

From *The Different Lives of Olivia*

(*Annehver uke – Olivias liv*)

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Published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS – Gyldendal Barn & Ungdom, Oslo 2019

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Chapter 1

When you live in two places, switching every other week, it's as if you live two different lives. Or at least that's how I think of it – that I lead a kind of double life.

In the weeks called *even weeks*, I live with my mum, and in *odd weeks* I live with my dad.

My mum's name is Linn, and my dad's name is Finn.

You might think they'd be perfect for each other, seeing as they have names that rhyme. But that's obviously no guarantee of everlasting love.

The thing is that my parents are really different.

Mum has long, wild hair, and a huge tattoo of an eagle on her back. She works at a newspaper, and loves to play loud music and fill the house with people.

Dad has brown hair, combed neatly into a side parting. He likes making lists of rules, or things that need to be done. And he likes going for walks in the forest. Preferably along deserted paths, where the only thing you might meet is a flock of birds. Or an army of ants.

It's hard to imagine two people who are so different as a couple. But they were once, long ago. Mum told me that one of the few things she and Dad agreed on was their love of olives – and so that's how I got my name.

My name is Olivia. I have two surnames – one from Mum, and one from Dad. I'm ten-and-a-half years old and have brown hair and green eyes, which sometimes look brown if the weather is really sunny. I don't like olives, but I do like almonds. And macaroni with butter

and ketchup. And using scissors to make curly ribbons, like the ones you wrap around presents. And I also like to practise holding my breath under water. I almost always do that when I'm at my dad's house, because we have a bathtub there.

In the weeks I'm with my mum, I live in an apartment in a yellow apartment building.

The apartment is on the first floor, and is actually quite big. But it soon seems small when you think of everyone who lives there: five kids, five pets and two adults.

Mum's new boyfriend is called Bjørn.

He's not really *that* new, because they've been living together for over a year. Bjørn has bushy, curly blonde hair, and is working as a taxi driver while he tries to figure out what he wants to be when he grows up.

Or at least, that's what he likes to say – that he's waiting to discover his hidden talent.

Bjørn is nice and fun to be around – but I'm not so sure about the talent. If it's there, it must be pretty well hidden.

Every other week, in the same weeks that I'm there, Bjørn's four sons also live in the apartment. These are the kids he has with his ex-wife, Benedikte.

Bjørn's two youngest boys are twins, called Kim and Kasper. They're in the second grade, and really noisy and funny. In the weeks we live with Mum and Bjørn, they sleep in bunk beds in a little bedroom next to the bathroom.

In another bedroom, in identical bunk beds, sleep me and Viktor.

Viktor is freckly faced and super smart and also really kind. He's four days younger than me, and since Bjørn and Mum moved in together, Viktor and I have been in the same class at school.

The only person in the house who has their own room is Ruben. He's Bjørn's oldest son.

Ruben is in high school, and over the past few months his voice has started to swing up and down when he speaks. And you never know what kind of mood Ruben is going to be in. Mum and Bjørn have explained that this is because of *puberty*. Victor and I have agreed that we hope *puberty* will never happen to us.

Ruben loves to sleep a lot and have his *own space*, but neither of these things is particularly easy when you live a house with so many others.

Because five animals also live in our apartment. Our dog, Sausage, who's really sweet and lazy and generally just lies there under the kitchen table and sleeps. And farts. Sausage loves to chew absolutely everything – except people. And then we have our budgies, Bill and Ben, and two goldfish called Sharkey and Sparky.

We used to have two other goldfish called Donald and Dolly, but one day they were just lying there floating in the water, belly-up – dead as doornails. Kim and Kasper held a funeral in the bathroom. We all had to observe a minute's silence while we thought back on all our good memories. I mostly just tried to figure out which fish was Donald, and which one was Dolly. Then we sang two hymns and a Christmas carol – even though it was the middle of summer. Finally, Kim and Kasper plopped the dead fish into the toilet and flushed.

It's almost impossible to get bored during the weeks I live with Mum. There isn't much space there, but there's always loads of laughter, plenty of noise, and even more fun.

Still, I'm often happy when Friday comes around and it's time for me to switch. Because in the weeks I live with Dad, my life is quite different.

