

A photograph of a person walking barefoot on a dirt path in a forest. The person is wearing a red long-sleeved shirt and dark shorts. They are holding a pair of black sneakers in their left hand. The ground is covered with dry leaves and twigs. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with warm, golden light.

ANDREA
BRÆIN HOVIG
DETTE
ER
ELLENS
BOK

Vigmostad

Bjørke

Sample translation of *This Is Ellen's Book* by Andrea Bræin Hovig

Translation by Siân Mackie

“And grand plié!”

Andrej shouts to be heard over the music in the ballet studio. A menthol lozenge flies out of his mouth, and sunlight bounces off his big, dark sunglasses. Piano music plays insistently from the sound system.

“And turn around!”

I’m standing behind Ina at the barre. She has the nicest back I’ve ever seen. Her pink leotard is very low-cut, making her shoulder blades look just right. I have the exact same leotard, but on me it just looks strange. It makes my broad, flat torso look like a pale pink marshmallow. I’m planning on getting a black leotard, but I have to wait until August and our annual shopping trip to La Danse. Last year, we were preoccupied with finding me new tights. I’d *shot up*, as adults often say.

“Concentration!”

Our ballet teacher shouts, but I’m not really following. My toes throb painfully in their pointe shoes, and I don’t feel well. Mum has ordered me new, bigger pointe shoes online that will be sent in the post to Säterstad.

“Last class before the summer holidays! Pay attention, Ellen!”

Yeah, yeah. This time next week, I’ll be on the train to the forests of Värmland, where Dad has a cabin. It’s really dark at the cabin. It’s so far away from anyone, and ...

“Ellen! What’s wrong with you?”

The menthol smell is suddenly so strong that my eyes start watering. Andrej has pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and is standing right next to me. His small, angry eyes flash. We’re the same height now, which probably doesn’t help him feel less annoyed.

“In August, I will test you, Ellen. Your feet. Your jumps. Your pirouettes. If you really want to be in first row, you need to get BETTER.”

He always switches to English when he’s angry. We’ve only heard Polish once, and that time he’d been so incensed he’d grabbed Britt by the arm and chucked her out of the studio. Britt had quit after that.

“Do you really want to dance the solo in the show, Ellen?”

Okay. Back to Norwegian.

“Yes,” I squeak.

But I'm not entirely sure that's true. Pain lances through my feet. I'll need to get those new shoes if I'm to make any progress here. These are just too small.

"Then you'll need to CONCENTRATE!"

Andrej's breath is like flames licking at my face. The other girls stand leaning against the barre, staring at us. Ina puts her left leg over the barre and slides down into a crazy deep splits, so deep in fact that it's like a banana. It's very impressive. I think she does it to distract Andrej, and it works.

"Okay. Out onto the floor, everyone!"

My heart pounds and my toes throb, but I stumble out into the middle of the room.

"Lovely, Ina," I hear Andrej murmur.

Chopin starts playing from the speakers, and we begin.

"AND ONE!"

I can't feel my feet anymore. That's maybe just as well. One, two, three. The sweat runs down my face, from under my arms and down my back. I try my best to plaster on that strained little smile that Andrej loves. The smile that says what our legs are doing is almost effortless.

"CHIN UP!"

I wish I didn't have to go to Dad's for the summer.

"THREE AND FOUR!"

But when you're thirteen, you don't always get to make your own decisions. I wish Ina could come with me. Then everything would be much better.

"SEVEN AND EIGHT!"

But Ina came last year, and I was intensely aware of how much she hated it. Ina's completely transparent that way. She went home two days earlier than planned.

"KEEP COUNTING!"

I think she got her Mum to call Dad and say something had happened that meant she had to go home. Which wasn't exactly great for me.

"CHIN UP!"

Oh, how I'm looking forward to carefully peeling off these shoes in a little while.

"Pay attention, Ellen. He'll get angry again if you don't," Ina whispers as she executes a lovely grand battement. "One final push, then holidays."

She gives me a small smile and isn't in the least bit sweaty. She's an expert when it comes to whispering messages that fly under Andrej's radar. Or maybe he just *lets them* fly under.

We dance across the room as the piano music explodes out of the speakers. Ina is always the best. Andrej hardly ever corrects her because everything she does is completely perfect. And even if she does do something wrong, it's still somehow beautiful.

“BOURRÉE!”

I totter across the floor to the best of my ability, all the while telling myself I'm light as a feather.

Ina and I hang back in the changing room. Her dad isn't picking her up today, so we can linger and chat for a bit. The other girls disappear into the summer evening, one by one. “See you in August,” they say, waving happily. My heart sinks.

I can't be bothered changing, so I just put my trousers and jumper on over my ballet clothes. Ina, on the other hand, folds hers neatly into their bag and slips back into her lovely clothes. Ina is cool and elegant. I'm sweaty, tall and broad.

“Are you looking forward to going to your dad's for the summer?” she asks, gazing at me with her pale blue eyes.

“Not really. But I'm sure it'll be fine.”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking whether she might be persuaded to change her mind and come after all. Because Ina never changes her mind.

“Nøtterøy will be amazing, though!” I say overzealously, worried she might read my mind if I don't say anything.

“Yes, it'll be nice,” she says.

I really wish I could say the same. That I'm going to have an amazing few weeks with Dad. But I don't think they'll be all that great. Mum and Dad divorced four years ago, and since then I've had to endure these stupid Värmland summers. Say what you like about Dad, but he doesn't know how to holiday. He once said that if it hadn't been for his boss forcing him to take six weeks of summer holiday every year, he'd have worked every week of the year. But now he has to arrange some sort of summer holiday for himself and me. It's a bit sad, thinking about it, and I can feel the tears coming again.

“Ouch!” I say as a diversion. “These hair pins really weren't designed to be kind to our scalps!”

I try to laugh as I take out the ones at the top.

“I know,” Ina says with a smile. “I usually let Mum do it while I eat dinner.”

I hold the pins my hand, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Have a good summer, then, Ellen!” Ina gets up before giving me a quick hug and walking out of the changing room and out into the bright June evening.

I suddenly feel very alone.

“Yes, have a good summer!” I shout.

But I don’t think she hears me.

