

The Melting

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p 22-25

Four shadows

There were three of us but we had four shadows. Jolan, my older brother, would have been one of a pair of healthy twins if his umbilical cord hadn't got wrapped around his sister's neck.

Endless photos were taken of their birth in '85 – four weeks premature – and stuck into an album with double-sided tape. Below was the date, the precise time, names of unknown uncles, notes of big dreams – achievable because in part they never needed to come true.

Jolan de Wolf and Tes de Wolf. On the card announcing their birth there was a small cross next to the second name, saving on a death notice.

Around the time Jolan was allowed out of the incubator – or so my father exaggerated – I was born.

That happened in about the middle of '88, at midnight. I was a girl. My name was Eva. I too arrived alone. Father had just gone out for a smoke.

Compared to Jolan's tiny, underdeveloped body, I was more robust from the start. Of my first year of life no more than fifty photos were taken. None of those snapshots had the time written next to them. No unknown uncles and aunts came to visit.

'Elephant paws,' my father wrote under the picture in which I'm using a potty for the first time. From the other notes I thought I could deduce they'd been written only later, since they mentioned something temporary or included an evaluation of how things stood. 'Eva, still with snow-white hair'. Or: 'January, when she could still laugh.'

Three years later, in '91, Tesje followed. Father took only a handful of photos of her and they didn't even get put in an album. Tesje was smaller and more fragile than us from an early age. She had thin skin that was shot through with veins, and fine blonde hair.

'What do you expect? After two children there wasn't enough material left over for her,' father joked, according to mother, at the bedside. Perhaps he said it out of pride, maybe he was overcome with emotion. Still, to the nurses it must have sounded like an apology, the way women apologize for a meal that is not a complete success.

'That's just what my father used to say, goddammit. Incidentally, you have four children, not three,' mum said. From the way she sometimes started talking about that again, quoting the 'goddammit', I knew here was where it started. This was her primal reproach.

The name was chosen only after a long argument. Mum wanted 'Tesje', my father wanted a different name, preferably 'Lotte', at a pinch 'Lotje'. But eventually, perhaps trying to make amends for something, he resigned himself to mum's proposal. Tesje became a homage.

When she was two she was given the nickname Kakkernestje – the ‘t’ was not pronounced. *Kakkernest* was a pet name for the youngest in a family, a word my mother had brought with her from the region of Belgium where she grew up, from a household with a tyrannical father in which she was the oldest. Since *kakken* means ‘to shit’, the word had something tragic about it, making you think of guinea pigs who shit on one side of their cage and sleep on the other. We knew well enough that the nickname wasn’t inspired by nostalgia but by regret over the choice of Tesje’s name, which mother didn’t want to admit to father. Yet we all used it: language was the only thing from my mother’s childhood that she referred to with pride.

Because of Tesje’s arrival I found myself in the middle position in the family, the one who in the forming of fronts could always go either way, depending on whether I wanted to form a coalition or an opposition.

Even before Jolan was born, my mother and father moved from a larger village nearby to a three-bedroom house in Bovenmeer.

Bovenmeer was one of those small places where to maintain a balance between supply and demand there could only be one of everything, or none: a corner shop, a hairdresser’s, a baker’s, a butcher’s, no bicycle shop, a library that you could read at one sitting, a primary school.

For years we talked of all the things to be found in the village as ‘the’, as if they were our possessions, to be held between thumb and forefinger. As if after a long war with big cities and surrounding villages we had got our hands on the prototypes of a corner shop and a butcher’s and then firmly anchored them in the vicinity of the church and the parish hall, at walking distance from just about everything, within everyone’s reach.

Shopkeepers played along. Out of laziness or arrogance they made no effort to think up names any more original than The Butcher’s or The Corner Shop, other than very occasionally, as a caption, their own surname.

Bovenmeer did make a few exceptions. We had two bars. Often men would walk out of De Nacht only to hesitate for a moment, pulling themselves upright against the door frame, before making for Het Welkom, where they still pulled beers in the first, early hours.

There were frequently occurring names: Tim, Jan and Ann. Both Pim and Laurens had a brother called Jan, although in the winter of 2001 a difference arose in the way in which they had them: Laurens still had a brother; Pim had only had a brother.

There was an empty chicken shed everyone called Kosovo. It was halfway between Het Welkom and the parish hall. For months a family of Albanian refugees lived in it. After they were deported, various clubs stored their junk there.

For a long time it was unclear to me what mother and father were hoping to find in Bovenmeer, whether they had ever believed they could cope in a village where parish festivals were organized every year, where no one was surprised when somebody was sent off to Kosovo for a pack of paper napkins.

