

ROMAN *DE* THOMAS RAP
BEESTEN



GIJS
WILBRINK

Gijs Wilbrink

The Animals

A fantastic hybrid of *Breaking Bad*
and *Joe Speedboat*

Winner of the C.C.S Crone
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Tom Keller belongs to the most notorious family in a region filled with poachers, mink farms and other shady enterprises. He grows up in this milieu full of secrets, blessed with a prodigious talent for motocross. When, as a grown man, he suddenly goes missing, his rebellious daughter returns to the home turf she was so eager to leave behind in search of him, culminating in a family reunion that takes a dramatic turn.

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GIJS WILBRINK (b. 1984) is an author, musician and founder of a podcast platform, a music blog and a literary fanzine. *The Animals* is his debut.



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All I'm saying is, it seems to me things were going wrong with Tom Keller already when those two uncles of his took him out in the woods at night and had him do things a nine-year-old boy has no business doing yet. His father, Frank, couldn't have approved either. But I don't think Frank knew, in fact, even if he wasn't behind bars yet, not back then.

But he was going to find out soon enough, he was going to find out what we were all going to find out: Johan and Charles took that poor kid out with them on the longest night of winter, in that stinky, rattletrap Volvo of theirs with a length of wire strung between the wheels, racing that thing like all get-out down the frozen dirt roads, and then they had that boy, their own kin, their nephew, walk back from the end of the track to scrape the decapitated rabbits off the ground.

Those two didn't even look back. They were in a foul mood, they were; the animals were skittish that night, a storm was blowing in.

The warm funk in the Volvo had to have stunk of full-strength tobacco and sweat, and of the brace of dead hares, polecats and pheasants they'd already dressed and laid out on the rear shelf. In the dark it looked like a sticky chunk of flesh from some beast with six arms and three tails. All of which, normally speaking, would have been tucked away neatly in tied-up pillowcases, but that night everything was a mess.

They'd taught Tom to field-dress during the day. How he had to leave the fur on, down low on the legs, so customers in the village could see that it was a rabbit or a polecat and not the neighbors' runaway cat. That he should cut the skin around the ankles and use his thumb and forefinger to peel it away from the legs on up. That another incision along the tailbone - without cutting into the flesh itself - would then make the rest come loose too, like a jacket turned inside-out.

By daylight Tom got the hang of it pretty quickly; by the light of the ash-gray moon, though, it turned into one big botch job pretty fast.

Those other two didn't lift a finger. Just stayed in the car, staring at the steamed-up windows. Not saying a word. Sometimes Johan and Charles would go all night without saying a word that wasn't a goddamn. If one of them stumbled in a deep puddle of water, it was goddamn. If an animal took off before they could blow it to hell with the Lee-Enfield that Frank had bought from a Canadian after the war: goddamn it. And now it was goddamn again, when fifteen minutes went by and Tom still wasn't back with the headless rabbits.

goddamn.

Charles, the younger of them, picked up the Lee-Enfield and the motorcycle headlight they'd rigged to make a jacklight, hopped out of the car



and slammed the door. His big brother Johan nodded and followed at his usual, sluggish pace.

They didn't resemble each other at all. Okay, both of them had their eyes set wide apart, anyone could have told you that, but otherwise no. At the age of twenty-five, Johan already had the face of a fellow who's worked hard all his life and now just sits and stares, silent and bitter. A face full of grooves, dents, scrapes and hard, irregular patches of stubble. Charles was wirier and five years younger, with only his smartass rectangle moustache to make him look grown-up, like he was his own man and not just the jerky little brother of his greatest idol and mentor. 'Chorrel' was what they called him the village, and 'Chorrel' was what he called himself too, as though no Keller could be fit to bear a fancy French name like Charles and pronounce it shamelessly in the fancy French way too. He was a good-for-nothing with long, wispy hair that looked like a bug curtain from the back; the polar opposite of Johan's crew-cut hamburger neck. The only way you could see they belonged together; those eyes, the same filthy denim overalls stuffed deep down into the boots, dark-blue caps, the constant flow of mumbled curses. That's the way they walked back up the dirt road. The Kellers have lived here for at least a hundred-and-fifty years (which sounds like a lot, but it's peanuts compared to my own family, for example, who've been right here in the center of the village for centuries; we, upstairs from Teeking's Café in the shadow of the church, and them, ever since they showed up here (and since suddenly everything became only about them, and not about the centuries that went before), tucked away out back of beyond, on the far side of the woods) – in that big house that had no curtains and needed no curtains either, because no one ever went out to their side of the woods, and even if someone did go out to their side of the woods then that wandering soul never would have looked straight towards their place but always askance, so as not to purposely pick up on what was going on in the little rooms of that big house with no curtains. You could call it a farm – though the Kellers had never done any farming – but the only perceptible smell of animals came from the cadavers that Johan and Charles hung outside to cure. But more even than the scent of death, there hung there that nauseating miasma of gasoline and Castrol motor oil, a stench that lingered in one's nostrils for an hour after a rare visit like that to their side of the woods.

