

Forgetting How to Breathe

A NOVEL

ANITA DAHER



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Flóki-Vilgerðarsson loosed the ravens at sea. The first flew up and turned back the way they'd come. The second spread its wings and soared high, circled the area around the boat, and returned without the news they sought. The third led the way sure and steady toward land.

— LOOSELY TRANSLATED FROM THE MEDIEVAL
MANUSCRIPT, *LANDNÁMABÓK*, THE ICELANDIC
BOOK OF SETTLEMENTS.

Chapter One

Tia struggled to keep exasperation from her voice. “Come on, Tag. I told you we have to hurry.”

“But I don’t *want* to hitch a ride,” Tag whined. “Can’t we take a bus?”

Her brother’s complaining was beginning to grate on her last nerve. She knew it was because he was scared—and only eight years old. With all they’d been through, she sometimes forgot that he was still a little kid. But what choice did they have? Winnipeg was a one-hour drive from their new home in Manitoba’s Interlake. Too far to walk.

“There is no bus,” Tia told him. “Anyway, it’s Friday night. Lots of people will be driving to Winnipeg to see shows and stuff.” It was what people did. Mama had gone to lots of shows before she’d disappeared. It was one of her favourite things.

“We’re not supposed to hitchhike.”

“It’s fine.” At thirteen, Tia figured she was pretty good at telling nice from nasty. She would keep Tag safe.

“But why do we have to go at all?” Tag asked.

“You know why.”

“Because of Scout.”

“No, it’s Cathy. She could have said yes. The lodge is huge.”

A dog that big belongs in a zoo, not a house. Cathy had said.

Yeah, right, Tia thought. *Exaggerate much?* But Cathy had insisted the dog should go to the animal rescue centre. Remembering Cathy's words, and the argument that followed, made Tia's blood boil all over again.

But he needs a home, just like Tag and I did.

You and Tag are people.

So what? It's not like you don't have space.

I'm sorry, Tia, but the answer is no. I won't change my mind on this.

"He's just a dog," Tag said.

"How are you even my brother?"

Tia loved her brother with everything in her, but they were polar opposites in terms of personality. Tia was more like Mama—adventurous, willing to take a chance on things, while Tag was cautious. Maybe his nature came from their father. Daddy had died when Tag was a baby and Tia was five. Her memories of him were dim, but at least she had a few. More than Tag.

A gust of icy wind stole her breath, pushing her back. It was almost April, but the warmth of spring so recently arrived with early buds and sun kisses had disappeared like a promise it couldn't keep. Tia tucked her chin into her jacket collar, moving quickly. She was in a hurry to get some distance from Cathy and Bob's, the latest in a string of foster care placements.

"You'll love the Magnussons," their caseworker, Jamie, had said as she dropped them off one week and two days ago. She'd said the same thing about the other four homes Tia and Tag had been placed in over the past two and a half months, none of which had worked out.

As always, they'd carried their belongings in garbage bags. Kids in foster care didn't get suitcases. But garbage bags would make them stand out in this town, which would get them stopped before they'd hardly made a start.

When they'd left the house with Scout, fake mom and dad hadn't even noticed they were wearing their school backpacks. *It's not stealing*, Tia told herself. Cathy and Bob had said they were theirs to keep. But instead of notebooks, inside they each carried a toothbrush, extra socks and underwear, two shirts.

Jamie had promised the Magnussons' place would be different, and on the surface, it was. The home was in the country next to Lake Winnipeg but still close enough to the small town of Gimli that they could walk there if they didn't mind a short hike. Cathy and Bob ran a tourist lodge called the Great Blue Haven. Guests stayed in cabins nestled along Lake Winnipeg, while the family lived in the main house, serving up breakfasts in a quaint tearoom.

Oh, Cathy and Bob acted nice enough, but Tia knew it wouldn't last. It never did.

