

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



When the climate goes feral

Coming of age in a tipping world

novel

All the sawmill's forest is lost in devastating fires. After years of drought, a period of torrential rain breaks out. The barren slopes no longer hold water, and a black tidal wave rages through the river valley. Eleven-year-old Mindra and her invalid grandmother are the last inhabitants of a village near the abandoned sawmill, high on the mountainside. She rescues some survivors, who become her new family. The world is tipping and they must make it on their own.

Colofon

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen, *When the climate goes feral*

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1. Survivors

The shortwave transmitter crackled, sputtered and whined as Min-dra slowly turned the variable capacitor in search of transmissions.

'Grova, where are you?' she repeated muttering at each turn of the pointer. But each time it turned out to be something other than a human voice.

Despondently, she laid her head on the table. In the old days, the transmitters were not far to each other and you could always hear a couple of truck drivers chatting nearby, Grova had told her. Later, when everyone had cell phones, no one used the shortwave anymore. He could then search the entire bandwidth without receiving a single transmitter. Since the cell phone masts had fallen over, Grova had occasionally contacted other owners of such antique transmitters. Later he had gone to town and not returned. When the river flooded, she had started the generator and turned on the transmitter with shaking hands. It was now the second week she had been searching. Food was almost gone and Grandma had fallen very badly.

'Grova, where are you anyway?' she muttered with increasing anxiety. Maybe Grandma would die and she was left all alone.

She put the transmitter on at a wavelength where there was no noise but also no sound and went to check on Grandma. She was snoring and fortunately not dead yet. She opened the outside door to watch and listen to the perpetual rain.

She had only a vague memory of the Internet; she was just a year into school when it went down. It was used in the upper classes for lessons and some of the older kids had cell phones, she could remember. In the big forest fires, however, the transmission towers had fallen over and never been rebuilt.

She still sometimes dreamed about those fires. The sky had been orange, even at day, and breathing was difficult.

Worries choked her, about Grova who had left for the city, about

Grandma who couldn't do anything anymore and was in bed, that it had been raining for weeks so she had to recharge the batteries with the little generator and there wasn't much gasoline left. She had turned off the refrigerator some time ago. The pickled and salted vegetables Grandma had made over the summer were also gone. Fortunately, there was still some rice and a bag of lentils.

The sound of a voice suddenly filled the room. A woman was speaking in the official language, but she did not understand it in the slightest. When she fell silent for a moment, Mindra nervously switched on the microphone.

'What are you saying, I can't understand you.' She repeated the sentence in her own language. 'Over.'

'Who are you?'

She gave her grandfather's call letters, her own name and where she lived.

'Is that in the mountains?'

'Yes. Over.'

'Are you aware that the river has flooded its banks?'

'That's why I'm not at school. It's under water. Over.'

'School? How old are you?'

'Eleven.'

'That's pretty young.' The woman seemed to sigh.

'So what?'

'We are looking for help. We are capsized and stuck on an island.'

'Are you at the shipyard? It has a shortwave transmitter, I know. But this is not the wavelength it used to transmit on.'

'You know it! Then where are you?'

'Nearby. In clear weather we can see the island well. The road runs to it.'

'How do you guess we're at this company?'

'My grandfather wrote down all the stations he knew and hung them behind his station. And you come through five-five.'

'Five-five?'

'Yes, that's very loud and very clear, with no noise.'

'O. Well, there's no one here and we found this equipment.'

'Then there must still be power. Everyone fled the flood.'

'No, the power is out. The poles fell over and the wires broke. We found a generator and started it up.'

'Oh, yes, we do as well. We have power from solar panels and batteries, but there has been no sun for weeks and I occasionally turn on our generator. With us, the power lines have already been broken in the forest fires.'

It remained quiet for a while, except for some distant crackling and noise.

'The water is still rising.' There was concern in the woman's voice.

'Is the cable car still there?'

'Yes, the cable across the river is intact. There's a cabin near at some kind of jetty, but I don't know how to operate it.'

