

Undrownable

I came busting out of our mother without making a sound. That's unusual. Most babies come into this world howling their heads off. Red in the face, screaming bloody murder. Often while shitting into the mother's lap. Not me. My face was red, true, but I kept my mouth shut. I know this because our father liked to bring it up all the time. That I didn't cry. It became the story of my origins.

Did not Cry.

You did. I know that because your birth is my first memory. Our parents were just twenty years old and already crippled, as happens with workhorses, but they just *had* to have a second one because a single child means a spoilt nest.

That is the story of your origins. You exist because I exist. And the fact that our father really wanted a son will also have played a part. Though it was clear right away that that bit didn't work out so well either. You came into this world hysterical: you screeched like a piglet being fed into the sausage grinder inch by inch. I could hear you before I laid eyes on you as I tottered on squeaky plimsolls after my father, dragged by the forearm down the hospital's linoleum corridors. (How I miss being little sometimes, to be pulled firmly along by a grownup! None of your business where to. Just letting yourself be dragged around limp-armed. It doesn't happen anymore.) The room smelled of sweat and blood and animal. Our mother's cheeks were wet and she was smiling. You were hidden in a blue blanket, all I could see was your nose. She handed you carefully to Dad, who balanced you on his arm and thought you were a bit skinny. He said I was much more solid when I was a baby, and that *I hadn't cried*. Our mother said that was true, but that my father *had* cried when I was born. That the nurses had told her afterwards he'd been pacing restlessly up and down the corridors. In his leather clogs, the soles of his boots

leaving a trail of muddy cross-shaped clots. When the nurses came to tell him he had a daughter, he'd sunk into a squat, hid his head in his hands and wept.

"Yeah, yeah," said Dad, handing you back to our mother. You were howling, in shrill, long-drawn-out wails, and it made our father flinch. I watched him as he stood there by the bed, rigid. It was hard to believe he'd ever wept in his life. His face looked as if someone holding a screw in their fist had carved it from a piece of wood. Our mother's face was hardly lined at all. She was round and soft and rosy. Like a drop of watercolour dribbled onto a piece of paper by accident. Paler and paler and more and more blurred.

I wake up but keep my eyes shut. That way I am nothing, *nada* and nowhere, for a little longer. Just for a moment. Then I start to turn into something again. I'm coming back together inside my body, that first and only real home. I run my tongue along the bitten-ragged insides of my cheeks. I push my elbows into the mattress.

Before I open my eyes, the bed I'm lying in always feels like the little mattress I slept on in the park home. As if I sank into that one so deep that I can never really escape it.

I still remember every speck of dust in the bedroom the three of us used to share. You and Dad slept in the small double bed, a wall of pillows between you. Because while a father sharing a bed with a son wouldn't do, a father in bed with his daughter was so much worse. So my place was on a cold, damp mattress on the floor next to the bed. As I grew older my hips pressing into the foam rubber started hurting more and more. The mattress butted up to your side of the bed, the farthest from the door. When I couldn't sleep, I'd weave my fingers into the springs underneath. If you then shifted your weight a certain way, it would practically slice my fingers off. They'd go all numb, and I couldn't pull them out until you turned over again. I'd hug them to my chest, and they'd burn and throb, coming back to life under heavy protest.

When we woke up in the morning our father would still be out cold. We didn't need to be quiet as we got up. His sleep was massive. If he fell asleep on top of you by accident, your squirming would not wake him. And yet we tiptoed. You, sneaking out of there as fast as you could, as if sticking around was asking for it. But I would sometimes crouch very quietly by his side of the bed, and stare at him up close. His hot breath was pungent and his ruddy skin glowed with the sunburn he'd earned working outdoors the day before. You could feel the simmering heat without even touching him. My name on his right shoulder, in thick capital letters: ADA. The ink already faded to blue by the sun. On his left was your name: BROOS. But mine had been there two years longer. The hair on his arm was so bleached it was almost white, it stood out starkly against the red. When he was awake I was hardly ever around. If he was in the caravan, we were outside. If I had to pee and he happened to be in the kitchen, I'd shrink past him as fast as I could, looking down at my feet. It was so tight in there that my clothes would brush his. For a whole horrible second.

When he was asleep and I sat by him like that, I'd get the urge to press my mouth to his hot skin. I imagined the white hair pricking my lips as I pushed it down flat against the skin, and the skin staying warm and calm under my touch.

