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Born, Not Made – Danila Botha (she/her)

When I was a teenager, I didn't think I'd live to be twenty-one. I didn't know why, to be honest. It was just a premonition that felt true. I didn't get through things by imagining that one day I'd create some art from the experiences. I survived thinking, one day I'll be able to buy a shovel big enough to bury all of this in someone's backyard, and I'll never have to think about it again.

I blocked a lot of details from my mind, so when I go back and try to recall them now, there are blanks, events and chunks of time that are missing. I wonder if I'll ever get them back. I wonder if I want to. Before we moved to Canada, my mom had told me that she was moving for my sister Taryn and I, for our futures, for our safety. She'd wanted to do it all along, we knew, but my dad wanted her to stay. Then my grandparents were in an armed robbery in their house. It was seven at night, still light outside, and they were eating dinner in their kitchen. No one was killed, but they were hit and kicked and shoved under the table. My mom says my skin is as soft as my grandma's, we both bruise like peaches. They had to be quiet unless one of the guys was asking them where their valuables were. When we got there, hours later, the drawers were all emptied out, there were crushed lipsticks and feathers from duvets and pillows, torn apart. There were clothes on the floor, plastic hangers snapped in half, a sunhat crushed by a heavy shoe. My eyes couldn't take in all the chaos; my grandparents were always so fastidious, obsessive even, about cleanliness.

It was my job, my mom told me, to be well adjusted. It was going to be harder for my mom than it was for us. She was a well-liked and respected doctor. No one would know her in Canada. Taryn was little, and I was young enough, she reminded me. Kids were resilient, everyone knew that. But bouncing back when you don't know the social codes or rules, when you have nothing in common with people, is basically impossible. I learned to fake it around my mom.

Once a week, on a Friday night, we would all have dinner together. She'd ask me how my day was, and I'd say fine, and she'd move on to Taryn, who was more expansive. Taryn instantly made friends. Taryn's teachers thought she was adorable. If my mom asked who my friends were, I'd tell her about my favourite characters in the books I was reading. She believed me, but then my memory for details was excellent, and her interest in me was always superficial.

On the weekends, my sister would get together with friends. Taryn had always been sweet and funny but back home she nearly constantly threw tantrums, bashing her baby teeth up into her gums when we played hide and seek, going headfirst into a wall at one of my birthday parties. She was the world's pickiest eater, something my mom used to complain about endlessly, but now, she thought I was the difficult one.

There was a girl, Yvonne, who was a year older than me who'd immigrated from Johannesburg at the same time. We'd gone to different schools, but we kind of knew each other. She was one of those obsessively normal people, someone who could pick up the trends and expressions and blend in, the kind of girl no one would ever be able to pick out of a line up. I was so jealous of her.

Yvonne walked with confidence. She lost her accent faster than me. I had to work at it. I watched a lot of bad American sitcoms about families who loved each other and kids who had the time of their lives in high school, cheerleaders and jocks and class presidents. I repeated phrases over and over so they sounded natural. "Yeah, right. I hate her guts. Oh My God."

I wasn't a bad student, but unlike at home, I wasn't an exceptionally good one.

Everything was different. Math was harder. The books we read were less interesting. I'd read under my desk when the teacher wasn't looking. Only one kid noticed.

"Any good?" he'd ask me, and sometimes we'd talk about books.

I wasn't used to being friends with boys. I found it hard to talk to him, though I always wanted to.

There was a boy named Erez who only ever talked to me in a slow, loud over-the-top South African accent that sounded slightly Texan. Our assigned lockers were beside each other, so there was no escaping him. He had thin, curly hair, a wide forehead, and wide-gaped teeth that his braces couldn't fix. He was obsessed with all the popular girls, making up songs that he would sing them, buying them expensive chocolate for Valentine's Day.

There were seven of them, including Ruthie, a girl whose sister Annie was already good friends with my sister. She came up to me one day and told me that my mom asked her to look out for me. A few weeks later we went to the mall together, ate French fries, and even took those cheesy photo booth pictures. I thought I'd finally made a friend. The next day, I put the photos up in my locker, like I saw everyone else do.

Erez grabbed the photo, tore it up, and threw it into the industrial sized garbage at the end of the hallway.

"Ruthie's my friend," I protested and Erez snorted. "No, she isn't."

