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Van Den Haak

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(married)

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Colour of eyes

MY BIRTHDAY IS NOT MY BIRTHDATE

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A SURVIVOR OF ADOPTION
FRAUD AND SEXUAL ABUSE FIGHTS
FOR HER TRUE IDENTITY

SAM VAN DEN HAAK



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*Unputdownable.
This story about a victim
of shady adoption practices
choosing to be a survivor, is a
breathtaking read!*

Cees Links
Creator and inventor
of WIFI



**Become anything
you want, but most
of all, become
yourself.**

Children being rescued from pitiful circumstances and living happily ever after in a loving new family. It is the romanticized narrative about adoption people would like to believe. But what is it really like?

My name is Sam, born in Sri Lanka, adopted and raised in the Netherlands. In this story I'll tell you what it was like for me to be taken from my own mother and being a brown girl growing up in a white adoptive family that provided me with a far-from-safe environment. Sexually abused by my adoptive father, I was turned out of the house by him at the age of seventeen and left to fend for myself.

But I'm a fighter. Finding out that my records were falsified, that my birthday wasn't even my birthdate, only sparked my resolve to find justice. Together with fifteen other Dutch adoptees, I am suing the Dutch government for adoption fraud and child trafficking. What I hope to achieve is simple: to have my actual birthdate in my passport.

Sure, I may have been dealt a bad hand, but this is a story of resilience. I've turned the loneliness I've experienced into my strength. My yearning for connection is at the root of the successful business I set up focusing on connecting people. But in the end, on the most important journey by far, searching for my real family and searching for myself, I'm proud to say I found both!



ISBN 978-94-93089-84-6



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MY BIRTHDAY IS NOT MY BIRTHDATE

First edition, September 2022

Second edition, September 2022

Third edition, oktober 2022

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Photography cover and author portrait: Saskia van der Leij, Flitsend Beeld

Layout and cover design: Ralf Emmerich, vanStijl

Correction: Joyce van Wees

Translation: Ms. Nannie de Gier (née Baran)

ISBN: 978-94-93089-84-6

NUR: 402

All character names have been changed, except where the characters in question have expressly given permission to use their actual names.

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GrowingStories
Hilversum

Foreword

Unputdownable. This story about a victim of shady adoption practices choosing to be a survivor, is a breathtaking read!

Written in a straightforward, quick-paced style, this rollercoaster ride of events will send the reader reeling.

Sam, you wrote an amazing book! Adoption has a dark side as well. On the one hand there are many good caring people who genuinely wish to make a difference to someone else's life, and on the other hand there are people exploiting the situation to their own advantage. On top of that, governments and authorities, corrupt and/or naive, that have let things derail completely, and subsequently prove unable to put things right due to incompetence, unwillingness or both. Your journey, wrestling yourself free from it all and rising above the misery and injustice, is breathtaking. An accusation without becoming plaintive. Your will to live permeates through everything and is refreshing. Your story is an inspiration to all who want to read it!

Cees Links

*Creator and inventor
of WIFI*

Prologue

Birthdate

“So, Samantha,” the man at the Chamber of Commerce asks while tapping away at his computer, “what’s your birthdate?”

“That would be the 4th of July, and please call me Sam.”

“Ah, nice, star sign Cancer. True multitaskers. Great entrepreneurs.”

“Well, actually I’m a Sagittarius,” I blurt out.

He looks at me. In his small eyes hiding behind an old spectacle frame, I detect confusion. Understandable. Evidently, this man is familiar with astrology, and he knows Sagittarians are born in November or December. His small eyes narrow a little. Suspicion, I recognize it instantly.

“My birthday is not my birthdate,” I hear myself say apologetically, which doesn’t help making things any clearer, or give him reason to trust me. Oops, how am I going to put this right?

“It was just an administrative error, well, a pretty big one actually. Paperwork cock-up, you know how it is.” He now lifts his eyebrows in complete astonishment. “Well, anyway, I’m a Sagittarius, famously honest, straightforward, and chasing their ideals. That’s why I’m starting the pub quiz company that I’ve always dreamed of having.”