Dad lives in a big, red house with his wife, Louise. Louise has very nice, white teeth – which probably isn't such a surprise, because she's a dentist. Dad and Louise have no animals or other children.

In the big house, I have a bathroom all to myself. And I have *two* rooms. One where I sleep and keep my clothes – and another where I can play and do my homework.

When I'm with Dad and Louise, I never get cornflakes for dinner, or vegetables that have been boiled for so long that they taste of nothing but water.

Eating dinner here is almost like being at a restaurant. Everyone sits *at* and never *under* the table when they eat. And there's never anyone who forgets to wash their hands before a meal, or who might somehow forget to brush or floss their teeth or take a fluoride tablet before going to bed.

At Dad and Louise's house everything is calm, and everyone has plenty of time. I always get help with my homework, and every single night, before I go to bed, either my dad or Louise reads aloud to me from a book. Two chapters – at least.

When I'm at Dad's place, it's as if everything is all about *me*.

It's a pretty nice feeling.

Still, after several days in Dad and Louise's big house, I sometimes start to feel a bit bored. Or that it's a little *too* quiet.

The fact that I don't have any siblings or pets there is one thing – but there aren't many other kids I can play with, either. For the most part, only adults and old people live in the surrounding houses, and the few kids who actually live there go to a different school to me.

But just when I feel that I'm starting to get a bit bored it's suddenly Friday, and time to switch again. And then another week of noise and fun and completely different rules awaits me.

When I think about my life, I imagine two big and totally different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. And when you put the two pieces together, they make a really great picture.

That's what I think – that my life is actually pretty perfect.

Or at least, that's what I thought until that week in the middle of November. When everything changed.

Chapter 3

When you live in two places, switching every other week, you have two different ways to school.

I have one way of getting to school that's really long, and one that's really short.

The journey to school from my dad's house is so long that I have to take two different buses to get there. But Dad usually goes into the office a bit later in the weeks that I'm with him, and drives me to school before he goes to work.

I think he does this because he feels guilty. Or he apologises quite often anyway.

'You poor thing!' Dad might say when we're sitting in the car, stuck in morning traffic on the way to school. 'Poor you, having to live in *two* places.'

If I'm in a good mood, I might answer: 'There are poor children in the world who don't even have *one* home – but me, I'm lucky enough to have two!'

Then Dad always starts to laugh. But other times, if I'm tired or maybe feeling sad, I say: 'It's your fault that my life is like this. You and Mum decided it had to be this way.'

Then Dad always falls silent. And if Louise isn't in the car, he gives me a sugar-free boiled sweet from a bag he hides in the glove compartment.

In even weeks, when I'm with Mum, my journey to school is super short. In fact, there's no more than six-hundred-and-ninety-seven long strides between the yellow apartment building and the school gates – Victor and I have counted them.

That's why it's pretty strange that the times I'm late for school are always in the weeks I'm with my mum.

Viktor throws the door open and we storm out into the back yard.

'We'll make it if we run!' he shouts.

And so we run. Past the swings and the little shed that contains the rubbish bins. Over ground covered in a thin layer of snow that almost hides the hopscotch board someone has drawn on the asphalt in pink chalk. And out through the gate, and onto the street.

My rucksack thumps against my back. I think of second period, when I'll make my way to our classroom after arts and crafts and give my social studies homework to my teacher, Ole Sverre. Then we'll also get new places – *another* thing to look forward to today!

Every four weeks, we switch places in the classroom. For the past month I've had a pretty bad place, on a table of four furthest from the window and with my back to the board.

But yesterday, Ole Sverre told us what our new places would be. And I cheered when I found out that I'd finally get my favourite place: beside the window, so I can look outside if I get bored, and look at the whiteboard when I want to keep up with the lesson. And I'll be on a table with a good group: Viktor, Vanja and Theo.

Maybe that's why I'm running so fast and why it feels so easy today – because I have so much to look forward to. Because today is going to be such a good day.

We run along the pavement. Past the hairdressers and the coffee shop and the apartment where the angry Turkish man lives – although he's not really from Turkey, he's from Bergen. And it's as if I don't get tired at all!

'Wait!' Viktor squeaks from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to discover Viktor lagging several metres behind. He's red in the face and panting, his mouth half open. He actually sort of reminds me of Sausage when he's been forced to go for a walk in the forest.

