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The Harbour Master

Written by Daniel Pembrey

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THE HARBOUR MASTER

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Part I:

The Harbour Master

1

THE DISCOVERY

THERE'S A SPOT DOWN by the harbour, with bicycle seats mounted on bollards like fishing perches, where you can't help but feel alert and vigilant. Even, or especially, at six in the morning. But maybe I'm biased. My forebears were fishermen and port workers, longshoremen and mariners.

In the March morning light, the water looked glassy; the flat mist was cool and clammy around my eyes. It called to mind generations of ancestors setting out at dawn and sailing off into the North Sea, unsure of what destiny lay before them.

We Dutch remain at heart a seafaring people: a small but proud collective who once traded with the furthest reaches of the globe – as attested to by the pale, stone maritime museum across the harbour, and the eighteenth-century vessel moored there, her masts blurring into the fog. These monuments to the 'golden age' appeared faint and ghostly, like some dim recess of my memory.

I let my finished cigarette drop to the ground; it fizzled out in a puddle as I exhaled the last puff of smoke. I thought about how it might be a fine time to quit, approaching early retirement as I was.

There was no one around except a lone dog walker and a vagrant talking to himself, louder than easy contemplation allowed. It's hard to find silence in this city: the movement of vehicles on the ring road, the rumble and creak of trains

entering and leaving Centraal station, a faint foghorn out in the sea channel. After thirty years as a cop on this beat, I can confirm that peace only comes from within.

I eyed my watch: still plenty of time before I was due to meet my wife. We tried to meet for breakfast on a regular basis now that Nadia had left for university and the nest had become empty again. Perhaps it was good for me – a routine for retirement? Though I was planning on telling Petra about the trip I'd discussed with Johan, my old army friend and fellow BMW motorbike owner.

My gaze remained on the dog walker, who had taken an alert stance similar to my own, his hands buried in the pockets of his charcoal-grey raincoat. So much of police work comes down to making quick and accurate character assessments. Maybe I needed to get a dog, I thought – a retired police one, perhaps, so we could be co-retirees together – when suddenly the man's hands flew up out of his pockets and waved above his head. 'Hey,' he yelled. His dog's bark was like a gunshot across the harbour. 'Hey!'

I was off my perch and running towards them. Before I'd even got there, I caught sight of a fleshy greyness breaking the water surface. My sinking stomach and the buzzing in my ears confirmed what my brain already knew: it was a body, with a floating corona of hair.

I reached for my phone.

*

'I've got it, Henk,' Bergveld said, resting his hand on my shoulder. The hand was more controlling than consoling.

Sebastiaan Bergveld was barely more than half my age. His sandy hair was short on the back and sides but floppy on top; he wore a designer raincoat, and shiny black shoes wholly unsuited to the harbourside. He was one of Jan Six's boys – on the up, politically.

But this wasn't the time to dwell on the ascent of Jan Six ('Six-

Shooter', as he was known) to the top of the Amsterdam police force, or Bergveld's rise through the ranks at the IJ Tunnel 3 station where he and I worked.

The reality was simple: Bergveld had tactical command of the situation now.

I'd arranged for a hoist to lift the corpse out of the water. Its engine was revving to power the hydraulics, sending a cloud of smoke between Bergveld and me. The body was raised, cradled in a black mesh harness, water dripping off it. It was like a funeral in reverse – a marine exhumation, you might say. The man with the dog had stayed, his head now bowed respectfully. The dog, a cocker spaniel, whimpered softly. Bergveld asked them to move along, explaining that this was a police matter.

I had my phone out, in order to film the removal of the body. The woman's thighs and arms had swollen to Frankenstein-like proportions, her dark trousers and top so stretched that they'd ripped at the seams. Her fingers were like little sausages; I couldn't help but look away. As I did so, I caught sight of a crowd gathering on Prins Hendrikkade. Mopeds buzzed to a halt, idling; cyclists stopped abruptly, pointing. Words were being shouted; I didn't catch what. Something prompted me to point the phone in their direction.