I notice the man isn’t familiar enough with astrology to get my Sagittarius joke. Nerves start creeping up on me.

What if I can't get my company registered now that I let slip that my identity papers are not entirely correct. The little office suddenly feels very cold, grey, and formal. Definitely not the place where messy things of any kind are appreciated.

“Shall we say that regardless of my star sign I'm going to become an amazing entrepreneur? And that you're hereby invited to a Sam's Pub Quiz event one evening?” I say with my most seductive smile.

“That seems like a splendid idea. Just sign these papers and then I can congratulate you, Sam.” Thank goodness feminine charm still works.

Reinventing Samanthaika

So, my actual name is Samanthaika. Samanthaika Monique van den Haak to be precise. “Monique” is the name my adoptive parents came up with and added. As if there weren’t enough changes to my identity and life already due to the adoption. I guess they did it for themselves, so it would feel like I was a child of their own. Unfortunately, the “feels like a child of your own” bit didn’t work out because there’s a lot more to it than giving an additional European name.

Correctly pronouncing my Sri Lankan first name, Samanthaika, proves impossible for most people. Whenever I introduce myself, I always have to repeat my name several times and I get a lot of “HUHs?” and “COME AGAINs?” And even then, it remains complicated because people somehow manage to put the stress on the wrong syllable. The one thing that’s truly authentic about me, that hasn’t been changed or distorted in the paperwork, is consistently mispronounced. It may seem trivial, but to me it feels like I’m not acknowledged or seen over and over again. As if I’m not allowed to exist. As if I’m not important enough to be properly named.

The memories attached to my birth name, and the period in which I was called by this name, are so painful to me that I stopped using it. Whenever someone says that name, my stomach immediately starts aching. I cringe and feel

stabbing pains throughout my entire body. So that's why I use Sam as my first name now. Anyone can pronounce it and Sam is very me. It's a name which, in my opinion, perfectly suits a Dutchified Sri Lankan. Many names in Sri Lanka start with an S.

Dutch men always want to call me by the diminutive "Sammie". Maybe it's because I'm rather short by Dutch standards, but I guess it's an authority thing. A woman with a man's name often remains complicated for them. Not that I care too much about it. Sam is who I am now.

And just in case you're wondering whether I'm trying to hide my past or forget my roots, believe me, that's quite impossible. I will never forget where I came from and what I've been through. But I have a choice, a choice to be the creator of my own future. This is a lesson, a survival strategy, and it might very well be the one piece of luck life has thrown at me.

Zembla, 2020

I'm watching Zembla, an investigative journalism program on Dutch tv. The 45-minute documentary reports about things that change everything completely. Forget about "uh-oh" or "mistakes will be made, especially in a banana republic". We're talking fraud here, structural abuse of the system, human trafficking. In plain sight of every supervisory authority, thousands of little children, including myself, were sold like hot cakes under the Sri Lankan counter. Dropped straight into the grabbing hands of eager white Dutchies who couldn't wait to shower an exotic baby with their warmth and care.

Rewinding to one hour ago, when my best friend Ron sent me an innocent text saying I should watch this series of Zembla episodes about Sri Lanka. I know Ron well enough to know he wouldn't send such a message for no reason. He is perfectly aware and understands that I really don't feel like hearing every tidbit about my native country. I was adopted, met my real family, I kind of understand what's what, end of story. "Sri Lankans simply don't like to talk about private matters," I always used to joke to Ron when I didn't feel like talking about difficult stuff and my feelings. So, after reading his message, I immediately plug in my headset and watch the program on my iPad.

I think I must have held my breath throughout the program. The information is overwhelming. I feel a tidal wave

building up in my body, the breaking point slowly approaching where surfers jump on their boards and ride the wave. Those surfers represent my emotions, and they are about to engulf me. I hear the waves rushing, the swirl of the ocean water. I'm trying to keep my balance.

Be practical, I think. First take care of your child. I call my son's father. "Jack? Can you look after Eli for a while?"

"But it's Sunday on your weekend...?"

"I have no other option. Can I drop him off at your place?"

"Uh, yeah, alright then."