'How many are you?'

'Three adults, two children and a baby.'

'I do know how the cable car is operated; I always cross with it when I go to school. I'm coming down. It will take a while, because I have to walk.' She was not thinking when she said this: she had once asked the operator to explain how it worked, he was no longer there and those people could only escape drowning with the cable car. So she had to do it.

'Are there no adults there with you who can help?'

'In our village, all the houses are abandoned. My grandfather works at the municipality and has been gone for weeks. My grandmother has fallen and is in bed. I take care of her.'

'O. Well, come soon then.'

'Have you tried other channels?'

'I'm already happy that you can receive me. I turned something, but I don't know how this thing works.'

'Just go ahead and listen if you hear anyone. I'm going now.'

She switched off the transmitter and put on coat, boots and poncho.

'Grandma?' she poked her head through the crack of the door.

'Yes my child?' sounded sleepy.

'Do you need anything else? I have to go to the island, there are people washed up and there is no one left to operate the cable car.'

'I have everything I need, dear. Off you go soon. I heard the woman say the water is still rising.'

'Can I go on the horse?'

'That's not ours.'

'Walking might take too long.'

'Then go ahead. Be careful.'

The horse approached Mindra curiously as she ran into the saw-mill. Wide, silent and empty it was, where once lay logs and sawn wood on the other side of the huge sawing machine. She had the impression that it was looking at her, asking why it couldn't saw. It smelled inside of moldy sawdust and hay. She remembered the smell of resin, freshly sawed wood and hot oil and iron, the singing yaw of the bandsaw through the logs. But then she was still a toddler at Grandma's hand bringing food to Grova.

There was no saddle and she tied a folded horse blanket on the animal's back, which sniffed at her to see if she had any treats with her. She had, and the agile upper lip took the cookie gently, as Mindra had taught him.

'Come along.' She pulled on the rope hanging off the halter; the horse clearly had no desire to go out into the rain.

She hugged the big head.

'We have to save people, sweet beast. Will you carry me down?' She could not prevent a shiver from echoing in her voice as panic fluttered up in her belly.

A choked spluttering was the answer and the horse gave up its resistance.

In the pouring rain, she climbed onto his back via the fence, lowered herself onto his neck and pointed down. That was incentive enough. With small strides, the horse carefully dribbled down the

path, which was slippery from the rain. His movements calmed her down.

The path joined the road that led up from the river to the shed for sawn timber and on to the woods that had burned down years ago. The asphalt was broken everywhere; the cracks were full of withered grass, already showing green blades. Here the horse switched to a sucker trot. Cold jets found the bare skin under her clothes. She clung to the neck and pulled her legs up, the back actually too wide for a girl as petite as she. The horse carried her down gently; because he wasn't saddled and didn't need a bit in, he made sure himself that his small passenger didn't fall off. They had walked this way together before. The horse had been brought some time ago by the owner of the sawmill with bales of hay from a boat in the river. Mindra had stood watching with Grandma.

Closer to the river it gradually became visible between the veils of rain how high the water had risen. Trees and scattered farmhouses seemed to float in the brown mud water. Only a small part of the island still protruded above the churning stream. Her heart pounded in her throat: now she had to show that she had not been boasting.

The horse stopped of its own accord at the tower of the cable car and she slid off his back, shivering with cold and excitement.

'Stay close,' she ordered the restless animal. 'When the water comes you go up.'

She waded toward the outside stairs, went inside and tried the iron door to the engine room, which was under the stairs to the platform. It was locked, but she knew where the key hung. With a feeling that she was doing something forbidden, she grabbed the key from its hook and opened the door. She had to hurry: the water was only a hand width below the sill. If it got into the engine room she didn't know if the cable car could still work. Doggedly, she forced down her rising fear.

A large winch was set up in the bare room with a drum of coiled steel cable used to pull the nacelle back and forth along the support

cable. Next to it was an emergency generator with a diesel engine, which was used in case of a power failure.