'Can I borrow that?' Bergveld gestured at my mobile, surprising me. 'There's something wrong with mine.' He was looking at the onlookers, too. 'Where's Larsson? This is turning into a circus.'

Kurt Larsson was the medical examiner, a Swede known for his indestructible joviality on the job.

Bergveld was fumbling with my phone.

'Here,' I said, reaching for it. 'Larsson's in my address book…'

But Bergveld had already found the number.

The hoist lowered the corpse gently onto the dull paving stones, the harness remaining beneath her bloated form. Her skin had taken on a pearlescent-grey tone in the light that was

breaking through the mist. She appeared to be young. Once out of the water, her hair was fairer.

Her eyes were closed. Hypothermia would have put her to sleep within minutes of entering the water – unless she had been already unconscious, or dead, upon entry. There was a third scenario: the shock of entering the freezing water had caused cardiac arrest. The visible parts of her flesh – face, hands, ankles, feet, and the mid-section of her thigh where the seam of her capri pants had split – appeared unmarked.

No shoes and no coat, on what had been a cold night. The shoes could have come off in the water. Theoretically the coat too, if she'd struggled and it had impeded her movement. The harbour wall was high and slick here: hard to get out without help.

I looked at her swollen feet. I couldn't see any abrasions on the toes from where she might have tried to scramble out, though I was too far away to be sure; Bergveld clearly didn't want me closer. There was a swirling black mark on her ankle, perhaps a stray strand of seaweed or some other flotsam.

Had she fallen off a pleasure boat? No, it wasn't the season for those. A student who'd tumbled in, drunk? I thought of my daughter Nadia at the University of Amsterdam nearby. Had the girl been walking this way alone? Anyone accompanying her would surely have helped her out…

'*Hoi oi*!' a sunny voice greeted us. I turned to find Larsson, carrying an Adidas holdall and wearing knee pads over his jeans. Sometimes I wondered whether he cried into his vodka at the end of each day, to compensate for his happiness at work.

Bergveld greeted him curtly, then took a phone call. On his own phone. Funny, it seemed to be working fine now. What had been the point of using mine? Some kind of power play? A mind game?

Larsson had his SLR camera out and began photographing the scene: the water, the harbour wall and the body.

Next he pulled on a pair of thin rubber gloves, knelt down, and examined the woman more carefully. I wanted to remove the flotsam from her ankle, perhaps out of respect, I don't know. I stopped myself long before Larsson needed to warn me about tampering with evidence; the smell had begun to waft along the dock… a salty, putrid odour, like rotting seaweed. Larsson, however, appeared perfectly at ease.

He reached for a pair of scissors and began, very carefully, to cut open the woman's trouser pockets, looking for identification. A short, single shake of the head in Bergveld's direction indicated that there wasn't any.

There was no time or justification for erecting a medical tent here at the scene, so Larsson unwrapped a black vinyl body bag from his holdall. The hoist operator, a wiry man dressed in stained blue overalls, stooped down to help him position the bag under and around the body, but Bergveld intervened, pausing his phone conversation to do the helping himself.

Once Bergveld resumed his call, I quietly asked Larsson: 'What's your best guess at the time of death?'

He looked at her closed eyes and straggly blonde hair. 'Thirty-some hours gone,' he said.

That put it at about midnight of the day before.

There were still a few onlookers on Prins Hendrikkade: two cyclists, a moped rider. The harbour wall led only out to the hulking, copper-clad Science Centre, built over the mouth of the IJ Tunnel to North Amsterdam. Of course, the science museum would have been closed at that hour.

Or would it have been?

I didn't want to get my phone back out to film or photograph the body again; Bergveld was still talking on his phone, but he was keeping an eye on us.

'What tests will you run?' I asked Larsson.

'The usual: tox, dental.' He smiled toothily.

Toxicology tests might throw up something. Dental checks

assumed records existed to match the woman's teeth. If she was from out of town, this could become a resource-consuming task: coordination with other police forces, Interpol even. It would become political, in other words.

