

The Flood – a novel by Mariët Meester

A young woman from Amsterdam spends her time in an old gypsy caravan on a man-made hill in a Dutch polder. Her only mirror has a cloth draped over it, because she wants to be truly alone. There are five other people on the hill; a farmer and his sister called Bro and Sis Spijker, a couple from Rotterdam and an aggressive farm equipment salesman. The young woman calls him 'The Heckler'. He lives at the bottom of the hill in a modern caravan. To piss her off he has parked a flatbed trailer in her back yard.

After a night of heavy rain the area around the hill has been flooded. Water is right at the edge. For a day and a night the young woman thinks she is alone on the hill, assuming that the others left before the flood.

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Ever since I was thirteen I tend to fiddle with my hair when something worries me. Thinking I was alone on a dry hill in a huge expanse of water, having to manage on my own, I took the cloth of my big mirror. My hair seemed to have been caught in a storm of burrs.

'You'll be fine,' I said to myself. 'There's an entire freezer full of food at the farm you can plunder until the rescue helicopter gets here.'

My mirror image answered: 'Even though there is an air-field nearby, you haven't seen anything flying, not even a glider. The air is eerily empty and silent. A lot of plastic and garbage is floating in the water. Maybe something really bad happened.'

'I could build a boat.'

Mirror: 'To go where exactly?'

'Just, away...' I said aloud and jumped up because of a loud knock on the door behind the mirror. I'm being rescued! I thought.

'Are you there? We've been flooded.' It was Bro's voice.

I opened the door. 'Yes I noticed.'

'Can I come in?'

I let him in and offered him a cup of coffee. He smelled of milk and manure. A familiar scent. While he sat on my red pluche sofa, pulling the stuffing out of his jacket with his knees squeezed together, I fussed with coffee and filters. I was taking my time, hoping he would stay for a bit. My hair was like his jacket.

After a sip of coffee, he put his cup down, repeating 'we've been flooded' and started whimpering like an animal driven into a corner. I felt my eyes welling up. Self pity can feel great, like a weight has been lifted off your chest, so we surrendered to that for a couple of

minutes. In his case something else seemed to be going on. I thought I heard him mutter 'Willem, Willem'. That was the name of his late brother.

Over a second cup he told me everyone was still on the hill. The Heckler had driven up the hill in a blind panic when he found his wheels submersed in water. The caravan of the young couple had been shifted sideways, waking them up. They fled to the farmhouse. Later their caravan had been ripped to shreds and blew off the hill. No-one had been hurt except Sis. A roof-tile had fallen on her shoulder. Bro told me a part of the barn roof had blown off, exposing the cows to the severe weather. That was the reason he came to see me: the cows. They needed to drink but he couldn't get a drop of water out of the tap, so he wondered if he could use my drums of rainwater.

Thinking about this for a few seconds, I told him there was plenty of water, all you needed was a bucket and a rope to get it.

'We already tried. They won't swill it. Too salty.'

Swill. A word introduced by The Heckler. I had almost agreed to give my water to the cows, but now this word caused me to change my mind. 'Aren't there any puddles they can empty out?' I asked him.

Bro finished his cup and left. I was so upset, that I started biting my nails and pacing back and forth between the bed and my desk. No power. No water. Nothing to drink for the animals. Our situation was a lot more critical than I had realised. One jerry-can was all I had left, the others probably still had the Rotterdammer's watertank, but what about in a week's time? Maybe they weren't planning to use my rainwater for the cows at all. Normally they didn't seem that concerned about the animals. My rainwater I would defend to the last drop!

Outside two herons were sitting on either side of an iron bar attached to the flatbed trailer. Two grey suited gentlemen I used to think, but now there was no place for these kind of observations. I hurried to the sink, drew aside the little curtain and grabbed one of the jars of prune-butter I kept there next to the propane bottle. I had thirty of these jars. First prune-butter I'd made in my life. Five jars were sort of bitter because I didn't know you were supposed to take the skins off before boiling them. The dates on the labels did not prevent me from taking the latest one. Protesting against I don't know what, I wolved the whole thing down, refusing to be sensible enough to empty an early jar.

