

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 Matthew 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 struck 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

body with a torch, but I don't find anything worth stroking, anything that calms me down or makes me breathe faster. As if of its own accord, my hand glides further from her hip bone towards her tail. I can see her bum hole opening and closing like the mouth of a hungry baby. Without thinking about it, I push my finger into the cow's bum hole. It's warm and spacious. Underneath it I can see something hanging that does indeed look like the custard bun Obbe was talking about, but then pinker, with a tuft of hair at the end of it. Between the two, I feel another hole, this one narrow and soft. It has to be the cow's cunt, I think. Immediately she clenches her hips and holds her tail close to her, shifting her leg back restlessly. Hanna flashes through my mind and I move my finger in and out, quicker and quicker until it begins to get boring. I put my other hand in my coat pocket and all of a sudden I feel the cheese scoop between the shards of piggy bank, the Coke ring pulls and Dieuwertje's whiskers. I'd forgotten about taking it from the cheese shed. I get it out of my coat pocket and turn it a few times in the air to examine it from all angles. An idea pops into my head. A rescuer needs to be tested, the way divers need to get a diving licence. This is going to be a test for the vet, because if he can save a cow from a roving cheese scoop, he can save a girl's roving heart too. I squeeze my eyes into slits in anticipation of the pain Beatrix must feel, and then carefully insert the cheese scoop into her bum hole. I press harder and harder so that her bum hole becomes wider and shapes itself around the scoop, until I can go no deeper. My hand and wrist completely inside the cow, I let go and pull my arm back. It's

covered in shit. I pat her warm flank, the way my dad patted my lower leg when he was finished with the soap.

'There's something wrong with Beatrix,' I say to the vet after I've cleaned my arm with the stuff my mum uses to clean the milking pails, rinsed the soles of my wellies with the hose and turned off the tap.

'I'll go take a look,' he says, walking to the cowshed. When he returns a few moments later, I can't make out anything in his gaze. No worried frown between the eyes, no grim set to his mouth.

'Well?' I ask.

'She's royalty, you know. They always make a song and a dance when they have a bit of pain. Nothing wrong there, that animal is as healthy as can be, and just to think that the poor creature is going to be put down tomorrow. This foot-and-mouth is an abomination in God's eyes.'

I smile at him, the way the TV lady from *Lingo* smiles when someone has failed to grab the green ball.

floor with its legs in the air. There are broken-off tails on the gratings. Horns. Chunks of hoof.

'Murderers! Hitler!' Obbe shouts afterwards. I think about the Jewish people who met their fate like hunted-down cattle, about Hitler who was so terrified of illnesses that he started to see people as bacteria, as something you can easily stamp out. The teacher told us during the history lesson that Hitler had fallen through ice when he was four and had been saved by a priest, that some people can fall through ice and it's better if they're not rescued. I wondered then why a bad person like Hitler could be saved and not my brother. Why the cows had to die while they hadn't done anything wrong.

And I see the hate in Obbe's eyes as he begins to hit one of the men in masks. Farmer Evertsen and Farmer Janssen pull him back by his overalls and try to calm him down, but he tears himself away and runs out of the cowshed, past Mum, who is still riveted to the door opening holding the two thermos flasks. If I take one from her hand, she'll probably collapse to the ground just as hard as the dry cows whose turn it is now. The stench of death sticks in my throat, like a chunk of congealed protein powder. I try to gulp it down and blink away the calves in the corners of my eyes like thunderbugs, until they begin to smart and I can only get rid of them with tears. Every loss contains all previous attempts to hang on to something you didn't want to lose but had to let go of anyway, from a marble bag filled with the most beautiful marbles and rare shooters, to my brother. We find ourselves in loss and we are who we are – vulnerable beings, like stripped starling

chicks that fall naked from their nests and hope they'll be picked up again. I cry for the cows, I cry for the three kings – out of pity, and then for my ridiculous self, wrapped in a coat of anxiety, wiping the tears away quickly again. I have to go and tell Hanna we can't go to the other side for the time being. We can't leave Mum and Dad behind like this. What's going to become of them when the cows have gone?

I hold my hand in front of my mouth to combat the smell and keep whispering, 'My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos, My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos, My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos.' It doesn't help, I don't calm down. I look at my dad; he's holding a pitchfork that he points angrily at the men every now and again. If only they were bales of hay or silage grass, I think to myself, then we'd be able to lift them up together and move them, or wrap them in green plastic and put them out in the fields for the view, and then let them dry out. One of the men, the tallest of the group, is stranding next to the cowshed door with Mum, eating a pink iced cake; his face mask dangles under his chin like a sick bag. He scrapes the icing off with his front teeth and only after he's done that does he eat the cake, while around him cows are flying into walls and bullets are being fired into heads. When he whisks a second cake out of the packet and carefully strips it of its icing, the cracks in my skin seem to grow bigger – this is how a caterpillar must feel when it's about to become a butterfly, but it has something that keeps holding it back, even though it can see the cracks forming around it, the light of freedom falling through them

– and my heart begins to beat so wildly behind my ribs that I'm afraid for a moment that the entire village can hear it, the way I'm sometimes afraid they'll hear in the night when I'm lying on my back, moving past the darkness. I wish I could scream and kick the men in their stomachs or tie two face masks in front of their eyes so they can't see the cows any more, only the darkness of their deeds, that are black and sticky and will cling to them with every step they take. I'd drag their stupid heads through the stained stalls and then grab them by their legs with the grab loader and drop them above the container.

Dad drops the fork and raises his head to the rafters of the shed, where doves are flying up with every bang. Their feathers are dirty – peace always comes in white, but this is war. And I briefly hope that Dad will come to me and pull me tightly to him, so that the press studs of his overalls press into my cheek, so that I can lose myself in the longing to cling on to him tightly, but the only thing I can lose myself in now is loss itself.

When I go outside, I see Obbe taking off his disposable overalls. He throws them into the protest fire built from dried reeds that is burning in the field next to the muck-heap, with a handful of lost farmers standing around it. If only we could take off our bodies in the same way, freed of the dirt upon us.

PART III

All of a sudden, Obbe presses his mouth to my ear and whispers slowly and emphatically: 'God-damm-it.' A strip of light falls through the chink in the curtains onto his forehead. The red gash from the banging has become a scar, like the seam of my sock. I squeeze my eyes shut and feel his warm toothpaste breath containing the forbidden word, which he repeats, disappear into the vortex of my eardrum. Lucky they're my ears and not my parents', because that is the worst word we can say and think and no one on the farm has ever said it before. I feel myself getting sad, more for God than for myself. He can't help the way things are going here and yet His name is being taken in vain. The more he says the word, the more I shrink under my covers.

'You used the *Sims* password.' Obbe hovers over me in his striped pyjamas. His hands rest on either side of my pillow.

'Just the once,' I say quietly.

'Not true – your avatars never have to work again because they're filthy rich. You've been cheating. You should have asked my permission first, Goddammit!'

I smell Dad's aftershave: a mixture of cinnamon and walnut. I'll have to satisfy Obbe in the same way as Dad, I decide, before instinctively rolling onto my belly, and pulling

down my pyjamas and knickers to bare my bum. Obbe takes his mouth away from next to my ear and says, 'What are you doing?'

'You have to put your finger in my bum hole.'

'But that's dirty!'

'Dad does it, though, so that I can poo-every day. You make a tunnel ready, you know, like we made tunnels for the ants we put in the aquarium filled with sand? It'll only take a moment.'

Obbe rolls up his shirt-sleeves, carefully parts my buttocks as though they're an animal encyclopaedia he's taking good care of and that only he is allowed to touch, and pushes in his index finger as though pointing out a rare creature, a cockatoo for example.

'Doesn't it hurt?'

'No,' I say, trying to hold back the tears by clenching my jaws. I don't tell him he's supposed to push in some Sunlight green soap, which isn't green at all but a kind of yellowish brown. I don't want my lips to start frothing, like some of the cows that had foot-and-mouth. Dad is forgetting to do it more and more often. Someone has to take over the job so that I don't have to go to the doctor or be exterminated.

Obbe pushes in his finger as far as he can.

'Don't you dare do a fart,' he says.

When I look back, I see that his pyjama bottoms are tight around his crotch. I think about the last time his willy performed a trick, and wonder how many fingers' worth of thickness he'd be, whether we could put that in to make the tunnel even bigger. But I don't mention it, not now: asking

questions creates expectations and I don't know if I can live up to them. When the teacher asks me a question, my thoughts sometimes seem to have been Tipped away. And I mustn't make Obbe even angrier. Imagine if his swearing woke up Mum and Dad. Suddenly Obbe begins to move his finger backwards and forwards, faster and faster as though he wants to give the rare creature in his collection a poke so that it will come to life. My hips slowly begin to move up and down: I want to run away and stay at the same time. I want to sink and I want to stay afloat. A snowy landscape appears around me.

'Do you know how long eels live?'

'No,' I whisper. There's no reason to be whispering but my voice becomes quieter and hoarser on its own. My mouth fills with saliva. I briefly think about my toads. They're sitting on top of each other and call each other 'little man' and 'little woman'. Their long tongues swing around each other, as though they're fighting for the same imaginary bluebottle. Does a toad have a willy? And can it pull it back into its sheath like a bull can, the way Obbe's wooden revolver can go back into its holster?

'They can live to be eighty-eight and they've got three enemies: cormorants, maw-worms and fishermen.'

Obbe abruptly withdraws his finger from my bum hole. The snowy landscape begins to melt. Alongside relief I also feel disappointment inside my chest, as though he's pushed me back into my pitch-black mind – a torch that is shone onto you to give you a stage but then switched off again. I'm spending more and more time escaping the farm by lying on

my belly moving my crotch against my teddy bear, making my bed slats squeak, harder and harder until I can no longer hear it, until I've got rid of all of the day's tension and all I can hear is the whooshing in my ears, the sea so much closer than during the day.

'Mum and Dad are forty-five and they don't have any enemies.'

'That doesn't mean anything,' I reply, as I pull my knickers and pyjama bottoms back up. I hope Dad won't be angry I've taken his job away from him, even though he failed to do it himself and has stopped touching me completely. I don't want to be even more of a burden to him.

'No, it doesn't mean anything,' Obbe says.

He swallows audibly a couple of times, pretending not to be bothered by it, or that he's not scared we're going to lose them even sooner than ourselves. He makes a face as he looks at his index finger. He has a quick sniff.

'That's what a secret smells like,' he says.

'You're gross.'

'Don't say anything to Mum and Dad, otherwise I'll murder Dieuwertje and pull that stupid coat off you, Goddammit.' Obbe pushes me away from him and strides out of my bedroom. I hear him go downstairs where he opens kitchen cupboards, then slams them shut again. Now the cows have gone we no longer have breakfast at a fixed time. Sometimes there isn't any breakfast to be had, just some dry crackers and instant porridge. Dad forgets to fetch bread on Wednesdays from the baker in the village. Or he's suddenly become afraid of

the mould. We have to stand in front of him in the afternoons. He'll be sitting in his smoking chair next to the window with his right leg crossed over his left, which doesn't suit him – legs wide apart is better – in his hand the blue fountain pen from his accounts book. We're the new stock and we have to be checked for potential illnesses; we have to show our bare backs like the undersides of our egg cakes. Dad inspects us for blue and white spots.

'Promise me you won't die,' he says, and we nod and don't mention the hunger in our bellies or the fact you can die of that too. In the evenings we get tinned soup with meatballs and extra vermicelli that Mum breaks above the pan. That way it seems as though she's still cooked for us. Some of the vermicelli strands float like lifebuoys in the soup bowls decorated with hens.

I move my legs a bit under the dinosaur duvet cover until they no longer feel heavy but their normal weight, even though I don't know exactly how legs are supposed to feel, probably weightless. Everything that's part of you is weightless and the things that are alien feel heavy. Obbe's toothpaste breath mixed with the swear-word hangs around me like a demanding milk customer: they're not satisfied with anything and stride into other people's farmyards as though they own them, heads held high. I push off the duvet and cross the landing to Hanna's room. She sleeps at the end of the corridor, her bedroom door always open a chink. She insists the landing light stays on the whole time. Hanna thinks that burglars are attracted to lamps like moths and that Dad could

chase them outside again in the morning.

I gently push open her door. My sister is already awake and is lying reading a picture book. We read a lot – we like heroes and carry them with us inside our heads, continuing their story there, but now with a leading role for ourselves. One day I'll be Mum's hero so that Hanna and I can go to the other side with peace of mind. Then I'll free the toads and the Jewish people, and buy my dad a cowshed full of brand-new-blazed cows, and get rid of all the ropes as well as the feed silo. No heights any more, no temptations.

