

The stolen horse (Cliff de Rouw, winner)

Sunrays glistened on the meadow. The ground thawed. The sky turned soft blue, the clouds pink. If it hadn't been war, it would have been a great start of the day. My boots knocked on the pad. In my left hand I had a milk container filled with bacon, in my right I had a burlap sack with eggs and a rope. It was about a four-kilometer walk to farmer Gerrit. At about half of my route I passed the highlight: the horse stable of Jacobs. I got on. A manure odor, which turned many urbanites around, blew towards me. Once, when I pinched my nose as a child, my father pulled my hand away. "Listen Toon, poo ensures the fertility of the country. It is the beginning of new life. New life from food that people in the city eat," he said.

I saw three large figures in the green meadow. The horses were already outside! I turned on. I held the bag up as straight as possible. The milk canister lid clattered. I came closer and walked further to watch the animals quietly. The horses stood as a royal family together. My favorite, Brutus, was the big brown one in the front. Jacobs let me to ride on her a few times. Her fur was shining, and she had thighs that covered a whole farm on wheels. Rumor goes that Jacobs feeds his horses before he feeds his children. I didn't know if that was true, but Brutus seemed to get enough.

I had to hurry. My dad probably had more jobs for me to do at home. If everything went well I had time on the way back to enjoy the animals.

At farmer Gerrits', I exchanged the eggs and bacon for potatoes and milk. Now, the real work started. Farmer Gerrit tied the heavy bag on my back with the rope. I took the full milk can in my hands and dragged it back to the path. The first two hundred steps went well. I stopped. I filled my arms with strength and dabbled on. That's how I gathered meters. The wind blew harder. The sun disappeared behind gray cotton wool clouds. Fifty steps. I stopped. No horses yet. I picked up the milk can again.

In the far, Jacobs' stable broke the horizon. Finally. I got closer. Figures. More than this morning. Most stood on two legs, upright, like ravens in a cornfield. On the driveway was a horse trailer. Did Jacobs want to sell his horses? I took all the trade again and dragged it with me.

The ravens were men in uniform. I untied the rope, put my things aside and rushed to Jacobs' yard. The man walked out of his stable with Brutus. The horse neighed.

"Come on!" Jacobs growled. His neck was red. He bit his lower lip. It was clearly to suppress his anger. The German helmets wobbled. Laughter came from underneath. Only the front man remained serious. With hand gestures he explained to Jacobs that he had to bring Brutus into the trailer himself. The German foreman shouted at the others. His soldiers marched into the stable. Moments later, they appeared happily again. They all had a full bag or tons in their arms. Without a thank you, the Germans loaded the food supplies into their wagons. They hooked up the trailer and drove away. Jacobs watched them leaving. His front teeth were still on his lower lip. There was a glassy look in his eyes. I returned to my belongings and continued my way home.

At home, I told what had happened.

"Those Germans can do whatever they want," my father roared.

"We have to do something, Dad."

"You can't, boy. Don't you bother. This is bigger than us. "

I walked away. If I argued, my father would have called me stubborn again. I brooded all afternoon. When feeding the chickens, sweeping the house, peeling of the potatoes, in everything I did. Surely there had to be something we could do?

Just before dinner I saw Jacobs coming up our driveway. My father was already in the kitchen. I stood in the hall. That's where I heard them best.

"Our Toon told me what happened," said my father.

"I am very sorry to ask you this, but do you have something to eat for us?"

Jacobs his question startled me. The proudest man in our village had to come to us beg. This could happen to anyone.

"Feel free to come by," my father said. "We will share with you, even if we have to fill our stomachs with flower bulbs. "

'Thanks.'

"Do you have any idea where they took Brutus?"

"I'm not sure, but I've heard they brought her to the big horse stable."

An idea came to my mind. The big horse stable. I had taken care of the horses over there, for a few weeks, last summer. Those stables bordered on the woods. I brooded further down

the hall. This time with the feeling I could do something. After dinner my idea grew into a plan. Just before everyone went to bed, I hid two burlap sacks, three carrots and a knife underneath my mattress. I had to do this. Those German bullies couldn't just rob us.

I had seen the moon rise. Everyone had to be in a deep sleep by now. As quietly as possible, I took my things from under the mattress. I sneaked down the stairs, put on my coat and boots, and slipped out the back door.

The night was cold and dark. The sound of the wind blew my footsteps into the distance. What if the Germans heard me? I had to get off the path. I started running towards the woods.

