

One is Enough

Els Beerten

An extract

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Window

Wait for me, that's what you told me, in those very words. And that it would be the day of your life. Then you jumped on your bike, and with a wide smile on your face you rode off down the street.

Meanwhile nine months have come and gone. There were days that began in grey, and ended in black. I survived them all, Louis. But next time you appear on my doorstep I intend to tell you what's what. So that once and for all you'll understand. That I won't be able to tolerate this again.

First you'll want to sit on the couch. You're right; it's an exceptionally clear day today. Even from my window I can see France in the distance.

You love France so much, Louis. They have the best weather and there's room for everyone. For a while I thought you had gone there. I haven't thought that for some time now. You don't abandon your family. To do that is to abandon yourself. And then you're nobody.

Born to shine

I was born in March of '44, seven years after my brother Louis. During the war they didn't have two pennies to rub together, and yet they made me. For the longest time I couldn't fathom why. If my first child had been Louis, it would have been more than enough for me. I'd be the happiest person on earth.

They say I was born without any effort. Our father had only just left the room when he was called back in. He's said to have bent over the crib and let out a sigh so deep that they could hear it clear on the other side of the village. There's no more beautiful child than Juliette, he's supposed to have said, that he could make something like that was a miracle. After that he put on his coat and disappeared.

After three days my mother wrapped me in a warm blanket, lay me in the crib next to the stove, put her shoes on and went straight to café 'Onder Den Toren', where she dragged our father away from

the tap and did not let go of him until she again stood in front of our house. She opened the door, kicked our father in the behind and with such force that he fell flat on his face, breaking his front teeth and his nose. She closed the door behind her, stepped over him, took me out of the crib, opened her blouse and put me to her breast.

He lay there on the floor for an hour. Then he opened his eyes, struggled to his feet, scraped the blood from his cheeks, from his nose and the floor, turned around and headed for the door.

Mother was sitting next to the stove, I was still nestled at her breast. Where did he think he was going, she asked.

Nowhere, said father, absolutely nowhere, at which point he opened the front door.

She didn't go get him again, mother said. Never again.

The front door closed shut. Father sat on the ground, covered his face with his hands. The most beautiful child in the world, he sighed, and that it was even possible, all he had to do was look in the mirror to know that.

Mother just smiled. And with that smile on her face she stood before him. That he should take a good look at her, his wife, the liveliest, the cleverest, the most beautiful woman for miles around. Did she look like somebody who would give her heart to just any old fool? She wanted him, and no one else.

He nodded. From me to her, and back to me, and that went on for an hour. 'Our little Juliet,' is what he is supposed to have mumbled. 'Ours. Born to shine.'

'Just so,' mother is supposed to have said, nodding.

When I was two I knew the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, and 'See the Moon is Shining Through the Trees.' Two hands on the ground, one foot in the air, a song, and everyone began to sigh. *Aaaaaaah, what a miracle, that child.*

Supposedly that's how it all began

Jules et les Juliettes

My brother Louis was there when our father left and our mother went to fetch him and saw to it that his nose was crooked for the rest of his life. I believe Louis without hesitation, for if mother got an idea into her head, she never let go of it.

What she wanted at the time, apart from father, was a big family. Our sister Mia had other ideas; she kept everyone waiting for eight years. Only when they had given up hope that it would ever happen, did it happen after all.

'Three is a good number,' said father.

Even if we weren't well off, we never went hungry; he worked much too hard for that. Our father had, in fact, two jobs: he worked in the mines, and he had his own ballroom band. He sang and played the accordeon, Louis played the trompet. Then there was a guitar player and a drummer.

I was hardly five when I was allowed to go with him. All I had to do was smile, father said that very first time, smile like only I can. My legs were still crooked and my knees were too small for my stockings, but I laughed and I laughed and everyone said aaaaaaah and the music began and my feet started to dance all by themselves and everyone kept saying aaaaaaah. Afterward father said that they had never received so much in tips, that I could go with them always from now on and that we were henceforth called Jules et les Juliettes. The very next week it was on the bass drum, the musicians' jackets, and the notices on the walls. Today Jules et les Juliettes. I was the plural.

Whereas Louis had had a trumpet when he was still in the crib and I could dance before I could walk, our sister Mia was clearly cut from different cloth. During the first few years of her life she was mostly sick. Her nose ran, and at night she nearly coughed her soul from her body. Our sickly child, that's what mother and father called her.

'Mia has weak lungs,' said mother, and that she wanted to bring in a specialist.

'With what money?' asked father.

'We'll just have to tighten our belts a little bit.'

'I already know what he's going to say,' said father. 'That it will probably get better on its own.'

The specialist said that both my parents were right. Mia had weak lungs, and it would probably get better on its own. But it would nevertheless be a good thing for the child to get some sea air; nothing better for the lungs than that.

'We have to go to the seashore, Jules.' 'It's much too far.'

'Then we'll buy a car.'

Father shook his head. And he kept on shaking it. Where would we get the money, mother? If only he knew.

'My mother never recovered,' said mother. 'Mia doesn't have the Spanish Flu.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'She doesn't even have a fever,' said father.

Like clockwork every winter mother brought it up. The Spanish Flu was the worst thing that could happen to you. Our mother had only just been born when she became half an orphan. She always sobbed, loudly and at great length, when she spoke of it. It does something to a person, our father would say, putting his arm around her and nodding toward us. Why he nodded like that I never asked him. At moments like that father looked at me as if I always understood everything. Of course, I said nothing.

Happily the specialist was proven right. Mia gradually became less and less a sickly child. Her nose hardly ever ran, she only coughed every now and then like anyone else, and she could walk and talk like the rest of us. As soon as she turned three she was allowed to go to school. She didn't get sick even once.

'From this day forward she joins Jules et les Juliettes,' our father said when Mia turned five. And that's what happened. She mimicked me so well that it wasn't long before we were both dancing our legs off and singing all the songs together, mouthing the words without sound. Not that I couldn't sing, I could sing every note, and perfectly. I had perfect pitch, said father, and for a singer that was a godsend. One day he would take me to Paris, but right now Mia needed me too much. I was a great role model for her, I knew that, right?

'Are you both called Juliette?' people would ask.

'Both of us,' Mia would then say, and the look on her face was so angelic and she laughed so sweetly that time and again people would lean forward, pinch her cheeks, and sigh that she 'was so sweet, that sister of yours'. I always nodded in agreement, which wasn't difficult at all. Mia could be the sweetest child in the world, but every Monday evening was for me. The first hour my father taught me to read notes, the second we sang songs together, he with his accordeon, me with my perfect pitch. You and me, Juliette, born to shine. And even though I was only thirteen and one day had not yet arrived, on Monday evenings it did just a little bit.

The Genes

The old doctor had retired and doctor Franssen had taken on all of his patients. Word was that he was paying everyone a visit. The rumour turned out to be true, for one Sunday evening he was at our doorstep.

'We're not sick,' said father.

'All the better,' said doctor Franssen. He was just stopping by to introduce himself.

There's coffee, said mother, or did he want a sandwich, something stronger, perhaps?

Something stronger was good enough for doctor Franssen.

Mother took his coat, father poured him a drink and waved his arm at us. 'Behold, the future,' he said solemnly. 'Our son Louis, and our daughters Juliette and Mia.'

Doctor Franssen smiled at us. We smiled back. That it was remarkable, he then said.

Puzzled, we gazed at him. Remarkable, doctor Franssen? 'The little one,' he said, 'her hair.'

His eyes went from Louis to me, to mother, and then to father. I saw what he saw. All four of us had brown hair. Whereas Mia's was black as pitch.

Whether there was something wrong with that, father asked.

‘Wrong? It’s marvellous!’ said doctor Franssen. That it had to be in the genes, the genes, he repeated, and whether we understood what he meant by that.

Of course we understood, we might be simple folk, but we weren’t idiots. ‘Musicians are geniouses,’ said doctor Franssen. ‘Especially when you get everyone to dance.’

Again we stared at him in amazement.

‘Jules et les Juliettes,’ said doctor Franssen. ‘The best ballroom band for miles around, so I have been told.’

‘Did they say that, indeed,’ father laughed. ‘Pour us another round,’ he said to mother.

It was true that Mia had wonderful hair. Film-star hair is what mother called it, and never in her life would she take scissors to it. She combed it every day until it shone like a mirror. ‘We can see ourselves in it,’ she would then say to me, pulling me close and planting a kiss on my head. Together we would look at our reflection in Mia’s hair.

‘Practically twins,’ mother would then say, laughing. It sounded like the most beautiful thing in the world, and even though I didn’t see what she saw, naturally I nodded.

Lost

The drummer thought our mother should also have a place on the stage. ‘We could give her a tamborine,’ he said.

‘There are enough of us already,’ said father.

‘You have the most beautiful woman for miles around, Jules, you’d be crazy not to show her off. Are you afraid they’ll all look at her instead of you?’

In a single motion father grabbed the drummer by the collar and lifted him at least four inches off the ground. That if he so much as touched our mother again, he would break both his arms and legs.

I ran to Louis and told him everything. ‘Finally,’ he said.

‘His arms and his legs!’

‘Oh, Juliette. Pa wouldn’t hurt a fly.’ He sighed deeply. ‘If only he was just as angry with our mother.’