So we were surrounded by water but at the same time we didn't have enough. I was the only one with a supply of drinking water. I could sell it to them. A liter for a kilo of meat. All those chunks of meat in their freezer must be thawing out by now. Or maybe I should ask them to remove their flatbed trailer and put my fence back up? The rainwater was going to

give me some major leverage. But for how long? They could just steal my rainwater in the middle of the night. The vacuum cleaner hose wouldn't scare them away. Maybe thin branches cut into nasty whips would do it. No, I would have to get the water inside, safely locked away. Fifty gallons per drum, how would I go about transporting all of it. I had a tub to do the washing up, a bucket for laundry, the kettle, a load of old bottles, some jugs and bowls, glasses, maybe I could even use plates. And of course the bucket from the outhouse. Four times fifty, so two hundred gallons in total to get into the caravan.

A comb with big teeth could not untangle my hair. It hurt. I pulled harder. I wanted pain.

Again someone knocking at the door. 'Yes?' I yelled. My voice sounded weird.

It was Bro again. In a very shy manner he stuck his head around the door and asked: 'You really don't want to give us the rainwater? Sis and the others told me to ask again.'

They kept using their weakest link. 'No, I need it myself,' I said. 'Come in please.'

As he was settling on the sofa, on which he had left an imprint of his behind last time, I considered quickly locking the door and using him as a hostage. I would have them in even more of a stranglehold than just with water. I rejected the idea. Mentally weak maybe, Bro was physically a sturdy specimen, hardened by wind and weather. The risk of the whole thing back-firing on me was too big. If he got the upper hand, I would quickly lose all my water.

'What exactly happened again to Willem, your brother?' I heard myself ask. For the second time he started crying, his body heaving as if he was having an epileptic fit. By the time he was able to get up from the sofa and walk to the door, he looked ten years older.

'You still have that great satellite dish to watch TV?'

'No, it blew away. We found it, but it's broken.'

Shoulders drooping Bro ambled on back to the farmhouse. I admonished myself: 'Enough already with your silly behaviour. This is an emergency. Place yourself above all this. If only because of self-preservation. You have to make friends. You have to make friends.'

After an hour or so of lying face down on the bed, I decided to act on my new frame of mind. When Bro showed up a third time to ask for water for the cows, I put my coat on and joined him. If they were really that thirsty I wanted to see it for myself. And anyway there must be puddles everywhere after all the rain. Even in the stable, if it was true that half of the roof had been blown off.

Side by side we walked. A calm breeze in the air. Birdsong, a lot of it. Bro looked down, I kept an eye out for swans since I didn't carry the vacuum cleaner hose to fend them

off, this was the new me. A hare hopped along the concrete path, legs too long and thin, it looked like a failed rabbit.

Without thinking Bro walked through all the puddles with his filthy clogs. Hey, the cows could be drinking this! I thought but didn't say anything. The new me was noble and open to anything. 'How many litres of water does a cow need every day?' I asked him.

He seemed to have not heard me and kept on walking. 'Look,' he said tamely when we got to the stable. One door was lying flat on the ground, the hinges, post and lintel gone. The wall had collapsed into a jumbled mass. Chunks of wall, piles of rooftiles, it was a miracle no cows had been hurt. They were all on the left attached to chains anchored to the wall. That the roof had been blown off was no exaggeration, on the right-hand side there was just the framework left. Some of it had snapped and was hanging down or sticking up strangely enough. Blue tarpaulins, shredded in some places, covered it partly. An attempt no doubt by Bro and Sis to create some shelter.

I didn't say anything. Bro did, but I couldn't hear it because the cows got very vocal about their needs when they noticed us. Normally I like their noises. The rattling of their chains, jaws masticating, stuff regurgitating, the occasional belch, a slowly developing melancholy low like a foghorn. But this sounded very sad, like a choir made up entirely of deep basses, all singing out of tune. Because of the rain they were standing in sludgy manure, but this could not be the reason of their complaining. It had to be thirst or hunger. But they weren't eating the hay.

'They're not eating,' Bro yelled in my ear.

'I can see that.' I shouted back after a bit, not being able to think of a more helpful comment.

'They have to drink first.'

'How much?'

'What?'

'How much water do they need?'

'Three buckets each, at least.'