The final week of school seems unbearably long. My timetable just says *have fun* with a smiley face. For people like me, who go to school because they have to, and not because they have their best friends there, the weeks leading up to the summer and Christmas holidays are kind of lame. The anticipation in the classroom and playground is palpable, and even the teachers come over all giggly and different from usual. I’m too big for being allowed to bring fifty kroner’s worth of crisps or biscuits to be that exciting, and I’m not exactly in a hurry to arrange summer get-togethers with my friends. The best friend I have doesn’t go to my school, and she’s not as much of a best friend as I’d like.

It’s not like I get teased or anything. I’m never excluded, and no one puts bags of dog poo in my backpack like they did with Thomas that one time. No, it’s more like I’m *invisible*. Everyone is perfectly nice to me if they notice I’m there, but they do that surprisingly rarely, considering how tall and broad I feel.

I sense that Mum is keen to get me out of her hair. Not that she doesn’t love me, but she doesn’t hide the fact that a single mother needs a break every now and then. I think officially I’m supposed to spend sixty per cent of my time with Mum and forty per cent with Dad, but since I turned twelve, I’ve spent more or less all my time with Mum. She often calls herself a *single mother*, even though I still go to Dad’s at the weekends.

I used to be able to look forward to weekends with Dad, but now I like them less and less. They’re so different to weekends with Mum. Dad lets me buy as many sweets as I like, and never checks the ratings on films and series. He loves comedy and horror and laughs his ass off at both. I like drama best myself, but whenever we watch stuff like that, Dad gets so tired that he falls asleep. So I’ve tried to enjoy jump scares and people hitting each other on the head with pots and pans, and to enjoy the sweet bag being so full that I can’t see the bottom.

But lately my stomach ties itself in knots when I’m on the bus to Etterstad. Dad has stopped airing out the flat before I arrive, and the smoke is always thick as fog. He often forgets to buy sweets, so I get sent to Joker with two hundred kroner to shop for us. Dad is

one of the very last people in Norway not to have a bank card. He doesn't believe the money is there if he can't see it, and he doesn't trust a small plastic card to hold his salary.

That was one of the things that took Ina by surprise last summer. I'm so used to Dad being different to other dads that it takes a lot for me to think: "That was odd, no?" But lately, little things keep happening that make me think just that. I haven't said anything to Mum about it because I don't want her to have even more to think about. Mum is having a kind of *existential crisis* at the moment. That's what she calls it when she posts that she's at a crossroads. I don't really understand what she means, but it seems to require a lot of thinking. It's bad enough having a distant dad in Etterstad without also having a distant mum in Frogner.

But I can't exactly stop time, so the day I leave will come no matter what I do. Mum helps me pack my bag. She's in high spirits. She puts on Cezinando and sings and raps in a deliberately embarrassing way as she keeps stroking my hair.

As usual, my bag is full to bursting even though I already have quite a lot of stuff at the cabin. I go to shove a phone charger into a side pocket, but Mum grabs it out of my hand as she raps along to the Cezinando song: "PJs, toothbrush, wellies, rain gear, thick socks, woolly jumper and chargerrr!" Mum swings the charger around like a lasso before plugging it back into the wall socket. "Don't double up, that makes you a chump," she raps. After the divorce, Mum made sure to buy at least two of all the essentials. She wanted me to be able to *travel light and feel at home with both Mum and Dad*. But I've never felt at home with Dad. I'm not even sure he feels at home anywhere.

Once we've finished packing, we still have a couple hours until the train leaves.

"Hot chocolate?" Mum asks.

She bustles around the kitchen while I sit at the table. I feel leaden.

"No, thanks," I say.

I'm struck by how gloomy I sound. I glance over at Mum and can see the muscles in her back tensing.

I clear my throat before saying, in a much cheerier tone:

"I'm saving my appetite for what we get at the station!"

"Cool," Mum says, putting the lid back on the hot chocolate.

Her tone is breezy, but I can see that she's agitated.

No, no, no.

Mum plops down into her usual kitchen chair and puts her hair up in a topknot. Her movements are comfortingly familiar, and somehow I already miss her. A lot. Three weeks

without seeing her twist her curls together so she doesn't need hair ties. Three weeks without giggling over Fjordland ready meals and embarrassing rapping. But I know Mum is excited. She'll miss me, but she's also looking forward to some alone time. I'm thirteen, not stupid.

I can tell Mum wants to ask me something. She rocks her chair and seems restless. Looks around the room as if the answer might be hiding somewhere. Then she takes a deep breath.

"Do you like going to your dad's, Ellen?"

Her voice is abnormally high. It's almost like there's an echo in the kitchen.

"How do you mean?" I use the same carefree voice that I put on before.

"Well ..."

Mum searches for the words. I know she wants me to go, so why is she asking?

"Your dad's a bit ... um ... odd, and ..."

"And?" I interrupt blithely. "Odd is good. You two are always saying that."

"Yes, but ..." Mum chews her lip. "But sometimes I feel ... And recently, he's maybe ..."

I can't be doing with this. The train is leaving soon, and this talk is going nowhere. There's no way I won't be on the train to Säterstad today. It's that simple. So this is only making it worse.

"Will we have time to get a Frappuccino from Starbucks before the train leaves, Mum?"

I see her level a relieved smile at the table before I trot out into the hall. I wish I hadn't seen it.

The Frappuccino seems much bigger than usual, but I can usually drink a whole one. I force it down so as not to add any fuel to Mum's agitation fire. It hasn't escaped my notice that she's paying extra close attention to me today.

The platform is rammed. Mum has bought me chocolate and a soda, and the big Frappuccino sloshes around in my stomach. I almost tip over backwards from the weight of my bag, and in a way, I start looking forward to collapsing in a train seat. Ina often says that starting something unpleasant should be *like ripping off a band-aid*. In other words, just get it over and done with.

"Look, there's the train! Come on, let's find you a good seat!"

Mum likes to save a few kroner by not reserving seats on public transport, a firm believer that *fate* should decide where we sit. She's usually delighted with where we end up,

apart from that time we had to stand all the way to Gothenburg to go to the amusement park. I was standing with my head wedged between overheated belt buckles and bulging pockets when I really heard Mum and Dad argue for the first time. I must have been around six years old. I remember a long stretch with my head pressed against a mobile phone buzzing in a coat pocket.