'Come on, Viktor!' I shout, 'it's only a little further – you can do it!'

We continue on past the grocery store and the bakery and the pizza place, and as we round the corner and catch sight of the big, white school building we see the main doors closing after the last of the students.

As we tumble into the arts and crafts room, the clock on the wall shows that the lesson *actually* started three-and-a-half minutes ago. But seeing as Rune, our teacher, hasn't arrived yet, it's not such a big deal.

Vanja casts an astonished glance at Viktor and me as we each throw ourselves across our desks, gasping for air.

'I thought you two only lived around the corner?' she says.

'Six-hundred-and-ninety-seven steps away,' I say, breathlessly.

'Probably fewer today,' wheezes Viktor. 'Fewer steps – but longer strides.'

His chest is whistling, like a bum note played on a recorder.

Suddenly the door is thrown open, and Rune comes in. He's carrying a big box in his hands and glances hurriedly up at the clock on the wall.

Rune is a young, kind teacher. But he's also pretty disorganised and forgetful. He started at our school this past autumn. My class has him for arts and crafts, and sometimes as a substitute teacher in other subjects.

‘My apologies!’ says Rune, blinking up at the clock on the wall. ‘Sorry I’m running a little late.’

‘We’ll try to forgive you,’ I say.

Viktor looks at me and sniggers quietly. He’s still pretty red in the face after our run.

I’m about to take my embroidery from my bag, but just then Elias says:

‘Are we going to make something today?’

He points to the box that Rune is holding.

I follow Rune with my gaze as he scurries between the tables, making his way to his place at the front of the classroom. He smiles slyly, and I notice that I’m starting to feel curious. And – to be totally honest – I’m pretty bad at embroidery. So I’ll be really happy if we get to do something else.

‘Are we going to make salt dough?’ Susanne calls out.

‘No,’ says Vanja, ‘that’s childish. Can’t we make Christmas decorations instead?’

‘Christmas decorations?’ says Theo. ‘It’s only, like, November.’

‘Yeah,’ says Vanja, ‘and after November comes December. You should try learning the months of the year, you silly cuckoo!’

This is typical of our class. When we have Ole Sverre, we’re usually pretty well behaved. But when we have Rune or a substitute teacher, everything quickly descends into chaos and noise.

‘Vanja, come on now,’ says Rune.

‘Did you know that if you find yourself under a tree while a cuckoo is calling, you can be granted three wishes?’ says Viktor.

This is typical of Viktor. He keeps a special notepad on his nightstand at home, in which he notes down fun facts.

‘Did you know that in China they eat dogs?’ says Susanne.

‘What does *that* have to do with anything?’ says Theo.

Then Susanne starts to cry – because it really doesn’t take much to make Susanne cry.

‘Did you know that if you dig all the way through to the other side of the earth, you won’t actually get to China?’ says Viktor.

‘You can’t dig all the way through to the other side of the earth,’ says Elias.

‘Of course not,’ says Viktor, ‘but *if* you could. You wouldn’t get to China – you’d get to New Zealand.’

‘New Zealand?’ I say.

Viktor looks at me and nods. But now Susanne is crying so loudly that nobody else can get a word in.

‘Now, all of you!’ shouts Rune, waving his hands around. ‘Settle down – we’re getting off track.’

‘Can’t you just tell us what we’re going to make?’ I ask.

Rune sets down the cardboard box on the table at the front of the room. A green roll of fabric is sticking up out of one corner.

‘Are we going to sew costumes?’ asks Theo. ‘Can I make, like, a Darth Vader cloak?’

‘Or Yoda,’ says Viktor. ‘Have you got some dark brown fabric, Rune?’

‘No,’ shouts Ibtizam, ‘why can’t we make ourselves white gowns for the St. Lucy’s Day parade – it’s our class’s turn this year!’

‘Yes!’ shouts Susanne, who has luckily stopped crying. ‘Bags I get to be St. Lucy!’

‘You can’t just say bags you’re going to be St. Lucy,’ I say. ‘Aren’t we supposed to draw lots for that?’

‘No – we’re supposed to have a vote,’ says Vanja. ‘That’s what Ole Sverre said – that we’d have a vote on who got to be St. Lucy.’

Susanne starts to cry again.

‘Hey, hey, hey!’ cries Rune. ‘Everybody, listen up!’