‘With ma??’

‘So much circus in one person, it sends chills down your spine. Some day there will be trouble.’

‘Trouble?!’ ‘Later, Juliette.’

From Louis I ran straight to our father. 'Louis says that ma is a circus,' I said.

Suddenly father looked at me very seriously. He opened his mouth, shut it again. Impatiently I began to hop from one foot to the other. If he kept on saying nothing then I would never learn what Louis meant and whether it was true or not.

'And that there would be trouble, pa.' 'He shouldn't say such things, Juliette.' 'But he did say them, pa.'

'Listen, child,' he said. 'People are not made of iron, ma least of all. Life hasn't gone easy on her, as you know. Try growing up without a mother, you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy. At any rate. You're a brave child, Juliette, and should your mother ever need you, then I hope you'll be there for her.'

I stared at him open mouthed.

'I know it's no small thing I'm asking of you.'

A brave child. If I wasn't one, I would be. 'You can count on me, pa.'

He let out a deep sigh. 'Don't forget Mia. See to it that the little one doesn't get lost. You're her big sister, Juliette.'

Even if he asked me to take care of the entire world. I nodded as earnestly as I could.

Father smiled.

There was nothing more splendid than father smiling. And of every star system, pa, if necessary.

It would prove to be too little.

Death

Father was not yet forty when he dropped dead.

The entire village was gathered in 'Onder Den Toren'. It was the only café with a television, and the Red Devils were playing against the Dutch that evening. The hour before the match began was for us.

The café was really too small to perform properly. We had left the drummer and the guitar player at home and we still didn't have enough room. That didn't prevent us from doing our very best. And as the villagers guzzled beer and danced like there was no tomorrow, father played and sang the soul from his body, Louis brought the roof down with his trumpet, I bashed the cymbals together so that my ears rang, and Mia danced until the soles of her shoes were smoking. The Devils had to win that evening, and Jules et les Juliettes would make a serious contribution to the effort.

That's when it happened. A rattle, a muffled scream, and a loud crash. Everyone stopped dancing. I turned around. Father lay on the ground, blood was running out of his nose, I took my handkerchief to wipe it away but Louis grabbed my hand and wouldn't let me. 'It's no use' he said.

I saw the tears rolling down his cheeks and the snot running from his nose. 'Get your handkerchief, Louis,' I said; I tore my hand free, bent over our father, and wiped and scrubbed the blood from his mustache. I rubbed his skin until the color returned to it.

'You can get up now, pa.' 'Child, he's dead,' said someone. 'Not a chance,' I said.

I was lifted up and dumped into a chair.

The year was 1959. The day was October 4. Two hours before the Red Devils played their worst match ever against the Dutch. Nine to one.

It was the microphone's fault. His lips must still have been wet from the beer he had just drunk. He must have leaned just a bit too far forward, touching his lips to the mic, and a surge through his body straight to the heart.

'He had a weak heart,' said doctor Franssen. 'If it hadn't happened today, it would have tomorrow, and without the microphone.'

Despite the fact that father could take anything. Even on that day. He sang everyone off their chairs. Everyone. And then just to fall silent. That a person can be so alive one moment, and then the next not even half as much. I've never understood it.

It was the most miserable day of my life.

Lustre

After the funeral there were cookies, beer, and coffee for family and friends. I went around with the coffee and poured more as necessary. The guitar player and the drummer stood with a pint in hand next to the tap. They raised their glasses when I walked past. 'To your father,' they said, clinking their glasses and downing the beer in a single gulp.

They stared sadly into their empty glasses.

'What's to become of *Jules et les Juliettes*, now?' the drummer sighed, 'I sure don't know.'

Louis joined them. I could see on his face that he didn't know, either. 'Surely we aren't going to stop,' I said, worried.

It couldn't be that difficult to find a singer? Who knows, maybe I could take over.

I opened my mouth to speak; Louis beat me to it. 'The lustre is gone without pa.'

'He was the cement,' drummer sighed, 'try building a house without it.' He looked at Louis. 'What do you think?'

'I can start tomorrow in three different bands,' Louis said. As if we had never existed. Our father should hear this. 'Louis? What if I sang?'

'You?!' I nodded as vigorously as I could, and he understood immediately that I was serious. He shook his head. 'Just be patient, Juliette, your time will come.'

Clearly his time had already arrived. On weekdays he was a teacher, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, a musician. He had played football until he was 18. If he hadn't taken a blow to his knee last year, he would still be playing.

Most people can do a couple of things well, Louis could do everything. I had sometimes been jealous of that in the past. But now that our father was dead and I was crippled by grief, just thinking about Louis, who was able to do anything, was comforting. Louis would keep us afloat. It's the least you can do when you can do everything.

Drama

'We're not going to sit here and mourn,' mother said, a week after the funeral, 'that won't bring him back. But first this.'

This was the vault she had ordered. Big enough for all of us. Unless we got married and had ten children. But in that case our children would take care of us.

'I paid up front for eternity,' mother said, 'so we'll have peace of mind.' 'For eternity,' I repeated. 'That's a long time.'

'Ninety-nine years,' said mother.

She had ordered a marble lid for the vault and had had 'The Engelen Family' engraved on it.

'That way they can't make a mistake,' mother said. And that now all of our money was gone.

I saw Louis go pale. 'You can't be serious, ma.' Did he have any idea what a vault like this cost?

He fell silent. We all fell silent. We all knew well enough, he and I, and even Mia. That a regular grave was cheaper, but it would accomplish nothing to tell her that.

She looked toward the heavens. 'He will be happy with his beautiful tomb.' And then she began to weep.

'Ma,' said Louis.

She shook her head, found her handkerchief and pressed it against her mouth. 'I loved him so much.'

'So did we, ma,' I said.

She stopped crying. Looked at the three of us. Her face once more contorted in grief.

‘Not as much as I did,’ she sobbed, so loudly that I pressed my hands to my ears. Meanwhile I watched Mia slide off her chair, walk around the table, climb into mother’s lap, and put her arms around her neck. I lowered my hands again. If the little one could stand mother’s blubbering, then I should at least try to.

Suddenly Louis stood up. His chair clattered loudly to the floor. ‘Enough with the drama, ma!’

All three of us stared at him, stunned. Mother began sobbing again. ‘Drama? In God’s name, Louis!’

‘Be quiet, woman!’

Suddenly it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. And in that silence Louis began to speak. Had we ever heard pa crying? No? Well he had. Could they imagine what that had been like? Hearing pa crying through the wall because she just had to have her hand in some other guy’s pants, that’s right, in the pants of another guy, those were the words they used to describe it at the school gate, and always just as he walked by. Oh, she had nothing to worry about, time and again he had defended her, that they should go try to sell their lies somewhere else, because his mother was a respectable lady. But the worst of it was that they were right. He could no longer count the times that he had lain there hoping and praying, that’s right—praying—praying the very plaster from the ceiling, that she would finally come to her senses, come back and ask father for forgiveness. And the fool would have welcomed her with open arms, he loved her so much. But time and again the glimmer of dawn was already peeking into the room when the front door opened. It was a bloody miracle that his heart had held out as long as it had.

Before anyone could say anything, Louis grabbed his coat from the hallstand. The door slammed with a loud bang behind him.

Mother looked at me. Her eyes were bulging with fear.

‘He has gone mad,’ she whispered.

I stood up. Looked at the door. My head was spinning with the things that Louis had said. What if it was all true?

I grabbed my coat, put it on.

And then mother said the thing that made me stay. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

And: things will be different.

And: someone has to take care of Mia. And whether someone could teach her how to do it.

If only father hadn’t told me that one day mother would need me. If only he hadn’t kept repeating that. And I hadn’t made him that promise.

I took my coat off, hung it back on the hook, and sat down again. I looked at mother.

‘I’m going to look for work,’ I said.

It was the second most miserable day of my life.

Holy is holy

'He'll be standing on our doorstep soon enough,' said mother the next day. 'He'll have to be on his best behaviour or we won't let him back in.'

But Louis didn't come back. The priest said he could live in the porter's house at the school, it was empty anyway. The priest liked men like Louis, he said, because they could always see what work had to be done.

'If there's anything I can do in return,' said Louis.

The church organ player has died, the priest said with a sigh. 'I only know how to play trumpet,' said Louis.

What if he took lessons? The parish council would take care of the fees. And he wasn't to worry at all about the rent.

'Agreed,' said Louis.

And could he mow the grass behind the parish hall every other week in the spring and summer?

That grass was a park. Taking care of the grounds would be more work for him than his pupils, but Louis could work like a horse. He never complained. I should know, he always told me everything he was thinking. He thought I could handle anything. And therefore I could handle anything.

In the beginning I went to see him every day. 'Ma is a whore,' he said one day.

'She's our ma,' I said. 'And a whore.'

'She cries all day long,' I said.

'Those are crocodile tears, Juliette. Has she ever even once asked about our grief, how deep it is, for example? No? That's what I thought,' said Louis. And that I could come live with him if I wanted to. And Mia, too.

'Then mother would have no one left,' I said.

