

My Fellow Skin

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An extract

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Part I

Chapter I

It was in the days before I had learned to talk properly. Hardly anything had a name, everything was body. Standing in front of the mirror my father drew the razor blade over his cheeks, stretched his neck and gently scraped the foam from his Adam's apple. From under his lashes he eyed his face narrowly, the curve of upper lip, the lower lip, the chin.

His dressing gown hung loosely over his shoulders. Behind him, in the tub, I was rocking in the waves he had made getting out of the bath, pulling the water with him. The solemn silence between him and his reflection gave everything an extraordinary clarity. I can still see, as sharply as I did then, the wet hairs bunching on his shins. In the mirror, above the slumbering sex and milk-white stomach, a track of curly hair rose from his navel to fan out on the shallows of his chest, where I could see his heart beating.

He had run the bath until it was half full. He had strewn soapflakes in the water and had rinsed the bitterness from my eyes when he washed my hair.

Clean-shaven now, he scooped water over his cheeks, turned to face me and held out his arms.

'Come on, arms up now,' he said.

I lolled weightless in his hands. I shook in all my joints as he dabbed at my ears with a clean towel and rubbed my skull dry. I clung to his calves.

Sitting wide-legged on the lowered lavatory seat he waited for me to steady myself, took my hands in his and ran the back of his thumb across my nails.

'Let's check,' he said, 'see if all ten of them are still there.' And if there was any dirt left underneath.

Finally he dressed me in my bathrobe and opened the door to let me out.

I stepped out of the bathroom like a prince, into the dusky corridor. Ahead of me, past doors behind which drowsed rooms, the corridor tunnelled through the house. Some rooms were familiar, others not. To the left was the door to the cellar, behind which descended a flight of brick steps, damp and glistening with salt crystals. To the right was the play-room with the building bricks and the dolls I never trusted because they always remained sitting down, even when I wasn't looking.

There were so many things waiting to be baptized. Anything without a word to it was too pagan and savage to be left alone. I had to lay my finger on everything within reach.

I could smell the kitchen, a whiff of drains and of hams in gingham sacks hanging from hooks on the rafters.

Someone called my name. A hand detached itself from the shadows by the chimney piece and lightly brushed my cheek, but I did not stop. From the far side of the stove I heard the pious creak of a wicker chair. Next thing I knew, my ear was given a playful tweak.

My mother busied herself taking plates from the cupboard and demonstratively banging them down on the table.

'Anton,' she cried. 'Anton, little man. Dancing about in your bare feet like that - you'll fetch up with a tummy ache.'

I took no notice. It was a time for cutting cords and chasing hens in the yard, even though that wasn't allowed.

In the recesses of the house, where the corridor forked in two and the light was rarely switched on, I felt a stab of fear. This place, inhabited by aunts and cousins in summer but deserted and soulless when they were gone, was home to the awesome grandfather clock. Its slow beat always seemed to be out to get me as I approached, but when I tiptoed past, it just went on ticking quite harmlessly. Now the clock was silent. My father had stopped it, so no one would be disturbed by the quarter-hourly chimes it sent ringing through the rooms.

He knew what was best for everyone in the house. He knew who wouldn't mind the morning sunlight and who was more partial to the west-facing rooms with the rambler rose outside the window, scenting the air after every shower as if death were at its heels. Come the lazy nights of August with the occasional thunderstorm, I would hear him get up to rescue cousin Flora from the cellar, where he would find her cowering in the space between the freezer and the bottle racks with an upturned saucepan on her head. He would unclench the rosary from her fingers, lift the saucepan off her hair, put his arms around her and say: 'It's not the Germans, Flora. Just a bit of thunder.'

The things that scared me were not yet inside me, but around me. I searched out my fears to check if they were still there. To make sure they hadn't taken it into their heads to abscond to other places, the better to pounce on me where and when I least expected. I checked for new shapes in the gloom under the stairs, where the now silenced clock filled the air with mute indignation. A door opened a little way and something with worn-down claws padded down the floorboards

towards me, wagging its tail. A moist nose snuffling my toes made me cry out in fearful delight. Not until I cried out again did the hoped-for response come.

'Hear that?' a voice boomed from one of the rooms. 'Our little man. Over here, lad. Let's have a look at you.'

The soft cooing of amused aunts guided me to the right door.

The three of them were sitting at the round table, drinking genever. There was Michel, who lived with us summer and winter in two separate rooms, enveloped in clouds of snuff and the stale smell of Molly his dog. Next to him sat Odette, a gawky creature with long arms like a praying mantis. At the other side of the table Alice, red-haired and flushed, offered me her unconscionably soft cheek to kiss.

'He's a fine mountaineer already,' said Michel, slapping his thighs invitingly. 'Watch this.'