“Ooh, this seat’s free for the entire journey!”

Mum says two words to a train employee, and hey presto, suddenly I’ve got a window seat. Mum seems happier now. She helps me and my bag get settled and kisses me all over my face. I narrow my eyes and laugh just like she hopes I will.

The train starts moving. I sit staring at my unopened soda, which quivers slightly on the small table. Next to it lies the chocolate, which has slid so close to the edge that it’ll soon be on the floor. Not that it matters. I feel sick, and I don’t want warm soda or half-melted chocolate. I narrow my eyes again. I picture Dad, who in a couple of hours will be ready to pick me up at the station. He’s been at the cabin for a couple of days already. He called yesterday to tell me that the weather was terrible and that he was looking forward to playing wally volleyball with me. I could tell he’d had a beer or two, and I don’t really like talking to him when he’s been drinking. He always ends up making promises he can’t keep.

I’m pretty sure Dad will already be on the bus to the station in Säterstad. Dad is never late. There’s always an hour’s wait at the train station before the bus to the cabin is due, but he never really trusts that it’ll come. Even though it’s the same bus driver every time, and he’s also someone you can set your watch by. Dad keeps a lookout for the bus for the whole hour and is always immensely relieved when it arrives. *Oh, good. That means we’ll get back.* He’ll then drop an exact number of coins and bills into the small dish by the driver.

I feel sweaty and nauseous. My jeans are sticking to my thighs. I’m wearing far too much clothing, but I can’t be bothered going to the toilet to change.

I’ll be at Dad’s cabin for three whole weeks. Longer than ever before. Without Ina. But I know she doesn’t mean anything by it.

I can see my reflection in the window even though it isn’t dark outside. I’m not much to look at. I wish I had a little snub nose with freckles. I draw all girls like that. When I choose an avatar emoji, that’s always what they look like. None of the options look like me. But I get it. No one would choose to look like me if they didn’t have to.

A lot of the girls in my class have started to get boobs and hips. My body is still quite childish, albeit broad with big feet. The worst of all worlds. My hair always stops growing when it reaches my shoulders, meaning I can't toss it when I laugh. I also struggle to put it in a proper bun for ballet.

I dig out my phone and send a message to Ina. I let the avatar with the snub nose say something about having a good summer and add a ballet shoe emoji after writing that I can't wait to break in my new shoes at the cabin. My heart pitter-patters a bit after I press *send*, but I try not to expect an answer. Ina responds to perhaps one out of every four messages. No one I know spends as little time on their phone as she does. Instead, she reads books and has long conversations with her parents and friends.

I suddenly regret the message. The emojis are stupid. I only have seven per cent battery left, and I can't wait to find the charger under my bed at the cabin as soon as I get there. I don't want to miss it if Ina does answer.

I pick up my phone again and consider posting something. But what? A soda in slo-mo? Ina and I got Instagram and Snapchat at the same time. I don't think Mum knew about the age limit of thirteen, but Ina's mum and dad are very concerned about that sort of thing. We follow quite a few ballet dancers. I'm always happy to see pros who are a bit on the broad side, but then it always turns out that's sort of the main point of the account. *Look! I'm graceful even though I'm not thin and petite! Dance with the body you have!* Then I unfollow them. There's just something cringey about it.

A pretty blonde lady sits chugging a soda a little further forward in the coach. Maybe she's on her way to Dad's, too. She's exactly his type. Big boobs, thin eyebrows and tight clothes.

Last summer, Dad had a new girlfriend visit him at the cabin. She was very nice to me but was just as fond of beer as Dad is. And at least as fond of making out. The cabin is small, so I didn't have many places to go. Fortunately, I have my own room where I can be alone. I spend most of my time in there reading old Donald Duck comics and on my phone. I broke my Candy Crush record last year after Ina left.

I sincerely hope there won't be any women kissing and drinking at the cabin when I get there. I've never kissed anyone myself, but I'm okay with that. Actually, I find it kind of disgusting, even though I'm a teenager now. Maybe there's something wrong with me.

Ina kissed someone during the Christmas holidays. She was in Geilo with her family, and at some sort of après-ski, she kissed a boy called Pelle. I think maybe she did it mostly to

get it over with, but I didn't tell her that. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, so I pretended to be impressed and envious.

Ina is my friend even though she's pretty, rich, kind and popular. It's unbearable, really, her being all those things at once. But ever since we met at ballet as six-year-olds, it's kind of been the two of us. I say *kind of* because we rarely spend time together outside of ballet. She's the best student and is naturally graceful. I, on the other hand, know I'm not. Nothing comes easily for me at ballet. Not even my ankles cooperate. They don't have the natural bend that is supposedly a must to turn pro. When Ina and I talk about what we want to be when we grow up, I pretend that ballet has never been an interesting career path to me. *It's just a hobby*, I tell her. But deep down, I'm really scared that she'll make a go of it and be a success. That's not how you should think about a friend, I know that. I should be cheering her on, like: *Come on, Ina! You have EVERYTHING going for you!* But I'm too jealous. I wish her almost anything she wants, just not a career as a ballet dancer.

It's been a long time since I thought I had a shot at being a prima ballerina. It hurts a little to think that I'll never be selected for a Russian company, for example, but just one look in the mirror shatters that dream. Grandma paid for Mum and me to go to Saint Petersburg when I was nine, right after the divorce was confirmed. Mum wanted to see old castles and stuff like that, and I was going to experience Russian classical ballet. It was incredible. All the female dancers were completely identical. They were exactly the same height and had the same body shape. They stood in long lines and moved in perfect sync. They looked like robot clones.

After the performance, I just wanted to go back to the hotel. I'd realised I had no chance. My ballerina dream was crushed then and there, even though I was only nine years old. I still dance, but a little less enthusiastically than before. I've taken off the little ballet shoes I had hanging from my school bag, and my *I am a ballerina* T-shirt has gone to the second-hand shop.

"Next station Säterstad," someone says over the loudspeaker. Something presses against my ribs. I'm starting to wonder whether I've got a tummy bug. That would be a great start, throwing up on my way into Säterstad as Dad stands waiting. But okay. Here we go. No going back now. I glance at the blonde at the front of the coach. She makes no move to get up. That's something.

