

TALES OF THE
DARK

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Dedicated to my wife, my life.
***She Who Must Not Be Named,
And We All Know Why, Don't We?***
(aka SWMNBN, AWAKWDW?)

Contents

Introduction	vii
The Dark	1
Maragarine*	7
Too Dry	9
Argh*	21
Mud	23
Patter	27
Three Interludes:	
Armpit Hair	31
The Mystery of the Moving Radio	32
Toilet Paper	33
In the Swim*	35
Sigurd	39
The Elizabethan Collar*	45
“42”	47
Watching the Royals	53
Vanya	55
Coffee Holes	57
Science Fiction Supplement	
Zarkan Coridian	61
A Dream of Broncanus	69
Withering Whites	71
Shoes	77
Red Elfski*	79
Operation Noah	81
Oh, Piggy!	87
Love’s Truck	91
Argh, Again*	101
Lobotomy	103
Harold, Halt!	107
Brussel Srpouts Murphy	111
Cedric Chattrel	119

Introduction

Good evening.

Know that as you read this tome, it is night.

You may be sitting up in broad daylight in the middle of a park, but right now, somewhere, there isn't a wink of light on the horizon, save the phosphorescence of the sea, or the glimmer of the Milky Way above, or maybe some lightning on the horizon.

What an absolute delight it is to welcome you to the midnight feast you hold in your hot little hands before greedy eyes... even if it is not for the first time.

And, may I add, what a very lucky person you are.

Inside these pages you'll find everything you could possibly need to entertain you during your hours of relaxation, or those precious moments of quiet time when you finally get a chance to unwind with a good read.

In the dark.

With a light on.

This work travels the veritable gamut: from the monstrous to the cute, dream to nightmare; a race along the road at break neck speeds, to a quiet amble along a country lane looking at the sunshine on some floating airborne pollen (I don't think that last one happens, but you get the drift).

It's a tumultuous explosion of myriad styles, wild imaginings and absolute escapism, all condensed into a light, easily palatable format... with a complete lack of pretention.

Hmm-hmm.

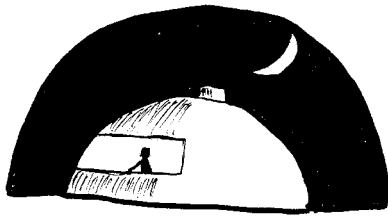
So welcome, once more, to *Tales of the Dark*. There's a glimmering light lying ahead, I assure you.

Literarely yours

Vern

Vernghart Hiedlemann AO

Literary Critic, 2013



The Dark...

Whatever happened to good old stories? From the olden days... with a pirate who has a peg leg, a parrot called Percy, pieces of eight, a treasure map, a three legged dog called Bill, and the mystery of what happened to the Christmas ham?

Sven leant back in his writing chair, in the warmth of his metal igloo.

He'd taken a few days away to work on his manuscript for Scandinavian Television. It was a dark piece, as his industry dictated. This one was about a murder, just for a change, and would be shot with lots of greens, with everyone looking drawn and distant.

What made this television series different was the lead character. She was a beaten housewife, who'd become director of police investigations into the paranormal after shooting her alcoholic husband in the first episode.

Why did they give a killer a job in the police force? Some said it was her woman's intuition, but she put it down to the regular intake of pickled herring.

Sven smiled to himself.

He'd been responsible for the pickled herring.

Sven was wearing his lucky knitted jumper, a pattern of white snowflakes falling into a red field from above. He habitually wore it as a motif while writing stories of death in the snow.

The metal igloo in which he was comfortably ensconced wasn't his home, normally a warm timber-lined flat in the middle of town. This was his holiday chalet, an extremely comfortable space warmed by the thermal energy of a nearby volcano. It was like something from outer space, the walls curved and groovily industrial. Perched on the edge of a frozen sea, the advantage of the locale – as far as Sven was concerned – was that it felt like he was a million miles from everything, which aided the creative process.