'Obbe swore. He said G-d-it; I whisper as I sit down on the foot of the bed. Hanna's eyes widen. She puts her picture book down.

'If Dad hears that . . .' she says. There's sleep in the corners of her eyes. I could wipe it away with my little finger, the way Obbe and I once got a snail out of its shell with a filling knife and smeared the slimy creature onto the tiles.

'I know. We have to do something . . . Maybe we should tell Mum that Obbe's being mean? Remember when Evertsen wanted to get rid of his dog? He said it was a nasty animal and a week later it was put down,' I say.

'Obbe's not a dog, you idiot.'

'But he is mean and nasty.'

'Yes, but we have to give him something. Something more like a bone than an injection – to keep him quiet,' Hanna says.

'What then?'

'An animal.'

'Dead or alive?'

'Dead. That's what he wants.'

'That's not nice for the poor creature. I'll have a talk with him first,' I say.

'Don't say anything stupid, you'll just make him angry. And we have to talk about The Plan. I don't want to stay here much longer.'

I think about the vet – he didn't manage to find the cheese scoop so it's impossible he'll be able to save my heart. I don't mention it – there are more important things going on.

Hanna takes a bag of Fireballs from her bedside table. There's a cartoon character with flames coming out of its mouth on the front. She tears open the plastic and gives me a red ball. I put it in my mouth and suck. As soon as it gets too hot, I take it out of my mouth again. It keeps changing colour – from red to orange to yellow.

'Once we're on the other side and have been saved, we might set up a Fireball factory. We can swim laps through the red balls every day,' Hanna continues. She moves her gobstopper from cheek to cheek. We buy them in the little sweet-shop at the back of the village on the Karnemelkseweg. The lady who sells the sweets always wears the same cute white apron and has black uncombed hair that sticks out all over the place. Everyone calls her 'the Witch'. Some horrible stories about her are doing the rounds. According to Belle, she turns stray cats into cat-shaped liquorice sweets and children who try to steal sweets into toffee. All the children in the village still buy their sweets from her, though.

Dad doesn't actually allow us to buy them. 'She's a heathen

disguised as a God-fearing Christian. I sometimes see her trimming her hedge on a Sunday? One time I'd crept round the back with Belle and we'd peeked into her garden over the hedge. It was so overgrown the plants could touch the stars. I scared her by saying that the Witch secretly visited anyone in the night who peeked into her garden, and she could turn you into a plant she'd later re-pot outside her back door.

As well as sweets, the shop also sells stationery and magazines with tractors on the cover or naked women. A bell tinkles when the door opens which is unnecessary because her husband, who wears a dust-coat as white as his face, his body as slender as a whippet's, is always standing behind the counter watching everyone who comes in. His eyes stick to you like magnets. Next to him there's a parrot in a cage. Mr and Mrs van Luik talk all the time to that brightly coloured bird, though it's more like complaining about the new ballpoint pens that haven't arrived, the liquorice laces that have dried out which you could break a window with, the weather that is too hot or too cold or too stuffy.

'You have to go now otherwise Mum and Dad will wake up,' Hanna says. I nod and bite the Fireball into chewing gum. The sweet cinnamon taste fills my mouth. Hanna picks up her picture book and pretends to read on, but I can see she's no longer able to concentrate on the words. The words are dancing the way they often dance inside my head, finding it harder and harder to form an orderly queue and come out of my mouth.

Two forks lie with their teeth through each other in the farmyard, like hands praying. Obbe is nowhere to be seen. I look for him in the empty stalls which smell of dried blood and where the odd broken-off tail is stuck to the ground. No one has been here since the cows were taken. I carry on to the vegetable patch and see my brother collapsed on the ground next to his beetroot plants. His shoulders are shaking. I watch from a distance as he cradles a dead beetroot in his arms and angrily pushes his finger into the soil to plant new seeds, the way he just did between my buttocks. This time he pushes more roughly. Obbe's other hand strokes the leaves of the beetroot plant – on good days he will also stroke a chicken's plumage. He has had no influence on what has happened here: Death has come. I wrap my arms around my coat. It's only November but it froze last night already.

Obbe suddenly pushes himself up, looks back and sees me standing here. I'm reminded of a line from Exodus: 'If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.' I smile at Obbe to show I have come in peace, that I always come in peace, even though I sometimes long to come with war in mind, the same way I sometimes take a broken toy to

the vegetable patch and bury it among the red onions, next to the one-winged angel. I know, though, that we'd have to come from a better family to be able to bury our childhood – we'd have to lie under a layer of earth ourselves, but the time isn't ripe for that yet. We still have our missions which have been keeping us on our feet until now, even though Obbe's half lying on the damp earth, looking back at me, unmoved. I shuffle my welly awkwardly back and forth over the ground and become aware of the goose bumps on my arms. The elastic of my pyjama bottoms is baggy around my waist. Obbe jumps to his feet; there's still a trace of tears on his face. He pats the mud from his striped pyjamas. The things that move us will finally cause us to fall apart like a chunk of crumbly cheese.

Obbe stands before me. His bushy eyebrows are like strips of barbed wire above his eyes, a warning not to come any closer. He rubs his cheeks dry with the back of his hand, holding in his other a couple of wilted plants. The beetroots at their tips are wrinkled and display traces of mould. The leaves are brown.

'What you just saw never happened,' he whispers.

I nod briefly and look at the coffee grounds around the cauliflowers to keep away pests. Are Mum and Dad the pests that keep eating away at us? Obbe turns around. There's wet soil on his pyjama top. For the first time I imagine digging a hole in the vegetable garden, laying Obbe in it and closing it, raking it over and letting the frost come over it like you do with kale, hoping it makes things better. I'd get a better version I could call a brother and whom I'd give my milk biscuits to when the drawer gets too full to fit any more. A

brother I don't have to be ashamed of any more in the school playground when he gets into a scrap again or when he shows off in the bike sheds, putting out his Lucky Strike cigarettes on a garden spider.

'Do not curse if God does not curse; do not swear when the Lord does not swear.'

Obbe stops at the wheelbarrow that Mum had lain in and which now has rainwater in the bottom. I angrily kick at the wheelbarrow with my foot so that it tips over, and the water streams out onto the earth and around the ankles of Obbe's wellies. Matthias's rusty go-kart lies next to the wheelbarrow. The red side seat has faded and there's a big tear in its back. No one has driven it since his death. Obbe smiles.

'You're always so good, aren't you?'

'I just don't want you to swear – do you want Mum and Dad to die or something?'

'They're already dead.' Obbe makes a cutting motion across his throat with his finger. 'And you're going to die soon too.'

'You're making things up,' I say.

'Unless you make a sacrifice.'

'Why a sacrifice?'

'When the time's right, I'll show you.'

'But when will the time be right?'

'When it's the colour of a good beef tomato. If you leave them on the vine too long, they split and burst open and the mould gets in. It's about finding the right moment,' Obbe says, walking away from me with the beetroot plants clamped under his arm. They leave mud patches on his pyjamas.

One by one, Dad puts the silver crows into a binbag and pulls the yellow loops at the sides towards each other = the opening looks like a cow's bum, with its sphincter clenching. He pauses for a moment, holding the binbag. I look at him over the top of my nature book, at his washed hair which he has combed neatly into a side parting, making lines with the teeth of the comb like a ploughed field, at his lip which has a dent in it like an ashtray – there's a cigarette stuck in it now. The side parting makes him look a bit like Hitler, but I don't say so. Dad might get the idea that I hate him too, and then he'd walk even more crookedly, closer to the soil, closer to Matthias's double grave where there's still room for one more family member – 'first come first served', Mum once said. I hope they don't make a competition of it.

On both the day of his death and his birthday we go to the graveyard next to the Reformed church where death smells of conifers. When we reach the grave, Mum cleans the photo on his gravestone with a bit of spit and a hanky, as though she's wiping away the imaginary milk residue from around Matthias's mouth. Dad lights a lantern and waters the plants and flowers around the grave. The gravel beneath our feet crunches as we change positions. I always stay as still as possible so as not

to knock against Mum by accident. We don't speak. I always look at the graves next to and behind Matthias's. There's a girl who fell off a boat in the summer and ended up in the propeller; a woman with an enormous butterfly sculpture on her grave because she wanted to fly but didn't have wings; a man who was only found when he began to smell. But one day, this is what it says in the Bible, all the graves will break open, one day the dead will return. I'd always found that a scary thought: I pictured all the bodies coming out of the earth and marching through the village like a procession of biology models, with chattering teeth and hollow eyes. They'd bang on the doors claiming to know you, saying they were relatives. I remember the lines from Corinthians that Granny once read to me when I was worried we'd no longer recognize Matthias: 'How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.' I didn't understand why we'd had to plant Matthias in the ground like a seed if above the earth he'd have been able to blossom into something wonderful. We never know it's time to leave until Dad turns around. I usually run my hand along the conifers as I walk past them, as though I'm offering Death my sincere condolences, out of respect, out of fear.

Dad has fixed his side parting with hair wax. I don't want the Jewish people to see him through the gaps in the floorboard like that – he'd frighten them unnecessarily. Though sometimes I doubt they're still living in the basement. It's so quiet and now winter's coming it's starting to get freezing cold down there, so cold that their bodies will-freeze over time, like the bottles of blackcurrant cordial. I'd put them up in the hay barn where it's warmer.

I carry on reading my nature book about ants and their carrying capacity: I hope for Mum's sake that the Jewish people are still there because if you take away a queen ant's subjects, I read, it's not long before she dies of loneliness; and vice versa, as the subjects also die if the mother lays down her wings and ceases to be. Without her, Dad, who is now tying a tight knot in the binbag, wouldn't survive for long. He once won two silver medals for the cows called Boude and Wijn who had produced a hundred thousand litres of milk. They were his favourite Blaarkoppen and they'd been featured in the *Reformist Daily*, complete with pictures. That Sunday we received weak handshakes after the church service and a free slice of vanilla sponge in the Hoeksteen, where people discuss the sermon afterwards. For a short while it had seemed as though Dad was emitting light among the members of the congregation, like my glow-in-the-dark stars. He spoke with sweeping hand gestures and grinned from cheek to cheek – the same smile as when he'd sold a calf to a cattle dealer. I looked at him and thought: this isn't Dad, this is a stranger we'll be going home with shortly, who will lose his light when the rest

around him light up again. That's why we had to stay dark, as it formed a nice contrast for Dad. I was impressed by him and the way he told people about Boude and Wijn's success. Sometimes you have to sell yourself – it's something we'll have to learn one day. Dad is good at that. One day he'll close a deal on me and Hanna – even though we're impatient to take matters into our own hands. As I was listening to Dad talk that Sunday, I picked off the greasy darker edges of the slice of cake in my hand and put them in my coat pocket. I resolved to stand on the edge of the sofa back home and offer the strips to Mum, like worms dangled above the beaks of young starlings. I wondered about putting them on Matthias's grave – he liked cake, especially with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles and when the centre was still a bit moist, but then I thought it might attract worms and beetles.

Out of the window I see Dad putting the binbag into the black container. When he returns he sits down in the smoking chair next to the window. The smoke of his cigarette causes half of his face to become foggy. Without looking at me, he says, 'We shouldn't have hung a calf in the tree as a protest, but a farmer. It would have made a bigger impression on those filthy heathens, those spineless shortbreads.' Dad often uses 'shortbreads' as a swear-word. I immediately picture Dad hanging upside down from a branch with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Now he's probably going to threaten to leave for good. Now he asks me whether I still remember the story of the man who got on his bike one day and rode to the edge of the world. As he was cycling he discovered that his brakes didn't work,

which was a relief to him because now he couldn't stop for anything or anyone. The good man cycles off the edge of the world and tumbles and tumbles, the way he's been tumbling all his life, but now there's no end to it. That's what death will feel like – like an endless fall without getting back up again, without plasters. I hold my breath. The story has frightened me a bit. Once Hanna and I had folded bottle tops around the spokes of Dad's bike so that he couldn't secretly go after the man. I didn't realize until later that Dad was the man. Dad was the one tumbling.

'Have you already pooped?' he asks all of a sudden.

I feel my body stiffen at once. I hope for a moment he'll be covered entirely in fog and disappear for a while. The only thing that came out of me was watery like chocolate milk and not really worth giving a name. Dad's talking about a real poo, the kind you really have to try hard to get out.

'And what rubbish are you reading there? You'd be better off reading the Authorized Version,' he continues.

