

Cotton Candy

Derk Visser

1

“Ezra?” Zoë pokes her head through the curtain of my fitting room. “There’s a salesgirl coming,” she whispers.

“Which one?”

“*That* one.”

Carefully, I glance past Zoë, into the shop. Not far from us stands a girl who works here. She lives in the apartment across from ours and often hangs out at the local takeout in the evenings. With boys. They call her *Easy*. She folds a top that I hadn’t put back in the right way. Then she walks over to the other side.

“Tell me if she comes back.”

“I need to pee,” says Zoë.

“Well you can’t. You need to keep watch.”

I pat my sister’s head and pull the curtains again. The top I’m wearing looks good on me. I look for a security tag, but can’t find one. Only a price tag. I pull it off and hide it behind the mirror. My hand is shaking.

Zoë pokes her head through the gap again. “Ezra?”

1

“Yes.”

“I really need to go.”

“There’s nowhere to pee around here. You’ll just have to hold it until we get home.”

“I want to go home.”

“In a minute.”

“I’m scared.”

“Zoë... for the hundredth time. This is not scary. You know what’s really scary?”

“I need to pee.”

I roll my eyes and my mouth drops open.

“Zombies,” I growl as scarily as I can. “They look like normal people, but actually they’re dead. Children who don’t listen, will be eaten by them.”

2

“Why do I always have to do what you say?” asks Zoë.

“Because you’re eight and I’m twelve!” I draw her into the fitting room. “Enough is enough. You can choose. Either you keep your mouth shut and wait until I’m finished, or I’ll tell Dad that you ran away on purpose and I had to look for you all afternoon. That’ll really make him angry.”

I pull my T-shirt over the top. Put on my denim jacket and button it up. Nobody can see what’s underneath. My heart is racing.

“But what if we get caught?” asks Zoë.

“We won’t.”

Zoë starts crying. She crosses her legs and tries to cover up her crotch with her hands.

“What are you doing?”

“I couldn’t hold it.”

“Hell.”

“I told you I had to go.”

“It’s no option peeing in a fitting room.”

I watch the small puddle trickling under the curtain into the shop. Quickly, I put my foot in front of it and sweep it back into the changing room. Zoë just stands there, her hands in front of her crotch. She starts crying even harder. I try to shut her up but she carries on.

“Is something the matter?” I hear from the other side of the curtain. Easy!

“No, everything’s fine.” My voice cracks.

“I can hear someone crying.”

“Her guinea pig has died,” I say as calmly as possible. “She just suddenly started thinking about it.”

“You’re not allowed in the fitting room in pairs.” She yanks the curtain open. Zoë stops crying. I’m so shocked I take a step back. Right into the puddle. Easy looks at the floor.

“She was crying,” I say quickly. I step out of the puddle and stamp my shoes dry. “A lot.”

Zoë wipes away her tears. The wet patch in her crotch is now clearly visible.

“It was her only guinea pig,” I tell her. “Stuff like that can be really upsetting for a child her age.”

“What are you wearing underneath that denim jacket?” Easy asks.

“What do you mean?”

“You came in here with a top just now, but I can’t see it anywhere.”

“Mom!” I stand on my toes and wave to a strange woman at the other end of the shop. Easy looks around.

“Run!” I scream.

Zoë takes off. Easy grabs my arm, but I manage to pull free. I fly through the skirt-aisle, past the special offers. I run through the security gate into the hustle and bustle of the shopping mall. After a short sprint, I start to walk normally, hoping not to draw any attention..

4

But Zoë is nowhere to be seen.

An hour later I find her in the playground in front of our apartment.

“Idiot!” I shout. “Don’t you realize how worried I was?” I push her. “You should have stayed with me!”

“I couldn’t stay with you. You ran way too fast.”

“What was I supposed to do then? Run slowly?”

Zoë folds her arms. “I’ll never join you again.”

“You should see what you look like. Why haven’t you gone in yet?”

“I’m too scared to.” She goes and sits on the swing, scowling.

“We need to wear sunglasses,” I tell her.

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” I look at the apartment block opposite. Easy lives there somewhere.

“I don’t have any sunglasses,” says Zoë.

“You have that Mickey Mouse pair.”

“They’re yours.”

“They were mine,” I say. “But you can have them.”