I planted my feet on top of his, gripped his knees with my hands and walked up his shins.

'Up you go, up you go,' chanted the Aunts.

Once at the summit I slid onto his lap. My fingers groped their way up his shirt, button after button, until they reached his chin. Bare skin at last. Stubble. Papery wrinkles. Chapped lips.

He leaned over me to reach for his drink, raised the glass to his lips, took a leisurely gulp and replaced it on the table, out of harm's way.

I put my hands up to his cheeks and smacked them in protest.

'You can't have any of that,' the Aunts said, laughing. 'Far too strong. You'd mess your pants.'

He pulled faces and gave me broad winks, stuck out his tongue and wagged his head from side to side. 'You can't hurt me. You're too little. It's milk you should be drinking. Milk and nothing else.'

I can still feel the palm of his hand against the back of my head, his thumb rubbing the hair in my neck the wrong way.

He was about to say something. I saw him swallow and press his lips together, then open his mouth so that his back teeth showed, but there was no sound.

He nodded and nodded, and I nodded along with him. 'Ullo,' I cried. 'Ullo, 'ullo, 'ullo.'

I could hear his breath rasping against the roof of his mouth, and deeper down, struggling in his voice box to drag the words from his stomach, as though he had to forcibly expel them from his spasming midriff.

Suddenly my pleasure capsized and I was gripped by a fathomless fear, no doubt because of the Aunts' shrieks of horror. Everything went dark.

Someone, perhaps my father, snatched me from his lap. Someone else, probably my mother, must have called the doctor.

He had fallen sideways to the floor. Hands flew to mop his brow, straighten his legs and slip a cushion under him, to pull off the slippers, then the socks, and to massage the soles of his feet, which already felt cold.

My mother took me to the kitchen and plied me with milk and chocolate, with crayons and pictures, to distract me from the commotion in the corridor, where someone hurried to answer the doorbell.

A moment later my father came to the kitchen. With his hand on the doorknob and half of him hidden behind the door, it was as though he didn't want me to see him. He glanced at my mother, shaking his head.

From elsewhere in the house came the sound of low-voiced lamentations. Curtains were drawn. Shutters creaked in their hinges. Our house, Callewijns Hof, at the foot of the dyke along the canal to Bruges, inhabited by us for generations, altered and extended and renovated, had preserved all manner of latches and locks from the past, and now proceeded to shut itself off from the outside world with every one of them.

My mother rose, ran my sticky fingers under the pump and dried them.

'Say night night, sleep tight.' And she scooped me up onto her arm.

In the parlour the Aunts were settled on the sofa like huge black flies, dabbing at their eyes with fluttery lace-edged handkerchiefs as flimsy as the grief choking their muted voices.

My father was hunched in a corner half hidden by the heavy blinds, clutching a huge square of checked cloth in his fists. Compared to the trickle of sorrow shown by his sisters and cousins the grief deep inside my father was a vast reservoir, swelling and swelling until the dam burst and it all poured out.

My mother carried me around the room, pausing in front of each mourner. Some were strangers, spectral figures holding their caps on their knees and keeping an unaccustomed silence, fumbling with trouser legs or whispering uneasy my-oh-mys. Oh my.

My father smiled bravely when I pressed my lips to his, and thumbed a sign of the cross on my forehead. The Aunts quickly tucked their hankies in their sleeves, took my face in both hands and offered me their cheeks. There was another ring at the door, and my mother said, 'Come, time for bed. Upstairs with you.'

She chivvied me up the stairs more hurriedly than usual, wormed my arms into the sleeves of my night shirt as if she were dressing a rag doll, and then tucked me up in bed without giving me a chance to say goodnight to my bears.

The whole regiment of bears sat on the shelf fixed to the wall facing my cot, motionless and adoring, their glass eyes staring and glinting in the glow coming up from a street light.

I was given a hasty goodnight kiss. Left and right of me my mother raised the collapsible sides of the cot. I was in a cage. The net curtains swayed to and fro in front of the screened window, and in the dying light a lost butterfly whirred helplessly against the pane.

Until now the days had billowed around me beatifically, and I would seize upon what they had to offer as if I were ferreting for hidden goodies in the Aunts' skirts on birthdays. The hours were puppet shows. They would open on demand to reveal the same familiar scenes again and again. The bits and pieces always waited patiently for me to notice them and acknowledge their existence by giving them names.

But now all sorts of things were going on behind my back. The usual sounds of the night unfurling its landscape, like the lowing of cows on heat, the barking of dogs, the fatherly throb of a barge on the canal beyond the garden wall, were drowned out by footsteps on the cobbles in the front yard.

The wrought iron gate in the archway was given a cautious push, which made it squeal even louder than usual. I could hear wheels rumbling over the cobbles and then the soft purr of an engine, at which moment a beam of surprisingly brilliant light swept across my room, covering my walls with a shifting trellis of leaves and branches.

