Pluto

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An extract

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The greatest thing you could achieve at primary school was to be invited to something. If there was going to be a birthday party on a Wednesday afternoon, the cheeks of the invitees were already glowing by morning prayers.[1]

My mother always gave presents that nobody liked, because they didn't glow or make a noise or feature in tv commercials.

I'd given Lode a little painted figure of a duck. It had remained on the kitchen table on the exact spot where he'd unpacked it. So I'd played with it a bit myself. Above me I could hear the thunder of children's feet and the mother's voice, suddenly shrill, because someone had holed up in the marital bed during Hide and Seek.

I'd looked forward to the birthday cake since the day before, but for some reason my opinion about it changed as soon as I saw a slice on a paper plate. Usually it didn't go down well – that's what the mothers would say, as they cleared up the messy remains: 'The cake mustn't have gone down well.'

Throwing up was the opposite of hiding. Your body was turned inside out. Everything that had been safely inside you now lay in a lumpy puddle on the expensive carpet.

There were also classic parties with organised games. They were a lot quieter, sometimes to the point of being boring, but they had their advantages. If you'd gone somewhere to play, you could count on a one-off alliance that would last at least as long as five school breaks.

No one ever came to play at our house. My sisters and I didn't need anyone else. The best Wednesday afternoons were when it rained, and my mother was downstairs with her girlfriends, sitting at the messy kitchen table. They'd all be a bit hyper, drinking toasts to the men they had lost.

Eliza was usually the one who came up with ideas. 'Shall we build a block of flats?' My three sisters could do anything. They only had to think of a block of flats, and hey presto, there it was. With little stairs and miniature flower beds and tiny cardboard doors that could open and shut, wee curtains at the windows and a teensy-weensy nameplate for each resident.

In our house, everything was possible. We even had our own newspaper, with made-up news. Along the lines of: the King couldn't find a wife so he just made the heir to the throne in his own belly.

When it came to real news, we were pretty clueless. Our mother refused to have a tv in the house because they were 'full of nastiness'. We did get wind of major events though. We'd hear about them in the playground, or Jane and Frederike would have seen them on their father's tv, in the apartment on the coast. News wasn't very cheerful. One time it was about an invisible radioactive cloud

[1] On Wednesdays, children in Belgium only go to primary school in the morning.

speeding towards us, another time about a sinister football stadium where people crushed themselves to death.

Eliza liked to play that she was a detective, and if she'd fallen out with Frederike I was allowed to be her sidekick. I'd spend the whole afternoon peering at the street through the kitchen paper tube to see if any hostile forces were approaching. Once I had to surrender the roll because Frederike and Jane were making a marble run that went all the way from the attic to the patio. We toiled away for hours, and it took rolls and rolls of sticky tape. But by the evening we were galloping happily alongside our marbles and cheering for the ones we'd betted on.

We opened a massage salon, with our mother and her cousin Titi as our only customers. They lay topless on the sofa and were given extensive treatments with olive oil and sunscreen. We even made a loyalty card for them, but Eliza and I came to blows on who was allowed to stamp it.

If you really wanted to be somebody at school, you had to have a sleepover. I never understood all the excitement. No one seemed to take account of the fact that other people's houses smelt of other people's houses. The house of the lady who lived across the street from us smelt like the inside of a new car. But most others smelt of yesterday's vegetable soup.

Each house had different rules, too. There were families that slept without underpants and families that kept their underpants on at all times. Shoes were another thing: on or off, and did you leave them on the mat in the hall or was there a special little shelf? Each house was full of surprises. They kept bread in the fridge. They arranged biscuits in a little bowl, instead of eating them out of the packet. Sometimes they had the same sort of biscuits as another family, but a more expensive brand. Their spaghetti sauce had sweetcorn in it. Every now and again, you'd come across fathers in these houses, men with all kinds of moustaches. One chucked his cigarette butts in the toilet and called his daughter 'Sis'. Another had a shaved head and walked around in sportswear all day, without ever actually doing anything sporty. His wife made teddy bears out of straw. In the lounge there was a bale of straw with some chunks missing, next to the gas heater.

In another friend's house you weren't allowed to drink during the evening meal. Only when everyone had cleared their plates of floury potatoes and sausage and apple purée was the oldest brother sent to get a bottle of soda water. A big brother – it took some getting used to, sharing a table with one. He had pimply cheeks and a particularly sweet smile. It was the first time I'd ever formed an opinion about a smile. It was he who fetched the bottle of water from the larder. That was something we didn't have at home, a larder, but I pretended I'd heard of them. He came back into the kitchen, cradling the glass bottle like a baby. The outside was a bit wet, so the label was starting to slide off. My friend pulled off the label and stuck it on her brother's hand. Her mother immediately ticked her off: 'No silly jokes in this household!' Totally over the top, in my view, but apparently something the family were used to, just like the smell of gravy.

