

BAANTJER

DeKok  
*and* Murder  
*by* Melody

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

### **TRANSLATOR'S NOTE**

Truth being stranger than fiction, most of Baantjer's stories are based on his own experiences as an officer of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Police (thirty-eight years, twenty-five years in homicide). But this particular story is based on actual events from before World War II and adapted for more recent times. Baantjer joined the police force in June 1945, one month after the war ended.

# 1

Jean-Paul Stappert waited at the curb in front of the clearly marked pedestrian crossing. He locked his eyes on the oddly stylized, red figure in the pedestrian light across the street. To his left and right people passed, ignoring the crossing light. He reflected it was actually a bit strange the little scarlet man in the light diverted his attention, causing him to freeze to the curb. Less than a year ago he would have crossed without thinking, just like the other pedestrians. He would probably not even have lifted his head to look at the light, would have ignored the traffic as well.

Once he had a close shave with a truck. He crossed at the last possible moment; the truck clipped him on the shoulder. He was not so much hurt as startled and knew it was his own fault. The driver didn't even notice. But Jean-Paul stood on the sidewalk for several minutes, stamping his feet and cursing in rage.

He could hardly imagine behaving as he did. He had definitely changed. He was certainly mellower. Life was better going with the flow. He found people more tolerable – some were almost likeable.

He felt himself begin to change one day when he suddenly

heard, deep in his subconscious, the sound of an oboe playing a lovely melody. It was an early, crisp winter morning. He was busy trying to break the lock of a parked car. The memory of this event lingered in his memory. He could evoke the events in perfect detail. He had been lured by the expensive camera on the back seat of the car, seemingly abandoned by a careless motorist.

When he heard the sounds in his head, he replaced the jimmy in his pocket and leaned against the car to listen to the ethereal sound of the oboe. The warm, clear tones moved and affected him in a way he had never before experienced. When he closed his eyes, he heard a playful clarinet take over the theme of the oboe. It was soon joined by the majestic tone of a bassoon. As if from a distance, he heard the tones swell, mingle, and then harmonize into an enchanting melody. He listened, enraptured.

He moved away from the car and leaned against an elm on the side of the canal, where he stared up at the gray sky through the bare branches. The flow of the music mimicked the branches of the tree. Phrases ran parallel, criss-crossing, but always striving toward the light. The music ended in a dazzling crescendo. Dazed, he shook his head.

That's how it began. He glanced a second time at the expensive camera, but he was no longer interested. He walked away from the tree, down to the end of the canal. Every once in a while he stopped. He placed his thumbs against the sides of his head and entwined his fingers before his eyes. The music would reappear, stronger than before. In a strange, almost hypnotic state he eventually found his way home.

Back on the street the traffic light changed; the static, little

red man was replaced by the green silhouette of a walking man.

Jean-Paul stepped off the curb and crossed the road. On the other side of the Damrak, near the terrace of the Victoria Hotel, he turned left onto the wide sidewalk. It was bustling with the usual strolling tourists and passengers striving toward the Central Station. Sometimes they bumped him. He merely murmured a soft 'sorry,' and continued on toward the shop windows.

There weren't as many people walking near the buildings. He stopped to look at his watch. With a start he realized it was just ten minutes shy of ten o'clock, later then he had realized. He increased his pace. He did not want to be late, not this time.

Almost at the end of the Damrak, he turned right into Salt Alley, crossed New Dike, and entered Count Street. With a short sprint he crossed just in front of a streetcar on Rear Fort Canal headed toward Mole Alley and reached Lily Canal via Tower Locks.

The sprint winded him a bit. He took a few deep breaths and started to breathe easier. Then he turned toward Emperor's Canal.

Suddenly he stopped. An inner voice told him to stop right then and there. The voice was inexplicable, but irresistible. He became agitated. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He was on time.

Suddenly his hands shook and he felt his heart race. He was overcome by an irrational fear. Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled down his back. From deep in his subconscious shreds of youthful night terrors surfaced.