'If this is foul play, what are the chances that it goes straight into the unsolved file?'

'Under the new regime?' Larsson glanced in Bergveld's direction. 'High, I'd say. Someone may step forward, saying they're missing a family member. Otherwise…'

I prompted him to continue.

'There are a lot of things competing for police resources just now,' he finished.

I looked at the mystery girl one last time as Larsson zipped up the body bag.

Bergveld was back, his call finished. 'Shouldn't you be somewhere else, van der Pol?' he asked me.

'I should,' I replied.

I was late for my wife.

2

DE DRUIF

I WALKED ACROSS PRINS Hendrikkade, texting Petra to suggest that we meet at De Druif, a locals' bar hidden around the back of the police station. Even though I wasn't handling the case, a longer breakfast at our usual café felt inappropriate now. Not that I included any of that reasoning in my message.

OK, came the terse response.

Then I called Liesbeth Janssen, the third woman in my life – my police partner.

'A body in the harbour?' she said. 'Who?'

'We don't know yet. No ID.'

'Wow.'

'Could you do a quick missing persons check? Female, probably in her twenties, Caucasian, height between one sixty-five and one seventy. Fair haired.'

'By "quick", you mean fast and thorough?'

'Start with the university, would you? Also – could you see if there were any events on at the science museum the night before last?'

'You think she was there?'

'I don't know, but it can't hurt to check. Even if she wasn't, there may still have been witnesses. What else is around there?'

'The Sea Palace – that floating Chinese restaurant in Oosterdok, near the train station?'

'Yes, we should make enquiries there as well.'

'Um… isn't this Bergveld's case?'

'It is. But let's do our part.' A sense of annoyance flared up, unbidden.

I was about to hang up when Liesbeth said, 'By the way, I have news.'

'Oh?'

'I got engaged.'

I paused. 'Well done.' Lucky Marc. Her intended was a trial lawyer. One of the good guys, I had to concede. 'Karaoke tonight then?' I said.

'I think we must!'

It was how things were celebrated at IJ Tunnel 3. Liesbeth's news could only bring cheer to the squad room. With the possible exception of Bergveld, who had quite a serious crush on her. Most of the men there did, innocently enough. Not me – she was young enough to be my daughter.

I'd briefly hoped that Nadia might have been interested in the police force, too, but no. Nadia wasn't a battler like Liesbeth, and that worried me sometimes – this liberal arts, 'go with the flow' approach to life… the world isn't so hospitable to that anymore. It wasn't just about careers and getting on professionally, it also had to do with basic safety. I'd seen enough muggings and violent assaults around Amsterdam to know that attackers had an innate gauge of a victim's vulnerability; they could see it in the way she held herself, walked even – how purposefully. There was something so primitive and predatory about it all.

My thoughts remained on the girl in the harbour as I entered De Druif. A heavily made-up woman wearing white cowboy boots was perched at the bar itself. Petra had found a table in the little seating space up a short flight of steps. The whole place was no bigger than a modest-sized living room.

'We haven't been here in a while,' Petra said tartly. 'Are you OK?'

'Yes. What would you like to drink?'

There was no food here.

'My usual,' she said.

I went to the bar.

'Henk.' Gert nodded his angular, shaved head.

'Gert,' I said quietly. 'Get me a jenever, would you? And a milky cappuccino for Mrs van der Pol.'

He raised an eyebrow and retrieved a clay bottle from beneath the bar. 'Bad start to the day?'

'You could say.'

Petra was facing away from me but I wasn't trying to hide the alcohol. Whenever we sat in a restaurant, I had to face the room, which meant she was required to do the opposite. Ask any cop in the world: they're never comfortable with a door at their back, unless they're with their partner. Police partner, that is.

Gert filled a little bulbous glass to the rim with the strong spirit. Then he turned his attention to the coffee machine.

I stared at the clear liquid, heaved a sigh and then downed it, feeling it burn through me, making me more alive again.