The Magnussons hadn't yelled at them or hit them or anything like that, but there was something about Cathy that got under Tia's skin. Apart from when she was saying "no," she was way too nice, like over the top, like a TV version of a mother. Tia couldn't figure her out. It wasn't like she was kid-starved or anything—Cathy and Bob already had young twin daughters, Summer and Daye.

Tia shivered and wished she'd thought to wear her sweater underneath her jacket.

"How much longer, Tia?"

"I'm not sure."

"C'mon, let's just go back. It wasn't so bad there. I liked it. Better than running away."

"We're not running *away*, we're running *to*. It's different. Besides, Uncle Richard is in Winnipeg. He's rich. He'll help us."

"He's not really our uncle."

"He said we could call him that."

"How do you know he's rich?"

“He lives in a hotel, doesn’t he? That probably means he owns it.”

“But we don’t even know his last name,” Tag argued. “Why can’t we just call the hotels from here?”

“Because we can’t,” Tia snapped. She didn’t need Tag pointing out that her plan wasn’t that well thought out. “If we’re there in person, they’ll see we mean business.”

“Who?”

“They! You know perfectly well who I mean! Anyway, Social Services knows about him, and they haven’t done anything.”

“Have too. Jamie said *they* couldn’t find him.”

“We have to find him ourselves. Besides, if the Magnussons really wanted us to stay, they would have said yes to Scout.”

Okay, fine, maybe this wasn’t really about Scout, but he *was* the final straw.

No, you can’t take a break from school. No, you can’t have food in your bedroom. No, you can’t stay up past nine o’clock. No, Tag can’t have extra applesauce in his lunch.

Tia’s dark thoughts softened as the shaggy, blond dog in front of them glanced back over his shoulder, as if checking to see if they were still following. Mouth open, tongue lolling out one side over black lips, he looked like an Irish wolfhound with a little something else mixed in. He was a big dog, the biggest Tia had ever seen, but not the giant their new foster mother had made him out to be.

“How do you even know that’s his name?” Tag asked.

“I don’t know. He just looks like it—stop asking so many questions!”

“Sorry,” Tag mumbled, sounding not sorry at all.

A slippery patch and a crazy dance to stay upright interrupted their bickering.

Tag grabbed hold, helping to steady her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Weird weather.”

Tia shivered again. From morning's first blink, grey skies had hung low and harried the land first with ice-cold drizzle, and then tiny snow pellets. There had even been the occasional rumble of thunder, though it had been faint, as if embarrassed. Now, as daylight began to fade, invisible fingers of ice snuck between folds of their outer wraps to replace warm spaces deep inside with something cold and hollow.

The last time the weather had been this strange was in October. The days had shortened like they always did, and leaves had all but blown from the trees. But one day after the morning frost had burned away, the sun got hotter and hotter, like a child stomping its foot in defiance. By evening, it was sweltering.

Long after Tag had gone to bed, Mama and Tia sat at the kitchen table, sipping iced peppermint tea. Mama moved to the open, night-darkened window and paused there, her fingertips resting lightly on the latch, looking out, as if seeing beyond the street, the city, to someplace faraway. She stood there so long that Tia wondered if she'd forgotten about her. Then, in a singsong voice, Mama confided that sometimes she thought about just taking off, getting a new name and starting a new life. When Tia asked what her and Tag's new names would be, she came back to herself, giggled, and said they had no one to hide from.

It was nothing. Just a silly what-if, like a story you sometimes imagined yourself inside. Except that it had made Tia feel all fluttery. She hadn't felt safe.

After that, she'd felt the same way every day. The dull ache in her chest she woke with would go away when she saw Mama at the table sipping her coffee, but it would grow back through the day, like a lengthening shadow, until she rushed home and saw Mama was still there.

Then, in January, Mama disappeared, and the shadow had wrapped all around her.

It hadn't taken long for Tia to grow tired of the sympathetic looks in people's eyes, the ones that said she and Tag were orphans.

But they weren't.

You can't be an orphan when you still have a mother, Tia thought. Even if you don't know where she is.