He narrowed his eyes and peered into the falling darkness.

A bit further down the canal, near the trees on the edge, he could just discern some vague shapes. They seemed to float nearer. For just a moment he hesitated. Then he walked on... toward his death.

Inspector DeKok of the old, renowned police station at Warmoes Street, felt restless. He was editing an extensive report for the judge-advocate, but was unable to concentrate. Vledder, his young colleague and friend, had done most of the actual typing, based on DeKok's suggestions. Vledder, himself, had gathered a wealth of data, storing it in his computer. Now DeKok was supposed to scan it a last time, before he submitted the final report.

With a tired gesture he pushed the pile of papers aside. He stood up and with slow, sluggish steps, began to pace up and down the crowded detective room. Without conscious effort he avoided the obstacles in his path. The other occupants of the room hardly looked up as DeKok paced back and forth in his typical shuffle. DeKok tried to rid himself of a restless uncertainty. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't quite grasp it. Slowly he realized it would be impossible to get rid of the feeling by walking.

He went over to the window and looked out, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet. Diagonally across the street, on the corner of the alley, a drunk carefully navigated his way in the direction of Rear Fort Canal. DeKok smiled. It was fascinating, if slightly pathetic, to watch the man's desperate attempt to proceed in a straight line. He managed it by stopping every time he was about to veer off course. With great effort he would take another two or three steps in a straight line and then stop again, as if recalculating his

bearings. His progress was painfully slow.

When the man had finally disappeared from his field of vision, the understanding smile disappeared from DeKok's face. The deep lines around his mouth froze. The restless feeling returned, this time, more intense. It was as if some strange, outside influence was attempting to drive his thoughts into a particular direction. It hovered at the edge of his awareness. He tried to isolate and dissect the feeling, but the key to the code was missing. He was at a loss. His sensitivity, his perception, and understanding of the feelings, was inadequate. An irritating feeling of discomfort gradually engulfed him. He turned around and looked at the clock.

It was two minutes past ten o'clock.

Erik Bavel leaned forward. He turned the key and pulled open the small door of an old sideboard. From behind a large stack of books he produced an electric percolator and placed it on the table. From a gray, earthenware jug, he poured water into the reservoir, and then pushed the plug into the outlet. He extracted a bag of coffee and a paper filter from his leather briefcase. Carefully he measured the amount of coffee.

A mischievous grin flashed across his smooth, young face. 'Aunt' Mina Lyons, his avaricious boardinghouse keeper, forbade her tenants to cook in their rooms. They were not even to make coffee – it drove up the electric bill. That is why Erik carefully hid his supplies and coffee pot. Only after ten o'clock at night, when he knew Mina had gone to bed, did he dare to make coffee. Perhaps because it was forbidden, the coffee brewing brought some of the happiest moments of his young life.

When the percolator made its final gurgle, he poured

his first cup. A calm sense of satisfaction washed over him. His eagerness and ambition had returned. He was healthy again, cheerful, almost elated. The attacks of depression that plagued him had abated. His studies had progressed satisfactorily during the last few months. If he could maintain his pace, he would graduate in about two years. He owed it all to Jean-Paul, who had guided him and helped him shake off his depression.

With the mug close by he settled himself comfortably in an old easy chair with a tall, wide backrest. He picked up a library book; rather than a textbook, this was an adventure story. He needed this diversion; the latest round of exams had been grueling. He slid farther back into the chair.

The book was well crafted and had a lively plot. Right from the first page Erik was absorbed in the story. He finished his coffee, but did not pour himself a second mug. He was so engaged he did not hear the door open, nor did he notice the figure creeping up behind him.

Young Bavel only became aware of the apparition as the hands closed around his throat. The hands could have been made of steel. Erik struggled to pry them loose, but the pressure was relentless... merciless and immovable. The book slid onto the floor.

It had taken Erik several moments to realize the intruder was killing him. He started to struggle more determinedly. He tried to push himself up in the chair, away from the distorted, grinning face above him, away from the throttling grip.

