

Our mother is the only one wearing a hat and sunglasses. A black hat with a broad, floppy brim. She totters through the village on high heels and we have to follow, hand in hand, in our baby-pink frocks. My sister's dress is too long and mine is too short; both are sized for 4-year-olds. When Mother walks through the village, she does so on clacking heels, like a queen, while we trudge behind her in our sandals. Dirt gathers under our toenails, but our faces shine in the evening light and our heads are bedecked with satin ribbons. The shopping bag bumps against Mother's knee with every step and we do our best to repress our laughter, because if we laugh: no playground for us.

The people's eyes waft over our shoulders like the wind. We lift our chins proudly, like Mother taught us.

Our village is very beautiful. We have pruned hedges, burgeoning flowerbeds, gleaming windows. Expensive porcelain figurines on the steps, majestic trees and metal garden sheds. Listing the treasures of the village out loud would produce a gorgeous litany:

pergolas

pale woodstain

climbing roses

twining ivy

leadlight windows

the curdled blood of saint someone-or-other

At night we're the little mice from the story book who won't go to sleep. We put on dark coats and creep quietly down the main road, avoiding the light falling onto the narrow pavement from this or that window, and jumping at the sound of water gushing abruptly from the sprinklers.

Our route takes us past the church to the edge of the woods. Two orange lanterns are glowing, and tonight so is the moon. At home we drew straws to see which of us gets to go first on the swing, so we don't fight and disturb the silence. While one of us swings back and forth, the other digs holes in the sand and covers them with sticks.

At home, Mother shuffles barefoot over the grey carpet that has lain in our apartment from day one, and which we sometimes secretly lift at the corner in order to sniff at the crumbling glue. The carpet is our world. We garnish it with daisy heads and poke pine needles into the short, bristly pile. My sister presses her cheek to the floor and tells me about a ship sailing to a magical island where the flowers grow as tall as trees and a blade of grass is as thick as your arm. We debate whether we ought to be afraid, but we aren't. We find a morsel and share it between us; our food will have to last us a while. There's no such thing as thirst on this island, until Mother brings us pale strawberry juice.

On the kitchen table there's a cloth that feels royally smooth to the touch.

On the cloth there's a tin of fish.

Watch, I'll show you!

Mother puts her finger through the ring pull and slowly peels back the lid.

Fish is good for us, says Mother, and tasty too.

We scatter breadcrumbs and splashes of red sauce.

After dinner, Mother turns on the television.

Watch closely, girls! she says.

We see other children in other houses.

Poor things, says Mother, those rooms are far too big for just one child. And we feel sorry for the children, who are driven through town in black cars and who have heaps of toys instead of sticks and sand.

It's quiet in our apartment. Mother is working, resting or sleeping, and we know how to keep ourselves busy.

For instance: we sit amid the hopeless clutter between our beds and imagine a campfire. My sister rustles baking paper, I toss a pair of tights into the flames. Then I hold out my arms, palms to the fire. The blaze keeps us warm, and keeps wild animals away.

For instance: we weave a spider's web of multicoloured yarn between our beds, and a stuffed toy serves as prey, twitching pitifully in its motley prison until one of us pounces. We enlarge our realm, stretching lengths of wool from window to door, from chair to wardrobe, from lampshade to radiator. Too late, we realise that we can hardly move either; we crawl along the floor in search of further prey, finding a bald doll, a fire engine that we both hate, a damp paintbrush, a shoe we've outgrown. The web quivers like crazy; the spiders are fighting over which of them gets the next victim, and each wins in turn, first this one, then the next. They secretly resurrect their devoured prey to stop the game from ending too soon.

Bellies full, we try to lie down side by side on one of the beds. Wool scratches our cheeks, our arms, our necks, we twist and turn until we're half-comfortable and then we flex our fingers to share secret messages in sign language.