10.00 o'clock

Nine years ago, when I came to live in Brussels, all middle-aged Arabs looked the same. Today, on this highway that leads to the village where I grew up, every white man at the wheel looks like my father.

I didn't necessarily want to live in the capital city, I just wanted to live in a town that I didn't know. Because in all the places I'd often been to I was bothered by the same abnormality: continually seeing myself from above. Shopping centres, department stores, libraries – in a bird's-eye view they were all similar spaces in which I, the chestnut-brown crown, scraped past thousands of individuals without touching them.

In the end, after my arrival in the city I began studying architecture, precisely so as to use as a strength what I'd experienced as a weakness. I went to live with girls only, in a student house. There was a communal kitchen and the bathroom was shared too. For the first few months it went well. Every Tuesday I cooked pasta for everyone. We didn't tell each other where we were from, which high schools we'd been to, what jobs our parents did. That wasn't relevant. What mattered was that we were there, together, around one table, the corners of our mouths covered in pesto.

I didn't miss a single hour of tuition and almost always went straight home after the final class. When my flatmates left for their parental homes with their dirty washing at weekends, I carried on studying and cleaned the communal rooms. I got the best marks, had the impression that with every design, with every scale model, I was making something possible.

But that changed. There were fewer and fewer guests on Tuesdays. People stayed away without excusing themselves in advance. They preferred to be with friends who were taking the same course – medicine, law, media studies. They went to bars, to the Fuse. I realized that we'd done so little to sound out each other's backgrounds at the beginning not because we wanted to give each other a chance to start with a clean slate but because it simply hadn't been worth the trouble. Our contact had served merely to bridge an interim period.

I cut more and more card to form partitions, worked out plans, studied materials, but could no longer see what I was making possible, only what I was making impossible by casting it into a definitive shape.

The only thing that gave me any pleasure at the end of that university year was searching the internet for miniature figures to put in my scale models. I looked for silhouettes in various stances: walking, sitting, swimming, jumping, chatting, stooping, cycling. Trees, planes, bikes, steps, chairs, umbrellas, Christmas trees: it wasn't cheap; I spent a good proportion of my scholarship money on it. Some figures reminded me of Tesje or Jolan. I didn't put those in my designs but on my bedside cabinet.

When my scale-models were standing in the main hall among other people's, that was what marked them out: the abundance of grouped mini-people.

Only when I heard a lecturer remark on them to another lecturer in the second year did I see what they meant and why no one would ever ask me to go with them to the Fuse. Nevertheless it was several weeks before I stopped cleaning the communal rooms of the house and another three months before I moved out.

In Brussels it was less cold than here. The rain there was fine and airy, stopping a few centimetres short of the ground to form dense, low-hanging fog. Here the wide landscapes are free of mist and it's almost freezing.

I haven't brought with me a single anecdote about Jan, nor have I sent Pim a photo, or

posted anything on the Facebook page, although I probably knew him better than all the others put together. They'll all trot out the same old clichés: that he was just a little too late to be a Christmas baby. That he was left-handed and extremely shy, and got on well with cows.

Long ago, when Jan was still alive, he and Pim used to be given disposal cameras by their mother every summer. At the beginning of autumn the pictures came back from the photo shop, both reels printed in duplicate. Then the ritual followed, the claiming of memories. Pim spread the whole lot out on the kitchen table, we poured glasses of River Cola and ate Sour Fruit Belts. Pim's mother paid for everything, so her son got a copy of every photo and Laurens and I had to share out the duplicates. We took turns choosing. There were only ever a few photos of all three of us – those will have been taken by chance passers-by or Pim's parents.

At first we fought over the group photos, but the older we got the more value was attached to the photos that showed us looking good. When I took one of the successful pictures of Laurens I could tell from his hunched shoulders that he wasn't pleased.

Among the spread on the kitchen table were always a few photos of summer days when we were not at the farm, that showed only Jan, for example, holding a broom or a rake, or a badly framed photo of Pim and Jan together, holding the camera out in front of them, or a shot of Pim, Jan and their mother on a rare outing to Planckendaal.

Laurens and I ignored those photos. Laurens wanted nothing to do with them and I was afraid I had no right to have one.

After Jan's accident Pim's mother didn't buy any more cameras. I saw from her way of looking that she expected Jan to come back, to walk into the farmyard and start sweeping out the stalls the way he did every morning. That was why nothing was to be photographed until he came back. Otherwise the prints, representations of the time in which he was briefly dead, would in retrospect be wrong.