One got nearly complete silence and peace out here, away from the hustle and bustle of Reykjavik – which even he had to admit wasn't particularly hustley or bustley. But out here he could be nearly alone in peace and quiet. Even the curved design of the hut reduced the usual aching moan of the wind off the ice to a quiet “whoosh”.

The wind wasn't blowing now. It was a clear sky during a long, long night. Later Sven would go out and enjoy the spectacular show of the Northern Lights, or “St Elmo's Fire”, those weird electrical ghosts that drift through the ionosphere.

Sven thought briefly of Stig Larson. If only Stig had known how successful his Dragon series would become, he would never have committed suicide. Or maybe he would have, since the suicide helped to launch his books.

Sven toyed briefly with the idea of killing himself, as a career development opportunity, but decided instead to have a beer.

He didn't feel lonely. His computer was the only friend he needed. It had everything. Wi-fi connectivity, and a hundred classic Scandinavian films from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and his home; Ísland.

Most films were co-productions funded by multiple countries, even in television. Edmund Ivanson (Sven's boss, the show's Executive Producer) had specifically requested Sven make his script international to rope in funding from a sister country.

Sweden and Denmark were the honey pots, but Norway was easier to get money out of. They weren't so "I'm-having-a-hot-tub-in-the-Volvo-at-Ikea-while-hosting-Eurovision" over there.

As he went to the fridge, he noticed that there was a strange sound. A kind of high pitched squeal. He had the sudden thought about putting a young girl into a wood chipper to disguise the evidence.

No, no. That's a movie in Hollywood. Maybe the dumping of the body in a large snow drift... What is that confounded noise?

This would never do. It was distracting him from the good work he was doing. He craned his head about, listening for the pitched keening's location. No, not from the couch. Or this computer. It appeared to be coming from... outside.

Sven looked out the window into the dark. It was as dark as a cave out there, a small sliver of moon the only light source. He let himself out of the metal curved door with its double seals into the crisp frozen air. The noise wasn't quite as loud. But it was there. Perhaps the shape of the room had amplified it, but it was definitely an external sound. Coming from across the ice.

A man thirty metres away, at a nearby igloo, raised a gloved hand in greeting, backlit by the lights of his hut.

It's getting crowded out here, now, too.

Sven tried to ignore him and peered into the dark. Five minutes passed, with nothing to accompany them but the two men standing outside their igloos and the sound of the strange whine, the noise growing incrementally.

The person who'd waved, began to twitch on the spot in the periphery of Sven's vision.

Show off. Some people just want you to look at them.

The hum had by this time grown to an all-surrounding drone, and the neighbour increased his activity with the noise level, slapping himself forcefully.

Sven gave up trying to ignore his neighbour, and turned to watch with a heightening fascination. The swatting figure had started to levitate. He was literally floating, a convulsing puppet surrounded by a black mist instead of strings.

The body ceased to struggle, and fell to the snow. It seemed surprisingly light when it landed. Like bones in a calico bag.

With bare time to wrinkle a brow in thought, something like a tennis ball connected to a needle shot at Sven's face. He dodged it, and it landed with a thunk on his igloo wall.

Peering closely, Sven realised it was a mosquito, the largest he'd ever seen. He crushed it with a ski glove. It popped, filled with a large amount of viscous, vermilion liquid.

Blood. So much for being sanguine. Sven allowed himself another grin at his own brilliance. Quips aside, however, even he realised something was wrong.

Mosquitoes? In winter... in remote Ísland... flying off the ice?

Before he had time to think further, the cloud was

upon him. Sven made desperately for the door of his igloo. But he was being held back. Staring down, he saw his legs being held back by the encroaching swarm. His lower half lifted from the deck, as twenty thousand proboscis pierced through his tough orange overall trousers.

With a surge of adrenalin, Sven clasped at his handle to refuge. Parallel to the ground now, he opened the portal and, with grunt dragged himself through the door.