‘It’s *you* who’s not doing much listening, Rune,’ says Theo. ‘We must have asked you what we’re going to make about eight times!’

‘Yeah,’ says Elias. ‘Just spit it out!’

‘Father’s Day cards,’ says Rune.

‘Huh?’ I say.

‘This Sunday is Father’s Day,’ says Rune. ‘And so I thought – what would be nicer than each and every one of you making a personal, cosy card to give to your dad?’

Then he starts to take things from the cardboard box: glitter glue, star-shaped stickers, felt-tip pens, ribbon, cardboard in various colours and some rolls of fabric.

‘What do you think?’ asks Rune.

He looks excitedly around the class, but nobody says anything, not for several seconds. It must be a new record. Then Viktor puts his hand up.

‘But on Sunday I’ll be with my mum,’ he says. ‘Can I make a card for my mum instead?’

‘That would be *all* wrong,’ says Susanne. ‘Mother’s Day isn’t until February.’

‘Can’t you make a card for your stepdad?’ says Nabil. ‘Or do stepdads not count?’

He casts a questioning glance at Rune.

‘Of coooooourse,’ says Rune, slowly, ‘Father’s Day card or Stepfather’s Day card – surely they’re one and the same thing?’

‘I’m not sure whether I have a stepdad right now,’ says Viktor. ‘I think he and my mum split up last weekend.’

I turn towards Viktor.

‘They did?’ I say, my voice quiet.

‘Well, they had an argument at any rate,’ says Viktor.

Benedikte, Viktor’s mum, changes boyfriend fairly often. I think Viktor finds it a little tiresome. But luckily she doesn’t move in with them.

‘What if you only have a seed for a dad?’ asks Vanja.

‘A seed?’ asks Rune.

‘Didn’t you know that Vanja has two mums?’ I say. ‘They got a seed from a man so they could have a baby.’

‘It’s called a *donor*,’ says Viktor.

‘So, like, does Vanja have to make a Father’s Day card for the donor?’ asks Theo.

‘Someone I don’t even know the name of?’ says Vanja.

‘No, no, no,’ says Rune, and clears his throat. ‘Of course not.’

‘What if you have a dead dad?’ says Susanne.

‘Dead dad?’ I say.

Susanne nods. Her bottom lip starts to tremble.

‘Is your dad dead?’ whispers Rune.

His face turns completely white, apart from his ears, which glow like two red lights.

‘What?’ says Nabil. ‘I spoke to your dad when a group of us were over at your place after school yesterday. When did he die?’

‘*My* dad isn’t dead,’ says Susanne. ‘But the dad of a girl who lives on the same street as my Grandma – *he’s* dead – and so just think of her, how sad it would be if her class had to make *F-F-F-Father’s* Day cards!’

The last of her words disappear into some quick, dry sobs. Then Susanne throws her body over her desk and bawls.

Rune runs his hands through his hair and over his burning ears.

‘Well, these days,’ he says, ‘it isn’t just heredity and genes that determine what makes someone a parent.’

‘Exactly,’ says Vanja.

‘You don’t need to think about biology when making your Father’s Day cards,’ Rune continues. ‘Think about who you’d like to give one to – from the bottom of your heart. How about that?’

He glances hopefully around the classroom.

‘Then I want to make a card for you, Rune,’ says Theo in a serious voice. ‘Because you’re like a father to me.’

Rune blinks rapidly. Vanja starts to titter. Then everyone is suddenly grabbing for the contents of the cardboard box.

‘Bags I get the black felt!’ calls Nabil.

‘Bags the purple ribbon!’ shouts Ibtizam.

‘Bags I get the green glitter glue!’ cries Theo.

But then Susanne starts to cry again, because precisely *that* green is her favourite shade of green. I choose a light blue piece of card – I think that must be my dad’s favourite colour. He almost always wears light blue shirts, anyway. I fold the cardboard in two. On the front I stick three red hearts, which I cut from felt.

I open the card and start to write.

DEAR DAD! I write, in capital letters using a gold pen.

For the rest of the lesson I fill the card with writing. About how much I love my dad. About how he’s the BEST DAD IN THE WORLD. About all the things he’s taught me, and all the things we do together: riding a bike without holding onto the handlebars, whittling a whistle from a piece of wood, using scissors to make curly ribbons to decorate presents with, holding my breath under water until I’ve counted all the way to thirty – *slowly*.

