

DAYS BY THE RIVER

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The noise didn't belong here. It was like a wrong note in the symphony of the early hours as it wafted in through the window: a scraping, like someone scratching a wooden board. Sara Harmsen leant up on her elbows, pricked up her ears. There was the rushing river, the sleepy cackling of the hens in the henhouse, a blackbird scolding. The sounds harked back to her childhood. It was the sound of the world as it should be, of peace. As though the battle waiting for her outside didn't exist.

How long had she been awake? The night hadn't been much cooler than the day; her pyjamas were sticking to her skin and her back was hurting. The ache in her lumbar vertebrae was revenge for the birch she'd felled yesterday, the hours of work with axe and chainsaw. It had never bothered her in the past. Today, it gave her backache. It was a foretaste of old age; she had no illusions about that. At the moment, it was still the occasional howl of a distant storm, but since she'd been heading towards fifty, she'd started to feel the storm gradually coming closer.

Maybe she'd be able to get back to sleep if she focused on the snoring beside her. The muscular body at her side was soothing, the fur, the animal smell. What must it feel like, to have fur? No more clothes, no shoes. Everything would be so much easier. It would be good to be an animal. A she-bear, perhaps, or a big cat. But she wasn't an animal. She was a woman who couldn't sleep, who was waiting for the sun to rise.

There it was again, the scraping noise from earlier. Sara Harmsen sat up in bed and listened. What the hell was that? Hadn't Luna noticed? She was sound asleep, as if nothing had happened, her

black-brown fur rising and falling, her square head resting on her forepaws. But Luna was getting older too. What on earth would she do, if one day Luna wasn't there? Just imagining life without her, good Lord.

The scraping sounded again, the hens were getting restless. Now the dog had heard too. She snapped her head up and sniffed, her muscles tensed, then she jumped up, scratched at the door, whining.

Something wasn't right. The blood was rushing in Sara Harmsen's ears. She threw off the bedcovers and stood up. On the landing, as she passed the door with the three brightly-coloured letters on it, spelling out JAN, Luna was already plunging down the worn stairs. Sara followed her and, on reaching the bottom, slipped on her green gardening shoes; Luna barked. Come on, open the door, she seemed to be urging.

"All right, here I am."

She stepped out onto the top of the stone steps. Everything here looked the same as ever: the lime tree extending its mighty branches over the yard; through the open shed door, she could see the tractor; the red swimsuit was hanging on the washing line. Luna seemed to have caught the scent of something. In a few bounds, she was over at the henhouse, barking her head off. From inside, Sara could hear the clamour of fearful chickens, which sent a shiver down her spine. Her gaze fell on the henhouse roof, the three missing pantiles. For God's sake! Why hadn't she repaired that long ago?

Sara grabbed her father's hunting rifle from the hook behind the door, ran in her pyjamas over to the henhouse and flung open the door. Seven hens and an orange-brown shadow were whirling around in there, a fluttering, snapping matter of life and death. She raised the

gun and aimed at the moving target, but before she could shoot, the orange bundle of fur whizzed past her and made its getaway. Luna followed it, barking with outrage.

Sara put the gun down; the hens cackled in agitation.

“It’s OK now, my lovelies. The fox is gone, everything’s OK.”

She sat down on the layer of sawdust, food remnants and droppings that covered the floor. She cooed to the birds, trying to sooth them, and to coax them over to her. The first to arrive was Siwa, followed by Dodona. They both seemed to be all right. But then Sara saw what had happened. The fox had caught Didyma. It had to be Didyma. The hen was bleeding from a bite to the throat and as she approached, she was wobbly on her feet. Sara took her into her lap and stroked down her back.

“That looks nasty, sweetie-pie.”

A rivulet of red was trickling down her feathers. Sara’s hands were covered in blood; it was dripping onto her pyjamas. The hen was trembling and moaning.

“Bloody fox,” she mumbled into the soft feathers.

Sara carried Didyma out. She cradled her favourite hen, walked up and down, humming a tune and feeling the warmth of the bird’s body, the trust she had in her, the hope that she’d be able to help. She came to a stop by the chopping block; the axe that she’d used yesterday to split the birch into firewood was still stuck in it.

“Sh, sh,” Sara said, still stroking Didyma’s back. She liked the hens because they trusted her. Because they were sincere. You could never tell what a human was hiding behind their smile. The true intentions behind their pretty words. A hen couldn’t lie.