Three buckets, if that is what he said, meant thirty-six buckets in total since there were twelve cows. Probably more water than went into one of my drums. It had been the madness of a city-dweller that had made me suggest puddles. A big puddle would not even be enough for a calf.

'And the water from the flood?' I tried once again.

'Too salty.'

The cows lamented without a break. I shuddered. Their song of begging was forceful and appealed to my kindness. All the same, I couldn't just give away my rainwater, people are more important than cows. This situation wasn't going to be over any time soon, we had to think of other ways of solving this problem.

'We have to talk about it,' I hollered into his ear and by accident touched it with my lips. It had prickly hairs growing on it. The ear itself was very soft. All of a sudden I felt like crying again.

Bro had not noticed I had touched him, or pretended nothing had happened. He did make a movement with his head which seemed to say: come with me. As the choir was significantly increasing their volume, I followed him, walking over the door and into the middle aisle, looking out for falling tiles or broken beams. As we reached the hallway leading into the kitchen he took off his clogs and I removed my Wellington boots. 'Doesn't it matter that the cows are wet on one side? Can they catch a cold?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Naah, it doesn't bother them.'

We kept our coats on. On our socks we entered the kitchen. At a table covered with a red and white checkered plastic cloth, sat Sis, The Heckler and the female half of the couple from Rotterdam. Her name was Josje. She had a white lace cloth covering her hair. She and Sis answered my 'Hello everybody' reasonably friendly, but The Heckler kept his lips as firmly together as his fingers were clasped around a beerglass. He stared into it and did not lift his head. Everyone had a glass. In the middle of the table several two liter bottles of pop had been opened. A bag of cookies had been ripped, spilling them onto the table and crisps had been unceremoniously dumped out of their bag.

Bro sat down on his favorite chair, his back to the kitchen counter.

'And?' Sis asked him.

He grunted in response, which presumably meant that there had been no agreement. The Heckler grunted also, but louder. Sis let out a dissappointed 'Oo'. Even so, she pulled up a chair for me to sit on. I hesitated. As I sat down she got up to get me a clean beerglass. She also pulled a bottle of pop out of a box and placed it in front of me. Conversation had been animated when we were taking off our clogs and boots, but now the place was strangely quiet.

I don't like pop and cookies, but in this case I was willing to accept them. As I reached towards the bottle to pour myself a glass, The Heckler's hand shot across the table, grabbed the bottle and put it on the floor. 'No water for the cows, no pop for city folk.'

No-one did anything, not even Sis. I waited for something to happen, but in vain. Not a word was said. The clock on the wall had stopped because of the power outage, but I guess

it must have been at least five minutes before I asked Sis how her shoulder was keeping up, since a roof-tile had fallen on it.

She looked at The Heckler as if she needed his permission to answer me. He kept looking into his glass, his face mean and hard. She went for it anyway. 'It's okay. It hurts but it could have been worse.'

'Jesus woman, you were heavily injured!' he yelled nastily.

'Josje put a band-aid on it.'

'Where is your fiancée?' I asked Josje as nicely as possible. It occurred to me that the bastard could be stealing my water as we spoke.

'Rob went to get help,' she said with a heavy meaty Rotterdam accent.

This was certainly a surprise. I didn't know what I was hearing. 'Get help? HOW?!'

'At least he isn't a sociopath like you, city slicker from Amsterdam,' the Heckler sneered from just above his glass.

I tried to focus just on her, but this was hard since their chairs were right next to each other. I noticed her delicate features and how pretty and petite she was. Bro had told me she was my age but this couldn't be, she was a lot younger. Her skin was clear, not a pimple or wrinkle to be seen. Most remarkable were her lavender-coloured eyes. With the lace cloth covering her, she looked like a bride. 'How did he leave to get help, isn't that way too dangerous?'

'Mister here said it was okay.'

Mister? Did she mean The Heckler? Maybe she called him 'mister' because she did not want to say his real name, not now, like me. I had always presumed they were the best of friends, the couple from Rotterdam and The Heckler.

'So... mister here... mister Modern-Caravan-Guy said it was okay?' This way I avoided his first name. I didn't know his family name.

'Don't get your niggers in a twist.'