Car doors were wrenched open, then slammed shut. The light beam went out. Lips smacked against cheeks. More footsteps, this time on the front doorstep with its little pitched roof. I recognised my father's bass voice, and the high-pitched, plaintive tones of my mother. I couldn't tell whether she was laughing or crying.

She was sure to be standing in the doorway, rubbing her hands over her arms, even though it was summer and by no means chilly.

The boot of a vehicle was opened and then closed with a dull thud. Meanwhile someone was hopping lightly down the corridor, singing jauntily: 'Down in the hole... down in the hole.' The singing stopped suddenly when the umbrella stand fell over with a deafening clatter.

A woman's voice, which I did not recognise, called out in suppressed anger: 'Shsh, Anton's already asleep.'

The stairwell filled up with the hollow echo of all the voices at once. My father shut the front door, I could tell by the scrape of wood across the tiled floor. Once the tumult subsided the voices coming up through the floorboards sounded muffled.

I was wide awake. The idea that things could go on being exactly the same as they were in the dark, despite having their distinctive shapes and features blotted out, gave me a strange sense of restlessness.

Whenever I turned over on my side or on my back, making my sheets rustle and the bars of my cot rattle, I could hear the sound hitting the walls and bouncing back to me.

Later, when my father slipped into my bedroom to see if I was all right, it was as though the room and everything in it, including myself, took a deep breath. He was surprised to find me wide awake, crawling out from the covers to greet him.

He lowered the side of the cot, sat down on the edge of the mattress and enfolded me in his arms.

I put my hands on his wrists and looked up. The stubble on the underside of his chin felt prickly through my hair.

It must have been very late, later than ever before. It was the dead of night, and I'd have been unconsciously floating off toward morning had not the natural order of things been disturbed, leaving us stranded. He did not tell me a story. He did not wind up the music box on the bedside table and talk to me until the tune started. He did not speak at all, just held me close to his chest.

Outside, on the landing, the stairs groaned under the weight of some bulky object being hauled up tread by tread.

'Over here,' I heard my mother say in a low voice, and again I could make out the sound of someone hopping lightly down the corridor. The hopping came to a stop outside my bedroom, and the slit of light under the door was interrupted by a patch of dark, which cast a long shadow across my floor. The same song was being sung, in the same whiney voice as before, but softer now: 'Down in the hole, down in the hole.' Then it tailed off.

'Night night,' my father said, lifting me up on his arm so that I might stroke each of my bears in turn. Furry ears, dry snouts against the palm of my hand, and the cool glass of their staring eyes.

'Night night,' I said imperiously, as though everything were still at my command.

My father pulled up the covers and tucked the blanket loosely under the mattress. He gave my fingers a joky nibble when I touched his lips in the dark. I laughed out loud. He shut the door gently behind him.

I gripped the sheet with both fists and drew it up around my chin. I stretched out comfortably. Calm had been restored at last. Even the bears, content now they had received their due, would be smiling down at me from their shelf.

If I lay there long enough without moving a muscle or batting an eyelid, they'd think I was asleep and start talking to each other in the dark. They'd be shy at first, but soon they'd be chattering nineteen to the dozen.

I slipped my hands under my pillow. The world fell silent. My eyelids grew heavy. The only sound was the wind riffing the leafy crown of the beech tree. The night filled up with all the words I didn't know yet, with all the things that had yet to be touched to be realised.

I turned over and shut my eyes.

'Night, night,' I repeated, 'night, night.'

Chapter 2

The twitter of birds roused me from sleep. Bees buzzed around the creeper outside. In the afternoon warmth, shafts of the brightest light jetted in through the window, flooding the floor and making the dust float in the heat. Inside the room the floorboards began to expand around the nails securing them to the beams below. Next they would emit a persistent ticking or tapping, sometimes so vehemently that the filler burst out of the seams with a loud pop and the falling fragments danced over the grain.

A small, compact bundle in my sleepwear, I kicked impatiently against the bedclothes that granted me little freedom. When I tried spreading my legs, the sheet stretched taut like a sail between my ankles and hips.

'Get up!' I must have cried. Or maybe it was 'Pa-pa!'

The echo bouncing back from the walls sounded less hollow than usual, and it was then that I realized, with some alarm, that the door was ajar.

There was the scrape of a foot, a tightening of the covers.

I glimpsed a hand disappearing below the foot of my cot. Someone with designs on my bears had ducked away like a flash, and was now lurking behind my bed.

I stared hard at the foot of the bed, as if I would eventually be able to look over the edge and grab the intruder by the scruff of the neck.

We waited. Neither of us dared to move, afraid to make the slightest sound. I could hear his breathing and he could probably hear mine.