I LIKE YOU EVEN MORE THAN FANTA! I write. And then I feel my eyes well up a little, because it sounds so nice.

When the bell rings, Rune gets a bit stressed.

‘Time to tidy up!’ he yells. ‘Everyone has to tidy up!’

And I’m so excited that I don’t realise I end up putting my Father’s Day card in the wrong place. Instead of putting it in my rucksack – in my class folder so that it won’t get bent – I end up shoving it in my drawer.

Then I hurry outside for break time. And when the bell sounds, I run all the way up the stairs to our classroom – even though it’s on the second floor. I think of all the good things I have to look forward to – to getting my new place, beside the window, and handing in my brilliant assignment about Italy.

But when I throw open the door to our classroom, this is what I see:

A girl I’ve never set eyes on before. Sitting in *my* place.

Chapter 9

When you live in two places, switching every other week, many things are doubled up – including the rules.

Rules about things like when you have to be indoors, bedtime, sweets, flossing your teeth, washing your hands, watching TV or using your mobile phone – they all might be completely different.

This might seem confusing to people who only live in one place all the time, but to me it's completely natural. Or as Viktor once said when someone at school asked what it was like to live in two places: life is a habit.

One of the many things that Mum and Dad have different rules about is household chores. And my Fridays are completely different, depending on whether I'm with my mum or my dad.

At Dad and Louise's house, Fridays mean time for housework.

When I go there on Friday, my dad usually lifts me up and says: 'Well hello there, my favourite child!'

Then I laugh, and answer: 'But Dad, I'm your only child!'

Then we both laugh a little, and then it's time to do the chores.

To be totally honest, it's pretty boring to start the weekend vacuuming and cleaning and tidying up.

But what's really nice is that after just an hour or two the whole house smells fresh, like soap. Everything is spotlessly clean and tidy and I can sit down with Dad and Louise and just relax, eat tacos in front of the TV and enjoy the rest of the weekend.

Fridays with my mum are quite different. When Mum comes home from work on Fridays, she usually says:

'Come on – turn down the lights and let's put some loud music on!'

I think the thing about turning down the lights is to hide what the apartment *really* looks like.

Because with seven people and five animals, there's a huge amount of dust and clutter and crumbs, and odd socks thrown around here and there – nobody ever knows who they belong to.

That's why it's a good idea to dim the lights. And then Mum puts some loud music on, and we might dance or play musical chairs, and then we might make pizza and pop some popcorn.

If I'm being totally honest, I like Fridays with my mum the best.

But waking up on Saturdays – that's best with my dad. Because at my dad's place I wake up in a clean and tidy house, with plenty of time for breakfast and a nice, blank weekend open before us.

With Mum and Bjørn, the mood on Saturday mornings is often quite irritable.

We go around stepping on leftover popcorn and clutter, and the morning light that streams in through the windows seems to reveal *everything*.

It's easy to start to argue, then. Because nobody can find what they're looking for. And someone always gets annoyed about the dust bunnies and breadcrumbs. And so usually, at some point or other on Saturday morning, either Bjørn or Mum loses their patience and shouts:

'Right, everybody tidy up! Everybody get cleaning! *Nooooow!*'

As I hop off the bus and walk down the path towards the big, red house this Friday, I realise I'm ready for a week with my dad. Even though there'll be plenty of chores and tidying up to do, as usual.

Because after a bad morning and an even worse day at school – no buns, *and* a cross against my name from Ole Sverre – things really ought to be about *me* for a while.

I stop in front of the steps to fish my house key from my bag. But just then the front door opens and Dad is standing there, smiling a huge smile.

'Hi honey,' he says, throwing his arms wide. 'It's so good to see you!'

I hurry up the steps.

'You're home already?' I ask, giving him a hug.

That's when I smell it – the smell of cleaning products, a clean house.

'I finished work early,' he says, 'and Louise has taken the day off.'

Louise comes out from the living room. She's wearing a long, flapping waistcoat, and her smile seems *even wider* than Dad's.

'Have you cleaned the house already?' I ask.

'From the loft to the cellar,' says Dad.

‘We wanted to get the housework out of the way before you arrived,’ says Louise, ‘so we can spend a bit more time with you.’