I'd only realize how stuffy our three bodies had made the little bedroom when I followed you into the other room. In the square space that was both the kitchen and lounge, there was barely room to turn around. (When Dad came to pick us up from our mother's on Friday nights, he'd often mutter, 'Come on, back to the shoebox.' Fag clamped between his lip, white-knuckled fist gripping the gearstick.) The floor bounced as you walked on it, just as the wall would give if you placed your hand flat against it. A bunker of heavy cardboard. Toast with heaps of chocolate sprinkles in the morning, so that when I bit into it, sprinkles rained down on my plate, which I'd mop up with a wet finger.

Sometimes the sweet soft taste of the chocolate got fouled by a bitter spark burning a hole in my tongue. That was when a speck of Dad's rollie happened to land in the sprinkles. Washing up only happened as a last resort, and Dad rolled his cigarettes over the same plates we ate from. I'd be watchful for a while, scared the next finger would pick up another of those shreds. Until I forgot about it again and was socked with another bite from hell. If it happened to you, you'd start blubbering, your tongue smeared with gobs of slimy chocolate sticking out of your mouth like a snail. Then I'd wipe your tongue with my sleeve and tell you you looked like a retard.

I open my eyes. It's too dark to see, but I know I am not lying on the mattress on the floor, I am not in the park home. I'm lying in a narrow bed. The wall the bed is pushed against is made of rough stone. Sometimes I graze my arm or leg on it as I kick something off me in my sleep. The green numbers on the alarm clock next to my bed say five fifty-five. I roll out of bed and get dressed in the dark. My clothes have grown damp and cold in the night. The hair on my skin stands erect in protest.

I leave the bedroom. I place my feet very softly on the rough wooden planks of the floor as I walk. Very calmly, heel down first. Next, slowly but without hesitation, rolling up onto the ball of the foot, then the toes. That's the best way to sneak out. On tiptoes is never that quiet. I grope my way down the creaky stairs.

Molina is still asleep, otherwise I'd hear him. The walls in here are so thin that it makes no difference where the sound's coming from, behind the nearest wall or faint and far away. Right now I am the only one who's making the house groan.

In the kitchen the only sound is the buzzing of flies round the light as I switch it on. When I stop moving the house falls back into an ancient silence. My feet suck in the cold of the stone floor. It's already worked its way up to my ankles.

I pull on my waterproof work boots. They've become mine because someone left them here. There's plenty of other abandoned footwear lying around. Also sweaters, leggings, raincoats. This house is full of lost & found, phantom stuff belonging to people whose faces I've never seen. The boots are leather and only a size too small. I scrunch my toes and tie them tight.

I put on a clammy raincoat and hang the dog leashes round my neck. I grab the bucket of fruit peels from the window ledge and pull open the heavy wooden kitchen door. The sun's already coming up. The sky is still dark purple and a thick mist hangs over the tall grass. I plod through it to the hayloft where no hay is stored, but is where the sheep sleep on the dirt floor with their guardians Bella and Lutien. As I approach the door I can already hear the dogs whining. I lift the heavy beam keeping the door locked off the doorjamb and Bella tumbles out right into me. Lutien too appears in the black door opening. "Buenos días," I say. I assume the dogs only understand Spanish, just like Molina.

Lutien is a man's name, but she too is a girl. She's a tad bigger than Bella. Her coat was white once, but is now a dull, grubby yellow. Her head is that of a polar bear. Her eyes glisten like black soap bubbles.

Bella jumps up on me. I clasp her head in my hands, run my thumbs over her rabbit-soft ears. Lutien leans into me, a bit calmer. I feel her warmth against my leg. I let go of Bella with one hand, and rub Lutien's flank. Her short rough fur tickles the palm of my hand. Bella pushes her head in. She doesn't want to share. I step into the hayloft, almost knocking Lutien down. The sheep are waiting patiently for the ruckus to stop. They won't make their way outside until the dogs and I are gone. There are also three hens. For them I dump the fruit peels on the ground. They don't start pecking until I take a step back, keeping their dinosaur eyes on me.

I eat a lot of fruit so they'll have something to eat. Molina doesn't believe in spending money on animal feed, except for the dogs, because they work for it.

The sheep are *free-grass máquinas*, the chickens (*the kitchens*) are organic composters. Bella barks impatiently as I pick two eggs out of the hay. I put them carefully into the empty bucket and leave it by the door. "Alright, vámanos!"

Lutien and Bella bounce elatedly ahead of me. We tramp through the wet grass and cross the bridge over the river that separates our property from the forest. The dogs walk in front of me with their noses low to the ground. Sometimes they stop to see if I'm still coming. I'm still coming. I've never had a dog, but I like them. They want you to be a reassurance. As predictable as a tree.

The dogs' leashes swing idly against me as I walk. I don't leash the dogs, they always come when you call. Molina is nonetheless in the habit of barking harsh commands at them, no matter how they behave. He never takes them for a walk. Actually, he pays practically no attention to them, yet they trail after him everywhere and prefer his presence to mine.