It was almost getting light as Johan and Charles took off down the track in search of their little nephew. And along with daylight would come the game warden, and with the warden the police as well, if there was even an inkling of suspicion that they'd been up to something with the Volvo again. The congealed clumps of mud on their boots grew larger and heavier with each step. Frank would kill them if they came back without Tom. If only he'd done just that – oh, if only he'd wrung their necks, then that would have been the end of that, and then everyone would have been spared the whole unholy mess later on and then maybe no one would have ever had to tell this story. But they found him, in the



beam of the motorcycle lamp, amid the thistles and stinging nettles at the side of the road, shaking and bawling just the way you'd expect a nine-year-old kid to do in a fix like that.

Johan saw the boy's shivering legs sticking up out of the tall weeds, and after a few giant steps found himself looking down at Tom, who was lying on his stomach and had one hand stuck in a snare, alongside a rabbit. The rabbit, of middling size and with a dingy coat of whitish fur, was half-dead. It was still moving feebly, its left back leg almost severed by the wire.

Whether Tom had been out to set him loose or else to put him out of his misery, no one knows, he never talked about it, not when he took off and left the whole clan behind later on, and especially not after the accident forced him to come back, like a dog with its tail between its legs, and to move in with them again, to let himself be taken care of and fed by them three times a day, to be confined to the property like a dog until someone came and took him for a walk. But there must have been something about that half-dead rabbit in the snare that felt different from the stone-dead rabbits he'd seen till then, something that saw to it that after that one night he never went out with them again, despite the weight he attached to their approval.

the harder you pull, the tighter it gets, Charles said.

The boy lay there like that for a few more seconds, atremble on the cold ground.

Johan pulled a pair of pliers from the pocket of his overalls and cut the noose; Tom's hand rebounded. He tucked it quickly under the other arm, rolled onto his back and looked up at the two bogeymen. Gradually he was able to choke back the bawling, to reduce it to a near-quiet peeping. The rabbit limped off down the dirt path, dragging its mangled leg across a frozen puddle.

Johan reached out, took Tom's free hand, and pulled him upright. Then Charles shoved the butt of the Lee-Enfield hard against the boy's stomach and levelled those aggressive eyes of his on him, those bloodshot, misaligned eyes that seemed to deliver harder blows to Tom's young head than the rifle did to his innards. A hot stream ran down the boy's legs. He started bawling again.

finish it off. Inadvertently, Charles found himself staring into the gun's muzzle, which seemed to unnerve him for a moment, as though he could see his own death. It only made him angrier. Again, he shoved the rifle butt against his nephew's stomach.

Tom fell over backwards, into the thistles, but scrambled to his feet again. The bawling stopped. He took the Lee-Enfield and raised it, trying to shake as little as possible while pointing the barrel in the rabbit's direction. It had already crawled a great way off, a tough customer it was. Tom peeped quietly.

finish it off now, goddamn it. Charles switched off the headlight. The first morning light was already coming through the bare branches.

The light turned everything gray – the thistles, the thin ice on the puddles, the long dirt road, the endless fields beyond the trees, distant rows of alder and



brushwood, all became desperately and hopelessly gray, especially the three of them and that limping rabbit, poised in a desperate, hopeless standoff; the eldest mostly impatient, the middlemost aggressive as a sighthound, and the youngest just scared out of his wits.

