

'You have to keep your buttocks as wide apart as possible.'

I'm lying on my side on the brown leather settee like a breech calf, looking back at my father. He's wearing his blue skipper's jersey, which means he's relaxed and the cows have been nice to him today. I'm anything but relaxed. I haven't been able to poo for days, which has made my belly hard and swollen under my coat, like the Bundt cake my mother sometimes lets rise under a striped tea-towel. The three kings were given Bundt cake on their way back from Bethlehem, and their turbans were used as a mould, which is why it is ring-shaped. I mustn't let go of my poo before we find the star, though even sitting hurts. I can't imagine travelling for hours.

'What are you going to do, Dad?' I ask.

He says nothing, just unzips his skipper's collar a little further. I see a chunk of bare chest. Using his thumbnail, he breaks off a chunk of the bar of green soap he's holding. In panic, I run through the last few days in my head. Have I said a blush word without *Lingo* being on? Have I been mean to Hanna? Before I can think about it any further, Dad has shoved the chunk of soap deep into my bum hole with his index finger. I just manage to smother a scream in the cushion under my face. I sink my teeth into the fabric. I can see the pattern on

the cover through my tears. Triangles. For the first time since Marthie's death, I cry. The lake inside my head empties. Dad pulls out his finger as fast as he's pushed it in. Again he breaks a chunk of soap off the bar. I try to stop crying by imagining that we are playing 'land grab', a game I sometimes play in the village with a couple of classmates. You throw a stick into the opponent's area, and Dad's finger is the stick, it's no more than that. And still I clench my buttocks and look nervously over my shoulder at my mother who is sitting at the kitchen table, sorting out the ear tags of the cows that have died – blue with blue, yellow with yellow. I don't want her to see me like this but there's nothing to hide myself with, though my blushes of shame cover me as heavily as a horse blanket. She doesn't look up from her work, even though we always have to be economical with the soap and the fact it's disappearing inside me, chunk by chunk, must affect her. An ear tag lands on the floor. She bends down, her hair falling in front of her face.

'Open wider,' Dad roars.

Still sobbing, I pull my buttocks further apart with my hands, as though it's the mouth of a newly born calf that has to be held open when it refuses the bottle. The third time Dad sticks his finger inside, I no longer react. I just stare at the string room window which has been covered with old newspapers, which is crazy because they like to talk about the weather and now there's not much to see of it. 'To stop Peeping Toms,' Dad said when I asked about it, and actually I could say that about him now, with my buttocks like two open curtains. But according to my father, soap in your bum hole is a tried and

rested method that has been used for centuries on children – in a couple of hours I'll be able to shit again. The last time Dad picked up the bar of green soap, Mum looked up briefly and said, 'Number 150's missing.' She's wearing her reading glasses, and everything far away from her is suddenly close up. I try to make myself as small as Hannah's Playmobil doll, which Obbe once sat on the edge of the settee with another doll right behind it, pushed up to its bum. I didn't understand what he found so funny about it and why he swiped them off the sofa when the elders came to visit. Making myself smaller doesn't help as I only feel bigger, more conspicuous.

Then Dad tugs at the hem of my pants as a sign that the procedure is finished, that I can get back up again. He wipes his finger on his skipper's jersey, and then uses the same hand to take a slice of gingerbread from the dresser before taking a large bite. I get a pat on my lower leg. 'It's only soap.' I quickly pull my trousers back up and raise myself on my knees to close the stud. Then I drop back down onto my side like a cow collapsing on the slats, wiping the tears from my cheeks with the palms of my hands.

'Number 150,' my mother says again. Now she takes off her glasses.

'Shipping disease,' Dad says.

'Poor creature,' Mum says.

Number 150 falls into the tray with all the other dead cows. For a moment I want to see that number which tumbles, tarnished and lonely, and will soon disappear into the filing cabinet never to be seen again. The cabinet gets locked, and

the key hangs on a hook on the side of the cupboard: it's about the gesture, closing something off so that a stall comes free in their heads. I can still feel my father's finger inside. Not long afterwards, the bar of green soap is back in the metal tray on the sink in the toilet. No one will worry about the broken-off chunk that is now roaming about my body somewhere.

When I look at the bar of soap as I'm peeing, I hear Obbe's words about how the unrolled wall of the small intestine has the surface area of a tennis court. When Obbe wants to tease me, he no longer just makes vomiting noises but now acts like he's about to toss up a tennis ball. I feel sick at the idea that a tennis competition could be held inside me and that I'm made up of more space than I actually take up. From time to time, I picture a little man smoothing out the gravel of the tennis court with a dragnet so that a new game can take place inside me and I can poo again. Hopefully the little man won't get green soap in his eyes.

On the table next to the new ear tags, my pale blue swimming costume lies lifelessly across my rucksack, a packet of ready salted crisps and a carton of strawberry yoghurt drink next to it. Sometimes there are crisps on the floor in the swimming pool, and the wet bits stick to your feet like soaked-off blisters and you have to flick them off with the corner of your towel. Later you see them hitching a ride under other people's feet.

'The giraffe is the only animal that can't swim,' I say.
I try to forget the piece of green soap roving about my body,

like I tried to forget my father's finger.

'Are you a giraffe?' Mum asks.

'Now I am.'

'You only have one part of the diploma left to do.'

'But it's the most difficult part.'

I'm the only person my age who hasn't passed their swimming proficiency test, the only one who freezes when I have to go 'swimming through a hole': it's important you can do this, as the winters are harsh here in the village. And even though Dad burned my strap-on wooden skates after that day in December, and it's now mid-May more than a year later, a time will come when I will have to brave the ice again. The holes in the ice are now mainly inside our heads.

'If God hadn't wanted people to be able to swim, He wouldn't have made us this way,' Mum says, putting my swimming costume and the packet of crisps into my rucksack. There's a box of plasters at the bottom. I mustn't forget to put one over my belly button, otherwise the green pin will be visible through my cozzie. Everyone will know then that I never go on holiday, otherwise I'd long for foreign countries, for beaches so white they look like they've been covered in sun cream.

'Maybe I'll drown,' I say cautiously, searching my mum's face in the hope she'll be startled, that more lines will appear in her skin than when she's crying for herself, that she'll stand up and hold me, rock me back and forth like a cumin cheese in a brine bath. My mum doesn't look up.

'Don't be so daft. You're not going to die.' She says it as

though she'd begrudge it me, as though I'm not clever enough to die young. Of course she doesn't know that we, the three kings, are trying to meet death. We caught a glimpse of him with Tisey, but it was too brief, too fleeting. Besides, if you aren't prepared for it, you don't know what you should watch out for. Good preparation makes the man – God knew during creation that we'd need a day to rest from everything we'd created during the week.

'And we can't go on holiday until you've got your diploma.' I sigh and feel the pin stick into my navel. The skin around it has turned light purple. Last week they'd put a white tarpaulin across the pool with holes in it, and the divers hung on to the side. The swimming teacher had told us that panic and hypothermia were our greatest enemies. The divers had ice-piercers around their necks to make it look more real. That day at Christmas, Marthies had forgotten his steel-tipped pin for breaking the ice. It was on the little table beneath the mirror in the hall. No one knows that I saw it there, that I considered running after him, but that my anger at not being allowed to go along held me back.

In the swimming pool, Belle pokes me in my side. She's wearing a pink swimming costume; there's a fake Pokémon tattoo on her right arm, the kind you get with two packets of chewing gum and that slowly disappears from your skin, bit by bit. She passed her diploma years ago, and now she's allowed to swim on her own in the pool and jump from the high diving board and go on the big slide.

'Eva's got tits.'

I glance furtively at Eva who is standing in the queue for the big slide. At the start of the school year she whispered to me that I must have got 'spunky' and 'funky' mixed up. Of course she was referring to my coat. Eva's two years older than us, and they say she knows a lot about the things boys like about girls and how to behave. As the end of the swimming lesson, she's always got the most frog sweets in her bag though we all started with the same number. One tip about boys costs two frogs. She's the only one who showers apart. I think it's because of her verrucas, which she says don't exist but I can see them on the sides of her foot, like the mucous glands on my toads, both full of poison.

'Will we ever grow some?' Belle asks.

I shake my head. 'We'll stay tit-less forever. You only grow them if a boy looks at you for longer than ten minutes.'

Belle looks around at the boys who are getting ready to dive through the hole. We're not being looked at, only observed, which is something quite different.

'Then we'll have to make sure they see us.'

I nod and point at the swimming teacher. His hand is feeling for the whistle around his neck. My words seem to get stuck, just like the children who choke up the slide – only the odd one shooting into the water now and again – until it's a train. My body begins to shiver, and the drawing pin rubs against my swimming costume.

'Panic is not an enemy but a warning, the teacher said. That leaves just one enemy,' I say. And just before I get up

onto the starting block, I see Marthies before me. I hear the clatter of his skates, the gurgling of the air bubbles under the ice. The divers said that your heartbeat increases underwater, but I haven't even dived in yet and my heart is beating against my chest like my fists against the ice in my nightmares. Belle wraps her arm around me: we are taught how to rescue people from under the ice, but above water we don't know how to keep someone on dry land, so it's not strange that Belle's arm is heavy and awkward. Her swimming costume is stuck to her body, and I can see the narrow line between her skinny legs. I think about the verrucas on Eva's feet, the way they'll burst open and fill the pool with green poison that will change the divers one by one into frog sweets, croaking.

'Her brother,' Belle tells the swimming teacher.

He sighs. Everyone in the village knows about our loss, but the longer Marthies is away from home, the more people get used to there being just the five of us. Those who are new to the village don't even know any better. My brother is slowly fading out of various minds, while he moves more and more into ours.

I free myself from Belle and escape into the changing rooms, where I put my coat on over my costume and lie down on the bench. It smells of chlorine. I'm convinced the water's going to start bubbling with soap-studs from the chunk of green soap in me. Everyone will point at me and then I'll have to tell them what's wrong inside. I carefully begin to make swimming movements lying on my belly. Eyes closed, I do the butterfly stroke and let myself sink into the ice hole. Soon I realize

that my arms have stopped and I'm only moving my hips up and down. The divers are right: an increased heartbeat and accelerated breathing. It's not hypothermia but imagination that is the enemy.

The bench creaks beneath my belly like black ice. I don't want to be rescued now, I want to sink. Deeper and deeper until breathing starts to become difficult. In the meantime I chew the frog sweets into tiny bits, taste the gelatine, the reassurance of sweetness. Hannah's right: we have to get away from this village, away from the cows, away from death, away from life in its original form.

9

Mum plunges a cumin cheese into the brine bath. It needs to soak for two to five days. There are two large sacks of vacuum salt on the floor next to her. Every once in a while, she throws a large scoopful into the water so that the cheese keeps its flavour. Sometimes I wonder if it would help if we dunked Mum and Dad in the brine bath, if we re-baptized them 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' so that they'd firm up and keep well for longer. I've only just noticed that the skin around Mum's eyes looks yellowish and dull, like the light bulb above the dining table with her floral apron as a lampshade, flicking from light to dark. We mustn't use an angry tone with her, we mustn't be surly and we definitely mustn't cry. Sometimes I think it would be more peaceful if they were ducked forever, but I don't want Obbe to take care of us. There'd be even less of us left then and we're already so few.

From the window of the brining shed, I see my brother and sister walking to the furthest cowshed. They're going to bury Tiesey with the dead chickens and the two stray cats, and it's my job to distract Mum. Dad won't notice, as he's just gone off on his bike. He said he was never coming back. It's because of me. Yesterday I pulled the freezer plug out of the socket to plug

in the roasting maker, but forgot to plug it back in again. When Mum and Dad rescued the beans they had just frozen, they lay wet and floppy on the kitchen table. The little green bodies looked dismal, like an exterminated plague of bush crickets. All our work had been for nothing – four evenings in a row we'd had to shell them with a tray on our laps for the rubbish and two milk pails next to us on the floor, so that all Mum had to do was wash and blanch them before packing them in freezer bags. When the thawed harvest lay on the table, Dad cut the plastic bags open with a bread knife, tipped the limp beans into a wheelbarrow and rolled them to the muck-heap – I'm worried we'll have to roll Mum and Dad in a wheelbarrow to the muck-heap and that it will all be my fault. After that he said we'd have to figure things out for ourselves – but we already knew he had to go to the trade union and when he got back he'd have forgotten he'd threatened to leave for good. Lots of people want to run away, but the ones who really do rarely announce it beforehand: they just go.

After Dad had left, we'd put Tiesey in a Russian salad container. Hanna wrote in felt pen on the lid: *Let us never forget*. Obbe looked on with a steely expression. He didn't betray anything but touched his crown more and more, and I knew he'd lain in bed tossing and turning and banging his head all night, so hard that Dad taped bubble wrap to the wood. I kept hearing the bubbles pop. Sometimes I wonder whether that's why Obbe's so mixed up; maybe he's muddled up his brains.

'Could you help with the curds a minute?' Mum asks.

I walk away from the window, with my hair still damp from the swimming pool. No one asks how anything went; they just announce – when they think of them – the things we have to do, and forget to find out what happens next. They don't want to know if and how I got out of the hole. I'm still alive, and that's the only thing they pay attention to. That we get up every day, however slowly, is enough proof for them that we're doing all right. The three kings continue to heave themselves onto our camels, even though the saddles disappeared long ago and we're just sitting on a bare hide, and all the bumps chafe our skin.

I use my fingers to press the damp white chunks into the cheese mould and slide it across to the wooden cheese press, pushing down on it to get the whey out of the curds. Mum closes the lid of the rennet. I bring the press down on the curds again. White pieces stick to my fingers, and I wipe them off on the seam of my coat.

'How's it going in the basement?'

I don't look at my mother but fix my gaze on the flowery meadow on her apron. It's possible that Mum will move into the basement one day; that she'll find the family, the Jewish people that live there, nicer than us. What will happen to the three kings then, I don't know: Dad is still incapable of even heating up milk for coffee, and if he lets even that boil over, how could he ever keep his children at the right temperature?

'What do you mean?' Mum asks. She turns around and goes to turn the cheeses lying on the wall shelving. Of course I should have known she wasn't going to give away her operating

base just like that. Just as you have to be careful with the cows when combining different races. Maybe she's preparing to go away, to leave us. Maybe that's why she's stopped wearing her glasses, so that we stay at a distance.

'Nothing,' I say, 'nothing is your fault, not even that stone in your tummy.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' Mum says, 'and don't pick your nose. Do you want to get worms again?' Mum grabs my arm hard; for the second time her nails prick through the fabric of my coat. She hasn't cut her nails for a long time, I notice. They've got white tips, partly yellow from the whey. 'What have we got to thank for this?' I don't reply. There are some questions Mum doesn't want a reply to. She doesn't say this, so you have to sense it. If you reply it only makes her sadder. She lets go of me more carefully than she grabbed me. I think of the plague she was talking to Dad about that night I got my bear down off the washing line. The plagues broke out in Egypt because the people wanted to go to the other side. Here they break out because we're not allowed to go to the other side although we long for it. It could even be that if Hanna and I leave, the stone in my mother's tummy would get less heavy. Maybe I could ask the vet to operate on her. He once cut a couple of abscesses from a cow after the neighbour trod on her udder. He threw them onto the muck-heap and less than an hour later, the crows had already eaten the bloody lumps.

