

BAANTJER

DeKok
and the Somber
Nude

Translated by H.G. Smittenaar

De Fontein

1

It was raining. It had been raining for days, endlessly long July days. Fat, heavy raindrops relentlessly pelted down from an even, grey sky.

DeKok felt vaguely melancholy. His mood was as sensitive as the most precise barometer; a long depression in the barometer found its counterpart in him.

With his big nose flattened against the window he surveyed the surroundings of the legendary police station on Warmoes Street. The rain veiled the nearby rooftops in a curtain of mist and water.

DeKok pressed his lips together. Deep creases appeared at the corners of his mouth. How often had he stood here lost in thought, grappling with crime and the underbelly of society. It had turned him into a grey old man: his upper body had acquired a distinct bow, his shoulders sagged. He thought about it not with bitterness but with his customary outlook of mild acceptance. Young Vledder, his assistant and fellow detective, came to join him at the window.

‘A good thing,’ he said contentedly, ‘we have no important cases to investigate at the moment. I wouldn’t look forward to going out in this weather. It’s raining cats and dogs!’

‘Well,’ nodded DeKok, ‘after all, we are in the middle of dog days.’ His broad, coarse face had the friendly look of a mild-mannered boxer. DeKok hesitated then said, ‘I remember my old mother. She didn’t like this time of year. You see the old lady... she was a bit superstitious. She never failed to warn me: “Careful, my boy,” she used to say, “the dog days of summer can be dangerous.”’

He remained silent and scratched the back of his neck.

‘Mother was right. In retrospect she was always right. She died during the dog days.’

DeKok shoved his thick lower lip forward and looked up at the grey sky.

‘I wouldn’t want to die just now,’ he said after a while.

‘What do you mean?’ Vledder looked at him cautiously.

DeKok made a vaguely lazy gesture toward the heavy leaden sky. ‘The heavens are closed,’ he said somberly.

At that moment there was a knock on the door.

Both turned to face the door of the large detective room. There was a light on in the hall outside although it was the middle of the day. On the frosted glass of the door they observed the shadow of a hooded and cloaked figure. It was a picturesque if rather odd sight. Again there was a knock on the door.

‘Enter,’ DeKok called out.

Slowly the door opened and a young woman appeared in the door opening. She pushed her hood back and shook out her hair. DeKok estimated her to be in her early twenties. She was beautiful, he noted, extremely beautiful. Long blonde hair fell in waves over the collar of her black cape. She unhooked her wrap and pulled it with an elegant gesture from her slender shoulders. A small shower of fine

raindrops cascaded to the floor around her. Vledder hastened to take her cape. She rewarded him with a faint, almost sad smile. Slowly she entered the detective room. As she progressed through the space the drab institutionalized room seemed to change from grey into a kaleidoscope of colors and sun.

With old-world charm DeKok offered her a chair next to his desk.

‘Please sit down,’ he said in his most friendly manner.

‘Thank you very much.’

Carefully she sat down, placed her purse on the edge of the desk, and crossed her legs, a mesmerizing gesture. Her movements were slow, refined, and aimed at achieving a powerful impression.

DeKok looked at her resignedly. He quickly replaced enchantment with the cool observation of a trained detective. Her manner and movements no longer impressed him. He experienced the alluring scent of her perfume as attractive but nothing more. He sat down in the chair behind his desk.

‘My name is DeKok,’ he said mildly. ‘DeKok with a kay-oh-kay.’ He waved in Vledder’s direction. ‘This is my colleague Inspector Vledder, my right hand. How can we be of service?’

She did not answer at once, but hesitated as if not sure what to say. The hands in her lap moved in a cramped gesture. Her long, narrow fingers worried at the hem of her skirt.

‘My name is Kristel Van Daalen – Van Daalen, with a double A.’

DeKok smiled at her.

‘You see, I’m very worried.’

‘Worried?’

‘Yes, very.’ She sighed deeply.

‘Why?’

She looked at him with big uneasy eyes.

‘My cousin has suddenly disappeared.’

‘Disappeared?’

‘Without a trace,’ she nodded emphatically.