I grin. For the first time today I feel truly happy.

‘I’ve baked some buns, too,’ says Louise. ‘Would you like one?’

‘Buns?’ I say. ‘Did you really just say *buns*?’

‘Yes,’ says Louise.

‘Are you sure?’ I say. ‘You don’t mean, like, vegetable soup?’

Louise looks at me, confused.

‘Vegetable soup?’ she says. ‘Would you rather have that?’

‘No!’ I say. ‘Absolutely not!’

Dad laughs.

‘Well then I suggest we go straight into the kitchen and get ourselves some buns!’

I think this is one of the smartest things Dad has said in a very long time.

I kick off my shoes and follow my nose as I move through the house. And then there they are, on a large platter in the middle of the kitchen table – twenty-four big, freshly baked, great smelling, absolutely perfect buns, stuffed full of soft raisins.

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Can I take two?’

Dad and Louise start to laugh. They look at me as if I’m the most important person in the world. It’s a lovely feeling.

‘Shall I take your rucksack?’ says Dad.

‘And your other bag, too?’ says Louise.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ asks Dad.

‘How about a glass of Fanta?’ says Louise.

‘Fanta?’ says Dad, turning to look at Louise.

‘Fanta?’ I say. ‘Can I really have a glass of *that*?’

At Dad and Louise’s house, fizzy drinks are something we only have at Christmas and on birthdays. Louise is always going on about the unbelievable amount of sugar fizzy drinks contain, and how bad it is for your teeth. But now she opens the fridge and pulls out a big bottle of Fanta.

‘It is Friday, after all,’ she says.

I sit down at the table and grab a bun in each hand. I enjoy every mouthful. And if I’m being completely honest, I also enjoy this:

The fact that there isn't a dog under the table – a dog that might gobble up anything at any moment. In this house there are no little boys running around in nothing but their Spider-Man underpants, or moody teenagers complaining about everything. Or parents who have to hurry off to deal with other children.

'You can choose what we'll have for dinner tonight,' says Louise.

'We've already bought what we need to make tacos,' says Dad. 'But if you'd like something else, that's fine too.'

'We can take a little walk to the shop if need be?' says Louise.

'Absolutely,' says Dad. 'You decide. Take all the time you need.'

'Tacos will be great,' I say, my mouth full of current bun. I'm now probably on my fourth – or is it my fifth?

'Great!' says Dad, and smiles.

'Tacos it is then,' says Louise, and she smiles, too.

I sigh. I feel tired, but in a good and sort of happy way.

'We need to have a little talk with you,' says Dad.

He clears his throat and glances quickly across Louise. Louise nods. I sigh.

'Do we have to clean the house tonight after all?'

Maybe there's something they've forgotten. The bathroom in the cellar, maybe? Or to vacuum the hallway, perhaps?

'No, no!' says Dad. 'This isn't about tonight. It's about something a little further off in the future.'

'Yes,' says Louise. 'A little further off in the future.'

'Oh,' I say. 'You're thinking about Christmas.'

Louise looks at me, confused.

'Christmas?' she says.

'Yes,' I say. 'Isn't that what you want to talk about?'

'Um...', says Dad.

'Last year I was here on Christmas Day,' I say, 'so I'm guessing I'll spend Christmas Day with Mum this year?'

Dad starts to cough.

'Christmas, yes,' he says. 'It'll probably be quite special this year.'

'Yes,' says Louise. 'Or *next* year. *That* will be a special Christmas.'

Dad and Louise look at each other and smile. I groan.

‘Do we have to start planning Christmas *next year* already?’

‘No, no!’ says Dad. ‘Actually, it wasn’t Christmas we wanted to talk to you about at all.’

Dad glances at Louise. Louise closes her mouth, pressing her lips together. She looks fit to burst – as if she’s full of secrets that might plop out of her at any moment.

And isn’t there something slightly different about her? Something about her hair? Or maybe her face?

Dad places a hand on Louise’s back and says:

‘You might have noticed that Louise looks a bit different?’

‘Yes!’ I say.

‘A little fatter, maybe?’ says Dad.

‘Huh?’ I say.

It really isn’t like my dad to say such things!

If Kim and Kasper had said that someone was getting fat, I wouldn’t have been surprised – but my dad!?

