

An unexpected message from above

Arjan Visser

Fall from Heaven



IN HIS SECOND NOVEL *Hemelval* ('Fall from Heaven'), Arjan Visser transports the reader to the world of the pigeon fancier. While still a young boy, Lode Bast becomes a fanatical pigeon-lover when he takes care of a wounded pigeon which lands in his garden; in fact it seems he was born 'with a pigeon in his heart'. Lode is a small, timid boy who grows up in a strict Puritan environment with a 'father who won't talk and a mother who won't shut up'. Nev-

ertheless, his father is all too pleased to tuck him in at nights and give him a kiss that lasts just a little too long. When his father dies – this later turns out to be suicide – Lode becomes even more of an outsider at school. Kip, one of his few friends, takes him to the local pigeon club where he finally finds honour, respect and friendship. His pigeons 'elevate him, make him bigger'.

Geesje, the check-out girl at the supermarket, seems an ideal marriage partner as well as being someone with a feel for pigeons. Their marriage, however, turns into a drama. Just how mistaken Lode actually was is shown explicitly in the second part of *Hemelval*, written from Geesje's point of view. To her, Lode should have meant salvation from a dead-end existence, full of guilt and sin. When her little man turns out not to be able to pray, she looks for salvation elsewhere; until she receives an unexpected message from above...

Even in his first book *De laatste dagen* ('The Last Days'), Visser showed himself to be a discerning chronicler of pallid lives subjected to higher powers. In *Hemelval*, he once again tells a story of lonely souls who are determined to find happiness here on earth. Visser's precise literary style, the loaded pace of his narration, and his light irony give this human drama its explosive charge.

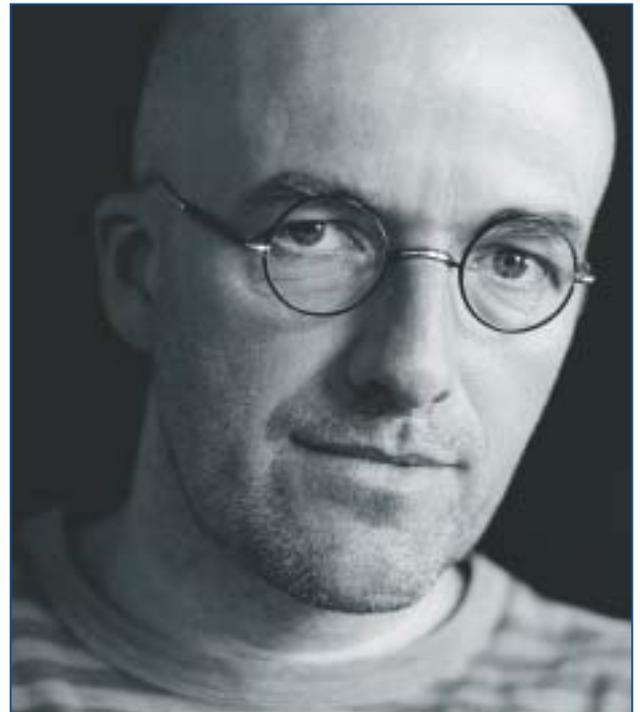


photo Harry Cock

Arjan Visser (b. 1961) earned journalistic renown through an interview series which has been running in the *Trouw* daily newspaper since 1998. A collection of these interviews has now have been published in book form. Dutch people from different backgrounds, famous and unknown, were asked to respond to the themes of Ten Commandments and this produced surprising confessions about faith and morals. Visser's fascination for this material was reflected in his first book, *De laatste dagen* (2003) which takes a farming family and describes in tangible terms how their minds are captivated by an itinerant preacher. This book was nominated for the AKO Literary Prize and received the Marten Toonder/Geertjan Lubberhuizen Award as well as the Anton Wachter prize. Visser has been highly praised for his capacity to balance compassion and irony, a talent which he made the most of to portray the vulnerable characters in his second novel.

After only two novels, it is impossible to ignore Arjan Visser. His style is oppressive, his suffocating universe gives little reason for hope, but the watertight set-up leaves no choice but to be swept along in the evolution of these minor lives.

ABDELKADER BENALI



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Synopsis Arjan Visser, Fall From Heaven

In the summer of the ninth year of Lode Bast's life, an injured pigeon falls at his feet. The boy puts it in a shoebox and hides it under the bed in his room. He knows that his father will object to his plan to take care of the animal and is therefore not surprised a few days later when the box has disappeared. Lode doesn't dare ask after the pigeon's fate. In any case he doesn't ask his father anything. It's safest not to say anything, he thinks. It is not clear what has happened between father and son. Lode cannot remember any actual events, but always feels the menace, the fear. Arguments between his parents usually end in his father departing to the shed at the back of the house. This is the place where Lode's father, two years after the pigeon fell into the back garden, commits suicide.

Neither of them will say it, but life changes for the better for Lode and his mother. Now they can enjoy each other's company openly. The downside of their happiness is that it becomes ever more difficult for Lode to go outside, to make friends. Shortly after his father's funeral the boy comes round from next door. He has been sent by his mother and can hardly hide his disinterest, until Lode shows him the ring which the injured pigeon had been wearing around its leg. The boy recognises the number on the ring and runs home with it. The next day he comes round for Lode and shows him that the ring belonged to one his father's best pigeons. When Lode tells him how he looked after the animal he gets an old pigeon as a gift. This time he doesn't have to hide his pigeon, he is given a coop and all the accessories – including a female pigeon which will soon produce offspring – and can devote himself to a love which will prove to be the greatest comfort in his lonely youth. He doesn't manage to have much contact with kids his own age, but he feels a close connection to his pigeons – before long he is allowed to convert the shed into a dovecote. They fly out into the world on his behalf. They explore the surroundings, the land, the world, but what is most important: they always return home. To him. Lode grows into his role of pigeon

flyer. He becomes a member of homing pigeon club See You Again and is yet able, without performing physical feats, to become champion.