'Make that two cappuccinos – the other not so milky.'

'Okey-dokey,' Gert said.

I returned to Petra.

'So… what's up?' she asked.

'Found a body in the harbour this morning.'

'Dead?'

I was about to make a joke, squad-room black humour, but stopped myself. 'Yes.'

'That's awful,' Petra said, screwing up her face. 'Who?'

'We don't know yet. She wasn't carrying any identification. A "Jane Doe", as my American counterparts might say.'

'Can't they use fingerprinting or something?'

'She's a victim, not a suspect,' I said. I did wonder whether Larsson might try lifting prints in addition to gathering DNA… although the girl's sausage-like fingers might not even give up that much. I felt a chill pass through me.

Petra was silent, taking it all in.

I looked askance at the little drawbridge onto Entrepotdok, vaguely aware of the hiss of the milk foamer. The skies, once promising, had darkened.

'Here, I just had time to get you a roll from the market.' Petra fished out a paper bag containing the fresh-baked bread. 'I thought the harbour master might be getting hungry.'

She liked to tease me about my early morning meditations down by the water, but I enjoyed the jibe. It's important not to take life too seriously. On the other hand…

'Who will handle the case?' she enquired.

'The girl? Who do you think?'

We paused as Gert set down the coffees, one slopping into its saucer. Sebastiaan Bergveld didn't drink here; it wasn't nearly trendy or expensive enough for his tastes. Still, it was unwise to talk shop so close to the station.

I tore off a piece of the roll and put it in my mouth, noticing an older guy joining the cowgirl at the bar. He was surveying the place too, and our eyes briefly met. But he didn't have the air of a cop about him. Too unkempt. A tattoo on his neck had lost its shape with the folds of skin that had formed there.

The bread was too floury and stuck to the roof of my mouth; I washed it down with a slurp of my cappuccino, which was scalding hot, burning my mouth and making it worse.

'You're especially quiet,' Petra remarked.

'Yes. I'm worried about our daughter. She seems so distant all of a sudden.'

My wife frowned. 'She's right here in the city. What are you talking about?'

'But do we know what she gets up to half the time? *Any* of the time?' I corrected myself.

'Henk, she's a student. What do you expect? What did *you* get up to as a student? I imagine it's rather the same. She's discovering herself… leave her alone!' Her mouth made a humouring moue.

'Maybe that's what I'm afraid of,' I said into my coffee,

blowing on it to cool it down. But something else was nagging – something I couldn't yet put my finger on.

'You and I have the same challenges,' Petra said.

'How so?'

'We're both being invited to let go of what we're holding on to.'

I set the cup down and ran my hand over my stubble, evaluating her statement.

It was true. Petra was a journalist for *Het Parool*, the Amsterdam daily newspaper, and a features writer of thirty years' standing. But features were becoming ever shorter and ever shallower 'human interest' pieces now, with the relentless online onslaught of free news and trivia. We'd talked about it enough times, just as we'd talked about Jan Six and Sebastiaan Bergveld from my own, parallel world of frustration. Though the conclusions we'd reached had never been voiced so starkly as this morning.

'And it hurts,' she added.

'Any suggestions about what to do?'

'Yes, we should go away. Not…' she added quickly '… on a sailing trip.'

I took a cautious sip of coffee. 'You really couldn't imagine spending any time on a boat?'

'Henk, we *live* on a houseboat.'

'Where then?' I was thinking about the biking trip with Johan.

'What about spending some time in Delft with my cousin? I'm sure Cecilia could use a little help with that conservatory she's trying to get built…'

'Hmm.' I eyed my watch. 'I should get to work.'

'Will you give it some thought?'

'I will.' I got up, then stooped again to kiss her on the forehead. 'Thanks for the roll.'

As I left, the unkempt man beside the cowgirl got up too, our eyes meeting once more. And that's when I worked out what had been nagging at me. The tattoo on his neck – it reminded me of the black mark on Jane Doe's ankle. Not seaweed. *A tattoo.*