On my toes I stepped through the trees. Still, I couldn't stop the branches from cracking. I held the knife out in front of me. Ready for anyone or anything. Slowly my eyes turned to darkness. First, I could distinguish the trunks from the moonlight in the background. Then also the bushes.

After a long journey I smelled manure. Step by step, the background turned black. It could only be one thing. A building blocked the moonlight: the big horse stable.

I sneaked up on the scent. The horses had to be there. The smell came closer. In the main building, in front of the road, light was burning. I crawled out of the woods and stepped into a burlap bag. Little by little, I shuffled along the wall to the door of the first stable. Carefully I pulled the top pin out of the lock. The top hatch squeaked open. I had to look for a long time before I saw anything. A figure appeared. Too small. Too thin. No Brutus. I closed the shutter and shuffled to the next stable. Brutus wasn't there either. Maybe in the third?

I pulled the pin out. The hatch squeaked. Yes! Those wide legs. It had to be her!

I raised my hands in the air, as I already had won her back.

Bang! Wood on the wood. Hatch against stable. I closed the hatch and put the pin back.

Light moved in the main building. I pulled the second bag over my head. I went on my side and made myself as small as a flower bulb. The ground was freezing cold. Footsteps grew louder. Light flashed around me. Undoubtedly a searching flashlight. My body shivered. If the soldier found me, he would kill me. Or worse, he would send me to a concentration camp. The flashlight shone on me. Everything inside of me stopped. Even if I wanted to run away, I couldn't.

A heavy voice sounded. It came from further away. It had to come from the main building.

The soldier called back. The light went away. It sounded like the soldier walked away from me. Slowly, his footsteps disappeared. I still saw twilight through the burlap sack. I took a breath. I had to get out of here as soon as possible.

I waited. More than an hour. I had to act. Maybe it was already getting light. My body was getting so cold, that it was getting harder move. I struggled out of the sag and pushed myself to my feet. My muscles were stiff. I stretched. Brutus was just behind me. With just a bit of wood between us. I was so close. I had to follow through. I unscrewed the locks with the knife. I opened the bottom hatch and crawled inside. Brutus came to me. I made clicking noises and stroked her forehead. She snorted softly. I gave her the roots and untied her reins. Brutus walked with me to the door. I climbed on her. I had never ridden bareback before. My heart was pounding in my chest. I had to. Three, two, one. Go!

I opened the top hatch. I kicked Brutus in her side and pulled on the left rein. Men screamed. Shots sounded. Brutus and I flew into the pitch dark. The adrenaline howled through my body. The horse ran through the woods. We went straight ahead. I bounced on her back. A high branch would kill me. Still I wanted Brutus to keep running. I didn't care where we went.

When the big stable was far behind us, Brutus calmed down. I tied her to a tree. As soon as it got light, I would take her home.

The next morning, I knocked on the door at Jacobs'.

"Sir, I have a surprise for you."

"I don't need any surprises. What is it?"

"You must come with me."

"No, boy. Tell me, what do you want?"

"I got Brutus."

It was as if my words struck him like lightning. The man faded.

"You stole the horse back?"

'Yes. She's in the woods," I said with a big smile on my face.

Mister Jacobs paced the hall. His neck turned red. He bit his lip and shook his head. "Do you have the brain size of a cow?" The man seemed to be boiling with anger. "What do you think, that happens if the Germans find out the horse is back here?"

"Hmm, well ..."

"Bring her back! Right now! Say you found her, when you were playing in the woods. "

"Mister Jac ..."

'No. If you understand what I am saying, you can take the horse back to your house. Then you'll find out."

The door slammed shut. Right before my nose. It was clear in one hit. Everything we had, was no longer ours.

I untied Brutus and walked with her through the woods to the big stable. When I saw the big hall, I took her to the main road. It was better to come from the out and open, I guessed.

Two soldiers saw me coming.

"I hound her," I said when I got to the gate.

A soldier grabbed my collar and pulled me away from Brutus. My heart was racing. The German pushed me away. He pointed his gun at me. The man looked over the runner. Determined, as if he was sure he saw me last night.

The other soldier came to stand right next to his companion, with Brutus. He whispered something in the other soldier his ear, and he shook his had to the horse. The gun dropped. The soldier made clear that I could go.

I took a deep breath and ran as fast as I could. When big stable was out of sight, I thought it was okay to walk. My legs were shivering. My body felt heavier than ever, even without a heavy bag on my back and a full milk can in my arms. I dragged myself home. The sky was gray. I stared at the empty pastures. An exchange with farmer Gerrit would never be the same again to be.