We trudge up the mountain. It smells of earth, damp, decay. I keep my eyes on the ground and take long strides. My leg muscles are burning. My raincoat is sticking to the sweat in my neck. The air feels sharp and cold in my lungs.

Halfway up the mountain we reach a small, level plateau. I always halt there. The dogs know it and wait. I take off my raincoat, spread it on the wet ground and sit down. As my breath returns to normal I look down. At the valley and the lowland where we live. The field looks exposed and unprotected amongst the dark trees. The brambles round the edges would encroach

on us given half a chance, we hack them back aggressively. Besides the house we live in, the field also has the hayloft and Molina's barn. There's another small building, no more than a lean-to, really. That's the bathroom. Positioned so that, from the house, the back wall is all you see of it. The front is open. There's no hot water and the loo is just a hole over the cesspit with a toilet seat. When I stand shivering under the shower, what I see is the field and the forest's edge, sometimes a sheep bleating at me.

From my perch on the plateau, it's all toy-sized. I stare at the shadow across the valley, which the sun is slowly nosing off the mountain. My sweat is growing cold and I shiver, wishing I was over there. So that the sun would make my cold sweat evaporate like dew on a tree's bark. Bella rests her muddy front paws on my trousers, gazing at me with her dark eyes. I press my lips to her fur. A short distance away Lutien is taking a dump.

What am I doing here, you may ask. I split. Just *popping out for a pack of cigarettes*. Toodeloo and never coming back. There are, I think, only a handful of people in the world whose life my departure disrupted — I don't count you as one of them, we already hardly ever spoke anyway and you won't miss me — so I don't feel too terrible about it.

One of the people whose missed messages I still delete from my phone from time to time is Frédérique. It's thanks to her that I'm here now, just as I owe her for a number of other things as well: art school, a place to live, everything. And she knows it damn well. We were roommates. Her father is a producer, an artist and curator, her mother was a painter, like her, although Frédérique doesn't limit herself to a single discipline. Both her parents are big shots in "the arts scene" as she calls it. By which, if you ask me, she just means: the world.

She'd often introduce me as an *outsider artist who grew up in a trailer park*, with her arm around me as if I were an interesting rummage sale find.

Her bedroom door was always wide open. I'd sometimes watch her asleep in her big bed, from the doorway. Spread diagonally across the mattress, on her stomach. Her blanket kicked into a corner. Naked. She said she was a hot sleeper. I also sweat like a pig in bed, but I still can't sleep unless I'm wrapped up in the covers like in a straightjacket. The door of my own room was always closed, and I slept on my own side, in the corner. She'd knock on my door just once and then walk in without waiting for an answer. She regarded the empty half of my bed as an invitation. She'd tease me about my stiffness, said I should do yoga. She'd shake me by the shoulders, back and forth, like a wobbly kitchen step-stool.

Whenever she got the chance she had fun painting over my wood sculptures. She painted their cheeks pink and coloured in the rough grooves. It made them look like sad old transvestites.

Since she was often away, I'd have the house to myself. She was always going off by herself — to art colonies, on backpacking trips, living in a hippie commune for three months, or just hitchhiking for fun. She always asked me if I'd like to come along, but for me, the switch from deserted trailer park to her posh apartment overlooking the Amstel was stimulation enough.

One drunken evening she told me she once was raped, on one of her trips. In the backseat of a car. By a man she'd been travelling with for a few days. She said it was a misunderstanding. Her mascara drew two fat lines down her face and I held her tight. What did you expect, I

thought to myself. But I said it wasn't her fault as she stained my shirt with black splotches. We never spoke of it again. She continued to go on trips. Unruffled in her free-spiritedness.

That's how I came to know about this place. She was supposed to spend six weeks in Spain, but she was back in ten days. She'd expected find a "creative breeding ground for artists" in Galicia, hoping to gain inspiration for her senior year. But as it turned out, *La Tierra's* website was out of date. When she arrived she found a dilapidated house and a single, chain-smoking Spaniard who spoke only Spanish. She was welcome, but he wasn't going to bother trying to communicate with her.

"So there I am," she said, "in the middle of fucking nowhere. With nobody but that dude who's doing his own thing, all he does is traipse around the property all day. He barely made eye contact with me!" She gestured wildly at her pretty face.

"I was so horribly bored that in the end I decided to kiss him." She shrugged. "But he wasn't interested, and after that the atmosphere was even more depressing." She ran her fingers through her curls, down her neck, and rested her thumb in the hollow of her clavicle.

"If he doesn't want you, then he doesn't want anybody," I reassured her. Two weeks later I was on a plane.

Tr. Hester Velmans