I kept looking into the azure blue eyes. 'How did Rob leave?'

'In the kayak.'

'Gee, wouldn't it have been better to wait a couple of days? That's taking a big risk, isn't it? Is he a good kayaker?'

'Your aptitude is pretty revolting.'

Ignore him, I told myself. Keep talking to her, you are not hearing him.

'According to Modern-Caravan-Guy here' (she was adopting my way of talking!) 'it is a very expensive kayak, one of the best. You know, the red one at the bottom of the hill. Rob is strong, he's a dockworker.' She glanced at her watch. 'He left an hour and a half ago.'

She wasn't altogether sure it had been the right thing to do, that was clear. I hadn't noticed a thing, I had been lying face down on my bed thinking. 'What do you reckon,' I asked Bro. 'Was it a good idea?'

Sis answered for him. 'Not a lot of wind, in the right direction too.'

'The wind is thin, Rob could be in Utrecht by now,' Bro added. Somehow this cleared the air and the five of us started talking about the flood. Why, how and when it was going to end. Josje and Modern-Caravan-Guy thought it would all be over by tomorrow, Bro and Sis thought it would take another day. But I feared it would be at least a week. That, they thought, was way too gloomy an outlook.

'Why did you send Rob out to get help then?'

'Don't get all hyped up.'

Wondering why this all happened the issue of global 'warning' tended to crop up. Modern-Caravan-Guy thought it was all a load of nonsense. His niece had recently decided to take the loser cruiser or go everywhere on her bicycle because of this global warning rubbish. It was an awful nuisance and took forever. And anyway, didn't you guys just buy a piece of shit roadster? Don't deny it!

He'd be surprised how valuable and desirable our roadster is. But I couldn't 'deny' that we drove it of course. Anyway, global 'warning'. What else could be causing this flood? The Krauts overflowing their rivers? Good for nothing bureaucrats interested only in getting paid, failing to set up overflow areas? Dykes that had 'bust' in the north or northwest? A storm had been predicted, but soon afterward the radio had gone dead. Sis had even tried the radio in the tractor a couple of times. The storm must have been the main cause, we agreed. Or maybe a tsunami. The Heckler suggested a terrorist attack on Greenland or the ice-cap near Alaska. Those beardy guys with their long dresses could melt the goddamn pole in one blast. A volcano erupting on the Canary Islands? Oh no, they didn't have volcanoes.

The talking back and forth got more intense. Only later did I understand that it was a very Dutch way of getting your head around something. Touching on certain subjects, throwing light on them, circling around them until you could pounce and get a firm grip on the whole thing.

According to The Heckler I was 'as thick as a prick'. The conversation also contained a lot of 'dead ends'. For a while everyone had participated in the discussion, but now it was just

us. The Heckler speaking in a stentorian manner, me keeping up with him. The others sat in silence, nibbling crisps and cookies, sipping pop. I love debating, but when The Heckler accused me of being as thick as a prick, I'm sure Bro, Sis and Josje thought it had all turned into a fight.

'You thought I was scared?' he yelled. 'I was very eagle to take that kayak myself you little hotshot from Amsterdam!' 'There is no sense in rating this all up again!' he added. His use of language was unique, I'm sure there was a system to it and in ordinary circumstances I would have loved to figure it out, but this situation was not ordinary. Not at all.

As the conversation steered towards another 'dead end', Bro ventured out, a pair of binoculars dangling around his neck. He came back to tell us he'd seen people sitting on top of the prison in the village. We all went outside to have a look. Through the thick lenses I saw about twenty people with a white flag. The Heckler was sure they were waving it, but it was just the wind.

Back in the kitchen, tucking into more crisps, cookies and soda (I still wasn't getting any) Josje suggested that sooner or later the people on the roof would probably build some sort of raft to make their way to land – our hill – expecting food and shelter. We'd be stuck with female prisoners, since they no longer housed illegal immigrants or criminal soldiers there.

A new discussion started. The Heckler hoped that maybe there would be a couple of hot babes in the bunch. In the end we agreed that any kind of raft landing would be pushed away. We would warn each other in case we noticed something heading towards our hill.

No, these were no ordinary circumstances.

Translation: Diederick Abbink