At the end of the first summer holiday that I spent in the empty student house in Brussels, I regretted most of all that there were no snapshots laid out on a table any longer. I understood that once you start going around on your own, fewer usable moments are left.

8 July 2002

'Are you going to ask if we can set up the swimming pool? You have to want it too, then there's more chance we'll be allowed,' says Tesje. There's a scar around her lips. Actually her mouth is the scar. At the age of three, it was a warm summer evening, she tried to catch up with Jolan and me on her tricycle. She raced along the Bulksteeg after our bikes, wearing only a swimming costume. A stone got into her front wheel, which jammed. She flew over the handlebars and broke her fall with her face. Her lips served as brake blocks. They dangled from her face by a single thread.

As is always said with hindsight about this sort of thing, as if there are moments in which calamities are more convenient, mum and dad were on the point of going out. They were wearing new clothes. Anne, the babysitter, had not yet arrived. Our neighbour, Anne's father, brought Tesje home with a tie knotted under her chin to hold everything in place.

Tesje's mouth was sewn back on in casualty. The plastic surgeon was about to go to a party himself – or so mum claimed – so he made a rushed job of it and the lower lip ended up crooked. The kind of crooked that you only see if you know about it.

Tesje sits upright, shakes the snow globe on her bedside table, then lies down again and waits for all the glitter in the globe to fall.

The snow globe is her snooze function. Every morning she rounds off her sleep with a fixed number of snowstorms.

I've been sitting in the pantry for an hour now, on the kitchen chair that mum most often sits on. To the right of my field of vision, at the end of the garden, Jolan is starting to dig up the turtle. It's cloudy but oppressively warm. I can tell from the beads of sweat on his back. He's wearing black jeans which, like father, he keeps in a separate pile in the cupboard for weekends. The big fluorescent work gloves give him a pale skin.

The turtle was buried three years ago in the winter, between the bicycle shed and the chicken coop, in the lap of the cherry tree. Father claimed it would become a beautiful skeleton, a 'collector's item', and on top he laid the leftover hollow bricks he'd once used to make a low wall in the bathroom. 'Now you have to wait six years before you dig it up again. The more often you ask about it, the longer it'll take.'

At first we looked in silence, longing for the point at which the worms and insects would have finished their appalling task. Grass grew back over the dug earth. Every time we passed the cherry tree we stopped for a moment at the brick under which the carcass was being gnawed away bit by bit.

But the longer we waited the more patience we had. In recent months I haven't thought once about the turtle rotting in the ground. Jolan probably hasn't either, until this morning. Where his sudden energy came from was difficult to explain. When I got up he already had father's work gloves on and the spade in his hand.

'You coming, Eva?' he said, excited. 'It's a perfect day for an excavation.'

He went into the kitchen for a moment, holding the spade, to butter some bread. He couldn't do that without taking his gloves off so he left it to Tesje. He went back out into the garden, trailing sand all through the house. Tesje hurried after him with the bread. She wanted very much to help him instead of me, but Jolan sent her away.

'Excavations aren't for girls!' he called out.

'Eva's a girl too, isn't she?'

To avoid having to answer, Jolan shoved all the bread into his mouth. Tesje simply started digging things up at random on the other side of the garden so that Jolan would have to share his

tools with her.

Now I'm watching them both like a hawk. They're having a digging race. Next to Jolan's hole a large pile of sand quickly forms. The handle of Tesje's spade is thicker than her wrists. She keeps digging in different places, leaving little molehills everywhere.

I could stand up, go into the garden to assist Jolan or help Tesje catch up. There's no one who would stop me. Yet it would be a waste to unearth a carcass without Laurens and Pim around, a wasted adventure.

I get to my feet, fetch a glass of water and sit down again.

This weariness goes deeper than ever. I no longer consist of one body but of a whole group of people, each hollowed out from a different side. And the table doesn't help. It attributes a greater purpose to this chair than merely sitting.

I could slide backwards, into the middle of the room, so that I'd no longer seem to need to take a decision about something. But you're allowed to sit on a chair in the middle of the room only when it's your birthday and everyone sings to you. I wish it was someone's birthday. I lay my arms on the tabletop in front of me.

From the living room comes the sound of a sigh. I can form a precise image to go with it. Mum is in the armchair and on the coffee table is the pear-shaped kitchen timer we bought her for her fortieth birthday.

Mum unwrapped the thing, put it in her hand and said indignantly, 'This is the kind of present they invented Mother's Day for.'