‘Since when?’

‘Since yesterday, Mr. DeKok. Yesterday, Thursday, she left around three in the afternoon. I haven’t seen her since. I went to look in her room when she didn’t appear for breakfast and found her bed had not been slept in.’

DeKok motioned to Vledder to make notes.

‘What’s your cousin’s name?’

‘Nanette, Nanette Bogaard.’ She paused, gave DeKok a faint smile, and added, ‘Bogaard, with a double A.’

‘Her age?’

‘Nineteen. She would have been twenty next month, in August. We were born about two years apart.’

The grey sleuth rubbed his hand over his chin, picking up on the young woman’s use of past tense. Her manner of speaking affected him.

‘Is it usual... I mean, does Nanette often stay out all night?’

‘No. At least I don’t think she did. You mustn’t think that I watched her all the time. She went her own way. But the whole night away from home... that is a different matter. In any case I never, until now, missed her at breakfast. She was always in time to open the store.’

‘Store?’ DeKok’s eyebrows vibrated slightly.

‘Yes, of course, Nanette and I own a flower shop along

old Duke Street. You know, just off the Dam near the New Church, around the corner from Blue Street. I – we – live there, as well, upstairs and to the rear. Perhaps you know the store? Ye Three Roses?’

‘I’m afraid,’ he answered slowly, ‘I’m only familiar with the bar The Three Bottles on Duke Street.’

‘I understand,’ she answered mildly. ‘The store isn’t that old yet. Uncle Edward died less than two years ago. He liked us a lot, our Uncle Edward. He called us his daisies.’ She smiled almost shyly. ‘Nanette and I could always get along very well, you know, even as children. No quarrels...’ She hesitated and then continued, ‘When Uncle Edward died he left us some money. Not a lot, but enough to start the business on Duke Street.’ She gestured vaguely around her. ‘We’re both from Aalsmeer, daughters of growers. You know how that goes. You start to live and breathe flowers after a while. Our own flower shop in the middle of Amsterdam seemed ideal, like a dream. Uncle Edward’s money made it possible to make a dream come true.’

She silently removed invisible lint from her skirt.

‘We complemented each other beautifully. Nanette was extremely gifted in an artistic way. The pieces she created were fantastic – little jewels. I don’t believe that anybody in town did better arrangements. Because of the arrangements our store has gained some recognition. It was Nanette’s doing.’

DeKok looked at her searchingly.

‘And what is your contribution to the enterprise?’

She smiled tiredly.

‘I’m not artistic. I take care of the business end of the store. I have what Nanette called a “bean-counter’s soul.”

Ach, I'm used to making ends meet; I grew up with it.'

It sounded like an apology.

'And Nanette?'

'Nanette wasn't interested in money. She couldn't have cared less about it.'

'What does interest her?'

She shrugged her shoulders in a careless gesture.

'Her passions were art and literature. All in all she was rather carefree.'

The inspector nodded, understanding but still disturbed by her references to Nanette in the past tense.

'Perhaps, eh,' he said hesitantly, 'that's the explanation for her disappearance?'

She looked at him sharply.

'What do you mean?'

'Because of her carefree outlook there may be no reason to worry. Maybe she's just been held up by a friend and has just forgotten to give you a call?'

Nervously she pressed her hands together.

'It's really very nice of you,' she sighed. 'Really it's very nice that you're trying to allay my fears, but believe me, *something has happened to Nanette!* Something has happened to her. I'm certain.'

'You're sure of that?' DeKok looked at her with some intensity.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Call it female intuition, call it what you want. Laugh at my silly fears – it doesn't matter. I feel it in my bones.' She remained silent as if at a loss for words.

Slowly DeKok rose from his chair and walked away from

his desk. At some distance he stopped, turned, and looked at the young woman from behind. His sharp eyes, trained by years of experience, noted every reaction, even minuscule movements of her shoulders.

‘Please go on,’ he said in a compelling voice. ‘Of what are you so certain?’

He saw her swallow.

‘Nan – Nanette is dead,’ she stammered.

