

BAANTJER

DeKok
and Variations
on Murder

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

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‘Did you bury him?’

Archibald (Archie) Benson shook his head. He had a long, narrow face with sunken cheeks. A lock of black, greasy hair fell in front of his eyes. His hands shook as he lit his cigarette.

‘I tried, but couldn’t find a suitable spot.’

The man in front of him grinned. Humorously.

‘You’re telling me the Kemner Dunes aren’t large enough?’ He cocked his head slightly as he gave the tall, slender figure of Archie a long, measured look. ‘Or did you get there and you forgot how to dig? It’s child’s play really, unless you never played in a sandbox as a kid.’

Archie ignored the sarcasm.

‘Look I said it was impossible. I’d have done it if I could have... really!’

‘So what did you do with the body?’

‘Nothing.’

The man’s eyes flew open. He fixed his gaze on Benson, a look of disbelief on his face.

‘Nothing?’ he repeated steadily.

With a defeated shrug, Archie thumbed over his shoulder.

‘He’s still in the trunk.’

The man stepped closer. He didn't stop until his face almost touched Archie's.

'Madman,' he hissed. 'We *have* to get rid of him. Do you not understand? Or, maybe, you'd like to spend the rest of your life in prison?'

Archie licked dry lips.

'Don't be ridiculous. Nobody wants to rot in jail.'

The man leaned even closer.

'Get him out of here,' he snarled.

For just a moment Archie Benson closed both eyes. The face so close in front of his own scared him. It was as if the eyes and the cruel mouth grew out of proportion. It was a face from a nightmare.

'I can't handle the job by myself,' he said hesitantly. 'Not on my own. The guy is huge. I tried twice to lift him out of the trunk. He's too damned heavy.'

The man gave him a searing look.

'First you tell me you can't find the right place. Now one guy can't lift the corpse out of the trunk.' There was suspicion in his voice.

Archie took a step backward, away from the face.

'I stopped at the edge of the sand dunes on the Sea Path, just outside Bloemendaal. Some guys told me more than one corpse has been buried there.'

The other man's look turned dangerous.

'You've been talking about our *job*?'

'No, I promise you. It's just something I heard... once.'

The other nodded without conviction.

'In any event, you were on the Sea Path, near the dunes. What happened there?'

Archie swallowed nervously.

‘As I struggled to lift the body out of the trunk, lights approached in the distance. As they came closer, I pushed the guy back into the trunk and closed it. The plan was to wait until the car passed me. But the cars kept on coming. After the third or fourth passed me I didn’t feel like trying anymore.’

‘The cars kept coming?’

‘I said so, didn’t I? How was I to know there would be traffic that time of night.’

The other slapped his forehead in frustration.

‘My mistake was ever agreeing to work with you. It isn’t as though nobody warned me.’

He pushed his chin out.

‘Where’s the car now?’

‘It’s parked in the front.’

‘You have the keys?’

Archie felt in his pockets.

‘What are you going to do?’

The other man snatched the keys out of Archie’s hand. He grinned crookedly. His face set in a satanic grimace.

‘Look at this as an opportunity for you to learn how to get rid of a corpse, and a bothersome witness... permanently.’

He turned on his heel and headed straight to the door.

Archibald Benson should have listened more carefully to the words of the other man. Maybe he was on overload or distracted. He followed the man outside obediently, head bowed. It was the last mistake he would make.

In Amsterdam, Detective Inspector DeKok of the Warmoes Street Police Station leaned back in his chair. He pulled his legs up, resting his heels on the edge of the desk. A groan of relief escaped him.

Vledder, his young partner, gave him a worried look.

‘Feet tired?’

The old man shook his head and smiled.

‘I’m not in pain. My feet only get bad when an investigation goes sour, or I am getting nowhere. It is always a bad sign.’

Vledder did not look convinced.

‘Pain is pain. How many times has that happened?’

‘How many times have my feet ached, or how many investigations have I bungled?’

‘Investigations, of course.’

DeKok did not answer at once. His broad, rugged face became pensive. For a moment Vledder thought his senior was ignoring him. DeKok was often lost in his thoughts.

‘You know,’ he said after a long silence, ‘every investigator has his secrets carefully stowed away in the recesses of his brain. We know very well when we have failed. It’s fortunate our failings seldom become public knowledge, otherwise our reputation would vanish on the wind.’ He fell silent again and pulled his lower lip out. He let it plop back. He repeated this annoying, unpleasant gesture several times.

‘We’re a lot like surgeons... our mistakes get buried.’

He shook his head, as if to clear it and then suddenly he grinned boyishly.