Kicking it shut behind him, he swatted at his legs, falling from mid-air as his diabolic assailants died. Once he made the floor, he rolled to and fro like someone trying to put out flames. Thousands of mosquitoes squashed under him, in an explosion of small red pellets.

By the time he was finished, the floor was a pulp of mosquito limbs and pools of his own blood.

With shaking hands, Sven poured himself a spirit and sat down in front of his computer.

Could it be global warming? Or perhaps some nuclear experiment that has gone wrong in Russia, way out over the tundra?

With trembling fingers, he started to tap away at his laptop.

This was going to make him more famous than killing himself.

Margarine

(based on a true story)

Margarine
 Seemed obscene
 Spoken in Amerikeen
 Because they held the
 end part in
 Saying instead margarin.

Basketball
 The man was tall
 Could climb over
 Ten foot walls
 Got recruited
 Soon was booted
 In an Aussie league
 At which none rooted.

When he heard
 About the word
 The pronunciation
 Seemed absurd
 But time would tell
 It struck a bell
 And soon he thought
 Of this word well.

Got on with life
 Found a wife
 And soon they both

Came into strife.
 Broke her waters
 Had three daughters
 They soon became
 Baby porters.

“Let’s call the third
 One Margarine
 The others are called
 Boring things
 Mary, Kate
 Aren’t names that great
 I’d like a kid
 With a name that rings.”

So Margarine
 Grew up in school
 Teased by kids
 As is the rule
 They asked her
 To spread her legs
 But she did
 Something else instead;
 Lots of work
 To block the din,
 But soon found herself
 Spread too thin.

Too Dry

The punching bag was long and heavy, like a pig stuffed into a hot dog. It bucked a little with each blow, the thud followed by a clink of supporting chain.

Twist your wrist as you punch, breathe out...

The bag exhaled as it was belted. Not much, it was heavily packed, but enough to give him satisfaction. Good power to weight ratio. There was a dint in the bag. Danny stepped in again. He was no George Foreman; he'd look like a leprechaun next to a mountain gorilla God, and could never collapse a punching bag like the Punching Preacher.

But there was a dint.

Build the tempo. Make a combination. Upper cut, straight drive, left hook, right short jab.

The sweat was beginning to flow. Danny gritted his teeth in a steely smile, licking the salt from the side of his mouth.

Three and a half kilos.

He could see the bowl of ice cream he'd eaten. And beer. Beautiful cold beer. Quenching a parched throat. "Why not?" he'd asked.

This was why not. He was going to have to do it the hard way. Again.

A gentle crackle came from the plastic he was wearing under his tracksuit. It was an idea he'd got from an old colleague, Reggie. Reggie was dead. He'd already been dead for a few weeks before he'd shot his own

brains out. When his wife left. Dead inside because of a woman. And all because he'd taken that fall.

Danny could see the face of Reggie's wife, laughing, putting a hand on his knee. He superimposed it onto the punching bag. Laughing.

■

The plastic lining was stuck together with tape and had elastic bands at the cuffs. His sweat formed a lubricating slick, and had started trickling down each leg, into his trainers. They'd stink when he took them off.

Danny wouldn't mind.

The watch timer went off, but the boxing kept going. He let the high-pitched, plaintive tweet of the alarm sound helplessly. There could be no half measures. With so little time to go, there was only one way to get there. Water loss.

He collapsed against the bag, the alarm giving way to a ringing in his ears.

'G'day Dan.'

He stripped off. The plastic suit was steamed up, drops of humidity trapped under the membrane like insects in amber.

'Why do ya keep going with those bags? Asbestos suits are two bucks a throw and never get a tear.'

Danny didn't reply, unpicking the tape at his neck.

'Running tomorrow?'

Danny nodded.

'Who're you on?'

'The Baron in the third....'

'I got the Leika.'

Danny frowned. Leika horses had all been borne by the same mare, Nothing Leika Dame, and her progeny were notoriously good.

So was Simon.

His odds had just narrowed.