A strange silence came over the detective room after Kristel Van Daalen’s last words.

Vledder looked at DeKok with impatient, questioning eyes. He was not happy with the conversation, and a number of unanswered questions burned in his brain. DeKok understood his young colleague – he could see the impetuous youth within – and motioned for him to go ahead.

Vledder approached the shrinking figure in the chair purposefully. He seated himself importantly behind DeKok’s desk and cleared his throat with a decisive sound.

DeKok watched from a distance. He liked his younger colleague, and he hoped Vledder would become his successor when he finally retired.

‘Nanette is dead?’ he heard Vledder ask. ‘At least that’s what you say.’

Kristel nodded.

‘Yes,’ she said tonelessly, ‘Nanette is dead.’

‘A rather hasty conclusion, if you ask me.’ His voice sounded hard and penetrating. ‘There isn’t a single clue to point in that direction. That is, you haven’t mentioned a single reason for your suspicion.’

The young woman raised tearful eyes toward Vledder, a

determined expression on her face.

‘If you want proof I can’t give it to you. I’m sorry. I mean, I think I have been clear enough. It’s just my feeling that Nanette is dead.’ She paused and took a deep breath. ‘And that is all. It should be enough for you.’ Her voice sounded reproachful, almost chastising.

Vledder’s face became red.

‘Feelings, feelings,’ he said loudly, ‘what use are those?’

DeKok interrupted soothingly.

‘But they really are everything, aren’t they, Miss Van Daalen? Feelings are the basis of our existence.’

She gave him a grateful look.

‘But you must understand,’ he continued calmly, ‘that we need more information about your cousin. If we’re to achieve anything at all we’ll need some sort of starting point, some idea as to where and how to start our investigations. That’s what my colleague meant to say. For instance, where was Nanette going yesterday?’

Kristel shrugged her shoulders. ‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Did she take a suitcase or an overnight bag?’

‘No, I saw only her purse, nothing else.’

‘How was she dressed?’

‘She had on a casual outfit, a blue suit.’

‘Did Nanette have friends?’

‘You mean men with whom she associated?’

‘Yes.’

She made an expansive gesture.

‘There were quite a few. Nanette had lots of friends. But recently she concentrated mainly on Barry Wielen, a journalist. He seemed nice enough, just a little fast... too fast for my taste.’

DeKok grinned, turning on his charm.

‘Journalists live their professional lives at top speed; it becomes ingrained. Have you talked to him about Nanette’s disappearance?’

‘No, I haven’t talked about it with anyone. I came straight here.’

‘All right, leave everything to us from now on.’ He scratched the back of his neck.

‘Oh, yes,’ he added, ‘before I forget, do you have a picture of Nanette?’

She opened her purse. After a little searching she found a picture. It was a good clear image, roughly postcard size.

‘It was taken about a month ago,’ she said.

DeKok took the picture from her and studied it with care. Nanette Bogaard was a beautiful girl, he noted. She looked a little like her cousin. The long blonde hair was the same, as was the structure of the face. She was perhaps a little slimmer, more fragile. He handed the photo to Vledder.

‘You can go home now.’ DeKok placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder. ‘As soon as we know something we’ll come and tell you at once.’

He walked over to the peg and took her cape.

Slowly the girl rose from her chair. DeKok draped the cape over her shoulders.

‘If you find Nanette at home, please let us know.’

‘No, Mr. DeKok, Nanette is dead.’

She shook her head sadly.

2

DeKok paced up and down the detective room with his hands in his pockets. He mulled over the conversation with Kristel – the words, the intonations, the gestures.

DeKok could do that. He had a photographic memory and a love for detail. A seemingly unimportant slip of the tongue, a facial expression, he noticed it all. He was born with the gift, but his profession had honed his gift to a fine art.

He halted in front of the window, his favorite spot. It was still raining. Suddenly he turned around and walked over to the peg on the wall.

‘Get your coat.’

Vledder looked surprised.

‘Say,’ he called with suspicion in his voice, ‘you’re not planning to start looking for Nanette, eh...?’

‘Bogaard,’ completed DeKok.