But his efforts were in vain. He simply lacked the strength. Slowly, inexorably, his resistance faltered, as his life ebbed away. A leaden resignation crept from behind his neck to his



brain, dulling at once his pain and his fear of death.

After a long time, the grip relaxed. Erik's body slumped back into the chair. His retina held a vision of endless green fields, filled with yellow dandelions and exuberant daisies. Above the field it was blue, a compelling azure.

Inspector Vledder turned away from his computer screen and looked up at DeKok.

'What's bothering you?' he asked. 'You're either pacing up and down like a caged tiger, or you have a thousand-yard stare.'

DeKok, still in front of the window, shrugged his shoulders.

'It's nothing.'

It did not sound convincing. Vledder grimaced.

'Come on, tell me another one, DeKok. I know you better than your wife does. I think you're angry, upset. If you don't want to talk, it's okay.'

The gray sleuth shook his head.

'I just have a gut feeling something terrible has happened... something that concerns us.'

Vledder grinned broadly.

'There's always something happening, or about to happen, at Warmoes Street. Usually something that involves us. It's inescapable.' He pointed to the pile of papers on DeKok's desk. 'Kind of like that report – have you finished it?'

'No.'

'Tomorrow is the drop deadline.'

DeKok moved away from the window and sat down behind his desk. He had not even heard his partner's last remark. He placed his elbows on the desk and sank his chin

into his hands. He stared across the room without seeing anything.

‘Do you ever have that?’ DeKok asked after a long silence.

‘Have what?’

‘An instinct somebody is trying to contact you... along eh, along... unusual paths of communication.’

‘Telepathy? Nonsense!’

DeKok looked at his friend, a serious look on his face.

‘Somebody,’ said the older man softly, almost whispering, ‘somebody needed me during the last hour.’

DeKok’s remarks made him anxious. Vledder felt a chill up his back. He shied away from intuition, relegating it to the same murky realm as superstition and psychic phenomena. He glanced at the clock to break the tension.

‘It’s just about eleven. The shift is behind us.’ He pointed at the pile of papers on DeKok’s desk. ‘Tomorrow we’re in it up to our necks. The judge-advocate has already given you several extensions. He won’t wait any longer.’

DeKok growled. He was used to differences of opinion with his superiors. It hardly touched him. With an impatient gesture he pointed at Vledder’s telephone.

‘Before we go, call the watch commander and ask if he’s had any new reports.’

Vledder shook his head, sighing deeply.

‘If they need us, they know where to find us.’ He sounded irked. ‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘I want to go home. This time of night the only thing I want to take on is some supper and the couch.’

Suddenly the telephone rang.

Vledder picked up the receiver and listened. He soon replaced the receiver, slowly. His face drained of color.

‘What is it?’ asked DeKok tensely.

‘It’s a corpse.’

‘Where?’

‘It was found in a boardinghouse at Prince Henry Quay.’

‘Murder?’ asked DeKok evenly.

Vledder stood up and nodded.

‘The victim was strangled.’

## 2

DeKok looked at the slumped figure in the easy chair and took off his hat. He believed death was entitled to a certain dignity. This was especially true when death came in such a violent form. He would never get used to it. Every time was jarring. The phenomenon of sudden death had intrigued him since he was first professionally confronted with a corpse. Since that time he had solved many mysteries, bringing many murky, inexplicable cases to resolution with logic and clarity.

DeKok studied the boyish face. Still preoccupied by his earlier feelings he wondered whether this youth had felt death imminent. Was he the one who had sent out the distress signals of fear and confusion DeKok had sensed earlier in the evening? With an effort he cleared his mind of such thoughts, focusing on the facts before him.

Vledder looked at his partner.

‘Since when do you take off your hat for a junkie?’

It sounded harsh and mocking. But DeKok knew it was Vledder’s way of dealing with the sadness and depression that overcame him. A sense of futility overwhelms officers confronted daily with violent death.