After secondary school he gets a job at an insurance office. It's a humdrum job – which he landed thanks to his connections at See You Again – but he's satisfied with it. What counts is not the hours spent in the office, but those afterward, in the shed, amongst his pigeons. When his mother dies Lode continues to live in the parental home. Eventually he tries to find a girl, but in the end is himself chatted up by Geesje, a checkout girl at the supermarket where he does his daily shop. Lode is surprised by her interest in him. He is particularly pleased that she clearly has no objection to his passion for pigeon racing.

Geesje, too, hasn't made much of her life so far. She is the child of strict religious parents and often clashed with them on account of her fiery character. When she becomes pregnant against their wishes and has an abortion the situation at home cannot continue any longer. She leaves home and wants to throw herself into a life of freedom, but then it dawns on her that she longs for the security of the parental home after all. She meets Lode and thinks that with him, a small, clean-living young man, she can build a similar life. Lode and Geesje get married. Geesje moves in with Lode and, in addition to security, tries to get her sexual desires satisfied. Lode fails in this. When her pregnancy also ends after twenty weeks in miscarriage she becomes convinced that she has made the wrong choice. Lode does not really know how to react to the miscarriage – in actual fact he is relieved; he'd rather not be a father – and withdraws ever more to the dovecote. At the office, where by now he is in charge of insurance for other pigeon flyers in the town, he discovers that his boss is involved in fraud. When one day this boss, who has been belittling him for years, goes too far, Lode decides to capitalise on this knowledge. The boss bribes Lode by letting him win first prize at a pigeon festival: a bus trip for two to Lourdes. Lode, who really doesn't want to go on the trip, thinks he can do Geesje a favour with this prize. He wants to try to do something good with this surprise. Geesje reacts enthusiastically, but not without ulterior motives: meanwhile, on a so-called

Spirit Day – where clairvoyants and faith healers gather – she has met a man who gives her the excitement she'd lost in the barren years with Lode. He is called Adri Zilversmid and has specialised in 'past lives'. The day before she is due to go to Lourdes with Lode she cries off. She assures him that he should go (so that she can spend a few days alone with Adri). Lode feels he has no option. He must go now. He doesn't dare say that he is particularly dreading leaving his pigeons on their own. Then he decides to take his favourite pigeon – which he has named The Son of Geesje – with him on the trip. He fastens a little case to the pigeon's foot in which he can put a message. In this way he can conceal his fear in a romantic way: he doesn't have to leave his pigeon behind and, once he has reached Lourdes, can send the animal back home with a message for Geesje. Yet The Son's company offers him little comfort: after only a few miles Lode starts to feel unsure. Where is he going to? How will he get back? That evening he rings home. A man answers the phone. Lode's fear and uncertainty are growing all the time. The next day the bus follows a winding road past Rocamadour. When Lode tries to take out the pigeon the animal escapes. Lode drops to his knees, searches for his bird, hears the chauffeur swearing, feels the bus turn, sees The Son in the distance but is then hit on the head by a dislodged first aid kit and passes out. Because of the pigeon the driver had lost control of the wheel. The bus shot off the road and came to halt on the edge of a ravine. Just before it was about to plunge into the ravine the passengers were saved by the fire brigade. Lode is the only passenger – unconscious, on the floor of the touring car – to travel the final few yards. Just before the bus hits the bottom and bursts into flames, Lode's pigeon escapes through the sunroof. On his leg he is carrying the little case in which, the previous evening, Lode put a message for Geesje. Here ends part one of the book – 'There'.

In part two – 'Back' – Geesje hears that Lode has been killed. In a sense this solves a problem for her, but her conscience troubles her. Hasn't she driven him to his death? She only dares ask Adri Zilversmid to come round when she suddenly realises that she hasn't been looking after Lode's pigeons in his absence

and imagines she'll find nothing other than dead animals in the shed. Zilversmid comes and before long he moves in. Pursued by a woman from a debt-collection agency, whom Geesje initially views as a rival, living together with Geesje is a perfect way out. He soon takes over and decides to convert the dovecote into a surgery. Geesje lets this happen. She has played along with his little games – he is always inventing new lives in which he can dominate her sexually, but worries about his insatiability. At the same time she dare not resist. When she falls pregnant again she is frightened she'll have another miscarriage, but is also frightened for the future of a healthy child: will Zilversmid be a good father? Wouldn't her child with Lode as father have been better off? As the weeks pass her worries grow. The distance opens up between her and Zilversmid. One day, around the twentieth week of her pregnancy, she sees a pigeon landing on the shed in the back garden. She's not the only one watching the bird. Zilversmid's cat – who moved in with him – has also seen the pigeon. The cat waits for the moment when the animal perches on the paving stones at the back of the house, jumps on top of it, takes it between its jaws and shakes it about. Geesje rushes towards it, chases the cat away and bends over the dove. She sees the little case, picks out the note and then, just before she feels Zilversmid's hands on her shoulders, reads the message Lode sent her: I'M COMING HOME.