From outside came the sounds of early afternoon. I could hear someone tramping about in the yard with clanking pails and the chickens squabbling over the best scraps.

A jolt against the foot of the bed reminded me of the intruder. Perhaps he'd been crouching there the whole time, perhaps his muscles had gone all rigid and he'd toppled over.

From behind the foot of the bed rose a mop of tousled, chestnut hair, then eyebrows like brushes over dark brown eyes. Holding my gaze, without a hint of shame.

I screwed up my eyes in disbelief. No one ever came here except my father, my mother, and on very special occasions one of the Aunts. To pick me up or lay me down or pat me fondly. That was the only kind of stir there was supposed to be. Everything else was supposed to keep quite still, like my bears on the shelf.

When I opened my eyes again I saw him emerging from his hiding place behind the bed. His shirt hung out of his pants. The buckles of his sandals were undone and tinkled around his ankles. He advanced slowly, a sly grin on his face.

'In the hole, down in the hole!' he chanted under his breath.

From the corner of my eye I saw him going down on his knees beside me. The wooden bars rattled loudly when he shook them, and he gave a little laugh of grim amusement.

Then, after a few seconds' tingling silence, came the sound of his voice alarmingly close to my ear. 'Anton...' he said, and then, slowly and maliciously: 'An-ton-ne-ke' as if he took pride in knowing my pet-name and using it against me.

I averted my face crossly and fixed my eyes on the stains of long-evaporated rainwater beneath the window sill. Sometimes, in the evening twilight, the stains seemed to liquefy and turn into trolls or wizards. If only I could focus on other things for long enough, he would surely go away of his own accord.

Suddenly I felt three fingers trailing across my face, moving from the cheek to the mouth and up to the eyes. I curled my toes in response to the tickling sensation, blew hard against his hand and twisted my head from side to side.

His fingers closed round my nose like a vice.

My eyes filled with tears, and the pain shot all the way up to the roots of my hair. He dragged me upright. I did not resist. My panting breath moistened his wrist. I struggled with both hands to push him away, but he did not loosen his grip, seemingly determined to unscrew my nose from my face.

I didn't want to plead for mercy, I didn't want to cry out, but his fingers dug deeper and deeper into my flesh. I felt sick from the pain. My midriff tensed, my lungs filled up almost to bursting, but when my mouth opened wide to scream, a woman's voice, the same as the night before, seemed to be doing it for me.

'Roland,' she yelled, 'Roland, boy... where are you?'

He let go of me at once. My head fell back on the pillow with a jolt.

I heard him stomp across the floor out of the room. The door shuddered in its hinges.

My muscles relaxed, my breathing recovered its familiar rhythm and I rubbed the moisture from my eyes. Elsewhere in the house a tap was opened, pipes murmured. Somewhere water splashed in a basin.

Roland. When my mother took me downstairs he was nowhere to be seen, but there were two unoccupied chairs at the other end of the table, gaping at me menacingly.

It was still dark in the house, and no one spoke. The Aunts clasped their cups with both hands and drank in silence, pausing briefly between sips to stare blankly into the distance. A thin, strangely cold light entered the room through the crack under the roller blind, making the Aunts' black hairpins stand out from the surrounding gloom.

Everything seemed to be late. The coolness of the shuttered rooms downstairs had robbed the hours of their soul. Outside, the back yard would be blazing in the heat of mid-afternoon, while

inside a morning atmosphere still reigned. There was the usual bustle to prepare for a new day, even though the day was half gone already.

Michel was missing. He ought to have been right next to me at the corner of the table with his walking stick propped against his thigh, feeding me my slice of bread, while I sat enthroned in my high chair with my own table-top and potty and the dog looking up at me longingly, whining softly and pawing the air.

My father was nowhere to be seen.

My mother stacked the dishes and carried them to the kitchen. The Aunts leaned back helpfully when she swept up the crumbs from the table with a small brush.

'Eat,' she snapped at me in passing. She pushed the bread into my hands.

I nibbled at it listlessly. Everything was eluding me. The table was already being cleared. Only at the far end, well beyond my reach, by the empty chairs, was anything left standing: milk and jam and sugar.

I heard feet stamping on the stairs, and again the voice of that woman.

'Come here, silly...'

Roland lurched unwillingly into the room at her hand. His hair had been combed flat over his skull and shone as if he'd been given a lick of varnish. The buckles of his sandals were fastened and his shirt was firmly stuffed into his trousers, which had been pulled up almost to his armpits. He resembled a wooden doll, only just come to life, with nothing but strife in mind.

'Sit down at table now. It's always the same with you,' his mother snapped while she turned an apologetic smile on the rest of us. She was just as coarsely shaped as her son. She exuded the same sort of menace, like the ominous grey of thunderclouds glowering behind a stand of trees.