“It’s OK,” Sara whispered into Didyma’s feathers, “it’s OK.”

For a moment, she stood there, the hen in her arms, pressing her lips firmly together. It didn't help.

She laid the body down on the block, freed the axe from the wood and chopped off the head with one quick stroke. Her chest clenched. It was as though she'd hacked off part of her own body. As if it wasn't Didyma's head that had fallen to the ground beside the chopping block, but her own left hand; as if the blood running over the wood wasn't oozing from the hen's twitching body, but from the stump of her own arm.

The sun was pushing its way over the horizon; it must be just after half past five. The morning light fell on the headless bird, which Sara had hung from the henhouse door to bleed out, on the red blotches sprayed all over her pyjamas, on the blood on her hands and arms.

Sara walked down to the river. She crouched down on the bank, beside the jetty, and held her bloody hands in the water. Her reflection looked back at her: her narrow face, her reddish, untameable hair. Other images overlaid it: the missing rooftiles, the fox in the henhouse, the decapitated head, all mingled in the stream.

Sara rubbed and scrubbed at her fingers until the water had soaked up the last of the blood, the way it patiently soaked up everything and everyone and carried them away towards the sea, all the dirt, all the fear and the pain.

She sat down on the gravel a little further along, rested her arms on her knees and looked downstream, to where her blue-and-white ferryboat was moored at the pier. How low the river was! The spot where she was sitting, this whole embankment, was normally underwater, the river rushing by wide and strong. Now it was idling away. It was still a stately body of water, but its level was dropping day after day in the heat. It had been closed to shipping weeks ago, and if it didn't rain soon, Sara wouldn't be able to run the ferry. She'd have no income. And what then? What will you live on then, Sara Harmsen, how will you manage?

Sara went back to the henhouse, collected the lifeless chicken from the door handle and took it in into the kitchen. As she pushed the bird into the fridge, wrapped in a plastic bag, her eye caught on the ice

compartment door. Go on, just a sip, she said to herself. For the shock. She pulled out the bottle and set it to her lips. The cool stream was just the job; it loosened the knot inside her. For a moment, she stood there, eyes closed.

She went up to her room and swapped the bloodstained pyjamas for a shirt and dungarees. A short time later, she was standing back in the kitchen when Luna stormed in. She'd returned without any prey from her foxhunt, and was now alternately barking and whining, as if so say: come on, come with me, there's something I need to show you.

Sara bent down and scratched her neck.

"Did you find where that nasty villain got over the fence? Good girl. Come on then, show me."

The fence was one of the few things she was still grateful to her father for, to this day. But that might have been because as well as the fence, she'd inherited his belief in things going wrong that made the fence a necessity in the first place. Her mother had hated the fence. It's like we're living in a high security prison here, she'd complained. It was deer-proof, two metres twenty high, made of a fine wire mesh, bent outwards and topped with barbed wire. It ran dead straight from the wall on the shore by the ferry pier, up the hill and down the other side, until it met the river again near the swimming area. The fence separated the semi-circle of land, nestled in the curve of the river, from a hostile outside world; it protected it from unpleasant visitors, from nosy-parkers, and particularly from all the other evils creeping and crawling out there. And from the fox, of course. In theory.

Luna led Sara up to the vegetable plot and showed her where the fox had got in. It had dug its way under the fence. A considerable

achievement given the bone-dry soil and a fence buried a fair way underground. By the time Sara had refilled the hole and packed the soil down with stones, the sweat was running down her back. The sun was already out full force.

“Just look at the state of us.”

Sara glanced at Luna with a shake of her head and clapped the dust from her dungarees. Today of all days, she could have done with her morning dip in the river. But she was running too late for that.

“Come on then, time for breakfast.”

A little later, Sara stepped out of the house with a tray in her hands, looking forward to bread-and-scrambled egg, and to green tea. Outside, she was met by the cackling of the hens, who were stalking across the yard, grubbing around as if they’d long forgotten the drama with the fox. Or as if they had impassively accepted what couldn’t be changed.

Sara set the tray down on the table in the shade of the big lime tree and sat in one of the chairs. Luna lay panting beside her in the grass.

Time to consult the oracle of the chickens. Sara shut her eyes. The path ahead of her ran from here down to the river, dividing the plot in two. The crucial question was this: were the majority of the hens left of the path, heralding a good day, or would she have to fear the worst because most of them were to the right? The forecast was astonishingly reliable. In the course of her days, things happened that Sara could attribute directly to the oracle. No wonder, coming from *them*, she found herself thinking. She could neither prove nor explain it, but she was firmly convinced of her hens’ gift of prophecy. That

was why she'd named them after seven Greek oracle sites: Ephyra, Olympia, Dodona, Delphi, Claros, Didyma und Siwa.