We imagine that we're really our neighbours' daughters and that we're only pretending to be our mother's children for her sake. The neighbour has a big garden that we can look down on from our room. She has a cat, a kitchen from which enchanting aromas emanate, visitors, a weekly appointment at the hairdresser's, no children of her own, no husband, a washing line, a pear picker on

a long pole, a garden hose, more visitors, sweet-smelling detergent, a hairnet for her curlers, slippers in various colours, an arm in a sling, now healed.

Our make-believe runs out of steam.

We pluck at the wool and watch the lampshade wobble, we worry that we might get electrocuted, we have a groaning competition, we jab each other in the ribs with our fingers, one of us screams, the other one screams.

We hear the creak of the door handle. Mother has that look on her face; our hearts pound in fear.

We have to undo this tangle at once.

We have to wind up the yarn into balls.

We have to learn to behave like normal children.

We mustn't disturb her when she's resting.

We won't be getting anything to drink.

We mustn't kick up a fuss, what did we expect?

We have to go and kneel in different corners.

We decide to hone our skills and weave webs of air in future.

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My sister's father is a painter who threw himself off a bridge.

It's Sunday, and we've gone for a walk in the woods. We visit her father week after week, because Mother only knows this one route.

Take a good look, says Mother, and hold hands like good girls!

The water thunders below us. The wooden bridge is long and narrow; our noses barely reach the railings, our gazes wander into the woods.

My sister's father's death is an ambient roar.

Well? says Mother, turning to face me.

My father tore my mother's skirt from her hips in a back alley and is also dead.

Our fathers are made of words.

We kneel on the floor, dizzy from the nail polish. Mother is lying on soft cushions.

We smooth the wool blanket over her legs.

Do your best, girls!

Our dresses are sized for 7-year-olds, my sister's hair is pinned back tight. We wield our brushes deftly, we've long since stopped fumbling and getting polish on her skin.

Mother wants garnet. I take her right hand, my sister her left, and we start with the thumbs.

Stop! says Mother, and we wipe the garnet off.

Burgundy, says Mother.

My sister takes her left hand, I take her right, and we start with the thumbs.

Mother's eyes are closed. We paint in small, delicate strokes and blow the polish dry on each finger, there's time.

The rain drums on the windowpane, keeping us indoors this Sunday. Once our work is done, we sit in a witch's circle of nail polish bottles and softly recite:

garnet

burgundy

anthurium

fleur de pêcher

metallic bloom

We chuckle quietly, leave Mother sleeping and go out into the world. Our world is the bed. We make blister packs crackle and savour the sound and the fact that we've lit a small but lovely fire. To pass the time we get undressed and count our moles. If we had children, our children would have twenty-three brown dots, and we rub our bellies together and try to make a spark until we hear rustling outside and quickly transform ourselves back into good little girls.

The big day is here. Mother makes fresh coffee but it's too early; it goes cold, she pours it away, looks at the clock. We adjust the plates and cups on the table, check the cleanliness of our fingernails, try to be well-behaved little girls.

We know how to keep secrets.

We mustn't tell the lady that we're princesses and that Mother reaches for the stars when she's in the closet.

We mustn't contradict Mother when she tells the lady that our nutritious fish is always served hot, because that's what the lady wants to hear.

We must be polite while our guest is here, we must say what our guest expects us to say.

We invent names:

Mia

Clara

Claudia

Magdalena

are our very best friends who come after school every day to play with us, who share their toys with us and invite us to their homes.

We replace Magdalena with Sarah.

We replace Clara with Carmen.

We replace Mia with Petra.

We get in a muddle and agree on Anna and Susanne.

We grow fidgety because Mother keeps scratching her legs.

We're so quiet, we hear the church clock ringing the hour.

Mother jumps to her feet and makes another pot of coffee. The doorbell rings, we're allowed to open it and say good morning.

Good morning!

Good morning!



We shake hands.

The lady is fat and has a stripey handbag. She leaves her shoes on, and glances in our mirror and our living room on the way past.