Perhaps I could have seen it in the greediness with which she took her best clothes from the closet on Sunday evenings and painted her lips. But I had also seen her praying, for hours beforehand. Around three o'clock, usually, the time when most people put on their Sunday best and went for a walk. Mother didn't go for walks, mother prayed. In complete silence, her prayer book in her lap, her eyes closed, her face lifted up toward the portrait of St Sebastian that hung on the kitchen wall. I didn't understand how she could keep her eyes closed

when there was so much to see. One glance at his naked torso, his strong muscles, his black locks, and I was blushing. Was it the arrows in his body that made him a saint, I had asked once. Holy is holy, said mother, and that was all she needed to know in order to pray for all the goodness in the world. That she went out afterwards, well, I'd just have to understand; father had also always understood, she said. And didn't she always come home safe and sound?

She was our mother and she prayed for all the goodness in the world. Of course I understood.

The Lottery Jackpot

Father had been dead for four months. The pension mother received from the mine was not enough for us to live on. Luckily I had found work at the baker's, or we would long ago have died of hunger.

When I came home that day mother and Mia were standing there waiting for me, beaming.

'Dinner is on the table,' said mother.

Dinner was always on the table when I got home. Why were the two of them sitting there, beaming, as if they had just won the lottery jackpot?

Had mother finally found work? 'We're going to buy a car,' said Mia. 'Excuse me?'

'That's right,' said mother, 'a car. Mia thinks it's wonderful.' 'We can't buy a car.'

'We already have. We can pay it off in monthly payments.' 'With what money, ma?'

She continued to beam at me. Had we won the lottery after all? It was possible. There were people who suddenly had all the luck in the world. But people who had all the luck in the world paid for their cars up front.

'I want to see more of the world,' she said.

As if I didn't. The world couldn't be just one street long, with a baker on the corner and at the end of it the village square. But for now that was my world. Or maybe we'd die of hunger after all.

'I want to see the sea, Juliette, and so does Mia.' 'Me too, ma. Later, when we have the money for it.'

She sighed. 'Doctor Franssen called.'

Doctor Franssen always called when someone was sick. And as far as I knew, all three of us were as healthy as an ox.

'Mia has started coughing again, I kept her home today. Doctor Franssen says that her lungs have got weaker. It's probably the cold and the rain. A child like Mia just can't take it very well. Maybe we should go to the seashore after all, he said.'

Even though it was winter, and it was cold and often raining, Mia hadn't been sick even once. Just because she had coughed a couple of times didn't mean she was at death's door. But that was the look mother had on her face.

Then she bowed her head and reached for her handkerchief. 'Ma.'

She looked at me. A tear rolled shakily past her nose, slipped over her chin and dropped into her lap. The next one had already appeared. It wouldn't take long before the very sea poured forth from her eyes. Before you knew it, she'd dry up completely. It would be hideous.

I don't know whether it was the exhaustion or pure misery that prompted me to burst out laughing.

She immediately stopped crying. 'You have no heart, Juliette.'

I stared at her, amazed. How could she say something like that? She knew how hard my work at the baker's was, she knew about the pain in my back and the cramps in my legs, but did I complain? Moreover I didn't keep a single penny of that money for myself. She got everything, because she was our mother and knew best what we needed. Hadn't she told sister Madeleine that I was the only one keeping her afloat during these miserable times? She had filled five handkerchiefs with snot during that visit. When the sister asked me whether I wouldn't rather get my diploma, I said that I wanted to take care of my mother. Surely she remembered that? How could she say that I didn't have a heart?

I had to leave the room. I had to leave the house. Before an accident happened.

'Juliette?'

I stopped in my tracks. 'Juliette. My child.'

How could mother's voice sound like two warm arms wrapped around me? I would just accept the lies. She loved me. Even though I had wanted to hurt her, she loved me.

I turned around and went back to her.

Seashore

Mother had let her eye fall on a used VW Beetle. Apparently she had had her wits about her. We really couldn't afford a new one.

'They will deliver it tomorrow,' she said one evening. And did she know how to drive?

'They are going to teach me.' She laughed loudly. 'I'm a quick study, they say. Don't you worry, Juliette.'

Someone from the garage delivered the Beetle to our house. He took mother for a test-drive. He would explain everything to her on the way.

It was half-past midnight when I heard her slinking up the stairs. I turned the light on in the hall. She looked at me with glittering eyes and red cheeks.

'I can drive,' she panted. 'Even in the dark. I knew right away where all the knobs were. I was amazing, he said.'

Who said?

'The man from the garage,' she laughed. She pressed her face against mine. She smelled like father had when he went out to play billiards.

'Have you been playing billiards?' I asked, dozily.

Mother laughed. 'I practiced all evening, Juliette. Practice makes perfect. Very perfect.' She laughed even more loudly. 'You are such a quick study, they said.'

I just nodded. I wanted to go back to bed.

'And after that we went for a drink. When you accomplish something, you should celebrate it, Juliette.' She looked at me, beaming. 'Tomorrow we drive to the seashore.'

Suddenly I was wide awake. 'To the seashore?!'

'Mia and I. You could go with us, but you have to work.'

'The seashore is far away. More than two hundred kilometers, I've been told. You've only just begun to drive.'

'Don't worry, I'll be careful. Mia needs the sea, Juliette. She's been coughing all week and I'm very concerned.'

She was no longer laughing. She was serious. That she was very concerned, and that she was going to drive to the seashore. When it came to getting her way, mother had the strength of a hundred horses.

'I'm going back to sleep,' I said. 'Wake me up when you get up.' 'That's in four hours, ma.'

'The seashore is far away, Juliette, you said it yourself. I have to be out the door early. And don't you worry, I know the way. And we'll be back in the evening.'

Mother didn't know what she was doing. Driving to the coast and back in one day, and she would drive carefully and she knew the way? We didn't even have a map of Belgium in the house.

Closing Time

Doctor Franssen brought the news.

I was wiping the crumbs from the countertop, when the door-bell rang. It was noon, almost closing time. We're closed, I wanted to say, but I said nothing. As long as the key hadn't been turned in the lock we let everyone in, the baker's wife had said that first day. And we're as friendly as can be when we do so.

He didn't smile back. It was mother. She had driven off the road and was in the hospital.

What do you mean, from the road, in the hospital, I thought, as my legs began to shake as if they were made of paper and the wind was blowing them to shreds.

'Mother is at the seashore,' I said. 'At the seashore and nowhere else. With Mia.'

With Mia. I looked at him, aghast. Why did he say nothing about her?! ‘Calm down,’ he said. ‘Your sister doesn’t have so much as a scratch.’

I was supposed to take care of her. I balled my fists in my apron pocket. Hide the keys, let the air out of the tires, I could have done so many things. I had done nothing.

‘Your mother was lucky. There are a couple of bruised ribs, but no broken bones. She can go home tonight. Don’t be shocked when you see her, her face is full of scrapes. But they, too, will heal.’

‘Her face,’ I sighed.

‘It could have been worse.’

It could not have been worse. He clearly had no idea how fond mother was of her face.

‘Your mother hadn’t been on the road for an hour when it happened.’

It was just past Diest that she swerved to avoid oncoming traffic and a good thing she ran into a creek on the side of the road, as it could have been a pole. I don’t even want to think about what might have happened then. She’ll have to forget the seashore for now, the car has been declared a total loss.’

I looked at him, appalled. A total loss. And who was going to pay for that? ‘The police have filed an incident report. There is a chance that the other party was at fault, and in that case all the damage will be paid for.’ He let out a sigh. ‘I wish all this misery would come to an end. Your mother has suffered enough.’

Our mother. Always our mother. He had no idea how hard the past months had been. ‘It’s all her own fault, doctor Franssen. She doesn’t know how to drive and then she sets out at once for the seashore. The coast, doctor Franssen. That’s practically another country.’

He nodded. ‘Your mother had been dreaming of the seashore for so long. Everyone needs to have a dream, Juliette, and your mother is no different from anyone else. You’re not going to tell me that you don’t have a dream? Then surely you know it can give you wings?’

I watched him as he left the store and thought of the stage I’d be standing on one day. Not just once, and not by chance. But my dream had never given me wings. Maybe I was doing it wrong. But before I could ask myself how, my thoughts turned once again to mother who wanted to see the sea, to the car that had been totalled, to Mia who might have been dead but didn’t have a scratch, to the cramps in my legs and the pain in my back.

Was I not trying hard enough, should I be thinking more about my dream? At least I knew which dress I would be wearing. It would be white satin, trimmed with gold thread. I would wear a ribbon around my curls, I’d paint my lips red, I’d look good enough to kiss. Father would sit in the front row and clap his hands till they were blue. Born to shine, he would say, and that he had known it all along.

Rainbow

That same evening Louis stood on our doorstep.

It's about time, I wanted to say. I swallowed my words. I should have any illusions, he hadn't come back to stay. He had come because of the storm in his eyes.

I touched his arm lightly. 'She's in a lot of pain, Louis.'

He nodded. 'Good,' he said, and walked into the living room.

Mother lay on the sofa, with a face that could have been someone else's. Black and blue and full of scrapes, swollen like a balloon about to burst. The rest of her body was covered in bruises and scrapes, too. Her eyes were slits on account of her swollen face. It must have been a strange world she saw through those eyes.

'Ma,' I said softly. 'Look who's here.'

She peered through her eyelashes. 'I see nothing.' 'It's me.'