I was glad to be sitting in my high chair, for the lofty protection it gave me. He would have to reach up on tiptoe to pinch me, or hoist himself onto the chair next to mine, but to my relief his mother sat down beside me.

'I've left you some cheese,' she said absently, 'and there's pear treacle, too.'

A cushion was stuffed under Roland's bottom and he eyed me triumphantly from the other side of the table as if it were his personal property. While his mother was busy buttering his bread, he lifted the lid of the sugar bowl a little way and let it drop with a loud clatter, again and again, with shorter and shorter intervals.

'Stop that, I tell you.' She snatched the lid from him and pushed the sugar bowl out of his reach.

He pouted sulkily and slumped back in his chair, ignoring his plate. Then he lunged forward to grab the milk jug, which he held at such a steep angle that the milk spilled from the lip onto the tablecloth.

'You wicked boy.' She gave him a smart rap on the knuckles.

He hit back immediately.

She was too astonished to speak. Her hand glanced off his temple. His head juddered sideways. He squirmed on his chair and started kicking the leg of the table non-stop.

The Aunts tried to take no notice. They emptied their cups and folded up their napkins. The only sign of annoyance as far as I could tell was Aunt Odette's eyebrow shooting up. She must have been seething with disapproval.

Unlike Flora and Alice, who were always telling me to be quiet and behave myself, and whose clip on the ear was more like a caress, Aunt Odette always bottled up her anger. When I was making a nuisance of myself and wouldn't listen, she would sometimes grab me by the back of the neck, sinking a fingernail into the skin like a sting. She never joined in with the 'carambas' of the others when I played bullfighter to my father's bull, and chivalrously dropped to my knees after the coup de grace to hug him and staunch his wounds.

She always sipped her drink, never gulped it down. In the evening she would sit on the bench under the rose bush with her eyes closed, soaking up the light of the setting sun, as if she possessed no warmth of her own and had to seek it elsewhere.

On my wanderings through the house I sometimes came upon her unexpectedly in the environs of the cellar or in the larder, where sausages and rashers were kept on the highest shelves, well out of my reach. Why she furtively scooped spoonfuls of butter, or trickled coffee beans into a box with deft, practised fingers, was a mystery to me. She counted the number of scoops, and listened attentively to the beans hitting the bottom of the box as if they were just as valuable as the coins in her soft leather purse, which I was permitted to hold occasionally, but never to open.

I was equally mystified as to why, back in her room, she stored away her prizes, adding butter to butter and coffee to coffee or pouring sugar from a scrap of paper twisted into a cone on top of the sugar she already possessed.

It was as though she could not abide depletion of any kind. The drawers of her wardrobe exuded a permanent aroma of roasted coffee beans, crystallised fruits, and chocolate. The smoky scent of sliced ham suggested a state of chronic abundance that would never end. Perhaps, like me, she was overcome with an inexplicable sadness at the sight of anything becoming less than it was before. The jam jar, which after each breakfast, had less and less jam in it and more and more unpardonable emptiness. The dismal sight of empty preserving jars and bottles on the shelves in the cellar, their mouths agape in a rictus of thirst.

The same sort of sadness spread through me when I contemplated the table in front of me. The beaker of milk, still generous and full. The plate with the sliced bread, as yet unchewed by my teeth, the promise they held intact.

Perhaps Aunt Odette understood only too well what was holding me back. Thrilled and subdued by the thought of the sheer plenty, of all that food having to vanish without trace, I clutched a slice of bread in each fist without taking a single bite. I didn't care if Roland was giving me scornful looks.

'You're dawdling again, I do believe,' my mother sighed. She pulled the bread from my hands. 'I haven't got all day.'

She fed me my sandwich at top speed, barely allowing me the time to swallow.

Then she reached for my beaker of milk and tilted it firmly against my mouth. I struggled to push the beaker away, and she nearly ended up pouring the milk down my nose.

I gasped for breath and glanced around the room, smacking my lips.

'The lad's such a slow eater,' one of the Aunts said.

'He's in a dream,' said Aunt Odette. 'the image of his father at that age. He used to sit and stare at his food just like that.'

My stomach started rumbling loudly. Next a sudden cramp convulsed my gut. I gave a little moan.

All eyes turned to me.

'Something coming? Ah, something coming, is that it?' giggled Aunt Alice. Roland was grinning, too.

I went red in the face. Blood rushed to my cheeks and my stomach went rock-hard.

Inside my body it was as though lids were remorselessly being screwed and unscrewed to seal certain ducts and open others.

I couldn't breathe, and when the twinges of pain shifted from my stomach downwards, there to burst through a thousand membranes, I felt quite dizzy.

'Go on, well done,' the Aunts chirped.

'Look at the poor lamb struggling,' Roland's mother smiled.