The timer is exclusively for personal use. She sets it to the maximum of 55 minutes, goes and lies in the chair, and every time she stands up halfway through the hour, to have a pee for example, she turns it back to the maximum. Only uninterrupted sleep counts.

Right in front of me on the patio, Nanook, our husky, is also asleep. Mum has tied the dog to one of the legs of the patio table by its lead. She's woven a web that she no longer knows how to untangle. She's lying with her head on her front legs. From time to time she lets out a sigh that makes the sand around her nostrils fly up.

Ever since someone in Jolan's class had stick insects to give away, we've also had pets that are allowed to stay in at night. The terrarium is in a corner of the living room. At first the little creatures didn't do too well but now that we've taken the insect zapper out of the room they're doing better.

The stick insects somehow make me think of my mother.

We don't cry at their deaths. Finding out one of them has died normally takes several days. You can only work backwards: rule out everything that indicates life until eventually only the opposite is left. Stick insects that die dry out. They don't become corpses but yellowish brown rolled-up leaves. As long as autumn comes slowly, no one makes a tragedy out of it.

I stand up and go out into the garden. With every step two knitting needles drill into my lower back. I go and sit on an upturned bucket not far from Jolan's archaeological site, in a place where I can't quite see over the edge of the hole. It's already deep, as demonstrated by the large pile of excavated sand.

'Eva, shortly, when the skeleton is exposed, I'm going to remove the sand with a paintbrush. Otherwise I'll damage it.'

Tesje comes over to sit with us too now. Above us the sky is darkening. The landscape is dry and thirsty. I watch the storm coming closer, first colluding in the distance until the clouds pack together into an upturned bruise: light grey, dark blue, in some places purple. We aren't far from the punch, the kick.

My underwear clings. I need to go to the toilet. Perhaps that's it. I get up to go indoors.

'Would you bring a plastic bag?' Jolan asks, without looking up. 'And a raincoat, one that can get dirty.' He tosses the spade aside and switches to the paintbrush.

Although there are no windows in the toilet, I can see the downpour begin outside. Even closed-off rooms change their atmosphere and colour. Thunder comes rolling in from far off and crashes through the house, right into the smallest corners.

I look at the blood. It's everywhere, in my pants, between my spread thighs, on the toilet seat.

My vagina is no longer a hole that leads nowhere, no longer a sewn-up breast pocket that turns out to be fake only after you've bought the shirt. I have a womb, I'm not different from the others, whatever Elisa may have said.

The toilet seat has grown warm under my buttocks. I can tell only from the cold places when I shuffle back and forth. I sit as still as possible. As soon as I sense my own body heat, the nausea comes on.

Someone walks down the hall. There's no door handle and no lock on the toilet door. There is a ventilation system that starts humming when the light is turned on, so everyone knows it's occupied.

'Who's on the toilet?' mum asks.

'I am,' I say.

'Who's I?'

'Eva.'

'Telephone for you.'

'I'm coming.'

'She's coming.'

I can hear Pim's voice blaring through the phone.

'Pim's asking whether you feel like coming for a swim.' says mother.

'Now?'

'Now?' mum repeats into the receiver.

I didn't know Pim had a swimming pool. It's pretty strange that someone who no longer has a brother suddenly has a swimming pool. An unfair exchange that nobody should be allowed to sign up for.

'Not now, tomorrow.'

Mum walks back off down the hall and closes the door to the living room. She fumbles the door handle. I can hear her muttering to herself. I just hope she's put the phone down first.

Pim has rung Laurens anyway. Maybe they're swimming now, without me. Nothing beats paddling during a thunderstorm, when tremors of thunder pass through the water. I ought to have picked up the phone myself, then perhaps I could have been there too.

Still, if I want to swim, I'll first need to learn how to insert a tampon.

After half an hour of wrenching and probing I go back into the kitchen. The tampon hurts and makes it hard to walk normally. I could point out on my lower stomach precisely how deep it's gone.

On the table is a shoebox without a lid. In the bottom is the stinking, sludgy carcass of a turtle, greedily gnawed away at. It's very much like stewing beef. The shell sits lopsidedly on the remaining bones. If it were a meal, mother would put it back on our plates and say, 'This still needs working on.' Next to the box is a bottle of glasses cleanser with a pile of cotton buds. On an opened newspaper are two cleaned legs. I can tell which leg was cleaned by Tesje and which by Jolan.

The garden is empty, the piles of sand have turned into mud and shrunk in volume. It's still not dark. We didn't get around to Tesje's swimming pool, I realize now.

I have no idea where everyone has got to. I open all the windows in the house but the stench refuses to move.