Behind us the shed door opens. Mum has just started testing a new cheese. She looks back and puts the cheese scoop down beside her on the counter.

'Why isn't there any coffee?' Dad asks.

'Because you weren't here,' Mum says.

'But I am here, and it's already long past four.'

'You'll have to make it yourself then, if you need some.'

'What I need is a bit more respect!'

He strides back through the door, slamming it behind him. Anger has hinges that need oiling. For a moment Mum pretends to continue with her work, but then she begins to sigh and goes to make coffee all the same. Everything here is a maths sum: respect equals four sugar lumps and a shot of condensed milk. I quickly stuff the cheese scoop into my pocket with all my memories.

'Boudewijn de Groot,' I whisper a couple of hours later to the darkness and the place I'm expecting Hanna's car to be. I didn't have to think for very long. If there's anyone whose voice has been running through my head for days, it's his. I even have a photo of Boudewijn in my purse, along with the photo of my first love: a boy called Sjoerd. There are cracks in his photo, and I remember how I felt when I found out that he swapped his love for me for two Pokémon cards and a milk biscuit behind the bike shed. From that moment on, I always emptied my dinosaur beaker of syrup and buttermilk into the bushes there as a memorial, especially because my classmates said it stank – they got real drinking yoghurt in a box. The ground and the plants behind the bike shed turned white. No, Boudewijn de Groot seemed the right choice to me because anyone who sings so beautifully about love must be able to

save love. And Mum and Dad like him. Surely they won't mind if he takes us away. Mum always used to sing along to 'Het land van Maas en Waal' so loudly that I thought she was longing for another place. Now she only listens to *The Musical Fruit Basket* – the requests programme for psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Hanna and I are lying on our backs in my bed with our arms hooked, like a pretzel. The duvet covers us to the waist, but it's too hot to lie under it completely. I'm picking my nose and put my little finger in my mouth.

'Gross,' Hanna says. She pulls her arm out of mine and frees herself from me. She wasn't able to see it but she knows I often fill my silences with picking my nose. It helps me think, as though looking for ways out in my thoughts also has to be expressed physically. Hanna says it will give me wide nostrils, that the elastic will get stretched, just like on my undies. You can buy new underwear but you can't buy a new nose. I lay my hand on my belly beneath my coat. A scab is forming around the drawing pin. With my other hand I feel Hanna's face, taking her earlobe between my thumb and forefinger for a moment. It's the softest part of a human body. Hanna snuggles up to me again. Sometimes I like it but more often I don't. When someone stands or lies too close I get the feeling I have to admit something, that I have to justify my presence: I'm here because Mum and Dad believed in me and from that thought I could be born – even though they've been having more doubts recently and they're paying less attention to us. There are creases in my clothes. I'm crumpled like the

screwed-up shopping list in the bin, waiting for someone to smooth me out and read me again.

'Mr Herbert is my choice,' Hanna says.

We're sharing my pillow. I move ever further away from her and picture my head falling off the edge, causing a tipping point in my thoughts, hoping that I'll be able to convince Hanna I don't need a saviour, that I do want to go to the other side, far away from here, that maybe we need something other than a man, that we can't simply swap God – he's the strongest Pokémon card we have. Even though I don't have any other solutions for getting out of here.

'Why Boudewijn?' Hanna asks.

'Why Mr Herbert?'

'Because I love him.'

'And I love Boudewijn de Groot,' I say. Maybe it's because he looks a bit like Dad, even though Dad's blond and he's got a smaller nose and can't sing as well. He never wears colourful shirts either, just his overalls, his blue skipper's jumper and a black suit with shiny lapels on Sundays. Dad can only play the recorder too. Every Saturday and Sunday morning, he accompanies us to the psalm of the week so that on Mondays we'll make a good impression at school. Every few couplets he presses his index finger to the air hole and blows, as if he knows that I always stray from the line I should be following. Sometimes I feel like I'm not singing for my father but for the whole village, with a voice as soft as butter and clear as a song thrush's; a thrush that's fallen into the butter churn – that's how they'd revere me, Mulder's girl. The shrill, flat

sound of the recorder hurts my eardrums.

'You have to know where he lives. That's a condition,' Hanna says. She leans over me and switches on the globe. My eyes have to get used to the light, as though the things in the room quickly have to put on a straight face, smooth down their clothes and become silent, so they match the idea I have of them. It's a bit like the way Mum always jumps if we go into her bedroom when she's only half-dressed, as if she's afraid she'll no longer satisfy the image we have of her, and decks herself out like a Christmas tree every morning.

'On the other side of the bridge.'

Hanna's eyes narrow. I'm not even sure Boudewijn de Groot lives on the other side, but I realize how exciting it sounds: the other side. Mr Herbert lives in the house one further than the sweet-shop, exactly the way we think about things: first what you want is sweets and later it's love. We understand that order of events.

'That's it,' Hanna says, 'we have to go there. There are tons of saviours and Mum and Dad won't dare to go there.'

I pinch the drawing pin under my coat, a lifebuoy in the middle of the North Sea.

'Do you want to kiss Boudewijn?' my sister suddenly asks.

I shake my head frantically. Kissing is for old people, and they do it when they've run out of words. Hanna is now lying so close to me that I can smell her breath. Toothpaste. She moistens her lips with her tongue. An overdue milk tooth is still trying to become a grown-up tooth.

'I've got an idea,' she says, 'I'll be right back.'

She slides out from between the sheets and comes back carrying Dad's Sunday suit.

'What do you want with that?' I ask.

Hanna doesn't reply. There's a perfume bag on the hanger – lavender. I watch her put on the suit over her nightdress. I grin but Hanna doesn't smile. Using a black marker from my pen pot she draws a moustache above her top lip. Now she looks a bit like Hitler. I wish I could cover her entirely in pen so that I can always remember her and mark her as mine. She's too big for my coat pockets.

'Come on. You have to lie on your back otherwise it won't work.'

I do what she says, as I'm used to her taking charge and me obeying her. She's dressed her bony legs in Dad's much too baggy trousers and has planted them next to my hips, her hair swept out of her face. In the light of the globe she looks creepy with a black moustache that looks more like a bow-tie.

'I'm from the city and I'm a man,' she says in a deep voice. I instantly know what I have to do, as though it's dead normal for her to be sitting on me in the middle of the night wearing Dad's suit. The jacket with the shiny lapels makes her shoulders bigger and her head as small as a porcelain doll's.

'I'm from the village and I'm a woman,' I say in a higher pitched voice than my own.

'And you were looking for a man?' Hanna growls.

'That's right. I'm looking for a man to save me from this terrible village. Someone who is very strong. And handsome. And kind.'

'Well madam, then you've come to the right place. Shall we kiss?'

Before I can answer, she presses her lips to mine and immediately pushes her tongue inside. It's lukewarm, like a leftover steak that Mum's warmed up in the microwave and served again. She moves it around rapidly a few times, her saliva mixing with mine and dripping down my cheek. As quickly as she's pushed it in, she pulls it out again.

'Can you feel it too?' Hanna asks, breathlessly.

'What do you mean, sir?'

'In your belly and between your legs?'

'No,' I say, 'just your moustache. It tickles a bit.'

We laugh as though we can't stop and for a moment it feels like that. Then Hanna collapses next to me.

'You taste of metal,' she says.

'You of wet milk biscuits,' I say.

We both know how bad that is.

10

My sister and I wake up with black stripes on our faces and Dad's Sunday suit all creased. I sit up in bed at once. If Dad catches us, he'll get the Authorized Version out of the drawer in the dining room table and read to us from Romans: 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.' With that same mouth we kissed each other last night. Hanna pushed her tongue inside me as she was looking for words she didn't possess herself. You can refuse the guilt of sin entry to your heart but never to your home. That's why when he comes to drum us out of bed, Dad will quickly find out that we've invited this sin in, the way we once let in a stray cat. We put it in the walnut basket behind the wood stove and fed it milk and crusts until it grew stronger. Neither Hanna nor I is going to be saved now.

Hanna smooths the creases out of Dad's suit and takes half a roll of peppermints from the breast pocket. She puts one in her mouth. I ask myself why she's doing this because the peppermints are meant for getting through the sermon, to keep us quiet so we don't start swinging our legs, which makes the pew creak so everyone in the row knows that Mulder's kids aren't listening to the words of Reverend Renkema. We

have no reason to sit still now – we have to get moving. After the service when we complain about how long it was, he says, ‘Anyone displaying impatience can listen for twice as long for punishment,’ before saying, ‘Lien next door, now she rambles on. She could talk the hind legs off a donkey, or the ears off your head.’ For a moment I picture my father and Lien standing facing each other on the farm track, with his ears falling off like autumn leaves. We’d have to stick them back on with Pritt stick. I’d rather put them in a little velvet box and whisper the sweetest and the most terrible words into them every night, before putting the lid back on and shaking the box so I’m sure the words have slid into the ear canal. I’ve got so many words but it’s as if fewer and fewer come out of me, while the biblical vocabulary in my head is pretty much bursting at the seams. I can’t stop smiling at the idea of Dad’s glued-on ears. And as long as Dad is making jokes about Lien next door and keeps repeating them, just like this week’s weather forecast, we’ve got nothing to fear.

Yet Dad eats the most peppermints during the silent contemplation and, just recently, as soon as we get home he’s been asking what the sermon was about to check whether we were paying attention. Secretly I think he asks for himself because he’s been distracted and is using us to get a summary. Last Sunday I said the sermon had been about the prodigal son, which wasn’t true but Dad didn’t correct me. The return of the prodigal son is my favourite story. Sometimes I picture Marthies arriving on foot with snow-white skin, and Dad taking the best calf from the cowshed and slaughtering it.

Despite the fact that Mum doesn’t like parties because of all the ‘jigging about and bam-bam-bam’ as she calls dancing and music, we’d organize a big party on the farm with lanterns, streamers, Coke and deep-ridged crisps ‘because he was lost and is found again.’

‘Do you think we did something wrong?’ I ask Hanna. She tries to suppress a yawn behind her hand. We’ve only had three hours’ sleep.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you know. Maybe we’re the reason why things are like they are with Mum and Dad. Maybe it’s our fault that Marthies and Tiesey are dead.’

Hanna thinks for a moment. When she thinks she moves her nose up and down. There is marker pen on her cheeks too now. She says, ‘Everything there’s a reason for comes good in the end.’

My sister often says wise things, but I don’t think she understands much of what she says herself.

‘Will it be all right, do you think?’

I feel my eyes moisten. I quickly turn them onto Dad’s suit, the padded shoulders that give him more authority on Sundays. We could easily puncture them with a knife. I pick the yellow trails of sleep out of my eyes with my little finger and wipe them on my duvet.

‘Of course. And Obbe didn’t mean it that way, it was an accident.’

I nod. Yes, it was an accident. Here in the village it’s always that way: people fall in love by accident, buy the wrong meat

by accident, forget their prayer book by accident, don't speak by accident. Hanna has got up and is hanging Dad's jacket back on the hanger. The perfume bag of lavender has burst open, and there are little purple flowers all over my duvet. I lie on my back in the lavender. Please let the day wait so that I don't have to go to school, long enough for the grass in the fields to be dry enough to make hay, long enough for the dampness in me to slowly subside.

11

On the news they've recommended drinking a large glass of water every hour, and even show a picture of what a big glass looks like – though it doesn't look like the glasses we own. Here in the village no two houses have the same glasses, and you can use glasses to make yourself different from the others. We use the ones that used to have mustard in them. In turn we drink water from a Coke bottle that Dad fills the glasses with. The bottle wasn't rinsed properly, giving the water a Coke taste, lukewarm from the sun. My nose itches from the dust that was whipped up by the haymaking. When I pick my nose the snot comes out black. I wipe it on my trousers, and don't dare eat it, afraid I'll get ill and return to dust. The hay-bales lie around me like bars of green soap in the field. I don't want to think about my dad's finger in me, and take a bite of the doughnut he's just given us. I can barely manage another soggy doughnut: they're coming out of our ears as the baker's hardly had anything else recently. I take a bite all the same, even if only to feel connected to Obbe and Dad: three people sitting on a hay-bale eating doughnuts need some kind of connection. Its soggy skin sticks to my teeth and the roof of my mouth. I swallow without really tasting it.

'God's knocked over his pot of ink,' Obbe says as he stares at

the darkening sky above our sweaty heads. I grin and even Dad smiles for the first time in ages. He gets up and wipes his hands on his trouser legs as a sign we should get back to work. Soon he'll start getting nervous that it will rain on the bales and they'll go mouldy. I get up too and pluck a handful of dried grass to protect my palms from the string around the bale. I take another quick peek at the smile on Dad's face. Look, I think, we only have to make sure that the ropes don't leave impressions behind, then everything will come good with us, and we don't have to be afraid of the Day of Judgement descending on our parents at any moment like a jackdaw on its prey, or that we sin more than we pray. As I pick up a new bale, my coat sticks to my sweaty skin. Even now it's boiling hot I don't take it off. I throw the bales onto the hay-cart so that Dad can arrange them in neat rows of six.

'We have to hurry up before the sky breaks open,' Dad says, staring at the ever-darkening sky above us.

As I look up at him I say, 'Marthies could lift two bales of hay in one go; he stuck his pitchfork into them as though they were chunks of nettle cheese.' Dad's smile immediately sinks into the skin of his face until nothing is left. There are people whose smiles are always visible even when they're sad. The smile lines can no longer be erased. It's the other way round with Mum and Dad. Even when they smile they look sad, as though someone's put a set square next to the corners of their mouths and drawn two lines pointing down.

'We don't think about the dead, we remember them.'

'We can remember out loud, can't we?' I ask.

Dad gives me a penetrating look, jumps from the hay-cart and sticks his pitchfork in the ground. 'What did you say?'

I see the muscles in his upper arms tense.

'Nothing,' I say.

'Nothing what?'

'Nothing, Dad.'

'That's what I thought. How dare you talk back to me after ruining the entire supply of beans when you unplugged the freezer.'

I stare up at the sky because I don't know what to do with myself. For the first time I notice that I've tensed my muscles too, and that I'd like to push Dad's head into the ink like a fountain pen before writing an ugly sentence with it – or one that's about Marthies and how much I miss him. My thoughts startle me immediately. 'Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.' And straight away I think: and hopefully the days on the other side, not just here in this stupid boring village. Obbe grabs the Coke bottle from the ground and greedily drinks the last bit without asking me if I want any more. Then he gets up to continue with the hay.