‘A junkie?’ asked DeKok, surprise in his voice. He pointed at the corpse. ‘He doesn’t look like a junkie to me. He’s washed and shaved and wears clean clothes.’

‘Maybe he’s kicked the habit,’ admitted Vledder grudgingly. ‘But as recently as last year he was a regular in the cells. He did mostly robberies and break-ins, cars and warehouses.’

DeKok nodded his understanding.

‘You have a name?’

Vledder took a notebook out of his pocket and rifled through the pages.

‘I’ve got him in here, somewhere. I processed the paperwork a few times when he was picked up.’ He grinned. ‘The last time he broke into a car with a cop standing just across the street.’

DeKok pointed around the room.

‘Did he live here then?’

‘No.’ Vledder shook his head. He was homeless – registered at his parents’ house, but sleeping in some abandoned building on Monk Street.’ He suddenly tapped a page. ‘Here it is, Erik Bavel... twenty-five... born in Heemstede.’

‘Heemstede – that sounds upscale.’

‘Sure,’ answered Vledder. ‘The boy comes from a good family. I met the mother once. She was a real lady. She had come to Warmoes Street to pay her son’s bail. Erik was studying medicine at the time, he was also developing a heroin addiction. Mrs. Bavel was very concerned about Erik. She had lost another son, about a year and a half earlier, also because of drugs.’

DeKok’s face hardened.

‘Heroin,’ he growled grimly. ‘I’m against the death penalty.’

But when it comes to merciless dealers who know very well what sort of damage they're doing... I feel public execution might be a deterrent.'

Vledder grinned.

'Careful! That's politically incorrect. Don't let them hear you in The Hague.'

DeKok shrugged his shoulders. He leaned closer to the corpse of the young man in the chair. The strangulation marks were clearly visible. It was even possible to detect the individual imprints of the fingers. He had seen the aftermath of strangulations, and knew the pathologist would find broken or crushed cartilage beneath the imprints.

He straightened out and looked at Vledder.

'Who discovered him?'

Vledder pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

'The boardinghouse keeper – she was raging.'

'She was naturally upset about the murder!'

Vledder shook his head. He pointed at the percolator.

'No, he had been brewing coffee on the sly.'

'What?' exclaimed DeKok, who was accustomed to peculiar reactions from witnesses. This didn't register.

'She forbids it absolutely,' said Vledder gravely. 'She doesn't want any cooking in the rooms. She's a fanatic on the subject. It uses too much electricity.' He nodded toward the corpse. 'She suspected the boy was brewing coffee at night, when he was alone. She had smelled an aroma of it in the corridor. That's why she went downstairs tonight, in order to catch him red-handed.'

'And when she saw the percolator she became angry?'

'Yes.'

'What was her reaction to the dead boy?'

‘She appeared untouched.’ Vledder gave a wry smile. ‘She acted like it was all an imposition, aimed at her personally. She sounded generally bitter, and refused to give any information about anybody else in the house. When I insisted, she slammed the kitchen door in my face.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ murmured DeKok.

Bram Weelen, the photographer, came in.

‘Good grief, DeKok,’ he panted, ‘I was almost in bed. You do pick ungodly hours to summon a person.’

The old inspector shrugged his shoulders and with an apologetic gesture, he raised both hands.

‘Death,’ he said in a sepulchral voice, ‘often makes its appearance during unholy moments.’

Bram Weelen placed his aluminum suitcase on the floor, pulled a handkerchief from a pocket, and wiped his forehead. He glanced around the room.

‘Anything special you need here?’

DeKok pointed at the suitcase that partially covered the book on the floor.

‘Mind the clues.’

‘Clues, clues,’ muttered Weelen as he moved the suitcase. ‘I’ve never yet spoiled any of your evidence.’

‘There’s always a first time.’

‘All right, all right all ready.’