‘By the way, do you know why surgeons wear rubber gloves?’

‘To maintain the sterility of their procedures, I suppose,’ said Vledder, looking self-assured.

DeKok shook his head.

‘They don’t want to leave fingerprints at the scene of the crime.’

‘That’s a terrible thing to say,’ smiled Vledder. ‘I’ll be sure not to repeat it. We’ll be accused of undermining the trust in the medical profession.’

‘Speaking of the medical profession, you know Dr. Eskes, don’t you?’

‘Of course, he’s a toxicologist, one of our foremost forensic analysts.’

‘He is, indeed. Some time ago, one of our colleagues was called to a crime scene, where a young woman had died. Like most cops, he’s as tenacious as a bulldog with a soup bone. Once he’s decided on a theory he hates to let it go.’

‘Like you?’

‘Never mind me. The young woman lived alone. One of her friends stopped by and accidentally found her dead. The friend summoned a doctor, but the doctor was too late to do anything but confirm the death.’

‘No coroner?’

‘Not yet. Our colleague arrived. The first thing that struck him was the condition of the body. There wasn’t a mark on it. The fact that the young woman had never complained about any physical illness or disability further aroused his suspicions. Absent any trauma or sign of struggle, our colleague thought of poison. Near the sink in the kitchen was an empty vial that had contained a prescription sleep remedy. On the kitchen table was a slice of meatloaf with one piece cut off and apparently eaten.’

‘The meatloaf was poisoned?’

‘Unable to prove it, our colleague called Dr. Eskes. Eskes, however, felt the young woman had taken an overdose of sleeping tablets.’

‘Did he, at least, test the meatloaf?’

‘That’s what our colleague asked. But Dr. Eskes insisted it had nothing to do with the case. He said sleeping tablets don’t work instantly and the woman might have felt like eating something.’

‘But, if she did eat some meatloaf, he should have tested it,’ said Vledder.

‘Sure. Even though the sleeping tablets were in her system and had started to work, our colleague insisted the meatloaf could have been poisoned, as well.’

‘Very shrewd, I’d say.’

‘Yes, well, both Eskes and our colleague refused to change their positions. Finally our colleague demanded Dr. Eskes analyze the meal.’

‘And?’

‘Dr. Eskes hesitated for just a moment. Then he took the remains of the slice of meatloaf and ate it.’

‘What?’

‘Our colleague was dumfounded. He asked what Dr. Eskes thought he was doing. Eskes replied he was analyzing the meatloaf. “If I’m dead tomorrow, it was poisoned,” he added.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ said Vledder.

‘No kidding. As you know the good doctor is alive and kicking.’

Vledder grinned, but with the knowledge the detective in the story could have been him. Vledder, himself, had a tendency to settle on a theory. Once his mind was made up the facts had no bearing. Was DeKok giving him a subtle hint?

His musings were interrupted by the opening of the door to the detective room. The face of an old lady peeked around the door. When she saw the two men near the windows, she came farther into the room.

Vledder and DeKok looked at her, astonished. She was dressed in a flapper outfit, straight out of the twenties. She wore a small, cloche hat, complete with veil, and a short, black dress with fringe. She looked around shyly.

‘May I come in?’

The inspectors nodded in unison. DeKok came from behind his desk and walked toward her. With a courtly little bow, he led her to the chair next to his desk.

‘Please have a seat,’ he said in a cordial tone. ‘How may we be of service?’

She sat straight, a little stiff, in the chair. With a precise, practiced movement, she lifted her veil. She studied the faces before her.

‘You’re inspectors... detectives?’

The old inspector gave her a winning smile.

‘We have served in this capacity for years, many years, in my case. Please allow me to introduce myself: my name is DeKok, with, eh, with a kay-oh-kay.’ He waved in Vledder’s direction. ‘And this is my partner, Dick Vledder.’

The woman gave Vledder a searching look and turned back to DeKok.

‘My name is Marlies, Marlies van Haesbergen. I must say... this isn’t easy. I have thought long and hard about what to do. Believe me, it took some sleepless nights before I dared come here.’

DeKok looked at her with question in his eyes.

‘Dared,’ he mused.

She nodded emphatically.

‘It was not an easy decision. I fear you’ll look on me as addled or foolish.’ She raised her sharp chin. Her eyes glistened with a mixture of bravado and apprehension. ‘I’m

seventy-four years old, sometimes a bit eccentric and absent minded. However I am in no way demented or senile.' She spoke in a firm tone, as if she was administering a lecture. 'I trust you will take my story seriously. I hope you will believe me.'