I have my phone and lots of books. I'll have chocolate pudding every day, and I can sleep as late as I want. I'm going to text Ina a lot, and maybe tell her that I think she should

try to go pro after all. I've got a lot of pocket money, and I can go to the shops in Säterstad town centre. Dad has no idea how much ice cream a thirteen-year-old girl should have, so I always get at least three scoops. I'll push through. And if things get too bad, I can always call Mum. *Call anytime, my girl!* was the last thing she said before she got off the train in Oslo. But I hardly ever call Mum when I'm with Dad during the summer. I never know quite what to say. *Oh, Dad? He got so drunk yesterday that he's still asleep. Do we have enough food at the cabin? How nice of you to ask. I saw one egg left in the box. I'm going to make scrambled eggs for us now.* It's just more trouble than it's worth.

I'm standing ready with my backpack on long before the train doors open. It digs into my shoulders. Travelling light isn't actually an option when staying with Dad for three weeks because he doesn't have a washing machine. The train pulls slowly into the station, and I see him straight away. He's standing straight as a steel pipe, anxiously trying to spot me. He always expects me to have got lost on the train, even though that's never happened.

"Ellen!" he shouts unnecessarily loudly, waving his arms.

Yeah, yeah. I know I have to get off here, Dad. I'm not going to turn around, sit back down and continue on to Skogsberg. I'm not going to have an aneurysm as I step down from the coach, fall onto the train tracks and get electrocuted.

"Hi, Dad," I say as I give him a hug.

I don't really like hugging him, but I suppose I don't have a choice. It would make things weird if I suddenly stuck an arm out and said: *whoa, whoa, whoa, this is my space, and you should respect it.* It's not worth it. Dad smells of tobacco, but not booze. I'm so relieved I get a lump in my throat, but I decide to rein in my delight a little. No point getting ahead of myself.

The bench we usually sit on to wait has just been painted, so we stand there like *two* steel pipes, trying to spot the bus. As usual, Dad is stressed. He smokes three rollies in succession. He rolls them standing up, his technique impressive. Dad really loves smoking. Last year, we took the train together, and he stuck his head out for a few drags at every station between Oslo S and Säterstad. I don't know any other dads who smoke like that. I've heard adults talking about *social smoking*, and how it was *soooooo naughty* of them. *Must have had one glass too many too, hehehe.* My dad always has one glass too many, and smokes as often as he can. And it's always me who opens the windows to air the place out. He couldn't care less. He'd have happily smoked himself to death in the glass box they had as a smoking area at the airport in Saint Petersburg. The air inside was so thick with smoke that

you could barely see the people sitting there. I remember missing Dad then. There, at the airport in Saint Petersburg, I had wished he was in that glass box with his rollies. That he'd soon be out to find Mum and me, laughing loudly about a guy who had farted in the box, giving him little choice but to get the hell out sharpish.

"There's Gunnar." Dad stamps his cigarette end out with his trainer and waves his arms again.

"Over here!"

My cheeks turn red.

"Dad," I whisper. "This is the last stop. He's not going to miss it."

"You never know," Dad says.

Gunnar the bus driver has made particularly good time today, so he joins Dad for a smoke. I dig out my soda and chocolate, now warmed at least 40 degrees, and take a short walk around the station. I sit on the steps of the small station house and look at the train tracks and the pond on the other side. I eat the chocolate, missing the usual resistance when I sink my teeth into it. The soda is so hot that it's become a kind of toddy, but it's not all that bad. Maybe this summer will be different. Better.

I fish my phone out of my pocket and message *I've arrived! :-)* to Mum. Now I only have three per cent left. I think of a long emoji-free message to send Ina when I get to the cabin and find my charger. I'll tell her how much she means to me, and how I'll support her as best I can in her ballet career. That maybe I'll become a dance teacher, and that we can watch lots of dance films together when I get back to Oslo.

"Ellen! The bus is leaving!"

I can't help but smile. Yeah, yeah. I'm neither embarrassed nor annoyed by his loud voice in the small station. I'm simply in too good a mood now. My bag feels light, and I feel lighter inside too.

It's hot on the bus, and the conversation doesn't exactly flow easily. Dad isn't very interested in ballet, and as long as I don't do anything illegal or stupid, he's generally happy. He doesn't need to know much about what's going on with me.

"All good with Mum?" he asks.

"Mm."

Long pause.

The houses outside the bus windows are red and very nice. I wish our cabin was red, too, but it's grey. I've noticed that people automatically assume the cabin must be red and situated by the water when I say it's in Värmland, but our cabin is dreary grey and situated in the forest. Far from other people and cabins. You can see a small lake out of one of the living room windows, and Grandma always goes on about it like it's stupendous. *Lake view, Ellen! Lake view! Your granddad sure knew how to build!* Of course, I wouldn't dream of telling her that all other cabins I've seen have been nicer. Grandma still really loves Granddad, even though he died before I was born. She loves to tell me about him, but never when Dad is around.

As far as I'm concerned, she can say what she likes about Granddad if it makes her happy. Granddad was an architect, but apparently didn't get many projects. *He was ahead of his time, Ellen,* Grandma used to say when she was on a roll. *He wouldn't compromise on his designs, so no one wanted them!* But if the cabin was any indication, it perhaps wasn't all that surprising he didn't get many jobs.

Grandma likes a Baileys in the evening. Then once she's had one, she has "one more for luck". Still, I'm never afraid of her drinking. It just makes her talk more about Granddad. But if Dad sees her having a drink, he always sneers and whispers something to himself. It's really nasty, and then sometimes Grandma goes and pours her drink down the kitchen sink, saying: *satisfied?*

I used to think they hated each other when stuff like that happened, but now I actually think the opposite. They really love each other. That's the kind of thing you realise when you turn thirteen.

One per cent.

I shove my phone into my bag and shoulder it. Gunnar the bus driver drops us off where there isn't really a stop so that we don't have to walk too far.

"Have a good holiday! See you around!" he says with a smile before driving off.