She walked around the facilities, trying to remember what the operator had told the schoolchildren when they were here on a field trip. Which she had organized herself: she was the only student to cross by cable car.

If the power went out, the driver had said, he had to flip a big switch first. She remembered that. In the faint light shining through the door, a metal cabinet was visible from which a large lever protruded. There: a symbol depicting a high-voltage pylon. The lever was transverse and pointed to a symbol of a motor. In the forest fires the electrical wires had been broken, for as long as she could remember the cable car had operated on the diesel engine, the switch was still on.

There was a metal cabinet with buttons, lights and gauges. Out of a lock stuck a key, which she turned. A pointer moved: the starter battery had sufficient voltage. She sighed with relief, though she didn't expect anything else. Now the engine could be started.

Next to a red button marked 'STOP' was a black button with the caption 'START'. She had been paying close attention and knew she had to first preheat the engine with an orange push button. There was a little grille above it and if she saw something glowing under it she could start. It was as if everything pointed itself, it felt familiar.

She pressed the start button and jumped backwards with a shriek when a loud metallic bang and brief bellowing sounded.

One more time. Afraid of the violence she caused, she held the button down panicked as deafening rattling and panting sounds came from the machine.

With a roar, the engine came to life. Mindra stood sucking on her finger that hurt from the hard pressing, while lights glowed and pointers moved. She knew those from the transmitter. There were three voltmeters side by side whose hands were at 400. Next to it was an ammeter whose pointer vibrated just beside zero. Logically, there were only some lights on in the engine room and along the

stairs. That much she did know, Grova had explained well.

The heavy hum of the motor was reassuring for it was part of the working cable car. It was as if she had awakened the entire system, that it had slept from the last time to come alive when needed. Twice a day the operator sailed across the arm of the river from the island to ferry passengers. In recent years, Mindra had often been the only one. Why the engine was on this side she did not know.

She ran upstairs, where the operation of the cable car took place from a booth. She had remembered that better. She studied the control panel, from which an ignition key stuck out, which she turned. A buzzing sounded and lights came on. Triumph! Everything was working. First she switched the handle that turned on the lights in the cabin, as the caption stated. The light that signaled that the gondola door was closed illuminated green. There was a push button for the horn. She pressed it three times, signaling that the gondola would soon depart. There was a pair of binoculars on a pedestal. She peered through them, focused, but saw nothing moving on the island. She honked again, this time longer. Because of the distance and the rain, it was just impossible to hear if it was working. Still she couldn't see any movement. There was an old-fashioned microphone. She had never heard the driver's voice in the cabin in all her crossings, but maybe it could.

She flipped the switch on the base of the microphone and shouted loudly: 'Come aboard! The gondola is about to leave!'

When there was still no response she ran downstairs; the water was already running under the outer door into the engine room! What was she supposed to do? Make a dyke? How? She hurried upstairs. On the control panel was a lever that started the winch. She first had to unlock it with a dial. She pulled it and at the same time looked through the binoculars; yes, the gondola was moving in her direction! She sighed with relief, so it wasn't that difficult. She let it return. At the embarkation point, the gondola turned itself off by a switch at the station.

That had an effect: through the binoculars, she saw several figures running toward the dock and a red light replaced the green of the door.

She called again through the microphone for them to get into the gondola.

Red turned green: the door was closed. Three times she honked and then pulled the lever toward her. Down in the basement, she heard the motor hum more heavily. Within her grew the feeling that she was now part of the cable car installation; the lights, buttons and levers gave her the means to control everything and the engine was her assistant, or more like the horse she rode and faithfully followed her instructions.

The gondola approached slowly. She glowed with pride that she had managed. Now the power didn't have to go out....

With a sigh of relief, she heard and saw the gondola slide next to the platform and disengage traction. The lever automatically jumped back to the zero position.

The door slid open and the passengers stepped onto the platform grate, soaking wet and chilly. Mindra held the door open for them. Two women carried a baby and a little boy; a young man carried a larger child.

