

Best-selling debut

Franca Treur

Confetti on the Threshing Floor



THE ENORMOUS SUCCESS of Franca Treur's debut *Dorsvloer vol confetti* (Confetti on the Threshing Floor) has more than a little to do with the subject matter: the strict Calvinist upbringing of a dreamy-eyed farm girl in the coastal province of Zeeland. Katelijne, the protagonist of the novel, grew up on a farm there with her six brothers. She would have liked nothing better than to work alongside the boys: hay-making, feeding the animals, milking, spreading manure, etc. But the opportunities were few and far between. Because she was a girl, she was allocated the typical female task of helping her mother with the housekeeping chores.

Alongside this portrait of archaic farm life, a prominent role is reserved for the family's Calvinist faith. Katelijne's parents adhere to a variety of Protestantism in which Man is born in sin, and even a virtuous life is no guarantee of a place in heaven. Forswearing sexuality and ungodly behaviour is not enough. One must be converted, touched by God, indeed, chosen by Him. The dread which the Last Judgment inspires in Katelijne is overwhelming. After being cheeky to her mother, she dreams that when Judgment Day comes around, God banishes her to hell: 'She's standing next to the open car door and giving her mother a cheeky look. 'Ohhh,' she hears people whisper, bringing their hands to their mouths. The Lord God looks at her and says: 'Remove her from My sight. Cast her into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.'

Franca Treur grew up herself on a farm on the island of Walcheren. She pulls no punches in her description of Calvinist life but she is not out to settle old scores. Her portrait of Katelijne's youth is painted with love, and it is full of astonishment rather than bitterness. That may well be the secret of its success. Fellow author Jan Siebelink did something similar in his perennial best-seller *Knielen op een bed violen* (Kneeling on a Bed of Violets). While he was delving into the darkest depths of Calvinism, he never rejected faith or the faithful.

And yet the key to the quality of *Dorsvloer vol confetti* is neither the rural nor the deeply religious setting. Franca Treur is simply a very good writer. The manner in which she tells her story, which is divided into brief scenes from Katelijne's childhood on the farm, commands respect. She combines keen observation with dreamy retrospection, and the Dutch original is punctuated with pithy regional expressions and Biblical quotations.



photo Bob Bronshoff

Franca Treur (b. 1979) was born and raised in Zeeland, and studied Dutch and literary theory at the University of Leiden. She writes for the national newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. The publication of her debut *Dorsvloer vol confetti* last year brought her unprecedented success. It is the best-selling debut of the twenty-first century.

Dorsvloer vol confetti is a buoyant regional novel with poignant accents.

NRC NEXT

An enchanting novel. Reasons aplenty to keep Treur in mind.

DE VOLKSKRANT

A striking narrative talent.

TROUW

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Sample Translation

Confetti on the Threshing Floor

(Dorsvloer vol confetti)

by Franca Treur

(Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2009)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

Confetti on the Threshing Floor

A lodge in a garden of cucumbers

Sundays are over most quickly in winter. When the pastor ends the afternoon service at four o'clock with the blessing for another week, all seven of them fly to the bike shed. 'Someone's going to break a leg,' Father says. 'That's how accidents happen.' It's what he always says: 'That's how accidents happen.' Just as he always says, 'If you smash anything, I'm not going to pay for it.'

It's all about who'll be first to ride up the brick path at home. The starting shot is the first note of organ music that plays them out of the church. For the sake of decency, they take the stage of the race from the pew to the bike shed at a speed-walking pace, but as soon as they're on their bikes, there's no holding them. They slalom through the spreading fan of churchgoers, past men in suits and women full of God-fearing thoughts, past little girls who leap aside, scared of their wheels, and lanky lads who'd be quite happy to throw them off balance.

Once they're past the bend, they can finally race past the mound in top gear and head straight for the blond crests of the dunes. By the time the first motorised churchgoer has caught up with them, they have to be at least past the plague wood, the thicket of trees where they're never allowed to play, because it has old cows buried beneath it that died of something infectious.

The wind is always blowing down the lane where they live. A salty sea wind that pounds against their foreheads and turns their hair into greasy strands. As they approach the fence around their farmhouse, the cyclist in pole position, who now has an unassailable lead, sits up straight, nice and relaxed, with one hand casually tucked into a coat pocket. La la la.

Kateljne complains that she can never win because she catches the wind more than the boys do, because of the plastic bag with her hat in it hanging from the handlebars, which sometimes spins around like a mad thing. And because of her flapping skirt, which billows out like the plastic sheeting stretched over the

silage. ‘That could give you an advantage though,’ her brothers say, but when the wind pushes her in the back and blows up from beneath her, she needs two hands to make sure no one sees her white underpants.

