

Machteld Siegmann

The Days of Trouble

(Excerpt #2)

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Meeus

Mother's not here, she's not in her bedroom, the spread has been smoothed and the window is closed. I go outside to see if I missed her when I came home, but the chair leaning against the stable is empty. She finished the crossword and left. Without Dad, all on her own. She straightened the bedspread, put on her shoes, and thought: why not go out? Maybe she even put on some lipstick.

I walk towards the horse, and he is happy to see me, he approaches me and nuzzles my hand. I tell him that I mucked out his stall and put in some fresh straw, I rest my cheek against his, and ask if he knows where Mother has gone.

He takes a step back and looks at me. He stands still and I can tell he's not thinking it over, and the fact that he's not thinking it over, means he knows.

"Where?" I ask, and I look around. Dad is on the other side of the drainage ditch. He's reached the end of the field, and he turns around before continuing. The sound of his tractor comes and goes with the wind. The crows are swaying on their branches above the thicket.

Perhaps she's gone for a walk. Could be she's gone to the village to run some errands—to the Vivo, because that's where she'd run into Anton. She would go and stand behind him while he was unpacking the boxes, and call his name, and he would stand up, surprised, and then she would hold him the way she held me and say that she loved him, right there in the middle of the grocery store. She would ask him what was on special, and would put that in her shopping basket, and then she would come home, and I would tell her about how I had helped Dad.

I grab the binoculars and the air rifle and the pellets, too. The crows can see me coming, but they just sit there because to them, I'm not a threat. I climb the lookout and listen to the caw-caw above my head, and the fluttering back and forth. It's hard not to think about how they're talking among themselves and bickering, and trading places until everyone is satisfied with their branch and their view. If you start thinking like that it takes the fun out of shooting. I use the binoculars to inspect the newly-sown field. I can't see any crows walking around, but there *is* a blackbird, and I can see its eyes, and one of its tail feathers is a little crooked. It's alright to think about blackbirds, because you don't have to shoot them. He won't be bringing his whole family along to make a huge ruckus while stripping the field bare.

I let go of the binoculars and aim my gun at the blackbird and at the fence, and at a coot swimming in the water, and at the branches over my head where I see the dark crow bodies between the leaves, and at Papa, who has reached the end of his row and has disengaged the seeder.

A crow descends and lands on a post in the field. He screeches, crooks his head to listen and then screeches again. "Screech three more times and I'll do it," I say quietly. I load a pellet and snap the barrel shut, but when I see his wide-open beak and the pink inside, I lose my nerve.

Maybe I should fire into the air first. If you fire into the air the crows disperse, even though they come back a short time later. But firing into the air hurts your ears. If only I had brought along some cotton balls to stuff into them. I start counting from one to a hundred and aim the barrel. The crow is still perched on the post, he's stopped screeching and is calmly surveying the land. What's he looking at? He's looking at Vonk's hedge. There's a bull behind that hedge, at least when he's not gone astray. You can't see the bull from here, but you can see Tony, who's washing the windows of her house, and the bus that's coming down the Tiendweg. I grab the binoculars to get a better look. There's nothing unusual about a bus arriving, but I keep watching because it's slowing down by the little bridge at Rinus's. The bus almost never stops here on Saturdays, but this time it looks like it's going to, it's flashing its lights and slowing down because somebody's walking towards it along the Tiendweg. It's a woman and she's carrying a suitcase and I think: who is that? Because it's not Mrs. Vonk who walks with a cane, and it's not Tony, either, who's washing her windows. I adjust the focus of the field glasses and see that it's Mother. It's Mother, she's wearing a white dress like she's going to get married, and she's carrying a suitcase.

I climb down and start running over the field towards her, I shout and wave the air gun to try and stop her and the crows screech along with me, but it doesn't make any difference, because she doesn't look up or around. She just gets in, the bus closes its doors behind her and pulls off.

(...)

Leie

When I get to Alkmaar, I have to wait for the bus. There is a young man in the bus shelter, smoking a cigarette. "Who's the lucky man?" he wants to know.

"What do you mean?" I ask. I'm not in the mood to chat, but don't want to seem rude. He says, "The lucky man," drawing circles in the air with his cigarette, "the groom." Some ash falls on my dress, but it's easy enough to brush off. "You mean Dirk?" I ask. I look at him. His hair covers his face like a curtain carelessly pulled shut.

"If Dirk is your husband, then yes," he says, and laughs.

"Dirk is still at home," I say, "he's with our boys."

"Jesus," he says from behind the curtain. He doesn't ask why I'm wearing the dress, and I don't think I would tell him even if he did, because who's to say that such a young fellow would understand? Maybe he thinks that you should just walk away from the wreckage of your past, that there's nothing for you there, that you're better off looking the other way.

"I'm going to see my father," I say.

"Oh."

"Yes," I say. And after a while, "I won't stay long. They're waiting for me at home."

"Well, I can believe that."

"They don't know that I left," I say, and I think: maybe they're looking for me.

"Geez," he says. "Shouldn't you call them?" He uses his cigarette to point across the street. "There's a phone booth."

I look. It's unoccupied, it could work.

"The bus won't be here for another seven minutes," he says.

I cross the road and go into the phone booth, slip some quarters in the slot and wait. Back across the road, the young man gives me a thumbs up. The phone rings twice and Dirk answers. He sounds out of breath.

"God Leie, where are you, are you at Tom's?"

"Not yet," I say, "the bus will be here soon."

"I went after you, Leie, in the car, but I was too late. Meeus saw you leaving, and Anton said..."

I can picture it: Meeus and Anton, my boys, worried about me, and Dirk, who for so long I could barely tolerate, as if I weren't married to him at all, as if he didn't give a fig about any of this. He tried to follow me and then sat there the whole time waiting for my call.

"Tell the boys I love them, will you? I love them and I love you, too Dirk—Dirk, hold on a sec."

The young man waves, I wave back, but that's not the point—he gestures to the left and I look, the bus is pulling into the square.

"I've got to hang up, Dirk, otherwise I'll miss the bus. I have to go, but I'll come back, you hear? First I have to see Tom."

I am suddenly exhausted. It takes a huge effort to open the door. But once I'm outside, the sun astonishes me again. How it shines on me and on everyplace I set my feet. And the softness of

everything, as if the day is flaunting itself. I hike up my dress, and wait beside the young man until all the passengers have disembarked from the bus.

The young man tosses his cigarette onto the ground and rubs it out with his sneaker, making a thorough and meticulous job of it, and I say, "Now all we need is a little breeze and there will be nothing left."

He looks up and for the first time there's a smile behind his curtain and he says, "Yes, a little breeze would be nice."

He waits for me to go first. I sit down at the very front, next to the window. The bus pulls away.