But Louise simply smiles even *more* widely. As if she *likes* being called fat. Maybe it’s a new thing, I think – that she wants people to be one hundred per cent honest with her, or something.

‘I’m not sure you’ve got that much fatter,’ I say. ‘I was thinking you had more grey hair.’

Louise’s smile disappears. She touches her hair.

‘I’m going to dye my roots tomorrow,’ she mumbles

Dad gives me one of his strict looks.

‘Olivia, honestly!’ he says.

‘*You’re* the one who called her fat!’ I say. ‘Is having grey hair worse than being fat?’

Dad blinks rapidly behind his glasses.

‘Erm...’ he says.

‘And anyway, it’s completely natural,’ I say. ‘Bjørn says that everyone’s hair goes grey when they turn forty.’

‘I’m only thirty-six,’ says Louise.

‘Exactly,’ I say. ‘That’s why you’re only *slightly* grey.’

Louise nods and looks down at the floor.

‘And by the way,’ I say, smiling at her. ‘Don’t worry about my dad calling you fat. If there are food shortages and mass famine, it can be useful to have a few extra kilos on you – that’s what Viktor always says.’

Dad coughs again. Louise leans towards him.

‘Maybe we should just say it?’ she says quietly.

‘Say what?’ I say.

‘Olivia,’ says Dad, ‘we have some fantastic news for you.’

‘Really?’ I say. ‘Will I get freshly baked buns next time I’m here, too?’

Dad and Louise look at each other. Now their smiles are as wide as they were just a few moments ago.

‘You’re going to have a little brother or sister!’ says Dad.

‘Huh?’ I say.

‘Yes!’ says Dad.

‘That can’t be right,’ I say.

‘Yes it can!’ says Louise, laughing. ‘Look!’

She jumps up from her chair and pulls aside the long, loose waistcoat she’s wearing over her sweater and trousers. And without the waistcoat hiding it, it’s completely obvious: a big, round bun in the middle of her body. But not a freshly baked current bun – unfortunately.

‘We didn’t want to say anything until we were completely sure,’ says Dad.

‘Sure that the baby is healthy,’ says Louise.

‘We had to have a few extra check-ups,’ says Dad. ‘But now everything looks just fine.’

They smile at each other. Then they turn to me and smile, at least just as happily.

‘So what do you think, Olivia?’ says Louise.

‘Won’t it be fun?’ says Dad. ‘To have a little brother or sister!’

I move my head up and down in a way that’s supposed to represent nodding. It feels as if everything is spinning around inside my head, sort of like being on a carousel. Or looking at a really difficult maths problem.

‘Oh, Olivia,’ sighs Louise. ‘Are you so moved that you can’t find the words?’

I don’t answer. Louise dabs at the corners of her eyes. Then she walks around the table and across to the chair I’m sitting in.

‘Right now, it’s the size of a grapefruit,’ she says, ‘but soon it’ll be as big as a melon, and then finally a little baby!’

She wraps her arms around my head. Her grapefruit belly presses tightly against my cheek. And then, completely out of the blue, comes a hard kick.

‘Ouch!’ I say, putting a hand to my face.

‘Did you feel it!?’ blurts Louise. ‘The baby was saying hello to you!’

‘Really?’ says Dad.

He gets up from his chair and hurries around the table to us. Louise turns towards him.

‘Let me feel!’ says Dad.

And as Dad puts a hand on Louise’s belly and laughs enthusiastically, I realise that the grapefruit really didn’t want to *say hello* to me.

Because here’s what really happened: I was kicked away – hard. Kicked in the face – by a baby.

Chapter 19 (final chapter)

When you live in two places, switching every other week, Christmas is a big deal. And sometimes you just have to learn to grin and bear the way things are.

That's why we're all sitting here together in a room at the hospital on Christmas Day itself: Mum and Bjørn, Viktor and me, Ruben, Kim and Kasper, Benedikte, Dad and Louise.

On the ward for newborn babies, right next door, is Signe. My sister.

She's only ten days old, and teeny tiny. And the cutest thing in the world.

For every day that passes, Signe grows – she's getting ever bigger and stronger. But because she's so small, and arrived so early, she has to stay at the hospital for a few more weeks yet.

When I heard that Signe couldn't come home for Christmas, I said: 'Well then I'll go to her!'