Windows 95

Like those of everyone else in the village, our childhood can easily be divided into two periods: before and after Windows 95. For all the other families, that division took place in '95 itself and was marked by the sudden, eager use of English words.

Games. Points. Levels. Winner.

Everyone did their best. But it struck only Jolan and me that those round sounds could never fit in sharp mouths deformed by dialect. We were practically the only people in Bovenmeer who had neither a television nor Windows and still called Cornflakes 'breakfast cereals', or Kwakies, after the ALDI home brand.

The true divergence took place in our family a few years later and it didn't coincide with the rise of Windows but with the start of Tesje's strange behaviour, which in turn coincided with the introduction of an operating system.

In '97, a few days after Laurens first played Tomb Raider all the way to the end, lost track of time and rang me on the landline to tell me he'd won, at an hour that was really reserved for grandparents' heart attacks, father decided it was high time we too joined the computer age.

Tesje was already asleep. I wasn't. I was doing what I had to do: being a lighthouse, but without a light. From my high bed I registered every sound, not daring to stop for fear I really did have a crucial function and that everything would go haywire, father would never come home again.

After a few minutes there were noises in the hall. Someone came upstairs with their shoes on. It was a tread I didn't recognize, resolute and quick. The footsteps reached the top stair, the one that creaked.

Cardboard had once been laid both on the landing and on the stairs, cut to fit into the tiniest corners and fixed down with paper tape. Under the cardboard was a light parquet floor and an oak staircase. The wood had been wrapped for so long that it might as well not have been there. Every morning we walked over the grain that my mother and father had wanted to keep intact. It ought to have been reassuring – something was not being worn out – but the longer I thought about it the more ludicrous it became: this parquet floor was being preserved for another, more important life.

The landing light came on. I turned over, my back to the bedroom door. The door opened and the light was sharply outlined on my pillow, cutting my head in half across my temples. I let my mouth fall open a little, shut my eyes, didn't react to my name. Yet I was roused out of bed all the same. That was the function of high-sleeper beds: to lay children at eye level, reducing the objection to waking them at impossible times in the night.

I walked down the stairs after my father. His head dropped about fifteen centimetres with every step.

I thought about the night when father came to get me out of bed because mother had said she was going to 'end it all'. Quite what exactly – herself, their relationship or the cherries that were waiting to be made into jam – was probably not clear to father either. Yet in the depths of the night we removed everything from the house that might help her to do it.

We had to be on the safe side.

'Believe me, for anyone who really wants to end it all, and has enough imagination, even a garlic press is dangerous,' he said.

We collected everything in a large cardboard box: pairs of compasses, sharp cutlery, tooth picks, fountain pens. The next morning my mother found the house virtually picked clean, the medicine cabinet stripped bare aside from a box of waterproof plasters and a small, blunt pair of scissors. For three days we ate with spoons and forks. We could no longer cut any paper.

Looking back I was even more worried about whether, if she hadn't wanted to die, we might have talked her into needing to do it by emptying the cutlery drawers.

After the arrival of Windows 95 it took a little while to agree on who could use the computer when. Jolan decided that each of us could play for an hour every evening, in the reverse order to how we were born. As long as they didn't mind, we could look over someone else's shoulder.

Jolan and I discovered the folder 'fun stuff' on the desk top, which had two video clips in it: Weezer's 'Buddy Holly' and 'Good Times' by Edie Brickell. We played those clips over and over – never before had we been so close to having a television with MTV. 'Good Times' became the soundtrack of '97.

As soon as we'd had enough of those, each of us chose a speciality. I started off by making pictures in Paint, every one of which was a failure – the stiff mouse was difficult to manoeuvre; Jolan concentrated on Hover!, smashing flags into pixelated backgrounds while a compass in his dashboard moved along with him rather randomly; Tesje was only six and she became devoted to staring at screensavers. She liked Starfield best of all. She asked me to set it to the maximum number of stars and the minimum speed and then spent hours travelling through time. The stylish chair, upholstered with woven reed, made long space travel easily visible: it left a pattern of red grids in the skin of Tesje's bottom.

It was only a few months later, when Tesje was seven and was getting good at playing Minesweeper, that I started to notice her strange behaviour. Every time a bomb went off under her mouse click she had to win a game twice.

Sometimes I found her crying when I came to take her place before she'd managed to clear the minefield often enough. As long as the number of explosions was greater than the number of defusions it had all been for nothing. Often I gave up my computer hour and sat down next to her to listen to her nervous mouse-clicking. Perhaps it was there, face to face with the controlled urge causing havoc inside her, that my love for her grew deeper.