“Why?”

“I’m twelve. What am I supposed to do with Mickey Mouse sunglasses?”

“But they’re broken,” says Zoë.

“No they’re not. I fixed them.”

“But I don’t like them all taped up.”

“Some kids would be thrilled to have sunglasses like those,” I say.

“I want new ones. Ones that are mine.”

“In Poland they’d jump for joy if they were given these sunglasses, and all you can do is whine. We have to wear sunglasses and you’ll wear the Mickey Mouse ones. That girl from the store lives in that apartment block. We could bump into her anytime. In the supermarket. At the takeout restaurant. In this playground. If she sees us, we’ll be in big trouble. It’ll be war.”

“I want a best friend,” says Zoë.

“What?”

“A best friend.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re my sister,” says Zoë.

“Yes? And?”

“You tell me what to do all the time.”

“OK.” I turn around and pretend to walk away. “Fine.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You said you wanted a best friend? Ask a girl from your class. Then I won’t have to deal with you.”

“Everyone in my class already has a friend.”

“Do you think it’s fun having to drag you around everywhere? You’re so annoying. You’re stubborn. You never listen. And you’re ungrateful.”

A police car drives past. The officers look at us. They stop. Shoot. Teenagers aren’t allowed in the playground, only younger kids with their mothers. And I’m nearly a teenager. You’re allowed to play here, but not just hang out. They look at us as if they’ve been on the lookout for shoplifters all day and have now spotted the country’s two youngest criminals standing next to a swing. That Easy girl told on us.

“Push,” Zoë says quietly.

I look sweetly at the policemen and give the swing a push. Zoë stretches her legs and leans back to pick up speed. Her

movements get faster and she really swings high now. I have to take a step back to avoid the swing hitting me.

“Good job!” I shout.

“Wheee!” screams Zoë.

The police car slowly pulls away. I wave at the officers. They wave back and drive on.

There’s something about kick-boxing on TV. About kids from a neighborhood like ours. With apartments. The coach explains how to hit and kick. And in particular how to keep your eyes open. To watch your opponent really closely and spot the gaps in his defense. And then attack. He says that you need to be *ruthless*. That means really tough. I like kick-boxing. I want to do it too. A sixteen year old boy shows his full trophy cabinet. He’s only been doing kick-boxing for four years and his father is already working on a second cabinet.

“You should do that too,” I tell Zoë.

“Why?”

“You need to be able to stand up for yourself.”

“I think boxing is stupid.”

“There are special outfits for girls like you. Pink shorts and pink gloves. Everything pink.”

“I’m eight,” says Zoë. “I don’t like pink anymore.”

“There are kids your age walking around at your school that even the principal is afraid of. They can kick so hard.”

Zoë rummages for a handful of chips out of the bag in her lap. I grab the bag and take some too. If you don't watch it, she'll eat the whole bag.

Suddenly, a doctor appears. He's sitting behind a desk wearing a white coat, and tells us that every time you get hit on the head, your brain gets damaged. I don't want to hear about that- I want to see the kick-boxing, with the young kids from a neighborhood like ours. There are brains on the doctor's desk. Made of plastic. A kind of construction kit. He takes it apart and shows where it can go wrong when you get hit.

"I don't believe that man," I say.

"But he's a doctor, isn't he?" Zoë snatches the bag of chips out of my hands.

I give her a kick, but she kicks me right back.

"Ouch!"

Zoë slides up to the other end of the couch.

After the doctor they show an old black man. It keeps getting worse. He used to be a world-champion boxer, but his hands now shake like mad and he can only talk really slowly. Like a robot whose batteries are about to run out. He's been on the end of too many punches. So they say. They show images of how he was beaten during a fight. Zoë covers her eyes with her hands.

"But there are loads of old people who shake and have difficulty talking" I say. "Mrs. Polak can't even hold a cup of coffee without spilling it. It has nothing to do with boxing. That's just old-age."

“I don’t want to do kick-boxing,” says Zoë. “I want to do gymnastics.”

“You can get concussion from gymnastics as well. If you fall off the high bar and land wrong, they can carry you off in an ambulance.” Sometimes I get so tired having to explain things to her over and over again. “You still pee in your pants, Zoë.”

“But I can’t help it. Mom said.”