'Did you operate the cable car? Alone?' the man asked incredulously when he saw that there was only a petite girl in the station.

Mindra nodded, speechless. Now that she had succeeded in getting the people off the island, she was giddy with sudden fatigue.

'We must get down quickly,' she urged, hoarse with emotion. 'The water is getting higher and higher.' She bolted into the control room and turned back the ignition key, turning off the lights on the console. She ran downstairs to stop the engine. If water got into the electrical parts there could be a fire. The water in the engine room was already ankle high. She pressed the button with 'STOP' underneath it and the engine came to a sighing halt. On the iron stairs, she heard the refugees hesitantly step down.

She flipped the ignition key and the rig was back to sleep.

She stroked the warm engine for a moment.

'Come out now, the water is flowing faster and faster!' Her voice skipped from it.

Outside she dared not to step on, she was still on the stairs and the water shooting past was already pulling at her legs and washing into her boots.

The horse stood a little higher up the slope watching her. She whistled on her fingers and beckoned with a soggy piece of caked rice in her hand. She sobbed with relief as the horse waded toward her.

2. Heat and food

The man unexpectedly lifted her onto the nervous animal's back and then helped up the girl he had been carrying. 'Hold on tight!'

The boy was also lifted onto the horse. The children apathetically let go. The man waded to dry ground holding the rope of the halter. He staggered through the swift current, but stayed on his feet.

Mindra slid down and helped the girl dismount, while the man put the boy on the ground.

'Now for the women and the baby. Stay here waiting for me.'

Mindra did like him taking charge, but also found him very bossy. The horse did not object. Moments later, the two women and the baby were also on dry land.

'You haven't come a moment too soon,' the eldest of the women said worried. 'Another moment and the cable car drive will be under water.'

Mindra looked at her uncertainly. What was she supposed to do now? The people had been saved, was it ready now? Could she just climb on the horse and go home? Then where were they to go? Where could they go? There was nothing here but the deserted village where she and Grandma were the only ones still living.

The woman might have heard her thoughts or seen them in her face. 'Where can we go, girl? Is there a way into town?'

'On the other bank. That's what the cable car is for. But the road is flooded.'

'Hadn't you better take us across the river?' the man asked piqued. 'Now we're stuck here.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Jack. You could see for yourself, the water is almost to the top of the windows of the houses along the road,' the woman said gruffly. 'We should wait here until the water subsides. Maybe then the girl will want to take us across by cable car.'

'If it still works.'

‘We’ll see about that later. In any case, people will be coming this way again.’

The woman with the baby said something Mindra did not understand. She was shivering from the cold in her wet clothes. She made a decision.

‘There are plenty of empty houses up high where you can take shelter. There’s usually still a stove and firewood will be there too, so you can dry off.’

The older woman nodded and smiled. ‘You’re a brisk girl. Let’s do that. May I know your name?’

‘My name is Mindra. We’d best start walking, we’ll get warm.’ She was shivering herself, for the poncho did not stop all the rain and the water was in her boots. What to eat she did not know. At least she still had rice and lentils.

Soon the two children proved too exhausted to make the walk uphill. At the woman’s insistence, Mindra was helped onto the patient horse and the two children were put in front of her. For the second time she was holding another child. It made her shy, but it was exciting as well.

The man wanted to grab the rope on the halter, but the horse moved forward so quickly that he missed. His passengers barely noticed.

‘I’m going forward!’ called Mindra. ‘I’ll fix fire.’

The horse searched his way up along the broken road. He walked straight to the open doors of the sawmill, where his hay was. Vaporous and dripping, he began to eat from it. Mindra slid off his back, helped the children off and wrapped the wet but warm horse blanket around them. She also took off his halter, which was bothering him as he ate.

‘Thank you, sweet horse,’ she whispered. ‘You have been brave and very careful. Without you, I would have been late.’ The animal coughed a little and blew sawdust from the hay through its nose.

