Put the phone back where it was, on the desk, and give me room.'

Vledder looked solemn.

DeKok gave him a reassuring grin.

'I know it's not the fault of the phone. Even though I was fully aware I should never turn my back on Igor, the sound of the phone startled me into making a thoughtless move.'

Vledder straddled a chair in front of DeKok's desk.

'Did he confess?'

DeKok shook his head.

'I think he'd sooner die a slow death.'

Vledder made an impatient gesture.

'What he did to you was attempted murder. Isn't that a kind of confession? At least it proves that Igor Stablinsky is capable of murder... and ready to ambush a victim or anyone who gets in his way.'

DeKok did not answer at once. He rubbed his hand between his neck and his collar as if to get some air. Absent-mindedly he noticed he was clammy. His underarms were wet with sweat.

'As evidence in the cases of Mrs. Linshot and Sam Lion, it's worthless. Even a so-so lawyer would explain the attack on me any number of ways. Igor isn't dumb and his lawyer is more than competent. Odds are the two of them will manage to concoct something. I wouldn't be surprised if they come up with an impressive complaint.'

'Against you?'

'Yes.'

'On what grounds?'

'Oh, excessive force, for instance.'

Vledder looked incredulous.

‘Did you hit him?’

DeKok laughed.

‘Of course not. I’m smarter than that, I hope. I did not lay a finger on him.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘But a complaint like that does not require any basis in truth.’

Vledder seemed confused.

‘No basis of truth?’ he repeated. ‘But a false accusation is punishable by law.’

DeKok grinned broadly.

‘Not if the complaint is against a police officer.’ It sounded cynical. ‘I’ve never heard of anyone being convicted for falsely accusing a police officer. That seems to be permissible in Holland.’

‘Did you make Igor angry?’

DeKok stared into the distance while he let the conversation run through his memory. He had an uncanny ability to recall the words, facial expressions, and gestures of past interviews. Then he shook his head.

‘No,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘At times the conversation was somewhat vehement. We were not exactly exchanging pleasantries, but I don’t think there was real anger involved. Stablinsky feigned anger, maybe.’

‘So?’ pressed Vledder.

‘As you know, it’s not always easy to remain completely calm during an interrogation. There are always moments when emotions threaten to get the best of you. It goes with the territory. And Igor Stablinsky is a very clever suspect. That stubborn, stupid denial undermines self-control. Like any interrogator, I grow impatient. Then my temper flares. This time I pursued the line of questioning, because I felt

he was coming unglued just enough to confess. Just then the phone started to ring.'

Vledder gave him a thoughtful look.

'Who was on the phone?'

DeKok grimaced.

'That's what's so odd,' he said. 'It was a woman, an older woman. She wanted to know if I knew anything about her geese.'

'Geese?'

'That's what she said.'

'Who was the woman? Do we have a name?'

'Yes,' said DeKok, 'it was a Mrs. Bildijk.'

Vledder looked surprised.

'Bildijk? From along the Amstel?'

'Yes.'

'Her name and address are in Stablinsky's agenda.'

DeKok slapped his forehead.

'Of course, with all the commotion I did not make the connection rightaway. Let's find out more about the good lady.'

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