

EMPOWERMENT

KRUIELDIEF/CRUMB

As a child, did you sometimes feel like you were being dragged into a story that wasn't quite your own?

Eljadid: "My sister and I grew up in it, so for us it was a normal situation.

But of course, when you're at the school gate and you see children being welcomed by their parents in a very enthusiastic way while your mom is standing there very weakly, you quickly get the idea that things aren't right. Then a little later, when you are eight or ten, when you are increasingly told that certain things cannot be done because there is no money for them, you start to feel more and more abnormal. Then, as an adolescent, you start to resist the situation and get angry, and afterwards you go to acceptance." Did you deserve to be an adult too early?

Eljadid: "It was constantly walking on eggshells at home and always trying your best not to say anything provocative. I had to put my sick mother to bed sometimes, whereas as a child you would expect the opposite. And then I began to feel that it was not right to be forced to take on the parental role at such a young age and to be forced to be an adult emotionally far too early."

"Why wasn't my loving her enough to make her love herself, too?" you write. Is this the essence of the book? Eljadid: "Certainly, had I not had my sister, I might have become a different and harsher person. We learned to love each other. We became each other's parents. Outsiders could show understanding, but only the two of us could really grasp it. My mother indeed could not give love. She was too bitter because of the pain and her life. She reacted that bitterness to the two people closest to her, which were my sister and me. But to what extent was it her fault? She grew up in poverty, had a difficult childhood and then fled into marriage and children, followed by divorce. How could I blame her for struggling to give love if she had never learned how to do so, being in constant survival mode? I used to not see that and be angry. Today that anger has given way to understanding."

Hind Eljadid thinks back to her childhood, her strong and yet weak (because sick) mother, her aggressive Moroccan stepfather who at first shows affection, and who can cook, but who then abandons the family but continues to leave his mark on Hind (a roaring man who storms into the store and is taken away in handcuffs by the police) and her sister with whom she has a special love and understanding relationship. (And who also drew the illustrations in this book.)

As you can tell from the names, they are "natives," which nevertheless leaves its mark on the family. The mother suffers from a rampant disease, the cause of which apparently cannot be found. This means that slowly but surely she is deteriorating and the care that she needs is gradually transferred to the children. For example, at the age of nine, Hind will bathe and wash her mother and help her to bed with her.

This important and in many ways defining part of their lives, is narrated by the author. However, not "just" chronologically and in story form. You can hardly call it a novel or a novella or poetic story. In 20 (main) parts you do find out all kinds of things and you experience - sometimes very intensely - the events and sympathize with their difficult lives. But those particles are written in an authentic way, built up with short sentences that look around and see again and again the next image, bump into a sudden idea, a next feeling, a next piece of memory from that world of "once upon a time" that sometimes seems almost fantasy - but with a rough, gritty fantasy, firmly anchored in a bleak, hurtful, threatening, hard world. Yet in those pictures there is a hesitant, childlike wonder, with the surprise of discovery, not as in fairy tales, however, but rather as in adult memoirs that also speak of nerves, headaches, clammy hands, pain, anger, gray colors. Then again, there are a few pages of poetry or an italic, a long "two words" poem about a young guy who threatens, beats, subdues, rapes the "I" person (Hind) ("makes my body his body") and "ordinary", catchy descriptions that mostly have to do with violence. The whole thus became a patchwork, stitched together with very colorful, contrasting patches and evolving almost imperceptibly toward a more classical (but also less interesting and powerful) narrative ending. The sisters are very different. Word artist Hind is a writer, with tattoos and piercings, and a lesbian mom of three. Illustrator Zahra, with headscarf, is a deeply religious Muslim woman and mom of two. Hind Eljadid we know from award-winning slam poetry and all kinds of performances of all kinds.