A sigh of relief escaped me. A fresh coolness spread across my cheeks, and I felt so light all of a sudden I was almost lifted right out of my chair.

'There's a clever boy!' The Aunts clapped their hands.

On other days I would have joined them in their jubilation. I might also have banged my beaker on the table and cheered loudly, but was discouraged by Roland's sniggers.

When my mother pulled the pot out from under me and a rush of startlingly cool air brushed my bottom, I was close to tears.

For all his mother's admonitions to be quiet and sit still and to mind his manners for goodness' sake, he went on hooting with laughter.

From the stairs came a bellowing man's voice: 'That's enough!'

Uncle Roger burst into the room, strode up to Roland and slapped him so hard that a blood-red weal appeared on his cheek.

For a second Roland held my gaze. He was speechless, wounded to the quick, and his whole face reddened. Then he scrambled down from his chair and bolted into the corridor, sobbing.

His mother made to get up from the table.

'Let him be,' said uncle Roger. He tightened the buckle of his belt. 'That boy will be the death of us.'

He sat down, poured himself a cup of coffee. Leaning forward to reach for the bread basket, his attention was caught by me.

His face cleared. 'So, and how is our little lad?' he asked. 'Everything all right then?' And he winked at me.

I winked back at him, with both eyes at the same time. My lips budded out.

Chapter 3

Having a bath with my father was infinitely preferable to having one with my mother. With her everything had to be done quickly, no messing about. First she stood me in the empty tub to soap me up from head to toe, then she soaped herself. She didn't seem to care that the cold was prising me out of the warm air and the suds were stinging my eyes.

When I huddled against her legs for protection my fingers strayed across the stretchmarks on her lower abdomen, feeling the vertical grooves on either side of her navel. I had seen her stand in front of the mirror pinching the slack skin between her fingers with a little sigh, as if I had caused her body to split down the middle when she gave birth.

How different her sex was, in comparison to mine and my father's, which were like spouts with a knobby lid at the end. Hers seemed to be hiding in its own folds. Past the big bush of hair, it lay curled up like a frightened hedgehog in the shrubbery. When she leaned back to soap her buttocks the strange ridge pouted into view, sliding out from its hiding place between her thighs and quickly back again.

She turned on the tap even more brusquely than other mornings. The warm water restored me to the world of warmth and comfort and my eyes stopped prickling.

A faint smile crossed her face when I shrieked in fun, but she had no patience for my delight when I clawed the gush of water and squeezed the sponge to make it pour.

She always had dark rings under her eyes. Her chronic fatigue gave her face the look of the finest, most breakable porcelain, but in fact she was tough. She shelled peas, made the beds. Day after day she would lay the table with a loud clatter so the whole house would hear. With each portion of over-cooked vegetables she dished out she was proclaiming her domestic pride - to us of course,

but especially to the Aunts. Reminding them that it was she who prepared the bean soup, she who kept their blood pressure down by baking salt-free bread especially for them, indeed that it was she who provided the four meals a day upon which their idle lives depended.

'She's no idea,' the Aunts grumbled behind their napkins. 'Too hoity-toity she is. Never got her hands dirty either. Never dealt with a farrowing sow.'

My mother towelled me dry, dragged the collar of my shirt over my too-large head, pulled my arms through the sleeves, clicked my suspenders on to my pants and tried stuffing my feet into my slippers.

'Don't curl your toes like that,' she sighed crossly, 'or it'll take all day.'

Then she let me step into my slippers myself and brushed my hair into a quiff, even though she knew I didn't like it.

'You can stay upstairs for a bit, with Aunt Odette.' She put me down on the floor. 'Downstairs you'd just get in the way.'

I had never seen Aunt Odette looking so stately, all in black. Cascades of pleats enveloped her skinny frame and she smelled even older than she was. Even dustier. Even drier.

'She's the sort that snuffs out like a candle,' my father used to say. 'The sort you come upon all stiff on a chair, like a dead crow on a branch.'

She had spread an old bedcover on the floor and had tipped the building blocks on top.

'Why don't you build me a fine tower,' she said sweetly, but her smile betrayed impatience. I knew she wanted to have done with me.

When she took up one of her old photo albums and began to turn the stiff cardboard pages, the tissue paper separating them made a soft, pattering sound like raindrops, which made me glad to be with her in spite of her aloofness. Aunt Odette rarely addressed me directly, unless I needed chiding, and even then she preferred summoning my father as if he were her servant, but she was always making strange secret sounds, which intrigued me like words in a foreign language.

I set about building the tallest tower I had ever built, merely for the reward of her feigned stupefaction. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her rise quickly to rummage in the dark wooden cabinet. Thinking she was unobserved, she carefully unwrapped a ruby-red boiled sweet and popped it into her mouth with a practical air, as though it were an extra-large indigestion tablet.