DeKok turned around. Dr. Koning, the coroner, stood in the door opening. The old man was dressed in his usual “uniform” of striped trousers, spats, and a swallow-tail coat. In one hand he held his case. In the other was a large Fedora, with a greenish patina, reminiscent of weathered copper. DeKok walked toward the old coroner and welcomed him heartily.

‘Were you sound asleep like our photographer?’ he asked, pointing at Weelen.

Dr. Koning smiled.

‘No, I was on duty tonight, and I have the whole night still before me. From pure boredom I started to read Shakespeare.’

‘What?’

‘Macbeth.’

DeKok smiled with admiration.

‘Ah, you read real literature.’

‘Yes,’ nodded the doctor, ‘it puts me to sleep.’

DeKok shook his head with mild disapproval. He liked Shakespeare; he could not imagine how anyone could find it boring.

Dr. Koning approached the corpse. He placed one hand against the cheek of the victim. Then he pulled up the eyelids. The pupil did not react.

DeKok kept his eyes on the coroner.

‘How long has he been dead?’

Dr. Koning did not answer. He straightened up and replaced his hat on his head. He took a small silk handkerchief from a breast pocket and started to clean his lorgnette.

‘You know very well, DeKok,’ he began, ‘there is little to say about the exact time of death at this point. But the boy is still warm. Based on that, I would venture to say that death may have occurred not too long ago – maybe an hour.’ He put the handkerchief back in its pocket and replaced the lorgnette. ‘Did you see the striations?’

‘Yes.’

‘This was done by powerful hands... somebody who has developed a very strong grip. The murderer could be a tennis player, for instance.’



DeKok nodded thoughtfully.

‘I’ll keep a look-out for him.’

The coroner smiled primly.

‘It could have been a “her” as well, you know.’

He waved a farewell and went to the door. DeKok called him back.

‘Haven’t you forgotten something?’

Dr. Koning returned to the chair and bent his head slightly in DeKok’s direction. The gray eyes behind the lorgnette sparkled mischievously.

‘I know what you mean,’ he said, pointing at the corpse. ‘He is dead.’

Only now was Erik Bavel officially a corpse.

‘Thank you, doctor,’ said DeKok.

Bram Weelen came to stand next to DeKok, his Hasselblad in hand. Together they watched the eccentric coroner leave. The photographer nudged DeKok.

‘I’ve made all the usual pictures, overall and detail shots of the room and the corpse. When I leave I’ll take a shot of the building facade. But that’s it, as far as I can tell, unless you can think of anything else.’

DeKok thought for a moment.

‘Try to get a shot of the face that I can use for identification purposes. I mean, not something that looks obviously dead. I might need it. Then, as far as I’m concerned, you can go back to bed.’

‘You don’t want the pictures first thing in the morning?’

DeKok shook his head.

‘Tomorrow afternoon is soon enough.’ He smiled. ‘And give my best regards to your wife.’

As Weelen made his last pictures, Fred Kruger entered.

The dactyloscopist had helped with crime scene investigation for many years. He was close to retirement. He nodded toward DeKok and looked around the room.

‘This is all?’ he asked in a surprised tone of voice.

‘What do you mean?’ asked DeKok.

Kruger waved around, indicating the room. ‘Everything is so... eh, orderly. There is no chaos, no damage. Nothing was pulled apart. Even the victim looks neat and tidy.’ He grinned for just a moment. ‘You could almost call it a tidy murder.’

‘A murder is never tidy,’ DeKok said stoically.

Kruger leaned over the victim.

‘Do you know yet, who it is?’

DeKok nodded.

‘Erik Bavel, twenty-five, a boy from a good background. Vledder knew him as a heroin addict. He’d processed this youngster a few times.’

The fingerprint expert showed doubt on his face.

‘Doesn’t look like a junkie.’

‘I said the same thing,’ smiled DeKok. ‘That’s one of the reasons I want you take his prints. I’d prefer now, but you can also do it tomorrow, before the autopsy. I’ve had some bad experiences with addicts. And with heroin you encounter the strangest scenarios. I’d like to be on the safe side... don’t want any surprises.’