Seven gasping children, with sand-coloured hair and tears forming in their eyes from the blasting wind. Three boys, Katelijne, and another three boys. The Minderhoud family. They jostle around by the back door to be the first inside after their father, who is the only one with a key.

They have names of course, but everyone in the village says ‘Arjaon and Rina’s boys’ and Arjaon and Rina themselves just call them ‘the boys’ for the sake of convenience. ‘Don’t forget, boys, you’re off to the dentist’s this afternoon, so make sure you clean your teeth properly.’ ‘Boys, put on your Sunday best; church starts in half an hour.’

But when Father says, ‘Boys, will you feed the cows?’, Katelijne knows — well, everyone knows, without it ever having been said — that she can leave her overalls and clogs where they are. Katelijne receives her work orders from Mother and when no work orders are necessary she receives her compliments, when Mother comes upstairs to find that all of the beds have been made and the toilet’s already gleaming before she has to point Katelijne in the direction of the washing soda. Mother does not like to waste words on household matters.

When the call comes — ‘Boys, dinner!’ — Katelijne is the last to take her place, with a quick check to see that everyone has cutlery. During the brief meal, talk soon turns to the agricultural minister Braks, to percentages of fat and protein, to five hundred guilders for a calf, and whether or not to put the cage wheels on the tractor before heading out to work the fields and, oh, there’s not much diesel left in the tank. Katelijne is never included in these kinds of conversations, most of which pass her by; she has her own world in her head, which depends very much on the library book she’s reading at the moment. The boys learn not to listen to her, for the simple reason that by their standards she never has anything interesting to say.

But there's no working on Sunday and their conversations are all about the sermon — at least during coffee after the service. And then the boys are happy to leave it to Katelijne, which really irritates her, because it's always difficult to talk about the path to salvation when you know it with your head, but not your heart. For bodily fortification, there are sesame crackers with cheese, which Father prepares, because it's Sunday. The rest of the week, the food is Mother's department. On Sunday they don't eat at midday, because they haven't done anything to make them hungry by that time. So they dive upon the four o'clock crackers like farmyard cats on a pan of milk.

'Another old sermon again,' Mother says as the sesame seeds fall onto the plateau of her breasts. Whenever there's no pastor, as is usually the case, because there's always a shortage of pastors in their church, someone reads a sermon. Preferably one from the distant past, when times were better and God's children were more plentiful.

'Ye-es,' Father replies, his moustache damp with coffee. 'But still relevant, don't you think?' And Mother agrees. That's their usual preamble to the real task: 'What were the points of the sermon, boys?' He always looks at the twins first—which he can do just as often as he likes, but they still don't know. The trickiest question they can handle is how many sweets they were given and they need their fingers even to work that out. Then he asks the older ones and Katelijne helps them out, in the hope of receiving a look of gratitude in return some day. However, as so often happens when people become too accustomed to something, they stopped noticing long ago; she just gets a kick in the shins from one or other of them when she doesn't perform.

If she can list the points, Father thinks she's listened carefully to the sermon, although it's just a matter of paying attention for a while at the beginning; there are usually only three points, and they often get repeated too. What she does with her thoughts during the sermon, or what her thoughts do with her, is entirely unrelated.

After the second cup of coffee, Father and Mother talk about other things than the sermon and that marks the beginning of the free part of the Sunday. Everything with ‘free’ in its name is always better than whatever came before. On Christmas Eve, the entire church waits impatiently for the ‘free’ story, which is terribly exciting, compared with the shepherds or the wise men from the East, and it’s also very good that they’re now free from the Germans. Enough of them still come to the island in the summer though, showing their wives where their headquarters used to be and talking about how many games of cards they played in such and such a bunker — you know, with my mate so-and-so, the one I told you about — before falling onto a beach towel, their throats hoarse from blathering on.

The little ones are the most impatient and the first to put their boots on — they won’t stay little for long though, because you need milk and fresh air to grow up big and strong and they have plenty of both here — and they chase (come on, whoo, move it, get along) the cows to the stall where they have to wait to be milked. Father makes a roll-up and turns on the milking machine. The big ones put down fodder on the side of the shed where the cows will soon exit with empty udders. Rogier, the eldest, is the only one who helps Father down in the milking pit, because if there are more than two of you, you just get in each other’s way.

Mother reads the church magazine, which she gets from Grandmother when she’s finished with it (like all of the magazines and newspapers that Father and Mother read). It contains only one tiny picture, of an open Bible. Katelijne prefers to read the *Christian Magazine for the Family*, which has pictures of Bibles in it too, but also ones of animals and of the Queen and the princes.