The last round goes slower. It's my job to steer the tractor and Obbe's to throw the bales onto the cart so that Dad can stack them. Dad keeps shouting that I have to speed up or slow down. Now and then he suddenly tears open the tractor door and pushes me roughly from the seat, before tugging hard at the wheel to stop us from driving into a ditch, sweat dripping from his forehead. As soon as he's back on top of the stack,

taking bales from Obbe, I think: if I accelerate hard, just once, he'll fall off the cart. Just once.

After the haymaking, Obbe and I lean against the back wall of the cowshed. He has a piece of straw sticking out through the gap between his front teeth. In the background you can hear the buzzing of the cow brushes that spin across their backs to stop them itching. It's long before feeding time so we're free for a while. Obbe chews on his straw and promises to tell me the password for *The Sims* on the computer if I help him with his mission. With the password you can get stinking rich and make the avatars French kiss each other. A shiver runs through my body. Sometimes when Dad comes to wish me goodnight, he sticks his tongue in my ear. It's not as bad as the finger with green soap, but still. I don't know why he does it. Maybe it's just like the lid of the vanilla custard that he licks clean every evening with his tongue, as it's a waste otherwise, he says – and the same with my cars as I often forget to clean them with cotton buds.

'Not something to do with death, is it?' I say to Obbe.

I don't know if I'm strong enough to meet death now. We're only allowed to appear before God in our Sunday best, but I don't know what the rules are for death. I can still feel Dad's anger weighing down on my shoulders. At school I don't take sides when there are fights. I watch from a distance and support the weakest person inside my head. When it comes to death, I can hardly stick up for myself, as I've never learned how to. Even though I sometimes try to look at myself from

a distance, it doesn't work, I'm stuck inside. And the incident with the hamster is still fresh in my memory. I know how I'm going to feel afterwards, but this doesn't outweigh my curiosity to see death and understand it.

'There's always the risk of running into him.'

Obbe spits the straw out from between his teeth, and a white splatter lands on the pebbles.

'Do you get why we're not allowed to talk about Marthies?'

'Do you want the password or not?'

'Can Belle join in too? She's coming over in a bit.'

I don't tell him she's mainly coming for the neighbour's boys' willies, because I'd been boasting about them and said they looked a bit like the pale croissants we sometimes had at hers for lunch, made from dough her mother got out of a tin and rolled up before putting them in the oven and baking them brown.

'Sure,' Obbe says, 'as long as she doesn't start blubbering.'

A little later Obbe gets three cans of Coke out of the basement, hides them under his jumper and gestures to me and Belle. I know what's going to happen and feel calm. So calm that I forget to clamp my zip between my teeth. Maybe it's also to do with the fact that Lien next door and her husband Kees have complained. They think the way I cycle along the dike with my sleeves pulled over my fingers and my zip between my teeth is dangerous. Mum and Dad had waved away their concerns like a low bid for a calf at auction.

'It's temporary,' Mum said.

'Yes, she'll grow out of it,' Dad said.

But I won't grow out of it – I'm actually growing into it and getting stuck, and no one will notice.

When we open the door to the rabbit shed, Belle is talking about the biology test and Tom, who sits two rows behind us, has black hair down to his shoulders, and always wears the same checked shirt. We suspect he doesn't have a mother, as why else does no one wash his clothes or make him wear something else? According to Belle, Tom's stared at her for at least ten minutes, which means that at any moment tits could start growing under her T-shirt. I'm not happy for her but I smile all the same. People need small problems in order to feel bigger. I'm not desperate to get tits. I don't know if that's strange or not. I'm not longing for boys either but for myself, but you must never reveal that, just like how you keep the password to your Nokia secret so that no one can break into you unexpectedly.

It's warm and dark in the rabbit shed. The sun has shone down on the plasterboards of the roof all day long. Dieuwerdje lies stretched out in his hutch. Mum took yesterday's soggy leaves out of his hutch and replaced them with fresh ones: she forgot sweets for the sweets tin, but not the leaves. Obbe slides the manger from the wood and puts it on the floor. He takes a pair of scissors from his pocket: there's a bit of tomato sauce sticking to the edges from when Mum cuts open the tops of the Heinz packets. Obbe makes a cutting gesture, and sunlight falls through the chinks in the shed wall momentarily and reflects off the metal of the blades. Death is giving a warning signal.

'First I'll cut off the whiskers, as those are the sensors, and then Dieuwerdje won't know what he's doing.' One by one he cuts off the whiskers and lays them in my outstretched palm.

'Isn't that bad for Dieuwerdje?' asks Belle.

'It's about the same as if we burn our tongue and then taste less. It's pretty harmless.'

Dieuwerdje darts into all the corners of his hutch but fails to dodge Obbe's hand. Now that all the whiskers are gone, he says, 'Do you want to see them mating?'

Belle and I look at each other. It's not part of our plan to cut off the whiskers and see whether they grow back, but the worms have returned to my belly. Since Obbe showed me and Hanna his willy, Mum's worm drink has been going through me even faster: I deliberately complain about having an itchy bottom. Sometimes I dream that worms as big as rattlesnakes are coming out of my anus: they have lions' jaws and I've fallen into the hollow in my mattress like Daniel in the lion pit and have to promise that I trust in God, but I keep seeing those filthy hungry faces with their snakes' bodies. It's not until I'm crying for mercy that I awake from the nightmare.

Obbe nods at the dwarf rabbit in the hutch opposite Dieuwerdje's. I think of Dad's words: never let a large rabbit cover a small one. It's wrong: Dad's two heads taller than Mum and she survived when she gave birth to us. This must be possible too then, and that's why I press the little rabbit into Belle's arms. She hugs it for a moment, then puts it in Dieuwerdje's hutch. We watch in silence as Dieuwerdje carefully sniffs at the dwarf rabbit, hops around it, begins to

stamp its back feet on the ground and then first jumps onto the front before jumping onto the back. We can't see his willy. All we can see are his heaved movements and the look of fear in the little rabbit's eyes, the same look I saw on the hamster.

'Desire without knowledge is not good – how much more will hasty feet miss this way!' Dad sometimes says when we get too covetous about things we want, and at that moment Dieuwerdje lets himself fall sideways off the little animal. I briefly wonder whether Dad lets himself fall the same way each time he's done it. Perhaps that's why his leg is deformed and always hurts. Maybe the story of the combine harvester was invented because it's more believable and free from shame. Just when we want to take a breath of relief, we see that the dwarf rabbit is dead. There's nothing spectacular to look at. It closed its eyes and departed. No convulsions or cries of pain; not a glimpse of death.

'What a stupid game,' Belle says.

I see that she's going to cry. She's too soft for this kind of thing. She's like the whey cheese is made of, while we're already further in the process with a plastic layer around us.

Obbe looks at me. There are pale downy hairs growing on his chin. We say nothing but both know that we'll have to repeat this until we understand Marthies's death, even though we don't know how. The stabs inside my belly become more painful, as though someone's poking a pair of scissors into my skin. The soap still hasn't helped yet. I put the whiskers in my coat pocket with the shards of the cow and the cheese in my coat pocket with the shards of the cow and the cheese in my coat pocket with the shards of the cow and the cheese scoop, pull the tab from the can of Coke and put the cold

metal to my mouth. Over the edge of it I see Belle looking at me expectantly. I have to fulfil my promise now. Jesus had followers too because He always gave them something that made Him seem credible. I have to give something to Belle so that she doesn't turn from a friend into an enemy. Before I take her to the peephole in the yew hedge, I tug at Obbe's sleeve and whisper, 'What's the password then?'

'Klapaucius,' he says, grabbing the little rabbit from Dieuwerdje's hutch and putting it under his jumper where it must still be cold from the Coke cans. I don't ask what he's going to do with it. Everything that requires secrecy here is accepted in silence.

Belle is sitting on a fishing chair on the other side of the yew hedge. I curl my little finger in front of the peephole.

'That's not a willy,' Belle cries, 'that's your little finger.'

'It's not the right weather for wilies. You're out of luck,' I say.

'When's a good day then?'

'I don't know, you never do. Good days are rare here in the countryside.'

'It's all just a pack of lies, isn't it?'

A lock of Belle's hair is stuck to her cheek – it had dangled into the can of Coke. She burps behind her hand. At that moment we hear laughter behind the hedge, and see the boys next door jumping into the inflatable paddling pool and floating on their brown backs, like raisins being soaked in brandy. I tug at Belle's arm.

'Come on, let's ask if we can play at theirs.'

'But how are we going to get to see the willies?'

'They always have to pee at some point,' I say, with a conviction that makes my chest swell. The idea that I've got something someone else is longing for makes me bigger. Side by side we go next door. My belly is full of bubbles. Will the worms inside me survive the Coke?

12

My fascination with willies must have come from when I played with the naked little angels when I was ten. When I took them out of the Christmas tree, I felt the cold porcelain between their sturdy legs like a bit of seashell in the chicken grit, and laid my hand on top like a twig of mistletoe, at the time protectively and this time out of an endless longing that has mainly nestled in my underbelly and is growing in there.

'I'm a paedophile,' I whisper to Hanna. I feel my breath travel across the hairs on my arms and try to lie back against the edge of the bath so that I don't feel it. I don't know what makes me more nervous: feeling my breath on my skin, or the idea that one day I'll stop breathing and that I don't know which day that will be. However I rearrange myself, I still keep feeling my breath. The hairs on my arms stand up; I dip them into the water. *You're a paedophile, you're a sinner.* Obbe taught me that word after he saw it on TV at a friend's house. They're not on Nederland 1, 2 or 3 because no one wants to see their faces on TV. Obbe said that they touched little boys' willies, though from the outside they look like normal people with normal lives who are older than us. There are five years between me and the boys next door, a whole hand's worth. It must be the case that I'm one of them, and that someday I'll be

hunted down and driven into a corner like the cows into the racks when we want to move them to a new bit of field.

After eating, Mum had passed around a damp flannel for us to take turns cleaning our ketchup mouths and sticky fingers. I didn't want to take it. Mum wouldn't forgive me if I wiped my sinful fingers on the same flannel she pressed her lips to – she hadn't eaten any macaroni with ketchup at all but still scrubbed her mouth clean. Maybe it was a veiled attempt to give us an advance goodnight kiss on our mouths – she was coming to give us one less and less often. I went upstairs myself now and pulled the duvet up to my neck, the way I'd seen in a film at Belle's house, and then someone always came and rucked the duvet under the main character's chin, which never happened to me, and sometimes I woke up shivering from the cold, pulled up the duvet myself and whispered, 'Sleep tight, dear main character.'

Before the flannel got to me, I pushed my chair back and said I felt the urge. The word 'urge' made everyone around the table look up hopefully: maybe I'd finally have to poo at last. But on the toilet, I waited until I heard all the chairs being shunted back, until my bottom grew cold and I'd read the birthdays on the calendar above the sink three times. With a pencil from my coat pocket I drew very faint crosses after each name, so faint you could only see it from close up, with the biggest cross after my birthday in April, and I wrote A.H. after it for Adolf Hitler.

The boy next door's willy had felt soft, like Granny's meatloaf I had to roll sometimes on Sundays on the counter,

sprinkled with herbs. Only meatloaf is greasy and rough. I wanted to keep holding on to the willy but the stream grew thinner and stopped. The boy moved his hips back and forth, making his tinkle jig around, and splashes ended up on the grey tiles. After that he pulled up his boxers and jeans. Belle watched from a distance. She was allowed to do up his jeans. You always have to begin from the bottom with an important job – from there you can grow to the top. Belle won't be able to forget the dead rabbit in a hurry, but this calmed her: I'd kept my word. I'd grabbed her finger and pushed it against the boy's willy, saying unnecessarily, 'This is a real one.'

'I'm a paedophile,' I repeat. Hanna squeezes a bit of shampoo from a bottle and rubs it in her hair. Coconut. She says nothing but I know she's thinking. She can do that, think before she speaks; with me it's the other way around. When I try it, my head suddenly empties out and my words are like the cows that lie down in the wrong place in the shed to sleep, where I can't get to them.

Then Hanna begins to giggle.

'I'm serious?' I say.

'You can't be.'

'Why not?'

'Paedophiles are different. You're not different. You're like me.'

I let myself sink back into the bath-water, pinch my nose shut and feel my head touch the bottom. Underwater I can see the hazy contours of Hanna's naked body. How long will

my sister keep believing that I'm no different from her, that we form a unit, while there are enough nights when we lie separate from each other in bed and sometimes she can no longer keep up with my train of thoughts.

'And you're a girl!' Hanna says as soon as I resurface. There's a crown of bubbles around her head.

'Are all paedophiles boys then?'

'Yes, and much older, at least three hands, and with grey hair.'

'Thank God!' I may be different but I'm not a paedophile. I picture the boys in my class. Not one of them has grey hair. According to the teacher, only Dave has an old soul. We've all got an old soul. Mine is already twelve years old. That's older than the neighbour's oldest cow and he says she's ready for the scrap-heap – she hardly produces any milk.

'You can say that again – thank God!' Hanna says loudly and we giggle, get out of the bath and dry each other, before pulling our heads into our pyjama tops like snails in search of protection.

13

The warty skin hangs loose around the skeletons. Every few seconds they puff out their cheeks, as though they are gathering air so they can say something but keep changing their minds. For a moment I want to cut open the warts to see what's inside them, but instead I rest my arms on my desk and lay my chin on my hands. They've hardly eaten anything since the road migration. Maybe they've joined the resistance like Mum, although I wouldn't know what they were rebelling against. In the Second World War, resistance was always against others – now it's only directed at ourselves, like with my coat, which is a rebellion against all the illnesses listed in the radio requests on *The Musical Fruit Basket*. I'm more and more scared of all the things you can catch. And sometimes, I even imagine that during gym I'll look at the queue waiting to jump the pommel horse and my classmates will start throwing up one by one – the vomit like porridge around their ankles and fear riveting me to the linoleum – my cheeks as hot as the heating pipes in the ceiling. As soon as I blink, the vision disappears again. To curb my fear, every morning I break a few peppermints into four on the edge of the table and keep them in my trouser pocket. When I feel sick or think I'm going to throw up, I eat one. The mint flavour makes me calm.

The headmaster won't let me leave early. 'There's usually a deeper underlying issue with children who are off school sick for a long time,' he said, looking past me as though he could see Mum and Dad's faces behind me, and the thing that could happen any moment, namely that absent-minded thing called Death who always took the wrong person or, the other way round, let them live.

'As long as you don't start spitting,' I say to the toads, taking two earthworms I got from the vegetable patch this afternoon before Belle came round out of a paper handkerchief. The earthworm is one of the strongest animals because it can be cut in half and still carry on living. They've got nine hearts. The worms wiggle around a bit as I hold them in a pincer grip above the head of the fattest toad; its eyes move back and forth. Their pupils are stripes – a slotted screwdriver, I think to myself. Handy to know if I have to take them apart one day to find out what's wrong with them, the way I did with the toasted sandwich maker that was covered in melted cheese. The toads refuse to open their mouths. I rub my legs together a bit – the knickers from school are itchy. I've been wetting myself a lot recently and hiding the wet knickers under my bed. That's the only good thing about grief: Mum's nose is constantly blocked so she doesn't smell the knickers when she comes to wish me goodnight.