‘Regarding the identity?’

‘Exactly.’

Kruger nodded his understanding.

‘I’d better do it now.’

Bram Weelen took the flash mechanism off his camera and packed the rest of equipment away in his aluminum

suitcase. There was a contented look on his face as he winked at DeKok and disappeared.

Kruger knelt next to the chair with the corpse. He placed his case on the floor, removing a small ink roller. He held the right hand of the victim, bent the thumb slightly, and quickly rolled the ink across the inside of the thumb. Then he took out a metal holder and inserted a blank card into it. With a practiced movement he took the fingerprint of the inked digit. DeKok leaned forward as he and his fingerprint man studied the imprint. It was a perfect impression. The loops and swirls were perfect.

Kruger put the card aside and proceeded to repeat the operation on the other fingers of the corpse.

DeKok watched with admiration. It was not as simple as it might seem to get useful prints of a corpse.

‘You need help?’

Kruger shook his head.

‘It’s a piece of cake. There is no rigor yet. As a matter of fact, I think he’s still warm. The fingers are supple enough.’ He looked around, a mild accusation in his eyes. ‘Besides, I’m not exactly doing this for the first time.’

DeKok smiled. The old man’s pride was justified. He turned around and went over to Vledder, who was sitting at the small desk near the windows. He placed a hand on Vledder’s shoulder.

‘Found anything?’

Vledder pointed at a large pad of graph paper. It was in the middle of the desk, centered on a rubber desk pad. The paper was well used; only a quarter of the sheets remained of an inch-thick pad. The top sheet was blank, except for the faintly blue, pre-printed grid. There were also vague

impressions of lines and dashes, presumably made on the previous sheet before it was torn off the pad. The impressions in the paper created a crazy quilt of undecipherable images. Vledder pointed at the pad.

‘What could he have been using this for? Graph paper?’ He repeated the words several times. ‘I searched, but this is the only graph paper in the room.’

‘No graphs on the used sheets?’

Vledder shook his head.

‘I searched through the text books and his notes. Everything else is on yellow and white legal pads. He had no graph paper anywhere else.’

DeKok pulled on his lower lip and let it plop back.

‘That’s strange,’ he said slowly. He looked at the pad on the desk. Then he decided, ‘Let’s take it with us. Perhaps they can do something with it in the lab.’ He shook his head and sighed deeply. ‘You know, Dick, I have a premonition the death of this young man is just the beginning. I think there are more nasty surprises in store. I wouldn’t be sur-’ He stopped suddenly and turned around to face a constable as he entered the room with a heavy step.

‘They’re asking if you’re about finished here.’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘Dispatch, they just called me on the radio.’

DeKok sounded annoyed.

‘What’s so important?’

‘There’s another corpse.’

‘Where?’

‘It’s on Emperor’s Canal, at the edge of the water, between parked cars. Officers are already there to protect the crime scene.’

‘Why? What sort of crime?’  
‘It was a strangulation, That’s all we know.’  
DeKok stared at the constable for a moment.  
‘And they called you?’ he finally asked.  
‘Yessir, they want you over there as soon as possible.’

Copyright © A.C.Baantjer  
Copyright © 2023 for this edition: Uitgeverij De Fontein, Utrecht  
First published by Fulcrum Publishers, Wheat Ridge, USA  
Original title *De Cock en de moord op melodie*  
Translated by H.G. Smittenaar  
Cover design De Weijer Design, Baarn  
Cover photo De Weijer Design / Unsplash / Redcharlie  
Typeset by Crius Group, Hulshout  
ISBN 978 90 261 6920 5  
ISBN e-book 978 90 261 6921 2

[www.uitgeverijdefontein.nl](http://www.uitgeverijdefontein.nl)

Uitgeverij De Fontein considers it important to handle natural resources in an environmentally friendly and responsible manner. The paper edition of this title was therefore produced using paper whose production was certain not to have led to forest destruction.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.