“And you cry about everything. You’re not a baby anymore. You need to learn to stand up for yourself. Gymnastics is not going to help you do that.”

I dive on top of Zoë and start tickling her to death.

“No!” she giggles. “Help!” She crawls across the couch and wraps her arms around her body. This stops me getting to her armpits, but I still manage to reach her sides, which she can’t stand.

“Help!” she laughs. She almost chokes. She pulls up her knees and puts her feet against my stomach. Using everything she’s got, she tries to push me off her. I fall and she jumps on top of me. She grabs my wrists and forces my arms against the ground.

“Surrender!” she gasps.

“Never!”

“You have to surrender, Ezra! I’ve won!”

Her hair is hanging in my face. I blow it away.

“Ok.”

“Ok what?”

“I surrender,” I say. Zoë lets go of me and moves away. She needs to catch her breath. I pretend to be exhausted.

“You’re the strongest little sister in the whole world. If you started kick-boxing, your trophy cabinet would be full in no-time.”

2

“I still need to unpack all of these boxes and put them on the shelves,” sighs Mom.

“We, you mean. We still need to unpack all of these boxes.”

I crouch down and pile up packs of chocolate cookies. “And I’m not leaving until everything’s on the shelves.”

Mom opens a box of caramel cookies. “You don’t have to help me, sweetheart. You need to go to Mrs. Polak soon.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to.”

“And what about Zoë? Who’s going to look after her?”

“I already told you. Zoë’s going to stay with me.”

“But your boss doesn’t allow it,” I say. “You’re not allowed to take kids to work.”

“But the boss isn’t here.”

Mom always knows better. I hardly ever win an argument with her.

10

“I think your boss is scary. The way he growls and those bushy eyebrows.”

“Can I go with Ezra?” asks Zoë. She’s sitting in a shopping cart behind us and is playing with a Barbie doll.

“Why are you eavesdropping?” I ask.

“I’m not. I can just hear what you’re saying.”

Mom rips open a box of jars of mayonnaise. She sighs again. The box should be in another aisle. Not next to the cookies.

“I want a caramel cookie,” says Zoë.

“Not now,” says Mom. She looks tired. She’s got dark circles under her eyes. She picks up the box of mayonnaise jars and walks out of our aisle. It’s quiet in the supermarket. Because of the holidays. Our aisle is empty.

“Can’t you give us a hand?” I ask Zoë.

“But I don’t have to. Mom already told me.”

“You may not have to, but you could still help out a bit. You’ve been sitting on your lazy butt all morning playing with that Barbie. Little kids play with Barbies, Zoë. You’re eight. Act your age.” I open a packet and throw her a caramel cookie.

“Are you crazy, you can’t do that!” she cries.

“You were the one that wanted a caramel cookie, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but not one of those.”

I put the clip back on the packet and put it behind another packet on the shelf. Mom comes around the corner.

Zoë quickly hides the caramel cookie under her T-shirt. Mom doesn’t notice. She’s looking at her watch. Something she does

about one hundred times a day. Three days a week. She hates her job, but I would too if I was her. Straightening all those hundreds of jars.

“It’s time, Ezra,” she says. “You need to go.”

“I know enough girls in my class who still play with Barbies too,” says Zoë. She waves her Barbie’s arm at me. “You have to go.”

I’m given an apron that’s never seen the inside of a washing machine. With a wire, Mrs. Polak slices off a piece of clay, which lands with a loud bump on the table. I can’t do pottery at all. I start messing around with the clay, no idea what I’m going to make. Mrs. Polak wants me to say what I feel.

“Clay,” I say.

“But what else?” She asks.

“Nothing. I just feel clay.”

“I’m asking it wrong,” Mrs. Polak says. “*How* do you feel? Angry? Sad? Or happy perhaps?”

“Do I look angry?”

Mrs. Polak looks at me. I can sometimes win the discussions I have with her. She could have been my grandma. Or perhaps my grandma’s grandma. She’s got a wrinkly face and thin grey hair tied into a knot at the back of her head. She walks a bit crooked. And her hands shake. They’re stronger than you think though. When you come in and give her a hand, she almost crushes it.

Mrs. Polak gently nudges my chin up with her index finger. “It’s good to talk about what you feel, Ezra...”