Today there was a mishap at school too. Luckily no one noticed except the teacher. She gave me a pair of knickers from the lost property box – there are things in there that everyone's stopped looking for, so they are properly lost. Red

letters on the knickers say COOL. I feel anything but cool.

'Are you cross?' I asked the teacher when she gave me the knickers.

'Of course I'm not cross. These things just happen,' she said. Anything can happen, I think then, but nothing can be prevented. The plan about death and a rescuer, Mum and Dad who don't lie on top of each other any more, Obbe who is growing out of his clothes faster than Mum can learn the washing labels off by heart, and the way not just his body is growing but also his cruelty; the ticking insects in my belly which make me rock on top of my teddy bear and get out of bed exhausted, or why we don't have crunchy peanut butter any more, why the sweets tin has grown a mouth with Mum's voice in it that says, 'Are you sure you want to do that?' or why Dad's arm has become like a traffic barrier: it descends on you whether you wait your turn or not; or the Jewish people in the basement that no one talks about, just like Marthies. Are they still alive?

One of the toads suddenly moves forward. I hold it back with my hand so that it doesn't tumble off the desk. Do they have silos in their minds? I rest my head back on my hands so that I can look at them close up and say, 'You know what it is, dear toads? You need to use your strengths. If you can't swim as well as a frog and you can't jump as high, you have to be better at other things. You're really good at sitting, for example. A frog can't compete with you on that. So still that you look like lumps of mud. And you're good at digging, I have to give you that. The whole winter we think that you've disappeared but

you're just sitting in the earth under our feet. We people are always visible, even when we want to be invisible. Apart from that we can do everything you can do – swim, jump, dig – but we don't find those things as important because we mainly want to do things we can't do, things we have to spend ages learning at school, while I'd rather be able to swim, or dig myself into the mud and let two seasons go by. But maybe the most important difference between you and me is that you don't have any parents any more or you don't see them. How does that go? Did they say one day, "Bye bye, chubby-checked kid, you can cope without us now, we're off." Is that how it went? Or did you go paddling one lovely summer's day in July and they floated away from you on a lily-pad, further and further until they were out of sight? Did it hurt? Does it still hurt? It might sound crazy, but I miss my parents even though I see them every day. Maybe it's just like the things we want to learn because we can't do them yet: we miss everything we don't have. Mum and Dad are there, but at the same time they aren't: I take a deep breath and think about Mum, who is probably downstairs reading the *Reformist* magazine. You can only take it out of its plastic on Thursdays and no sooner. Her knees together and a mug of aniseed milk in her hand. Dad scrolling through teletext for milk prices. If they're good, he goes to make himself a sandwich in the kitchen and Mum gets nervous again about possible crumbs, as though she's from pest control. If the milk prices are disappointing, he goes outside and walks away from us along the dike. Every time I think it's the last time we'll see him. Then I'll hang his overalls

on the peg in the hall next to Marthie's coat – Death has its own coat hook here. But the worst thing is the endless silence. As soon as the television's off all you can hear is the ticking of the cuckoo clock on the wall. The thing is, they're not drifting away from us but we're drifting away from them.

'Promise me this will stay between us, dear toads, but sometimes I wish I had different parents. Do you understand that?' I continue. 'Parents like Belle's who are as soft as shortbread just out of the oven and give her lots of cuddles when she's sad, frightened or even very happy. Parents that chase away all the ghosts from under your bed, from inside your head, and run through a summary of the week with you every weekend like *Dieuwertje Blok* does on TV, so you don't forget everything you achieved that week, all the things you tripped up on before scrabbling to your feet again. Parents that see you when you're talking to them – even though I find it terrifying to look people in the eye, as though other people's eyeballs are two lovely marbles you can continuously win or lose. Belle's parents go on exotic holidays and make tea for her when she comes home from school. They've got hundreds of different sorts including aniseed and fennel, my favourite tea. Sometimes they drink it sitting on the floor because that's more comfortable than sitting in a chair. And they horse around with each other without it turning into fighting. And they say sorry as often as they're nasty to each other.'

'What I was wondering, friends, was whether you toads can actually cry or do you go swimming when you feel sad? We've got tears in us but perhaps you seek comfort outside

yourself, so you can sink away in it. But more on your strengths, that's where I started. Of course you have to know what you want to make use of and how you want to do that. I know you're good at catching flies and at mating. I think that last one's a funny business but you do it all the time. And if something you like doing stops then there's something going on. Have you got toad flu? Are you homesick or are you just being difficult? I know I might be asking too much but if you start the mating season, Mum and Dad might get going too. Sometimes someone has to lead by example, the way I always have to set a good example for Hanna, even though the other way round works better. Or are you just mainly kissing now? Belle says there are four bases: kissing, fumbling, more fumbling and mating. I can't talk about it, I haven't even been able to bat yet. Even though I understand you have to start slowly. It's just we don't have much time. Mum didn't even eat her rye bread and cheese yesterday and Dad is constantly threatening to leave. You should know that they never kiss either. Never. Well, just at twelve o'clock on New Year's Eve. Then Mum leans cautiously towards Dad, holds his head briefly like a greasy apple fritter, and presses her lips to his skin without making a kissing sound. Look, I don't know what love is, but I do know it makes you jump high, that it makes you able to swim more lengths, that it makes you visible. The cows are often in love – then they jump on each other's backs, even females on females. So we have to do something about the love here on the farm. But to be honest, dear esteemed toads, I think we've dug ourselves in, even though it's summer.

We're buried deep in the mud and no one is going to get us out. Do you actually have a god? A god who forgives and a god who remembers? I don't know what kind of god we have. Maybe He's on holiday, or He's dug himself in. Whatever it is, He's not exactly on the case. And all these questions, toads. How many fit inside your little heads? I'm no good at maths but I'm guessing about ten. You have to think that if your little heads fit about a hundred times inside mine, how many questions there are in me and how many answers that haven't been ticked off yet. I'm going to put you back in the bucket now. I'm sorry about this but I can't set you free. I'd miss you, because who would watch over me when I sleep? I promise to take you to the lake one day. Then we'll float away together on a lily-pad, and maybe, only maybe, I'll even dare to take off my coat. Even though it will feel uncomfortable for a while, but according to the pastor, discomfort is good. In discomfort we are real.'

There's exactly twelve hours between the morning and evening milkings. It's Saturday, which means Dad goes back to bed after the first round – you can hear the floor creaking until it's quiet again upstairs. We're not allowed to take our places around the kitchen table until about eleven, when he feels like breakfast. It's been laid since eight o'clock, and sometimes I walk in hungry circles around it in the hope that Dad will hear my impatience vibrating up through the ceiling. Sometimes I secretly smuggle a slice of gingerbread upstairs and break it in two. One half used to be for Hanna but now it's for my toads. When Dad finally comes to the table – first he has to shave himself so that he's neat and tidy for the Lord's Day – there's still a bit of shaving foam on his neck and collar. It's already past eleven and Dad's bread is still waiting on his plate. I've already walked around the kitchen table four times and Mum has already spread a slice of wholemeal with butter, and put some brawn and a blob of ketchup on top, the way Dad likes it.

The open sandwich reminds me of the run-over hedgehog I saw next to the road yesterday on the way home from school. It was a sorry sight: that flattened body with its innards a bit further up on the verge and its eyes pecked out, must have been

by a crow. There were two black holes you could push your fingers through. It lay on a side road through the fields where very few cars or tractors pass. Maybe it was the hedgehog's own choice, maybe he'd been waiting for days for the wrong moment to cross. I squatted down next to the hedgehog sadly and whispered, 'Lord have mercy on us and be near. We are united in this place to say farewell to Hedgehog, who was so merclessly taken from us. We return this broken life and lay it in Thy hands. Receive Hedgehog and grant him the peace he could not find. Be to all of us a merciful and loving God so that we may live with death. Amen.' After that, I picked a few handfuls of grass and laid them over the hedgehog. I didn't look back as I cycled away.

I place a slice of bread on my plate and cover the entire surface very carefully in chocolate sprinkles. My stomach rumbles.

'Is Dad still in bed?' I ask.

'He didn't even go back to bed,' Mum says. 'I felt the covers – cold.'

She leans over the table and spoons the skin off Dad's cold coffee. She likes skins. I watch the limp brown milk sheet disappear into her mouth and a shiver runs down my spine. Obbe's chair opposite me is empty too. He must be on his computer or with his chickens. Obbe and I each have twenty chickens: white Leghorns, Orpingtons, Wyandottes and a few laying hens. We often pretend to be two successful companies – his is called The Peck About and mine is called The Little Bantam. Once a year we have chicks, little yellow candyflosses

on legs. Most of them are raised by the mother who keeps them warm under her wings, but sometimes the mother rejects them, not knowing what her wings are for. The thing is, they can't fly with them – their bodies are too fat and heavy to stay aloft. That's why we put their chicks in an aquarium filled with sawdust in the shed and hang the calves' heat lamps above it. Sometimes I take one upstairs to the attic and let it sleep in my armpit. I wrap a piece of kitchen paper around its bum so I don't get covered in shit. Obbe and I sell our eggs – a box of twelve costs one euro – to the chip man on the square. He makes the most delicious mayonnaise from them or boils the eggs for Russian salad. Obbe used to spend a lot of time with his chickens. He could spend hours sitting on an upturned milk pail watching one of his red hens take a dust bath. Now he spends less and less time there. Sometimes he even forgets to feed them and they fly up against the mesh of their run hungrily. I think he does it deliberately. He has started hating everything, so he probably hates the chip man and his mayonnaise too. That's why I often give them bread and gather the eggs from the laying house and secretly put them in my box. I hope he's finally cleaning out the run. Dad threatened to sell them if he didn't do it very soon. Particularly in this hot weather, there are tons of maggots and chicken lice. You can watch them walking along your bare arms, little brown bodies with six legs, before pinching them dead between your fingers. Hanna has come to the table too in the meantime. It's taken her just a few seconds to scoff the whole bowl of strawberries. Waiting makes us nervous because we don't know what's

coming next – where's Dad? Has he finally plucked up the courage to cycle off for good? Without a skirt guard though, because the cover broke when his bike blew over after church. Or did Dad collapse among the cows only to be trampled? I turn my attention to the strawberries. I'll go fetch some new ones from the vegetable plot: Dad loves them, and he likes to eat them covered in a thick layer of castor-sugar.

'Have you already looked in the cowshed?'

'He knows we have breakfast at this time,' Mum says, putting Dad's mug in the microwave.

'Maybe he's gone to fetch some silage grass from Janssen's?'

'He never does that on a Saturday. Let's just begin without him.'

But none of us makes a move to start eating. It feels strange without Dad. And who's going to thank God 'for need and for abundance'?

'I'll go and have a look,' I say, shunting my chair back and accidentally knocking against Marthies's. It wobbles a little and then falls backwards onto the floor. The crash vibrates in my ears. I want to quickly set it upright again but my mother grabs my arm.

'Don't touch it.' She looks at the chair-back as though my brother has fallen again, always falling in our minds, again and again. I leave the chair and stare at it as though it's a dead person. Now she's eaten all the strawberries, Hanna starts on her fingernails. Sometimes there are bloody bits of cuticle between her teeth. A silence follows the crash, no one breathes. And then all bodily functions slowly return:

feeling, smelling, hearing and moving.

'It's just a chair,' I say then.

Mum has let go of me and is clutching a jar of peanut butter.

'You really come from another planet,' she whispers.

I look at the floor. Mum only knows Planet Earth. I know all eight planets, and know that up to now life's only be found on Earth. *My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos.*

Mum never serves us nachos but the sentence is a useful way to remember all the planets. If I'm nervous about something or have to wait too long at the traffic light near school, I repeat the line up to ten times inside my head. The line also makes me insignificant. We are all just nachos in an enormous bowl.

'What on earth is going to become of you?' Mum complains. Her other hand is now clutching the jar of Duo Penotti. Since Matchies's death none of us has eaten it, much too afraid we won't be able to keep the white chocolate bit white, that the colours will get muddled up until it becomes just one black hole.

'We will become Big Friendly People, Mum, and of course this chair isn't just a chair. I'm sorry.'

Mum nods approvingly. 'Where has that man got to?' Again she presses the start button on the microwave. She doesn't put me back in the solar system, but lets me float. Am I really different from the others?

I quickly open the back door and go out into the farmyard, crossing it towards the cowsheds. I take a deep breath and exhale as hard as I can. I repeat this a few times and see that the sky above me is beginning to turn grey. It's a perfect day

to escape to the other side. There I'll be in charge of what I do when and I'll be able to eat breakfast whenever I want, but the closer I get to the cowsheds, the slower I begin to walk. I try to skip the half-tiles in the yard. *Otherwise you'll get really ill and you'll get the shits or start vomiting. And everyone will see. Everyone in the village, all your classmates.* I shake my head to get rid of the thoughts and notice that the hatch to the feed silo, which is next to the milking shed, has been left open. There's an enormous pile of feed pellets under it. Dad is always warning us about rats. 'If you spill anything they'll start with the feed and move on to your toes. They'll chew right through the soles of your shoes.' The stream of pellets is getting thinner, and most have already fallen out. I run my hands through the pellets for a moment. They feel cool and pleasant as they slide through my fingers. Then I close the hatch and secure it to the side with a rope.

Suddenly I'm reminded of the rope hanging in the middle of the barn that used to have a blue space hopper attached to it as a diversion for the cows. But one day the space hopper was burst by a new cow that still had horns. The rope was left hanging. Sometimes we nailed the leaves from a walnut tree to it, or one of Obbe's *Hitzone* albums that Dad had confiscated dangled there, its shiny back helping keep away the shit flies, just like the walnut leaves. Now I picture Dad's head hanging there instead of the space hopper. Mum often speaks for Dad. Who knows, maybe that was the case that night when I hid behind the rabbit shed. There are so many ropes in the countryside, but not one of them has a set job.

He's not standing on top of the silo in any case.

Through the door to the cowshed, I see Obbe standing in the feed section. He's forking silage grass in an elegant curve in to the cows, sweat on his face like the morning dew on the shed windows. The cows are restless, whipping their tails from left to right. Some of the tails are matted with dried-up dung. Every now and then we cut it out of the hairs with a hoof knife, more for the way it looks than for the cows themselves. With every elegant toss, Obbe's biceps bulge. He's getting stronger. My eyes dart to the dozens of backs of the cows, to the corners of the shed and the rope in the middle. Then the back door opens and Dad appears. He looks different, as though someone has left the larch open in his head, like a feed silo. The top press studs of his overalls are open, showing his tanned chest. Mum finds that inappropriate – what if a milk customer should see him like that? I think she's worried the milk customer would go off without any milk but with Dad instead. Milk costs one euro a litre. Dad is made up of about fifty litres. That's partly the reason Sunday is Mum's favourite day, because no one can spend or accept money on the Lord's Day. On that day we're only allowed to breathe and partake of the bare essentials, and that's just the love of God's word and Mum's vegetable soup.