I close my nature book in shock. Ants can carry up to five thousand times their own weight. People are puny in comparison – they can barely lift their own body weight once, let alone the weight of their sorrow. I pull my knees up to protect myself. Dad taps his cigarette ash into his coffee cup. He knows Mum hates him doing that – she says it makes the coffee taste of wet cigarettes, of the number one cause of death.

'If you don't start pooing, they'll have to make a hole in your tummy and your shit will run into a bag. Do you want that?'

Dad pushes himself up from the smoking chair to stoke the fire. He stacks his worries like the sticks of kindling next to it: they blaze up in our feverish minds. We all want Dad's worries, even though they only burn briefly and don't give off much heat.

I shake my head. I want to tell him about Obbe and his finger, that it will all be fine. At the same time, I don't want to disappoint him because you mustn't just make people superfluous – he could go rusty.

'You're holding it in deliberately, aren't you?'

I shake my head again.

Dad comes and stands in front of me. He's holding a piece of kindling in his hand. His eyes are dark – the blue seems to have been swallowed up by the pupil.

'Even dogs shit,' he says. 'Show me your stomach.'

I carefully put my legs back down on the ground. He takes hold of the seam of my coat. But the drawing pin, I think then. If Dad sees it, he'll pull it out roughly, like an ear tag from a dead animal. Mum and Dad will definitely never go on holiday then because the only place I want to go to is myself.

'Friends,' we suddenly hear behind us. Dad lets go of my coat. His expression changes at once: the sky often clears unexpectedly inland, as Dieuwertje Blok says on her pre-Christmas show. She's been back on TV for a week now. Sometimes she winks at me and then I know what we're doing is right – that once Hanna and I have gone, she'll keep an eye on things. This reassures me a bit. Dad opens the stove door and throws the stick in.

'The animal's healthy from the front but sick at the back end.'

The vet looks from Dad to me. It's an expression he used for the cows but that is now intended for me. The vet nods and opens the press studs of his green jacket one by one. Dad begins to sigh now. 'She's got a problem with her arsehole.' I think about all the bars of soap I've hidden in my bedside table. There are eight of them. I could make the entire ocean froth with them. All the fish, walruses, sharks and sea-horses would be washed clean. I'd make a washing line for them and hang them up with Mum's clothes pegs.

'Olive oil and a varied diet,' the vet says. His nose is running. He sniffs and wipes it on his sleeve.

I clutch my nature book even tighter. I forgot to fold over the corner of the page I was at. If only there was somebody to do that for me so that I'd know my place, where to live my story from again, and whether that place is here or on the other side: the Promised Land.

Dad turns around abruptly and walks to the kitchen. I hear him rummaging around in the herb cupboard. He comes back with an old bottle of olive oil; there are yellow crusts around the edge of the lid. We never use olive oil in the food. Dad is the only one who sometimes uses it, to grease the door hinges to stop them from creaking.

'Mouth open,' he says.

I look at the vet. He doesn't look back but stares at a wedding photo of Mum and Dad on the wall. It's the only picture in which they're really looking at each other, where

you can see that they were in love, even though Mum has a dubious smile on her lips and Dad is leaning awkwardly on one knee on the grass, his deformed leg handily out of shot. Their bodies are still supple, as though they'd been coated in olive oil for the shot. Dad is wearing a brown suit and Mum a milk white dress. The longer I look at the photograph, the more doubting their smiles become, as though they already know what the future has in store for them, the cows around them in the field like bridesmaids.

Before I can do anything, Dad squeezes my nose shut, holds the bottle's spout to my lips and pours the oil into me. I begin to splutter. Dad lets go.

'There we are. That should be enough.'

I try to swallow the nasty oil and cough a few times. I wipe my mouth on my knee – it's like a greased baking tin – and wrap my arms around my belly. Don't throw up, don't throw up or you'll die. Dad points outside – the vet follows his finger. I don't hear what they are saying. All I can hope is that one day God will pick up the farm like the grab loader picked up the dead cows. I clench my hand tighter around my belly. I want to let go of my poo and I don't want to let go of it. Maybe Obbe should stick in something bigger? If it came out I'd carefully fold up a few pieces of toilet paper – the rule is eight for poo, four for pee – and run my hand between my buttocks like a manure shovel. Should I take a sip of Mum's rennet that makes holes pop up in the cheese? Then I'll get holes in me too and everything will be able to get out at last.

I mash the florets of broccoli on my plate. They're just like mini Christmas trees. They remind me of the evening that Marthies didn't come home, the hours I spent sitting on the windowsill with Dad's binoculars around my neck. They were actually supposed to be for looking for the greater spotted woodpecker. I didn't see a greater spotter woodpecker and I didn't see my brother. The cord of the binoculars left a red stripe behind at the back of my neck. If only I could bring closer what was becoming increasingly far from us by just reversing my gaze, by looking through the big end of the binoculars. I'd searched the sky often enough with them – looking for the angels from the tree that Obbe and I had secretly got out of the box in the attic a week after our brother's death. We'd rubbed them forcefully against each other ('my juicy little angel, Obbe had groaned affectedly, to which I'd replied 'my sweet little piece of china') before letting them fall out of his skylight into the gutter. The weather has turned them green. Some of them lie buried under leaves from the oak tree. Every time we go to check whether they're still there, we're disappointed. If the angels here lose the ability to fly after the most minor setback, how can they be with Marthies in heaven? How can they protect him and us?

Eventually I twisted the lens caps back onto the binoculars and returned them to their case. I never got them out again, not even when the greater spotted woodpecker did return – their view will stay black forever.

I take a big mouthful of broccoli. We always have a hot meal at lunchtime. Everything here is cold in the evening: the farmyard, the silence between Mum and Dad, our hearts, the bread spread with Russian salad. I don't know how to sit on my chair. I shuffle around a bit to try to feel my burning bum hole, reminding me of Obbe's finger, as little as possible. I mustn't give anything away, otherwise my brother will make my rabbit as cold as the evenings. And I must have wanted it myself, right? You keep bulls calm by showing them your buttocks if you're a cow.

I can't keep my eyes off the stethoscope lying next to the vet's plate on the table. It's the second time I've seen one in real life. I saw one once on Nederland 1, but you didn't see the body because that would be too much nudity. I fantasize for a moment that the stethoscope is on my bare chest, that the vet lays his ear to the metal and says to Mum: 'I think her heart is torn. Does it run in the family or is this the first time it's happened? Perhaps she should go to the seaside where the air is clear. All that liquid manure gets into your clean clothes and the heart can get infected more quickly.' I picture him taking a Stanley knife out of his trouser pocket, like the one Dad uses to cut the ropes of the silage grass packing – whoosh whoosh until it falls free of its shape. Then he'd draw lines on my chest with a felt-tip pen. I think about the Big Bad Wolf that ate

the seven little goats and was cut open so they could be taken out alive – maybe a big girl would come out from inside me, freed of her fears, or someone who would be seen in any case, the girl who'd been hidden for too long beneath layers of skin and coat. When the stethoscope leaves my skin, he'll have to lay his ear to my chest, and then just by breathing in and out, I can make his head go up and down so that he understands me. I'd say that it hurts everywhere and points to places where no one has ever been – from my toes to the crown of my head and everything in between. We could draw guiding lines between the freckles to give ourselves boundaries or to cut a figure out of me, just like those dot-to-dot pictures. But if he doesn't hear my cry for help I'll have to remove the metal from my chest, open my mouth as wide as possible and poke the round tip as far down my throat as I can. Then he'll have to listen. Choking is never a good sign.

Obbe elbows me in the ribs.

'Hello, Earth to Jas, pass the gravy will you.'

Mum hands me the jug. Its handle has broken off. There are globules of fat floating in the gravy. I quickly pass it to Obbe before he puts a downer on things by asking me what I was thinking about. He'd start listing all the boys at school, while the boy I do actually think about a lot has a memorial plaque at the place he always parked his bike. Things aren't very cheerful anyway now the cows have gone and the vet is talking about the impact of foot-and-mouth on all the farmers in the village. Most of them don't want to talk about it and those are the most dangerous ones, he says, most likely to be

weighed down and end up doing something silly.

'Hard to understand that,' Dad says without looking at anyone, 'you've always got your kids still.'

I glance at Obbe whose head is almost touching his plate, as though he's studying the structure of broccoli and seeing whether the florets can be used as umbrellas to hide ourselves under. I can see from his balled fists that he's angry about what Dad said, or what Dad hasn't said. We all know that Mum and Dad can be lead weights too, like the ones we use to keep the curtains hanging down in their place. I keep on watching the vet. From time to time he runs his tongue along the silver metal of his knife. It's a handsome tongue – dark red. I think about the plants in Dad's greenhouse, and how he uses a knife to cut across a vein before planting the cuttings with the leaves pointing upwards in the potting soil, then fastening them with a fence staple. I imagine the vet's tongue touching my tongue. Will I finally uncurl then? When Hanna poked her tongue into my mouth a while back, I tasted that she'd eaten the last honey drop. I ask myself whether the vet's tongue tastes of honey, whether that will calm the tickling insects in my belly.

Dad sits at the table with his head in his hands. He's no longer listening to the vet, who suddenly leans forward in a secretive manner and whispers, 'I think your coat looks lovely on you.' I don't know why he's whispering because everybody can hear, but I've seen people do that at other times, as though they want everyone to lean in a little, to prick up their ears, to be drawn towards them like a magnet and then to put everyone back in their place. It's got something to do with

power. I think it's a shame that Hanna's staying at a friend's house. Otherwise she'd be able to hear that it won't be much longer before we're rescued. Maybe I should forget the incident with the cheese scoop. It did make me lose a bit of my belief in him, just like the time – I was in the fourth year of primary school – when Dad called me to the table. It was the first and last time we'd have a conversation at the table that wasn't focused on the cows.

'I need to tell you something,' Dad had said. My fingers felt for my knife and fork, to have something to hold on to, but it was long before dinner and the table hadn't been laid yet.

'Saint Nicholas doesn't exist.'

Dad didn't look at me as he said it but stared at the coffee grounds in his cup, holding it aslant. Dad cleared his throat again. 'The saint at school is our Tjerre, the regular milk customer, the bald one.' I thought about Tjerre who sometimes rapped his head with his knuckles as a joke, making hollow sounds with his mouth. We loved it, every single time. I couldn't imagine him with a beard and a red mitre. I tried to say something but my throat was as full as the rain metre in the garden. At last it overflowed and I began to sob. I thought about everything that was a lie: sitting in front of the open fire, singing Christmas songs in the hope he'd hear us, though at best only a coal tit had heard us; the mandarins we received in our left-out shoes that made our socks smell acidic. Maybe Diewertje Blok was fake too. The fact we had to behave, otherwise we'd be put in the saint's empty sack and taken to Spain.

'And Diewertje Blok then?'

'She's real, but the Saint Nicholas on television is an actor.'

I looked at the pepernoten that Mum had put in a coffee filter for me. Everything we were given was carefully weighed, even these miniature spiced cookies. I left them untouched on the table, the tears kept on coming. Then Dad got up from the table, fetched a tea-towel and dried my tears roughly with it. He kept on scrubbing even though I'd stopped crying, as though my face was covered in boot polish – the polish that fed the illusion, the soot smeared worn by the saint's helpers. I wanted to pound on his chest the way he'd pounded on the door for years, and then run away into the night and not come back for the present. They'd been lying all this time. Yet over the years that followed I tried to believe in the holy man just as determinedly as I believed in God – as long as I could picture them or see them on TV, and as long as I had something to wish or pray for, they existed.

The vet puts the last broccoli floret on his plate into his mouth, leans forward again, and lays his knife and fork in a cross on his plate as a sign he's finished eating.

'How old are you?' he asks.

'Twelve.'

'Then you're almost complete.'

'Completely nuts, you mean,' Obbe says.

The vet ignores him. The idea that I'm almost complete and ready for someone makes me feel proud, even though it's actually like I'm falling more and more apart – but I do know that complete is always a good sign. My collection of milk caps

is almost complete; there are only three empty plastic cases, so at a certain point I'll get the same feeling as when I leaf through my file and think about all the games I've won and lost. Though it must be harder to leaf through yourself, but perhaps you have to be a grown-up to do that, to stay at the same stripe on the door-post, no longer able to rub out your old height. And Rapunzel was twelve when she was locked up in a tower and rescued by a prince. Not many people know that her name is the German word for lamb's lettuce.