After the meal my friend demonstrated the spare bed by lying on it. A creaky, flower-patterned camp bed. 'Staying over' was a verb, it sounded like something you did, but now staying over turned out to be a wobbly bed. I was already thinking about the night. It would be dark. And they'd have forgotten to snip holes for stars. My friend must have sensed that something was up, because she pushed the camp bed a bit closer to her bed. I'd rather she'd pushed it the other way. Towards the window, where you could see the sky over the nursery greenhouses going pink.

My friend and I had the same pyjamas. Hers were a size smaller, but they had the same animal pattern. The animals were in different places, though. She had a skunk on her elbow, I only had a little bit of skunk tail on my collar. The head of her giraffe was just under the chest pocket, whereas my giraffe was on my back, satisfyingly intact. The pyjamas gave us a feeling of belonging together.

‘Like sisters,’ she said. Twin sisters, I thought, because when it came to ordinary sisters, I already had three.

While we brushed our teeth my friend chattered away nonstop, foam words dripping down her chin. Suddenly her mother came into the bathroom, dressed only in a cotton nightie. It contained a pair of sagging breasts. I was used to my mother’s breasts; she liked to get them out a lot. They had stretch marks, because of breastfeeding. I’d drunk the longest – two years. My mother liked to claim that her breasts were still productive, that they leaked milk if she heard a crying baby. Breasts were no strangers to me, but still, I didn’t dare look at my friend’s mother’s bosom – or at least not too obviously – just a quick peek via the mirror above the washbasin. She got two flannels out of a squeaky wall cabinet and gave each of us one. Mine was orange with a big white daisy, my friend’s was plain green. I wet the cloth under the hot tap and rubbed it round my face. The flannel was hard and smelt nice.

‘Do you always wash your face before you go to bed?’ my friend asked.

‘Yes,’ I lied.

At home we never washed our faces before going to bed, or at any other time of day. Once a week, on Sunday evenings, I’d have a bath together with Eliza and Frederike. Jane was getting hair under her armpits and other places that she was secretive about, so she was allowed to have a bath just by herself, an hour later, once the boiler had filled up again with hot water.

It was quite a business fitting all three of us into the bath, and we always fought about who had to sit on the plug. Frederike trapped her farts in the plastic mug we kept our toothbrushes in, and we took turns in having a smell. Jane didn’t know what she was missing!

My friend also wet her flannel under the hot tap. Unhurriedly, she rubbed a bit of soap on it. Then she pulled down her pyjama bottoms and began washing her bum. It was one of those moments without an emergency exit, so I just copied her. The thing was, you never knew whether something was a rule only in one particular house, or something the whole world knew about except you. Perhaps everyone washed their bums at night-time, and it was just us who didn’t. Maybe it was one of the many things my mother scorned as ‘middle-class’.

I thought about the big daisy on my flannel, and wondered if it was going a bit brown.

My friend rolled up her flannel and threw it into a corner of the bathroom. I threw mine too, trying to aim it as close to hers as possible.

A sleepless night lay ahead for me and my freshly washed bum. I had no idea what time it was, nor if I was the only one in the house lying awake. The unbroken silence made me think I must be. I imagined everyone in a radius of a hundred kilometres fast asleep in bed, and what a gigantic pair of compasses you’d need to draw a circle like that. It was so quiet in the room that I snapped my fingers softly to check I hadn’t suddenly gone deaf. I’d never heard of such of a thing, but there were a lot of things people had never heard of, yet happened all the same. My ears still worked, which was reassuring, but it remained horribly quiet in that bedroom. It was one of those times when I felt sorry I didn’t believe in God anymore. It would have been a perfect moment for him to entrust me with a secret.

I’d worshipped God for a long time. At night, with my hands pressed together and an appropriate vocabulary. It was a strictly secret affair, because my mother only ever cursed the Creator. Partly to soften that, I’d become an ardent believer. I waited for him like you’d wait for a lover who was late, but who you knew for sure would turn up, was on his way. I thought up excuses for his absence. The bridge was open. The road was icy. He’d fallen asleep in the train and no one had had the kindness to tap him on the shoulder at his station.

My list of requests for God was lengthy. I asked him if he could make my mother’s hair long again – as long as on the day before her cousin Titi tackled it with the kitchen scissors. And whether he could possibly fix up a husband for her – one who stuck around, preferably with a steady job and

banknotes in his wallet. Most of my prayers were about my mother. Though I did once ask whether he couldn't make one of my sisters disappear, preferably in a way so as we didn't miss her. One less sister would mean more room in the house. Enough room for our elbows on the table, more room for our shoes on the rack, no more fights about a crookedly divided cake – because five was such an awkward number – and above all, a bigger chance I'd be heard when I tried to get a word in at mealtimes.