She sat up at once. 'Louis.' 'Indeed.'

'It was an accident, Louis. I wanted a car to go to the seashore ...' 'Spare me your explanations. Doctor Franssen told me everything.'

She sighed. 'Look at me lying here, black and blue from head to toe. But doctor Franssen says that everything will be fine. I just have to be patient.' She winked at me. 'Juliette, pour Louis a cup of coffee.'

'I won't be drinking any coffee.' 'A drink, then?'

'Where is Mia?'

'She's sleeping. The child is exhausted. The child is always exhausted. It's her lungs. That's why we drove to the coast. For her lungs, and nothing else.'

Louis nodded, and then he nodded again. 'Just you try that again,' he said then.

Mother sat up straight again, crossing her arms over her chest as she peered at Louis through the slits of her eyes.

'I'll drive to the seashore if I want to.' I saw the storm in his eyes.

'Louis,' I began, softly.

He looked past me at mother. 'That you risk your own life, that's one thing. But risking Mia's that ...'

'I took driving lessons!'

'Driving lessons, don't make me laugh; fifteen minutes instruction on how to start it and use the brakes, more like, and after that a grand tour lasting hours in the café.'

'How can you say ...?'

'Don't even try, ma. I know the men in the village, I can still hear them bragging on how they closed the café with you and afterwards had to crawl home on hands and knees. I didn't even have to ask what state you were in at the end of the evening, whether or not you kept your hands to yourself. I could see it in their eyes. And now I want to see Mia.'

'But Louis, I...'

'I said I want to see Mia.' 'Follow me,' I said.

He followed me up the stairs.

'What's wrong with the little one?' he asked.

'Nothing,' I said. 'She coughs every now and then. Like everyone else in winter.'

'How can you stand being here? It drives me mad just to see her face.' 'Father always said she wasn't made of iron, Louis.'

'Our father loved her too goddamn much.'

He sighed. 'I'll bring you some money each month; you could use it. To begin with, you need to have the chimney looked at, haven't you noticed how polluted the air is in the living room? Before you know it, the three of you will suffocate. I'll send someone who can help. And the wallpaper in the living room is peeling. Surely you can see that, Juliette. There are some rolls of paper in the attic, put ma to work hanging paper once she's better, then at least she'll be doing something useful.'

As if she would listen to me.

'And you're not to tell her about the money, Juliette, or it'll be gone before it even arrives.'

We stood before the bedroom door. Taking the doorhandle in hand, he carefully opened the door. Mia was deep asleep beneath the covers, her thumb in her mouth.

'You shouldn't allow that, Juliette. Her teeth are going to go crooked.' Come back, then, I thought. Mia would listen to him. And mother wouldn't dare go against him. Surely he knew that?

We crept down the stairs, through the hall, into the living room. 'See you later,' he said to mother.

'If you say so, Louis.'

I took my coat from the hook and followed him outside. He waited for me. I fairly skipped toward him. *Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high.* Father sang that at the end of every show, and the people would dance as if the world was going to stop turning the very next minute and it was nothing to be bothered about. 'I'll walk with you,' I said.

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.

'Louis,' I began. The words pressed too hard against my throat. I wanted to tell him so much, but how to begin? The time for beginnings had long since passed. But soon he would be gone and who knew for how long this time.

'What now, Louis?'

I saw him nod, nod again. 'Maybe you should come live with me after all. My house is big enough.'

'Mia wouldn't want that.'

He sighed deeply. 'It's our mother who wants so much.'

I almost told him. How much I wanted to sing. And whether he thought that I ever might. But I knew what he would say. If I wanted to sing, there was only one thing for it, and that was to sing. And not just in my room or while riding my bike. Sometimes a person had to make tough decisions, no matter how difficult that was. Hadn't he had to do it, too? I needed to know that he hadn't left because he wanted to, he had left because he had to. Did I want him to go mad?

He turned the corner of our street, stopping to wave one last time. My brother, who could do anything.

He just turned the corner.

Sixteen

March arrived.

Mother still didn't have any work, Mia attended school just as infrequently. What I thought about this was clearly of no importance. If the child coughed like that, she was staying home, mother said. Luckily she didn't say another word about the seashore. Meanwhile all expenses caused by the accident had been reimbursed, so not a cent was owed. A police report had been drawn up and officers were so impressed by her testimony that they felt no further investigation was necessary. For once it was not a bad thing that mother could wrap every man in the world around her little finger.

I made her swear on our father's soul that she would not buy another car. And that henceforth she would consult with me on every expenditure.

She had given me a very nasty look. That I was starting to act like Louis. And that she didn't find that in the least bit pleasant.

Swear it, I said.

Mid March I turned sixteen. The baker's wife gave me half a day off; Louis had arranged it without my knowledge. We took the tram to Hasselt, drank English tea on the Main Square and ate the most delicious things with it. When night fell, we went to a show with lots of music and dancing.

Oh yes, I said to Louis, that's what I want to do later.

I know, he said. Then he took an envelope out of his pocket and in it was a piece of paper with this printed on it: Ten singing lessons for Juliette Engelen. On Sunday evenings, starting next week.

I was so happy, I started to weep.

Did you think I had forgotten all about it, said Louis.

Rosa

Rosa was going to give me singing lessons. I had never heard of her, but Louis had. She had studied in Brussels for five years and she spoke her mind everywhere and at all times, which I shouldn't let bother me, because for the rest she was just like us. Exactly like us, Juliette.

We rode our bicycles to her house. We first had to ride through three villages, cross the train tracks, past a field, all the way to the very last house.

'Here it is,' said Louis.

Before he could ring the bell, the door swung wide open. And the way she stood there! In a red floral print dress, a red ribbon around her hair knot and red shoes that shone as if they held the sun itself. I stared and stared. Louis was wrong. She wasn't anything like us. But she nodded so warmly at me that it didn't matter at all that she wasn't like us.

'Let the party begin,' she said. Party?

'Just follow me. We'll dive right into it.'

She led me to her music room, flipped the fallboard open and played a few notes. Sing after me, Juliette. Off we went. From high to low, and back again, a hundred times to begin with. Hands on your stomach, not your back. Ribs forward, chin down, hold your head high. To the ceiling, Juliette, not a centimeter lower. Forget your throat, sing from your toes. Sing, Juliette, stop shouting. And your breathing is all wrong. You'll suffocate that way. Look at me. Do what I do. Again.

In between she poured tea. Good for your voice, she said, and that I had to take care of it. But I was lucky. My voice was strong as iron, and it would take some doing before it failed me.

'Moreover you have strong jaws. It's no wonder your voice sounds so good.' 'Strong jaws?'

'They make the best sound box, Juliette. The rest is practice.' It sounded so simple.

'You have to commit yourself, Juliette. It's everything or nothing, preferably everything, or we won't even start.' She gave me an earnest look.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?'

I nodded. 'Everything,' I repeated, 'everything and more.' She smiled. 'Your brother says you can read music.'

'Our father taught me.'

'I have a song for you. Do you know Judy Garland? You remind me so of her, you know.'

'Judy Garland of the rainbow? Me?!'

She laughed. 'You even have her curls and little button nose. Only your eyes are different. When you look out from the stage with those embers of yours, you won't even have to sing and they'll hang on your every word. You have your mother's good looks, says your brother.'

'Is that what he says.'

'You're not exactly overjoyed to hear it.' 'When are we going to start singing?'

She said nothing for a moment. 'You're right, Juliette.' She stood up, picked up a thick folder from the table and began to leaf through it. 'Here it is.

Zing! Went The Strings Of My Heart! Judy Garland was your age when she sang it for the first time.'

'How do you know all this?'

She smiled. 'Music is my entire life, Juliette. From morning to night it's all I do.'

'I want to study music, too!'

'That's not a bad idea, I think. But now I'm going to play and you're going to sing.' She shoved the sheetmusic into my hands and sat down at the piano again and played a chord. 'First we'll read the text. Do you understand English? No? Maybe a little?'

I'll help you with the translation, because you have to know what you're singing. Every song tells a story, Juliette, and you can have the best voice in the world, if you forget to tell the story, you might as well just keep still.'

She read, I read, she translated.

'Now it's up to you, Juliette. Sing it as if it were your story. How you go about doing that is something you'll discover later. And if that doesn't happen, then no ship has been lost. Not everyone is born to stand on the stage.' She smiled. 'I can hear you thinking. Whether you can, when you'll find out. Don't rack your brain about it, Juliette. It won't bring you an inch closer to finding out.'

She pressed softly against my stomach. 'There's your answer,' she said.

I stood up, my legs slightly apart. I straightened my back, breathing calmly. Think of the story. You love someone and you tell him so. It can't be that hard.

Rosa nodded. Was I ready? The first notes.

Father should see me standing here. Born to shine, that's Juliette. I have to practice first, pa. Practice a lot, says Rosa.

Father.

Would that I could.

One more time. My arms around his waist, my face against his chest. Just five minutes.

I placed my hands on my stomach.

Wanted so much to see him for five minutes. Just that.

And although it was me singing, I no longer existed. I had become a big void. A void that cried and laughed. That was angry for what was, what wasn't. And afraid.

That too.

But above all, one that loved.

At ten o'clock sharp Rosa closed the fallboard.