The vet looks at me for a long time. 'I don't know why you don't have a boyfriend yet. When I was your age I would have known what to do.' My cheeks get as hot as the sides of the gravy jug. I don't know what the difference is, why he would have known what to do as a twelve-year-old but as an older man my father's age he no longer does. Aren't adults supposed to know everything?

'Chance of rain tomorrow,' Dad says out of the blue. He hasn't listened to any of the conversation. Mum keeps on walking between the counter and the table so that no one will notice that she's barely eaten a thing. I read in my nature book that ants have two stomachs: one for themselves and the other to feed other ants. I find this touching. I want two as well – then I could use one stomach to keep my mother at a reasonable weight.

The vet winks at me. I decide to tell Belle about him tomorrow. Finally I've got someone to whisper about. I won't tell her he's got a lot of wrinkles, more than an unironed tablecloth, that he coughs like a calf with swine fever, that he's

maybe even older than my father and has got wide nostrils you could fit at least three chips in. I'll tell her he's even more handsome than Boudewijn de Groot. And that means something. After school, Belle and I often listen to his music in my attic bedroom. When we feel very sad – Belle can sometimes get very down when Tom doesn't text her a big X at the end of a message but just a small one, even though when you type a full stop, the big one comes automatically and so he's gone to the trouble to replace the capital letter with a small one – we say to each other, 'There's a drowned butterfly inside me.' Then we simply nod, knowing exactly how the other feels.

Carrying the shovel that still has a bit of white paper from Obbe's lantern sticking to it, and wearing my pyjamas, I go into the field behind the breeding stable we privately call the sperm barn. I dig a hole just next to the place where Tiesey is buried and where Obbe patted down the overturned earth with the back of the spade, and this time didn't poke in a stick because it isn't something we want to remember, that we want to look at. As I dig, the stabbing feelings in my belly get more and more intense. It makes me short of breath and I clench my buttocks tightly, whispering softly, 'Wait just a little while, Jas, you can almost go.' Once the hole is deep enough, I glance around quickly. Dad and Obbe are still asleep and Hanna is playing with her Barbies behind the sofa. I don't know where Mum's got to. She might even have popped next door to see Lien and Kees, who has just bought a new milk tank for when the new stock arrive – a twenty thousand litre one.

I quickly untie the cords of my striped pyjama bottoms and drop them and my knickers to my ankles, feeling the ice-cold wind on my bottom, and then I squat and hover over the hole. In a last attempt to solve my poo problem by looking it up in the Bible yesterday evening, Dad came across a reference in Deuteronomy: 'Designate a place outside the camp where

you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement.' He'd leafed on and closed the Bible with a sigh, meaning there was nothing useful for this problem there, but the lines had stuck in my head. It had kept me awake in the night. I tossed and turned in the dark and kept thinking of those three words, 'outside the camp'. God must have meant outside the farmyard. Was that the only place I'd be able to poo? I didn't say anything to my parents about my plan because not being able to poo is the only thing we still talk about, the only thing that makes them look up when I stand in front of them in the kitchen and lift my T-shirt, my swollen belly like an egg with a double yolk, feeling the same pride as when one of my silky fowl lays a massive white egg.

I look back between my legs and feel the pressure in my bum. Whether it's due to the olive oil or the Bible verses, it works. Only instead of a steaming brown trail descending into the earth like an enormous worm, a few droppings come out of my bum. I keep on pressing as the tears run along my clenched jaw and I feel myself grow dizzy. I have to go on and get everything out otherwise I'll burst one day, and then I'll be even further from home and from myself. The droppings look a bit like the ones my rabbit Dieuwertje does, but then one size bigger. Mini pasties. Granny once said that poo is healthiest when it looks like the greasy veal sausages she sometimes makes. My poo looks like anything but that.

More and more steam comes out of the hole. I pinch my

nose to keep out the smell, which is much worse than a stable full of crapping cows. When nothing else comes, I look around in search of leaves and suddenly notice that everything is bare or buried under a thin layer of frost. I don't want to freeze shut like the plug in the bath-tub in the field which the cows drink water from in the summer. And so I pull my knickers and pyjama bottoms back up without wiping my bum, trying not to let the fabric touch the skin, otherwise everything will get dirty. As I turn around, I bend over the hole for a moment like an eagle hovering over its chicks. I look at the droppings lying there in a heap and begin to close the hole to cover the excrement. I flatten the earth with the shovel, stamp on it a few times with my wellies, and poke a stick in it so I'll remember where I lost a piece of myself. I leave the field, put the shovel back among the other shovels and pitchforks, and think briefly about the boys next door who actually find in the toilet bowl all the things they've lost: a blue button, a Lego brick, plastic bullets from a gun at the fair, a bolt. For a moment I feel big.

Belle says, 'Sadness doesn't grow, only the space it takes up.' It's easy for her to talk. The space she's talking about is only the size of a fish tank and came about when her two guppies died. Now she's twelve and it has become an aquarium. That's as far as it goes, while in my case it grows and grows and can no longer be stopped: at first it was six foot tall and now it's as big as the giant Goliath from the Bible. I nod at Belle anyway. I don't want the glass of the aquarium to break and for her tears to escape. I can't handle people crying – I want to wrap them up in silver foil like my milk biscuits and put them in a dark drawer until they've dried out. I don't want to feel any sadness, I want action; something to pierce my days, like bursting a blister with a pin so that the pressure is eased. But my thoughts keep straying to this afternoon when Mum had a shindy after the vet left. That's what Dad calls everything we're not to take too seriously: a shindy. Out of the blue, Mum suddenly said, 'I want to die.' She had simply continued clearing the table, filled up the dishwasher, and brushed the potato shoots that were on the chopping board into the peelings basket to give to the chickens.

'I want to die,' she repeated, 'I've had enough. If a car ran over me tomorrow and left me as flat as a squashed hedgehog,

I'd be happy.' For the first time I saw desperation in her eyes. Obbe had got up from the table. He pressed his fists into his crown. It didn't calm him down. 'Drop dead then, if you want.'

'Obbe!' I whispered. 'She's about to break.'

'Can you see anyone breaking here? The only thing breaking is us.' He'd thrown his mobile at the wall above the stove tiled in Delft blue, shouting, 'Goddammit.' His Nokia fell apart. I thought about the *Snake* game on there – the snake was probably dead now. Usually it only got tangled up in itself when it ate too many mice and started bulging out of the screen. Now it was broken.

There was a deadly silence in which I only heard the tap dripping. Then Dad stormed in from the sitting room, his gammy leg bumbling behind him. He pushed Obbe roughly to the kitchen floor and held his arms behind his back.

'Do it then – kill yourself – otherwise I'll murder you all!' my brother screamed.

'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain,' Dad cried. Mum squirted some washing-up liquid on a scouring sponge and scrubbed the oven dish.

'You see,' she whispered, 'I'm a bad mother. You'd be better off without me.' I'd clamped my hands over my ears until the screaming stopped and Dad let go of Obbe, until Mum opened the oven and pressed her wrist a few seconds to the still-hot baking tray to warm herself up inside.

'You're the best mother,' I said, hearing in my voice that I

was lying – it was as empty and hollow as the cowsheds. There was no life left in it. But Mum seemed to have forgotten what had just happened already.

Dad raised his arms in the air. 'You're driving us mad, bonkers!' he said, setting off for the wood store. Granny on the more religious side always said you had to nip arguments in the bud immediately. Were we the bud? And I thought, no, parents live on in their children, not the other way round – the madness lives on in us.

'Do you really want to die?' I asked Mum.

'Yes,' she said, 'but pay no attention, I'm a lousy mother.' She turned on her heels and carried the peelings basket to the shed.

I was frozen to the spot for a moment and held my hand out to Obbe. His nose was bleeding. Obbe batted my hand away. 'Shit-pants,' he said.

Belle and I are sitting in the sperm barn on the dusty stone floor. In the middle of the barn there's a dummy cow consisting of a metal frame with a piece of hide on top that's supposed to drive the bulls crazy. Beneath the hide are metal rails with a black chair on them. The chair is made of leather. You move it forward and back to be able to catch the sperm. The hide is torn in places. It's called Dirk IV and is named after a famous bull that sired hundreds of calves. They made a bronze statue of him and put it on a pedestal in the middle of the village square. I interrupt Belle in her argument that sadness always begins on a small scale and then expands. She knows life the

way tourists know a village: they don't know how to find the dark alleyways, the path forbidden to trespassers. I say, 'Lie down on Dirk.' Without asking why, Belle climbs up onto the dummy cow. I sit on the black leather chair beneath her. The hide is hollow on the inside where it's reinforced with a tube. Belle's feet dangle down over the sides – the toes of her All Stars are covered in mud, her shoelaces grey.

'And now move your hips like you're riding a horse.'

Belle begins to move. I lean to the side to have a look. She's taken hold of the top of the hide for a better grip.

'Faster.'

She goes faster. Dirk IV begins to squeak. After a few minutes she stops. Panting, she says, 'This is boring and I'm tired.'

I adjust the chair so that I am sitting exactly beneath her hips. I can go four holes further.

'I know something exciting we could do,' I say.

'That's what you always say, but this is totally dumb.'

'Give it a chance.'

'Pretend the cow's Tom. You can do that.'

'And then?'

'Move again.'

'What's supposed to happen?'

'In the end you'll see wonderful colours, like a Fireball that keeps changing, and you'll get to the other side of the bridge where there's no sadness, where your guppies are still alive and where you'll be in charge.'

Belle closes her eyes. She begins to move back and forth.

Her cheeks grow redder, her lips moister with saliva. I let myself sink back in the chair. Maybe I should put together a presentation for Mum and Dad, I think. I'd give it on toads and I'd explain how they're supposed to mate. It's important that Mum lies on top of Dad – her back is as fragile as a gingersnap. And that's the only way Mum is going to start eating again, so that Dad will have something to hold on to. We should organize a toad migration through the farm.

We'd put Dad at one side of the room and Mum on the other side and have them cross. We could also fill the bath so that they could swim together, just like the day when we got the new mint green bath-tub – it was two days before that day in December, and Mum and Dad had gone in it together. 'Now they're totally naked,' Matthies had said and we'd giggled so much, picturing two apple fritters plunging into the frying fat. They'd come out golden brown, towels wrapped around their waists like paper napkins.

The dummy cow's hinges squeak even louder. Dad was proud of Dirk IV. He always patted the creature on its fake flank after using it. I suddenly feel my throat burning, my eyes stinging. The first snow of the year falls early, descending into my heart. It feels heavy.

'I can't see any colours.'

I scramble up from the chair and stand next to Belle whose eyes are still closed. I quickly put on Dad's pale green raincoat that was hanging over a chair next to the work counter in the shed. Then suddenly the door opens and Obbe pokes his head around it. His gaze goes from me to Belle and then back.

He comes in and closes the door behind him.

'What are you playing?' he asks.

'A stupid game,' Belle says.

'Get lost,' I say. Obbe can't join the game otherwise he's sure to do something mean. He's as unreliable as the weather here in the village. He's still got blood on his nose from when he was pushed onto the kitchen floor.

Some part of me feels sorry for him. Even though I'm not feeling it as much now he's started swearing – and what's more, he often steals food, or money from the holiday tin on the mantelpiece, reducing the chances of us going camping to nil, and ruining Dad's savings for his bottom drawer. Now the most he'll be able to buy is a toaster and a drying rack. One day he'll steal Mum and Dad's hearts too. He'll dig a hole for them in the field, like one of the stray cats holding a cormorant it has caught in its mouth.

'I know something fun,' he says.

'You're not allowed to play.'

'I don't mind if you do. Jas only thinks of boring things.'

'See, Belle says I can,' Obbe says, taking some silver-coloured AI guns from the cupboard above the work counter and a box of Alpha sheaths. These are long sticks with coloured tips. They're used to inseminate the cows that have failed to get pregnant. Obbe hands me a pair of blue gloves. When I don't want to look at him I focus on the stubble on his chin. They feel like the cumin seeds that Mum sometimes has me stir into the curd. He started shaving a few days ago. I follow all his movements tensely.

'You can be my assistant,' he says.

Again the cupboard bangs open. This time he takes out a little bottle containing some kind of gel. He smears some on the gun. 'Lubricant' it says on the label.

'Now you have to take off your trousers and lie on your front on top of the cow.' Belle follows his instructions without complaining. I suddenly realize she hasn't been talking about Tom much recently, more about my brother. She wants to know what his hobbies are, his favourite food, whether he prefers blondes or brunettes and so on. I don't want Obbe to touch her. What if the aquarium broke? What would we do then? Once Belle is lying on Dirk IV, I have to hold her buttocks apart, exposing her bum hole like the fountain pen holder at school.