Mother often asks Katelijne what she thinks of the princes, particularly the eldest one when there’s a photograph of him in the magazine wearing his big naval officer’s hat, but Katelijne would rather read the serial story than look at the princes. And when she’s finished that, she goes to eat Duyvis peanuts at Grandmother’s, who lives nearby and is all on her own too. Katelijne’s grandfather was still around to be the twins’ grandfather, but not for Lourens. He

died without turning to the Lord and as far as Grandmother is concerned he's the no-longer living example of what happens when you think your business is more important than your salvation. So she only gets out the peanut tin after she's read Katelijne a story from the Bible. Or two.

If you want to get wet, you have to walk in the rain. If you want to be saved, you have to use all the right means: read the Bible, go to church and to catechism. You cannot earn salvation in this way, but the Lord in His mercy might see fit to bless you.

Kateljne knows she can give Grandmother no greater pleasure than to say 'more' when she's finished a story. Then Grandmother thinks that the Lord just might already be working to make the seed in her heart unfurl and grow. What a miracle that would be, for there are so few of God's children to be found these days. Although it feels very special that Grandmother might see her that way, Katelijne doesn't usually encourage her to carry on reading. She knows the stories and, to be honest, she's more interested in the handful of salted peanuts.

The brothers also take it in turns to go round, their cheeks flushed and rosy from the fresh air. They hold their hands out until Grandmother fills them — 'you little monkeys, what huge hands you have!', she always says, even to the little ones, so she doesn't really mean it — and then they scarp straight back to the cows.

Finally Katelijne dares to say to Grandmother that she thinks it's 'a bit unfair' that the boys don't have to stay and listen, but she always does. Grandmother gets completely the wrong end of the stick. She says that she thinks it's a shame for the poor boys too.

On Sunday evenings at the dinner table Father doesn't read out from the normal Bible, as he usually does, which always makes her thoughts drift off to something else after just two verses, except for when it's a really exciting bit. Like when he reads about the wanderings in the desert and the quails falling from the sky to feed the children of Israel, or the water springing out of the rock after Moses

speaks and strikes it with his staff. She loves the story of the heathen prophet Balaam, who comes to curse Israel, but ends up blessing Israel instead, after his ass speaks to him, and the serpent of brass that cured people when they beheld it, and she feels sympathy for Rahab, the harlot with the line of scarlet thread who saved the lives of Joshua's spies.

However, much of the Bible consists of laws, pieces of wisdom and warnings, which are dull and impenetrable, but Father doesn't miss out a single thing, not even the long lists of names.

'These are the generations of Shem: Shem was an hundred years old, and begat Arphaxad two years after the flood. And Shem lived, after he begat Arphaxad five hundred years, and begat sons and daughters. And Arphaxad lived five and thirty years, and begat Salah. And Arphaxad lived after he begat Salah four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters.' And this Salah begat children and his children begat others and so on and so forth. And all of the generations are in there.

'They all grew to be so old in those days, didn't they?' Father sighs longingly. The children understand what he means. If there's anyone who could use an extra century, it's Father; there's more than enough work for him to do.

But on Sunday evening the State Bible remains closed and Mother reads from the children's Bible instead. Father says they're not to call it that, the children's Bible, because there is only one real Bible, the true Word of God, and that's for everyone, young and old. She reads from *Biblical History, told to our children* and her voice, which is usually so loud, becomes as soft as velvet. The children almost forget that they already know the stories inside out.

At moments like this, sitting in the yellow glow of the bulb coming from beneath the fabric lampshade, Katelijne, who is naturally predisposed to such feelings, enjoys the warmth of her family around her. But these gatherings can never last for long; there are full udders waiting.

Cows come first. They were created before those who have to milk them.

One day a young pastor is sent to the village. Mother's very keen on him. He receives quite a lot of criticism in the village though, because his wife turned up to his first service wearing a red cardigan (it was a muted red, some people said, trying to make it sound better, but you really mustn't rush to defend such things, say the strict believers; this is about eternity, after all) and maybe it wasn't even so much the red cardigan that they didn't like, but the straight shoulders it was hanging from as she walked all the way to the front pew. A person who is full of pride in himself has no room for the Lord. On top of that, this pastor's wife appears to have stepped straight out of the pages of the Wehkamp catalogue, which can't be said of many of the village women. And that means that the pastor himself has become a little suspect too.