The way up to the cabin is very steep, but Dad's there in a few quick bounds. I hurry after him. Even in good weather, Dad is always afraid that lightning will strike at the cabin while he's away from it. *Oh, shit,* he says when there's a boom of thunder, even if it's so far away I can barely hear it. *Get under the table, Ellen.*

The living room table is in the middle of the room, and Dad firmly believes that's where you're least likely to be struck by lightning. So I've found myself sitting under there a

few times. I usually grab my phone first because I know it can take time. That's where I broke my Candy Crush record last year.

It's actually kind of strange that Dad lets me have my phone under the table when there's lightning outside. It would have been just like him to say it attracts lightning or something. Apparently, you can never be too careful when it comes to phones and the internet. Dad is really scared of the internet and would never dream of installing any form of Wi-Fi at the cabin. Or at home, for that matter. According to him, there are crooks and low lives all over the internet. I've tried several times to explain that the internet is used for absolutely EVERYTHING, but I've given up now. Luckily, Mum got me unlimited data, and I've found a spot with 4G out on the lawn.

Every year the cabin seems smaller. Mum says it's probably because I'm getting bigger. Everything seems big when you're little. But this time the cabin really does look smaller and darker than ever. When Grandma was here, there were always flowers on the table and pale purple curtains on the windows. But after Dad took it over, he put up blackout blinds, and he says *flowers belong outside*.

"Good to be back," Dad says, stamping off invisible dirt on the stoop. Like we've been out on a long expedition.

The cabin smells surprisingly clean, and I worry there's a woman in the picture after all. My stomach clenches, and I sneak into my room. Everything is so tidy in there that I squirm, even though I know it's always like that. Dad gets very anxious about mess, to put it mildly.

I can immediately tell that several of my Calvin and Hobbes comics have been thrown out. Probably because their front covers were a little shabby. Only the intact pages remain, and there aren't many of them. I also notice that the bedding is the same as last summer. It won't have been washed. That was one of the things Mum and Dad used to argue about. Dad thought Mum was messy, and Mum thought Dad was unhygienic. And on and on it went. I can't bring myself to care much about mess or dirt. But I would like more light in here. The mechanism on the roller blind is broken, so the room is always dark.

I want to call Mum, but my phone battery is dead.

I pull out the drawer under the bed. Last year, Dad got rid of everything he and I agreed was too childish. *You can keep what you need most in here*, I remember him saying. I know I left my charger there, along with some dried flowers because I wanted to see how

they'd cope spending a year in a drawer. But now the drawer is completely empty. Panic bubbles up inside me. Where's my charger?

"Dad!"

I go out into the living room. No Dad. All I can hear is the newsreader on the radio.

"Daaaad!"

My heart starts pounding. HE CAN'T HAVE THROWN IT OUT, CAN HE?!

I run out onto the lawn. Dad is switching the sprinkler on in his tiny lemon-yellow underpants. He's always worried he won't get enough sun.

"Dad! Where's my charger?"

He turns, looking concerned.

"What charger? The white one? The one that was in the drawer under the bed?"

"Um, yes!" I say.

"I threw it out. Didn't you get a new phone?"

"Yes, but the charger's the same!"

I can feel the tears coming. Fuck Mum for playing lasso with my other charger and thinking I didn't need two. I can't call Ina. I can't call Mum. I can't beat my Candy Crush record and check lame posts on Insta that I can screenshot and send to Ina so that we can text back and forth for hours if she's in the mood. OH MY GOD.

"Are you completely INSANE, Dad?" I can't control myself. "When can I buy a new one?"

"But sweetheart, we're going into town next week, aren't we?"

"Next week? Are you kidding?"

I run back into the cabin and throw myself on the bed. This is going to be hell. Dad doesn't have a driving licence, which means we rely on the damn bus that never seems to run. We have to fucking CALL Gunnar when we go shopping once a week. A taxi is completely out of the question. It costs hundreds of kroner. I hate Mum for insisting I get by with what she bought me a hundred years ago. I hate Dad for not understanding how important the internet is. I hate myself for not being the best at anything, and because I'm going to be here for three weeks getting even further from being the best. The only way is backwards while I'm here. I hate my life.

There's a knock on my door.

"Ellen?"

I don't answer. My face is puffy from crying.

“Do you want some chocolate pudding?”

I do, actually, but I can't say that. I want him to really sweat. Throwing out a phone charger? What kind of idiot does that?

“No, thanks. I'm going to bed.”

“Bed? But it's only six o'clock! Don't you want some pudding? There's a good crime drama on this evening, and I've bought two new DVDs.”

Is he for real? What thirteen-year-old wants to watch SVT or a DVD with their dad in a shitty old cabin a hundred miles from anywhere?

“I don't want to,” I tell him.

I hear Dad shuffle into the kitchen and open the fridge door. My stomach drops. Do I hear bottles clinking? An opener? Cheery whistling that might mean he's started drinking? My blood roars. I've never been here alone with Dad without being able to use my phone. What if I starve to death? What if Dad drinks himself to death, and I can't even call Gunnar the bus driver because Dad's done something with the landline while drunk? I go to the door to listen. No bottles clinking. No *pfffft* from a beer can. No *pop* from a wine bottle. No uncapping of the vodka. Just a pair of scissors cutting up some kind of cardboard.

The living room is stuffy and bright. We each sit in our own armchair, each with our own pot of chocolate pudding. As usual, Dad doesn't use a spoon, he just squeezes the contents straight into his mouth. I got a spoon from the drawer. There aren't many to choose from, and they all taste like metal.

The evening sun shines directly onto the screen, but I don't bother pointing out that it would be easier to see if we lowered the blinds. Dad has bought a horror film with no subtitles, with zombies snapping at pretty ladies, so I'm happy not to watch much of it.

“Oh, shiiiiit,” Dad keeps saying.

I really want to send a message to Ina. I want to ask her to send a video of herself dancing some of the routine we rehearsed before the summer, and I already have my answer planned: OMG! (Without starry-eyed smiley face) YOU'RE SO GOOD! CAN YOU PLEASE TEACH ME TO DO GRAND JETÉS AS EASILY AS YOU DO THEM?? PLEEEASE? (Without pleading face)

I picture her smile when she reads the message. She'll have her hair in a loose bun, and her long fingers will lock the phone and put it away. She hardly ever uses her phone. I'm going to be more refined from now on. Read more books and practise more ballet at home.

Just like Ina does. I'm even going to pick up my pointe shoes at the post office here. Mum has sent me the collection message.