Sara opened her eyes. Three of the chickens were pecking on the left of the path, and the other three were on the right. With only six hens, the oracle just wouldn't work. She'd have to buy a seventh again. And she'd name it Didyma again. If the ghost of Didyma was around here anywhere, she'd surely be feeding on the right of the path. A day on which she'd had to kill her favourite hen couldn't possibly be a good one.

Sara bent over her plate, picked up the slice of bread-and-scrambled egg in both hands and bit into it. Siwa strutted over the courtyard, pecked around her legs, brushing against her ankles. Sara licked her fingers and ruffled the hen's back, a gesture that Siwa rewarded with heartfelt clucks. Olympia and Delphi were coming over too, wattles flapping, to see what was going on. Soon, all six hens were pecking and grubbing around her feet.

"Thanks for the eggs." Sara nodded to them.

Siwa stretched and flapped her wings. Then she suddenly fluttered up and landed skilfully in Sara's lap. For a moment, Sara flinched, but then she put her arm around the softly cackling hen and gave her a stroke.

"What's up, cutie?"

Sara ran her fingers through Siwa's feathers and enjoyed the peace the hen gave off. She found herself remembering Jan, how much he'd loved the chickens. The way he'd talked to them, like he was speaking a foreign language. When Siwa had had enough, she jumped off Sara's lap breaking her train of thought. God, she'd lost

track of time. She wiped her hand over her face. She had to be down at the ferry by seven. Time to go!

Sara walked down to the river, and then followed the beaten path towards the pier, keeping to the edge of the water. She had her bag of provisions over her shoulder, bread, apples, pasta salad and plenty of drinking water – that was the most important thing in this heat. She was still a way off, but she could see the first passengers waiting by the ferry. Luna had also grasped that they were in a hurry. She ran on ahead, as far as the barred gate, where she dropped down onto her haunches and waited, her tongue hanging out.

Sara unlocked the gate, now it was only a few steps to the pier on the other side of the deer-proof fence. As she walked, she wiped the sweat from her brow; she was late. Not even ten minutes, but still late. That was a particular problem for Emil and Pia, who took the ferry every morning to get from Erlengrund to the grammar school in the town. Felix Kowalsky and two, three others, who lived in Erlengrund and worked on the other side of the river also relied on the ferry leaving on the dot of seven. Which they normally could.

This morning, there were three people besides Emil and Pia gathered by the flagpole and the shield-shaped sign that her father had painted many years before with the words *Green Moon Landing Stage*. There was a young couple with paniers on their bicycles – the woman was just studying the board with the times and fares. And there was Mieke Petersen, Sara's primary school teacher from Erlengrund, who cycled to the indoor swimming pool in the town every Monday and Thursday morning for aqua gymnastics. How old must Mieke be now? Eightyish, surely. It was amazing that she could still do such distances by bike. But maybe the fact that she moved

primarily under her own steam was the whole reason she was so vigorous.

“Morning, Sara.” Mieke nodded to her, leaning both arms on her handlebars. “It’s not like *you* to be late! Should I be worried? Kowalsky and the others have gone. They went down to Niderbreden by car, to the bridge. Kowalsky was raging. Well, you know what he’s like. Always polite, always proper, but if anything doesn’t run to plan, he loses his temper.” Mieke looked at her with a shake of her head. “I told him: Why don’t you go over to Sara’s and ring the doorbell? But he wouldn’t.”

Sara hastily opened the gate and stamped, her footsteps clanging, across the metal bridge that linked the embankment wall to the floating jetty to which the little ferry was moored. It had been such a steep drop down, because the water was so low. She undid the chain to allow her passengers to board the blue-and-white ferry. The two schoolchildren with their backpacks pushed past her. Emil stopped a moment and looked up at her, blinking into the sun.

“You’re late,” he said seriously.

Good grief. She was late this once, and now she was getting ticked off by an eleven-year-old smart aleck. “Get yourself down to the bow or we’ll be later still,” she snapped at him.

Emil trotted on and the three adults wheeled their bikes aboard. It was a small boat, which could transport a maximum of ten passengers, and their bicycles. Even so, it was rare for her ferry to be fully loaded.