Sample translation from

Hemelval by Arjan Visser

(Amsterdam: Augustus, 2006)

Translated by Barbara Fasting

1

Lode Bast's first pigeon fell with a gentle thud one summer afternoon onto the freshly scrubbed tiles behind his parents' house. It landed next to a yellow tow truck which seemed, afterwards, to have been parked there deliberately. Lode knelt down next to the bird and looked up, as if mentally estimating the distance the animal had fallen. Two white clouds in the shape of smurf hats drifted by. A warm breeze caressed Lode's forehead. Someone somewhere was mowing the lawn. The pigeon allowed itself to be picked up without protest. A pale grey layer of feathers covered its breast and wings, it wore a mother-of-pearl collar around its neck, and a dark executioner's hood seemed to have been pulled over its head. Its eyes were red. It was only when Lode pressed it to his chest that he saw that one of its legs was attached to its body by no more than a single tendon, more like a thread. Lode took the tiny ring encircling the pigeon's limp leg between his thumb and forefinger and read 'h, sixty-eight, dash...'; he rotated it and suddenly felt something fall into his lap. The pigeon looked around unperturbed, as if it wasn't the first time it had lost a body part. Encouraged by the bird's stoic reaction, Lode did not take the incident to heart. He put the ring into his shorts' pocket, picked up the leg – a wrinkled, four-toed claw – and tossed it into the flower bed. Lode put the pigeon down where it had fallen. 'Wait here,' he said. Then he went and got a shoe box from the shed, covered the bottom with earth, and lowered the bird, his bird, carefully into the box. Lode placed the lid, in which he had made a number of holes with a screwdriver, on the box and hid it under his bed.

The first day he fed the bird peanuts and breadcrumbs, the second day he brought it an egg cup full of tomato soup. The third day, after school, as he was heading up to his room with a piece of chocolate, his mother stopped him. 'According to your father,' she said, 'pigeons are flying rats.'

Lode raced up the stairs as if he thought he could catch up with time, but under the bed he found only some soil and a big marble that had been missing for months. He found out nothing about the fate of his pigeon.

Lode had a father who wouldn't talk and a mother who couldn't keep quiet, but as a rule the things she talked about had nothing to do with what he kept silent about. Lode's mother talked about the weather, about her health, which always left something to be desired, and about the news that reached them – the occupants of Tomatenstraat 15 – via the newspaper. She read the headlines aloud and commented on them. Ferry capsizes, leaving four hundred dead: 'Imagine, four hundred people!' Minister to push through tax increases: 'And just who do you think will be hit hardest?' She never expected an answer to her questions. She talked because she didn't like silence. And Father only reacted to the noise she produced when it went on too long. Then he slapped her in the face and later – after Lode arrived – thumped his fist on the table. Afterwards he usually stomped off to the shed outside and didn't reappear for hours.

Lode did not remember ever being struck by his father, and yet it was as if his body had felt those blows. He'd recoil when his father made some unexpected movement. He was even afraid of a goodnight kiss. And whenever he chose something different from his father, there was that look, the throbbing vein in his neck, the duck forward as if to get up from his chair. That's why Lode did what was expected of him. He cried over his pigeon, but not in his father's presence, who never liked it when Lode cried. 'Save your tears for later,' he'd said, once when Lode confessed that his fear of the dentist had made him keep his toothache secret for weeks. 'It'll all get a whole lot worse.'

Lode decided to forget the pigeon. What he held onto was the memory of its red eyes and the tiny ring, which he kept in a matchbox. It read H68-180611. Like a secret code, a message – but from whom? There was no one he could ask; besides he didn't really want to talk about it. Fantasizing was better than talking. Sometimes the pigeon was bringing a message for spies, at other times

extraterrestrials had thrown it overboard from their UFO. After that he didn't think about the pigeon ring for a long time.

The day his father was carried out of the back shed on a stretcher and taken to the hospital by ambulance, two years after the pigeon had landed at Lode's feet, the ring rolled back into his consciousness. He took it out and examined it carefully. Was there a connection between this mysterious little ring and his father's accident? This time Lode didn't wonder who the sender was, but tried to unravel the message. H68-180611. What significance might this combination of numbers have for his life? The question kept him awake. Now that, for the first time, his father had not come up for the kiss that always lasted too long, for the unduly rough 'tucking in', now that he no longer had to admonish his heart to beat more calmly, it still continued to flutter in anticipation, restless and unfulfilled. The numbers marched through his head, six, eight, one, eight, zero, six, one, one, they exchanged places, they tumbled over one another, confusing him. When on the following day, 18 June 1972, Lode Bast lost his father, he settled for this solution: it was the eighteenth day of the sixth month and he was eleven years old. He had not discovered what 'H68' stood for, but he'd racked his brain long enough. An incredible sense of liberation came over him.

Not long after the funeral he and his mother were sitting together in the back garden. His mother was crying, but she didn't look sad. In her lap lay a letter that was folded in three widthwise, like a bill. Her tears sparkled in the sunlight. Lode poured her a glass of lemonade and she said 'Lovely!' in a tone of voice he had not heard her use before.