Shit. Mum! She needs to know I don't have a charger!

"Dad?"

"Hm?" He's grinning at the screen. He has pudding on his chin.

"Can I borrow your phone to call Mum?"

For the first time since the zombies appeared on the TV, he looks at me.

"Why do you need to call your mum? I told her you'd got here."

"Yes, but I know she likes to hear my voice. To know I'm doing okay and stuff."

"Why are you always calling your bloody mum?" His voice is suddenly sharp.

I jump a little and put the pudding back on the table. I don't want it anymore.

"I don't call her much when I'm here. I just want to tell her I don't have a charger. So she won't worry."

"She won't."

Dad looks back at the screen. His jaw is tense, his grin long gone. I hate him a little in that moment. I feel sick. I jump up. "I'm going to bed," I say sullenly.

"Okay. Night, then," Dad says. Just as sullen.

"Shit."

I lie whispering to myself in the dark room. It's a bright summer's evening outside, but the blackout roller blind only lets in a few small strips of light where it's worn.

"Shiiiiit!"

Ina never swears. I used to swear a lot, but now I also think it's vulgar. Ina's family are Christians, and "oh my God" is like the worst thing you can say.

Are you sure you want to call on God right now? Ina once asked me in the changing room. I was fiddling with the ribbons of my pointe shoes, stressing like crazy about being late. Our ballet teacher isn't exactly kind to those who arrive even a minute late. Andrej is from Poland and thinks we Norwegians are spoiled brats.

Oh my God, these fucking silk ribbons! I snapped as I tried to undo the knot I hadn't bothered to loosen the day before. *I think you should wait until it really matters before calling on God,* Ina said before strolling calmly into the studio. It's probably the only time I've been really annoyed with her. The nerve of her. Walking around and being so perfect! Putting her lovely long hair up in a flawless bun and standing at the front of the line! Andrej always asks her to stand there so that the rest of us have someone to follow and something to aim for. The

only time I've been asked to stand at the front was that one week last year when Ina was at home with the flu.

That time in the changing room, I just shuffled after Ina into the hall and stood behind her at the barre. The silk ribbons chafed my ankle, and I felt like shit. *I don't believe in God*, I whispered as soon as the music was switched on and the warm-up started. Heart pounding. *Of course you don't*, she whispered back as she did a lovely arabesque. I could feel my blood boiling. She was acting like she was the teacher! I sulked for a couple of days, but I missed her so much that I hadn't been able to keep my distance for very long. We never talked about it again, but I stopped swearing and calling on God for no good reason.

“Holy fucking shit! Oh my fucking God!”

I have good reason now. Just the thought of tomorrow is almost unbearable. What am I supposed to do here? Without my phone? I'm sure the last thing I whisper before I fall asleep is something really, really foul.

I wake up to Dad crashing around in the kitchen. He has almost no kitchen equipment, but still manages to make an absurd amount of noise with what little he has. When he's frying two eggs, it sounds like he's cooking a four-course meal for 40 people.

I feel a little flicker of delight. Dad makes really good fried eggs. Mum's a bit stingy with the butter, as she's often on some diet or other. But Dad always puts lots of butter in the pan, and he always puts mayonnaise on the bread before he chucks the egg on top. I stretch languidly, but then I realise I'm actually quite angry. I don't want to let Dad off the hook, so I decide to look like I've been crying all night.

“Morning, my girl,” Dad says with his back to me. The fried eggs need his full attention.

“Morning,” I say with in the most cheerless voice I can muster before going into the bathroom and locking the door behind me.

I'm glad to see he hasn't thrown away my toothbrush or hairbrush. That's something. The smell of butter and eggs filters in through the crack in the door, and I can see the sun shining outside.

“Grandma's coming with us in the boat today!” Dad calls from the kitchen.

Now I'm even happier. Crap.

“Okay,” I reply.

I try to keep my voice as depressed as possible. He's damn well going to have to work for it. Throw away my charger? And then get mad because I want to call Mum?!

“My head’s a bit sore,” I add.

It’s not true, but it sounds good.

“Okay,” Dad says. “Then we’ll cancel. No problem.”

Dammit. No, no, no! I love spending time with Grandma, and she always makes waffles and squash when we’re doing something. Grandma lives by the Norwegian border but has a small red car that she can drive to the cabin in “one, two, three”, as she says. I really wish she was always here at the cabin with Dad and me, but there are only two bedrooms. Besides, Dad and Grandma grow tired of each other pretty quickly.

“I might feel a bit better after breakfast,” I call through the door. “Food usually helps, right?”

My voice is brighter and more hopeful now, but it has to be. I’d rather spend time with Grandma than sulk.

We eat our eggs and bread in silence. The only sound comes from the radio, and the birds outside. Dad always has the radio tuned to a news channel. He loves the news and doesn’t want to miss anything. Dad eats really fast. The food just disappears. He rolls himself a cigarette, and soon we’re both sitting in a cloud of smoke.

“I feel a bit better now,” I tell him, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

That’s something I would never do at home, but when I’m with Dad, any thoughts of hygiene kind of go out the window. Dad is quick to call out vanity. When we were at my oldest cousin’s graduation, he laughed uproariously at all the men with their slick hair and perfect stubble. I remember Mum shushing him a lot that day, but they still loved each other then, and I could tell that deep down she thought he was funny, and cheeky in a good way. But that was then.

Remember: Dad doesn’t have a washing machine at the cabin! was one of the last things she reminded me of before I got on the train.

“Great,” Dad says.

But he’s staring into thin air, and a shiver runs through me. I try to tell myself he’s just listening intently to the news, but right now they’re partway through a feature on the National Theatre, and if there’s one thing I know, it’s that Dad isn’t interested in theatre. I try not to read too much into it.

“Cooee!”

Grandma’s happy voice makes my heart skip a beat, and I dash out to hug her.

“Goodness, you’ve shot up, Ellen! That’s my girl!”

She smells my hair and hugs me almost flat against her. She smells of waffles and smoke. We stand and hug for longer than is usual. Grandma has really big boobs, just like Mum. It feels like hugging a soft sofa.

“Ellen, Ellen, Ellen,” she says, rubbing my back. “It’s so nice to have you here!”