Later that day, in class I was so sure that she'd be upset with him, that when he told me, like he always did, that I was a loser with no friends, I looked in her direction, and said "Ruthie's my friend."

Erez looked at her and laughed like it was the best joke he'd ever heard. "Ruthie, you want me to tell her? Are you really friends with *her*?"

Ruthie fixed me with the same big smile she'd had on the first time we'd talked.

"Of course," she said, in an over-the-top cheery voice, "I'm everybody's friend."

Another boy, Judah, had a long, thin nose, beady eyes, and sharp looking canines. He scuttled like a rat in the hallways. Together, he and Erez made fun of me while everyone either ignored them or laughed along.

One day, our French teacher was absent, and a substitute did the attendance.

Instead of Lindi, she read my name as Linder. Linder Bumbum, instead of Lindy Buxbaum.

Judah thought this was hilarious. He led the whole class in a chant, "Buh buh buh buh buh buh, BUM," to the tune of Charge! Like at a baseball game.

The class would chant it, then look at me, and I would slide down in my chair, trying to disappear.

The teachers would look away, like they couldn't hear anything. I'd never thought about my ass being big before, but I started asking my mom to buy me bigger clothes and tying sweatshirts around my waist.

Judah would make kids playlists, individualized and thoughtful, which slowly made him more popular.

"Bum, I made you one," he said one day, and I was stupid enough to ask to hear it.

It had one song on it, which I'd never heard of, called Mr. Personality. I think it was from the 1990's.

Over the chorus, Judah sung his own version "They call her Lindi personality because she's so ugly" Nathan stood behind him, laughing so hard he had to wipe his eyes.

The worst thing happened at Zev Epstein's bar mitzvah. Even if you had no friends, you got invited, because everyone invited the whole class.

Every table had heavy centerpieces made of silver balloons and a heavy weight.

I ate chicken for dinner. I danced to ancient dance music, including the YMCA, and the Macarena.

In the passage that led into the party room were stacks of extra chairs, five or six heavy piles of metal, padded chairs. Everyone was inside unless they had to leave to go the bathroom.

Erez and Judah were waiting for me in between the chairs. One of them was holding extra centerpieces, the other one held me so I couldn't move.

I didn't scream, but even if I had, the music was so loud, no one would have heard me. I'm not sure they would have cared if I had.

They used five centerpieces in all, tied my hands and feet, and the back of my hair to a stack. If I moved, I threatened to bring a whole stack of chairs down on me. I was around five feet tall, and each stack was over six feet, at least.

Nobody freed me. Eventually my mom came to pick me up. I watched the colour drain out of her face when she saw me trapped there. She used her car keys to cut the ribbons.

The school's principal said, "It happened on a weekend, not on school property, so there's nothing we can do."

My mom didn't offer to let me move schools, so I didn't ask.

She channeled her rage into changing my behaviour. "What did you do, she asked to make them make fun of you?"

"Let's make a list," she said, trying to be practical, "of all the things you can change and do to make kids like you."

I stopped talking for a long time. If I didn't say anything, no one could make fun of me.

When I got home, it was weird to have to start talking again, so sometimes I didn't. I chewed a lot of gum. I went online a lot. I talked into my sleeves.

"Teenagers mumble," my mom told anyone who asked. "It's totally developmentally appropriate."

I read a lot. I drew sometimes. I listened to music.

I spent my lunches either in the bathroom or in the school library. I read just about everything in their fiction section, from *The Hobbit* to Holocaust literature.

I got skinnier. I tried my hardest to disappear.

They say artists are born, not made. It's true that I was always a weirdo. It's true that drawing and writing were my favourite things to do as a kid. I like creating imaginary worlds. I had imaginary friends for way longer than was considered normal. It's also true that if none of these things had happened, they might have remained hobbies. When I lived to be twenty-one, I officially decided to make the most of my life. If I hadn't needed to become invisible for so long, I might never have needed any recognition.

- ❖ Danila Botha is the critically acclaimed author of short story collections *Got No Secrets* and the Trillium Book Award, Vine Awards, and ReLit Awards finalist *For All the Men (and Some of the Women I've Known)*. Her award-winning novel, *Too Much on the Inside* was published in 2015. She is currently working on her new graphic novel, and has a new collection of short stories, and a new novel coming out soon.