Okay, I think after I've dropped off Eli, that's the child-care box ticked. Next on the to-do list is taking a USB stick back to Ron, something I now wish I had done the day before. So maybe after I've done that, it'll be possible for me to drive straight to the park and find a quiet bench where I can write. Or cry. Or maybe even scream. I notice the surfers are egging me on.

When Ron opens the door, he is talking on the phone. He looks at me and abruptly says to the person on the other end of the line, "Sorry, must hang up now. Yes. I'll call you back later." Apparently, my face speaks volumes.

It feels like I cried for hours, held by Ron the entire time on his big, soft grey sofa. I don't think either of us said anything. "I've never seen you cry as much as this," Ron says after a long silence. Oddly enough, we then burst out laughing. We shriek with laughter for a while. It's a bit weird, but who cares. The laughter feels wonderfully liberating.

"I feel so empty, Ron. My birthdate is incorrect, remember? What if I've been snatched from my cradle as well?" Because of my sniveling the big, soft grey sofa is covered in paper tissues, streaked with black mascara. "I suppose you're

in doubt now about whether you've met your real family?" Rons says. We watch the program again, together this time.

The most terrible practices are described: babies that were stolen from the hospital, their mothers being led to believe their baby had died. Women who were told that their child would return from the western world in a few years with a serious amount of money. Baby farms, where women were deliberately impregnated just to steal their baby after birth. Women who were paid to pretend to be the birth mother of a child that wasn't theirs, only to give it up for adoption.

The possibility crosses my mind that my family was duped. Or worse still, that it is all one big conspiracy.

But then another comforting thought, one that will be warming my heart for the rest of my life, enters my mind: for me to be one hundred percent sure that the family I found, are indeed my blood relatives, I only have to look at the evidence on one of my fingers. Something we found out on my first day in Sri Lanka – the day I lost my birth mother but found back my family. When my birth mother, and I'm sure it was her, sold me, she slipped in a little note. It's just that now I am completely in the dark about the circumstances under which the sale was concluded.

Fraud

After the couch session at Ron's, I watch the series of Zembla episodes again. They report about baby farms, about identity issues, about child trafficking and about the wrongs at the Flash adoption agency.

When I heard the name Flash, I knew for sure this was also about me. I remembered the name of this agency from the stories my adoptive mother told me. I had read about Flash's horrible practices often enough in Facebook groups and articles. But I stuck my head in the sand, didn't want to know, didn't want to believe it.

"The adopted children are adults now and find out that their adoption papers from the 1980s were forged," says the voice-over in the tv program, and then, "Who had an interest in sending these children to the Netherlands with false papers?" Well, Zembla, that's the million-dollar question.

I have always been "team grateful". Life is simply more fun when you're grateful and positive about what you have, instead of focusing on the hard times. So, my answer always used to be that adoption is a solution for the children, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents. The child is given the chance of a better future, the adoptive parents see their long-cherished wish to become a parent come true and it solves the problematic situation the biological parent is in. Stop being so naive, Sam.

Zembla's question is answered tentatively. Those tens of thousands of adoptions mainly served the interests of the people who could make money out of it. Zembla's research opens my eyes and I see and recognize adoption fraud. On that basis I draw two seriously painful conclusions. Adoption isn't just a way of solving the baby supply and demand situation, it's also a form of trafficking. Fraud was committed so I could be adopted, thereby creating falsehoods around my existence. I have my birthdate to prove it.

This is something I'd like to investigate more thoroughly. I got trafficked, it's as simple as that. That's why I had a childhood in which parental love meant that I was supposed to be spooning with him in bed whenever she wasn't looking. Where it never felt like home because my bedroom wasn't really meant for me. And there was me thinking it was all my fault.

Can I rewind? Can I forget what I've seen? It feels incredibly lonely not to be able to discuss all this with the people who brought me to the Netherlands with whatever intention they had. I'm not able to do so because of the other secret. The secret which makes me never want to talk to them ever again.