'It won't hurt, will it?' Belle asks.

'Don't be afraid,' I say with a smile on my face, 'you are worth more than many sparrows.' It's from Luke, and Granny had once said those words when I was staying the night and got scared I'd die in the night.

Obbe stands on an upturned feed bucket so that he can see better, aims the gun between Belle's buttocks and pushes the cold metal into her without warning. She screams like a wounded animal. I let go of her buttocks in shock.

'Stay where you are,' Obbe says, 'otherwise it will hurt even more.' Tears pour down her cheeks, her body shakes. I think feverishly about my leaky fountain pen. The teacher said I should leave it standing in cold water for a night, and then rinse it and blow it dry the next day. Should I lay Belle in cold

water too? When I look at Obbe worriedly, he nods at the container in the corner where the straws of bull sperm are kept in nitrogen. Dad forgot to lock up the container. I'm guessing Obbe has had the same idea - rinse. I unscrew it, take out a straw and pass it to Obbe. The gun is still sticking out between Belle's buttocks.

'You're the best assistant in the world.'

The ice is beginning to melt a little. What we're doing is good. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices that aren't that nice, like when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and he finally gave him an animal. We also have to try different things before God is satisfied with our attempts to meet Death and leave us in peace.

Now Obbe pushes the straw into the gun. There are so many alternatives and still we do it, without knowing that the nitrogen will burn her skin. I feel cowardice making my legs heavier when I run out of the sperm barn with Obbe hot on my heels. We both fly to the other side of the farmyard. 'And lead us not into temptation but save us from evil,' I whisper to myself, as I see Hanna lean her bike against the side of the farmhouse. Her pillow is clamped under her luggage binders. She's carrying her overnight bag in her hand. When she hasn't been to Granny's for a long time, it gets full of silverfish. We crush them between our thumbs and forefingers, rubbing them to dust, then blow them from our fingers.

'Come with us,' I say, running ahead of her to the stack of hay-bales behind the rabbit shed. We crawl between a few

bales of hay so that we're out of sight of Dad, the crows and God.

'Will you hold me?' I ask.

I try not to cry about Belle's screams that are still ringing in my ears, her eyes opened wide, burst like half-full fishbowls.

'Why? What's happened?' Hanna gives me a worried look. 'You're shaking all over.'

'Because . . . because otherwise I'll burst,' I say, 'just like that hen of Dad's when the egg was too big and was sticking half out of its bum. If Dad hadn't killed it, it would have burst into pieces and its innards would have flown everywhere. I'm about to burst like that.'

'Oh, yes,' Hanna says, 'that poor creature.'

'I'm a poor creature too. Won't you hold me now?'

'I'll hold you.'

'You know,' I say, as I press my nose into her hair which smells of baby shampoo, 'I do want to be bigger, but not for my arms to grow too. Right now you fit in them perfectly.'

Hanna is silent for a moment, then she says, 'When they get too big, I'll just wrap them around me twice, like my winter scarf.'

That night I dream about Belle. We're in the woods at the edge of the village, just by the ferry, and we're playing the Fox Hunt game. I don't know why, but Belle's wearing my mum's Sunday overcoat and her Sunday hat with the kind of gauze over it and a black ribbon on the side. The seam of the coat drags along the ground, picking up sticks and mud; it rustles as she walks. Only then do I notice that Belle and the fox have fused into something part human, part animal. We walk further into the woods and end up lost between the tall, thin trees that resemble upright boot-jacks in the dark. Wherever I walk, Belle appears with her rusty red fox's body.

'Are you the fox?' she asks.

'Yes,' I say, 'get lost before I eat you up like a fresh chicken.' She raises her chin disdainfully and tosses back her hair.

'Moron,' she says, 'I'm the fox. Now I have to ask you a question and if you can't answer it, you'll throw up or get the runs and you'll die a premature death.' Her nose and ears have suddenly become pointed. Everything sharp has extra value: teeth to bite through food, hearing to listen to sounds. The fox's body suits her. Each time she takes a step forwards, I take one back. I'm expecting her to let out an eerie scream at any moment like in the barn, that her eyes will open as wide as

those of a pike caught on a hook. Helpless.

'Is your brother really dead or is Death your brother?' she asks at last. I shake my head and study the toes of my shoes.

'Death has no family, that is why he keeps looking for new bodies so that he won't be lonely. Until that person is under the ground, then he looks for a new one.'

Belle reaches out her hand. In the dream I suddenly hear what the pastor once said: 'The only way to combat your enemy is to make him your friend.'

I look back to take in a breath of fresh air, one without any germs in it, and ask, 'What would happen if I gave you my hand?'

Belle moves closer. She smells of burning flesh. Suddenly her bum is covered in sticking plasters. 'I'd eat you up in a flash.'

'And if I didn't give you my hand?'

'I'd eat you up slowly, that would hurt more.'

I try to run away from her but my legs turn to jelly beneath my body, my wellies are suddenly too big for my feet.

'Do you know how many voles in the belly of a fox would mean he no longer had to fathom his own emptiness?' When I finally run away from her, she calls after me with an inbuilt echo effect, a voice for playing hide-and-seek. 'Dear vole, vole, vole.'

Dad squints to figure out how high the silver-plated skates should hang. He has three screws clamped between his lips in case one falls, and he's holding an electric drill. Mum stands, damp-eyed, watching from a distance, the vacuum cleaner hose held aloft. I look at her white vest which is visible because the belt of her dressing gown has come loose, and I can see her saggy breasts through the thin fabric. They look just like two egg meringues, the kind Obbe sometimes makes and sells in the playground in freezer bags, four at a time. If the egg is too old the white gets thinner and this makes the meringue soggy. Dad climbs down the kitchen steps and Mum turns off the vacuum cleaner, making the silence seem silver too.

'They're crooked,' Mum says then.

'They aren't,' Dad says.

'Yes, they are. Look, from here you can see they're crooked.'

'Then you shouldn't stand there. Crooked doesn't exist, they hang differently from every angle.'

Mum pulls her dressing gown belt tight, hurries out of the living room, pulling the vacuum cleaner along with her by its hose – it follows her around the house all day like an obedient dog. Sometimes I'm jealous of that ugly blue beast – she seems to have more of a relationship with it than with

her own children. At the end of every week I see her cleaning its tummy with great love and putting a new Hoover bag in it, while mine is about to burst.

I look at the ice skates again. The insides are lined with red velvet. They're not hanging straight. I don't say anything about it. Dad has gone to sit on the sofa and is staring ahead glassily. There's a bit of dust on his shoulders. He's still holding the drill in his hand.

'You look like a scarecrow, Dad,' Obbe, who has just come in, says in a challenging tone. I hadn't heard my brother come back until about five in the morning. I lay waiting, my heart pounding, analysing every sound: the slaloming of his footsteps, the way he felt along the wall, forgot to skip the creaking steps – the sixth and the twelfth. I heard him hiccuping and not long after that he threw up into the toilet in the bathroom. This has been the pattern for a few nights in a row. My pyjamas are constantly soaked in sweat. According to Dad, vomiting is an old leftover sin the body needs to get rid of. I knew Obbe erred by killing animals, but what he did wrong by going to barn parties, I didn't understand. What I did know was that he kept putting his tongue in different girls' mouths. I could see that through my bedroom window – he stood there in the light of the stable lamp as though he was Jesus, surrounded by a heavenly glow, and then each time I'd press my mouth to my forearm and use my tongue to run circles on my sweaty skin. It tasted salty. This morning I didn't say much to Obbe, so as not to inhale any bacteria that would make me throw up too. It reminded me of the first and last

time I'd been sick, when Matthies had still been alive.

It was a Wednesday – I was about eight – and I'd gone with Dad to fetch bread from the bakery in the village. On the way back, he gave me a currant bun, an extra-large one. It was still deliciously fresh, without blue and white spots. When we arrived at Granny's – we always dropped her off a feed-bag full of bread – I started to feel nauseous. We walked around the back because the front door was more for decoration, and I'd thrown up onto the soil of her vegetable patch, the currants swimming in the brownish puddle like swollen beetles. It was the spot where Granny planted her carrots. Dad had quickly kicked a layer of soil over it with his boot. When the carrots were pulled up, I expected Granny to get sick at any moment and die because of me. At the time I wasn't yet afraid I would die myself, because that only came when Matthies didn't come home, when the incident in the garden became multiple versions of itself. In the worst version, I'd escaped death by the skin of my teeth. I sometimes wondered whether the girls pushed their tongues so far down Obbe's throat that this was why he threw up, like when you stick a toothbrush too far into your mouth and it makes you gag. Mum and Dad didn't ask where he'd been or why he kept stinking of beer and cigarettes.

'Shall we go for a bike ride?' I whisper to Hanna, who is sitting behind the sofa, drawing. None of her figures has a body, only a head, reflecting the way we're only focused on other people's moods. They look sad or angry. She has her overnight case clenched under her right arm. Since she came back from

her sleepover, she's been carrying her case around all over the place, as though she wants to hang on to the possibility of escape. We're not allowed to touch it or even comment on it.

'Where to?'

'To the lake.'

'What do you want to do there?'

'The Plan,' is all I say.

She nods. It's time to set our plans in action – we can't stay here any longer.

In the hall Hanna puts on her anorak that hangs on the blue coat peg. Obbe's is yellow, mine is green. Next to mine there's a red peg. The coat isn't missing but the body that should be wearing it is. Only Mum and Dad's hang on wooden hangers, which are warped from the damp of rain showers in their col-lars. They were once the only reliable shoulders in the house but are now sagging more and more.

I suddenly think of the time that Dad took hold of me by my hood. Matthies had only been dead a couple of weeks. I'd asked Dad why we weren't allowed to talk about him, and whether he knew if there was a library in heaven where you could borrow books without getting a fine if you were late taking them back. Matthies didn't have any money with him. We forgot to return our books so often – particularly the Roald Dahls and the Angry Witch series, which we read in secret because our parents said they were godless books. We didn't want to entrust them back to the librarian. She was never nice to us. Matthies said she was afraid of children with greasy fingers and children who folded over the corners of the

pages. Only children who didn't have a real home, a place they could always return to, made dog-ears – this was why they had to keep a record, the way I would later myself even though mine were more like a mouse's ears. When I asked Dad that question, he'd picked me up by my hood and hung me from the red peg. I dangled around a bit with my feet swinging but I couldn't get myself free. The ground had disappeared from beneath my feet.

'Who asks the questions around here?' he said.

'You do,' I said.

'Wrong. God does.'

I had a good think. Had God ever asked me a question? I couldn't remember one, though I thought of lots of answers to questions people could potentially ask me. Maybe that was why I didn't hear God.

'You can hang there until Matthies comes back.'

'When's he coming back then?'

'When your feet are back on the ground.'

I looked down. From my earlier experiences of growing, I knew this could take quite a long time. Dad pretended to leave but came back after a few seconds. My coat zip was digging into my throat painfully, breathing was difficult. I was set back down on the floor and never asked another question about my brother. I deliberately built up a big fine at the library and sometimes read the stories out loud under my duvet in the hope that Matthies could hear them in heaven, ending with a hashtag the way I did when using my Nokia to leave a message for Belle about an important test.

*

I cycle along the dike behind Hanna; her case is on her cargo rack. We pass our neighbour Lien halfway. I try not to look at her son who is sitting on the back of her bike, even though I know I'm not a paedophile. There's something angelic about him with his blond hair and I love angels, whether they're older or younger than me. But Granny says you should never leave the fox to watch the geese. Granny doesn't have a fox or any geese, but I can imagine it not going well if you left the two together. Lien greets us from a distance. She looks worried. Now we have to smile back cheerfully so she doesn't ask any questions, not to us or our parents.

'Pretend to be happy; I say quietly to Hanna.

'I've forgotten how to.'

'As though it's for the school photo.'

'Oh, right.'

Hanna and I smile our broadest grins, and the corners of my mouth pull. We pass Lien without any difficult questions. I glance back for a moment at her son, suddenly picturing him dangling from the rope in the attic – angels always have to be hung up so that they can spin on their own axis and offer everyone around them the same support. I blink a few times to get rid of the horrible image and think about what Reverend Renkema said last Sunday during the service. It was from Luke: 'Evil does not enter us from the outside but from the inside. Therein lies our ailment. The tax collector beat his breast and prayed. He beat his breast as though to say: here is the source of all evil.'