All added up, that was the moment, I know for a fact, and everyone else who Johan told the whole story to during that week of motocross could have known just as well, but that was the moment when the kid got the curse put on him. Honestly. Tom looked at Charles again with his sad blue eyes, looked back at the limping rabbit and then shut his eyes when it actually happened.

For the first time in his life, Tom Keller shot and killed something with a big gun.

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[pp. 308-312]

Then there she came, Isabella. Little rabbit's foot.

I wasn't prepared for it, no one was. But she came, there was no way she was not going to come and thereby prompt that landslide that every child is, in the end – every child is a landslide, every child shakes the ground from which it emerges, brings gravel and clay and sand and silt into motion, even at those spots where it has been resting rock-steady for ages. Everything rearranges, proportions shift.

Three brothers; the eldest, after years of radio silence, finally speaks up again, sends for the other two to tell them that they must make way, because – hallelujah – a grandchild is coming.

Three brothers; each on a tectonic plate of his own, the youngest two who must suddenly pay heed to a man with whom they haven't spoken in years. Summoned. As soon as they look him in the eye they know once more how things stand, how the child has caused their plates to shift. He wouldn't be able to lay a finger on them, the eldest, but that's not even necessary. They listen anyway.

Three brothers; the eldest in the cooler for decades, the middlemost in voluntary exile across the border to Germany, the youngest relegated to the back house. Because even the youngest, that youngest brother who never let anyone lay down the law for him, except for those brothers of his, he never objected for a moment when it came from them, that youngest brother settled right away into his role of cacodaemon of the back house, and proceeded to terrorize the young family from there for the rest of their born days. It was all the obnoxious little prick had left, he would have to make do with that.



The house was for Tom and Maureen and their child, still unborn, barely growing inside her mother's poppy-pod belly, feeding on her fuddled blood. The house was for no one but them, thus spake Frank. His old room was to receive a new habitant. Never again would it be his room. The trophies Tom and Maureen had stowed away there for so long were carried up to the attic, vague memories of a past that would never return, memories that could now make way at last for new prospects. Hope – little bundle of hope, unborn talisman. A few more weeks to go. Maureen came down the attic stairs and doubled over with a stabbing pain in her belly. Rushed to the hospital. Did someone say a few more weeks? She arrived a couple of hours later. Little bundle of cares.

A girl. Way too early, tiny and hooked on morphine like all get-out. That was how the doctors discovered the way Maureen had been getting by all that time, how for almost two years she had given Tom half a dose and saved the other half for herself, for herself and her fetus, although that latter fact had been beyond her medical ken. In the hospital they discovered it, and within a couple of days we would all find out, God, such disbelief, disbelief that we hadn't seen it all along. All of a sudden, so much fell into place. Sweet little Maureen.

There she was, the child, tiny little addict by birth. Isabella is what they called her, which must have been Tom's idea, Isabella. But we would call her Bella, right from the moment that the news of the child and the morphine started making the rounds: Tom and Maureen have a daughter and she's called Bella. That's the way they jerk you around, your name, your whole life: that's how they make you into public property from birth. Who am I to claim it should be otherwise?

In the hospital they helped them kick their morphine habit – mother and father and newborn daughter, all three, so that the oldest two, when they were finally released and stood on the threshold of their own house with that little bundle of hope-cares, not only hadn't the faintest idea how the hell they were supposed to take care of a little bundle like that, but also no clue as to how they were supposed to get by in life without that consoling elixir running through their veins. But they'd been helped off of it, all three of them. What they couldn't get Tom off of, though, was the antidepressants, not then and not never, not even when he stopped taking them of his own accord later on and came completely unglued and the whole wide surroundings tossed a fit.

She was there, baby Bella. Unbaptized and godless, but she was there. (Unbaptized and godless, but they still couldn't resist appointing a godfather, God only knows what made them kick me like that while I was down, why they had to choose him of all people, he who had nothing to offer but misery and terror, he who had nothing to teach that little bundle; did the idea come from the hellion himself, or was it little Maureen with her silly three sacraments, Maureen making some ignorant attempt to align herself through her daughter with that grim clan that had never let itself be aligned with anything? So why kick me in the bleeding gut like that when I was already down, I've asked myself that so



often.) Well, there she was, little Bella, she came to comfort the two of them, to assure them that they would never have to be alone ever again. His talisman, his rabbit's foot, his reason to live – her reason to stick around, to give up what our mother had never been able to give up. Never in her life would she leave Tom Keller behind the way our mother left our father. Never in her life would she go back and correct that mistake she'd made, not matter how obvious that mistake became as the months piled up.