Part 1:

Looking for
a safe haven

Growing pains

I grew up in West-Frisia, in the north of the Dutch province of North-Holland. If home is where the heart is, my heart must have got lost somewhere on my way to the Netherlands because it certainly wasn't in the home my adoptive parents provided. Mother, father and three sons, I can't recall ever having a sense of belonging in this family. Thinking back of my childhood I get flashbacks of an old pendulum clock ticking away, the 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles, the sound of newspaper pages being turned endlessly, or so it seemed. Traditional Dutch evening meals always including boiled potatoes. The silence on Saturdays until the six o'clock news began. My hair always cut short like a boy's because it was practical. Weekends, evenings and holidays spent reading and making jigsaw puzzles. Every family member quietly absorbed in their own solitary activity.

My adoptive parents already had three sons of their own before I became a member of their family. Two of my adoptive brothers didn't live at home anymore because of serious multiple physical and mental disabilities, which was a sad enough fact in itself. Their disabilities were caused by a metabolic disease. If the disease had been discovered in time, the consequences would have been less devastating. Timely treatment could have prevented the damage to their organs which eventually caused their bodily functions to

shut down. But my adoptive parents were unaware of the disease, resulting in the insides of their children's bodies slowly deteriorating. The two boys were no longer able to speak, or function properly. All they did was just sit in the care home, waiting for the next stimulus or the next tube feeding. My adoptive parents visited them once or twice a week, often with their son still living at home and me in tow, because that was the done thing. I can't say I enjoyed those visits much. It was hard to connect with the two boys. The only time I enjoyed being with them was when my parents took the boys along with us to the annual fair and they allowed me to feed them cotton candy while they sat relaxed in their wheelchairs. I could tell they enjoyed it as much as I did.

In kindergarten, I stayed down a class because of the two things I loved more than anything else, namely endlessly playing and doing games. So there I was, branded "too playful" by teachers, a severe verdict for a mere five-year-old. I was like a little proverbial bull in the china shop. Out of control, out of place, a misfit. I was the jigsaw piece that didn't fit in their puzzle. I never felt I belonged. It seemed as if my adoptive parents were forever annoyed with me. At the time, I totally got why: I didn't resemble the perfect child they already had.

Perfect, as far as my adoptive parents were concerned, in at least two ways. If the average person in the Netherlands has an IQ of 100 according to the so-called "normal distribution", someone with an IQ higher than 130 is considered highly gifted. My adoptive brother had an IQ of at least 130. But it wasn't just his intelligence that made him the

perfect child, he also knew exactly how to behave. I don't think there ever was a boy so quiet and obedient as he was. He knew and had accepted his place in the family pecking order. An unobtrusive boy in the background because all the care and attention went to his brothers. At a parents' evening at school, my adoptive father once stated I was idle and dumb. I only found out because the boy I had a crush on rejected me because his father had told him what my father had said. I can't say I hold a grudge against the lad for rejecting me. I mean, I wouldn't want to go steady with anyone whose own parents proclaimed them idle and dumb. And if truth be told, I wasn't any good at math and chemistry. Always muddling up numbers. Why that was, I came to understand later on in my life. I am a dyscalculic, but despite dyscalculia, an IQ test proved that I have a score of 126. I may not be a patch on my adoptive brother, but I'm definitely capable of something. So, even if the wiring of my brain prevents me from ever becoming a pilot, so does g-force and my proneness to airsickness. If I want something really bad and it's realistically possible for me to achieve it, I believe in it and go for it. I know now I'm smart, that I can run a successful company in addition to being a single mother. Too bad instilling confidence in my own capabilities wasn't part of my upbringing.

However, there are two things my upbringing did instill in me that turned out to be good traits for the entrepreneur I am now, namely being frugal and calculated. My adoptive parents looked twice at every penny. For instance I had to wear my adoptive brothers' hand-me-downs. Everything for a life of moderation. Once, I had to take my bike to the

bike repair shop because I had a punctured tire. It was a 20-minute walk from our beautiful, large, detached house. “Don’t forget the receipt!” my mother called after me. It was the first time I did this by myself, and it was super exciting. Luckily, everything went well, and I got home in one piece with the exact change, down to the last penny but without a receipt. The man at the shop hadn’t given me one and because I was so nervous it had slipped my mind to ask. As a punishment, my mother made me walk all the way down to the shop and back again to get a receipt, because she insisted on me showing her the receipt. Economy was practiced religiously in our household. Thinking back of the huge villa we lived in, their frugality still makes no sense.