'Nothing is finer,' the pastor has said, 'than passing a house on your evening walk and hearing songs of praise ringing out to heaven.' Mother must have discussed this with Father in bed; he's not at all in favour of the young pastor. 'If you ask me, he'll be lapping it up,' he says, but he doesn't say what it is that he'll be lapping up. Maybe he got that from Grandmother; she is his mother after all and she's against the new pastor too. 'He preaches on and on, but he never gets to the point,' she said, although she took her words back a bit later.

All the same, on Sunday evening they sing exactly nine psalms, one for each of them. The older ones, who have had recorder lessons, take it in turns to accompany them. Their handmade shutters stay open, so that passers-by can not only hear the heavenly singing, but also see the heavenly singers.

In the summer, it's a different story. In the summer months there are three services on Sunday and that alone ensures that it's a day of unrest.

Father and Mother think that in principle two church services are enough, but it's too simple to imagine they could just behave as though it's winter. Sometimes there's a pastor in the afternoon and sometimes in the evening, and having a pastor is better than listening to one of the congregation reading out a sermon.

But Father still prefers to go in the morning and the afternoon, unless there's a very good service on in the evening.

Mother chooses to go in the evening, probably because she has the option, and so there's a chance that the children will have to go along with them three times; for example, if Father says they didn't sit still enough in the afternoon service, if they haven't been able to list the points of the sermon or if they've played with a ball on the day of rest. Another possibility is that they'll have to go with Mother in the evening, because she doesn't feel like going on her own.

It all started with a stale biscuit. 'I'm not eating those dusty old things,' Katelijne said rebelliously. 'At Aunt Mattie's they have sticky buns with their coffee after the Sunday service.' Mother called her an ungrateful little brat: 'And anyway how do you know the biscuits are stale? Couldn't keep your paws off, eh?' This accusation is now hanging like a balloon over their heads, welcoming the large grey clouds that are floating towards them over the dunes, watched very closely by nine pairs of eyes, because the hay is out drying.

'You can't trust the weather forecast one inch,' Father says and that's all he'll say on the subject, because he must place his trust in the Lord. He's speaking to no one in particular, but the people occupying the white plastic chairs on the freshly mown and sprinkled lawn have all heard and each of them is trying to think of an appropriate response, but there isn't one. It wasn't the subject in church that morning; who preaches about crops and toil in this day and age?

The hay was already as good as dry on Saturday. But Father didn't want to start baling it yet. Pelleboer the weatherman had talked about yet more high pressure and didn't mention clouds, not even a wisp. 'I'll wait,' Father had said. 'A few hours of strong sunshine and Monday will be a fine day for making hay.' But the sunset last night hadn't looked good.

In the scrubby adjoining meadow, where the recent drought has left hardly anything juicy and tender behind, the cows reach longingly over the barbed wire,

tempted by the scent of the freshly mown lawn. Grass is always greener on the other side.

‘Dead to the law by the body of Christ,’ Katelijne recites. ‘One: the law curses the sinner. Two: the law condemns the sinner. And three...’ She hesitates. ‘I had it just a second ago,’ she says anxiously. Curses, condemns, what was the third point again? She swings her feet backwards and forwards and the edge of the seat cuts into the flesh at the back of her knees.

‘The law kills the sinner,’ she says with a sigh of relief.

Father nods. ‘Do you remember the reading too?’

Kateljne thinks for a moment. It was from Galatians, but there’s no need for her to answer now, because a car comes past and everyone turns to look at the road, which very few people come down. The little ones stand on tiptoe to peer over the bushes.

‘Kooosje and her dog,’ Father announces, stretching his neck like a heron. The dog is running down the grass verge alongside the car, with its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Someone declares that it’s criminal of her to drive so quickly, which is completely unnecessary, because everyone agrees on that subject and she flies past too quickly every day. But still it feels good to voice such feelings and so there’s always someone who says it’s criminal and that Kooosje needs to get up off her lazy behind.

Other such frequently repeated statements are: that you’d never ever want to live in the village, that you’d never in a million years want to live in town or work in an office, that milk from a carton is undrinkable and that the best time to spread muck is when the wind’s blowing towards the village.

‘I’d like to go for a drive in Kooosje’s car some time,’ Rogier, the eldest brother, growls. ‘And then she could run along beside it until her tongue was sticking out of her gob. And you can bet I wouldn’t keep under the speed limit.’ It’s not the first time he’s said that either.

‘But it’s ages until you’re eighteen,’ Katelijne says.

‘I know how to drive a car though,’ he says. ‘I drive the tractor, don’t I?’