Mum gently pointed out that the agreement was that I would spend Christmas with her and Bjørn this year.

I said: 'Surely you must realise that everything's changed now that my sister's been born!'

Me – who just a few weeks ago had been afraid that everything would be all about the baby. I suddenly realised how afraid I was that everything *wouldn't* be all about the baby.

Luckily, Mum understood. And when I refused to celebrate Christmas anywhere but where Signe was, Viktor said that he refused to celebrate Christmas anywhere other than where *I* was. And then Kim and Kasper said that they couldn't celebrate Christmas without Viktor. And so in the end, everyone gathered together here, in a little room at the hospital.

We've just eaten our Christmas dinner. Everyone has had a chance to see Signe. And today, I even got to hold her. She sleeps almost all the time – that's just how it is when you're growing, you don't really have the energy to do anything other than sleep. But when I coaxed my little finger into her tiny hand, I felt her squeeze it.

'That was an excellent Christmas dinner,' says Mum, wiping her mouth with a red serviette.

'Yes – it really wasn't bad, was it?' says Louise.

'It was wonderful,' says Benedikte, smiling.

Viktor told me that she's broken up with Tommy. Or Tony.

Now she lifts her glass.

‘Thank you for letting me celebrate Christmas with you,’ says Benedikte.

‘And thanks for having us, too,’ says Bjørn.

‘Thank you for coming,’ says Dad.

‘Thank you for the food,’ says Viktor.

‘Thank you for Signe,’ I say.

Everyone lifts their glasses.

‘To Signe!’ says everyone in unison.

Kim burps.

‘Oops,’ he says. ‘Excuse me! Are we going to open our presents soon?’

Everybody laughs.

Dad has to go to the bathroom, and I follow him out into the hall. I give him an envelope.

Dad smiles.

‘Is it a Christmas present?’ he asks.

‘No,’ I say. ‘It’s a Father’s Day card.’

Dad looks at me, confused.

‘A Father’s Day card?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It’s just a little late, that’s all.’

Dad pulls the card out of the envelope. His eyes well up as he reads it.

‘That makes me really happy,’ he says, dabbing at the corners of his eyes.

‘I mean everything that’s written there,’ I say. ‘Even about the Fanta!’

Dad has to laugh.

‘Merry Christmas, Dad,’ I say, and then we hug.

It’s only when I’m heading back towards the room, where the others are waiting, that I catch sight of her.

A dark ponytail swinging from side to side, all the way down at the end of the long corridor.

‘Cornelia?’ I call out.

The ponytail swings around in the air as she turns. Cornelia catches sight of me and her expression brightens.

‘Olivia?! What are you doing here?’

Cornelia says that she’s been to visit her dad. He’s on duty, and so has to work all Christmas Day, even through the night.

‘But I got to wish him a Merry Christmas and give him a gift,’ she says.

‘That’s great,’ I say. ‘Did you get something nice, too?’

I nod towards the gift bag she’s holding in her hand.

‘An iPad,’ Cornelia says.

‘Wow,’ I say, ‘an iPad!’

Cornelia nods.

‘Since my parents got divorced, Dad’s been giving me gifts that are far too expensive.

I think it’s because he feels guilty.’

She smiles quickly.

‘How about you?’

‘We haven’t opened our presents yet,’ I say. ‘In fact, I’m not even sure if we have any presents to open this year. It’s been pretty hectic, with my sister and all.’

I feel it as soon as I say it out loud. How well the words fit in my mouth: *my sister*.

‘She’s so cute!’ says Cornelia. ‘The picture you sent of her yesterday – she’s just gorgeous!’

‘I know,’ I say.

‘She can be Bendik’s girlfriend,’ says Cornelia.

‘Yes!’ I say. ‘Then we’ll almost be related!’

We laugh. A nurse flashes us a quick smile as she walks past, on her way down the corridor. I watch her go. Then I say:

‘It doesn’t really matter whether I get any presents this year.’

‘No?’ says Cornelia.

‘Because I’ve already got the two best things of all,’ I say.

‘*Two* best things?’ says Cornelia.

I nod.

‘A little sister,’ I say. ‘And a new friend.’

I look at Cornelia. She looks at me. And then a huge smile spreads across her face.

‘Merry Christmas, friend,’ she says.