Despite my rich imaginings, God gave no sign of life. Nothing suddenly fell over by itself, my mother's hair stayed just as it was and, apart from the November gales whistling round our house, I heard no whisperings that could pass for a divine message. My mother was right, I realised: even the ultra-devout got fed up if they were never rewarded.

My friend's parents slept in the room below hers. On my way upstairs, I'd seen that their bed was a mess, the green quilt trampled on the carpet. Parents' bedrooms were holy places, but not half as exciting as the bottom drawer of a mother's dresser. Just by opening it, you could find out who she was under her clothes. My mother usually didn't wear a bra. Too much bother, she reckoned, just like hairclips and a husband for life and letters from school with bits you had to fill in.

There were shutters in front of my friend's bedroom window. That made it hard to know how much night there was still to go. On top of that her room seemed very short on breath; the air in it felt kind of second-hand.

I didn't dare leave the room, though, so I pictured what I'd do if I was downstairs, walking around the darkened lounge. I could eat the biscuits, the different brand ones. Or I could sit on the sofa and look at the lit-up greenhouses next door but one. The flowers were kept in the light day and night, my friend had told me, so that they'd never stop growing. Those poor flowers – they were being totally ripped off. It made me realise how lucky I was, actually, to be allowed something like nights – times when two things went away: light and people who could see you. Doubly invisible.

I also thought about the big brother's bedroom, but even in my fantasies I didn't dare knock on the door.

My eyes began to get used to the dark. On the wall there was a World Wildlife Fund poster of an animal that was nearly the last of its species. The other side of the wall was where the neighbours' house started. What rules did they have there? Were they underpant sleepers? And when it came to spaghetti sauce, how did they stand on sweetcorn?

My friend slept soundlessly, as if she was tiptoeing through her dreams. I'd have preferred her to stay over at my house. Our house smelt of old vases, because my mother found dead flowers more interesting than fresh ones. She only got really keen on them when they began to droop, fade and shed petals on the table. My mother didn't see washed bums as a priority, and she'd have loved it if someone had stuck a bottle label on her. She'd have thrown herself down on the floor, giggling delightedly, and told me and my sisters to cover her with labels from head to toe. 'Your life is an artwork, girls,' was one of her terrible sayings. Almost as bad as: 'You're my favourite daughter.' At first, those words had made me feel so warm inside that even my earlobes throbbed. But that warm feeling soon cooled when I heard her say the same thing to Jane a few days later. My sister was ill in bed with flu, and my mother came to take her temperature in the middle of the night. Holding the thermometer under her armpit, she stroked her eldest child's damp forehead. My mother must've thought I was asleep but – rather like my teacher Rita, who had eyes on her back – I had eyes that could see in the dark. I studied her whispering lips and could read what they said quite clearly: 'My favourite child.' Only three little words, said in an instant, but they amounted to high treason.

When my mother left, forgetting to leave the door ajar, it dawned on me in the pitch blackness that she might say it to the other two as well. Did she call us all her favourite? In that case, all four of

us were her favourite child, which also meant that none of us were. A missed opportunity. You might as well chuck all your scratch cards in the bin without scratching them.

How could I know what kind of artwork I wanted to be? Luckily my mother had a list of extra questions to get me on the right track. 'What sort of museum do you want to hang in, Tonia?' 'Between which other artworks?' She could go on interminably. Did I want museum visitors to think I was beautiful or was it more important that they were shaken up? Was there a story I wanted to tell? Did I want to reveal all, or would I rather keep something back?

Frankly, what I really wanted was to be ordinary, unremarkable, the colour of paving stones, so people would just walk over me without having an opinion about me. But I knew that wouldn't satisfy my mother. She expected something big from us. Something with at least six dimensions, unexpected angles and surprise effects. Something as all-consuming as the love she'd felt for two of our three fathers.

After two successful gambles, she'd staked her heart a third time and lost. A blunder from which I was born.

Even if you had your head in your hands, my mother could read your thoughts.

'You're fretting about something, aren't you?' Her questions set off tears. Even quite ordinary questions like: 'Don't you like the vegetable quiche?'

'I'm not an artwork!'

'No of course not,' she would say soothingly, with her kind, husky voice. 'You're only a plan, a rough draft. You're just sketching the outlines.'

I began to get the picture: I'd sketched the outlines all wrong because I didn't have the talent for it, or the slightest ambition. Because above all, I wanted to be a paving stone.