That's true. He's already driving it on the farm and around the yard. Not on the road yet though, because he needs a tractor driving licence first and you have to be sixteen for that. He can actually drive better than Father, because Father sometimes forgets to drop the front loader when he drives through the barn doors and they're only designed with the height of a snorting horse in mind.

Not that the barn is any the wiser, of course. It always remains in blissful ignorance. During the war, it even stood up to its knees in water for a while, but you wouldn't know that now. The only sign is a line running just above the rusty anchor plates; the salt has changed the colour of the joints from the ground up to that point, that's all.

'But yesterday you were driving around like a headless chicken,' says Christiaan, the second brother, who goes to special school and spends the rest of his time trying to catch Rogier out.

Christiaan produces rivalry just as he produces sweat, or his daily turd, which he then faithfully places at the feet of his first-born brother in the hope that he'll slip and fall flat on his face in it one day. He does this to assert his right to his own place in the pecking order (Father's pecking order, in which Rogier has for years been the undisputed leader). And that's also the reason why he's started bringing home nuts and bolts and nails that he 'found somewhere on the way to school'.

It began a few weeks ago. Rogier came home with a screw that he'd seen lying on the ground. It was still shiny; it had never been used.

'A self-tapper,' Father said, flicking it with his finger. 'Look, it's got a drill point on it too.' He put it in his trouser pocket, gave Rogier an appreciative nod and said, 'That's going to come in handy some time.'

The next day Christiaan suddenly placed two wing nuts on the tablecloth and three days later a bolt and a cap nut. All of them brand spanking new. They all agreed that he'd pilfered them from his school workshop and Father obviously told him he had to stop right away, but Christiaan said indignantly that he was just keeping his eyes open on the way to school these days.

‘Yeah, I bet. All the way from here to the bus stop,’ Rogier said, and then of course it all turned into another row, just the way things are heading now, following Christiaan’s comment about the ‘headless chicken’.

The little ones side with Rogier and their chubby hands start thumping away at Christiaan’s knees, which have a beige pair of trousers stretched around them on Sundays, not denim (those are just for weekdays). Katelijne lines up squarely behind Christiaan, not because he’s right, but because it’s Christiaan, and he’s always the underdog whenever Rogier’s involved. Finally, there’s Jeroen, the third brother, who tends to come out in favour of Rogier and whatever it is that Rogier’s in favour of — with the exception of red-and-white cows, because Jeroen is the only one in the family who prefers black-and-white ones. Jeroen has ideas all of his own, which don’t depend on anyone else at all. But what’s more important than his ideas is his unparalleled skill at calming skittish animals. He’s already managed to save Father a lot of trouble.

Mother asks if that’s what they learned at church, that bickering, and says she’d like to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee just for once, and Father shouts, ‘That’s enough’, and then another car comes past, driving slowly. A Passat, according to Rogier, who is always quick to notice things like that. The car has a German number plate.

‘Bloody Kraut,’ Christiaan says.

‘With a Hitler moustache,’ says Rogier, making stuff up.

‘They all have Hitler moustaches,’ says Christiaan, who always swallows that sort of nonsense. You can make Christiaan believe anything. When they’re lying in bed at night and Jeroen ‘reminds’ him that he hasn’t said his prayers, he kneels right down beside his bed and starts singing ‘Now I lay me down to sleep’, even though he did it only five minutes before.

‘He should go back to Krautland,’ says Lourens, which sounds particularly amusing coming from the mouth of someone who isn’t even four yet.

‘Who teaches you to say that kind of thing?’ Mother says, but she’s laughing too and so the whole family’s happy again.

The sun looks increasingly like an egg yolk from a chicken that hasn't eaten any greens — and that's not a good sign. You shouldn't be able to look at the sun; if you can, it's not strong enough to dry the grass. In the Bible, the prayer of one believer, the prophet Elijah, is enough to make it rain after a time of serious drought. Unfortunately it doesn't appear to work the other way around, when you want to stop the rain. Nine children of the Lord on a medium-sized lawn who would like to turn the hands of the clock forward until work once again becomes a sacred duty and not a forbidden act are apparently not enough to change a thing about the weather, so they will have to stand by and watch in resignation as the rain turns the potentially perfect hay into pale, musty rubbish that no cow would want to eat and which will lie overheating in the hayloft until it becomes a danger to them all.

Just after midday, at a quarter past twelve, Father sends everyone to bed, so that he can go himself, along with Mother. Most of them actually try to sleep, instead of reading a book in bed as they do in the winter. If they're snoring contentedly, they hope that Father won't wake them at two o'clock and they can at least escape the afternoon service. It's hardly worth even trying, because Father has no problem pulling the covers off them, but the trick worked once and if it worked once, it might work again. Katelijne, who can't sleep in the middle of the day anyway, intends to put down her book at ten to two and then pretend.