‘Right, Bogaard. You’re not already looking for her, are you? The girl has barely been gone twenty-four hours. Surely there’s no reason to panic.’

‘Her cousin says she’s dead.’ DeKok looked at him evenly.

‘Her cousin is crazy. She’s going off nothing but her feel-

ings, female intuition. Just because this flower girl took it into her head to imagine her cousin dead you want to alert the entire police force?’

DeKok struggled into his old raincoat.

‘No,’ he answered calmly, ‘not the entire police force, just the two of us. For the moment that ought to be enough.’

Vledder shook his head in desperation. He couldn’t understand the man. He walked over to DeKok, placing himself in front of the old sleuth, and raised a finger in the air.

‘Just listen to me,’ he said, irritated. ‘Young Nanette has never been away from home, overnight, that is, according to her cousin.’

‘And?’

‘And she’s nineteen years old. DeKok, think: *nineteen!* This is just the age to start experiencing the occasional nightly adventure. What harm can it do? It’s healthy.’

‘I know a lot of fathers,’ answered DeKok casually, ‘who would prefer some different sort of healthy activity for their nineteen-year-old daughters.’

Vledder sighed.

‘You know quite well what I mean. There’s no question of a real missing person. What does Miss Van Daalen want from us? She can hardly expect us to call out the troops every time a nineteen-year-old stays out all night. That’s...’ Vledder searched for the right word. ‘How can I put it? That’s, eh, monks’ work!’

‘Come again?’

‘Yes, you know, one letter at a time, year after year, never an end, you know what I mean.’

DeKok laughed loudly. He placed his old, dilapidated felt

hat on the back of his head and walked out of the room. Vledder, furious, followed, his raincoat bunched up on his shoulders.

Barry Wielen was a tall, slender young man with friendly eyes and an old-fashioned moustache with points aiming proudly at the sky. DeKok was visibly impressed with the moustache; he looked at it with admiring attention. Wielen found this attention embarrassing. He moved restlessly under the searching eyes of DeKok.

‘What do you want?’

The inspector shoved his hat a little farther on the back of his head and wiped the rain off his face with a handkerchief.

‘That you take these wet raincoats from us.’

The young man grinned, embarrassed.

‘Of course, of course, I’m sorry.’

Suddenly he came closer, helped remove their coats, put the coats away, and led the inspectors to a spacious room. It was somewhat cluttered but clean and cozy.

DeKok cleared off an easy chair and, without waiting for an invitation, sat down and stretched his legs with a groan of pleasure. Vledder followed his example. Wielen watched the performance with a surprised look on his face, a loss for words.

‘What can I do for you, gentlemen?’ It sounded a bit timid.

DeKok shaped his face into a friendly grin. It always surprised Vledder how attractive that made him look.

DeKok looked at Wielen from the depths of his easy chair and said, ‘Nanette Bogaard.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Nanette Bogaard,’ repeated DeKok. ‘She’s still a minor, and we’re here to collect her.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Wielen, a vacant look on his face.

‘It’s really not all that difficult to understand,’ said the inspector. ‘We’re inspectors attached to Warmoes Street station. We’re looking for Nanette Bogaard, and according to our information, she’s here with you.’

‘What?’ a befuddled Wielen uttered again.

‘Your vocabulary is rather limited. You also seem to be rather slow in the comprehension department... unfortunate traits for a journalist, I’d say. But all right, I’ll try to be clearer: Nanette Bogaard, as stated, is an underage girl. We have reason to believe she spent last night with you. In the event you do not turn her over to us, or if you refuse to cooperate in our investigation, you may be charged with kidnapping.’ He paused for the desired effect then continued. ‘Kidnapping is, of course, a criminal offense.’ DeKok made it sound like a special treat.

The journalist looked at him, a dazed look on his face.

‘You think I’ve committed a criminal offense?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, absolutely. Article 281 of our very own criminal code defines kidnapping. It is an interesting article. You should read it sometime. The minimum is six years with no parole.’

‘Six years?’ Wielen looked anxious.

