

Watchman for the Morning (excerpt)

Machteld Siegmann

You don't mind me staying here a while? Because to be honest, I have no idea how long this will take. The baby might arrive this evening or during the night, or it could wait until tomorrow. Let's hope he doesn't make life too difficult for his mother. Or she, because it could just as easily be a little girl.

If it takes too long, may I sleep on your couch? That's awfully neighbourly. I won't be a burden; just pretend I'm not here. Decorating a Christmas tree is a big job, and with the holidays just around the corner, you must be in a rush. Wait, I'll help you put it in the stand.

She sensed this afternoon that the baby was on its way. Aria. She was working at her drafting table, and when I brought her a cup of tea, she looked up and said: 'Grandpa, I think the baby's coming.' I thought she was joshing me because she's not due for another three weeks, and I can't get back into my house until next week. I asked: 'What makes you think that?' and she said: 'I just feel it.' She glanced at the unfinished sketch and the box of baby things she hadn't put away, assuming she still had all the time in the world. 'The baby wants out,' she said, and she seemed so sure of herself, I didn't dare argue with her. Her first labour pains arrived while we were eating. I asked: 'Has it started?' She nodded and held onto the table for dear life. 'Shouldn't you call someone?' I asked, panic rising because I had no idea where I was supposed to go while the baby was being born. She looked me in the eye, and I didn't have to say a thing: she knew exactly what I was thinking and she had it all worked out. She said: 'I asked the downstairs neighbour if you could stay with him.' She'd arranged it all without my noticing a thing. 'And what about you?' I asked because, of course, I couldn't abandon her. 'A friend of mine is on her way over,' she said. I thought: if only my wife were still alive to be with her. Because Aria doesn't want to have anything to do with the baby's father, and her own mother is worse than useless.

Your name is Filip, isn't it? We sometimes run into each other on the stairs. And I've met your little boy, Tim if I'm not mistaken? He's at his mother's now? Figured as much. He recently made a drawing for Aria; she taped it to the fridge. She happened to be out when he brought the picture, and when he saw me, he said: 'But maybe you'd like a drawing, too?' He must have thought I looked like someone who could use a nicely coloured drawing, and he was right about that. So, he drew a bridge over a river for me. A car was driving over the bridge, and I was at the steering wheel. I said I thought it was splendid and told him about my dog, about how she loves to go for rides. He asked: 'And where does she sit?' 'Preferably in the front,' I said, 'so she can keep an eye on everything.' And at that, he

grabbed his coloured pencils and drew the dog. We spent a long time sitting there on the stairs, chatting.

Aria talks about you all the time. No, it's all good, don't worry. About how you help her when things break down, when there's a technical issue with the electricity or something, or how you have a knack for fixing a blocked toilet. She only mentions you in a good way. Like how she can rely on you. It's nice to know someone is keeping an eye out. That she's not entirely alone, I mean. Even though she has friends, of course, and that artist group she belongs to. They make all sorts of different things, photographs and images. One of them got her pregnant. Apparently, it's not just art they're making.

If you have the time, you should go and have a look. Aria loves showing her work: but only the finished product. She shields her works-in-progress from comments and snap judgements. I've been there a few times myself. She makes tapestries, did you know? Oh, she's shown you pictures. And what did you think? Well, let me tell you, in real life, they're big. Let's say: this entire wall plus part of your kitchen. But she's also made smaller ones. Clouds and waves on the water. With the wind picking up, how should I put it? The wind whips the water until it spatters in the air. The images remind me of where I live.

You from around here, sir? I mean, were you born here? Right, I keep forgetting to use your first name: Filip. Where I come from, we're more formal with people we don't know very well. You'll have to forgive me. At my age, it's hard to shake off old habits. From Limburg, you say? That means you're a newcomer here, too. Although I do know my way around, I was here during the war, and later, I went to night school here. But I never lingered. Didn't have money for bars and didn't have the time either, because I had to get up early the following day to go to work. I remember women with loose morals used to hang around here: prostitutes. That's right, after the war. In the street where they're restoring the façades of the buildings. When I think back, it was all such a mess... They dropped so many bombs. I had to cross a vast wasteland to get here.