Dad is chasing the last cows inside, slapping their haunches with the flat of his hand. He slides the lock on the big stable door. I don't get it. The lock only gets shut in the winter or when nobody's on the farm. It's not winter and we're all home. Dad piles up all the forks in the feed section and wraps them

up in the plastic left over from a silage pack. For a moment, Dad looks up to the heavens. He hasn't shaved, I notice. He holds his hands to either side of his face, his jaw tense. I want to tell him that Mum's inside waiting, that she isn't angry, that she hasn't yet asked whether we love her, so she can't be doubting the answer, and that his sandwich is ready on his favourite plate, the one with cowhide patches around the rim, that Hanna and I practised Psalm 100 this morning, the psalm of the week, and that it was as pure as milk.

Dad hasn't noticed me yet. I stand there watching, the china bowl from the strawberries in my hand. Along with Obbe, he fetches the bull from among the young cows; the bull hasn't been there two days yet. We've called him Bello. Dad calls all the bulls Bello. Even when we're allowed to choose and pick another name, they always end up being called Bello. I've already seen his willy. It wasn't for very long because Mum came out of the milking shed right that second and put her hand, which was covered in a rubber glove, in front of my eyes and said, 'They're doing the conga.'

'Why aren't I allowed to see that?' I asked.

Now Dad spots me at last. He makes a shunting gesture with his hand. 'You've got to get out of the shed, now.'

'Yes, now,' Obbe repeats after him, his blue overalls tied around his hips. By the looks of it, he's taking his role as Dad's disciple seriously. I feel a brief stab around the area of my spleen. Here among the cows they suddenly seem to understand each other; they are father and son.

'Why?'

'Just obey!' Dad shouts. 'Close the door.'

The anger in his voice startles me. His eyes are like rock-hard rabbit droppings in his face. Sweat drips down his forehead. At that moment a cow close to me slides over the grating and collapses onto her udders. She makes no effort to get back up again. I give my father and Obbe a questioning look, but they've already turned around and are squatting next to the young cow. I stride out of the shed and slam the door behind me, hearing the wood creak. Let that bloody shed collapse, I think, immediately feeling ashamed of my thoughts. Why aren't I allowed to know what's going on? Why am I kept out of everything?

I crawl under the bird net in the vegetable patch. Lien from next door stretched it out over the rows of strawberries to stop the seagulls and starlings eating them. I fall onto my knees on the damp earth. Because it's Saturday I'm allowed to wear trousers since there's work to be done. I carefully push aside the plants to find the best fruit, the ones that are completely red, and put them in the dish. From time to time I pop one in my mouth – they're deliciously juicy and sweet. I love the texture of strawberries, the little seeds and the hairs on the inside of my mouth. Textures calm me down. Textures create unity, they keep something together that would collapse otherwise. Wok vegetables, cooked chicory and scratchy clothes are the only textures I don't like. Human skin has texture too. Mum's is beginning to look increasingly like the bird net: little compartments drawn in soft skin, as though

she's a jigsaw puzzle that's losing more and more of its pieces. Dad's got more of a potato skin – it's smooth and there are a few rough patches, and sometimes a dent from a nail he's walked into.

Once the bowl is full, I crawl back out from under the bird net and wipe the soil from my trousers. Dad's and Obbe's wellies are in the shed, next to the door-mat, one of them still half hanging on the boot-jack. They aren't at the breakfast table but on the sofa in front of the TV, while it's daytime and the screen is supposed to be black during the day. Usually there's just snow to see then. At first I thought we might find Marthies in there, but later I discovered that Dad had simply pulled the cable out. The news was on: 'Farms here have also been struck by foot-and-mouth. God's punishment or bitter coincidence?'

Just like the weather, God can never get it right. If a swan is rescued somewhere in the village, in a different place a parishioner dies. I don't know what foot-and-mouth is and don't get the chance to ask because my mum says I should go and play with Obbe and Hanna, that this isn't going to be a normal day like the rest, and I don't want to interrupt her by saying that the days haven't been normal for a long time, because her face looks just as pale as the creamy crocheted curtains in the windows. I also notice that Mum and Dad are sitting remarkably close to each other. Maybe this is a sign they are going to get naked soon and I should leave them in peace, like the way you shouldn't separate two snails that are on top of each other because it might damage the mother-of-pearl on

their shells. I put the bowl of strawberries in front of them on the dresser, next to the open Authorized Version, in case Mum gets hungry after mating and finally wants to eat again. Dad is making strange sounds: he hisses, growls, sighs, shakes his head and says, 'no, no, no.' Different animals make different mating sounds – it must be the same with people. And then I catch a glimpse of a cow's tongue with blisters on the screen. 'What's foot-and-mouth?' I quickly ask all the same. I don't get an answer. Dad leans forward to pick up the remote control and just keeps pressing the volume button.

'Go on!' Mum says without looking at me.

As though the volume stripes on the screen are stairs, I stomp harder and harder as I go up to my room, but no one comes after me. No one tells me what in God's name is about to happen.

15

There's a black note on Obbe's bedroom door that says DO NOT DISTURB in white letters. He doesn't want to be disturbed but if Hanna and I don't go to his room for a while, he does come to ours. We don't have signs on our doors. We want to be disturbed so that we're not so alone.

Around the white letters, he's struck sickers of pop stars including Robbie Williams and Sugababes from the new *Hitzone 23*. Dad knows Obbe listens to them but he doesn't dare confiscate his Discman – it's the only thing that keeps him quiet, while I'm not allowed to keep saving up for one. 'Buy books with your savings, that's more your thing,' Dad said, and I thought: I've been sidelined by the cool stuff. In any case, Dad thinks all the music on CDs and on the radio is wicked. He'd rather we listened to *The Musical Fruit Basket*, but that's totally boring and for old people, for rotting fruit, Obbe says sometimes. I think that's funny, rotting fruit in a sick-bed: a request for Hymn 11. I'd rather listen to Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* because they argue about things normal people would just shrug at; their squabbling calms me down. Then I turn on my CD player and crawl back under the covers and imagine I'm a rare paper clip from Bert's collection. 'Klapaucius,' I whisper, as I gently open the bedroom door

a crack. I see a strip of Obbe's back. He's sitting on the floor wearing his overalls. The door creaks as I open it a bit more. My brother looks up. Just like the note on his door, his eyes are dark. Suddenly I wonder whether butterflies have a shorter life expectancy when they know they can flap themselves to death.

'Password?' Obbe calls.

'Klapaucius,' I say again.

'Wrong,' Obbe says.

'But that was the password, wasn't it?' Diuwerfje's whiskers are still in my coat pocket. They tickle my palm. I'm lucky Mum never empties my pockets, otherwise she'd find out about all the things I want to hang on to, the things I'm collecting to become heavier.

'You'd better come up with something better than that or I won't let you in.' Obbe turns back to his Lego. He is building an enormous spaceship. I think for a moment and then say, 'Heil Hitler.' It's silent for a moment. Then I see his shoulders move up and down slightly as he begins to chuckle, louder and louder. It's good that he's laughing – it seals an alliance. The butcher in the village always winks at me when I come to buy fresh sausages. This means that he agrees that it's a good choice, he's happy that I've come to free him of the sausages he made with so much love and which smell of nutmeg.

'Say it again but with your arm raised.'

Obbe has turned around completely now. Just like Dad, he's left the top press studs of his overalls open. His shiny tanned chest looks like a chicken on a spit. In the background

I can hear the familiar theme tune to *The Sims*. I stick my hand in the air without a moment's hesitation and whisper the greeting again. My brother nods at me as a sign that I can come in, before returning his gaze to his Lego. There are various groups of blocks around him, sorted by colour. He's taken apart the Lego castle he kept the dead Tiesey in for a while until he began to stink.

There's a stale smell in his room, a smell of decay, of an adolescent body that hasn't been washed for a long time. There's a toilet roll on his bedside table with pale yellow wads around it. I play with the wads and carefully sniff the paper. If tears had a scent, no one would cry secretly any more. The wads don't smell of anything. Some of them feel sticky; others are as hard as rock. The tip of a magazine sticks out from under his pillow. I lift it up – there's a naked woman on the cover with breasts like gourds. She looks surprised, as though she doesn't know herself why she's naked, as though various circumstances have combined to make this *her* moment. There are people who are startled by that moment, as though they've been looking forward to it all their life, but once they get there it's still somehow unexpected. I don't know when my moment's coming, only that I'll keep my coat on. The lady must be cold, even though I don't see any goose bumps on her arms.

I quickly drop the pillow again. I haven't seen the magazine before. We don't get anything but the *Reformist Daily*, the *Reformist* magazine, *Dairy Farmer*, some supermarket advertising brochures and Marthies's judo magazine – my

parents keep 'forgetting' to cancel the subscription which means that every Friday his death comes crashing onto the door-mat again. Maybe that's why Obbe bangs his head on the edge of his bed – to get the naked women out of it, so that he can zap himself away like the TV channels, and Dad must see it in you if you've had something in your head that isn't pure.

I sit down next to Obbe on the carpet. He's holding a princess captive in the ruins of his Lego castle. She's wearing lipstick and mascara and has long blonde hair to below her shoulders.

'I'm going to inseminate you,' Obbe says, pushing his knight up and down against the princess, the way Bello the bull does with the cows. I can hardly put my own hand in front of my eyes because there's no one to check whether I'm peeking or not. Better to give temptation free rein, I decide. As I watch the scene, he takes from the Lego box a clean tuna tin we've been using to keep our coins and gold medallions in – they smell of oily fish. Obbe holds out his hand.

'Here's your money, whore.' My brother tries to make his voice sound deep. His voice has been breaking since the spring, it shoots from high-pitched to low.

'What's a whore?' I ask.

'A woman farmer.' He looks at the door to check our parents can't hear. I know Mum isn't against women being farmers, even though she considers it more a man's work. I take another knight from one of the broken lookout towers. Obbe pushes his doll against the princess again. They continue to look happy.

I lower my voice. 'What's under your skirt, princess?' Obbe bursts out laughing. Sometimes it's just as if a young starling has flown down his throat – he chirps. 'Don't you know what's under it?'

'No.' I set the princess upright and study her from all sides. I only know about willies.

'You've got one yourself. A cunt.'

'What does it look like?'

'A custard bun.'

I raise my eyebrows. Dad sometimes brings custard buns home from the baker's. Sometimes there are a few blue spots on the bottom of the bun and the custard has soaked in, but it still tastes quite good. We hear Dad shouting downstairs. He's shouting more often, as though he wants to force his words hard into us. I think it's a proverb from Isaiah: 'Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.' What kind of rebellion is he talking about?

'What's foot-and-mouth?' I ask Obbe.

'A disease cows get.'

'What's going to happen?'

'All the cows have to be put down. The entire herd.'

He says it without emotion, but I notice that the hairs around his crown are greasier than at the hairline, like damp silage grass. I don't know how many times he's touched his crown but it's obvious he's worried.

My chest feels increasingly hot, as though I've drunk a mug of hot chocolate too quickly. Someone is stirring it with

a spoon, making a whirlpool in my heart – stop stirring, I hear Mum say – and the cows disappear one by one into the whirlpool like chunks of cocoa mixed with milk. I dedicate all my mental energy to thinking about the Lego princess. She's hidden a custard bun under her skirt and Obbe's allowed to lick out the cream, his nose covered in icing sugar.

'But why then?'

'Because they're ill. They're going to die anyway.'

'Is it infectious?'

Obbe scans my face, squinting his eyes into the flat blades we sometimes buy for Lien next door's wood chipper, and says, 'I'd watch out where you breathe and where you don't if I was you.' I clasp my hands around my knees, rocking myself faster and faster. I get a sudden vision of Mum and Dad turning as yellow as Lego figures. They will be struck to one spot when all the cows have gone if no one picks them up by the backs of their necks and clicks them onto the right place.

After a while Hanna comes to sit with us. She's brought cherry tomatoes, which she peels with her teeth, revealing the soft red fleshy pulp. The care with which she eats the tomatoes, doing everything in layers, touches me. When she eats a sandwich she starts with the filling, then the crusts and only then the soft part of the bread. When she eats a milk biscuit, she scrapes off the milk bit with her front teeth and saves the biscuit till last. Hanna eats in layers and I think in layers. Just when she's about to put a new tomato between her teeth, Obbe's door opens again and the vet folds his face around the

edge. It's been a long time since he came round, but he's still wearing the dark green dust-coat with black buttons, the four limp fingers of a rubber glove dangling from his pocket, the thumb folded back. For the second time he's come to bring us bad news: 'They'll come to take samples tomorrow. You can assume they'll all have to go, even the unregistered ones.' Dad has a few unregistered cows to be able to sell a bit of extra milk to the villagers or family members. The money from this 'black-market milk' is kept in a tin on the mantelpiece. For holidays. Nevertheless, I sometimes see Dad open the tin and take a couple of notes out when he thinks no one else is around. My guess is that he's saving up for his 'bottom drawer', for when he moves out. Eva at school's doing that too, even though she's only thirteen. Dad is probably looking for a family where he's allowed to lick his knife after putting it in the apple syrup jar and doesn't have to shout or slam doors, where they don't mind if he leaves his trouser button open after eating and you can see the blond hairs curling up above the waistband of his pants. And maybe he'd even be able to pick out his own clothes there: every morning my mum hangs what he has to wear over the edge of the bed – if Dad doesn't agree with the choice she spends the whole day not speaking to him or gets rid of yet another foodstuff from her diet, which she announces with a sigh as though the item doesn't want her any more.

'If He wants it this way, it must be God's will.' He looks at us one by one with a smile. It's a nice smile, nicer than Boudewijn de Groot's.

'And,' he continues, 'be extra nice to your parents.' We nod obediently; only Obbe stares downly at the heating pipes in his room. There are a few butterflies drying on them. I hope the vet doesn't see and then tell Mum and Dad.

'I have to get back to the cows,' the vet says, turning around and closing the door behind him.

'Why didn't Dad come and tell us himself?' I ask.

'Because he has to take measures,' Obbe says.

'Like what?'

'Close off the farmyard, install a disinfectant bath, take in the calves, disinfect the tools and the milk tank.'

'Aren't we measures?'

'Of course,' Obbe says, 'but we've been fenced off and tied up since our births. We can't be anything else.'

Then he moves closer to me. He's wearing Dad's aftershave to gain a bit of Dad's natural authority. 'Do you want to know how they're going to murder the cows?'