She's leaning on her elbow, reading a book she got from school as a Christmas present. She's already read it three times, but she's read all of the books in the library, so she doesn't have much choice. She's not really concentrating on the book though, because she has a hole in her stomach and it's rather noisy. In fact, it's really very noisy indeed for a hole that's the size of a stale biscuit.

She knows Mother doesn't have anything nice in the cupboards. 'Sweets are junk,' is Mother's simple motto. Against her own better judgement, Katelijne sneaks down to the kitchen anyway (Father and Mother's bedroom is directly above it). Her bare feet slap quietly against the floor tiles and she almost stumbles over the buckets by the washing machine. Mother uses them to catch the rinse

water, which she says is still clean enough for scrubbing the floor or flushing out the loo. In the kitchen the cupboard doors creak accusingly and the barrels and biscuit tins that she ferrets out make their own hollow metal sounds. Empty, all empty too.

A sandwich then. Carefully she navigates the butter dish over the jar of peanut butter. The lid of the butter dish can fly off really easily and it makes a terrible racket when you tap Morse code on it with your knife, let alone when it crashes onto the hard floor. The brown Brabantia breadbin makes such a loud grating noise too; it's as old as Vlissingen. Now just the chocolate spread, which of course has to be right at the back. Ten minutes of acrobatics later, everything's on the kitchen table and all she needs is a knife.

Just as she's got the kitchen drawer open, she hears a car slowing down and turning up their drive. Visitors on the day of rest are as rare here as sweets in the jar, and they've picked a pretty inconvenient time to turn up too. Katelijne watches as the innocent pot of chocolate spread transforms into a vessel of temptation. The butter dish leaves behind a slick and sleazy smear of grease and the bread looks ashamed at enticing her to the filthy sin of eating.

Is there any way to avoid a slap on the behind now?

Kateljne hurries out on her bare feet through the patio doors to the drive, where a woman has got out of the passenger side of the car. She has short hair, painted lips and earrings and she's wearing trousers. A man is sitting at the wheel and in the back seat is a boy of about ten with a face as pale as a sugar beet and brown eyes that are far too big. It's the Passat that drove past before.

'Ist deine Mutti irgendwo?'

'What?' Katelijne says.

'Dein Vati oder deine Mutti? Sind sie da?' As though the woman knows that her mother and father must be there somewhere, she projects the shrill words past the honeysuckle and the Virginia creeper up to the window with its crocheted curtains and the dried bridal bouquet.

‘No,’ Katelijne says quietly. She looks up. No sign of movement behind the curtains as yet; her parents are not likely to sacrifice their Sunday afternoon nap to engage in corrective punishment, but there are no guarantees, just as eighty years of faithful churchgoing offer no surety for the fate of the soul in the hereafter.

The woman looks from Katelijne to the car to the sky, with disappointment on her face. The sky appears to be eliciting sympathy for their plight by turning the colour of the sand used to fill horse paddocks. Before long, puddles will render much of the land hereabouts inaccessible for both man and beast.

‘*Vor es zu regnen anfängt, wollen wir das Zelt aufgeschlagen haben.*’ She brings her fingertips together to make the pointed roof of a tent. ‘But everywhere is full. Could we please stay here for just one night? *Wir würden dir sehr erkenntlich sein.*’ She points at the grass beside the drive, where they have their swing and the rabbit run with two black-and-white Giant Papillons in it.

Do they want to camp here beside the house? Father and Mother will never allow that. No strangers running around in their garden.

Kateljne shakes her head. It’s not going to work.

‘*Er ist krank,*’ the woman says. She points at the boy in the back of the car. He stares at Katelijne with his cow eyes. She isn’t used to that much direct attention and suddenly realises she’s standing there in her nightie.

‘*Er ist krank,*’ the woman repeats.

Krank. Katelijne runs the word through her mind. It means ‘sick’. The Lord Jesus once used that word Himself. ‘I was sick, and ye visited me,’ He said. ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’

In some Bibles, every word that the Lord Jesus actually said Himself is printed in red. Her teacher at school told them about it.

Kateljne points at the grass. ‘Okay, there then,’ she says, giving in, because that’s how it feels: as though something stronger than her is forcing her to speak.

‘*Ach, vielen Dank. Wann kommen deine Eltern wieder?*’

Kateljne can feel the woman looking her up and down, from head to toe. She wants to tell her that she's wearing her nightdress because... actually, why is she? Who goes to bed in the middle of the day?