A little later they moved the dining room table and two chairs outside, creating a little nook under the orange glow cast by the canvas awning. They had chips and mayonnaise – both of which Lode's father considered unhealthy so had not allowed to enter the house. No fatty foods, no clutter, no racket, no nagging, no talking back. But now they didn't have to worry about the rules his father had laid down. Lode ate greedily. His fingers glistened. His mother nibbled at the dark

yellow overdone chips. Between them lay the letter, the neatly folded letter, covered with greasy fingerprints. They were both looking at it.

‘There’ll probably be some gossip about your father’s death,’ his mother said. ‘Pay no attention. As soon as there’s another death, they’ll forget about us.’

Since that day, the day the ambulance drove away from Tomatenstraat, Lode felt stared at and ignored. As soon as he got too close to people, on the street or in the shops, conversation ceased, and it was as if everyone immediately put on a mask, a mask that looked like the face of an old woman crying. They murmured behind their thick, warped plastic lips, and in the little holes in their eyes Lode saw the fires of curiosity. The murmurers made him feel uncomfortable, but he believed his mother. He knew that even without a new death, she was right: this wouldn’t go on forever. The very first night, he realized that that’s how it could be from now on: there was no reason for him not to simply fall asleep. What he ought to do was just hang on to the good things – the feeling of relief, the closeness of his mother, and never let go.

Lode’s mother held a small object up to his face. A clown winked at him from the brightly coloured wrapper, the word ‘Deelicious!’ coming out of his mouth. Lode wasn’t hungry, but he took the lollipop and finished it in big bites. The cold crept up to his forehead. Now everything was full, his stomach, his head. He felt as if any minute he might explode, but this time his ‘weak constitution’ – as his mother referred to it – held up. The nausea which so often plagued him and which could only be remedied by vomiting, remained at bay. He sniffed the evening air, looking up at the deep blue sky. It seemed more crowded than ever. He remembered a question he’d once asked his father: whether an airplane had ever collided with a star. ‘Not yet,’ he’d replied, ‘not yet.’

Lode looked at his mother. She was staring up at the sky, too. He saw the sparkle in her eye, the smile on her face, and just for a moment he dared to believe that not everything he was afraid of would actually happen.

That was how the summer of 1972 passed: in festive disobedience. It was as if they were celebrating their independence with new rituals and previously

forbidden treats. Lode went to bed later, but fell asleep sooner. In the morning he ate breakfast slowly, postponing the moment when he had to leave the house as long as possible. Outside, questions lurked. Questions that did not demand an answer, only confirmation, questions that embarrassed him. Inside, everything was obvious, orderly, and clear.

And yet Lode remained reticent during those first weeks without a father. He was still afraid to say what he did or didn't like. He accepted the improvements in his existence the same way he had managed to endure his past unhappiness: by keeping as quiet as possible. It was as if he was still expecting some intervention, a reprimand, a slap. But whereas in the past he had waited for things to go away, now he hoped they would never end.

One sultry day in early September, when a clap of thunder split the leaden sky and the rain came bucketing down on the tiles in the back garden, Lode did something he knew his father would have disapproved of. He took off his clothes and dashed outside in his underpants. He danced in the puddles, threw his arms into the air. His mother stood at the kitchen window, smiling. She clapped her hands, as if she heard music coming from the back yard. Her cheeks were red. Lode beckoned to her to come outside. She nodded enthusiastically and called out, 'I'm coming!' Minutes later the two of them were standing side by side, Lode and his mother. She planted a kiss on his dripping hair. 'My sweet Lode-Lode'. He put his arms around her and began to dance again. They danced until it stopped raining and the scent of the flowers and the grass was stronger than ever before.

Autumn came and the euphoria that had been evoked by the rain dance and had continued to smoulder under the summer sun, barely survived the cold east wind. Then Lode discovered a more modest happiness, that of simple homeliness, together, indoors. Warm, cosy, pleasurable. Only then did he notice the plants on the windowsill. There had never been plants there before. And there were pictures on the wall that he'd never seen before either. He pretended that the two of them

had survived some catastrophe and that in the last few months everyone on Tomatenstraat had come over with things for their house.

By now Lode understood that his father's death had been horrible. He was 'that poor boy' and people referred to his mother as 'that poor woman'. Many of the cards and letters they had received expressed the wish that God would be merciful to Lode's father. Lode's mother had hung the messages of condolence above the sliding doors with Scotch tape, as she used to do with Christmas and birthday cards. It was a custom she'd had to give up, because her husband said they only 'collected dust', and besides they 'looked untidy'.

In the light of her presence, beneath the lamp of her love, Lode seemed to grow. He listened as his mother read from the newspaper. Sometimes he shared her disbelief, at other times he gently differed with her. They understood each other; it was as if only now, without the third person – the outsider – they dared to acknowledge that fact. They laughed a lot, and thanked each other for the smallest kindness done out of love. Lode not only helped with the housework, but occasionally combed his mother's hair or cut her toenails, which were thick and hard. His mother refined the attention she bestowed on him. She cared for him as she had always done, but took pleasure in surprising him with little treats. She bought a jar and kept it filled with sweets, came home with a night light – which his father had always been against – and plugged it into the socket next to his bed without saying anything to him. At supper she'd fill his glass with Seven-Up instead of water, put a pinch of cinnamon on his apple sauce, a bit of honey in his tea or, when it got colder, a spoonful of whipped cream on his hot chocolate. He would have liked to do something in return for all those things, for everything that suddenly came his way, but he didn't know quite what. He thanked her in words and the occasional kiss. For him, each kiss was a deed, something he had resolved to do. He set off to deliver it, his lips already pursed. And when he was within inches of her head, he stopped for an instant and then planted his kiss quickly, like the thrust of a dagger: a rapid back-and-forth. Her kisses were

fleeting, too, but manifold. They wafted towards him, barely touching his cheek, and leaving behind the merest trace of perfume.