Danny caught the reflection of his white carcass, skin stretched on bone. He wrapped a towel round his waist and made his way onto the wet concourse. Shouts of kids echoed off walls, there was the tang of chlorine in the air, and a soapy feeling under his feet. He was deaf and dumb to any of it. Only one thing got his attention. He tried not to look. But it was magic.

She had a pink elastic in hair styled into a fountain, with a pink leotard and leg warmers to match. But her lips. He couldn't not look.

They were dipping into a trail of water that arced gracefully before landing with joyous splashes in the basin. Her little pink lips sucked delicately at the clear liquid trail.

She noticed him staring, lifted her head and wiped her mouth with the back of a wrist. She smiled. Danny walked away, angrily.

The sauna. Make it to the sauna, then everything will be OK.

He felt lighter, that was for sure. Like he was floating. The world was swaying, curiously distant. He must be getting close.

Danny ran a cold shower, pushing his lips together, making sure he didn't drink. He could feel the pores of his skin contracting.

There were three men inside the sauna. He gave them a nod, poured a ladle of water on the coals and took the top tier. Simon moved next to him. Danny could feel the steam at the back of his throat, touching him on the sore spot. The steam tasted of pumice.

'Far to go?'

'Nah.'

‘That’s good. You go much further and you’ll end up as a pile of dessicated coconut.’

Simon waited for a laugh but didn’t get anything.

*

The silver paper tore at the corner; triangles became a rectangle, white circled filters packed in underneath. He pinched the first to get it up and tease it away. The smell of caramels; twenty caramel sticks, without a single calorie.

Clamped between lips, he lit a butane power shot lighter. The wind didn’t trouble it. A slow pull, feeling his diaphragm strain. Smoke hit the back of his throat, on the sore spot again, and then rushed into the mysteries of his insides. He had a pain in his right chest. He hoped it was muscular. Billowy dragons chased each other out of his mouth... and then it came.

The surge was like a freight train. He could hear it coming, felt the vibrations down the track. Then it was on him, a big comfortable wave of a rush. His eyes felt like they’d roll back in his head. The surge. The surge. God, was he going to be sick?

He came back into reality. Calm. He’d hardly even notice the next nineteen. But that first one for the day. Danny leant against the wall and savoured the smoke. It was nearly as good as a meal.

But he’d love a glass of ice water. Just one.

He took a big sniff of black coffee instead. That was it. He could feel the loosening. He went strolling, bandy legged to the toilet. It wouldn’t be much, maybe fifteen grams, but it would mean he’d made it. He never drank coffee on days like today. He was already dehydrated and didn’t need the extra fluid.

*

The black boot strap near the knee tightened, colours pulled over a vest singlet. He'd have six different colours today, but the orange and red of the third was the one he'd kept thinking about. The most likely to win. A proper pay day.

'Right, so one more time. When you get to the biscuit factory gate, four hundred metres, let her go.'

'Yes Mr Flynn.' Danny looked at the trainer. He had two black eyes. It didn't do to ask how something like that happened. Still, you couldn't help wondering. Might even have been a horse; which would be the answer you got.

'You're the man for us, Danny Boy. You know what you're doing. Don't let her get out too fast. Got me?'

'Yes Mr Flynn.' The crop in his boot was rubbing his right ankle.

'Dan the Man. Hold him back. But not too far. Don't get trapped on the ████████ fence. When I think about the missed opportunities with Nelson...'

Danny stopped and put a hand up on Flynn's shoulder.

'A great horse, Mr Flynn. A real champ. He was a great mate of mine.'

'Yeah, well... you're a good boy, Danny. Just bring the Baron 'round wide if you have to, but when you get to the gate – open him up. This is the one, Dan. These monkeys are finally going to get a bath.'

Dan walked alone into the ring, leaving Flynn clutching his own hands at the entry. Flynn was joined by some fat bloke with a moustache. He had a blood red peanut with a bum part, and talked low into Flynn's ear.

owners. They were all the same. He'd probably thought out the game plan for Flynn. Like not getting caught on the fence was a strategy. Or letting your horse bolt to the front and blow his wind was something he'd ever do. They couldn't help themselves.