So, I came and then I left again. Didn't hang about. Why should I? Bicycling from here to Windhoek takes more than an hour. It's only half an hour with the car, but I didn't have one back then. Do you know it, Windhoek? It's next to Kortland, just cross that one bridge, and you're there. It's a tiny island at the place where two rivers converge. At first, it was just mudflats, then they built a dike around it and pumped it dry. But that was long before I was born. I've lived there all my life, although I was away for a while. And am away again now. The house once belonged to my grandparents. My grandfather built it with his own hands. You know that a lorry drove into it? I see. Aria already told you about that. Half of the front was ripped off. A couple of inches to the left, and there would've been a gas leak. That's how reckless some people are when they drive over the dike! My house won't be fit for human habitation for another week, at least.

Yes, it certainly is nice being able to stay with Aria for so long. It's kind of her and comes totally out of the blue. The way she said: 'Come stay with me,' even though her house isn't huge. Three rooms, like you have here, no garden, only a cramped balcony. I have never understood how people can survive without a garden, and I must admit, this is challenging for me. My house overlooks the dike and the river behind it. At the back, I have some land. There's a vegetable patch, chickens, and of course, my carpentry shed is there. Yes, I miss that, too. And my dog, of course. Her name is Jaffa. She turned up not long after my wife died and hasn't left.

Do you want to know how the accident happened? The town council says it was only a matter of time. They said the house stood in the wrong place and should've been torn down years ago. Even though it all comes down to a cat, at least that's what the lorry driver said. You might ask yourself: a cat crossing the road, how trivial is that? But the lorry driver tried to avoid it. He didn't think, wait a minute, watch out for that house. And the cat could have run a little faster. Maybe it didn't see the lorry coming or assumed the driver would swerve. That wouldn't surprise me because cats are snooty creatures. And the driver did swerve; the cat got that right. The driver headed straight for my house, ploughed through the outside and cavity walls, and came to a halt in my living room, where I sat smoking a cigar.

Strange that such an insignificant occurrence is why I'm here now, instead of working in my garden, or sanding or carpentering in the shed. I'm talking about the cat crossing the road, which caused someone to suddenly jerk their steering wheel in another direction and barrel into my living room. I was sitting in the chair beside the sideboard, to be precise. I keep my cigars in one of the drawers. That way, I only have to stretch out my hand to grab one. Whatever takes my fancy, a Willem II, an Agio or a Hudson. It was early evening, already getting dark, but the lights hadn't been turned on yet. I picked the Hudson because I'd heard on the radio that frost was expected, but also because the next day would've been my wife's birthday. I was anticipating missing her even more than usual that night. I thought it would be a good idea to stoke the fire so I wouldn't wake up early from the cold and from missing her. When I say early, I mean before seven, even though it sometimes takes me an hour to get out of bed and do my daily calisthenics.

My memory isn't what it used to be. I only know it was a Hudson, and not the usual, everyday Agio or Willem II, because it was still clamped in my fist when they found me and took me to the hospital.

Suddenly it was pitch dark except for one blinking light, on-out-on-out, that lit the room and the dust-covered man behind the wheel, staring down at me and looking stunned. The driver wasn't injured, and neither was I, except for some scratches and a few bruises. But they wanted to take me to the hospital, just to be sure. I don't remember a thing about being brought there. In the hospital,

they said my dog had wanted to ride with me in the ambulance, but there had been a woman in the crowd who'd come to look at the accident, and she took care of the dog. They made her write her name on a piece of paper, I've got it here somewhere, wait a minute, oh, here it is, look, there's the name, *Ide*, and on the back: *Good heavens, Tak!* because she and I go way back, and she was pretty shaken up. Since then, my dog has been staying with her, and she also keeps an eye on the house.

No one ever saw that cat again. It just kept on going, I reckon, maybe looking back to see what had caused the bang, wondering why people were getting so worked up on such a promising evening. Because at that hour, the night is still young for such a creature.

So now you know why I'm staying with my granddaughter for a while. But you knew that already. She's quite a special girl, don't you think? You agree, I see it written all over your face. Although *girl*, now she's having a baby, she's going to be a mother. Then you're not a girl anymore; for the sake of your child, you become tough as steel. When I left, she said: 'Don't worry, grandpa, it's all going to be all right.' That's how she is. And now she's lying there, waiting for the baby. Even though it's more working than waiting, as you well know. She's a strapping girl, it's going to go fine. But sometimes I feel a twinge, right here, to the right of my stomach, from all the excitement.

(Translated from the Dutch by © Eileen J. Stevens)