And she cried, too: her tears were like dew, soft drops that soaked him without his realizing it. Lode cried fat, solid tears that seemed to appear on command. Brief, violent bouts of crying. ‘For Father,’ he’d explain afterwards, with red-rimmed eyes and a crumpled face. His mother suspected that this was a half-truth, but she was incurious about the things that he withheld. Whatever it was, it would go away by itself if he stayed with her.

Lode did not know why he’d suddenly burst into tears. When he looked at his tearstained face in the mirror and asked that question himself, he couldn’t think of anything. It was only when he turned away from the washbasin and looked outside that his head filled with reasons. In the space that he shared with his mother – 120 square metres between Tomatenstraat 13 and Tomatenstraat 17, four rooms and a kitchen, a back garden and a shed – everything was beautiful and right. Outside, on the other side of the purple corduroy curtains, behind the man-high fence, were the things that were bad and ugly.

2

Rocamadour. The word was inextricably linked to the idiom of pigeon-breeding. He could hear himself calling to his birds: rocamadourrrr. It was a lovely cooing sound, just the kind of sound that pigeons liked, and yet ... there was something not quite right about it. Lode tried it out softly, on his tongue: ‘Rocamadourr, Rocamadourr ...’ He rolled the ‘r’ in the front of his mouth, changed the ‘a’s into ‘o’s’, but it seemed to take on a more and more sinister ring. With his eyes screwed up and his nose in the air, he did his best to erase the place name from his memory, but the word was like the hiccups he couldn’t seem to get rid of. It was not until a half-hour later, when Marielle Baard launched into her ‘practical information on the delightful little town of Rocamadour’ that he realized that, for a brief moment, he’d succeeded. But there was the sound again: that primeval sound, a dark rumbling in his chest. It made him anxious.

‘Over a hundred and fifty monkeys in the Fôret des Singes,’ the tour guide said. And: ‘A unique collection of model trains’. He picked up snatches of sentences, but missed the words linking them. The primeval sound interfered with good reception: roucoumedourrr. ‘Delicious fresh goat cheese from local producers.’ ‘The magnificent caves of Gouffre de Padirac.’ Lode dropped his shoulders. Could he ask for an aspirin? ‘In Le Rocher des Aigles, there are over four hundred birds.’ Roucoumoudourrr – birds? Lode sat bolt upright. ‘Eagles, vultures, owls, falcons’, Marielle Baard went on. Lode pricked up his ears, the sound disappeared. ‘And there are spectacular shows in which the birds soar to a height of a thousand metres, and then, at a command from their handlers, swoop back down to earth.’ Lode grabbed his rucksack, wrapped his arms around it. ‘Oh, boy, oh, boy, oh boy,’ he whispered appalled.

‘Any questions?’ Marielle asked, turning her head in the direction from which she expected them. But Mrs. Galmeijer, who had previously held forth at great length during ‘A brief history of pilgrimage’, remained silent. Apparently she wasn’t interested in birds. But Lode did have a couple of questions: What are we

doing here? Can't we just drive past Rocamadour? Or better still, turn round and head back home?

'Well, then,' said the tour guide, 'enjoy the rest of the trip. The weather is clearing up, and we'll be in Rocamadour in an hour or so.' Roocomoodoorr, Roocomoodoorr. Lode felt nauseous. He belched. His tongue tasted of gall.

Coo roo-c'too-coo.

He was awakened by a gentle ruffle, like brushes on a drum. Lode looked over at Charles. That morning he had sat down next to him without saying a word. His face betrayed nothing. No flush, no colour, no movement. You don't care how long you have to stare at me, Lode thought. You're going sit there and wait for me to give you an answer. You think I owe you that. Okay. But there was something he wanted to know, too. 'Where were you really, yesterday afternoon?'

Charles just looked at him, apparently not planning to answer.

'Fine by me.' Lode stroked the rucksack on his lap. 'It won't be long now, Sonny. Not long.'

Marielle Baard took up her position in the aisle. 'Just a little while now, and you'll see on your left the magnificent medieval town of Rocamadour,' she said.

The bus groaned.

'Rocamadour means 'rock of Amadour, and Amadour was in fact Zacchaeus who, as we all know, in Jesus' day was a tax collector. The tour guide looked round the bus and smiled at the passengers, who nodded their agreement.

'Luke 19,' Mrs. Galmeijer called out.

'Exactly,' Marielle Baard continued. 'He became a disciple of Christ and – 'Married Veronica!'

'Yes, thank you, Mrs. Galmeijer,' the tour guide said curtly. 'He married the woman who had wiped Jesus' forehead on the way to Golgotha. After the crucifixion Veronica and Zacchaeus had to flee from Palestine. They crossed the Mediterranean in a rowing boat, went through the Straits of Gibraltar, and landed on the coast of Aquitaine.'

Marielle Baard leafed through her notes, keeping one eye on Mrs. Galmeijer.