I nod and think about the teacher who said I'd go far with my empathy and boundless imagination, but in time I'd have to find words for it because otherwise everything and everybody stays inside you. And one day, just like the black stockings which my classmates sometimes tease me about wearing because we're Reformists – even though I never wear black stockings – I will crumple in on myself until I can only see darkness, eternal darkness. Obbe presses his index finger to his temple, makes a shooting sound and then suddenly pulls the cords of my coat together, constricting my throat. I stare him straight in the eye for a moment and see the same hatred

as when he shook the hamster around in the water glass. I pull myself away, and shout, 'You're crazy!'

'We're all going crazy – you too,' Obbe says. He takes a packet of mini Aeros from his desk drawer, tears off the wrappers and stuffs them into his mouth, one after the other until they are just a big brown mush. He must have stolen the Aeros from the basement. I hope the Jewish people managed to hide in time behind the wall of apple sauce pots.

Dad likes crows' funerals the best. Sometimes when he finds a dead crow in the muck-heap or in the field, he hangs it upside down with a rope from one of the branches of the cherry tree. Soon a whole flock of crows turn up and spend hours circling the tree to pay their last respects to their fellow. No other creature mourns for as long as a crow. Generally there's one that really stands out, a bit bigger than the others and fiercer too, and it crows the loudest of all of them. That must be the flock's pastor. Their black-feathered cloaks contrast beautifully with the pale sky, and Dad says crows are intelligent animals. They can count, remember faces and voices, and hold a grudge against anyone who treats them badly – but after a crow has been hung up, they hang around the farmyard. They stare down from the gutturing searchingly as Dad walks between the house and the cowsheds, like cardboard hares at a shooting range, their black eyes boring into his chest like two shot holes. I try not to look at the crows. Maybe they want to tell us something, or they're waiting until the crows are dead. Granny said yesterday that crows in a farmyard are an omen of death. I think that either Mum or I will be next. There must be a reason Dad asked me to lie down in the farmyard this morning so that he could take the measurements for a new bed, which

he is making from pallets and oak and the leftover planks from Obbe's chicken coop. I lay down on the cold flagstones with my arms alongside my body and watched Dad unfold a tape measure and lay it from head to toe, and I thought: if you saw off the bed legs and take away the mattress, you could easily turn it into a coffin.

I'd like to be laid facing down in it, with the viewing window at the height of my bum so that everyone could say goodbye and look at my bum hole, since that was where the entire problem was located. Dad folded his tape measure back up. He had insisted I stop sleeping in Marthies's bed as 'little Johnny can't bear it any more.' And over the past weeks I've looked so pale that Lien from next door has started bringing around a crate of mandarins every Friday evening. Some of them are wrapped like me in jackets, made of paper. I keep holding my breath all the time not to inhale any germs, or to get closer to Marthies. It's not long before I collapse to the floor and everything around me fades into a snowy landscape. Once I'm on the floor, I regain consciousness quite quickly and see Hanna's worried face. She holds her clammy hand to my forehead like a flannel. I don't tell her that fainting is nice, that in that snowy landscape there's more chance I'll meet Marthies than there is of meeting Death here on the farm. The crows circled above me when I was lying out in the yard and Dad was noting down the centimetres in his accounts book.

Mum has put a clean fitted sheet over the new mattress and shaken up my pillow. She presses her fist twice into the

middle of the case, where my head will come to lie. I look at my new bed from my desk chair. I miss the old one already, even though my toes touched the end and it seemed like I was lying in a thumb-screw that turned me tighter and tighter. It was a safe feeling at least, as though something was setting boundaries so I didn't grow any more. Now I've got so much room to wiggle around and I can lie diagonally. I'll have to dig a hollow to be able to lie in it now Marthies's shape has gone. His measurements are nowhere to be found any more.

Mum kneels on the edge of my bed, her elbows resting on the duvet that smells of liquid manure because the wind was blowing the wrong way, which it is doing more and more often. It won't be long before the smell of cows doesn't get into anything, before it disappears from even the inside of our heads and all we can smell is longing and each other's absence. My mum pats the duvet gently. I get up submissively and crawl under the sheets, lying down on my side so that I can still see Mum's face. From here my blue striped duvet cover makes her seem miles away from me. She's somewhere on the other side of the lake, her body as skinny as a moorhen frozen in an ice hole. I shift my feet to the right so that they end up beneath Mum's folded hands. She moves them immediately as though I'm electric. There are dark rings under her eyes. I try to gauge how the news of the foot-and-mouth has affected her and whether the crows have come for me or for her.

'Do not allow yourselves to be beaten by evil, but beat evil with good', Reverend Renkema preached in the morning service. I was sitting with Hanna and some other children

from the village, next to the organ on the balustrade. From up there I suddenly saw Dad rising from a sea of black hats which, from above, looked like the yolks of rotten eggs that were speckled with black because no one had collected them from the nest. Some of the children around me had been in the nest too long as well, and sat there with sleepy faces staring into space.

Dad glanced around him, ignoring Mum's little rugs at the seam of his black overcoat, and cried out, 'The pastors are the cause of it.' There was deathly silence in the church. Everyone looked at my father and everyone on the balustrade looked at Hanna and me. I let my chin sink further into the collar of my coat and felt the cold zip against my skin.

To my relief I saw the organ player feel for the white keys and start on Psalm 51, causing the congregation to rise to their feet, and Dad's protest fell away among the villagers like a lump of butter among egg yolks, and in between that the soft hissing of the gossips. Not long after that, we saw Mum flee the pew with a wet nose, the hymn-book clamped under her arm. Belle had poked me in the side: 'Your dad's not right in the head.' I didn't reply but thought about the foolish man in the children's song who built his house on sand – the rain streamed down and the floods came and the house collapsed with a plop. Dad was building his words on sinking sand. How could he blame the pastor? Maybe it was our own fault? Maybe it was one of the plagues – and a plague here is never a natural phenomenon but a warning.

Mum began quietly to sing, 'Higher than the blue skies and

the stars of gold, abides our Father in the Heavens; Marthies, Obbe, Jas and Hanna he beholds.' I don't sing along but turn my thoughts to the bucket under my desk. Mum thinks roads are dirty, unpleasant creatures. She sometimes sweeps them up with a dustpan and brush from behind the boot-jack and carries them to the muck-heap like a pile of potato peelings. The roads aren't doing too well either. They look a bit peaky, their skin is getting drier, and they spend a lot of time sitting with their eyes closed – maybe they're praying and they don't know how to round it off, the way I don't with conversations. I just start shuffling my feet and staring ahead until someone says, 'OK, bye then.' I hope the moment won't come that I have to say 'bye' to the roads, but if they don't eat soon, that's going to happen.

After she's stopped singing, Mum puts her hand into the pocket of her pink dressing gown and takes out a little parcel wrapped in silver foil. 'I'm sorry,' she says.

'What for?'

'For the stars, for this evening. It's because of the cows, the shock of it.'

'It doesn't matter.'

I take the parcel. It's a crumper topped with cumin cheese. The cheese is warm from her pocket. Mum watches me take a bite.

'You're just so odd, you and that funny coat of yours.'

I know she's only saying this because Lien from next door mentioned it again when she came round to find out how the cows were doing, and therefore us too. Even the vet brought

up the subject of my coat with Mum. When she came in a bit later after feeding the calves, she got up in the middle of the kitchen, on the strepladder she normally only unfolded to get down the spider's webs. To every web with a spider in it, she'd say, 'Be off with you, old spinster.' It's the only joke Mum tells, but we still cherish it like an insect caught in a jam-jar. This time she didn't climb the strepladder to get rid of a spider but to get me out of the web she'd spun herself.

'If you don't take off your coat immediately, I'll jump.'

She stood there high above me in her long black skirt, her arms folded in front of her chest, her lips a bit red from the cherries – one of the few things she still eats – like the body of a spider squashed on pristine white wallpaper. I gauged the fall. Was it enough for Death? According to the pastor, the devil was afraid of the village because we were mightier than evil. But was that true? Were we stronger than evil?

I pushed my fist into my belly to calm the excruciating stabbing feeling that had arisen, and clenched my buttocks in a reflex, as though I was trying to keep in a fart. It wasn't a fart but a storm, a storm that raced through me. Just like the hurricanes on the news, mine also had a name. I called it the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost raced through me and my armpits struck to the fabric of my coat. I would get ill without my protective layer. Frozen to the spot, I continued to look at Mum, at her polished mule slippers, at the steps on the ladder that had splatters of paint on them.

'I'll count to ten: one, two, three, four ...'

Her voice slowly faded away, the kitchen grew hazy, and

whatever way I tried to bring my hand to the zip, I couldn't manage it. Then I heard a dull thud, bones hitting the kitchen floor, a crash and a cry. All of a sudden the kitchen was filled with people, with lots of different coats. I felt the vet's hands resting on my shoulders as though they were the heads of two calves, his voice calm and guiding. Slowly my vision became sharper and zoomed in on Mum, who was lying in the wheelbarrow Dad had used to take the beans to the muck-heap. Obbe pushed her across the farmyard to the doctor in the village. I only saw some crows fly up – they looked like streaks of mascara through my tears. Dad refused to take her in the Volkswagen. 'You don't take rotten mandarins back to the greengrocer's,' he said. Meaning it was her own fault. It wouldn't be much longer, I thought, before we'd wheel her away for good. And Dad didn't say a single word for the rest of the evening. He just sat there flat out in his overalls watching TV, a glass of genever in his hand, smoking a cigarette. He was getting more and more holes in his overalls from the burning cigarette ends he laid on the edge of his knee for want of an ashtray, as though being here was suffocating him and he needed more air holes.

The vet, who has been here constantly since the news, had taken me and Hanna for a drive around the village. Sitting in the car is the nicest way to sit still: everything around you moves and changes and you can see it without having to move yourself. We drove to the rapeseed fields and sat on the bonnet and watched the combine mowing the plants out of the ground. The black seeds ended up in a big container.

The vet told us that they would make lamp oil, cattle feed, biofuel and margarine from them. A flock of geese flew over. They were headed to the other side. For a moment I expected them to fall from the sky like manna from heaven and land at our feet, their necks broken, but they flew on, further and further, until I could no longer see them. I looked at Hanna but she was deep in conversation with the vet about school. She'd taken off her shoes and was sitting on the bonnet in her stripy socks. I wished I could take off my green wellies too, but I didn't dare. An illness could get in on every side, just like burglars, even though Mum and Dad underestimated their cunning – they only locked the front door when they left, assuming only people they knew would come in through the back.

We didn't even mention once what had happened at home. There weren't any words to take the edge off fear, the way the blades of the combine decapitated the rapeseed plants to keep only the bit you can use. We silently watched the sun go down and on the way back got a bag of chips from the chip man which we ate in the car, making the windows steam up, and my eyes too because for the first time I briefly didn't feel alone: chips unite people more than any other type of food.

An hour later, we lie in bed with greasy fingers, smelling of mayonnaise, after an evening that was filled with hope despite the odds. But because of the chips, I don't feel like eating the crumpet. Only I don't want to disappoint Mum so I take a bite anyway. I keep seeing her lying in the wheelbarrow, her injured foot dangling over the edge. Obbe, who suddenly

looked so fragile that I wanted to comfort him. In Romans 12, it says, 'If your gift is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully; I don't know what my gift is – maybe my gift is to shut up and listen. And that's what I did. I just asked him how his Sims were doing, whether they were already kissing. 'Not now,' he said, shutting himself away in his bedroom. The new *Hizone* came out of his speakers so loudly that I could sing along to the lyrics under my breath. No one said anything about it.

Mum is growing limper, just like the frozen beans. Sometimes she just lets things fall from her hands and blames us. I said the Lord's Prayer five times today. The last two times I kept my eyes open to keep watch on everything around me. I hope Jesus understands – cows sleep with one eye open so that they can't suddenly be attacked. I can't help being more and more afraid of everything that could take me by surprise in the night: from a mosquito to God.

Mum stares with hollow eyes at my fluorescent duvet cover. I don't manage to swallow the bite of crumpet. I don't want her to be unhappy because of me. I don't want her to get out the kitchen steppladder again, because that way it would be easier to reach the rope or climb up the feed silo. She'd only have to kick the ladder away with her foot. Obbe says it doesn't take long – it only takes time for the person hanging themselves because they get a rush of things to contemplate. The contemplations in church last at least two peppermints. And

if her fear of heights didn't stop her this time, it wouldn't stop her on the silo either.

My mouth full, I say, 'It's so dark here.'

Mum's eyes look at me hopefully. I think about Belle's friendship book. Mum had crossed out the answer to the question 'What do you want to be?' and replaced it with 'A good Christian.' It meant no one noticed I'd had a growth spurt at the question 'What's your height in centimetres?' I wonder whether I am a good Christian. Maybe if I give something to my mum to cheer her up again.

'Dark? Where then?' she asks.

'You know, everywhere,' I say, swallowing my mouthful.

Mum turns on the globe on my bedside table and pretends to creep out of the room carefully, with her sore foot bandaged up and the belt of her dressing gown tied tight. It's a game we used to play when Mathies was still alive. I couldn't get enough of it.

'Big Bear, Big Bear! I can't sleep, I'm frightened.'

I peek through my fingers as she walks to the window, opens the curtains and says, 'Look, I've fetched the moon for you. The moon and all the twinkling stars. What more can a bear want?'

Love, I think to myself, like the warmth in the cowshed of all those breathing cattle with a common goal – survival. A warm flank to rest my head against, like during the milking. All the love they can give consists of poking out their tongues now and again when you offer them a chunk of mangel.

'Nothing, I'm a happy bear.'

I wait there until the stairs stop creaking and then I close the curtains, try to think of my rescuer so that the oppressive feeling around my stomach disappears, making way for a longing, a longing that birds can best express. I notice that my bed creaks with every movement and that this means my parents must know what I get up to in the night. I stand up on my mattress to put the rope hanging from the beam in the attic around my neck. It's too loose. I can't move the knot – it's been tied for too long – but for a moment I wrap it around my neck like a scarf, feeling the rough fibres against my skin. I imagine what it would be like to slowly suffocate, to be a swing and to know which movements are expected of you, to feel the life glide out of me, the way I feel a little bit when I'm lying on the sofa but-naked being a soap dish.

17

'This is an initiation,' I say to Hanna, who is sitting cross-legged on my new mattress. There's a Barbie's head on the front of her pyjamas. It's got long blonde hair and pink lips. Half of the face has worn off, just like the Barbie dolls on the edge of the bath. We scrubbed off their smiles with a scourer and a bit of soap. We didn't want to give Mum the impression there was anything to smile about here, especially not now the cows are sick.

'What's that? An "initiation"?' Hanna asks. Her hair is in a bun. I don't like buns – they are much too tight and people call us 'black stockings' even more then, because the buns of the women in the church look just like balled-up socks.

'A ritual to welcome someone or something. My bed is new and this is its first night here.'

'All right,' Hanna says, 'what do I have to do then?'

'Let's start by welcoming it.'