She left the shivering children behind and ran to a house that was not boarded up. It had belonged to Grandma’s brother and she had

been there before, looking for food, finding none but firewood. Hurriedly she stuffed wood shavings from a basket and pieces of wood from the pile into the stone stove. She ran to her own house for fire – quickly checking to see if Grandma was asleep – and returned with a flaming and hissing piece of wood to light the stove. Panting and puffing – she was muggy hot under the poncho – she fetched the children from the sawmill and installed them next to the stove. The loam-bricked bench was part of the flue and would soon get warm, too.

It was raining less heavily than down in the river valley; the rain was coming from behind the mountain ridge. It was usually drier here because they were in the rain shadow, Grova had explained. The sky lightened up and the rain became drizzle. Across the path the three adults came stumbling. She waved from the open door, the smoke from the chimney billowing toward the refugees.

‘We don’t have any dry clothes or blankets for you,’ she apologized. ‘It will be warm enough later to dry your clothes.’

‘Do you have anything to eat?’ the man asked gruffly. Mindra noted that the young woman with the baby was afraid of him.

‘There’s only a little rice with lentils left, but I have to cook that first. Our food is almost finished.’

The older woman had sat down tiredly beside the children. ‘If you want to cook something for us, please, dear Mindra. I’ll go outside in a few minutes to look for plants we can eat. Maybe we can make a thick soup. Is there a creek nearby? Edible tubers often grow there and we can pick water snails.’

Mindra pointed to where the old road continued uphill.

‘There’s the bridge. The stream used to run past the sawmill, my grandfather has told me. When there was no electricity, the sawmill had a water wheel.’

‘Good. You cook some rice with lentils; we’ll go find tubers and edible plants. Jack, are you coming?’

The young woman, breast-feeding her baby, looked up briefly and smiled at Mindra.

'It's getting warmer already,' she whispered. Mindra smiled back, she thought the woman was very young; she looked more like a schoolgirl from the top grade of her school than a housewife. But she did have nice breasts. Shyly she averted her eyes.

In her own home, she stoked up the stove and put on a pan of rice, lentils, water and salt. Grandmother was still asleep. When the river would subside, Grova would hopefully return with groceries.

When the rice was boiling, she put the pan on a hot side of the stove and put the lid back on the cooking hole. Time to put on dry clothes; she was wet down to her underwear.

She dozed a bit by the stove until the smell of cooked rice with lentils woke her. Or rather, it was her stomach that reacted to the smells.

In the other house it was warm now, too. Jack was hauling dry firewood from the sawmill and the older woman was cutting tubers and vegetables. Everything was still present in the house, as if the occupants might return at any moment. But that had been the case for years. When Grandma's brother had died, his son and his wife had packed their bags to go to work in the city; they had never returned. Her mother, too, had moved to the city with her father to work. She felt a flurry of desolation pass. The refugees she had rescued filled the void somewhat, though it also made her a bit restless and she was afraid they would eat all their meager supplies.

The woman put a pan of water on the stove and put in the vegetables and sliced tubers. Mindra watched intently, imprinting shape, smell and color of the wild vegetables in her memory. She had never known you could find anything to eat in the wild.

'Look,' said the woman, 'these tubers are related to sweet potatoes. This is a kind of yam. Those green leaves are ramson, which smells and tastes like garlic. These are bulbs that look and taste like onions. The pith from these stems is very nutritious; you can't eat the stem itself.'

'And what's this?'

'Larvae from a tree stump.'

'Ew. Are we really going to eat those?'

'Yes. They taste a little like these snails.' She showed Mindra a bucket.

'Ew!'

'Because it rains so much, they are easy to find. They like to graze on paths and roads where algae grow. In the stream there are pointy water snails and crabs. Haven't you ever eaten things like that?'

Mindra shook her head. She found it bizarre that they had to bite the bullet when there was so much to eat around the village.

'I took groceries from the supermarket every day. Lots of pork and beer, Grova loved that. Grova works for the municipality and there was always money. Also bread, but Grandma used to bake it herself.'