Would you like to see our bedroom? we ask.

We open the door and point proudly at our freshly made beds.

Very nice, says the lady. Then she drops into one of the chairs in our kitchen.

Mother places sugar and milk in front of her along with the biscuits from the blue packet, which she has artfully arranged in several layers on our nicest plate.

Please, help yourself, says Mother.

Skinny as we are, we sit down on the same chair and watch the lady take a notebook out of her bag.

She talks about things we don't understand.

Our mother listens to her words intently.

Just for fun, we're asked to open our mouths wide and show the lady our teeth.

They're as white as snow.

The lady writes in her book.

My girls! says Mother, gently stroking our hair.

They're still growing, she says.

They're often out in the fresh air.

We wonder if we're allowed to talk about the woods, but we decide it's safer to say nothing.

Watching the lady gives us plenty to do. We think she isn't dressed well and that she doesn't smell very nice either. But we like her pen, which sweeps over the pad with soft scratches like an enchanted broom. Her handwriting is so big that she has to keep turning the page and she soon fills half the book, even though she talks a lot and Mother hardly talks at all. We're a little surprised that the lady hasn't touched the coffee or even the biscuits, which we're already eagerly looking forward to. Mother notices too; she pushes the plate a little closer to the lady and points at the full coffee pot, which is no longer steaming, and the lady smiles and

nods as if she's planning to dive in at any moment, but instead her pen dances over the page and she talks to Mother about raw vegetables and bedtimes. Mother shows the lady the fridge, and the lady has to stand up to look inside.

Thank you very much, says the lady, but she doesn't sit down again and instead follows Mother into our bathroom. Mother shows her our bathtub and the sink and the supply of Ocean Breeze soap and our towels and our toothbrushes and our hairbrushes and the plasters and the toilet paper and all the while the lady wheezes.

Thank you very much, she says abruptly, looks us sternly in the eye, and then spots a dried out Plasticine figure on the shelf beside the door.

How lovely, did you make that? she asks us, reaching for the brightly coloured animal with its curved tail, thin as a hairpin.

We feel sure she's going to drop it and we're right. It shatters into a thousand pieces.

Oh! says the lady, and she musses our neatly coiffed hair.

Never mind, she says, as if we were the ones who broke it, and Mother comes back with the dustpan and brush and the lady hastens to leave.

The red-haired teacher is walking ahead of us with her daughter. From here, we can't see the gap in her teeth that we like so much. We see her hair waving in the wind, her speckled summer dress, her right arm, which she reaches out to pull her daughter off the road and onto the pavement. She's wearing flat shoes, her daughter is holding a little bucket. We try to catch up with her, but our mother falls back and like good girls we stay by her side.

We can already hear voices in the distance. Mother leads us to the playground. The swing is occupied and there are heaps of toys in the sandpit. As soon as the other mothers see us, they lower their eyes into their children's gaudy juice cups. We approach them and politely take care not to step on their picnic blankets. Our mother strokes our hair and pushes us forwards.

Go and play, girls!

The other mothers watch us from the corners of their eyes and tend to their children.

Marta, they call, not so fast!

Felix, they call, not too high!

Alma, they call, come here for a minute!

Some of the children squeal as they try to catch each other or run away.

Some of the children sit in the shade and give their dolls a haircut.

Some of the children jump over rubberised cords, pigtails flying.

All of them give us a wide berth, as if we're toxic.

Go away!

We stand by the slide, which doesn't interest us, and look at a girl with bleeding knees. We try to catch the other children, steal their balls, drink from their cups.

Go away!

Go away!

Their mothers whisper and watch us closely. Our mother stands to one side in the shade. She lifts her chin and pays no heed to all the hissing.

We don't know how to play like the other children.

We know bad words and say them to their faces.

We don't find it funny when the other children make fun of us, and we want to go straight back home.

You don't need friends, Mother says after we've left the other children and their sugar-shiny lips. Not when you've got me.