I sweep my hair behind my ear and say loudly and clearly, 'Welcome, bed.' I lay my hand on the bottom sheet. 'And now for the ritual.'

I lie down on my belly on the mattress with my head sideways under my pillow, so that I can still look at Hanna and tell her that she's Dad and I'm Mum.

'Sure,' Hanna says.

She lies on her front next to me. I pull the pillow further over my head, pressing my nose into the mattress. It smells of the furniture shop where Mum and Dad bought it, of a new life. Hanna copies me. We lie there for a moment like shot-down crows; neither of us speaks, until I take away my pillow and look at Hanna. Her pillow is moving softly up and down. The mattress is a ship, our ship. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.' For a moment I'm reminded of the lines from Corinthians. I turn my attention back to Hanna and whisper, 'From now on this will be our operating base, the place where we are safe. Repeat after me: Dear bed, we, Jas and Hanna – Mum and Dad – are pleased to initiate you into the dark world of The Plan. Everything said here and longed for here stays here. From now on, you're one of us.' Hanna repeats the words, even though it's more like muttering because she's lying with her face in the mattress. I can hear from her voice she's finding it boring, that it won't be long before she's had enough and wants to play a different game. Even though this isn't a game, it's deadly serious.

To give her an idea of the seriousness of all of this, I rest my hand on the pillow covering the back of her head, then take both ends of it and press down hard. Hanna immediately begins to twist the lower part of her body, which means I have to use more force. Her hands thrash around, clawing into my coat. I'm stronger than her; she can't get out from under me.

'This is an initiation,' I repeat. 'Anyone coming to live here has to feel what it's like to almost suffocate, just like Marthies, to almost die. Only then can we become friends.'

When I remove the pillow, Hanna begins to sob. Her face is as red as a tomato. She greedily cries to take air. 'Idiot,' she says, 'I almost suffocated.'

'That's part of it,' I say. 'Now you know how I feel every night, and now the bed knows what can happen.'

I snuggle up to the sobbing Hanna and kiss her cheeks dry, the salty fear.

'Don't cry, little man.'

'You're frightening me, little woman,' Hanna whispers.

I slowly begin to move against my sister, as I often do with my teddy bear, and whisper, 'Our days may be longer if we show daring.'

My body gets hotter and hotter from my movements; my coat sticks to my skin. I only stop when I feel that Hanna is about to fall asleep. We don't have time for sleep now. I sit up in bed again.

'I choose the vet,' I say suddenly, trying to make my voice sound decisive. There's a moment's silence. 'He's kind and he lives on the other side and he has listened to lots of hearts, thousands,' I continue.

Hanna nods and the Barbie's head does too. 'Boudewijn de Groot is much too ambitious for girls like us,' she says.

I don't know what she means by this – girls like us. What actually makes us who we are? How can people tell by looking at us that we're all Mulders? I think that lots of girls like

us exist, it's just we haven't run into them yet. Fathers and mothers meet each other one day too. And since everyone has a parent inside them, they can finally get married.

It's still a mystery how our parents found each other. The thing is, Dad's hopeless at looking. When he's lost something it's usually in his pocket, and when he goes to do the shopping he always comes back with something different than what was on the list: Mum's the wrong kind of yoghurt, but one he was happy enough with and vice versa. They've never told us about how they met – Mum never thinks it a good time. There are rarely any good times here, and if we have them we only realize afterwards. My suspicion is that it was exactly like with the cows, that one day Granny and Grandpa opened my mum's bedroom door and put Dad in with her like a bull. After that they shut the door and hey presto: there we were. From that day on, Dad called her 'wife' and Mum called him 'husband'. On good days 'little man' and 'little woman', which I found strange, as though they were worried they'd forget each other's sex, or that they belonged to each other.

I fibbed to Belle about how they met. I told her they bumped into each other in the Russian salad section of the supermarket and they'd both picked the beef version, their hands touching briefly as they reached for the tubs. According to our teacher, eye contact isn't necessary for love, touch is more than enough. I wondered then what you should call it when both of them are lacking: eye contact and touch.

Even though I think there are girls like us, I nod at Hanna. Maybe they don't smell of cows all the time, or of Dad's anger

and cigarette smoke, but there's probably something you can do about that.

I briefly press my own hand to my throat. I can still feel the impression of the rope in my skin, and I think about earlier, the wobbly kitchen stepladder and the crash, and then the rope seems to be a bit tighter, a double knot under the larynx. Everything seems to stop just below the throat, just like the strip of light from Dad's tractor headlights on my duvet. We can hear him outside, spreading cow manure across the fields. He has to do it secretly because no one's allowed to muck-spread any more, to reduce the chances of contamination. We don't know what we're supposed to do with it otherwise. The planks on the muck-heap you roll the wheelbarrow along have sunk away into the muck – there isn't room for any more. Dad said that not a soul would notice if he spread it across the fields at night. There was even someone from the fallen stock company who came in a white suit, and brought dozens of rat boxes filled with blue poison to spread around the farm so that the rats couldn't pass on the foot-and-mouth. Hanna and I have to stay awake. Dad musn't suddenly slip away from us. The strip of light moves from the foot end to beneath my chin and begins again from the bottom after a while.

'Tractor accident or a fall into the slurry pit?'

Hanna squashes up close to me beneath the duvet. Her dark hair smells of silage grass. I breathe in the smell deeply for a moment and think about how often I have cursed the cows, but now they're about to be killed, I'd like nothing more than for them to stay with us – that it will never become so quiet on

the farm that we can only remember the sound of them, that only the crows in the gutturing are left to keep an eye on us.

'You're as cold as frozen bread,' Hanna says. She lays her head in my armpit. She isn't joining in with the game. Maybe she's worried that if she says something it will actually happen. That like in *Lingo*, we'll be able to predict beforehand who is going to take the lucky green balls for the jackpot, and that we'll be able to predict death too.

'Better a frozen loaf than a defrosted bag of beans,' I say, and we laugh with the duvet pulled over our heads so that we won't wake up Mum. Then I move my hand from my throat to Hanna's neck. It feels warm. I feel her vertebrae through the skin.

'You're closer to the perfect thickness than me, little woman.'

'What for, my little man?' Hanna plays along.

'For a rescue.'

Hanna pushes my hand away. For a rescue you don't need the perfect thickness – it's actually the absence of perfection that means we're fragile and need to be rescued.

'Are we fragile?'

'As fragile as a blade of straw,' Hanna says.

Suddenly I realize what's going on. Everything from the recent past falls into place, all the times we were fragile, and I say, 'This is another of the plagues from Exodus, it must be. Only they're coming to us in the wrong order. Do you understand?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you had a nosebleed which meant water changed into blood. We've had the road migration, head lice at school, the death of the firstborn, horseflies around the muck-heap, a grasshopper squashed by Obbe's boot, ulcers on my tongue from the fried egg, and hailstorms.'

'And you think that's why there's a cattle plague now?' Hanna asks with a shocked expression. She's laid her hand on her heart, exactly above the Barbie's ears, as though she's not allowed to hear what we're discussing. I nod slowly. After this, there's one more to come, I think to myself, and that's the worst one: darkness, total darkness, daytime eternally clad in Dad's Sunday overcoat. I don't say it out loud but we both know that there are two people in this house who long constantly for the other side, who want to cross the lake and make sacrifices there, whether Fireball gobstoppers or dead animals.

Then we hear the tractor cut out. I switch on the globe on my bedside table to combat the darkness now that the tractor lights are no longer illuminating my bedroom. Dad has finished the muck-spreading. I picture him in his overalls standing looking at the farm from a distance. The only light shining is at the front of the farm, the oval-shaped window that is lit up as though the moon has tumbled a few feet downwards half-drunk. When he looks at the farm he sees three generations of farmers. It belonged to Grandpa Muller and he took it over from his father. After Grandpa's death, many of his cows lived on. Dad used to often tell the story of one of Grandpa's cows that also had four-and-mouth and

wouldn't drink. 'He bought a keg of herrings and forced it into the mouth of the sick animal. It didn't just get some protein but also it made it very thirsty, so that it got over the pain of the blisters and started drinking again.' I still think it's a nice story. You can't treat tongue blisters with herring any more; Grandpa's cows will be put down too. Dad's entire living will be taken from him in one go. That's how it must feel to him – Tiesey but then times the number of cows, times one hundred and eighty. He knows every cow and every calf.

Hanna disentangles herself from me – her sticky skin slowly pulls free from mine. I sometimes feel as though she's one of the celestial bodies on my ceiling that fall down from time to time, meaning that I've run out of wishes to make; although I've learned that the heavens aren't a wishing-well but a mass grave. Every star is a dead child, and the most beautiful star is Marthies – Mum taught us that. That was why I was afraid on some days that he would fall and end up in someone else's garden, and that we wouldn't notice.

'We have to get ourselves to the safe zone,' Hanna says.

'Exactly.'

'But when then, when are we going to the other side?' My sister sounds impatient. She doesn't know much about waiting and always wants to do everything right away. I'm more cautious; that's why so many things pass me by, because things can be impatient sometimes too.

'You're good at talking but not much comes of it.'

I promise Hanna I'll try harder and say, 'When the mice are away, love will play.'

'Is that another plague? Mice?'

'No, it's protection for when the car comes back.'

'What's love?'

I think for a moment and then say, 'Like the eggnog Granny on the less religious side used to make that was thick and golden yellow: to get it to taste nice, it was important to add all the ingredients in the right order and the right proportions.'

'Egnog's gross,' Hanna says.

'Because you have to learn to like it. You don't like love at first either but it starts to taste better, and sweeter, with time.'

Hanna clamps on to me briefly – she holds me the way she holds her dolls, under my armpits. Mum and Dad never cuddle; that must be because otherwise some of your secrets end up sticking to the other person, like Vaseline. That's why I never spontaneously give hugs myself – I'm not sure which secrets I want to give away.

Dad's clogs are next to the door-mat, with blue plastic covers around their hard noses to prevent any further contamination. I wish I could stick a plastic cover over my face so I could only breathe my own breath. I wear his clogs to empty the basket of peelings onto the muck-heap, tipping them out onto cow pats white with dew, and suddenly it occurs to me that this might be the last pile of cow shit that I'll see for a while. Just like the sound of the early morning mooing, the feed concentrate mixers, the milk tank's cooling system turning on, the cooling of the wood pigeons attracted by the corn feed that build nests in the rafters of the barn, everything will ultimately fade into something we only recall on birthdays or when we can't get to sleep at night, and everything will be empty: the cow's stalls, the cheese shed, the feed silos, our hearts.

A trail of milk runs from the milk tank to the drain in the middle of the farmyard – Dad has opened the tap. The milk can't be sold any more, but he continues to milk the cows as though nothing's about to happen. He secures the cows between the bars, attaches the cups to their udders, then uses one of my old underpants covered in salve to clean them afterwards. I often used to feel embarrassed when Dad rubbed one of my worn-out pairs of knickers on the udders, or cleaned

the milking cups with them without any kind of bashfulness – but sometimes at night I've thought about the crotch that has passed through so many other people's hands, from Obbe's to Farmer Janssen's, and that they touch me that way, with calluses and blisters on their palms. Sometimes a pair of knickers gets lost among the cows before finally getting kicked between the gratings. Dad calls them udder cloths; he doesn't see them as underpants any more. On Saturdays Mum washes the udder cloths and hangs them to dry on the washing line.

I pick a leftover apple core from the bottom of the peelings basket with my fingernail, and see out of the corner of my eye the vet squatting next to a white tent. He sinks a syringe into a jar of antibiotics and presses the needle into a calf's neck. The calf's got diarrhoea – mustard yellow has splattered against her sides, legs trembling like fence poles in the wind. Even on a Sunday the vet is here, but if we were to lie on the bathroom rug with thermometers up our bare bums, things would be put off until Monday. Mum would sing the Dutch nursery rhyme about *Kortjakje* – 'often is *Kortjakje* sick, never on Sundays but always in the week'. And I thought, *Kortjakje's* a coward: she can't go to school but she can go to church – that's a bit wet. It wasn't until I started secondary school that I understood. *Kortjakje* was frightened of everything unfamiliar. Was she bullied? Did she get tummy ache as soon as she caught sight of the school playground like I do? When school trips were announced and all the germs would go along too? Did she break peppermints on the edge of the table to stop feeling sick? Actually, you had to feel sorry for *Kortjakje*.

The plastic covers crunch with every step. Dad once said, 'Death always comes wearing clogs.' I hadn't understood. Why not ice skates or trainers? Now I get it: Death announces itself in most cases, but we're often the ones who don't want to see or hear it. We knew that the ice was too weak in some places, and we knew the foot-and-mouth wouldn't skip our village.

I escape to the rabbit shed where I'm safe from all the illnesses, and I press the limp carrot tops through the wire mesh. I briefly think about a rabbit's neck vertebrae. Would they crack if you twisted the head? It's a scary thought that we hold other beings' death in our hands, however small mine are – like bricklaying trowels, you can use them to build, but also to chop things to the right size with the sharp edge. I slide away the manger, let my hand descend onto the fur, and stroke Dieuwerfje's ears flat to his body. The edges of his ears are hard from the cartilage in them. For a moment I close my eyes and think of the lady with the curls from children's TV. The concern in her eyes when she explains that Saint Nicholas's helpers have all got lost, and everyone's going to wake up to empty shoes next to the fireplace and the carrots next to them for his horse, gone floppy from the heat, their orange skins all wrinkly. I also think about the meringues on her table, the gingerbread men, and the way I sometimes fantasize that I'm a gingerbread man allowed to get very close to her, closer than to anyone before. She'd say, 'Jas, things grow and shrink, but people always stay the same size.' The way she'd reassure me because I can no longer reassure myself.

When I open my eyes again, I take my rabbit's right ear

between my fingers. Then I feel the place between Dieuwerfje's back legs. It just happens, like with the little porcelain angels in the past. At that moment the vet comes in. I quickly withdraw my hand, bending my head to put the manger back in front of the hatch. If your head turns red it's heavier, because embarrassment has a larger mass.

'They've all got a fever, some of them even forty-two degrees,' he says. The vet washes his hands in the water barrel with a bar of green soap. There's algae on the inside of the barrel. I urgently have to clean it with a brush. I peer over the edge. The froth from the soap makes me feel sick, and when I place my hand on my lower belly I can feel my swollen intestines. They feel just like the fennel sausages from the butcher's that are impossible to digest.

The vet puts the bar of green soap between the stone feeding troughs on a wooden table. They are from earlier rabbits, most of which died of old age. Dad buried them with a spade in the furthest field where we're never allowed to play. Sometimes I worry about the rabbits there, whether their teeth might carry on growing a long time after death and stick out of the ground where a cow could get caught on them, or worse, my dad. That's why I give Dieuwerfje a lot of tops, and I pick buckets of grass for him so that his teeth don't grow too long and he's got enough to chew on.

'Why can't they get better? Children get better again when they have a fever, don't they?'