'Two hours is more than enough. Now your voice has to rest; drink some tea before you go to bed. I'll give you some to take with you.'

Louis was waiting for us in the living room. He stood up when we came in. He looked at us inquisitively. 'And?'

Rosa nodded. 'I'll do it.'

She had tested me, and I had passed. Louis clapped his hands. 'Splendid, Juliette.'

'I want to study music,' I said.

'Why not?' He laughed, slides the chair on which he had been sitting back under the table, and smoothed the wrinkles from the tablecloth.

Suddenly I saw how at home he was in that room.

We said our goodbyes. First she hugged me, then Louis. Blushing, he jumped on his bike. He waved at her like a sailor going off to sea for a year. Only when she was a red dot in her door did he turn to look where he was going.

'You'll see her again on Sunday,' I said.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'She's coming to school to give music lessons.' 'You're happy about that.'

'She's the best,' he said, dryly. As if she weren't also the sweetest and the prettiest.

'You told her I look like mother.'

'As if you didn't know that yourself! And no, you don't have her character, you're an angel. Do you think I'm mocking you? Far from it, Juliette. And not only are you an angel, you sound like one. Father was right, you're going to be a star.'

'Oh, Louis.'

'Hang on to your handlebars or you'll run me into the creek.'

'I really want to study music, Louis, like Rosa. The new school year doesn't start until September, she says, and if ma hasn't found work by then, she can take over my job at the baker.'

'Did Rosa say that?'

I nodded. 'When are you getting married?' He almost fell off his bike. 'Married?'

I laughed. 'You're in love with her, Louis. If I were you ..., ' I started to say. 'But you're not me.'

He stopped at the corner of our street. I rode on alone.

Mother was asleep when I got home. As quietly as I could I went upstairs. I got into bed even more quietly.

Everything or nothing, and preferably everything. My life had started again.

Doctor Franssen

The next morning I walked whistling into the kitchen.

Mother was already up. 'You came home so late last night. How was it?' And here I thought she wasn't the least bit interested. I smiled happily at her.

I would tell her everything. About my strong jaws, how I looked like her and that I wanted to go to Hasselt in September. 'Brilliant, ma.'

She did not return my smile.

'Lucky thing that you didn't know anything about my troubles, or it would have spoiled your evening, but you had only just left when it started, first my bowels, and then my stomach. Doctor Franssen came straight away. He prescribed something that made me feel somewhat better, thankfully. And I need to tell you something else. You won't want to hear it, but I'm going to tell you nevertheless. I don't think those singing lessons are a good idea, Juliette. I sit here inside these four walls all week, and then I really need my Sunday evenings, it's that or go mad. You need to understand that, child.'

I stared at her, dismayed. Couldn't she for once just be my mother? Surely it wouldn't be that hard for her? Just listen and be happy for me?

'I'm going to work,' I said. 'You haven't eaten anything.' 'I won't drop dead.'

'No,' she said, 'You won't drop dead. Not you.' At which she lifted her eyes and sighed deeply, just in case I hadn't understood that she would.

Always her.

I went outside. The streetlamps were still on. The day hadn't yet even begun and I was already on my way. If I now just kept walking. If only I could.

Doctor Franssen was one of the first customers.

'Your mother didn't feel well last night,' he said, gravely. I shrugged my shoulders.

'She still misses your father very much.' 'So do I.'

'I know that, child.'

'But she doesn't! She should start by opening her eyes, doctor Franssen! And now she even wants to take my singing lessons away from me. But that is not going to happen!'

He frowned. 'You know what it is, Juliette, your mother isn't the kind of person who can sit at home all day. She should have something to keep her busy. I'll see what I can do.'

Late that evening he came to our house again. I was in bed, but I could hear them talking and the next morning I found out what about. Apparently the singing lessons were good for me, said mother, and, well, you see, she had given it serious consideration. I needn't worry, I could continue taking them. And she had a job. At the chemist's they needed a cleaning lady. Doctor Franssen had put in a good word for mother. That had apparently helped, as she could start in the morning.

I couldn't wait to tell Louis. He came into the bakery a little before eight. 'You look happy,' he said.

'She found a job. At last, Louis.' 'For as long as it lasts.'

I almost sent him away without his bread.

Happiness

Every day that followed mother got up when I did, made coffee for me and made sandwiches for Mia, after which she woke her up and helped get her ready for school. Every evening when I came home, dinner was on the table and it smelled and tasted as it had done when father was still alive and, in addition to being the liveliest, the cleverest, and the most beautiful woman, mother was also the best cook for miles around. In between times she pulled down the old wallpaper in the living room and kitchen in a flurry, and she needed barely two evenings to hang the new paper. Should have done that long ago, she said; she got the vase out of the cupboard, filled it with water and lilacs from the garden, and soon enough the house smelled as if father had never died. That I had laid claim to her Sunday evenings hadn't bothered her for some time now. There was a better class of folk on the dance floor on Saturday evenings, Juliette, if only she had known that before, true friends, Juliette, people who cared about you, they still existed and they taught her all the dances of the world, she would never learn them all, there were so many.

I looked forward to Sundays all week. Louis was always waiting for me on the corner of our street. When I told him that I knew the way and wasn't afraid of the dark, he at first didn't know what to say.

'You have no idea how well you sing.'

'As if you hear what I sing,' I laughed. 'When are you finally going to kiss her?'

'There's a time and place for everything, Juliette.'

May arrived.

'Mary's month,' said mother; she took a pail of water and a sponge and cleaned all the pigeon dung from the grotto in the garden.

'And now let's pray,' she said, 'as hard as we can. It's time.' 'What should we pray for?' I asked.

'For our happiness,' said mother, 'now that we've finally found it. That the powers on high don't take it away from us again.'

The entire month of May she recited the rosary and lit one candle after the other at the statue of the Virgin Mary. In the meantime she continued waking up with a song on her lips, putting the most delicious dinners on the table, and talking ceaselessly about who came into the chemist's. Every Saturday evening she put on her best dress, left for the dance hall in a good mood and returned home in an even better mood.

Until that one Saturday. She was home at eleven.

'Men, Juliette.' She sighed deeply. All of them were equally bad. And no, I wasn't to ask any more questions, I wouldn't understand anyway.

Someone had hurt her. This was something new for mother, she had clearly lost her bearings. No big speeches or gestures, no drama this time. She sounded genuinely unhappy. I didn't want to know who had hurt her like that, whether she had loved him as much as father. That was impossible, of course, so why would I ask that question.

'Come mother,' I said, 'go to bed. Tomorrow things will already be half better.'

Father's words, I had heard him say them so many times before. To my surprise they had just rolled off my tongue. I can depend on you, father would say, and that he had known it all along.

The next day was Sunday. She sat in her dressing gown at table when I left for the bakery, and when I came home she was still sitting there.

'Do you want me to stay home tonight, ma? We can play cards, it will take your mind off things.'

Ah, my child, you always look so forward to your lesson.

I'll crawl into bed on time and tomorrow I'll be at the chemist's fresh and rested. They'll have to do a lot worse to keep your mother down.'

She laughed.

Even though she sat there in her dressing gown, her slippers on her feet, hair unbrushed and anything but well-rested, she looked strong as an ox.

I laughed back.

'I believe you,' I said.

When I came home with my head full of music, she was sitting on the sofa with Mia on her lap. 'It's the child,' she said. 'There's something wrong with her.'

I say down next to Mia and put a hand to her forehead. 'She doesn't have a fever.'

'She may not have one now, but she may get one later. Just to be sure, I've notified doctor Franssen.' She nodded at Mia. 'Tell Juliette.'

'I'm coughing,' Mia coughed. It sounded pathetic. 'And she has a stomach ache,' said mother.

Half an hour later Mia had left everything she had in her behind in the toilet. 'She is sick,' said doctor Franssen. 'That is clear.'

As if she had won some big prize, mother beamed. But she hadn't won some big prize, Mia was sick. 'Probably a stomach flu,' said doctor Franssen.

'She still doesn't have a fever,' I said.

'Not everyone gets a fever with stomach flu. It would greatly surprise me if it was something else. There's a flu going around, and you know how susceptible children are. I'll give her something for the diarrhea.' He looked at mother. 'Let me know if it doesn't pass in a couple of days.'

'But you'll be coming around tomorrow?'

'A number of my other patients are home with high fever, and I have to visit them first.'

Mother nodded. 'Don't you worry, we'll be fine.'

I nodded. For once she was right. We had been fine for months now. We'd survive a flu, too.

A candle burned in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary all night long. For our happiness, said mother, so we don't lose it.

And when that candle went out, another took its place. And after that, another.

And then we lost our happiness anyway.

Celebration

For as long as Mia was sick, mother stayed at home during the day. Towards the evening she went to the chemist's, and I was there to take care of the little one. Not that Mia was a lot of work. She slept all day long, right through breakfast and the other meals.

'She has to eat, ma.'

'You shouldn't force a sick person to eat.' 'But surely you see it, too, ma.'

'Listen child, everything will be fine. As long as doctor Franssen doesn't panic, neither will we.'

Good thing he was there. He came every day, just after noon. I never saw him, but that didn't matter. As long as he kept an eye on Mia, so she wouldn't grow too weak.

That day I did see him.