I press my fist to my chest for a moment, so hard that all of my body tenses and I begin to lurch on my bike, whispering to myself, 'Forgive me, God.' Then I put my hands back on the handlebars to be a good example to Hanna. She's not allowed to cycle no-handed. When she does, I tell her off, just like how every time a vehicle wants to pass us, I cry 'Car!' or 'Tractor!'

There's a gap between Hanna's front teeth like a planting machine. I feel more air enter my tense chest momentarily. Sometimes it's like there's a giant sitting on me, and when I hold my breath at night to get closer to Matthies, he sometimes watches from my desk chair, with big eyes like a newborn calf. He encourages me, saying, 'You have to hold on for longer, much longer.' Sometimes I think that the Big Friendly Giant has escaped from my book because I once left it open on my bedside table and fell asleep. But this giant isn't friendly, more angry and domineering. He doesn't have gills and yet he can hold his breath for ages, sometimes all night.

When we reach the bridge we throw our bikes onto the verge. There's a wooden sign at the start of the railings that has the following painted on it: 'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.' It's from Peter. There's an empty chewing gum packet in the grass. Someone wanted to get to the other side with fresh breath. The lake is calm, like a pious face in which no lies can be found. There's already a thin layer of ice here and there at the water's edge. I throw a pebble at it. It lands on top of the ice. Hanna steps onto one of the boulders. She puts her case down next to her and stares at the

other side, her hand sheltering her eyes.

'I've heard they hide themselves away in pubs.'

'Who?' I ask.

'Men. And you know what they like?'

I don't reply. Seen from behind, my sister isn't my sister but someone who could pass for anybody – her dark hair is getting longer. I think she's deliberately let it grow so long so that Mum has to plait it every day, meaning Mum has to touch her every day. My hair is always fine as it is.

'Chewing gum that doesn't lose its taste.'

'That's impossible,' I say.

'You always have to be sweet and stay sweet.'

'Or they should chew less.'

'In any case you mustn't be too sticky.'

'Mine always loses its taste really quickly.'

'But you do chew like a cow.'

I think about Mum. Her jaws chew so much each day, there must be increased tension, and increased tension is a reason to jump off a feed silo, or to break the thermometer Mum uses to measure the temperature of the cheese and swallow the mercury – Dad has been warning us about mercury since we were very small: it would be a fast death, he said. It taught me that you die fast or slowly and that both things have their advantages and disadvantages.

I stand behind Hanna and lay my head against her anorak. She is breathing calmly.

'When do we leave?' Hanna asks.

The cold wind blows right through my coat. I shiver.

'Tomorrow after the coffee break.'

Hanna doesn't reply.

'The vet said I was complete,' I say then.

'What does he know of those things? He only sees complete animals – the incomplete ones get put down.' Hanna's voice suddenly sounds bitter. Is she jealous?

I put my hands on either side of her hips. One push and she'd just topple into the water. I'd be able to see then how Marthies got underwater, how it ever could have happened.

And then I do it. I push her from the boulder into the water and watch her as she gets a ducking before coming back up again spluttering, her eyes wide with fear like two black fishing floats. I shout her name, 'Hanna, Hanna, Hanna.' But the wind beats my words onto the boulders. I kneel at the water's edge to pull her out by her arm. After that nothing is the same any more. I lie on top of my wet sister with my entire weight, repeating, 'Don't die, don't die.' We don't get up until the church bell tolls five times. Water drips from my sister from every side. I take her hand and hold it tightly, squeezing it as though it's a wet dish-cloth. We're as empty as the Queen Beatrix biscuit tin on the breakfast table we once won on the Postcode Lottery: no one can fill us up. Hanna picks up her overnight case. Her body is shivering as much as the red and white wind sock blowing next to the bridge. I've almost forgotten how to cycle, how we're ever going to get home. I no longer know where we're going. The Promised Land on the other side has suddenly become a drab postcard.

'I slipped,' Hanna says.

I shake my head, hold my fists to my temples and force my knuckles into the skin.

'Yes, I did,' Hanna says, 'that's the story.'

That night my dreams are feverish again, but this time they're about my sister. She is skating over the lake with her hands behind her back, puffing out clouds. Reverend Renkema has parked his Volkswagen on the side of the ditch with its headlights pointing across the ice. The strip of light indicates how big Hanna's laps should be. Renkema is sitting on the bonnet in his black vestment, the Bible on his lap. Everything around him is white from snow and ice.

Then the headlights slowly start to move towards me. I'm not a person but a folding chair that has been abandoned next to the jetty. No one needs me any more to hold on to as they skate. My legs are cold to the touch, my back misses hands. Every time Hanna comes past and I hear her skates scraping the ice, I want to shout to her. But chairs can't shout. I want to warn her about the treacherous wind holes in the ice but chairs can't warn people. I want to hold her, press her to my back, take her in my lap. My sister glances at me each time she comes round. Her nose is red and she's wearing Dad's ear muffs that we sometimes put on when we're longing for his hands to be wrapped around our cold heads. I want to tell her how much I love her, so much that my back, the chair-back, begins to glow for a moment – the wood becomes warm

like after a day of having borne a visitor. But chairs can't say how much they love someone. And nobody knows it's me: Jas disguised as a piece of furniture. A little way off, some coots slide past. I'm reassured they don't sink through the ice, though my sister must weigh about thirty-five coots. When I search the ice again, I see that Hanna has moved outside the strip of light and is disappearing from sight. Renkema begins to toot his horn and flash his headlights. My sister's yellow knitted hat slowly sinks like the setting sun. I don't want her to go under. I want to be an ice-pick and bore myself into her, pinning myself to her. I want to save her. But chairs can't save people. They can only be silent and wait until someone comes to have a rest on them.

'Where you see sticks in the ground, that's where the mole traps are,' Dad says, handing me a spade. I take hold of it by its middle. I feel sorry for the moles, falling into traps in the darkness. I'm just like them: during the day it seems to get blacker and blacker, and in the evening I can't see my hand in front of my eyes. I dig a little around my feet, turning up everything we've pushed under the turf. This morning I turned on the globe on my bedside table and there was a brief flash of light before it went pitch black. I pressed the switch again but nothing happened. For a moment the ocean seemed to flow out of the globe – my pyjamas were soaking wet and smelled of piss. I held my breath and thought about Matthies. Forty seconds. Then I let some fresh air in and unscrewed the globe. The bulb still looked perfect. I thought briefly: this is the darkness, the last plague, then we'll have had them all. I quickly dismissed the idea.

The teacher had been right when she told my mum and dad at parents' evening that I had an overactive imagination, that I built a Lego world around myself. It was easy to click it together and apart – I determined who was an enemy and who was a friend. She also told them I'd given a Nazi salute at the door to the classroom – I had indeed raised my arm in the air and said 'Heil Hitler' as Obbe had told me to. He

said it would make the teacher laugh. The teacher didn't laugh but made me write up lines after school: 'I shall not mock history, just as I shall not mock God.' And I thought – you don't know that I belong to the right side, that Mum is hiding Jewish people in the basement who are allowed to eat sweets, including mini biscuits, and drink an infinite amount of fizzy drinks. I tell her the mini biscuits have two sides: one is chocolate and the other is gingerbread. I've got two sides too – I'm both Hitler and a Jew, good and evil. I'd taken off my wet pyjamas in the bathroom and spread them over the floor, which was heated. Wearing clean knickers and my coat, I was leaning against the bath, waiting for them to dry, when the door opened and Obbe came in. He looked at my pyjamas as though a corpse was lying there.

'Have you pissed your pants?'

I shook my head firmly. I clutched the bulb from the globe tightly in my hand. It was a flat little bulb.

'No, the water came out of my globe light.'

'Liar, it didn't have any water in it.'

'It did too,' I said. 'There are five oceans.'

'Why does it smell of piss here then?'

'That's just what the sea smells like. Fish pee too.'

'Whatever,' Obbe said. 'It's time for the sacrifice.'

'Tomorrow,' I promised him.

'Good,' he said, 'tomorrow's the day.' He glanced at my pyjamas again and then said, 'Otherwise I'll tell everyone at school that you're a little piss monster.' He'd closed the door behind him.

I'd lain flat on my belly on the bathroom floor and practised butterfly stroke, which turned into just moving my crotch against the fluffy mat as though it was my bear, as though I was swimming in the ocean among the fish.

I follow Dad into the field. The frost has turned the grass rock hard under my wellies. Since the cows no longer go into it, he's been checking the traps every day: he's holding a couple of new ones in his right hand to exchange with the old ones that have clapped shut. When I'm doing my homework, I can see him through my bedroom window often taking the same path across the fields. Some days Mum and Obbe go with him. From above, the land looks just like a ludo board and I feel the same relief when they're safely back in the farm, in the stables, like pawns. Even though it's getting more difficult for all of us to be in the same place. Each room in the farm can only tolerate one pawn, and as soon as more come along there's an argument. Dad will lay his mole traps inside then, too. He hasn't got anything else to do and sits in his smoking chair all day like a stuffed heron, not saying anything until he can turn us into his prey. Herons love moles. If he does say anything it's often an interrogation about the Authorized Version. Who lost his hair and therefore all his powers? Who turned into a pillar of salt? Who was swallowed by a whale? Who killed his brother? How many books are there in the New Testament? We avoid the smoking chair as though it's the plague but sometimes you have to go past it, just before a meal for example, and then

Dad keeps on asking questions until the soup's gone cold and the breadsticks soggy. One wrong answer and you're sent to your bedroom to reflect on things. Dad doesn't realize there are already so many things to reflect on, that more keep on turning up, that our bodies are growing and that these contemplations can no longer be switched off with a peppermint, like in the church pew.

'In the olden days, you used to get a guildler per skin. I'd nail them to a plank to let them dry,' Dad says. He squats down next to one of the sticks. Now he feeds the moles he catches to the herons behind the cowshed. They dip them in the water first – they can't swallow them dry – and gulp them down without chewing, as though they're Dad and God's word, which slips down in the same way.

'Yes, kiddo, you have to keep your head doing this – if it claps shut you'll be as dead as a doornail,' Dad whispers as he pokes the stick deeper into the ground. Nothing in it. We go to the next trap: again nothing. Moles like to live alone. They go into the darkness alone, like everyone has to fight their dark side in the long run. It's pitch black more and more often inside my head. Hanna digs herself up from time to time, but I don't know how to get out of that damned tunnel system where I can block Mum and Dad at every corner, arms like weak springs next to their bodies, trapping them like the rusty mole traps in the shed.

'Much too cold for those animals,' Dad says. A drip hangs from his nose. He hasn't shaved for a few days. There's a red scratch on his nose where he scraped himself on a branch.

'Yes, much too cold,' I agree, pulling up my shoulders like a wind-break.

Dad stares at the sticks in the distance and then suddenly says, 'People are gossiping about you in the village. About your coat.'

'What's wrong with my coat?'

'Are there molehills growing under it? Is that it?' Dad grins. I turn red. Belle's have slowly started to grow now. She showed me in the changing rooms during gym; her nipples were pink and swollen like two marshmallows.

'Now you,' she'd said.

I shook my head. 'Mine grow in the dark, just like cress. You mustn't disturb them otherwise they'll get drowsy and go limp.' She understood, but it wouldn't be long before she became impatient. Even though Obbe and I had shut her up for a while. She hadn't told her parents what had happened, because there'd been no angry phone call. Only at school now there was a history book between our tables, like the Berlin Wall. She hadn't wanted to speak to me since the incident and had lost all interest in my collection of milk biscuits.

'Every healthy girl has molehills,' Dad says.

He gets to his feet and stands before me. His lips are chapped from the cold. I quickly point at a stick a little way away.

'I think there's a mole in that one.'

Dad turns for a moment and peers at the place I pointed out to him. His blond hair has got long, just like mine. It stops just above our shoulders. Normally Mum would have sent us

to the hairdresser's on the square a long time ago. Now she's forgotten. Or maybe she wants us to be overgrown, for us to slowly disappear like the ivy covering the whole of the front of the house. Then no one will be able to see how little we amount to.

'Do you think you'll ever be able to marry before God like that?'

Dad stamps his spade into the earth – one-nil to him. There isn't a single boy in my class who looks at me. They only point me out when I'm the butt of one of their jokes. Yesterday Pelle had put his hand down his trousers and stuck his finger through the fly.

'Feel this,' he said. 'I've got a stiffy.'

Without thinking about it, I'd taken hold of his finger and pinched it. I felt the bones through the thin skin that was yellowish from smoking. The whole class began to whoop. A little bewildered, I'd gone back to my chair next to the window, while the laughing became louder and the Berlin Wall shook in its foundations.