Each of my sisters had a body part they could impress with. Jane had to wait a long time for her breasts, but once they arrived they looked perfect, with brown nipples you could fit thimbles on.

She kept her bras in a drawer that stuck, lots of different kinds: transparent ones made of gauzy material, old-fashioned white cotton ones, a brightly flowered one, a green lace one, a pre-shaped one of synthetic fabric. When she had a date with her boyfriend, I'd wait till I heard her bike wheel clatter off the pavement before snooping around her drawer. After a while I knew her collection so well I could tell which bra she was wearing when she went off to see that boy with the pointy shoes.

It was intoxicating, all those candy colours, floaty fabrics and teeny hooks and clips, almost as thrilling as Frederike's diary, which was full of spelling mistakes, but so painfully honest that I wanted to black out some of the sentences to protect her from snoopers.

The reason my two older sisters had the same father was because my mother hadn't then yet realised that her heart shed its skin like a snake every three years. They didn't look at all alike though, and they had quite different characters, whereas Eliza and I could pass for real sisters with blood that was 100% identical, not just half. My mother always enjoyed it when someone picked us two as children of the same father. It made her feel she'd defied the laws of genetics.

Eliza's trump cards were exactly the things in which she most differed from me: her ability to charm people and her dirty-blonde locks. They always fell so perfectly. Even coming out of the sea after a swim they looked like they'd been draped over her shoulders by someone with a higher degree in hairdressing.

Besides attractive hair, Eliza was also lucky enough to have the nicest father. My mother clearly thought so too, because she always brightened up when I knocked on her bedroom door to say that 'Eliza's daddy' was on the phone. I avoided using his real name because it didn't suit him, and there was no need to keep rubbing people's noses in that fact. My name didn't suit me either. Antonia was a

name for girls with straight teeth and artistic ambitions. But there was no escaping a name, so whenever anyone called 'Antonia' I would respond obediently.

I thought Eliza a much better name. Under that flag I, too, might have become someone who laughed aloud when reading the cartoons in the school newspaper.

Eliza's father liked to chat to me on the phone. Each time he'd bombard me with questions. He'd want to know whether I was managing to put up with those three annoying sisters. Whether my mother still had such a beautiful body. How the swimming lessons were going. 'Hunky lifeguard, *Antoniaatje*?' And whether I'd yet mastered the backward humpback crawl. You never really knew if he meant what he was saying, or whether he was joking. He appealed to me the same way God appealed to me.

My heart went into a higher gear whenever I heard his voice. It was unforgivable that my mother hadn't stuck it out with him a bit longer. Especially when I heard her hiccupping with laughter on the phone to him, lying on her stomach on the bed. My mother always got at least ten questions fired at her, and the answers were never 'yes', 'no' or 'all right' – the responses I usually resorted to.

It was simple: if my mother had stayed with him for another four years after Eliza was born, I'd have been his child. Sadly, I knew enough about biology to know that in that case I'd have been a different child, the result of another incalculably vast coincidence. Perhaps I'd have been someone who really couldn't appreciate his jokes. Or one of those kids with perforated eardrums who weren't allowed swimming lessons.

Being a child of Eliza's father was the nicest imaginable version of my life, but I could never build this castle in the air without feeling guilty towards my real father. Despite the fact I couldn't picture him at all. I couldn't even fall back on photos, because my mother had burnt them all, together with her cousin Titi. It was a story they loved to tell. They'd collected all the stuff my father had left behind, dumped it in a wheelbarrow and wheeled it to a nearby nature reserve. On a patch of land next to the lake they'd built a little tepee out of dried reeds, on top of which they'd placed my father's letters and photos. It only took a single match, the fire took hold with amazing speed. The corners of the photos began to curl, my father's face swelled up, changed colour and evaporated in a puff of poisonous gas.

It had been a hot summer. For weeks the parched grass had thirsted for rain; it was so dry it crackled when you walked on it.

One tiny puff of wind was enough to show my mother and her cousin Titi how fast a piddling little flame could turn into a carpet of fire. For a second they'd stood there rooted to the spot, the blaze reflected in their eyes, but then they'd sprinted to the lake. Water was what they needed, water, water, water. There was a whole lake full of the stuff, but they didn't know how to get it to the fire. My mother claimed it was she who came up with the brilliant idea. She ripped off her long cotton dress and plunged it into the water. Titi immediately got it and did the same.

Whirling their soaked dresses around, they fought the flames. Working from opposite sides of the inferno, they thwacked the life out of the fire. Their breasts flapped from side to side. Their cheeks grew flushed and their eyes watered from the intense heat – also because they realised there were so many other things they'd like to beat the hell out of with a wet dress.

It was one of my favourite stories: how the ritual farewell to my father had nearly set acres and acres of a nature reserve ablaze.