Tia bit her lip. She knew Tag liked Cathy and Bob, and she was taking him away anyway. It was for the best. No matter how nice they acted, they weren't family. Tia and Tag would never truly fit.

Maybe taking off was impulsive, but it didn't matter. All Tia knew was that she couldn't stay another minute at the Magnussons, and there was no way she'd leave Tag behind. Not ever. Abandoning people who love you was about the worst thing a person could ever do. That wasn't Tia.

And it wasn't Mama, either.

It couldn't be.

If she let herself think that, even for a second, she was afraid she'd forget how to breathe.

"Tia," Tag whimpered, touching her hand. He'd stopped in front of a wrought iron gate at the side of the road. It was an entrance to a small cemetery—one of those private family ones that dotted the countryside, abandoned and overgrown. Tag had always been terrified of cemeteries. Tia had no idea why. Maybe he'd seen some spooky movie, or maybe someone had told him a scary story. Whatever the reason, Tia had learned not to push or tease him. It only upset him more. Instead, she held his hand. As long as she stayed quiet, he'd calm.

Big, soft flakes of snow had begun to fall, insulating them, muffling any sound they might have heard from the highway, which wasn't too far away. Still, this road was little more than a lane, and as it disappeared around the next bend, poplar, aspen and spruce crowded the edges of it, reaching

skyward. It was like the entrance to another world far from home.

Tia shook her head, breaking the spell. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

All at once, there was a commotion from around the bend.

“Holy!” Tag cried.

Tia spun around as if an electric jolt had shocked her body. When she saw what had caused Tag to cry out, she froze.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tia has a hard time feeling like she belongs with her new foster family. Have you ever gone to stay with someone who is not your family? How did that make you feel?
2. When Tia sets out to find her mother, she insists that Tag come with her. Why does she do this? Do you think her reasons make her right? Why or why not?
3. Cathy is worried about Tia spending too much time at the ranch because she wants them to have “family time.” Do you spend special time with people who are important to you? What kinds of things do you like to do together?
4. Tia learns a little about Icelandic culture through Jennifer’s love of baking. Have you tried foods or recipes from other countries or cultures? What is your favourite?
5. Where are your ancestors from? If they immigrated to Canada from another country, when? How would travelling be different then from now?
6. Do you know anyone who moved from another country? Imagine some of the challenges they might have faced, or perhaps still do. How would it be different from moving to a different community or a new school?
7. We learn that even though Tia’s mother has faults she also loves her children and even teaches good and helpful lessons. This is because people are made up of good and bad and everything in between. If you were to write a story about a character that has one special good quality, and one special fault, what would they be?

ABOUT THIS BOOK

For readers age 10-14

Themes/subjects: family, foster care, belonging, choices, hope, animals, Icelandic heritage

Synopsis:

At the edge of an Icelandic community in the heart of Canada, 13-year-old Tia is angry. Her mother has disappeared and she and her eight-year-old brother, Tag, have been sent to yet another foster home, this one with a family and “fake mom” that feels smothering, Tia feels more isolated and farther away from her real mother than ever. She desperately tries to convince her brother to return to the city where they will find Mama and reunite their family. But when a freak spring snowstorm and a herd of runaway horses lead her to the Ice Pony Ranch and Animal Rescue Centre, Tia is offered a job that might just change everything.

“Forgetting How to Breathe is a strong, engaging story of a young girl and her quest for stability in life. Tia’s journey is real and challenging. She is aware and sensitive to the path she is on, but has no way of foreseeing the series of events that will help her find focus and balance. As I read the story I thought about my own teen years and a part of me somehow felt that I could identify with Tia”

– Fred Penner

“A sweet story of a young woman discovering who she is and what values she lives for, surrounded by gentle, good people who are sturdy and resilient but also tender and kind. And their virtues are highlighted without demonizing those who struggle with life’s challenges and adversity. It is a story about living life on a human scale.” Stefan Jonasson, editor of Lögberg-Heimskringla