The baker and his wife celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, we ate cake, we sang Happy Birthday and then we were given the rest of the day off.

It was raining when I stepped outside. 'Wait until it passes,' said the baker's wife. I shook my head.

'Mia is sick.' 'You're worried.'

'She's hardly eaten anything for some time now.'

The baker's wife nodded. 'Your mother needs you, run along now, child.' She cut out a big piece of the cake with her knife. 'Maybe your sister will eat this.'

I wrapped the cake in waxpaper and cycled home through the rain.

Doctor Franssen was there. Mother sat next to him, in her nicest clothes. There was a bottle of wine on the table. The bottle was empty, just as empty as the glasses that stood next to it.

Mother hadn't opened a bottle of wine since father died. Even when father was still alive, wine was only drunk on special occasions. There must be something to celebrate.

Was it doctor Franssen's birthday?

I gave him a friendly nod. 'Is the celebration for you?'

'That's very perceptive of you, Juliette,' said mother, with a grin on her face as wide as a barn door, 'it is indeed a celebration, because doctor Franssen has discovered what's wrong with Mia and it is perfectly curable.'

I was instantly elated. 'Oh, doctor Franssen,' I sighed.

He flashed a quick smile. 'I have a strong suspicion that she has an iron deficiency. I've drawn some blood and in a few days I'll have the results. Meanwhile she can start on the medication, and she'll be better all the sooner.'

He sounded so cheerful. He clearly had confidence in the diagnosis. If he did, then I would, too. 'Thank you, doctor Franssen,' I said, 'For all you do.'

'I'm just doing my duty, child. And speaking of duty, my next patient is waiting for me.' He looked at mother. 'If you'd like, you can ride with me as far as the chemist's. Juliette is here now.'

Mother nodded and stood up.

'You'll find your dinner on the counter, Juliette. The child is upstairs. Let her sleep.'

They drove off.

Let her sleep? Now that Mia was going to get better, she might be hungry. The piece of cake! I unwrapped it and put it on a plate. Excited, I went upstairs.

Mia wasn't in her bed.

She sat on the floor, against the wall. Trembling as if the world was ending. She looked at me, her eyes full of fear. I had no time to think.

What had happened, how bad it was. I pulled her up, put my arms around her. She kicked. In the air, hitting the cake. I howled. That it was me. Juliette. The world wasn't coming to an end, and neither was she.

Suddenly she ducked her head. As if something flew over it. Something that was about to crush her.

People could lose their minds from one moment to the next. But not Mia. Still I had my arms around her. Suddenly she stopped kicking and fighting. She closed her eyes, but she wasn't asleep, her breathing was too irregular for that.

Her long black hair was plastered against her cheeks, soaked in sweat. I brushed it out of her face, pushing it behind her ears. Her face was on fire. She had a fever, and I knew about fevers. A fever could be tamed.

My eyes flew about the room. On top of the wardrobe there was a small bottle of medicine, I reached for it. It had a label with a word printed on it that I didn't recognize. Laudanum. Mia had followed my gaze. For the briefest of moments a smile appeared on her face. Then at once her face was twisted by a cramp. She pressed her stomach, and pointed at the bottle. Was this the medicine that doctor Franssen had spoken of? The label said nothing about fever. I would find something downstairs. I wrapped my arms around Mia once more, put her in bed, and tucked her in. She immediately kicked the sheet off of her and gave me an angry look. She lunged for the bottle, started to open it. I grabbed it out of her hands, pushed her back down in bed, and tucked the sheet in so tightly that it would be some time before she got it loose again.

In less than a minute I was back.

She had slipped out from under the sheet. 'Cold,' she said, her teeth chattering.

I pulled the blanket off the bed, wrapped it around her and gave her the glass with the anti-fever medicine in it. With a single swipe of her hand she dashed it against the wall.

Dazed, I looked from the wet spot on the wall to the shards of glass on the floor. Then again at her. She had thrown the blanket off, wrapped her arms around her knees.

She was crying in long, heaving sobs. She was likely to choke on her own breath. Mother. She would listen to mother.

I wrapped my arms around Mia, laid her in bed.

'Listen, I'm going to get ma. And you're going to stay put in bed, okay?' I said it as calmly as I could, as I tucked the sheet under the mattress as tightly as I could.

'Don't be afraid,' I said, more for my own benefit than for hers, 'I'll be right back.'

As quietly as I could, I closed the door behind me. Straight away I ran down the stairs and outside. As if the devil were chasing me, I sprinted down the street, turned the corner, towards mother.

A person doesn't die that quickly

I stormed into the chemist's.

From behind his counter the chemist gaped at me in surprise. Next to him my mother stood wielding a dust cloth. 'Juliette?'

'It's Mia, ma.' I panted. From fear, from running, or both. 'You have to come, and right now. She has a fever and she's shivering like you wouldn't believe!'

Her face had gone as white as a sheet. 'High fever? How high? Is she still breathing?'

'Yes, ma, of course she's breathing,' I said.

'Have you already given her something?' asked the chemist.

I thought about the little bottle that was on the wardrobe above Mia's bed. It was still in my pocket. I took it out of my pocket and showed it to him. 'She wanted this desperately, but I wasn't sure if it was allowed.'

Mother grabbed it out of my hands and stuck it in her coat pocket. 'What are you doing?'

'Putting it away, of course. Before you drop it.' 'What is it?' asked the chemist.

'Something for her diarrhea, um, I've forgotten what it's called ...' 'The name's on the label,' I said. 'Lauda and something else.'

'Laudanum.' Surprised, he looked at mother. 'I remember when you came in with the prescription. But that was quite some time ago. Don't leave it lying around near that child, you know it does more harm than good.'

Mother nodded earnestly. 'I haven't used it for the longest time,' she said, as she put her coat on and button it up. The next moment she had her hand on the door handle.

'Why are you dawdling, Juliette.'

Mother threw open the bedroom door.

We were hit in the face by the stench of urine. Mia lay rolled up in the bed, but her gaze was fixed on a spot on the wall. In a single motion mother leaned down, wrapped Mia in her arms, and pulled her close. 'Oh my poor child,' she said, 'you are so very sick.' She looked at me. She smiled. The same way she had smiled when I told her that father was dead. A person doesn't die that quickly,

she had said. She had given Mia and me each a handkerchief. Then she had put the kettle on and coffee in the filter. When the water had reached a boil, she poured it over the coffee, and she kept on pouring until the filter overflowed and the coffee began to drip from the table to the floor. She had stood there looking at it, a smile on her face. Father will be happy, she said, we knew he wanted coffee when he had been to the café. She wouldn't be surprised if he had simply passed out after his umpteenth pint.

Louis had come in. His mouth was twisted with grief. And still mother continued to smile. They had given her the fright of her life, she said to Louis.

Maybe it was true. I would never forget the feeling of utter warmth that coursed through me at that moment. Any time now the door would fly open and father would be standing there. And even if he was three sheets to the wind, he'd be coming into the room on his own steam. Maybe he was already in the hallway, he just had to hang up his hat, quickly pass a comb through his hair?

I looked at Louis.

On his face it could clearly be read that father was still dead. And then he said as much, too. That father had turned blue, and that mother shouldn't even think about having an open casket. Because there are certain things that you just don't do to a person, and this was one of them. And if mother didn't understand that, he'd be happy to explain it.

'Hurry now, Juliette,' said mother. 'Surely you can smell that she has wet the bed. Go on, get some warm water. Soap and a towel. And something for the fever.'

Her smile was gone. And I knew why. Mia never wet her bed. Mia never smelled bad. Mia never saw the world coming to an end.

Father would never forgive me. I ran out of the room.

Ask and you shall receive

We washed Mia. Afterwards I soaked a washcloth in cold water, folded it in half and laid it on her forehead. In the meantime the shivering had stopped. Just like that, it had stopped.

'Hopefully she'll sleep through the night now,' mother said. 'Meanwhile we'll recite a rosary.'

Carefully we crept downstairs. In the kitchen mother lit the candle in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, took up her rosary, and wrapped it around her fingers. 'Hail Mary, full of grace,' she began, 'the Lord is with You, sit down next to me, Juliette, blessed are You above all other women, go on, pray with me, it will do you good.'

It was only in moments of the direst need that mother brought out her rosary. When she had finally realized that father was dead and a miraculous resurrection was out of the question, things had been no different. First she had cried for an hour, then she had blown her nose and given each of us a handkerchief. We're going to recite a rosary, she had said.

My throat had been full of tears; how was I supposed to pray. Mother had looked at me disapprovingly. You won't help father that way, Juliette, go on, child, close your eyes and do your duty.

I had closed my eyes. As mother prayed out loud, I saw father lying there on the ground, his eyes open, gaze directed upwards. As if there was nothing to be seen there, that's how he was looking.

Where is pa now, I had asked Louis after the rosary.

You shouldn't wonder about such things, Juliette. I want to know, I said.

He had put his arm around me. Our pa is ours and we are his, the same flesh and blood, Juliette, and whoever is of the same flesh and blood cannot be separated, that is forever. And forever is longer than human understanding can fathom.

Why do we have to pray so hard, then?