“I’m just doing some pottery. You said I had to.”

“It’s going to be beautiful.”

“That’s what you think.”

“Try to use a bit more imagination.” She makes some strange gestures around her head that I don’t understand.

“Why?”

“Then you’ll be able to make the most beautiful things. Something beautiful can emerge from this piece of clay.”

“It’s going to be an ashtray.” I look at her. “My dad started smoking again.”

This is my second visit to Mrs. Polak. I have to paint, draw or make pottery. And talk about Dad. And how I’m feeling.

Dad came back a hero from the war and was one until New Year’s Eve. Right up to the first firecracker. That’s when he dove under the table. And when the rockets shot up into the sky behind the apartments, he stormed out onto the hallway. Our neighbor stood there with his son, lighting sparklers. Dad attacked him and then ran away. The police only found him when it got light, huddled in a corner in the basement. Under a piece of plastic. Suddenly, Dad was no longer a hero, he’d gone a bit crazy. The war had come back. But now it was in his head.

“Finished!” I say. I show her my ashtray.

“That was fast.”

It’s turned into a ridiculously large ashtray. But then Mrs. Polak shouldn’t have given me such a huge lump of clay. Dad can stub

out his cigarettes in it for the rest of his life without ever having to empty it.

“It’s lovely,” Mrs. Polak says. “Your father will love it.”

“Dad smokes on the balcony and always flicks his cigarettes away. But the neighbors below have now complained that it rains cigarettes all day. That’s why.”

I give the ashtray to Mrs. Polak. “What are we going to do with it?”

“We’ll put it in the oven,” she says. “Then it’ll be ready the next time you come.”

“Do I have to come again?” I ask.

“Absolutely. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Mrs. Polak walks over to the sliding doors and gestures for me to follow. She tries to open the door, but it won’t give way. After she has given it a kick with her pointy shoe, it opens with a squeak.

The yard is bursting with fragrant butterfly-attracting flowers. Everywhere there are statues, which I don’t really understand the meaning of. They are shiny spheres of stone and metal, with holes in them. They glimmer in the sun. Mrs. Polak clearly used her imagination when she was making them.

At the back of the yard there’s a large tree, underneath which stands an oven. It’s a stone block with a glowing-red window in it. Next to the oven there’s a gas tank.

Mrs. Polak puts on an apron that also looks as though it’s never been washed. She then puts on two large oven gloves. They come up to her elbows.

“Move back a bit, my girl.”

She pokes a stick through the lid handle and lifts it up carefully, putting it next to the oven on a scorched patch of grass. Hot, dry air comes out of the oven, just like at home, when Mom has baked an apple pie. But this is much hotter. And it has a chemical smell. Give me an apple pie instead any day.

“Does my ashtray have to go in there?”

“Yes, I’ll put some glaze on it and on your next visit you’ll have a lovely, shiny ashtray. Your father will be very happy.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s important, Ezra, that you can express yourself.”

“What’s the ashtray got to do with that?”

“That you can cry if you’re sad, scream if you’re angry...”

15

“And that you can make an ashtray if you don’t want to do anything.”

“That you can sing when you’re feeling happy.”

Mrs. Polak stands up straight and throws her arms up into the air, oven gloves and all. “O Sole

Mio!”

She scares me to death. She closes her eyes and takes a bow, as if she’s standing in front of a packed opera hall instead of an empty yard with strange statues.

I’m scared that she’ll ask me to sing too, as well as paint and make pottery. And that I have to say how it feels.

“Fuck.”

“Excuse me?” says Mrs. Polak.

“The guinea pig.”

“What guinea pig?”

“Our guinea pig is dead,” I tell her. “Mom put him out on the balcony in a shoe box, and he’s still out there. We only had him for one week.” I take off the apron. “Dad gave it to us.”

Our balcony has become a dumping ground. And nobody clears it up. Mom doesn’t have the time, Dad doesn’t care. Zoë is too small and I have other things on my mind. Some of the trash bags have been ripped open by birds. There are bottles and jars everywhere that need to be taken to recycling. Two broken folding-chairs have been lying in the corner for ages and a rusty go-kart has been there since last week. Zoë found it at the playground and dragged it upstairs.