‘Yes, a long time. When you finish, you’ll be about thirty,’ nodded DeKok. He added, ‘But the maximum is life imprisonment, again without parole. You could very well die in jail.’

Barry Wielen sat down and rubbed his hand over his

eyes. He was trying to gather his thoughts. Normally he was able to control himself, able to control most any situation. It was something his profession required. But DeKok had given him no time.

He looked into the friendly eyes of the old detective across from him. His face appeared to be both cunning and irresistible. Slowly Barry got ahold of himself. The journalist in him took charge of the situation and decided not to knuckle under. A faint smile appeared underneath his gorgeous moustache.

‘I wish it were true,’ he said.

DeKok looked at him, noting the change in attitude, and asked, ‘What do you mean?’

‘I wish Nanette *had* spent the night with me. I must say, it is an exciting thought.’

He grinned softly. His face became almost as attractive as DeKok’s when he grinned.

‘But I’m sorry to have to disappoint you,’ Wielen continued. ‘Nanette isn’t here. She hasn’t been here. Search the premises if you want. You’ll not find her. I haven’t seen her for at least two weeks.’

‘So you do know her?’

‘Yes, of course. Nanette, wow-wow-wow, what a beauty... a treasure!’ His entire face lit up. ‘The wild daisy from Ye Three Roses.’

DeKok pulled up the left side of his mouth. It looked like a snarl.

‘Wow-wow-wow?’ he repeated evenly. ‘And when,’ he continued, ‘was the last time you saw Nanette?’

‘I told you, about two weeks ago. It was more or less an accidental meeting.’

‘How do you mean “more or less accidental”?’

‘Well, eh –’ suddenly he stopped. Wielen looked at DeKok. He looked from DeKok to Vledder and back again. A look of utter surprise came over him.

‘Something is wrong here.’ He shook his head and then asked, ‘Why would two inspectors from Warmoes Street be interested in vice? You’re homicide! Why this interest in Nanette?’

‘She’s gone.’

‘What do you mean *gone*?’

‘Nanette is missing. Kristel Van Daalen, her cousin, reported her missing this morning. Now do you understand our interest?’

Wielen nodded vaguely.

‘Sure, sure,’ he responded, sounding distracted. Apparently he had some trouble accepting the disappearance of Nanette as fact. ‘Please go on.’

‘You spoke of an accidental meeting?’

Wielen leaned forward and reached for a pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. DeKok looked at the long, sinewy fingers of the journalist. They shook.

‘Yes, yes, we met.’

He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

‘It was evening. Around half-past ten, I think. I’d just left the paper after finishing up the report of a court case I was assigned to earlier that day. I drove via the Dam and skirted the Red Light District.’ He gestured with his cigarette. ‘Suddenly I saw Nanette turn onto High Street, she came from the Quarter.’

DeKok looked incredulous.

‘Nanette came from the Red Light District?’

‘Yes, I too thought it strange. Really. I didn’t know her all that well, but Nanette never struck me as the kind of girl who could be found anywhere near that part of town. I could hardly believe my eyes.’

‘What did you do?’

‘At first I drove on, then I turned and passed her from behind. I looked in my rearview mirror.’

‘And?’

‘I hadn’t been mistaken. It was Nanette. I drove on and parked on the Dam, near the monument. From there I walked to Duke Street. I waited for her near Ye Three Roses. It didn’t take long. She arrived shortly thereafter.’

‘What did she say?’

Again Barry pulled on his cigarette.

‘I just acted as if I’d met her by chance. I didn’t mention seeing her in the District. I didn’t really dare mention the subject. You understand, I didn’t want to give the impression that I’d been spying on her. After all, I didn’t have any right to call her on it.’

DeKok looked at him searchingly then questioned, ‘I thought that, eh, the two of you...’

A sad grin spread fleetingly over the face of the young man.

‘Ach,’ he said, ‘it’s really never been more than a slight flirtation, a game to Nanette.’

DeKok listened to the tone of his voice. ‘You’re in love with her?’

Again Wielen sighed.

‘In love, yes, you could call it that.’

‘Nanette hasn’t reciprocated?’