'I'm never going to get married. I'm going to the other side,' I say, with my thoughts still in the classroom. It just slips out before I realize. The colour drains from Dad's face, as though I've said the word 'naked', which is worse than suggesting we're talking about developing tits.

'Anyone who gets it in their head one day to brave the bridge will never return,' he says in a loud voice. Ever since that first day when Matthies didn't come home, he's been warning us and making the city out as a slurry pit that would suck you

down if you went into it, and intoxicate you.

'Sorry, Dad,' I say in a whisper, 'I wasn't thinking about what I said.'

'You know how things ended for your brother. Do you want that too? He pulls his spade out of the ground and walks away from me, giving the wind the chance to come between us. Dad squats next to the last trap.'

'Tomorrow you'll take your coat off. I'll burn it and we won't mention the matter again,' he cries.

Suddenly I picture Dad's body between the blades of a mole trap, us sticking a branch in next to his head so that we know where the pawn died. Rinsing the trap with the garden hose in the barrel in the rabbit shed, I shake my head to get rid of the nasty image. I'm not afraid of molehills but I am afraid of the darkness they grow in.

We return to the farm without any loot. On the way back, he whacks some of the molehills with the spade to flatten them.

'Sometimes it's good to frighten them a bit,' Dad says, following this with, 'Do you want to be as flat as your mother?'

I think about Mum's breasts, which are as slack as two collection bags in the church. 'That's because she doesn't eat,' I say.

'She's full of worries, there's no space left for anything else.'

'Why has she got worries?'

Dad doesn't reply. I know it's got something to do with us, that we can never act normally – even when we try to be normal we disappoint, as though we're the wrong variety, like this year's potatoes. Mum thought they were too crumbly and

then too waxy. I don't dare say anything about the roads under my desk and that they're about to mate. I know it's going to happen and then they'll start eating again and everything will be all right.

'If you take your coat off, she'll fill out again.' Dad gives me a sideways glance. He attempts to smile but the corners of his mouth seem frozen. I feel big for a moment. Big people smile at each other, they understand each other, even when they don't understand themselves. I lay my hand on my coat's zip. When Dad looks away, I pick some snot from my nose with my other hand and put it in my mouth.

'I can't take my coat off without getting sick.'

'Do you want to make us look like twits? You'll be the death of us with that funny behaviour of yours. Tomorrow it's coming off.'

I slow my pace until I'm walking behind him and look at Dad's back. He's wearing a red jacket and has a trapper's pouch on his back. No moles in it or anything else. The grass crackles under his feet.

'I don't want you to die,' I scream into the wind. Dad doesn't hear. The mole traps he's carrying in his hand gently knock against each other in the wind.

II

The toads' heads rest on the surface like floating sprouts. I cautiously use my index finger to push the plumper of the two down in the milk pan I've secretly taken from the kitchen, until it plops up again. They're too weak to swim, but floating is going well.

'Just one more day and then we'll leave for good,' I tell them, getting them out of the water. I dab their bobbly skin dry with a stripy red sock. I can hear Mum shouting downstairs. She and Dad are arguing because one of their old milk customers has complained to the congregation. This time not about the milk that was too pale or too watery, but about us, the three kings. I look pale in particular and my eyes are a bit watery. Mum said that it was Dad's fault, that he didn't give us any attention, and Dad said that it was Mum's fault because she didn't give us any attention. After that they both started threatening to leave but that turned out to be impossible: only one person could pack their bags at a time, one only person could be mourned at a time, and only one person could come back later and act like nothing had happened. Now they're arguing about who's going to leave. Secretly I hope it's Dad because he usually comes back around coffee time. He gets a headache if he doesn't drink coffee. I'm

not so sure about Mum: we can't tempt her back with sweets. We have to beg her and make ourselves vulnerable. It seems they're moving further and further apart. Like when they cycle over the dike to the Reformed church on Sundays, and Mum goes faster and faster and Dad keeps having to close the gap. It goes the same way with arguments – Dad has to solve them.

'They're going to take my coat off me tomorrow,' I whisper. The toads blink, as though they're shocked by this announcement.

I think I'm just like Samson, though my strength isn't in my hair but in my coat. Without my coat I'll be Death's slave, do you get that?'

I get up and hide the wet sock under my bed with the wet knickers. I put the toads in my coat pocket and go to Hanna's room. The door is open a chink. She's lying with her back to it. I go inside and lay my hand under her nightdress on her bare back. Her skin has goose bumps – it feels like a Lego sheet. I could click myself onto it and never let go again. Hanna turns over sleepily. I tell her about the moles and Dad saying I have to take off my coat, about the argument, them threatening to leave, always threatening to leave.

'We'll be orphans,' I say.

Hanna is only half listening. I see in her eyes that her thoughts are somewhere else. It makes me nervous. Usually we roam around the farmyard when we're together. We think of escape routes, we fantasize about better lives and pretend the world is like *The Sims*.

'Has a mole trap gone off or is the mercury out of the thermometer?'

Hanna doesn't reply. She lights up my face with the torch, I hold my arm in front of my eyes. Can't she see we're not doing very well? We're slowly floating away from Mum and Dad on a lily-pad instead of the other way around. Death hasn't only entered Mum and Dad but is also inside us – it will always look for a body or an animal and it won't rest until it's got hold of something. We could just as easily pick a different ending, different from what we know from books.

'I heard yesterday that you can fantasize yourself dead, that more and more holes will appear in you because it will nag away at you until you break. It's better to break by just trying it – that's less painful.' My sister brings her face close to mine. 'There are people waiting on the other side who can only lie on top of you in the dark, like the way night presses day to the ground, only nicer. And then they move their hips. You know, the way rabbits do. After that, you're a woman of the world and you can grow your hair as long as Rapunzel in her tower. And you can become anything you like. Anything.' Hanna begins to breathe faster. My cheeks grow warm. I watch as she lays the torch on the pillow and lifts up her nightdress with one hand. She pushes against her colourful spotted underpants with the other. She closes her eyes, her mouth open slightly. Her fingers move against her knickers. I don't dare move when Hanna starts to moan and her little body curls like a wounded animal. She pushes it backwards and forwards a bit, the way I do with my teddy bear, only this is different. I don't know what

she's thinking about, only that she's not longing for a Discman or thinking about mating toads. What is she thinking about then? I pick up the torch from the pillow and shine it on her. There are a few droplets of sweat on her forehead, like condensation from a body that has got too warm in a space that is naturally cold. I don't know whether I should rush to her assistance, whether she's in pain or whether I should fetch Dad from downstairs because Hanna's feverish, maybe even hitting forty degrees.

'What are you thinking about?' I whisper.

Her eyes are glassy. I see she's somewhere that I'm not, just like that time with the can of Coke. It makes me nervous. We're always together.

'Naked man,' she says.

'Where did you see him then?'

'In Van Luik's shop, the magazines.'

'We're not allowed there. Did you buy Fireballs? The hot ones?'

Hanna doesn't answer and I begin to worry. She raises her chin, squeezes her eyes shut, sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, groans again and then lets herself fall back onto the bed, next to me. She's covered in sweat – a lock of hair is sticking to the side of her face. It looks like she's in pain but also isn't. I try to think of explanations for her behaviour. Is this because I pushed her into the water? Will she break out of her skin like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon and then batter herself to death against the window, against the insides of Obbe's hands? I want to tell her I'm sorry, I hadn't meant it that way

when I pushed her into the lake. I wanted to see how Matthies sunk under the water, but Hanna's body wasn't my brother's. How could I ever have got them confused? I want to tell her about the nightmare and ask her to promise never to skate on the lake, now that winter is coming to the village on a sled. But Hanna looks happy, and just as I'm about to turn away from her angrily, I hear the familiar crackle. She takes two red Fireballs from the pocket of her nightdress. We lie next to each other, contentedly sucking and blowing and laughing at each other when our Fireballs get too hot. Hanna presses against me. I hear the sitting room door slam next to us, Mum's crying. Apart from that it's quiet. I used to sometimes hear Dad's hand patting her back like a carpet beater to get out everything she'd inhaled during the day: all that greyness, the dust of days, layers of sadness. But the carpet beater has been missing for a long time.

Hanna blows a big bubble. It pops.

'What were you doing just now?' I ask.

'No idea,' she says. 'It's just been coming over me recently. Don't tell Mum and Dad, will you?'

'No,' I say softly, 'of course not. I'll pray for you.'

'Thank you. You're the sweetest sister.'

When I wake up my plans always seem bigger, just like how humans are bigger in the morning because of the moisture in your intervertebral discs which makes you a couple of centimetres taller. We're going to the other side today. I don't know if that's why I'm feeling strange and everything around me seems darker. Obbe and I stand behind the cowshed as the first snow falls on us, fat flakes sticking to our cheeks, as though God is sprinkling icing sugar the way Mum did over the first doughnuts of the season this morning. The grease drips from the corners of your mouth when you sink your teeth into them. Mum was early this year - she'd fried them herself and built up in three layers in a milk pail: doughnuts, kitchen roll paper, apple fritters. She took two full buckets to the basement, to the Jewish people, because they deserved a new year too. Her fingers were totally bent after peeling the apples for the fritters.

Obbe's hair is white with snow. He promised that if I make a sacrifice he won't tell anyone that I still wet the bed, so the Day of Judgement can be delayed. He's taken one of the cockerels from the coop. Dad is so proud of the creature, sometimes he says, 'As proud as a cow with seven udders.' This is because of its bright red saddle feathers and green hackle feathers,

its large earlobes and shiny comb. The cock is the only being that has remained unaffected by everything and now parades around the farmyard, its chest thrust out. It's calmly watching us now with leaden eyes. I feel the toads moving in my coat pocket. I hope they don't catch a chill. I should have put them inside a glove.

'You can stop once it's crowed three times,' Obbe says.

He hands me the hammer. I clench its handle for the second time. I think about Mum and Dad, about Dieuwertje, my brother Marthies, my body filled with green soap, God and his absence, the stone in Mum's belly, the star we can't find, my coat that has to come off, the cheese scoop in the dead cow. It crows once before the claw hammer sticks into its flesh and the cockerel lies dead on the flagstones. My mum made me smash my piggy bank with that hammer. Now it's blood not money that comes out. It's the first time I've killed an animal with my own hands – before this I was just an accessory. When I once stood on a spider in Granny's sheltered housing that didn't have a shelter, Granny said, 'Death is a process that disintegrates into actions and actions into phases. Death never just happens to you, there is always something that causes it. This time it was you. You can kill too.' Granny was right. My tears begin to melt the snowflakes on my cheeks. My shoulders jerk irregularly. I try to hold still but don't manage it.

Obbe casually pulls the hammer out of the cockerel's flesh and rinses it under the tap next to the cowshed, saying, 'You're really sick. You did it too.' Then he turns around, picks up the cockerel by its legs, and walks toward the fields with its head

dangling softer back and forth in the wind. I look at my shaking hands. I've made myself small in shock and when I stand up again, it's as though there are split pins in my joints that keep everything connected but also moving independently. And all of a sudden a magpie moth flutters around me, black patches like spilled ink on its wings. I guess it has escaped from Obbe's collection. It's the only possibility; you don't see butterflies or moths in December – they hibernate. I catch it in my palms and hold it to my ear. You're not allowed to touch anything of Obbe's, not his hair or his toys, otherwise he gets furious and begins to swear. You're not even allowed to touch the crown of his head, while he presses on it the whole time himself. I hear the moth fluttering in panic against the inside of my hands and clench them into a fist, as though holding a scrap piece of paper with irreverent words on it. Silence.

Only the violence inside me makes noise. It grows and grows, just like sadness. Only sadness needs more space, like Belle said, and violence just takes it. I let the dead moth fall out of my hands and into the snow. I slide a fresh layer over it with my welly: it's an icy grave. Angrily I punch the shed wall, skinning my knuckles. I clench my jaw and look at the stalls. It won't be long before they're filled again – my parents are waiting for the new stock. Dad has even given the feed silo a new lick of paint. I'm worried it will stand out too much and attract Mum, a glimmer in her death wish. The problem is it's going to seem as though everything has gone back to normal, as though everyone is just continuing with their lives after Marthies and the foot-and-mouth. Except for me. Maybe

a longing for death is infectious, or it jumps to the next head – mine – just like the lice in Hanna's class. I let myself fall back into the snow, spread my arms and move them up and down. I'd give a lot to be able to rise up now, to be made of porcelain and for someone to drop me by accident so that I'd break into countless pieces and someone would see that I was broken, that I can no longer be of any use, like those damned angels wrapped in silver paper. The clouds coming from my mouth lessen. I can still feel the hammer's handle in the flesh of my palms, hear the cock crowing. 'Thou shalt not kill nor avenge thyself.' I took revenge and that can only mean one more plague.