Dad steps into the hall, and the mood instantly shifts.

“Hi, there,” he says shortly as he laces his trainers. “Basket’s all ready, I assume? We’re good to go.”

He quickly finds our three life jackets and stands impatiently, keys in hand. Grandma pretends that everything is as nice as it was a minute ago, chirping away.

“What a beautiful day! The boat’s in shipshape, I hope? I’ve packed some extra yummy toppings for the waffles. Have you put sun cream on?” And so on.

I enjoy the chatter and hope Dad won’t spoil the nice summer feeling.

It’s quite a long walk down to the jetty where the boat is moored, but this is something Grandma always waves aside. Today is no exception.

“Wasn’t it so clever of Jan Ove to build the cabin there? That way we have a lake view but aren’t disturbed by other people chugging around in their boats! We can enjoy the quiet of the forest with only a short walk to the lake!”

When I arrived yesterday, I noticed that the *lake view* is now history. To be able to see down to the water, the trees have to be cut down at regular intervals. This isn’t something Dad is particularly interested in, so since last year the view has been blocked entirely.

“Yes, so clever!” I chirp back at Grandma. But just the right amount of chirpiness. I know from experience that Dad doesn’t like women who are of one mind and chirpy with it.

Grandma trots eagerly down the path. She’s wearing a red summer top and has her hair in a low bun. She’s so pretty.

I’ve just managed to summon a little joy and excitement when I hear “Oh, shit!” right behind me. I know straight away what the matter is. Dad is terrified of vipers. I think if he had to choose between them and nuclear war, he’d opt for the latter. “Stop!” he shrieks.

He shouts so loudly that he startles the wildlife in the forest out of its summer torpor. Birds take flight, and two tired toads suddenly hop right onto the path.

“Relax, Dag,” Grandma says calmly, setting down the lunch basket. “There aren’t any vipers here. They’re just harmless grass snakes!”

“How in the hell can you know that?” Dad stands stamping his feet, tears of panic in his eyes. “You don’t know shit!”

His head whips from side to side before he clearly decides on an escape strategy. He takes off running down towards the jetty as fast as an Olympic sprinter. Dad can run really fast, and when Grandma and I arrive at the jetty a few minutes later, it looks like he’s been sitting there forever.

He sits with his back to us, legs dangling over the edge of the jetty. The little rowboat is a strange sight bobbing next to him. It’s half full of water and algae, and I cannot for the life of me work out how we are going to get out onto the water in it with our lives intact. My stomach clenches. So much for this being a good day.

“Oh, Dag.”

Oh, how I wish Grandma wasn’t talking to him in that dejected tone.

“Haven’t you done any maintenance on the boat this year?”

Dad slowly turns towards us. I start to shiver. Our jetty is always in the shade, positioned where the sun rarely shines. The algae love it – that and making the jetty green, slippery and cold.

Dad’s gaze is icy cold, too.

“No, I haven’t done any maintenance on the boat. I don’t give a flying fuck about this hunk of junk.”

My teeth will start chattering soon, so I try to hold my breath in case that helps.

“Ugh, Dag.”

No, no, no, no. Not that voice, Grandma! Please!

“Ugh?!”

Dad is on his feet now. He stands at the end of the jetty and suddenly looks huge. His broad chest looks like concrete, and his calf muscles seem to vibrate. I’m scared he’ll topple over backwards. He’s standing far too close to the edge.

“This damn jetty was designed by a drunkard, Mum. Who on earth builds a jetty in the shade? Why are there no other boats or cabins near here? Hm? Have you stopped to consider that? Well, let me tell you. Dad was a fucking failure! You twittered and pattered around while he drank us into destitution! You went to the liquor store for him even though you cried on the way! Once you even sent ME with a fucking note! I’ll never forget it! You stayed to look after Dad while I passed a note over the counter that said: *My husband needs a Bordeaux to help him draw, AND YOU’D DRAWN A SUN! Regards, Elisabeth Hoff*

Hansen! I was EIGHT YEARS OLD, Mum! I HAD TO STAND ON MY TIPTOES TO GIVE THEM THAT DAMN NOTE TO GET THAT BOTTLE THAT DAD THREW UP RIGHT AFTER ANYWAY! RED FUCKING VOMIT ALL OVER THAT BLANKET I LOVED! WHICH YOU THEN THREW AWAY BECAUSE IT WAS APPARENTLY TOO EMBARRASSING TO TAKE TO THE LAUNDRETTE! FUCK!”

My teeth are chattering so hard now that the toads up the hill can probably hear it. I feel snot running down my lip, so I wipe my face with my sleeve again. I hardly dare breathe. I hardly dare move. I wish the jetty would just collapse, sending Dad into hysterics. Then he'd come ashore and roar with laughter and say something like: *Oh, shit, and the damn lunch basket just floated off? With all the waffles and shit? Hahahaha!* But Dad just stands there shaking. Yes, literally shaking all over. Grandma puts down the lunch basket and calmly walks towards him. I try to breathe a little. This wouldn't be a good time to pass out. Or maybe it would, actually. I try to hold my breath a little longer.

“Dag,” she says calmly, reaching towards him.

He doesn't take her hand.

Instead, Grandma picks up the orange bailer lying by a rock under the jetty and climbs into the boat. Slowly but surely, she begins to scoop the water out. There's a crack in the bailer, so it's slow-going. Each scoop leaks a little. But maybe that's a good thing. All that matters now is that Dad calms down. He stands as stiff as a rod and watches Grandma calmly and rhythmically empty the boat of water. She's left her sandals on the jetty and is sitting with water up to her ankles. She doesn't look at us.

“Sorry, Mum,” Dad says softly.

“That's okay,” Grandma replies and keeps bailing.

The small motor is kind of noisy, and the floor of the boat is slick and smooth. We chug along for several minutes before we get out of the shade. My teeth chatter. Dad sits at the front of the boat and stares fixedly out at the water, while Grandma sits at the back and steers. She hums a little, and I don't know whether that's a good or a bad thing. I'm scared Dad will fly off the handle again, but his breathing seems to be slowing now. He's shirtless and looks warm. Dad never gets cold. I'm the one with that affliction.

None of us say anything. The only sound is Grandma's humming and the old motor propelling us forward. We're in the sun now, and after a while my shoulders sink down from ear level.