'It will take some time to get everything back to normal,' the woman said grimly. 'I can teach you to find your own food, if you want. There's so much around us. Didn't you know that?'

Mindra shook her head.

'I always had to go to the cable car very early to catch the school bus, and when I got back with the groceries I had to help cook, get firewood and do homework.'

'Did that work out?'

Mindra looked sadly at her hands.

'I was often so tired that I fell asleep over my writing.'

'I saw that many times at my school too, dear child. The students who came from far away often fell asleep in class, and when I asked why, they usually said that they had already had to work so much before they could run to catch the school bus.'

'Was ... are you a teacher?'

The woman smiled and stroked Mindra's short hair.

'At a school further upstream.'

'Did you flee in a boat and did it capsize?'

The woman nodded and put a second pan of water on the stove. 'With Jack.' She pointed with her head to the two children, who had fallen asleep. 'Those two we picked out of a tree on the way, as we did her and the baby. Near the island, things went wrong; we hit a

flooded tree. That fortunately allowed us to get ashore.'

'Are ... did a lot of people drown?'

'I'm afraid so, Mindra. We saw many collapsed houses and sunken boats along the way.'

'O.' Mindra turned to herself. There was actually no one across the river who was close to her and of her fellow students she knew at most their names. She had always been an outcast at school. There might have been people drowning whose faces she knew. That was too vague; they could also all have fled in time. What about the people she didn't know by face? So many people lived on the other side where the farmlands were fertile. If you drowned you died. What was death anyway? No human being she knew had ever died. Neither had any animals. The only animal she knew was the horse and it had been in the sawmill for less than a year. She had eaten meat and she knew it came from animals that were killed.

She couldn't figure it out; she couldn't reconcile drowning people with her experiences. That people were leaving she knew. First her parents left, then Grova, then the cable car driver. Maybe Grandma would die and leave her alone. She had to manage it all by herself. That's why she had been able to operate the cable car. Because she had known for a long time that she had to be able to do everything herself. She had organized her class' field trip to the cable car and paid such close attention to what the driver explained that she had managed to start the emergency generator and get the people off the flooded island.

It filled her with a sense of being capable. It also included the ease with which the horse responded to her.

The teacher could follow her train of thought a bit on Mindra's face.

'There are many children like you who live with their grandparents because their parents work in the city, dear child.'

Mindra looked up startled.

'No, I can't read minds, but I can see that you know how to get by.'

'Do you have kids like me at your school, too?'

The teacher nodded. 'Many live in the mountains. Those have to make long journeys to school.'

'Do they fall asleep in class?'

'Often they do. You don't?'

'Not at school, I always sleep on the bus.'

'I thought it was very clever how you brought the cable car to life.'

Mindra nodded, her face concerned. She was pleased with the compliment, but it also brought up old fears. She decided to tell the teacher.

'I learned it from the driver. I was always afraid that the cable car would stop working when the gondola hung over the river. There were power failures so often. He demonstrated how he would then start the engine when I was there with my class. Then I wasn't afraid anymore. After the forest fires, there was no more power and the motor did everything.'

'Because of that, you were able to save us.'

Mindra remained silent confused. She had been afraid and because of that she had been able to save people. That felt strange. But when she went to the cable car on the horse and started the motor and ran the gondola, she had not been afraid. Precisely not, because she knew how it worked. So does being afraid come from not knowing? Sometimes it does, that is. She had learned a lot from Grova, who loved Mindra to teach all sorts of things. Even the operator had enjoyed explaining everything to her.

Meanwhile, the soup was ready. The young woman and Jack had flipped the cooked snails from their houses and put them in the soup. The teacher ladled the soup into bowls she had found in a cupboard. With the rice and lentils, it became a thick mash that tasted surprisingly good. When she had tasted the first tough piece (was it a cooked snail or a larva?) she ate the others as well, although she remained a bit crept out. She hadn't been able to eat so much and so delicious in days.