She loves being on stage. Zahra Eljadid, is a social-cultural worker with Voem (the Association for Development and Emancipation of Muslims) and also an illustrator and painter. She does not like to be on a stage. "Zahra and I grew up in a tiny apartment in a social block on den Dam, a disadvantaged neighborhood with a lot of poverty in Antwerp North. In recent years the neighborhood has become more beautiful and more expensive, but there are still people living in those same social blocks, with the same worries and problems," the sisters said in an interview with the Gazet van Antwerpen. In *Kruimeldief*, a moving and tender book full of memories of those difficult years, the sisters process the loss of their mother. The words are engaging, the drawings moving. It is truly a book that gets under your skin. "When I was a young child, my mother could not resist wiping my face clean, with saliva, early in the morning, barely out the door, on the way to school. 'Mother's ointment', she called it ! I didn't care what natural magical powers my mother's saliva might possess, I didn't like it. No matter how hard I turned my head, the saliva-soaked thumb always managed to touch the tip of my eye.

RAMI

We met Rami in 2016 in Eeklo, a small town near Ghent. He is in Syria and 7 years earlier he arrived in Belgium. His passion? Swimming. It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon. His motto: I have lost my country, but not my dream. I will never lose it.

His story:

When I was 6 years old I already had the swimming jitters. My life in Syria was great. I could do what I wanted and what I was good at and that was swimming. It didn't take long before I was allowed to join the Syrian swim team. I quickly won a lot of championships. When the war broke out I travelled to Turkey to stay with my brother. I only had a small backpack with me because I assumed that the war would be over after a month or two. I ended up living there for 4 years. I really wanted to continue to swim, but it was not obvious. I trained with Galatasaray, but as I did not have the Turkish nationality, I was not allowed to participate in competitions. There was very little support and so I tried to train myself as best I as could do. But I was advised to stop swimming and look for a job. That meant 'Give up my dream'? I never thought I could

do it! Swimming is my passion and my life. I remembered the 80% of the Syrian athletes that were forced to give up their dream... I was advised to go to Europe. There, the chance of being allowed to participate in competitions would increase considerably. After 10 days I arrived in Belgium via Greece where I wanted to build my new life. Very soon I was affiliated with the Mega swimming team in Ghent. Given my high level, I had the opportunity to participate in competitions with the team.

When did your Olympic story begin?

The one in a lifetime opportunity came along when the International Olympic Committee of Refugees started looking for sports athletes to form an Olympic refugee team. I immediately contacted them and told them what I already had on my record. I did not have to wait too long for their answer and I was allowed to participate in the Games with the Olympic Refugee Team. It was a dream come true. After everything I had been through, I finally got this fantastic opportunity. We were 10 athletes in total. Among them is a Syrian swimmer from my hometown. She's my best buddy, she lives in Berlin. The Olympics were the most wonderful experience I ever had. Being among the best athletes in the world was mind-blowing. Eating, drinking, swimming, ... they were just sitting right next to me! After the Olympics I got a scholarship for the next Olympics. I still have 3 years to prepare. Thanks to the support I can now continue to grow in what I really want; I am where I wanted to be. There are now a lot of swimming camps where I can participate. Which swimming discipline are we talking about? My aim is to get a medal in the 100-meter butterfly. The focus is now, of course, entirely on the Tokyo Games in 2020. I participate in as many competitions as possible. Last month I won the bronze medal at the Belgian Championship. I came from nothing, kept doing what I love and what I'm good at and now I'm invited by everyone to share my story. Even to Queen Felip and Queen Mathilde. How was your way to Belgium? Getting to Turkey was easy, but getting from Turkey to Belgium was a different matter. I took a boat to Greece with my younger brother and we continued the trip afterwards by bus or just walking. We had no food, had to wait until night to cross borders, ... I have crossed many countries: Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Germany, ... A long, long road. My father arrived in Belgium 2 months earlier. My bigger brother had his life in Turkey and my mother was able to obtain a visa because my father was already in Belgium. And finally Rami: 'Which

country will you represent at the Games in 2020? I do not know. I don't really care either. I don't have a Belgian passport yet, so joining the Belgian team is quite difficult. But in the end, it's not about the country. I sport in my name, not in the name of a country. At the end of the game my name is on the board. When I look at myself now and see where I stand, I am proud. I have lost my country, but not my dream. I will never lose it.