Once everyone was on board, Sara reattached the chain, cast off the mooring rope and walked back to her roofed area at one end, where Luna had already taken up her accustomed position in her

basket. She used a joystick to turn the rudder so that the ferry moved off at an angle to the current and glided over the water.

During the crossing, Sara kept under her canopy. It was the best place on hot days like this. She leant her elbows on the railing and looked across the river. There was one bus an hour from the other landing stage to the town four kilometres away, which normally took Emil and Pia to school. Today, it was going without them. And without Felix Kowalsky, physics teacher at the Heinrich-Boll-Gymnasium, who would be late to class today too. Embarrassing for someone who normally demanded strict punctuality from his pupils. The only people unconcerned by all this were the young cyclist couple. They were sitting on a bench, whispering sweet nothings to one another.

Her father had leant on this railing on the crossings too. Sometimes, when he'd taken her on the ferry with him, they'd stood here side by side, arms on the railing, eyes on the river. Look there, a trout, he'd say, pointing into the water, and Sara had inhaled the smoke of his roll-ups, had felt her father at her side, had felt good.

Mieke Pietersen came over and joined her, propped herself up on the metal rail. Her thin, grey hair blew in the breeze, her hands were folded. Sara enjoyed being close to the old woman. It was a simple proximity, that didn't need many words. She liked that.

Sara's life would have been different if it hadn't been for Mieke Petersen. The primary teacher had advised Sara's parents to send her to the grammar school. Her mother had immediately been in favour, but Paul Harmsen hadn't wanted that. A girl? What for? So what if she was talented? The ferryman had been irritated that his daughter was more intelligent than him. That she kept dragging clever

tomes home from the town library, reading them anywhere and everywhere. When Mieke Petersen turned up on their doorstep, Paul Harmsen had only reluctantly agreed to a chat with the teacher. They'd spent almost an hour in the front room. When they came out again, Mieke had won the ferryman round. With the stubbornness and ingenuity that she was infamous for throughout the village.

"We need rain." Mieke looked a little way downriver, to where the rocks were already dangerously close to the surface. "Or you'll be running your ferry aground. And the corn will be withering on us in the fields." She nodded over to the bank.

Sara agreed. The water level had been critical for days. The first thing she did every morning was to look at the mark on the embankment wall, and every time she did, it was a bit lower. The only advantage was that there were no motorboats anymore. It was quieter on the river now.

Mieke cleared her throat and glanced sideways at her. "News that the ferry didn't run on time will be around Erlengrund like wildfire. You can bet your life on that."

She was right. Kowalsky would enjoy spreading it around, adding fuel to the fire among the advocates for a bridge. Sara followed Mieke's gaze to the spot where the leisurely current through which her ferry was gliding gave way to a rushing and gurgling. The riverbed narrowed here because it had to push its way between two wooded hills. In very low water, rocks protruded above the water in these narrows. Like now. The Eye of the Needle, her father had always called this spot. Just there, where the river was at its narrowest, a bridge should be built. Or so said part of the village. Alexander Ahlhausen, mayor of Erlengrund, was one of them. So was Felix

Kowalsky. There was even a Pro-Bridge Association. They'd spent years urging Sara to sell the piece of land outside her fence. It bordered directly on the Eye of the Needle, and would be needed for the bridge.

Mieke coughed again. "You know I'm on your side, love." She stroked Sara's arm. "The ferry, the house, your land, none of it would be the same if there was a bridge here. Four generations, your family's been running the ferry. That's not something to just give up. It's your life. And your bread-and-butter. Besides, a bridge would be a curse on the village, not the blessing they're trying to paint it as. To bring in tourists. Don't make me laugh! Erlengrund doesn't need tourists. Erlengrund needs peace and quiet. It's just a waste of money. And at a time when money is the last thing anyone has going spare." She shook her head.

Sara was glad to hear Mieke talk like that.

"Good grief, Kowalsky was hopping mad just now," Mieke began again, shaking her head. "Do you know what he said?" She leant forwards. "It's impossible that one woman can hold up the bridge for an entire village, that's what he said. She needs dispossessing. Someone should talk to Mayor Ahlhausen."

The blood rushed to Sara's cheeks. What had got into that idiot? It was her land, her decision. And if people didn't want to use her ferry, then they didn't have to. They could go by the bridge in Niederbreden, fifteen kilometres downriver. Let them build their bridge where they liked, just not here.