Nonchalantly he shrugged his shoulders.

‘She is too playful, not serious enough.’ He looked at DeKok for a moment. ‘After all,’ he concluded, ‘love is serious business, don’t you agree?’

‘Without a doubt,’ nodded the inspector. ‘There have been quite a few murders because of love. Certainly love is serious enough.’

‘Murders?’ Wielen looked trapped.

‘Love is one of the prime reasons for murder.’

The journalist brought a hand up to his forehead. The intelligent look in his eyes disappeared. He started to grin like a fool.

‘I, eh, I haven’t killed Nanette,’ he almost stuttered.

DeKok reacted quickly. ‘Who said you did?’

‘Nobody, nobody, but I thought, I mean...’

For a long time DeKok looked at Wielen thoughtfully. He rubbed his hand through his grey hair. He had weighed the reactions of the journalist, but his impressions were mixed. ‘Did Nanette say anything?’ he asked.

‘When?’

‘That night, in front of her flower shop?’

‘No, nothing. Well, I mean, we chatted a while. But she didn’t tell me where she’d been that night. She went inside after about half an hour.’

‘And were you able to solve the puzzle later? I take it the question of Nanette in the Red Light District worried you?’

‘Indeed, but I haven’t seen her since.’

‘So that was two weeks ago?’

‘Yes, two weeks.’

They remained silent together for a long time. The journalist lit another cigarette. He had barely finished the previous

one. Young Wielen was obviously nervous, his tension well on display. There was a hunted look in his eyes and he was jumpy like a scared animal. His left hand kept turning the points of his extravagant moustache.

Vledder had at first listened carefully to the conversation between his colleague and the journalist, dutifully taking notes. And although he was more or less familiar with DeKok's methods, he always enjoyed seeing the master in action. But now his interest was waning. Vledder did not believe Nanette had disappeared. As far as he was concerned the girl had simply stayed out all night. No big deal. He thought DeKok was making too much fuss over the matter. Before long Nanette would reappear, and all this trouble would be for nothing. The thought made him highly annoyed. They had better things to do than run after a girl with a yen for adventure – in the pouring rain, no doubt.

Slowly DeKok looked around the room. His glance separated the clutter and took in the bare walls, absorbed the spare furniture. He stood up almost lazily, with slow movements.

The old inspector's trained eye had discovered something in Wielen's somewhat disordered room that was lovely, dissonant, sunny, and full of color. It had pride of place near the window, on top of a battered bookcase. There sat a small bunch of wildflowers artistically arranged in a thin, pale porcelain vase decorated with pink ribbon. A small masterpiece in the art of flower arrangement. DeKok walked over to the bookcase and lifted the vase in his hand. He looked at the flowers with interest. 'Gorgeous,' he murmured appreciatively, 'extremely well done. I have seldom seen anything as fine as this.'

After a while he replaced the vase carefully. It was as if he was handling a fragile religious relic. He stood and looked at it for a while longer, his hand supporting his chin.

‘It’s a pity,’ he sighed, ‘wildflowers are so fragile. They don’t last long.’ His voice sounded genuinely depressed.

‘It should be a crime. I mean, people should be prohibited from picking wildflowers. They belong outside in the fields, the woods, the streambeds.’

He gestured at Vledder. ‘How long do you think these wildflowers will last, fresh and vibrant, in a stuffy bachelor’s room?’

Carelessly Vledder shrugged his shoulders. He did not understand the direction, or the purpose, of DeKok’s question.

‘I don’t know,’ he said hesitantly, ‘a few days... a week perhaps?’

DeKok nodded thoughtfully.

‘A few days, a week,’ he repeated. ‘You’re right. Certainly after a few days the slender stems would wilt.’ Again he looked at the colorful bouquet, an admiring look in his eyes. Only after several minutes did he turn away. His face was expressionless, like a mask. He crossed the room and halted in front of the journalist.

‘Barry Wielen,’ he said calmly, ‘there’s but a single person able to arrange ordinary wildflowers in such a refined and artistic manner... your friend Nanette, the wild daisy from Ye Three Roses.’

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