And there’s another thing that makes no sense to me. My adoptive parents already had three sons when they adopted me in 1984. I was two and a half years old when I was put on the plane to the Netherlands, sitting on the lap of this white woman who was to be my mother from now on. They wanted a new addition to their family, and not wanting to run the risk of having another sick child, adoption was the logical choice. But with all the care and attention for their two sick children, you might very well wonder whether this family ever had any real room for a tiny brown Sri Lankan girl who was no longer welcome in her own biological family and had needs of her own.

Cowboy

“Are you ready?” The folkdance teacher sounded like a popular singer trying to whip a fan-filled stadium into a frenzy. The reaction was likewise. “Yeah!”

“Then go ahead and enjoy, guys!” By “guys” she meant us girls. So out we went, onto the stage. Enjoying myself, though? I had never enjoyed folk dancing one bit. It wasn’t me shouting “yeah” just now, I just couldn’t.

I had ended up there by coincidence. Why folk dancing and not street dance or hip hop you might wonder? The answer is simple: my adoptive mother took folk dance classes. As I couldn’t stay home for lack of a sitter, I had to tag along. There was also a children’s group that I automatically became a member of. The dancing was usually done in a circle, which I thought was really dumb. The only pleasant thing about it was the feeling of belonging somewhere and being part of a group. But to say I had been looking forward to performing on stage, no not particularly.

The first notes of the music blared across the stage and the girls came on. Funny really, the teacher calling us “guys”. The only one who had a guy’s part was me. They had given me a cowboy suit to wear. With a big hat on and a hobbyhorse between my legs I represented the Wild West in this show. I didn’t have a clue what the Wild West

meant, but it sounded masculine and bold, and I was told the Wild West was a tough place to live.

All the other girls were wearing gorgeous, colorful, flowy dresses. They got to do the Maypole dance. In the middle of the stage there was a Maypole, a colorful pole with long ribbons attached to it. On the beat of the folk music, we had studied a dance in which all the girls held onto a ribbon and danced gracefully to the music, weaving the ribbons around the pole. Every girl but me. I had to ride by on my horse. Once again, I had to do something that wasn't me at all. That is, it didn't match how I felt. It did, however, perfectly match how I looked: like a boy.

I didn't have any say in how I looked. "Nice and short" was what my adoptive mother always said to the hairdresser, no matter how consistently I had been pleading over the years that I'd like to have long hair, just like all the other girls in my class. Her response to my pleas was that all young Sri Lankan girls had short hair and it looked cute. Apart from that she said I'd hate having all the tangles combed out of my hair every morning and evening, it would be too much of a bother. Nonsense of course, I think she only wanted it that way for her own convenience. Anyway, my short hair made sure that at eleven years old I still looked like that cute little dark kid in the photo of the passport with which I had come to the not so wild West, the Netherlands. It felt like my adoptive mother wanted to maintain the picture she had of me when I first arrived, because it was far nicer than the reality in which I didn't live up to that picture.

Go ahead and enjoy guys. The use of "guys" felt like a stab in my heart. It wasn't just my face that resembled a

boy's. I had to wear my adoptive brothers' hand-me-downs. Most teenage boys wear out their clothes more quickly than their parents can buy them, but because two boys in this family were in a wheelchair, the clothes they wore remained in excellent condition. To prevent their clothes from ending up with another child in their ward, my mother had sewn yellow labels with their names and ward number in all their clothes. Those labels weren't removed when I got to wear their sweaters or trousers. Every time I put on these clothes, I was reminded that they weren't actually bought for me. So, I usually wore boys' clothes. For special occasions, like the holidays and photo opportunities, they sometimes bought me a dress. Not that I felt comfortable wearing a dress on such occasions, because when I looked in the mirror all I saw was a boy in a dress.

