

Machteld Siegmann

The Days of Trouble

(Excerpt #1)

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“What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.”

(Joel 1:4)

“And as wind in some lordless random comes to rest,
and all the disquieted dust within,
peace came to the hinterlands of our minds,
too remote to know, but peace nonetheless.”

– Christian Wiman, *Hammer Is the Prayer*

Zanengeest, 1942

There was a calf and it was called Firstborn, and it was born on the evening that she arrived. She had ridden on the back of a bike of a man she didn't know and had clung to the handles of the seat and to the thought that at the end of the ride, her mother and father would be waiting for her at the top of the stairs where she lived and give her a slice of bread and maybe even a bit of cheese because she had made such a long trip. They would tuck her in and then go and whisper by the window together in the dark. She was counting on it and couldn't possibly imagine any else. She couldn't imagine that her mother and father wouldn't be there when she arrived. Or that a door would open and a woman she had never seen before would be there, or that she would hide behind the person who brought her, a man who said very little, but whom she trusted after all those hours. The woman said "Dear Lord" and "Come in quickly" and then she went through two doors, and people she had also never seen before were sitting at a table, a boy bringing a potato on a fork to his mouth and another boy who turned around and stared at her open-mouthed, but her mother and father weren't there.

The woman bent down, looked at her in the face and asked, "And who might you be?" She said nothing because no part of her wanted to stay there. If she had said her name, it would have stayed there in this kitchen with people she didn't know and didn't want to know. The man who had brought her handed the woman a suitcase and said things, while she made sure that she stayed standing next to the man, focusing all her attention on the boys who were eating potatoes. She didn't want to leave any part of herself behind, but she thought it best to bring something back home. She brushed aside the hair that kept getting in her face and then the woman picked her up and said, "Are you hungry, little one? Are you hungry?"

The woman wanted to take her coat off, but she pressed her arms tightly against her sides so that it couldn't be taken off and the woman stopped trying and served potatoes on plates taken from the cupboard. The man who had brought her sat down on a chair and was given a plate of potatoes; she sat down next to him and got some as well. She was so hungry that she completely forgot to pay attention. Only when she was finished and completely full, so full that she felt warm and a bit sleepy, did she noticed that the man had left and had left her all alone with these people.

Now she couldn't think of anything more that was going to happen. She had nothing more to go on that would help her imagine what was to come. And she had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that made it so that she couldn't cry. But then she

thought, maybe the man will come back. She thought it best to stay on the chair and keep quiet the whole time.

The boys went through different doors, while the woman, humming, lit the lamp above the table and went outside. She saw the woman through the window slam the shutters with two loud bangs that startled her, then the woman came back in still humming while she just watched.

“Your name is Leie,” the woman said. “I’m the mom.”

The woman couldn’t get her coat off, but was able to grab her, pick her up and take her wherever she wanted. The feeling in the pit of her stomach made it so that she didn’t resist or get angry, but was limp on the outside so that she didn’t feel the woman and hardly saw anything. She was lifted up onto the kitchen counter and got a hot wet cloth against her face and her hair was combed in a way that made it easy for her to close her eyes and imagine that she wasn’t there, and all this time the woman spoke softly to her, saying words like “little cheeks” and “pretty hair” and “such a long trip” and “You know what?” and “You can if you want to”, and many more things.

She was put on the chair again and given a cup of warm milk that she was finishing up when the door through which she came, opened. A man appeared, but it wasn’t the man who had brought her and left her here. He was wearing a blue coat and blue trousers and looked at her while he took off his cap and put it back on. “Young lady,” he said.

She climbed down from the chair and walked towards him because it wasn’t so bad if another man was sent to pick her up. She grabbed his hand, looked up at him and waited.

“Oh child, you don’t want to be here,” he said.

She brushed her hair aside and keep looking at him because what he said was true.

“You want to go back to them, right? I’d bring you back if I could,” he said. And she listened and didn’t make her body limp. “I’d bring you back if I could, but I can’t. Your mother and father want you to stay here with us for a while.”

Now she couldn’t look at him anymore, but wouldn’t let go of his hand.

The bigger boy now came and asked, “Does she speak Dutch?”

“She’s tired, I’m going to put her to bed,” the mom said.

The smaller boy also stood next to them and said "Mom, she can stay with me. He turned to her and said, "You can stay with me."

"You must be tired, child", said the man.

She didn't say anything, looking at him.

"Just before you came here a calf was born, a beauty of a calf. Once you're up tomorrow, I'll show it to you," he said.

She didn't understand him, but heard the warmth in his voice.

Later when the mom picked her up and carried her, with the smaller boy following behind them, she let the mom take off her coat and the dress she was wearing and got tucked in a cot with a wreath of flowers painted on it. There was a lamp and it kept burning while the boy got undressed and also after he picked up a book and started reading out loud. She looked at him and listened to the words he read like "town musician" and "will-o'-the-wisp" and "willow wren" until she fell asleep.