You can't blame them. The strapper was leading the Baron to him. All they dream about is taking home silverware and shaking the club president's hand over some cucumber sandwiches.

Knees up near the shoulders, a relaxed crouch, the rhythm of the Baron drummed a comforting tattoo beneath him. He'd ridden this horse before. It was a badge of honour to ride him in a race.

Behind the gates, the field wheeled. They knew something big was going to happen, and some of them were beginning to act erratic. They were all mad. Pure-bred horses were related to the same handful of Arabian bloodlines; so in-bred madness was a by-product. But the madder, the faster.

You could have a tame horse or a fast one. Your choice.

Danny ran a hand down the Baron's neck. 'Easy boy.'

A couple of officials took the Baron's head and guided him home, locking them in. The adrenalin was starting to pump. It was magic time.

The marshals indicated all clear, orange lights flashed, circling overhead. Hands tightened, gripping onto manes.

Crash.

A wall of horse flesh exploded onto the course. The thunder of hooves welled beneath them. In the flurry of activity, Dan put his head down next to the big

red stallion's neck and held on for grim life. The first bound was nearly the horse's entire length. By the time he raised his eyes to check the field, he was perfectly placed. A middle gate, and they'd broken out in the first third.

Mud sprayed onto his goggles, flicks of stone and grass. It was a dead track today, heavy. Danny eased the Baron wider, looking for firmer ground. Someone was closing on his flank. He looked under an armpit and saw Simon grinning back, waiting to take him.

They were coming past the grandstand now. The crowd wasn't great.

Five thousand?

They were screaming like there were ten times more. Dan caught a quick glimpse of striped shirt and gut at the edge of the rose garden, waving its form guide over a beetroot coloured head. That'd be the owner who'd talked to Flynn. Who else?

The Baron's sides and neck were beginning to stream with sweat. The smell of hay was coming out, the breathing starting to labour, big bellows going like a steam train. But he had plenty in the tank.

They were rounding the final bend. The biscuit factory gate was there, right there. Dan remembered Flynn's words, but wasn't placed.

Not yet.

The whips were starting to come out. He kept his away. The straight.

Now.

It was perfect. A gap between rumps, starting to widen. He eased the reins and gave the big red the word, and they shifted up a gear. It was as though a turbo button had been pushed. The Baron stretched out, pulling in the leaders. Then they were up by a

neck. At the corner of his eye, Dan could see a black shape nudging in and out of view. He pulled the whip and gave the red a crack.

And then time stopped.

A billboard was over the back of the crowd. It wouldn't mean much to anybody else. Dan had been bringing his eyes forward to bring the horse home. But it was there. Blue. Ripples of water. A girl in an orange bikini diving into a pool, submerged in cool loveliness. The ripples made patterns of light, and a bottle of soft drink sprayed droplets into the air.

Dan's ears roared. He couldn't pull his eyes away. Water, water with a bikini and a soft drink to boot. He wasn't in the race anymore. His ride was moving sideways. Drifting him towards the swimming pool. She was lovely. And wet.

What am I doing?

His head snapped up and they were at the line. There was no one else. Only him. He and the Baron had done it again. A pay day at last. He'd put a thousand on this race, so was in for a good one. He might even be able to buy a pool. And a girl. Danny stood in the stirrups, punching the air.

'You cut me up!' Dan turned smiling to see Simon furious. 'There's no way you're getting away with it.'

Dan felt his stomach sink somewhere near his stirrups.

Did I cut him up?

He couldn't remember. There was the poster, the girl, the win. He'd won. A siren was sounding in the distance. Dan knew it was bad news.

'There's been a protest at race three. Race three. Hindrance by The Red Baron. Results of the review pending.'

The crowd was silent as he rode in to the winner's circle. All except for one voice, coming from a purple head at the rear of the crowd at the enclosure.