The (be)wild(ering) West

Adopted girl from a faraway country + dark skin + short hairdo + clearly wearing boys' clothes that had a label in it with a boy's name: you do the math. Of course I was bullied at school. Saying I was different would be an understatement. Kids are cruel and clueless about the impact of what they say and do might have. Maybe I was an awful child, I don't know. Since I struggled with how to present myself, I was continuously adapting myself to try and live up to other people's expectations, hoping to be liked well enough to become part of a tribe, any tribe. So maybe I came across as a phony. It's a distinct possibility, but I honestly can't remember, because I've blocked out as much of my childhood as possible.

Another reason for being bullied could be because my adoptive mother was a very active volunteer at school. She was a lunch lady, helped out in the library and did many other chores. The other schoolchildren considered her strict and therefore not very friendly. I could see why they felt like this about her and if this was the reason why they took it out on me, I can't really blame them.

At school we had lessons on the topic of bullying. In one of those lessons, to visualize the effects of bullying, we had to crumple up a piece of paper and make it as small as possible. We were then told to unfold the wad and smooth it

out again. This proved quite impossible, the wrinkles kept showing. That smoothed-out piece of paper was exactly how I felt. Children can be cruel, and the bullying left a scar that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Just like that funny scar on the second phalanx of my left middle finger.

The bullying often began jokingly, but it always left me feeling lonely. As I was such tiny girl, everyone could lift me up and put me anywhere. They stuck me bum first in a bin on a regular basis. It must have looked incredibly funny, me stuffed so deep in the bin that my knee pits hugged the rim and my legs, which weren't long enough to touch the ground, dangling up and down in an attempt to wriggle myself out. Perhaps it was even more hilarious to see me tip over, bin and all, and watch me scramble up, bin still stuck to my bum. But what really made every other kid's day was when they could call me "tramp", because the whiff of garbage still lingered around me.

But why stick to the bin if you can go bigger? To earn the school some additional income, wastepaper was collected at school every Friday afternoon. The paper was stored in a big open top yellow wire mesh container in a corner of the hallway next to the schoolyard where all children played during recess. The container could be accessed throughout the week so the teachers could put wastepaper that couldn't be used in class anymore in there. On several occasions I got dumped in this container for fun during recess and left to my own devices. Being too short to climb out, I had to wait for someone to discover me and feel sorry enough for me to set me free. Due to the wire mesh, the container felt like a prison. But that wasn't the worst part. To me, being shut out

while I could hear the other children playing and having fun was much bigger torture.

There is one memory, however, that is etched in my memory. It's the living proof that having to wear hand-me-downs can have really devastating consequences. One day I was sent to school in a pair of dungarees that had belonged to one of my adoptive brothers. When everyone went to get their coats to go outside and play, someone came up with the brilliant idea to lift me up and hang me on the coat rack by the shoulder straps of my dungarees. Everyone went out laughing, and I was left hanging there all alone. It hurt, physically this time as well. I count myself lucky that I only looked like a boy, because if I had actually been one, I'd have gone through the rest of my life with a squeaky voice, unable to father children. The dungarees painfully cut into my crotch. It felt like I was hanging there for hours, the fifteen-minute playtime seemed to last forever. When everyone came back in, a teacher lifted me off the coat rack, which, again, was considered hilarious. I could only cry, in tears for being picked on again and in tears because it really hurt when I had to pee.

For all the short hair and boys' clothing I wore, I wasn't tough or masculine at all. That's why the role of a cowboy didn't suit me one bit. I'd never even seen a cowboy movie! The schoolyard, with all its relentless bullying was my personal Wild West, the bewildering West. Did I even want to be here? I increasingly often began to wonder whether I did.

Broken

Every day, at 5.00 PM sharp, my adoptive brother and I got a handful of crisps in a bowl. The bowls were small and made of shiny black earthenware. They looked quite full even with only a single handful of crisps. I looked forward to that potato-crisp moment every day. Sure, we always had cookies when drinking tea, but where friends had a cookie jar filled with Jaffa cakes, shortbread or chocolate bickies, ours only contained dry biscuits or tasteless oatmeal cookies. It wasn't so much out of economy, it had more to do with my adoptive mother forever watching her weight. I don't remember her as chubby, but she used to be really slim when young, and I suppose she thought back longingly to those days. So, in order not to be tempted to raid the cookie jar, she only bought boring cookies that would taste exactly the same after two months in the jar.