DeKok smiled uneasily.

'But we haven't any reason to... I mean, why would we not believe you?'

Her lips, surrounded by endearing wrinkles, pursed into an appealing pout.

'I'm well aware what people think of old people. If an elderly individual voices a suspicion, especially a vague suspicion, people dismiss it as a delusion.'

'And that's what you came to do?'

Marlies van Haesbergen stared into the distance. The mistrust had gone from her eyes.

'I've come to the conclusion,' she said softly, 'that something terrible has happened to Mr. Vreeden.'

DeKok was fascinated by the old woman. Her green, sparkling eyes kept him captivated. She must once have been a beauty. He leaned forward in a confidential manner.

'Who... eh, who is Mr. Vreeden?'

'You don't know?'

She moved in her chair.

'You should know who he is. Mr. Vreeden is an important man. He's the managing director of a multi-national corporation. His company conducts dredging operations all over the world.'

'Dredging?'

Her eyes lit up.

'Holland is home to the world's foremost experts in dredg-

ing, water works, harbor building, dams, dikes, all of the above.’

DeKok nodded vaguely. He searched his memory for any knowledge of dredging projects. Other than that massive, costly Delta Works storm-surge barrier project along Holland’s southern coast and a small, asthmatic dredger in the Amsterdam canals, he couldn’t think of any.

‘So you believe something terrible has happened to the esteemed Mr. Vreeden?’

‘Yes, I am convinced.’

DeKok smiled.

‘Why?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘Where did he go?’

Marlies van Haesbergen sighed.

‘Nowhere... he’s dead.’

DeKok felt he had to be careful. He must not show any signs of impatience.

‘How do you know he’s passed away?’

‘He was dead in his chair.’

‘Where?’

She waved an arm in the direction of the windows.

‘I found him in the company boardroom. It’s also his office.’

‘When did you find him?’

‘Four days ago.’

DeKok and Vledder exchanged looks of amazement.

‘Four days ago?’ he exclaimed.

The old woman closed both eyes.

‘I warned you about my vagueness – time doesn’t have the meaning it once did.’ It sounded like an apology. ‘In any

event I know how many sleepless nights I've passed.'

DeKok relaxed.

'How did you happen to be in Mr. Vreeden's boardroom?'

She nodded decisively, as if DeKok had finally come to the crux of it all.

'I live there. That is, in the building. The address is Emperors Canal 1217. My husband was the building custodian and concierge for nearly thirty years. We lived in an apartment on the top floor. When my husband died, Mr. Vreeden, himself, told me I could keep on living on the top floor.'

She smiled, lost in memories. Then she continued.

'There's no custodian in the building anymore, nor is there a concierge. Mr. Vreeden modernized. An outside cleaning crew comes periodically, and there is a receptionist in the lobby. I still walk through the rooms in the building, before I go to bed. It is an old habit – helps me to feel everything is all right.'

DeKok nodded his understanding.

'And during one of these nightly inspection tours, you found Mr. Vreeden?'

'Yes.'

'Dead in his chair.'

She hesitated for a moment.

'That's what I thought, yes.'

DeKok rubbed his eyes.

'I have to tell you,' he said in a tired voice, 'I don't understand your hesitation.'

Marlies van Haesbergen nodded encouragement.

'I understand perfectly. This is certainly my dilemma, as well. It is also why I've waited so long to tell you my story.' She remained silent, as if gathering her thoughts. 'Four days ago,

during my inspection tour, as you call it, I encountered Mr. Vreeden in his chair in the boardroom. It was startling, since he was never there that late. I managed to say something by way of greeting, but he did not answer. I took a few steps in his direction. He was leaning back, his eyes closed. In that moment there was no doubt he was dead.'

'And then?'

'As soon as I could react I knew I must do something, phone someone.'

'And did you?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

She swallowed hard.

'Once I picked up the phone in the boardroom, I realized it is connected to the switchboard. With no one there, I had to use the private line in my apartment.'

'So you left the boardroom?'

She nodded, now looking fragile and weary.

'I took the elevator to go upstairs. But it's old and very slow. Meanwhile I wondered whom to call. Should I call a doctor, the police? Suddenly I realized, without examining him closely, I could not be sure he was dead. I hadn't even touched him to see whether he was cold.'

'So you went back?'

Marlies wiped her forehead, her hand shaking.

'Yes, indeed, I returned. When I got off the elevator, I thought I heard something. Anxiously I went to the door of the boardroom. I was surprised to see the light was off because I recalled leaving the lights on.' She pressed both hands to her eyes. 'When I turned on the light, the chair was empty.'

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