I felt my cheeks burn with indignation. Once she was seated again I heard the click of the sugary gem against her molars. Her lips parted from time to time to emit soft sucking sounds. In the end I was drooling so profusely that my saliva tasted almost as sweet as the real thing.

Aunt Odette breathed serene contentment. Now and then odd-sounding words crossed her lips. She was so engrossed in her photographs that she seemed to be in a blissful dream, in the middle of which she sighed and said, with a rare tremor of ecstasy in her voice, 'Yugoslavia,' or 'Prague. Such a lovely city. Praha, they call it.'

Fired by her emotion, I shouted 'Praha' in response, and knocked down my tower by accident, at which she gave me a look of affectionate surprise and ruffled my hair with her bony fingers.

'Yes,' she laughed. 'Praha. Praha is a thousand times lovelier than Vienna.'

I waited for her to doze off. She had already slipped off her shoes and put her legs up on the sofa with a great swish of petticoats, and propped a cushion in the small of her back.

Downstairs was busy. I could make out the tinkle of spoons against teacups and the occasional dull pop of a cork bursting from a bottle-neck.

After a while the noise died away. Aunt Odette had already shut her album. Now her chin sank onto her breast. I got up.

The door gave willingly when, standing on tiptoe, I twisted the handle. There was no teasing little whinge as it swung open.

Of all the doors in the house there were some that would collude when I ventured on forbidden forays, and there were others that gave a tell-tale creak as they fell to behind my back. There were drawers that responded eagerly when pulled open, as though jumping at the chance, and other obstinate ones that held back or jammed half-way or refused to budge once they were sticking all the way out like gaping jaws, no matter how hard I tugged. Hidden inside them were entire worlds, compact universes, held together by a logic or gravity that eluded me. Bits of string tangled up with locks of snipped-off hair. Lame-fingered gloves clawing at frayed collars, perhaps in search of their other half. Loose cuff-links. A scattering of stamps, some unused and others heavily postmarked, but all of them yellowed.

How many more treasures could there be, hidden away in all the drawers I couldn't reach? What could be housed on the summits of the store cupboards? Some of them went all the way up to the ceiling. Even when my father carried me aloft, their contents remained unseen. There were bound to be far more exciting panoramas to be observed than the same old rows of plates and glassware that came within my field of vision.

I was on the landing, and it was oddly quiet in the house. Out in the yard voices tailed away. Outside the window at the end of the corridor, the crown of the nut tree burst into flames in the dying sun. In the kitchen someone filled a bucket of water and shut the back door.

From my parents' room came the sound of my father talking in a low voice to my mother. He had left his shoes by the door. I picked them up, carried them to the middle of the corridor, sank down on the wooden floor and kicked off my slippers.

I placed the shoes side by side. A smidgin of my father's warmth still lingered inside them, a hint of his sweat, when I stepped shakily into his shoes. An odd sort of tremor ran up my calves, as though the strength of his legs were seeping up from the soles into my own muscles. I had a sense of stepping lightly, of being four times as tall, although in fact I advanced with difficulty, dragging my feet. It was time for everything to wake up again.

The objects in the house showed themselves to their best advantage only to people who were bigger than me. Anyone as small as me, puny even in my father's shoes, had to make do with a view from a low, distorting angle. The ghastly loops of dusty cobwebs between cupboard and wall or under the sink, in which dead flies with devoutly folded legs quivered in the draught. Or the toad that showed up on the the back doorstep every night, crawling into the strip of bright light under the door and clearing its throat repeatedly, as if it had a weighty message to deliver. There were the spiders, whose rightful home was out in the pine trees by the chicken run. In the annexe at the back of the house, among rusty milk churns and watering cans, they had spun webs like pointed caps blown off magicians' heads, from which they emerged in a flash whenever a prey announced itself.

I liked the place best of all in the hours before supper, when everything went quiet and the house draped its walls comfortably about my shoulders. Whenever I ventured into one of the rooms, or when I was in my father's shoes zigzagging down the corridor, past all the doors behind which I caught the muffled sounds of the small habits in which everyone indulged, it was as though the space around the house divided like a cell and then kept on doubling again and again, until there was no end to it and time vanished into the infinity of folds.

The spare rooms at the back of the house, which were normally empty and bare except for the elaborate crochet counterpanes on the beds that reminded me of the Aunts when they dressed up for special occasions, were now full of suitcases. The wardrobe doors were open, and inside I saw coats and suits which carried the scent of other houses in their seams. There were shoes scattered around the legs of the bedside tables, on top of which lay white handkerchiefs or piles of folded newspapers crowned by spectacles in awesome frames.

The brass locks of the suitcases shone seductively. How I wished I could reach them on those high forbidding beds, if only to hear the cold mechanical click with which they would spring open.