One day, a bowl showed a big white crack in the earthenware and little pieces had chipped off. It wasn't me who'd done it. My adoptive brother kept quiet. Mr. goody-two-shoes never put a foot wrong of course. He wouldn't even play in the snow because getting soaked wasn't his thing. He also had the nerdy hobby of wanting to keep record of everything. During holidays he'd rather stay home than go on a three-week holiday. Heaven forbid he'd miss the TV ratings for a few weeks causing a hiatus in his meticulously kept records.

So, the verdict was that it must have been me who had broken the bowl. Except it wasn't, but did they believe me? The only thing my adoptive brother had to do to be believed, was nod no. In my adoptive parents' eyes, I wasn't a particularly prudent child. Thinking back, I'm not so sure whether that was true. I consider the home I now live in a cozy chaos, but I hardly ever break anything. Yet back then I always got blamed for such things. No wonder if you compare my ever-cautious adoptive brother to the boisterous girl that I was. My obviously different color and temperament set aside, my character must have seemed rather fierce and in sharp contrast to my adoptive brother's model behavior.

That bowl of crisps was a daily ritual. I came home for it if I had been playing outside. My adoptive brother took his bowl up to his room. While quietly eating my crisps, I would dream away and imagine that my family on the other side of the world was doing the same. We were all united that way. Crisps as a connection, it won't come as a surprise that I'm still addicted to them. Even now I don't eat more than a handful at a time, it's ingrained in my system. Yet every time I think back of that incident with that stupid, small, shiny bowl that I supposedly had broken, I feel broken myself. I am that black bowl with the white cracks, one that altogether lost its luster. That accusation turned about the only thing that was nice about being home, ugly.

Different

In my family I stood out like a sore thumb. If they were the baseline for what was considered “normal”, I was anything but normal. I felt uneasy about not being more like them, that I didn’t prefer doing things on my own, without someone else. Why didn’t I enjoy doing a jigsaw on my own, or read a comic book in my room, or even go for a bike ride or play with my toys alone? I was full of energy and preferred playing with others, outside if the weather was good and inside with my toys if it wasn’t.

I loved, and I still love, being around people and being sociable, whereas the other family members rather kept to themselves. To me, this made the summer holidays last interminably long. We always spent three weeks in countries like Germany, Switzerland or Denmark, because nature was beautiful there and provided every opportunity to properly unwind. We stayed in big houses or at holiday resorts where the distance between the holiday cottages was big enough to make contact with other holidaymakers virtually impossible. The entire family was fond of taking long walks in nature, visiting museums or going on city trips seeing churches or other buildings. I preferred theme parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, or anywhere that allowed me to be active and blow off steam. Unfortunately, places like that were hardly ever close to where we were spending our holi-

days. If, on a rare occasion we did go to a theme park, I was supposed to stop moaning for the rest of the holiday and actively participate in the family's holiday itinerary. I was told I should be grateful that we had enough money to be able to go on such a luxurious holiday. Meanwhile, I was bored to death and had rather stayed at home where I could escape from my family during the day.

The biggest difference between me and the other family members, and most other Dutch people for that matter, was my skin color of course. I hardly ever met anyone who looked like me. Adults often looked at me questioningly. They never said anything, but I could hear them wonder "how peculiar, those two white people have a dark-skinned child."

Kids were different. They asked me flat out why I had a poo color and if I had been in the sun too long. In the beginning I always cried whenever they asked me such questions. But I soon learnt to suppress my tears and after a while the answer came automatically. "I'm adopted. I was born in another country where it's warm because the sun always shines, and all people have the same color as I do."

"How did you get here then?"

"By plane. My parents picked me up themselves." I didn't know all the exact ins and outs of it myself, but there were some photos of that moment, and I was often read from a book titled "In the belly of the plane". The main character in this book is Kim, a girl who is adopted from Korea. The book emphasized how special it was that Kim got a new family in the Netherlands and how grateful she was that her new parents were so pleased to have her and that from then

on she would have such a wonderful new life. I always wondered whether Kim would also be happy spending summer holidays in Switzerland and having to go on endlessly long walks, but the book didn't say anything about that.