‘When Veronica died,’ she continued, ‘Zacchaeus built an altar to the Blessed Virgin Mary on top of a rock near Quercy, and changed his name to Amadour. This means ‘rock lover’. The chapel became a place of pilgrimage for Catholics from all over the world and in - Marielle Baard ignored the raised finger of Mrs. Galmeijer – in 1161 – ‘

‘Didn’t Zacchaeus go to Rome?’

‘ – in 1161 a farmer found the mummified body of a man. It was the body of Zacchaeus, the saintly Amadour.’ After solemnly intoning these words, Marielle Baard sat down again. She’d decided to save the stories about miraculous cures for later.

‘Why don’t you want to be a father?’

Another one of those questions. Or hadn’t he spoken? Lode glanced sideways. Had Charles moved even closer to him?

Whenever the conversation turned to children, he had a standard reply – there are already enough people on this earth – but when it came to questions about fathers, he had nothing to say. For him the word father had only one connotation. Father was father. That tall man next to his bed. The smell of him. The menace. Father was the man who had gone into the shed and shot himself. The man he was trying to forget. Dead. There they were again: the footsteps. Mounting the stairs slowly, with a shameless resolve, they came closer and closer. And then – even worse – the moment came when, briefly, there was no sound. The creak of the door handle. ‘Are you asleep?’ The hands. Everywhere. ‘Because children don’t love their fathers,’ Lode said suddenly. He didn’t understand what was going on inside him. Why was he talking to Charles? He didn’t owe him any answers. Why was the man going on about his child? It wasn’t even a child. ‘Was it a boy or a girl?’ Carla asked when he got back from St. Christopher’s Hospital. ‘A girl,’ Lode had said, but actually he didn’t know. A miscarriage wasn’t a child, was it? He realized that it wouldn’t be a good idea to make the comparison

in front of Geesje – at least not right then – but he'd seen the same thing in the pigeon world. Not all female pigeons were suitable for breeding, not all eggs were good. And if something wasn't good, you should just chuck it.

'Why didn't you love your father?'

'Did I ever say that?'

'Wasn't he good to you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about. Would you go back to your own seat, please?'

'What did he do with that pigeon?'

'What pigeon?'

'The pigeon that landed in the back garden, the pigeon you wanted to take care of, the pigeon you hid under your bed. '

'One day it was gone. '

'What happened to it?'

'I don't know. One day it was just ... gone. '

'Did your father wring its neck?'

'I don't know. '

'Were you afraid?'

'I got new pigeons. Look. ' Lode opened the box and put his hand in. He felt how the Son ducked out of his reach – into a corner, Lode thought. But the pigeon had hopped over the edge of the box and onto the seat, and from there to the floor of the bus. Lode felt the inside of the box, exploring it more and more frantically with his fingers, and ended up staring at the empty box on his lap. 'Where are you?' he called out in desperation. He stood up, looked around and sat down again. 'Oh, where are you?'

Marielle Baard, distracted, turned around.

A gust of wind entered the bus through the sliding roof. Lode stared at the pale blue sky. Had he flown away? Through the opening? Was he heading home? For an instant he was cheered by the thought, but then he remembered the tourist

information that Mrs. Baard had given them about the attractions in the neighbourhood, and this made him gasp. ‘Eagles, vultures, spectacular flying shows ..’ No, no, the Son could never have found the exit that quickly. He had to be here somewhere ... Lode pulled himself up by the seat in front: ‘Mrs. Baard!’

‘Mr. Bast,’ the guide replied coolly.

‘Please could we close the roof?’

Mariëlle Baard took the trouble to deliver the answer in person. She zigzagged down the aisle, leaned over and said quietly but firmly that an hour ago Mr. Bast had wanted fresh air, and now he was complaining about that fresh air and that Mr. Bast was forgetting that there were other passengers on the bus – respectable passengers – who were less capricious than Mr. Bast and who wanted only to enjoy everything that Gloria Tours had to offer and that ... Lode shook his head vigorously and when Mrs. Baard wouldn’t stop, he held his hands to his ears.

‘Where are you,’ he whispered. ‘Come on, Sonny, come on. Where are you?’ His hands were wet with sweat, or maybe with tears. Lode could feel his underpants going all damp. He wanted to shout it out, force the bus to stop, grab Mrs. Baard by the throat, but he did none of those things. The engine of the luxury coach roared and rumbled along, and the tour guide was already on the way back to her seat, next to the driver. Halfway down the aisle she reached for the handle of the sliding roof, and grim-faced, opened it a little further.

Lode dropped down, pushed Charles’s legs aside, and pressed the right side of his face to the floor of the bus. He saw thick ankles in orthopedic shoes, plastic shopping bags, balls of dust, and a plastic cup that rolled back and forth between two seats. ‘Sonny!’ he called. ‘Sonny!’ To the left, a pair of feet turned in his direction, as if they were trying to hear what he was saying. He tried to straighten up, but Charles’s calves were in the way. ‘Would you ... I want ...’ As Lode levered his shoulders upward, he could see Charles’s double chin, the caverns of his nose. ‘I’m stuck,’ Lode said, and again he pressed against Charles’s legs, but as he lay there, flat on the floor, the space around him seemed to be getting

smaller and smaller. He let his head drop and considered mustering all his strength and then, in an enormous explosion shooting upwards, like lava from a volcano, crushing, burning, and consuming everything and everyone. Pinned down by an idiot, a sadist, held hostage in a bus on the way to a place he didn't want to go to anyway, away from the woman who didn't understand him, who might be fooling around with someone else, Lode felt despair take hold. Even the image of his pigeons in the coop could no longer help. The consoling thought that very soon – not long now – he would be reunited with them would not come. And if he didn't even have his pigeons to help him, what did he have left? Where would he go if there was no longer a coop there? Where did he feel at home? Was home where he had lived with his mother, where they had taken refuge from the world? Or was it the room he shared with Geesje, where he had got her pregnant? Was he at home between her creamy breasts or near his mother's soft lips? Goodnight, my boy, sleep tight. Everything's going to be all right. It was all right, Mama, really, it was. Until Papa came. And of course afterwards, when he'd gone, when he'd finally gone, it was even better.