When I open the door to the balcony, Dad is standing there. And Dad on the balcony means: enter at own risk. The dumping ground then becomes a minefield, one wrong step through which something falls or breaks, and Dad can explode. He is startled by everything, and gets angry about nothing.

Dad leans against the railings. He’s starting to look a bit like a homeless person. His cool, spikey hair has grown long. No hairdresser is allowed to get near him. Nobody knows why. Maybe he’s frightened of the scissors. The stubble is now on his chin and cheeks. He shaves now and again, if we tell him that he’s prickly.

In one hand he’s holding a cigarette, in the other an old jam jar. That wasn’t the idea. The jar. I’ve just made an ashtray. He

takes a drag of his cigarette and closes his eyes. It seems as though the smoke not only enters his lungs, but swirls around his head too. When he opens his eyes, it spirals out of his nose. He pulls a satisfied face. I love that face. He's got other faces too, but this is the one I love. Now I dare to go out onto the balcony.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Have you seen a shoebox?"

Dad looks around. "No. I haven't."

I want to say something about the jam jar, but hesitate. You never know. Even his satisfied face can explode without warning. Although he does seem really relaxed. I try it. I didn't make the ashtray for nothing.

17

"What do you need the jar for?" I ask.

"I'm not allowed to flick my cigarette stubs away anymore."

"There can be mold on jars like that. It could make you sick." I take the jam jar out of his hand. The stubs are floating around in a little bit of rain-water. On the faded label you can still read that there used to be strawberry jam in the jar. "Look, mold."

"Do you want to take my cigarettes away from me now too?" he sighs. "I'm not allowed to flick my stubs away, so I use a dirty jam jar. Soon the upstairs neighbors are going to start complaining that I'm smoking them out."

"Don't pay attention," I reply. "Those people complain about everything. They smoke us out with their burnt barbecue meat."

I carefully step over a trash bag and push the folding chairs aside. No shoebox. Dad takes a drag of his cigarette and then puts it out on the railing. "What do you need a shoebox for?"

"The guinea pig is in it."

For a moment, it looks like Dad's satisfied face is about to change. He frowns. I look out of the corner of my eye to check whether the escape route to the kitchen door is free. I'm one trash bag and two big jumps away from the door. I'd purposely left it open.

"Hasn't it been buried yet?" asks Dad.

"Uh. No."

"Why not?"

I take a step back. "Uh... I've been really busy."

"Busy?"

"Yes."

"Are you busy, or are you just worried about something?"

I look at him, surprised, not really understanding what he wants. "It's school holidays," he says. I see a slight smile. He takes out a new cigarette and lights it.

"The sun's shining," he says as the smoke wafts around his head. "Relax." I give him back the jam jar.

He wraps his arms around me and kisses me on the forehead.

The council won't let you bury any pets near the apartments. Nobody knows though what you're supposed to do with them. We've got bins for trash, glass containers for white, brown and

green glass, paper containers, plastic containers and containers for material. But nothing for dead pets.

I guess you can't just bury any animal. There are dogs around here that come right up to Zoë's shoulders. But a guinea pig...ours fit in my hand.

Mom helps me bury it. Dad doesn't. He's had to bury so many people that there's no more room, even for our guinea pig.

We're crouched in the bushes. We've got a balcony and no yard. That's why we haven't got a shovel. But if your guinea pig dies, you have to have something to bury him with. Mom sticks the serving spoon in the ground. And digs a hole big enough for the shoebox.

"Can I see him one last time?" asks Zoë.

"You only just looked at him," I say. "Nothing's changed in the last ten minutes."

"Well, just once then," says Mom. She removes the lid of the box.

The dark brown guinea pig is lying on a bed of grass that Zoë and I have picked. Surrounded by flowers that Mom wanted to throw away, but were perfect for decorating the shoebox. We've colored in the outside of the shoebox with markers. Yellow. Zoë insisted.

"He stinks," she says.

"That's the flowers," I say. "He only died yesterday. He's not going to start stinking that fast."

Zoë hovers with her nose over the shoebox. Mom scrapes the edges of the hole away neatly and makes a nice rectangle.

“You could have reminded us,” I remark.

“Do you realize how busy I am? You should have thought of it yourselves. You’re the ones with spare time.”