"Don't worry too much about Kowalsky," Mieke whispered to her once they'd almost reached the other side. "His bark's worse than his bite. Ahlhausen is much more dangerous. You need to keep an eye

on that one. He wants to make his mark with this bridge. I can already see the plaque: Mayor Ahlhausen Bridge.”

Sara nodded, Mieke was right. Kowalsky might bad-mouth her, but Ahlhausen had political influence. Both of them got on her nerves. But for now, she had to moor up so that Mieke Petersen and the other passengers could disembark.

It took Sara a few crossings to settle down. Going through the familiar motions took her mind off things. People came, people went, Sara put on her just-don't-speak-to-me face and took refuge in her book as often as she could. Each crossing took only a few minutes. And mooring and casting off left no time for reading. She read her books in little snippets, but she was used to that kind of interval reading now. Sara didn't have a fixed timetable, just made crossings when needed. If there were no passengers waiting on either bank, it gave her longer breaks, when she could read twenty or thirty pages at a time. Mainly on rainy days. But there was no chance of rain today.

Around noon, it got so hot that she kept firmly in the shade of her canopy on the crossings. She drank a lot and moved in slow motion; Luna lay apathetically, her tongue hanging out, panting rapidly. She spent her lunchbreak on the shady bank with her feet in the water. It wasn't until the afternoon that the heat eased and Sara took cycle tourists with paniers on their e-bikes over the river, along with racers on road bikes in parrot-bright jerseys, families chauffeuring their whining offspring around the countryside in bike-trailers, hoping that the ferry would offer a bit of a change of scene. Then there were the people from Erlengrund: going to the doctor, the supermarket or the water park in the town, going to buy shoes there, or visit friends and relatives across the river. A perfectly ordinary day.

By the time the clock under her canopy was showing half past five, it was time to call it a day. She'd take these last three cyclists over, and then come back to her pier and moor up. She'd make herself an egg salad for supper.

Sara looked across to the other bank, enjoying the breeze in her face. There was nobody else over there, waiting for her. It looked as though her last trip of the day would be solo. She was in the middle of her docking manoeuvres when she spotted the young man coming down the path towards the pier, limping on one leg. He was dressed all in black, knee-length shorts with combat pockets and a hooded T-shirt with a white print. He'd pulled the hood right over his face. Despite his limp, he seemed in a hurry, and kept looking around him as he went. It seemed like she'd have a passenger on the last crossing of the day after all.

As he came closer, she could see how tattered his clothes were. His shorts were stained and there was a hole in his T-shirt sleeve. The three cyclists had barely stepped off the ferry when this tall, hooded figure was already stumbling aboard over the metal bridge. His T-shirt read *No Nation, No Border, Fight Law and Order*. It was far too warm for a day like this. Luna had spotted the man too. Head down, she crept around him, picking up a scent. Suddenly, she started to bark, deep and growling. She never did that. What was the matter with her?

The hooded man stood still for a moment in front of the barking dog, then swerved around her, leant his back against the railing and slumped to the floor. He was exhausted, there was no mistaking that. His shins were scratched, as if he'd run through thorny scrub in his shorts. He looked up at Sara. There was a cut over his left eyebrow, a blood-encrusted fissure peeking out beneath his hood; it looked nasty. The rest of his face was hidden in shadow.

That was the last straw. An injured passenger. Did he need help? How much hassle would she be letting herself in for if she started looking after this guy now? Did she want that, just before

finishing for the day? No, she did not. She just wanted to go home, to be left in peace.

The young man cleared his throat. “Excuse me, would you mind... er, could you...” His voice was high-pitched, almost childish, soft and melodious. “Would you mind setting off? That would be kind of good.”

Anything else? Did this guy want to set her departure times now? That was definitely going too far, injured or not.

“We set off when it’s time.”

The bloke hadn’t even paid her. She loomed over him, looked down at him. “That’ll be a euro, please.”

Her strange passenger drew up his knees and hooked his arms around them, lowered his head onto them. Under his hoodie, he was shaking his head.

“Please, I haven’t got any money,” he mumbled. “Could you just take me across anyway?”

Luna was pacing around him, sniffing suspiciously.

What should she do? Should she say: No money, no crossing, now kindly get off my ferry? Or was it wiser to take him for free and hope that he’d limp off at the other side and disappear never to be seen again?

“All right then.” She nodded. “I’ll make an exception.”

[END OF SAMPLE TRANSLATION]