'What the hell...!' The sound came from the front of the bus. Lode recognized the voice of the driver and then the voice of Marielle Baard. 'A bird!' The bus swerved suddenly to the left, then to the right. 'Watch out!' Lode felt something hit his temple, right through the floor of the bus. Then there was a loud, grating noise as the bus came to a halt, its engine throbbing. Passengers were screaming. Marielle Baard tried to calm them, but it was as if she was too shaken herself. 'Sit down! Please sit down!' Lode felt the bus rocking, like a boat on the waves. With every downward plunge people cried 'Oooh' and 'Nooo!' Lode turned his head and looked up into the calm eyes of Charles. Behind him, through the open hatch in the roof, he saw the bright blue sky. He thought he heard Charles's voice, low but still audible above the din: 'Here we go.' And again the bus creaked and grated. Lode let his head drop back to the floor. Suddenly he saw the Son come sliding towards him, nails scratching, as he braced himself against the force of gravity. He stretched out his arm. 'Come to me, Sonny!' Lode called. 'Come to

me!” But the only thing that reached him was a metal first aid kit, which hit him so hard in the middle of his forehead that he lost consciousness.

That was the condition in which Lode found himself when the firemen arrived and freed the passengers – one by one – from their precarious position. And in that condition, wedged between two seats on the floor of the bus, where no one could see him, he would complete the last leg of the journey as the only remaining customer of Gloria Tours, plunging down the final hundred metres. He would see nothing of the breaking branches, the rocks, the sea of flames. And nothing of the frantic flapping of his wounded pigeon who, just before the end, found his way out through the open hatch of the bus.

3

One day before the twentieth week of Geesje's pregnancy, a white pigeon visited the newly reorganized back garden at Tomatenstraat 15.

Geesje was standing at the granite draining board she had just gone over with a scouring pad. It was no more than a tuft, a wisp, fluttering across her field of vision, but she registered it with suspicion. This – alongside the overwhelming urge to clean the house, her unbelievable appetite, the hot flushes, and the crying jags – was just one more hurdle thrown up by her pregnancy. Events that deviated from the normal – and these were becoming more and more frequent – were regarded with mistrust. The suspicious way Zilversmid observed her. The sound of the doorbell at an unusual time of day: be on your guard. This white spot, too small for a plastic bag, too big for a snowflake: strange. She turned to the garden, saw the shed, now painted white, and the shiny copper nameplate that Adri had screwed onto the front of the shed one morning.

Office A. Zilversmid.

The back garden – large gravel tiles, railway sleepers, a narrow strip of ground for the marigolds, and a stone statue portraying 'the universe' that Adri had brought with him – was neat and tidy. Everything as it should be. Geesje was about to return to her chores but hadn't yet turned round when the white spot streaked past. This time she saw it clearly. It flapped its wings as it flew over the shed and came down on the roof. The landing was not flawless. The bird came down at an angle, tried to regain its balance, ducked its head over the edge of the roof, took flight, and then fluttered briefly in front of the closed window before flying off, over the shed and the row of houses on Druivenstraat, and into the distance. Geesje went in the opposite direction, slamming the kitchen door hard behind her. What was that creature doing in her back garden? Just as she was about to reach a milestone. If she managed to reach the 140th day without problems, nothing could go wrong with the baby. But this ... this white apparition was something that had gone wrong, something that shouldn't have

been there. She knew what Carla would say – ‘You’re too sensitive’ – and she would have taken comfort from her words. But their friendship had suffered as a result of the ill-fated dinner at The Long Wall, and perhaps even more from the later efforts to patch things up. ‘Theo was only trying to warn you.’

‘Well, he could have found some other way.’

‘But Gees, Zilversmid’s wife – ‘

‘Adri’s explained everything. You have no idea what the man’s been through!’

In actual fact, neither did she. All Zilversmid had ever told her was that he’d been married and that one day his wife had left. ‘Theo says – ‘ But Zilversmid had interrupted her: ‘You know, I’ve been hearing some pretty strange things about Theo.’ He’d sniffed once and said something about the smell of rotten meat. ‘You just tell that friend of yours she’d better watch out for his black soul.’

When he turned and went into the shed, Geesje had seen a clear resemblance to Lode and – when she stopped to think about it – to all the men in her life: after a while they tired of her. They turned away from her, withdrew into their sheds, where she wasn’t wanted. Pigeons or spirits, in the end it didn’t make a great deal of difference.