'I *krank* too,' she says, pointing at the pink bear on her tummy. The words are out before she realises and suddenly her parents are no longer lying behind those yellowing curtains, but are racing like mad to find a doctor to cure her illness. She likes that image: Mother saying 'Oh, Arjaon. Don't drive so quickly,' and Father answering furiously that he is prepared to go to any extreme to help his daughter.

'*Ach so,*' the woman says, and her chilly gaze suddenly becomes a look of sympathy, which Katelijne prefers, if she's honest. '*Wann kommen deine Eltern wieder?*'

Kateljne doesn't understand. 'There,' she says, pointing again. 'There, by the swing.'

The woman gets back into the car with her husband and son and they drive up close to the grass. Back in the kitchen, Katelijne returns to making her sandwich because it's time to think of herself now after all that charity. Then she hides it under her nightie, but it won't stay there — it does stay put when she tucks it inside the elastic of her pants though — and she makes herself another one. Lids and cupboards shut, crumbs brushed off the table, no one any the wiser.

Munching away behind the nets of her small bedroom window, she watches the man as he spreads the tent out on the ground. The woman says something and takes hold of one of the ends of the tent. The man shrugs his shoulders, the woman shakes her head and points up at the sky, which is about to burst open like a juicy sun-ripened tomato. They turn the tent ninety degrees.

The boy is kneeling on the back seat, with his elbows on the parcel shelf and something in his hands that looks like a Rubik's cube. Again he looks straight into Katelijne's eyes, and she shrinks away, but not for long. Only God and her conscience can see her standing there behind the curtains.

Kateljne suspects that Father and Mother will be angry, because they're not keen on strangers, but she had no choice. The men on the road to Emmaus did not recognise the Lord Jesus when He walked with them and when they invited Him into their house. God forbid that you might send Him away.

The tent's up. The man is tying ropes to the poles of the swing and fixing them in the ground with pegs. It's a high, almost square tent, the colour of milky coffee, with dark-brown zips.

The boy is allowed out of the car now. He's wearing jeans and a black jumper with yellow stripes and carrying his pillow under his free arm. He looks at the house one more time, where Katelijne is spying through a window in a small room, and then he disappears into the tent with his father. The mother follows with a blanket.

Kateljne has had enough of standing there, because the lino's cold on her feet, but she feels responsible, like a lifeguard at the open-air swimming pool. She needs something high to sit on. There's a cupboard unit from Grandmother's old kitchen up against the window, which is now used for Katelijne's clothes. She can't sit on that though; it doesn't have a top, just a pale-blue bath towel, and when she pulls that away, she's looking straight into the cutlery drawer full of underpants, cotton tights and rolled-up socks.

She lifts her desk chair (which also began its career in Grandmother's kitchen) onto the bed, but that's much too wobbly and also too far from the window. So she puts it against the windowsill and piles it high with books from her only bookshelf. Sitting on top of that, she has a perfect view of the German man coming out of the milking shed with a bottle in his hands, presumably full of water that he's taken from the low tap. His wife stoops as she comes out of the tent and says something to him, pointing at their house. The man shakes his head. The bottle, which he was holding aloft like plundered booty, sinks down; it would seem there are suddenly more important issues. The boy comes out of the tent and joins in the conversation. His parents look at him seriously, listen to what he says and then nod. He takes a few steps forwards, leaving his parents standing a

couple of metres behind him, and fiddles with his trousers. His mother rushes forward to help, but he pushes her away and manages it all by himself. He pees in an arc against the rabbit run, as though his parents aren't standing there watching him with worried faces.

But it's good to be hospitable, Katelijne thinks. Even when your guests have just peed all over your rabbit run and are now eating a banana on your swing.

'What's all this then?' Father's standing in the doorway with his bandy white legs, dark-blue socks on his feet and a saggy pair of pants above. He is looking in surprise at Katelijne, who is still sitting on top of her books by the window. Then he sees the German car through the nets, and the tent, which the family have just crawled inside, because it's started raining so hard that everything is soaked through, like cardboard that's fallen into a puddle. That certainly includes the tent and the hay.

'They're sheltering here from the rain. There was no room for them anywhere else and they have a sick little boy with them.' Luckily it comes out just as she's rehearsed.

'Is this all your doing? Why didn't you call us?'

Kateljne gets it in the neck, especially from Mother, who comes to join Father, with her liver-coloured tights already on beneath her nightdress. She would never do something like that without first consulting Father. Her fury is fierce and comes quickly, as though it's been lying in wait for some time.