The vet dries his hands on an old tea-towel and hangs it back on a hook on the wall of the shed. 'It's too infectious, and

you can't sell any of the meat or the milk. You'd only make a loss then.'

I nod, even though I don't get it. Isn't it a greater loss this way? All those steaming bodies we love so much will soon be killed. It's like with the Jewish people, only they were hated, and then you die sooner than when you go to your grave out of love and powerlessness.

The vet turns a feed bucket upside down and sits on it. His black curls hang like party streamers around his face. I feel like I'm all legs now I tower over him. It's difficult anyway to know what to do with the extra centimetres only noted in friendship books. We used to mark them on the door-post. Dad would fetch his tape measure and a pencil, and score a line in the wood at the place your head reached. When Marchies didn't come home, he painted the door-post olive green; the same green as the shutters at the front of the house that have been kept shut all the time recently – no one is allowed to see us growing up.

'It's a sorry business.' He sighs as he turns the palms of his hands upwards. You can see the blisters on the inside. They're just like the air cushions in the envelopes Dad sent off vials of bull sperm in, which sometimes stood, lukewarm, among the breakfast things on the table. In the winter I'd hold them to my cheek when I'd just got up and the cold of the floor had reached my cheeks via my toes – hearing Mum in the background spitting on the little windows in the wood-stove before polishing them with a piece of kitchen roll. She always did that before Dad was allowed to put in the kindling, which

he lit with some old newspaper. She said you could feel more heat if you could see the flames fighting for a piece of wood.

Mum didn't like me holding the vials to my cheeks – she said it was unsavoury. She said calves were forged from it, like Granny made new candles from the candlewax that everyone in the village saved for her. But the stuff in the vials was whitish, sometimes watery, sometimes very thick. One time I secretly took some up to my bedroom. Hanna insisted we open the vial once it had cooled down and we could no longer warm ourselves up with it. When the vial got as cold as our bodies, we each dipped our little fingers in it, and, counting to three, struck it in our mouths. It tasted insipid and salty. In the evening hours we fantasized that calves would come out of us, until the plan to find a rescuer blossomed in our minds and we felt bigger than ever: we'd turn into liquid in the rescuer's hands, just as fluid as the semen in the test tubes.

'Is your coat comfortable?'

It's a while before I can answer. My thoughts are still taken up with the blisters on his palms.

'Yes, very.'

'Not too hot?'

'Not too hot.'

'Do you get teased about it?'

I shrug. I'm good at thinking of answers but less good at saying them. Every answer gives rise to an observation. I don't like observations. They're as persistent as when a butter brush covered in cheese wax falls onto your clothes – almost impossible to wash out.

The vet smiles. I only notice now that he has the widest nostrils I've ever seen, which must mean he spends a lot of time picking his nose. It creates a bond I mustn't forget. There's a stethoscope around his neck. For a moment I imagine the cold metal on my chest and him listening to everything moving inside me and changing. The vet drawing a worried frown across his forehead and pushing his thumb and index finger between my jaws to feed me, just like the calf. He'd keep me warm under his green dust-coat.

'Do you miss your brother?' he asks suddenly. He lays his hand around my lower leg and gently squeezes. Maybe he's feeling whether I'm sick: you can tell from the fleshiness of calves' legs how healthy they are. He rubs his hand softly back and forth, which makes the skin under the denim grow hot, and the warmth spreads through my whole body like the thought of homecoming and hot chocolate on a cold winter's day, a thought that is quite a lot less warm by the time you get home. I stare at his neatly trimmed fingernails. You can see the impression of a ring around his ring finger – the skin is lighter there. Loved ones always remain visible in your heart or under your skin, the way my chest seems like it will split when my mum sits on the edge of my bed and asks in a porcelain voice whether I love her and I reply, 'From hell to heaven.' Sometimes I hear my ribcage crack and I'm afraid I'll split for good.

'Yes, I miss him,' I whisper.

It's the first time anyone's asked me whether I miss Matthias. Not a pat on the head or a pinch of the cheek but a question.

Not: how are your parents doing? How are the cows doing?
But: how are you doing? I stare at my shoes.

When I look at the vet, he suddenly appears cast down, the way Mum often looks, as though she's been carrying a glass of water on top of her head to the other side all day without spilling a drop. That's why I say, 'But I'm doing so well I may even speak of happiness, praise the Lord until the knees of my jeans are replaced by patches featuring comic-book characters.'

The vet laughs. 'You know you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen?'

I feel my cheeks fill with colour like the circles after multiple-choice questions. I don't know how many girls he's seen in his life but I still feel flattered. Someone finds me pretty. Even with my faded coat that's beginning to fray at the seams. I don't know how to respond. Multiple-choice questions often have traps, according to my teacher, because they all contain part of the reality and at the same time are lies. The vet hides his stethoscope under his shirt. Before he goes out, he winks at me. 'To make peace,' Mum sometimes says when Dad does that to her. She says it angrily because peace died out long ago. Still, something sears inside my ribcage, something different than inside my heart, which often blazes like a bramble bush.

We are growing up with the Word, but words are lacking more and more frequently at the farm. Now it's long past coffee time and yet we're still sitting silently in the kitchen, nodding our heads at unasked questions. The vet is sitting in Dad's place at the head of the table. He takes his coffee black, I take my squash dark. Like every afternoon before feeding time, Dad has set off on his bike for the lake to see whether he's missed anything, a blue clothes peg on his left trouser leg so that it doesn't flap into the spokes. There's a lot Dad misses. He looks at the ground or up at the sky more than at the things at eye height. At my current size I'm right between those things, and I'll either have to make myself bigger or smaller to be seen by him. Some days I watch him through the kitchen window until he's just a speck on top of the dike, a bird fallen from its flock. In the first weeks after my brother's death, I kept expecting him to be brought back on the carrier of Dad's bike, albeit frozen to the bone. Then everything would be all right again. Now I know Dad always returns with an empty carrier and that Marthies will never come back, just like Jesus will never descend on a cloud.

There's silence around the table. There's less talk in general and that's why most of the conversations only take place inside

my head. I'll have long chats with the Jewish people in the basement and ask them how they'd describe my mother's state of mind, whether they happen to have seen her eat anything recently, whether they think that she'll just drop down dead one day, like my roads that keep refusing to mate. I fantasize there's a laid table in the middle of the basement between the shelves of flour packers and pots of gherkins, with Mum's favourite nuts in those greasy packers – although she only likes whole nuts, not the half ones, which she gives to Dad. And she has put on her favourite dress, the sea blue one with daisies on it. I ask the Jewish people whether they'll say the Song of Songs for her because she finds that one so lovely, and whether they'll take care of her, in happiness or in adversity.

The conversations about my dad are different. They're often about his bottom drawer. I hope his new family will talk back to him more if he leaves us, that someone will dare to challenge him and doubt him, the way we sometimes doubt God. Sometimes I even hope that someone will get angry with him and say, 'Your ears are full of mangels, you can only hear yourself, and that traffic-barrier arm that's so loose, we'll have to repair it, there shouldn't be any hinges.' That would be nice.

Obbe sticks his tongue out at me. Every time I look at him he sticks out his tongue, which is brown from the chocolate meringue biscuits they gave us with our squash. I took mine apart so I could scrape off the white cream with my teeth. I don't realize that my eyes are filled with tears until the vet winks at me. I think about the science lesson we had at school

about Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, about the way the moon must have felt when someone took the trouble to come closer by for the first time in its existence. Maybe the vet's an astronaut too and someone will finally take the trouble to see how much life is left in me. I'm hoping it will be a good conversation. Only I'm not sure what a good conversation would consist of. It will have to contain the word 'good', that seems clear to me. And I mustn't forget to look the other person in the eye for a long time, because people who look away too often have secrets to hide, and secrets are always hidden in the deep-freeze compartment of your head, like containers of minced meat in the freezer. As soon as you take them out and leave them unattended, they go off.

'All the animals have got the runs. It can't get much worse,' the vet says in an attempt to break the silence. Mum has balled her hands into fists. They lie on the table like rolled-up hedgehogs. I'd told Hanna they were hibernating but that soon she was sure to feel along the veins of our jaws, the way she sometimes did with her index finger before scraping the dried milk from the corners of our mouths.

Then the hall door opens and Dad comes into the kitchen. He unzips his skipper's jersey and throws a bag of frozen bread onto the work counter. He stands next to the table and eats his meringue biscuits with large bites.

'They're coming tomorrow around coffee time,' the vet says. Dad thumps the table. Mum's biscuit bounces up slightly, and she lays her hand protectively over it – if only I was a meringue biscuit, I'd fit perfectly inside the bowl of her hand.

'What have we done to deserve this?' Mum asks. She shunts her chair back and goes to the counter. Dad pinches his septum, his fingers like a bread clip so that he won't dry out by starting to cry.

'Upstairs, all of you,' is all he says. 'Now.'

Obbe gestures at the loft. We follow him up to his room – his curtains are still completely closed. This afternoon, the teacher said at the end of the science lesson that if you breathe through your nose, everything gets filtered by the little hairs in it. If you breathe through your mouth everything gets right inside you, you can't stop illnesses getting in. Belle had started breathing loudly through her mouth, which made everyone laugh. I'd only looked at her anxiously: if Belle got sick, it would mean the end of our friendship. Now I only breathe through my nose; I keep my lips firmly sealed. I only open them to say something, even though that's less often now.

'You have to drop your trousers, Hanna.'

'Why?' I ask.

'Because it's a matter of life or death.'

'Does Dad need more pants for the cows?'

I think about my own. Maybe Mum found the knickers under my bed and she saw that they were yellow and hard from the dried-up piss. Obbe raises his eyebrows as though I'm the one asking funny questions. Then he shakes his head.

'I know something fun to do.'

'Not about death again?' Hanna asks.

'No. Not about death. It's a game.'

Hanna nods eagerly. She loves games. She often plays

Monopoly on her own on the carpet in the sitting room.

'Then you have to take off your knickers and go and lie on the bed.'

Before I can ask what his plan is, Hanna's taken off her trousers and her pants are around her ankles. I look at the slit between her legs. It doesn't look like the custard bun Obbe was talking about. More like the slug Obbe once cut open behind the boot-jack with his penknife, that slime came out of.

He sits on the bed next to Hanna. 'Now close your eyes and spread your legs.'

'You're peeking,' I say.

'Am not,' Hanna says.

'I saw your eyelashes quiver.'

'That's the draught,' Hanna says.

Just to be sure, I lay my hand over her eyes and feel her eyelashes tickling my skin. I watch Obbe take a can of Coke and begin to shake it around wildly. Then he holds the can to her slit and forces her legs as wide open as possible, affording me a view of the pinkish flesh. He shakes the can a few more times then holds it as close as possible to the opening. Suddenly he opens the ring pull and the Coke squirts in a straight line into her flesh. Hanna's hips jerk, she cries out. But what I see in her eyes when I take away my hand in shock is not something I know. Not pain but more like peace. She giggles. Obbe shakes a second can and repeats the procedure. Hanna's eyes grow bigger, her lips press damply against my palm, she moans quietly.

'Does it hurt?'

'No, it feels nice.'

Then Obbe breaks the ring pull off one of the cans and lays it on the little pink ball sticking out from the slit. He gives it a quick jerk as though he wants to open her like a can of Coke. Hanna moans louder now and writhes across the duvet.

'Stop, Obbe. You're hurting her!' I say. My sister lies on the pillow, sweating and wet from the fizzy drink. Obbe is sweating too. He picks up the half-empty Coke cans from the floor and gives me one. I drink it greedily and see over the top of it that Hanna's about to put her knickers back on.

'Wait a minute,' Obbe says, 'you have to keep something safe for us.' He gets the bin out from beneath his desk, empties it onto the floor and fishes out dozens of Coke ring pulls from among the failed test papers. Then he pushes them into Hanna one by one.

'Otherwise Mum and Dad will notice that you two have been stealing cans,' he says. Hanna doesn't complain. She seems like someone else all of a sudden. She almost looks relieved, even though we'd promised each other we'd feel eternally burdened to take the weight off our parents. I look at her angrily. 'Mum and Dad don't love you.' It's out before I realize it. She sticks out her tongue. But I see the relief slowly fading from her eyes, her pupils becoming smaller. I quickly rest my hand on her shoulder and say that it was a joke. We all want Mum and Dad's love.

'We'll have to make more sacrifices,' Obbe says. He sits down at his computer which springs buzzing to life. I don't

know what kind of sacrifice we've just made but I daren't ask any more questions, afraid he'll come up with a new mission. Hanna sits down next to him on a folding chair. They both act as though nothing happened, and maybe that's the case and I'm worrying unnecessarily, the way I worry about night falling every time. It's just part of the process. However afraid I am of the dark, in the end it always gets light again – like now, even though the light's artificial, the light of the screen, but still the darkness of just then has largely disappeared. I pick up a forgotten ring pull and put it in my coat pocket with the whiskers and the shards of my piggy bank. We have to be careful with Hanna – she could betray us with every step – you can probably hear the tinkle of ring pulls inside her body, the way they sometimes break off when you're drinking and fall into the can and can be heard with every sip. I look at my brother and sister's backs. It suddenly dawns on me that I can no longer hear the fluttering of butterfly wings against the lids of the cottage cheese tubs. A line from Marthew springs to mind: 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.' Obbe and I really need to talk. And even though it's never just the two of us but three, I have to make sure that Hanna's ears are closed, just for a moment.

After dinner, I quickly slip outside, step over the red ribbon around the cowshed, and hold my hand in front of my mouth like a paper face mask as I go in. Since no doors or stable windows are allowed to be open, there's a strong whiff of

ammonia, mixed with the smell of silage. I run the manure shovel across the gratings behind the cows and pile up the runny shit in the middle. The slurry falls between the gratings – I hear it ending up in the sub-basement. You have to keep the shovel at a good angle from your body otherwise it keeps getting stuck between the gaps. From time to time, I push against a cow's hoofs to tell it to move. Sometimes you have to do it more roughly or they just ignore you. I walk along behind the gutter to the dry cows, which stand there chewing amiably as though unmoved by the fact that this is their last meal. I let Beatrix lick my hand. She's a black cow with a white head and brown patches around her eyes – all cows have blue eyes because they have an extra layer that reflects the light. In the winter I do that with the calves – I let them suck on my frozen fingers until they're totally vacuum-packed, like the sadness inside my chest. Every time I hear that sucking sound it makes me think of that story of Obbe's. He said that Janssen's son didn't put his fingers in there but something else, but those were just stories that went around the village like the stink of muck-spreading once a month, and it was better to turn your nose up at them.

I let the cow lick my hand again. First you have to gain their trust and only then do you strike without mercy, that's what Obbe taught me. That was how he'd caught the butterflies for his collection. I let my hand glide from her head along the backbone to the place between her hip bone and tail. Along with their ears, it's the place cows like being touched the most. Every evening I search for a similar place on my own