'What the ■■■ was that? You had him.'

*

It was a long drive. Barbed wire ran with the car, dark lines strung along paddocks, dancing as they traveled; keeping pace as they flew down dark tarmac with no sealed edges.

Gum trees stood out pale against the moonlight as they drove through the night. The moon made a perfect crescent, with a bright star near its cusp, eliciting sounds of the call to prayer. The woman in the driver's seat filled in the details.

'Found dead in his own shed.'

'Suspicious?'

'If you count cutting your own head off with a chainsaw...'

'Maybe he tripped. Like those blokes who turn up to emergency after tripping in the shower onto a bicycle handle, or vacuuming in the nude. Why would homicide want us?'

'He was a jockey.'

'Christ. They couldn't bring Johnny in on this?'

An airplane came in low, landing at Tulla, as the dark car turned onto a dirt road, heading toward a light in the back blocks of the flat countryside.

'Vans.'

Noses of white trucks were nestled together over a long drive, three with satellite link ups. They were under a welcoming metal arch in the shape of a horse shoe, propping the bare bones of a climbing rose.

Bad luck for some.

The Detective scanned the fence-line. One of them would jump the fence, get some closer shots. He thanked nobody in particular that he wouldn't have to be the one running around paddocks after photographers.

Flashes went off as they drove past, a short and attractive girl in a pants suit doing her lipstick. And then they were gone, left behind a line of State police men as the Commodore approached the buildings ahead.

A ride on mower, plastic wrapped hay bale split open, a wood pile down the side with an axe stuck in the chopping block – all registered in a scan. The shed was taped off.

The Detective sunk into the white stones on the approach. His driver ducked under the tape, and the Detective noted the rough concrete floor.

A temporary workbench had been set up in the centre of the shed; MDF clamped to a silent chainsaw. Clamped at the handle, trigger taped down. It must have run out of petrol.

He didn't look at the body straight away. A corpse could be a distraction. Most times it was better to look around before looking down.

Hanging from a nail on one wall was a mechanics calendar. "Miss January". They were in July. Fifteen years later. He took a closer look. It was a girl with a hose, water cascading over a substantial chest in a white t-shirt. Head back, eyes closed, water shining and running down a form that made you thirst. He was glad her eyes were closed. She'd only got a couple of drops of blood on her.

Gore was all over the chain of the saw, thick pieces of flesh gobbled on to the teeth, black and sticky. There

was also a graceful splattered arc of blood that shot out and up. Blood on the roof beams.

The dark pool in which the body lay had started caking. The head had fallen clear of the puddle, trunk face down, arms outspread, blue on the edge of the palms. The shirt collar was frayed beyond recognition; it was impossible to see where the shirt finished and the body began.

The Detective zipped his jacket a little closer. He never felt sick. He'd seen plenty of people throw up at less than this. But it always made him cold. Like being plunged into ice water.

The head was at a funny angle. It had flipped upside down in comparison to the body. He squatted to look at the base of the skull, giving the head a nudge with the end of his pen. A three-inch construction nail in a stray piece of timber was making it prop.

'Found by a neighbour. Never turned up, couple of days not answering his phone.'

The Detective gave a whistle.

'You know what I find weird?' the driver piped up. 'The blood.'

He stood up next to the puddle and gave it a look.

'If you pushed someone on that, where are the footprints? And it's been here, what, a day? It's hardening up. But there's not enough of it.'

The Detective nodded. 'This whole floor should be soaking. It's too neat.' He looked back up at the picture of the girl. Her eyes were still closed, and her shirt was wrinkled down with drinkable wetness.

'Too dry.'

Argh

There once was a cat who lived down by
the sea
He used to get salt in his whiskers.
He lived in coiled rope at the edge of a lee
Where the sailors were all active friskers.
They'd frisk one another, and sometimes
the cat
Who thought the practice inoffensive;
And he chewed on sardine heads, lying on
his mat,
Thinking how mice were much more
defensive