Because little Maureen was only getting worse and worse. That pounding in her head again. What she'd been repressing with that stuff for the last two-and-a-half years now came barreling into her skull like a ten-ton Caterpillar.

Our old dad died that same year. What I could never fill for him was the empty silence around the house, the void.

He died after having been deserted twice, and from the moment he died it was only Sis and me left, and neither of us felt like looking the other one in the eye. We just couldn't. I saw her only one more time without one of us immediately turning and walking the other way, at the ceremony before we buried our father, I could see her plain as day. Church chock-a-block, never as well-attended since Pastor Lubbelink had thrown up his sacred blood there, because my God weren't the people just wild about my father, that much was clear on that day and that was what I understood most fully on that day, the love that kept the upper hand over the mourning for a few hours, and since Father's funeral I have perhaps never again been that happy. And everyone felt that in the same way, I'm sure of that, collectively we saw the symbolism of that packed church that reminded us of the priest who had been torn from our midst in such rude fashion by a member of that ghastly clan, the symbolism of that full church building that still existed only by grace of the other, younger member of that same ghastly clan who'd taken such a horrible header on that day I never want to think about again, the symbolism of that youngest of all the clan members who was as much a grandchild of the man we'd come here to commemorate as of the man we all cursed, our ambivalence incarnate, two drops of blood that should never have mingled, present here today along with her mother, my rudely dispossessed sister, my rudely dispossessed surrogate daughter, the actual daughter-by-blood of the good, dead man who had brought us all together here today – all that symbolism, all those images cast now against the cross vaults above our heads, waltzing round to the echoing notes of the church organ, chasing each other like the fox who bit its own tail.

A common love that didn't include her. How I wished it could, for her sake. I knew exactly where she was seated, my sis, little sister with on her lap little Bella, sitting perfectly still, calm as calm can be, silent and still as her father Tom. It was not for Maureen that all these people had come here. She sat there, lonely and alone with that child and the pounding in her head; the rest of her grim new clan officially unwelcome in that sanctuary, and after that day my



sister herself would never feel welcome there either. There she sat, no one coming to her to pay their respects or offer their condolences, no one even so much as glancing at her; each and every one of them came to offer me their condolences, but they walked right past her, and what I wanted to do most right then was push those people aside and go to her, oh Maureen, oh little sister, I really wanted to rush over to you, wanted nothing more than to take you in my arms and forgive you for having deserted us like that, but I couldn't – my head was pounding too, the hornets started buzzing and swarming at the very thought of it, they stung my thoughts to death, the pressure behind my eyes made me stone-blind. And so I remained in my seat like an invalid, looking the other way and focusing on all the love and symbolism. It would be ages before *I spoke to her again, years, two whole decades.*

In the years after his daughter was born, things went better with Tom Keller. Not that we ever saw him. Not that we had actually started looking in as we passed that big house with no curtains, that needed no curtains either because no one ever looked inside anyway, we'd grown completely used to that, even though a child and one of the Teekings lived there now, along with the only Keller we had no cause to fear. But things were going better with him, that's what we told each other and so that's the way it was. Whether it was the pills or whether it was the ever-burgeoning bundle, after all those years of shadow-pain Tom Keller once again had something for which to let his soul shine through. Life was water from the brook, life was light. Walks along the river, carnival in Germany. You heard them living. If you went walking in the woods at the weekend, you could hear them, father and daughter, you heard them having fun and horsing around and playing lawn bowls amid the molehills in the yard. Bella cooing and frolicking and Tom chasing her sluggish-slow on that wooden leg. Maureen was the only one who stayed inside all the time, in the dark, eyes closed, hands pressing against her temples. While the other two were outside having fun, she was hitting bottom and falling right on through.

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- *Translation by Sam Garrett*