'I can't go to church like this,' Father says. And then the anger begins all over again. Hadn't Katelijne thought about this? You're completely tied down when you have strangers on your property.

'You think you can just do whatever you like.'

'They'll need to use the toilet too,' Mother suddenly gasps, already picturing brown German stripes in the loo.

'Yes, and tonight as well,' Father says. 'So the door will have to stay open all night. If we let them stay here, that is.'

Mother's against the idea, but Father thinks it's not right to just send them away. The decision is made that Mother will go to church now, with Katelijne and the boys, and that Father should stay here with little Lourens. Then they'll talk about it again this evening.

The twins are excited about going in the car, but it's almost dry now and Mother decides at the last moment that they'll go on their bikes, so they arrive sweating two minutes before the service begins, with wet patches on their clothes from the dripping trees in the village square. There's no time now to brush their hair. As Katelijne and Mother are hurrying to put on their hats in front of the mirror in the hallway, the vestry door is already opening beside them. A procession of ten men gosesteps past, all in black, black as their souls are before the Lord, according to the teachings of the church. The secretary of the church council looks in annoyance at the dishevelled and incomplete Minderhoud family, his three chins lending extra weight to his disapproval.

Kateljne hopes the sermon will be about the good Samaritan — that thought occurred to her on the way to church — but unfortunately it's about the children of Judah, who were carried away from Canaan by the Babylonians because they had sinned against the Lord. Most of them settled in their new land and adapted to the ways of the godless Babylonians. There were only a few who still feared the Lord, a few lone children of Zion weeping with longing for the temple and with wonder that the Lord had not yet destroyed them for their sins:

Should we not weep now that the Lord has departed from our homeland? Should we not weep now that our leaders no longer heed God or His Word, now that they blaspheme against God's commandments and dishonour God's day and God's name? Should we not weep now that so few true, weeping children of Zion remain, now that only the rare soul may be found, like a cottage in a vineyard, like a lodge in a garden of cucumbers?

Exactly, thinks Katelijne, promptly adapting the sermon to her own purposes. We should be a cottage in a vineyard, a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, and that means offering accommodation to those who wish to shelter, for how should the world know otherwise that we are cottages and lodges? And she decides to announce this when they are having coffee afterwards, because she has not yet had the chance to bring up the subject of their Biblical obligation.

She glances at Mother, who is too busy with her own interpretation of the sermon to return her daughter's look.

'Oh dearly beloved, let us once more humble ourselves in true awareness of our guilt,' the elder reads with just a little additional drama in his voice, which means the amen is approaching. The boys, who have sat slumped all the way through the sermon, can hear it too and they sit up straight, ready to be the first on their feet for the prayer of thanks.

'We must be as the true children of Zion. Fathers and mothers, young men and daughters, children, how great it would be if we could cry out as one: We have sorely offended our God, we have strayed from the path of salvation. Yes, we and our fathers too. Oh, that we might bow with heartfelt sorrow before God's unerring and precious Word. Amen.'

When she cycles up the driveway beside her silent mother, the tent and the Passat have gone.

'They've found another place,' Father says. 'I said they could stay here tonight if they couldn't find anything else.'

Kateljne asks where they've gone and Father answers that he doesn't know. He says it so sternly that Katelijne doesn't dare to introduce the subject of the lodge in the garden of cucumbers and decides to keep it for Grandmother instead, who at least understands that sort of language.

Now the boys finally want to hear all about the visitors too and Katelijne revels in the attention and the power of her knowledge. She uses her ammunition sparingly, releasing the details one by one. Father and Mother haven't heard all of the details yet either (there aren't actually that many, so she has to be economical

with them). She watches with satisfaction as her words are received by eight open mouths.

‘Did he really piss on the rabbit run?’

‘Filthy pig.’

‘Typical kraut.’

An appropriate punishment is devised for Katelijne’s inconsiderate behaviour: straight to bed after dinner for a whole week, which by Monday evening Mother has altered to straight to bed after finishing the washing up.

Sadly, by the next day, none of her brothers are interested in new details about the German boy. The hay needs to be turned; they have to make the best of it. Once again, the roles are as they have always been. The vast majority of the family is obviously perfectly happy with that.

The twins find a Rubik’s cube by the swing. A few days later, when interest in it has dwindled, Katelijne takes it for herself and hides it away, deep beneath her clothes in the kitchen unit. At night in bed, when the light from the lighthouse peeps intermittently through a crack in the curtains, gently stroking her cheek like a mother kissing a sleeping baby, she takes it out. As she twists the coloured blocks, her imagination takes her travelling, along with the pasty-faced boy, like a ladybird perched on the rear window of the car.