I put the lid on the box. Zoë and I put the box in the hole together. I regret forgetting about the guinea pig. He was a really sweet little thing. Zoë makes a cross sign, I wonder why, because we don’t believe in anything.

Mom sprinkles some dirt over the shoebox with her spoon.

“What age can guinea pigs reach?” asks Zoë.

“Five or six,” says Mom.

“Why has he died already then?”

“We don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Do you know what it costs to find out how a guinea pig died?”

I ask.

“No.”

“In your whole life you wouldn’t be able to earn enough to pay for it.”

“They’re really fragile animals,” says Mom. “One little cold and they can be done for.”

“But it isn’t even cold,” says Zoë. “It’s summer.”

Mom smooths out the dirt. “Well, at least we gave him a proper burial now.”

I look around. There’s nobody. So the good thing is, there’s no police either. They’re always driving around our neighborhood,

looking for people breaking the law, like us. The real trouble-makers never get caught. Recently a few boys from the block opposite were hassling a girl from our apartment block. Right by these bushes. The police were nowhere in sight. A man two floors below saw it going on and threw a flower pot at the boys. The girl was able to get away.

“When are we going to paint our bedroom?” asks Zoë. “You’d promised we could.”

“We’ve just buried the guinea pig,” I say. “And you’re starting about painting a room.”

“I want to paint it yellow,” says Zoë.

“We know.” I look at Mom. “When are we going to a bigger house? We were going to maybe move. I want my own room.”

“What’s wrong with yellow?” asks Zoë.

“Everything. A canary is yellow. And pee, which you know all about. But not a room. “

“Ezra, stop it,” says Mom.

“I hate yellow. I want my own room.”

“But we’re not going to move,” says Mom. “How did you get that idea?” She wipes the serving spoon clean on the grass and we sneak out of the bushes. I check if you can see anything from a distance, but you can’t. Nobody will find out that our guinea pig is there.

We walk back to our apartment. On the other side of the grass a man is walking his dog. Two children are hanging in the rings in the playground. No-one else is around. It’s vacation time and half the neighborhood is in Turkey. Or Morocco. Mom puts her

arm around me. She looks tired. The bags under her eyes seem to be getting bigger every day. But she still looks like us. Blond hair and blue eyes. And she looks really kind. Nobody would believe that she's just secretly buried a guinea pig.

"Staying here isn't good for Dad either," I say. "We really need to move. This neighborhood keeps reminding him of the war."

"Why?" asks Zoë.

"Because all the men have moustaches and the women headscarves. That's just asking for trouble."

"Well we're not going to be moving anytime soon," Mom says again.

"Are we going to go to the fair then?" asks Zoë.

"I've got to work for the next few days."

22

Zoë sighs.

"How do you think we can buy our food?" I ask her. "Someone needs to earn the money."

"Ezra," Mom says. "Stop it."

"When is Dad going to start working again?" asks Zoë.

"I promise that we'll go to the fair as soon as we can."

"Yes!" shouts Zoë. She skips ahead. Zoë shouting YES all the time really irritates me. One moment she's peeing her pants and crying her eyes out, and the next moment it's all yes-this and yes-that.

"When is Mrs. Polak going to retire?" I ask.

"Why are you asking?"

“Because she’s really old already. She’s a bit weird. I don’t think she’s quite right.”

“She’s good at what she does.”

“Well, I haven’t noticed.”

“Some other war-veterans’ kids go to her too,” says Mom.

Like there’s a whole army of kids lining up at Mrs. Polak’s door every day. Dying to tell her how they feel. At the end of her hallway there’s a small waiting room with four little chairs and a few comics. I’ve never seen any kid in there.

“I get so embarrassed having to go there,” I say. “That sign by the front door with ‘Psychologist’ written on it. I’m not mad, am I?”

“Nobody is saying that. It’s to help you.”

“You’d be better off sending Zoë. She still pees in her pants.”

“Maybe I will.”

“I’m not going anymore. I’m twelve. I’m not going to sit playing with clay. Or painting.”

“First!” shouts Zoë. She’s standing at the entrance to the apartment and is waving at us. Mom lets go of me and waves back.

“That sign at Mrs. Polak’s is all flaking off,” I say. “She’s no longer a psychologist now. If you look at it from a distance, it reads ‘Psycho’.”