In the last room, at the very end of the passage, I came upon a huge black coat lying on a sofa. It hung over the bolstered arm, with a slip of the front turned back, as though a well-turned lady's calf might emerge from it any moment. The collar of dark fur glistened so invitingly that it was impossible to resist.

I sank down on my haunches and leaned forward in my father's shoes at a precipitous angle to bury my cheeks, nose and forehead in the soft tickle of myriad hairs. The satin lining smelt sweet in a dry sort of way, and felt like cool water under the flat of my hand.

I was on the point of letting myself fall face down on the coat so as to lose myself altogether in the blissful, caressing sensation when I heard footsteps. Their jaunty pace did not bode well.

I froze, pulled the flap the coat over my head and wondered what would happen next.

The footsteps halted.

The satin was absorbing my body heat fast, and the steam from my breath couldn't get out. When I stuck my head out for a breath of air, I found myself looking straight into my cousin Roland's mischievous face.

'Down in the hole. Down in the hole,' he intoned, tapping each of my shoulders several times with his forefinger. 'Down in the hole.'

I was desperate to get away. The mere thought of the torture he had inflicted on me a few hours earlier was enough to make my eyes sting with tears.

He skipped across the room and stood in the doorway all bright and shiny, as neat as he had been at breakfast, except for his trousers, which were streaked with chalk and bits of cobweb. He must have been snooping around the whole house, all the remotest outposts of my very own castle.

The chalk on his thighs could only have come from the walls in the cellar, the one place I had never dared to explore all by myself, where it always smelled of damp and mould and where the weak light bulb flickered as scarily as a candle that might blow out any moment. In winter the ground-water oozed up between the tiles and left little bumps of salt behind when it dried, as white as the powdery snow that drifted into the attic through the chinks between the roof-tiles. The attic and the cellar were the only parts of the house that were not sealed off from the outside world, a condition I found both appealing and daunting.

'Have a look. Come on,' whispered Roland. He was leaning with one shoulder against the door frame, picking at a bit of dead skin around the thumbnail of his other hand until he drew blood.

For a second I thought I was supposed to admire him for bleeding, that he took pleasure in administering pain to himself as brutally as to me or his mother. But he raised his thumb to his mouth and licked the wound.

'Come on!' he urged, grabbing me roughly by the arm when I held back.

He set off at a brisk pace. I could barely keep up with him. My father's shoes flew off my feet, tumbled over the floor and bounced against the plinth. I felt like screaming, shouting that he shouldn't go so fast, but I restrained myself. I didn't want to wake Aunt Odette nor alarm my father.

We stumbled down the stairs, through the passage, round the corner, past the grandfather clock, to the annexe. I had been there often enough, but now I was wandering in a strange place. It didn't feel right that I was being led, like a visitor, a stranger, but Roland wouldn't let go of my hand.

He slowed down and stopped in front of a closed door. I knew it well, even though the glass panel was a shield of darkness instead of glowing with the familiar light of the window beyond.

Roland twisted the handle and swung the door wide open.

An unfamiliar chill struck my face. Air that felt unexpectedly fresh, without the merest hint of snuff or pipe tobacco, nor of booze or men fast asleep.

Roland pushed me into the room. It was pitch dark. I only knew where I was when the cold floor underfoot made way for the thick pile of a carpet. Behind my back I could hear Roland fumbling along the walls. Something clicked under his fingers and the light went on.

Michel was lying on the bed, motionless in his best suit, eyebrows raised. Even though his eyes were shut I had the feeling he was surprised to see me there, or that he was pretending to be annoyed because I had the cheek to disturb him.

The line of his lips curved up at one corner of his mouth and down at the other, half smile and half scowl, as though he couldn't make up his mind whether to make me hoot with laughter or cry out in fear. His hands were yellow, his nails blue.

The pillow supporting his astonishingly bald head - I had rarely seen him without his cap - was decked with twigs of cherry laurel, and at his feet lay a bouquet of early dahlias.

For all I knew he was having me on. At harvest time, in the barn, he always played he was the corn monster, and in the orchard he would give the almond tree a sudden shake when I passed unsuspecting underneath.

'Michel,' I called out, half-grinning.

'Shshsh,' Roland whispered. He clapped a sweaty hand over my mouth.

I drew back indignantly.

'Michel!' I cried again.

Roland brushed past me. He stopped a few paces short of the bed. He tucked his hands under his arms, as if he too expected Michel would leap up any minute and chase us down the passage to tap us on the backside with his walking-stick.

He did not move.

Roland went up to the bed and slouched against the mattress. He extended his arm and covered Michel's hand with his.

My heart lurched, but aside from an almost inaudible click of rosary beads in the blue fingers, nothing happened.

Roland looked at me, hunching his shoulders.

'Down in the hole,' he said solemnly, 'down in the hole.'