

EXCERPT FROM

Lange dagen

CHAPTER 1

by Pia de Jong

The winter when I turned fourteen, our playroom slowly changed into a captain's cabin. Like a magpie looking for glimmering objects, my father had started gathering things. The first object was a yellow copper instrument. It was a compass that had belonged to my grandfather. Apparently my father had opened the brown leather suitcase he carried to the attic the morning after the funeral and had never touched since. Later that day, I watched how he carefully polished the compass, which fit snugly into the palm of his hand, with a soft cloth. My father always taught us to take care of our things, so they would last longer. Under the glass of the compass was a rusty needle that trembled if you touched it.

"It's a very sensitive instrument," my father would say. "Wherever you are, it will show you the way, flawlessly." But that was later, during that unforgiving summer when we would travel to exactly that one place on earth where this was not true.

Slowly the room filled up. My toys all disappeared. Thrown out, or given away. The contents of my drawer were emptied and cleaned. In one of them, one day I found a bottle full of brown fluid. Gun Oil, I read on the label.

Then came spray cans to make textiles water-resistant, and tins with grease to impregnate shoes. Plastic mugs stood next to aluminum bottles, a Swiss Army knife and a box of all-weather matches. The room filled up with sleeping bags, woolen hats, and thermal underwear. In a corner stood a portable stove with two burners and handles.

What was going on? This could be nothing other than a thorough preparation for a dangerous expedition. But to where? My father had something in mind. When he wasn't busy gathering things, he would stare out of the window. He did not hear my mother when she called him for dinner. His thoughts were far away, in a place I did not know. I did not want anything to do with this. I had enough to do with my own life.

There was once a time when my father could make me



laugh with just a few words. He was a magnet, and I loved to be captured by him. We clicked together, he and I, like the two little black-and-white magnetic dogs my brother used to play with.

"This is my father," I told the teacher proudly when he took me to the first day of school. He was slim then, with a full head of hair. His hands were the most beautiful I had ever seen. I saw in her eyes that she saw how special he was. She blushed when he shook her hand.

The days then were strung together like the beads on the necklace I wore. It was made of dried melon pits, in which I punched holes with a needle I found in my mother's sewing kit.

I remember exactly when he started to change. It was just before his forty-fifth birthday. He told me he was halfway through his life. I don't know why, maybe because his own father had lived up to his ninetieth birthday. That whole day he had looked full of regret. He did not notice the snow that fell steadily from morning till evening without interruption. When he opened my present, a bottle of aftershave lotion, he just shook his head. He did not even sniff it. I avoided him the rest of the day. He considered the things I cared about most of the time to be of no importance. They just irritated him.

Around that time he started to go bald. Stray hairs were glued to his chair, the collar of his suit. They were in the sink, the pillow, the tablecloth. My mother had to brush off his clothes twice before he left for work and was silent about what she saw. When he was home, he paced up and down, between the bathroom and the hallway, the two places where mirrors hung. He got advice in a health-food store to buy birch water, and he sprayed his head with it continuously. The sweet odor would never leave his chair. After about six weeks, all his hair was gone. Suddenly I noticed his eyebrows. They had grown grey and bushy, as if they tried to make up for the loss of hair on his head. My father had changed irrevocably. Only old photos gave away the way he once looked, but we had only a few pictures of him.

“I remember exactly when he started to change.”

He had rolled the dice in life, taking his chances on what a man was supposed to do: found a decent job, married a good wife, begun a family. He wanted to mold Stephen and me in his image. But to his dismay, society had taken over the upbringing of his kids. He got annoyed about school parties if beer was served, never mind drugs. He got so upset about trashy TV shows that one day he dragged the television set into the garbage.

At the same time, his own job had hit a dead end. In fact, it was going steadily downhill — and he knew it. When he read the newspaper, he tapped his foot incessantly on the floor. It made a clicking sound that drove me nuts. I could not read a book when he did that, let alone a newspaper. He constantly glanced around him, as if he were being attacked by hidden creatures who were out to get him.

“They try to take advantage of you, always and everywhere,” he said one day.

He was sitting in the living room, bent over a stack of papers. A blue envelope had fallen on the floor, close to his shoe. His reading glasses dangled by a cord from his neck.

“People are only looking out for themselves. Honest people like me are the victims. What will come from that?”

Mealtimes, which we always spent together at the table, a quiet ritual of our day, took on a different character. My father spoke excitedly about his colleagues. About Jansen from administration, who always made the wrong decisions, and about Houtsma, who was untrustworthy. But especially he spoke about his boss, Karl ten Bruggenkate, a man with a hunchback whom my father suspected of ruining his career on purpose.

“What he did to me today ...” he would start, right after my mother would serve us. Then a story would unfold, about a terrible injustice that had recently happened to him. Without saying a word, my mother, Stephen and I stared down at our potatoes. Speaking faster and faster, stumbling over his own words, he talked about his work, a world I only knew from stories. The outside world was a jungle, in which one had to survive, I understood. It was not the survival of the fittest — no, there were other rules. It was about having the right friends, about knowing people in the right places, and about being liked. All things he did not care about. These, according to him, were all about outside things. It did not say anything about character, what really counted. As he talked, the color of his face and neck flushed into an unnatural red. At those moments, I was afraid of him.

Stephen always ate without looking up. When he was finished, he pushed his chair back and stood up, ready to go to his room. An hour later, he closed the door behind him.

My mother, a quiet woman who was beautiful when she was young but did not care about her looks anymore, treated my father as a musician would treat an instrument that would easily get out of tune. She knew exactly when to keep quiet, or when to talk about easy subjects. She liked harmony in her family.

My father stayed at home more and more often, instead of going to work. He suffered from migraine headaches, a pain in his left ear, and from stomach cramps, which confined him to spend hours in the restroom.

“Our food is being poisoned,” he announced one day. He had pushed his plate forward and folded his arms over his stomach. “Look at chicken, they feed them with hormones, to make them get bigger faster, just to be slaughtered earlier. That’s totally unnatural! Only sick minds can come up with this.”

After that moment, we were not allowed to eat chicken anymore. The meals were times he lectured us about terrible things happening to our food. Fries were prepared from cancerous grease, and was full of burned oils that gave us cancer. Now here was a task for the police, if they ever wanted to do something useful. Shut those places down. Children would end up sick from all the poisoned stuff; these were all crimes. And by the way, what kind of grown-ups would they become, after being raised in these small apartment buildings, no healthy air?

At night, as I lay awake in bed, his words would run again and again through my mind. Why was it that only my father was concerned about these issues?

I ran my fingertips over the bumpy wallpaper next to my bed, touching it lightly until I found a spot that was cracked. I tried to scratch it open. It was harder than I thought. A thin coating of calcium dust got under my fingernails. It tasted bitter as chalk.

In those days, in my dreams, I was always running through an abandoned field of closed-down factories, jumping over mounds of garbage, looking for an exit that I could never find. ■