He had shrugged his shoulders. For mother it was like doing homework, whoever prayed the most, got the most points, or something, and whoever got the most points went straight to heaven. She never did have an answer for the question concerning the poor wretches who could hardly count or write. Did they have to stand in the corner for all of eternity? Surely the powers on high could not be that cruel, said Louis.

So it didn't matter whether we prayed or not?

We live in a free country, Juliette. As long as mother gets something out of it, then she should continue to do it.

'Pray, Juliette,' said mother, 'and loud enough that they can hear it on high.' 'Full of grace,' I said, ten times louder than before.

'And pray a bit more cheerfully, Juliette. We don't want them thinking we're doing it against our will.'

More cheerfully? How could mother ask something like that. People who recited a rosary were not happy. Except for mother, then. There was an exception to every rule.

'Take my word for it, Juliette. The Lord is with You. Blessed art Thou, come on, Juliette, join in, and loudly, I said.'

'Above all women,' I chimed in. And off we went, as loud as we could. The Hail Marys resounded through the house and in my head and slowly but surely they supplanted all other thought.

Ask and you shall receive.

Be still now, little one

Before I went to bed, I looked in on Mia.

She was sitting straight up in bed. Her hands dangled at her side like they hung on strings. A doll that had lost its way. With a look of fear on her face as if the world was once again coming to an end. Just then she began to sob. Just like that, without warning, tears rolling from her eyes. And there were so many that for a moment there I thought Mia was the cleverest one of us all, that she knew something that we could not comprehend with our silly common sense.

‘Mia,’ I pleaded.

I held out my hands, she pushed them away. She hit herself hard in the stomach.

‘Little one,’ I said. ‘Be still now, my little one.’

There they were again, father’s words. Way too loose-fitting, a coat that was several sizes too big.

She opened her mouth wide. A noise came out. As if there was a cat inside her, a cat that yowled as if it was slowly being suffocated. I took her hands, pulling them away from her stomach. I had to see it. Whether there was something moving there beneath her skin. Something like a cat.

That I hoped it was the case. That it was a cat. And not Mia. He shouldn’t have asked so much of me.

I leaned toward her, my face almost touching hers.

As softly as I could, I folded my hands over her head. ‘Be still now, my little one.’ I whispered. It was the only way I could utter our father’s words again.

The door opened and mother was in the room. In a single motion she pushed me aside, took Mia out of bed, pulled her onto her lap, and held her tight. ‘It’s not possible, she mumbled,’ ‘Not so quickly.’

What in God’s name was she talking about? ‘But I see what I see.’

She took a small bottle and a sugar cube out of her pocket, unscrewed the top, put a few drops on the sugar cube and pushed it into Mia’s mouth.

‘Suck on it,’ I heard her command.

Mia sucked, and how. As if she were sucking up life itself. Her mouth moved ever so slightly. I saw her swallow. And then again. Then she opened her eyes. She gave mother a look of utter elation.

Mia seemed to have come back from the dead. And that wasn’t possible.

Not in a few seconds. Even in the Bible it took them at least a couple of days. I looked at the bottle in mother’s hands; it had no label. ‘What is this, some kind of magic potion?’

'Something for the fever. I didn't think it would hurt to try.'

We both looked at Mia. He eyes were closed. 'It's working,' mother said with a sigh. 'Finally. Tomorrow she'll be a lot better.'

And then it happened. Mia stopped breathing.

Hole in the ground

My legs gave out beneath me.

'Come child, get up.' Mother took hold of me and pushed me into a chair. 'We have to stay calm,' she said, as she sat down next to me.

Mia had stopped breathing and mother was talking about staying calm? My legs began to tremble again, but they wouldn't give out. I stood up, took Mia by her shoulders, and shook her, come little one, breathe, breathe, I say.

She made a sound.

As if she was sucking in all the air in the house at once. As if she wanted to try it one last time. That I dared even think it might be the very last time. But look at her lying there, her arms over her body, her eyes closed, she didn't move an inch. She looked like every dead person I had ever viewed. It was her skin that made me think of the dead. No living person had skin like that. It had changed colour, like the day that just won't dawn. I bowed my head down to the tiled floor beneath my feet. The tiled floor upon which we had kneeled to recite the rosary. I kept staring at that floor. I wanted it to open up, so I could disappear into the darkness down below. Never had I longed for anything more than that hole in the ground.

'Juliette,' said mother. 'Don't just stand there. Fetch doctor Franssen. He has to come right away, Juliette. Now. Or else.'

Or else what?

'I'll never forgive him.'

I ran outside at once, into the darkness.

Dancing

I had only told half my story when doctor Franssen pulled his car out of the garage.

He was shocked when he saw Mia. 'I don't understand it. Yesterday she seemed to be on the mend.'

Mother took out a handkerchief and began to cry hard. 'I want my little girl back, doctor.'

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. 'We all want nothing more. As I said, I don't understand this. Not at all. I am taking her to the hospital straight away.'

'To the hospital?' I repeated in a timid voice. 'In the middle of the night?' 'It is very serious,' said doctor Franssen. 'She's in a coma, god knows what illness she has.'

Mother sighed. 'I'll fetch some clothes for her at once.'

'No time for that,' said doctor Franssen. 'We have to leave now.' But she had already turned and run up the stairs

It was pitch dark outside.

Doctor Franssen laid Mia gently in the back seat of the car. He spread a blanket over her.

Mother got in.

There was no room for me.

'I want to go with you,' I said. 'No room,' said mother.

Her voice sounded much too light. As if she was going out dancing and all the names of all the men had already been entered into her dance card.

'We'll take good care of her, Juliette. In the meantime, you should start praying.'

'Praying?!' I shook my head. The last time I had prayed enough to cover every possible disaster that could occur during one person's life.

'Just do as I say,' she said. 'You'll see that it helps.' They drove off; I watched them go.

Okay, then. I'll do as she says. But I wasn't going to sit in a chair reciting the rosary until they came back. I needed to think of something stronger.

Scherpenheuvel

All that night I lay awake. I got up at first light, washed, made a couple of sandwiches, stuffed them in a backpack. I put my coat on, buckled my shoes, and pulled the door closed behind me.

Moments later I was in the shop.

I had to go to Scherpenheuvel, I told the baker's wife, but tomorrow I'd be back, as early as she wanted me and for as long as she wanted me. She said it was fine, and that I had to tell my brother. Maybe he would go with me?

Louis knew that Mia was sick. The last time he had come in for his bread I had started to tell him. Did he understand that mother and I were just about at our wits' end? Don't spoil her so, was his

answer, show her a little tough love and you'll see: the next day she'll be healed. I almost threw his bread in his face. Why don't you come show us how it's done, I said angrily. He had looked at me with his mouth agape, his money in his hand, his body poised to leave. That he thought more about Rosa than he did about us, was one thing. But you can be so over the moon in love, you still don't forget your family. He had enough sense to know where he was needed most, I wasn't about to rub his nose in it. Let him follow his own plan, I'd do the same.

And now I was going to tell him that I was going to Scherpenheuvel? I don't even want him to come with me.

She was his sister, too.

Five minutes later I rang his doorbell. He opened the door, he had his coat on, his book bag in his hand.

He smiled broadly. 'Did you come to congratulate me? Who told you? Oh, you don't know yet. I asked her, Juliette. Popped the question. Yes, Rosa. Who else? Why do you look so dismayed? Aren't you happy for me?' He smiled even more broadly. 'Don't worry, your time will come.'

My time had arrived long ago. 'She's in the hospital.'

He turned white as a sheet. 'You mean Mia?? How is she?'

I shrugged my shoulders. Showed him my backpack. 'I'm leaving for Scherpenheuvel.'

'What in the name of heaven are you going to do there?' 'What do you think,' I said.

He shook his head. 'Have a little more faith, Juliette. The doctors can do an awful lot these days. They'll do everything to nurse Mia back to health.'

'You didn't see how sick she is. How could you have, you didn't have any time for that.' The tears were building up behind my eyes, but he wouldn't see them.

He sighed. 'I'll go with you, if you want it so much.' 'I'm going alone.'

'But...' 'Alone,' I said.

I saw him look at my feet. 'Surely not in those shoes?' 'I don't have any others.'

He stood there, with his hand on the latch, ready to pull the door closed behind him. As if he were someone else. Because if Louis were Louis, then he would have put his coat on; come Juliette, he would have said, follow me, I know the way. And I would have followed him, because I don't know the way.

I walked out of the village.

One-way trip

It was thirty kilometers to Scherpenheuvel, the baker's wife had said, I should count on eight hours of walking, including rest stops.

And then back, I had said.

She had shook her head. A pilgrimage was a one-way trip, Juliette. Getting there was difficult enough. Attend a mass in the basilica, light a candle, and then take the bus home. Everyone did it like that.

What everyone else did, wouldn't be enough.

Again, she shook her head. Don't expect miracles from the powers on high. But I do, I had said.

It started to rain as I left the village. And it didn't stop raining. I pulled my hood over my head and followed sign after sign, first to Diest, then to Scherpenheuvel. My shoes were soaked, and it wasn't long before my feet had become blocks of ice. And on my blocks of ice I walked on, as I lost track of time, just as I had all thought of a miracle; I had become the miracle, for my legs kept moving forward even though I had no feet. And they kept moving because there was but one way, and that was forward. As long as the road went forward, Mia would not die.