As she lay in bed, these thoughts wormed their way into her consciousness, through the darkness and her half-sleeping state; they only partially numbed her, so that she felt the pain without being able to do anything about it. She saw connections which in broad daylight had remained invisible. And she knew for certain that, for the second time, it was her pregnancy that had brought about the estrangement. She opened her eyes, trying to identify the outline of the ceiling light, as if she needed a shape to which she could address the following question: ‘Why do I always have to fend for myself?’ She saw her mother sitting on a couch. There was some knitting lying in her lap, and her father was standing next to the window with his back to her. She touched his shoulder. ‘May I come home?’ she asked. ‘All we can do for you,’ he replied without turning around, ‘is pray.’

Next day she forced herself to go into the nursery – where everything was in readiness – in order to call up the image that Adri denied her. ‘They don’t concern themselves with the lives to come,’ he’d said, when she wanted to know if he could ask those who had already passed over whether their child would be healthy, whether it would be happy. She began to wonder what her life would look like if she got what she had hoped for so intensely and for so long. That’s something she had scarcely done the first time.

Then she’d been ready for it; as far as she was concerned the baby would come and after that everything else would follow as a matter of course. After a few months, she’d go back to work part-time at Van Zanten’s Supermarket, but if need be she’d stay at home. They could manage on Lode’s salary. Her life with Lode had been neat and orderly. A bit dull, perhaps, but at least there were no riddles. With Zilversmid she had found herself in a maze; she remembered the entrance, but there was no way she could find it again. She hadn’t entirely believed the story about the wife who disappeared, but she was afraid to ask any more questions. She even kept her mouth shut about the big rifle that he had taken out to the shed. It was better not to think about that. She didn’t know whether he could really cure people, but she did not doubt that he could read her mind. She was consumed by him, every fibre of her being. He slurped her up, like an oyster. He took her body: mind and all. There was no way she could escape him. His hard hand and her fearful heart: that was their union.

But what would happen now, when the child made itself heard, when it lay there in the crib, small and helpless, when it started to crawl around the house on Tomatenstraat, started to grow up, become curious? What if it began to try its father’s patience, if it didn’t meet its father’s expectations? She sensed how much deeper her fear could go, if she continued to think about this. If it wasn’t about her heart, but about the heart of her child. How big would his hands be then? How strong his arms? How deep his voice?

She pressed a stuffed toy to her cheek and looked around the room. Above the changing table, behind the painting of a teddy bear in a hot-air balloon, there was

a stain. It was the spot where Lode's souvenir from the Black Forest had been glued to the wall. *Mutti ist doch immer die Beste*. In her mind's eye she saw Lode standing there. She saw his face about to flood with tears. At that moment she felt something that Zilversmid said he experienced every day: it was as if Lode was really there, as if she could almost touch him. Her little man. A sudden 'message from beyond' – as Zilversmid would have put it – almost took her breath away. 'God, yes,' she said, rigid with fear, 'you would have been a loving father.' And a shudder passed from the crown of her head to her tail bone.

A day later the pigeon was back. Geesje was standing in exactly the same spot in the kitchen when she was startled by the same white spot. She opened the door, shielded her eyes with one hand and stared at the bird, which had now landed on one of the gravel tiles.

It was as if the moment had been captured on film, in a few seconds of shutter time: Geesje in the door opening, her belly thrust forward; Adri behind the little window, next to the sign 'Office A. Zilversmid'; Mao perched on the roof of the shed, a black, taut spring, and there, at the intersection of their frozen glances: the small white bird. Only the leaves of the chestnut tree behind the row of houses on Druivenstraat betrayed that something was happening, or rather, that something was about to happen. A slight breeze, a breath held in.

Mao was the first to move. He launched himself in the direction of the bird. Geesje saw how without a sound all four feet landed simultaneously on the pigeon. Black on white. His head shook from side to side. Geesje held onto her belly, took a step forward and broke the silence: 'Get out of here! Leave it alone!' The cat jumped away from her in a zigzag path, his tail pointing jauntily into the air. Adri Zilversmid came out and stood there in front of the shed. As Mao wound himself around his leg, he leaned down and stroked the dark head.

Geesje took a few steps and knelt down next to the pigeon. Its head rested on the mangled breast. Its beak was open. She found a broken piece of flower pot among the marigolds and slid it under the battered body. As she lifted the bird, she saw that one of its legs hung loose, and she remembered the story Lode had

told her about his very first pigeon, which had suddenly fallen at his feet one summer's day. She looked at the shed, his shed, at the back of the garden and she saw him standing there in his overalls. He was not as clearly present as the day before. It was as if only the front of him was there, a thin slice of human being, like a venetian blind that could be raised. 'I have to bury you,' Geesje whispered, 'properly.' She laid the pigeon carefully on the ground, removed a plant and made the hole a little deeper. 'Finish and start again.' And each time she pushed her spade into the ground, she repeated the words, 'Finish and start again. Finish and start again'. Once the pigeon's grave was deep enough, she slid the shard under the dead animal. That was when she saw that the claw had become detached, and that the foot bore not only a ring, but also a silver-coloured cylinder, fastened with a tiny leather strap. With a feeling of loathing, she tugged at the strap and, using the nail of her little finger, worked the paper back and forth until it fell on the ground in front of her. By now she was panting. Zilversmid's child stirred in her belly. 'Life is a ferris wheel.' The words seemed as ominous now as they had once seemed exciting. She was going round and round, with no end in sight. Breathe slowly. In, out. Finish and start again. In, out, in, out. The contents of the cylinder lay on her spread fingers. With her thumb she unrolled the paper and saw at a glance – just before she felt two large hands on her shoulders – in the child-like handwriting of Lode Bast, his final message.

I'm coming home.