I suddenly feel two hands under my armpits and I'm lifted to my feet. When I turn around Dad is standing before me – his black beret isn't black but white. He slowly raises his hand to my cheek. For a moment I think we're going to start slapping our hands like at the cattle market, that we'll assess my meat as healthy or sick, but his fingers curl and stroke my cheek so fleetingly that I wonder afterwards whether it actually happened and whether I haven't invented a hand made of our misty breath from the cold, that it was only the wind. Trembling, I stare at the blood patch in the yard, but Dad doesn't see it, and the snow slowly hides the death.

'Go inside. I'll come and take off your coat in a moment,' Dad says, as he walks to the side of the shed to work the beet crusher. He turns the handle firmly – the rusty wheel squeaks as it turns, bits of sugar beet fly around him, most of them landing in the metal basket. They're for the rabbits – they love

them. As I walk away, I leave a trail behind in the snow. My hope that someone will find me is growing steadily. Someone to help me find myself and to say: cold, cold, lukewarm, warm, getting warmer, hot.

When Obbe comes back from the fields, there's nothing noticeable about him. His back to Dad, he stops in front of me, puts his hand on my coat zip and roughly jerks it upwards, catching the skin of my chin. I scream and step backward. I carefully pull the zip down again and touch the painful patch of skin, abraded by the metal hooks of the zip.

'That's what betrayal feels like, and this is just the beginning. You'll be in for it if you tell Dad that it was my idea,' Obbe whispers. He makes a cutting gesture across his throat with his finger before turning around and holding up a hand to greet Dad. He is allowed into the cowshed with him. For the first time in ages, Dad is going back into the place where all his cows were exterminated. He doesn't ask whether I'd like to join them and leaves me behind in the cold, bits of skin stuck in the zip and one cheek burning from his touch. I should have showed my other cheek, like Jesus, to see whether he meant it. I walk back towards the farm and see Hanna rolling a ball of snow.

'There's a giant sitting on my chest,' I say once I reach her. She pauses and looks up, her nose red from the freezing cold. She's wearing Matthies's blue mittens the vet had brought with him from the lake, and which lay defrosting on a plate behind the stove like pieces of meat for the evening meal. My brother had thought it childish that Mum had tied a string

to them because she was worried he'd lose them, and frozen fingers were the worst thing, she said, not thinking about a heart that stayed cold for too long and how bad that was.

'What's the giant doing there?' Hanna asks.

'Just sitting there, being heavy.'

'How long's he been there?'

'Quite a long time, but this time he's refusing to get off again. He arrived when Obbe went into the cowshed with Dad.'

'Oh,' Hanna says, 'you're jealous.'

'Not true!'

'You are. The Lord hates lying lips.'

'I'm not lying.'

I make my chest swell and then cave in again, as though a claw hammer has been stuck into me too. I keep on feeling it, the same way I still feel the impression of Obbe's body after he's lain on top of me, long after taking a shower. I'm not jealous because Obbe's with Dad, but because he has the death of Dad's favourite cockerel on his conscience just as much as I do and it hasn't made him fall backwards into the snow. Why does he never catch a chill from the ice-cold plans he drags us into? I want to tell Hanna about the cockerel, tell her the sacrifice I had to make to keep Mum and Dad alive, but I don't say anything. I don't want to worry her unnecessarily. And maybe she'll never cuddle up to me again in bed, leaning against the chest that contains so much that is hidden and that is capable of more than she thinks. This is one of those afternoons, I think, that I stick to the next page with Pritt

stick in my diary, only to carefully peel apart again later. First to get rid of it and later to see whether it really happened.

'You can shrink giants by making yourself bigger,' Hanna says, stacking two snowballs on top of each other – the head and the middle section. It reminds me of the time I built a snowman with Hanna and Obbe – on Christmas Day – and called it Harry.

'Do you still remember Harry?' I ask Hanna. The corners of my sister's mouth curl upwards until her cheeks bulge like two mozzarella balls on a white plate.

'When we put the carrot in the wrong place? Mum was in a total state, and fed the entire supply of winter carrots to the rabbits.'

'It was your fault,' I say, grinning.

'It was because of that magazine in the shop,' Hanna corrects me.

'The next morning Harry was gone and Dad was in the front room, dripping with snow.'

'This is a serious announcement – Harry is dead,' Hanna says in a fake deep voice.

'Then we never ate peas with carrots, just the peas – they were much too afraid we'd have dirty thoughts if we ever saw another carrot.'

Hanna arches her back laughing. Before I've realized it, I've spread my arms. Hanna wipes the snow from her knees and stands up. She takes hold of me. It's strange to cuddle in broad daylight, as though our arms are stiffer during the day and seem coated with udder ointment in the evenings, like

our faces. She takes a broken cigarette from her coat pocket. She found it in the farmyard. It must have fallen from behind Obbe's ear – he keeps one there because all the boys in the village keep their cigarettes behind their ears. Hanna clamps it between her lips for a moment, then presses it into the snowman under the carrot.

I look at my hand. The knuckles are red, two of them are skinned – the flesh is pinker there with red bloody edges like ruptured prawns' heads. I go to the shed and put one foot on the heel of the other to take off my boot without touching it. I don't want to use the boot-jack, which has been standing there in solitude now that no one asks for help any more. Since the cows went, Mum and Dad have only been wearing their black clogs. A long time ago we had a cast-iron boot-jack but it got bent because of Dad's deformed leg. I kick my boots off and go through the dividing door into the kitchen. It's spotless and even the chairs are at an equal distance from the table, coffee cups upside down on a tea-towel on the counter, teaspoons lined up neatly next to them. On the counter there's a memo pad upon which is written, 'Slept badly.' And above it the date, one day before the cows were put down. Mum has been keeping a diary in short sentences ever since the outbreak of foot-and-mouth. On the day the cows were killed, it says, 'Circus has begun.' Nothing more and nothing less. Next to the memo pad, there's a note: 'Guests in the front room, be quiet.'

I tiptoe into the sitting room in my socks and lay my ear to the door of the front room. I can hear the elders talking in solemn voices. Once a week they come to see whether 'the

preaching has borne fruit, whether 'crops have grown after the Word was sown'. Are we faithful believers and do we listen to God and to Renkema's sermons? After this, they always start to talk about forgiveness, as they stir vortices into their coffee, like the ones their piercing glances cause in my belly. Usually Mum and Dad take the house visits and we, the three kings, only have to join them once a month. We're mainly asked which part of the Bible we know well, how we cope with or think we're going to cope with the internet and alcohol, with the exuberance of growing up, our appearance. After that comes the standard warning: 'Sanctification follows justification. They cannot be separated. Beware the leaven of the Pharisees.'

Now the new stock of cattle is coming, Dad is busy with the preparations, so Mum has to take the house visit alone. On the other side of the door, I hear one of the elders ask, 'How pure is your way of life now?' I press my ear harder to the wood but can't hear the answer. When Mum whispers that usually says enough; she doesn't want God to hear while we all know that the ears of the consistory also belong to Him – He shaped them, after all.

'Would you like a shortbread biscuit?' I suddenly hear Mum ask loudly. The biscuit tin with Queen Beatrix's head on it is opened. I can smell the fragile sweet smell of shortbread from here. You should never dip shortbread in your coffee – it collapses immediately so that you have to scrape the crumbs from the bottom with your teaspoon. Yet the elders still dunk their biscuits in their mugs every time, as carefully as

the pastor who dunks the fragile children being baptized into the water, as he quietly recites the baptismal formula from the Book of Matthew.

I look at the clock and see that the house visit has only just begun, so they'll be here for at least another hour. This is perfect; no one will disturb me. I knock gently on the basement door and whisper, 'Friend.' No reaction. After killing Dad's cockerel, I can no longer be counted among the 'friends', but when I say 'foe' I don't hear anything – no nervous shuffling, no one quickly hiding behind the apple sauce, even though it's almost all been eaten.

I push open the door and feel along the wall for the light cord. The light flickers slightly as though it's wondering whether to illuminate or not, and then comes on. There's a greasy cooking smell in the basement that issues from the milk pails filled with doughnuts and apple fritters. I can't see the Jewish people anywhere, nowhere the light of the glow-in-the-dark stars on their coats. The bottles of blackcurrant cordial stand untouched on the shelf next to dozens of tins of frankfurter sausages and jars of egg liqueur. Maybe they've fled? Did Mum warn them and hide them somewhere else? I close the door behind me and walk deeper into the basement, my head bent to avoid the spider's webs, a grey gossamer of silence now there's no longer anyone hiding here. I feel the toads in my pocket. They're finally sitting on top of one another and stick to the fabric of my coat like ice cubes. 'I'll free you in a minute,' I reassure them, thinking of the words from Exodus: 'Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels

to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.

It's time I let them go, because their skins feel as cold as the chocolate frogs and mice filled with fondant that Mum bought at the HEMA and whose silver jackets I always smooth out with my nail and keep. On TV yesterday, *Dieuwertje Blok* bit the head off a purple frog. She showed the white filling: on the inside they were made of ice cream. She winked and said that everything was going to be all right, that the saint's helpers had got lost but a sharp-eyed farmer had found them and they were on their way again. Every child would still get their presents in time, as long as the chimney was well swept, clean like all children's hearts.

After that, Mum had watched *Lingo* from behind the ironing board. Hanna suggested that Mum should go on TV sometime, that we should put her name down. I'd nervously shaken my head: once Mum was behind the glass of the TV set, we'd never get her back, or maybe only in pixels when the screen was snowy, and what would become of Dad then? And who would guess the jumbled-up word? Mum was good at that – yesterday it began with the letter D. For the first time she didn't guess but I knew at once: d-a-r-k-n-e-s-s. It seemed like a sign I couldn't ignore.

I stop in front of the freezer next to the wall. I move the cloth hanging over it with fruit weights on its corners – which are unnecessary because there's never any wind in the basement – and open the lid. I see only frozen Christmas Stollen: Mum and Dad get them every year from the butcher, the skating association and the trade union. We can't eat them

all and the chickens have had enough of them too, and leave them untouched in the run where they slowly rot away.

The freezer's lid is incredibly heavy – you have to pull hard before it comes free from the rubber seal. Mum always warned us about that, saying that 'if you topple in, we won't see you again until around Christmas'. I always pictured Hanna's body as frozen food and Mum scooping her out.

Once I've got the lid open, I quickly push the pole standing next to the freezer into the rim so that it stays open, and squeeze myself through the opening, through the hole in the ice. I think about Matthies. Is this how he felt? Was his breath so abruptly cut off? Suddenly I remember what the vet said when he fished my brother out of the water with Evertsen: 'When people have hypothermia, you have to handle them like porcelain. The smallest touch could be deadly'. All this time we've been so careful with Matthies that we don't even talk about him, so that he can't break into pieces inside our heads.

I lie down among the Christmas Stollen and fold my hands over my stomach, which is bloated again and overfull. I feel the drawing pin pricking through my coat, the ice on the sides of the freezer, hear the clap of ice skates. Then I take the toads out of my coat pocket and put them beside me in the freezer. Their skins look bluish, their eyes are closed. I read somewhere that when toads climb on top of each other, the male gets black horny lumps in its thumbs so that it can hold the female more tightly. They are sitting so quietly and close to one another I feel touched. I take the smoothed-out, coloured

silver foil papers from the chocolate frogs out of my other coat pocket and fold them carefully around the toads' bodies so that they'll stay warm. Without giving it any further thought, I kick the pole out from under the lid and whisper, 'I'm coming, dear Matthies.' A loud bang follows, the freezer light flips off. Everything is pitch dark and silent now. Icily silent.

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MARIJKE LUCAS RIJNEVELD (b.1991) grew up in a Reformed farming family in North Brabant before moving to Utrecht. One of the most exciting new voices in Dutch literature, their poetry collection, CALFSKIN, was awarded the C. Buddingh' Prize for best poetry debut in 2015, with the newspaper de Volkskrant naming Rijnveld literary talent of the year. In 2018, Atlas Contact published their first novel, THE DISCOMFORT OF EVENING, in the Netherlands. It was a national bestseller as well as being nominated for the Libris Literature Prize and winning the prestigious ANV Debut Prize. Alongside their writing career, Rijnveld works on a dairy farm.

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