Ten meters before the basilica the police stopped me. Had I run away from home? It's for Mia, I said, so she'll get well again. This weather isn't fit for a dog, they said. Then it's sure to help, I said. Absolutely, they nodded in agreement, wrapping me in a blanket, rubbing some warmth back into me and pouring me a steaming hot cup of coffee. You made it, they said. That's more than enough.

I have to go back, I wanted to say. But in the meanwhile my teeth had begun to chatter hard from the cold and the rain.

No, no, they said. A pilgrimage is always one way.

Candle, I stammered.

It's already burning, they said. Everything will be all right. And that they would take me home.

Rainbow

It took me a while to undo my shoelaces, the rain had made them so stiff. I put newspaper in my shoes and placed them on the mat to dry. Carefully I removed my socks. It hurt. No wonder, my feet were covered in blisters, some of which had already burst. I dabbed the fluid and blood that came out of the blisters and disinfected the wounds.

An hour later mother was still not home. I stood on the threshold and looked outside. It had stopped raining. As if the miracle had decided to show itself at that moment, a rainbow appeared in the distance. It hung there in all its colorful glory, right under my nose.

The powers on high had finally decided to take action.

I went back inside. It was dark. There was a floor lamp next to the sofa. I stumbled as I reached for the switch.

There was the rattle of glass on glass.

At my feet lay mother's old handbag. Was she using that again? I bent down. What were those bottles? I counted them. Ten, eleven, twelve—I looked inside her bag. Two more! On most of them there was a label. Laudanum? The stuff that Mia had wanted so badly.

Fourteen bottles of laudanum. Why so many? And why were they in her old handbag?

Had mother stolen them? But why would she do that? Had she hoped that laudanum would help Mia?

What in god's name had mother been thinking?

I grabbed a number of the bottles and put them in my pockets. I ran out of the house on my bare, swollen feet, around the corner, until I stood before the chemist's.

I rang the bell. Above me a window opened, the head of the chemist appeared.

'I need help,' I panted.

In his dressing gown he let me in. 'Child, we were already asleep,' he said. And that I had to calm down, because he couldn't understand a word I was saying.

'It's Mia,' I said, still panting. 'Mother ...' 'What about your mother?'

I rummaged in my pockets, took out the bottles and pressed them into his hands.

'Heavens, child, what is this?' He turned around and went into the shop, where he held the bottles under the light. 'They come from here, but how...' He opened a couple of the bottles, smelled them. 'Laudanum? So much? No one could use this much in an entire lifetime, let alone in a couple of weeks...' His voice faltered. 'Surely she didn't give this to your sister?'

His face had turned grey.

'Your sister has to go to the hospital, and right away!' 'Doctor Franssen took her there last night.'

He grabbed the telephone. 'I'll call them right away, maybe they can save her with an antidote. I hope it's not too late, child, I hope it from the bottom of my heart. And I'm going to call the police.'

The police?

'I'm sorry to have to say it, but your mother has committed a serious crime, child.'

A serious crime?

He looked at me sadly. Before I could say that he was making a terrible mistake, he was already on the line.

I ran outside. I glanced up. The rainbow was gone. What was I thinking, that it would be visible despite the darkness? Yes, that was what I had thought. The powers on high were capable of a great deal, mother always told us. So was she – but not of a serious crime. Her life revolved around Mia, if it was up to her Mia would live to be a hundred, instead of barely eight.

Barely eight.

I couldn't stay there. At home the front door stood wide open.

For food and drink

'First they let you wait in the hall for hours. Just when you begin to wonder whether they've forgotten about you, there they are. Are you the mother? Do you want to see her? What do you think, you say. Is she all better now, you want to ask, but you say nothing, because they take you by the arm and they support you as you walk into the room, as if you aren't capable of walking on your own. But you can walk. And you look at that arm and you know right away that something serious has happened. I'll come back tomorrow, you want to say, then the worst will be over and I'll take her home with me. But you don't say a thing, because you see that there are far too many people in the room. You see your child lying on the bed. Suddenly you hear the room go quiet. They all turn to look at you. Your child is an angel now, they say. As if you're in luck, that's how they say it, and then you look and you look, but you don't see it. You see only your child lying there and you can think of only one thing, that you didn't bring her into the world for that.'

I look at mother, stunned.

'I don't want to know,' I say, miserably.

As if I weren't there. She just looked through me.

'They take you to your child, you touch her and you feel how warm she still is. For a moment you think that they are all mistaken. But suddenly doctor Franssen is standing next to you and he asks you how you are. And he asks it so kindly that you start to weep. You want to sit down, because your legs are shaking so badly it's not funny, but you remain standing there, crying your eyes out. Wouldn't you rather go outside, they ask. Now you're angry. You'll stay there as long as you want, you say. You can't take your eyes off your child as they pull a sheet over her. Right away you see that the sheet is for an adult. Don't you have a smaller one, you want to ask, but you can't say it, and you start to curse because you can't keep crying, you stumble over the sheet and they grab you and before you know it you're standing in the hall and they put a glass of water in your hand and tell you that you have to go home. There's another child waiting for you there, they say.'

Mother began to weep. And she cried so loudly that it wouldn't be long before the ceiling came crashing down. My head began to throb from all that racket. I should be crying, too. Mia was dead and there weren't even any tears behind my eyes. I didn't understand myself anymore.

Mother opened her arms. 'Come here, Juliette,' she said.

Juliette was the child who was at home and waiting for her. I stayed where I was. By the front door. On the mat.

Mia was dead. And that one there, with her arms open wide and her face holier than the Virgin Mary's under her glass dome, she could twist it any way she wanted, but it was all her fault. And she would twist and turn things until in the end it wasn't her fault at all.

I could turn around and leave. There was no one left to keep me in this house any more. And I would have left, for good this time. If mother hadn't started in on my shoes. My wet shoes, that stood next to me on the mat.

'In the name of God, Juliette, what have you been up to now?!' 'I went on foot to Scherpenheuvel.'

She began to sob even harder. 'Oh, child.' 'And it didn't help,' I said.

I remained standing where I was and waited. But she didn't say she was proud of me. And she didn't ask whether it had been difficult. It had rained all day, but Juliette had walked and walked. Until she had arrived. 'Those were the only shoes I had,' I said. 'And now I don't have any. Except my pink ones. But those are for dancing. And I will never dance again.'

Mother stopped crying. 'Of course you will.'

I looked at her, stunned. That she, in her immense grief, didn't understand that I would never again be happy. 'Mia is dead.'

'I know,' she said, sobbing again.

The way she sat there on her chair, hands in her lap, as the tears rolled down her cheeks in great floods. Beautiful on the outside, rotten on the inside. But in the end justice would prevail, because the police would punish her. They could be here any moment, they would arrest her and take her away.

And when they had left, I would go to Louis. To begin with he would hold me tight. From now on I'll take care of you, he would say. First we would cry, hard. Then we would bury Mia. We would pick out a small, white casket for her, one they would make especially for her, and before they nailed the lid shut, we would give her a little crucifix. Everyone would wish us luck, just as they had done when father died, and now, too, they would tell us to carry on as best we could.

But I didn't want an existence in which I constantly had to pretend as if life went on as usual. Because it didn't. It didn't go forward, but backward. And it would continue to do so until everything was gone and all I had left was loss.

'The police are coming for you,' I said.

She stopped crying. 'What did you say? Don't be a fool, child.' She tilted her head and wiped the tears away with her handkerchief. With her holy face she'd be able to convince the police of anything, how Mia had got sicker and sicker, through no fault of hers. And the police would believe her. Just like everyone else always believed her.

Suddenly I saw that she was wearing her silk scarf. The one she always wore when she was dressed to the nines. Mother always wanted to look her best, even when her child lay on her death-bed.

It made my eyes sting gazing at her neck like that.

I knew what had to happen. And that it would not be hard at all. Father had done it with his chickens when they came down with the snots. Because they were better off dead than alive, he had told Mia and me. They were rotten inside, they could never get better. He would do it so quickly that they wouldn't even know they were dying. And we had to stop our yammering, immediately. That we should save our tears for the really bad things in life.

'I'm starting to believe that you're not even grieving,' I looked at her, shocked.

'I always did think that you were jealous of Mia, Mia with her film-star hair and her eternal smile. Whether she's dead or not, Mia will always be here, Juliette, and she will always remain the prettiest and the sweetest.'

Something tore apart inside me, it had to be something like that. I must have thrown myself at her, my hands out in front of me, so she went down. And I went down with her. With my head on her breasts I heard her screaming that I had gone completely mad and she would have me locked up for the rest of my life. Just as she had deprived Mia of everything, had caused father's heart to burst, and had driven Louis out of the house, so too she would destroy me. I sat on top of her. As she stomped, kicked, scratched, and flailed, I took her by the throat and I tried to squeeze the noise out of her body. Even then she wouldn't be still. In a flash I caught sight of the bread knife on the kitchen table. For food and drink, oh Lord, for our daily bread we thank you, oh Lord.

Two arms lifted me up.

'Come with me,' a voice said.

I looked back at mother. I saw how her gaze fell on nothing in particular. Not on them, not on me, not on the ceiling, not on the floor beneath her. She looked as if the world had once and for all gone utterly askew, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could make it right again.