"But are they your real parents?"

"No, my real mother couldn't take care of me anymore and that's why I'm here and she's still there."

"Don't you miss her then?" After this question I invariably remained quiet. Basically, because I didn't know. Although no sound left my mouth, a whirlwind of thoughts thundered through my mind. Did I miss her, or didn't I? I didn't know her. I had no idea who she was and if she remembered me or knew where I was or even if she missed me. Not being able to tell whether or not I missed my own mother felt anything but normal to me.

Another thing that wasn't ordinary about our family, was that there were two children who were both physically and mentally disabled. They looked different from other children because they were in a wheelchair. Their eyes were lop-sided, which made them look cross-eyed. They often drooled, wore diapers and were tube fed: they received their food through a tube attached to their stomach. Incapable of talking, they communicated by wailing, crying or laughing. We visited them every weekend in the care home where they lived. They stayed at a ward with children with similar disabilities and when we were there, we took them for long walks. That is, they sat in their wheelchairs, and we pushed them. These visits were also to drop off clean clothes and collect the dirty laundry. I always thought this was weird since there was a laundry service at the facility. My adoptive

mother was overrun as it was, with all the volunteer work she did, it didn't make sense she wanted to do this herself. I grew up knowing that these two boys wouldn't live to a very old age. Caring for them seemed to be the most important thing in the world and for as long as they were alive everything else was considered irrelevant. In most families, parents will pass away before their children do, but in my family it would be the other way round. Even on that point, the family I grew up in was completely different.

Normal

“When you kiss your dad, do your tongues ever touch?” There, I’d finally said it. I thought I’d never pluck up the courage to ask about the thing I had been dead curious about for so long. In my small world, within my family, everything that happened in our home was the norm for me because I didn’t know any better. Yet somewhere, deep down, it always felt a little weird. As if it might not be quite so normal after all? I needed to hear from someone else how things were done at home in their family.

Since so much in my life felt different and out of the ordinary, I just needed to know whether the way my adoptive father and I showed each other affection was indeed normal. I had my doubts, but it wasn’t something I’d dare bring up with other children. As it kept niggling at my mind, I decided I should ask someone I wasn’t so close to. That way, it wouldn’t be too awkward.

A good opportunity to find out came along when my cousin held a sleepover at my aunt’s, and I stayed there. My aunt, the sweetest woman in whose company I always felt at ease and loved, had adopted two children as well, a boy and girl from Indonesia, so their skin tone resembled mine. According to her birth certificate, my cousin was two years older than I was, and like everyone else that age, the walls of her room were covered with posters of pop stars. Nearly

everything in her room was blue, her favorite color. It made me envious, because it meant she'd been allowed to decorate the room to her taste. I never had that and longed so much for a bedroom that truly felt mine the way her room truly felt hers.

My cousin and I were playing upstairs in her room, together with a friend of hers, a girl who also had a brown skin color. When my cousin went downstairs for a moment and I was left with her friend, the opportunity to ask the question that had been burning on my mind was finally there. A slight panic struck me. What would I ask her, how should I tackle this? Would I dare ask if her father also shared the big double bed in the master bedroom with her in the mornings during the weekend. Would he also slip his hand into her panties once her mother had left the bed. Did they rub their bodies against each other, and could she feel his usually soft penis stiffen to her touch? Did she enjoy it? There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but fear held me in a tight grip. Perhaps if I asked something more casual, then it wouldn't be too weird if she answered no.

When I heard my cousin climb the stairs, I realized I had to be quick, or I would lose my nerve for good. My body tensed up, I didn't know where to look or how to act. I felt nauseous and a cold sweat started trickling down my back. It was nerve racking. I took a deep breath and blurted out my question. "When you kiss your dad, do your tongues ever touch?"

She looked at me and said: "Yeah sure, quite often."

This was exactly the answer I'd been hoping for. I felt I could breathe normally again. My muscles relaxed; my re-

lief was huge. Not only because I'd asked the pivotal question in the nick of time before the door opened and my cousin walked back in, but mostly because someone else had just told me that this little corner of my life was perfectly normal after all.