Breathe with your belly, Mum always says when I get stressed, and then she puts her hand on my stomach. *Breathe into your hand, Ellen*. Sure. All good in theory, I think. But I try. I put both hands on my stomach and try to breathe into them. It actually works. My heart stops beating quite so fast.

“Sore tummy, love?” Grandma asks.

I jump. The calmness in her voice sounds forced.

“No,” I reply quickly. “Maybe just a little hungry.”

“We’ll be over to Bärstrand soon, and then it’ll be time for waffles!”

Twitter, twitter. I know how much Dad hates twittering. But he’s clearly completely zoned on his thwart. He just stares intently at the small island we’re heading towards.

Oh, how I miss Mum. And Oslo. And Ina. This is unbearable. The shivering starts again, but I have to pull myself together. I know no one in this boat would take kindly to crying and complaining right now.

“Do you mind, Dag?” Grandma asks mildly, but of course Dad is already up and ready.

Dad always gets up long before we reach land so that he’s ready to use his muscular legs to make sure the boat doesn’t crash into the rocks. He stands firm as a mountain. It looks almost magical. The boat pitches and tilts, but Dad stands tall no matter what. To think such a strong and steady father could be so afraid of grass snakes and lightning. It’s absurd.

Grandma chatters her way along the path, while Dad brings up the rear. I walk in the middle, trying to make myself as small as possible. When we get to the “nice spot”, as Grandma calls it, she unrolls the pale pink blanket we always bring, plops down and sighs:

“Oh, how lovely!”

Dad and I stay standing. A bit like the two steel pipes I thought of us as at the train station yesterday.

“Ellen, are you coming swimming?” Dad has already turned and is jogging up towards the rock he usually dives from.

“Of course!” I pipe up.

Luckily, I’m wearing my bikini under my clothes, so I’m ready in no time.

“Wait for me!”

I stumble after him in my bare feet, trying not to be too worried about stepping on sharp objects.

“Have fun!” I hear Grandma chirp behind us.

Hm, I think. Easier said than done.

“Want to see something, Ellen?”

Dad is standing by the diving rock and seems completely calm now. I’m so out of breath that it’s embarrassing.

“Sure,” I wheeze.

He doesn’t reply, just starts walking further inland. I’ve never been further inland than Dad’s diving rock. I’m terrified of diving, but I love watching him do it. He does the craziest things on the way down. Spins and turns. It’s as if he finds complete freedom in plummeting towards the water.

I hurry after Dad along the path. A lot of this island is a complete mystery to me. It’s much bigger than I thought. I regret not putting on my sandals, because I keep stepping on spruce needles and sharp pebbles.

“Ouch,” I yelp. Again and again.

But Dad doesn’t even turn around. After a while, he takes a sharp right through a thicket.

“Wait!” I shout as I try to push branches and bushes aside. “This isn’t where the path goes, Dad!”

But Dad just strides onwards through what look like tall rose bushes. They’re covered in thorns, and I get what feels like hundreds of scratches on my body.

Then the landscape opens up. The ground gives way to a sharp drop. Dad is already standing at the edge. From where I’m standing, it looks infinitely far down to the water. It’s like something from YouTube, too scary to be real. I don’t dare say anything. I just stand there looking at his back. It’s broad and sweaty, covered in bloody scratches from the thorns. I can tell from his back muscles that he’s clenching his fists over and over. I’ve seen him do the same thing before. It’s never been a pleasant sight, but now it’s even worse than usual.

“This is where I used to dive when I was little, Ellen. You didn’t expect this from flat Värmland, did you?” He barely glances at me.

“Wow,” I say, impressed.

“No one knew I did it.” He stares down into the void. “This was my secret place. I always felt like I had some sort of bet going with someone. I don’t know who. Not God, in any case. No way. But someone. I used to think, if I survive one more dive, I’ll be a good boy. And I survived every time, as you can see. I’m still fucking standing here.”

My heart pounds in my chest.

“I don’t think you should dive, Dad. Aren’t you hungry? Grandma must be wondering where we are.”

This really doesn’t feel good.

“Come here, Ellen!” Dad turns to me and smiles. Challenging me.

“No, thanks,” I bite out.

Dad steps even further out. He’s right on the edge now.

“See you,” he says. And dives.

“DAAAAD!” I shriek. “NOOOOO!”

I turn and run back through the thorns. My skin is being torn all over, but I don’t have time to push the twigs aside.

“Grandma! GRANDMAAAA!”

Which way did we come from? I suddenly can’t remember and run every which way. I taste blood in my mouth and try desperately to recognise trees and bushes. I know I haven’t been here before.

“GRANDMAAAA!” I scream.

Panic has completely overwhelmed me. I whirl this way and that, crying. What if Dad is floating unconscious in the water? Someone has to save him!

After what feels like an hour, I finally see a path. But which way do I go?

“GRANDM—”

“Ellen? What are you doing here?”

I throw myself against Grandma’s soft body. I choke out something about how Dad might be dead, but Grandma just sits down on the path, pulls me down with her and puts my head in her lap.

“Dad’s sitting on the blanket waiting for us. He asked me to go and look for you at his diving spot. He’s having a really bad day.”

I sit up.

“What? He’s alive? And how do you know where his secret diving spot is?”

“It’s not much of a secret. Your dad’s been coming out here to dive when things get too hard for him since he was a kid. Ever since he was allowed to use the boat on his own.”

“And you’ve never tried to stop him?”

I wipe snot and tears from my face using the backs of my hands.

“Of course I have. But I gave up years ago.”

I don’t want her comfort anymore. I look at her. I love her, but right now I don’t understand her at all. What kind of mum lets her son risk his life like that?

“Ellen,” she says and looks down. She rests her chin on her knees and plucks at some dry, brown spruce lying on the ground. “Dad’s not completely well, and I don’t know how much you get that. He might have a mental illness, and it’s a bit tricky to figure out exactly what it is. Dad doesn’t want to talk about it, and he refuses to go to the doctor.”

I’ve heard of mental illness before. I’ve heard people at school say: *Are you a complete psycho?* when someone is being crazy.

“Can you recover from something like that?” I ask.

I have so many questions but don’t know where to start. Come to think of it, maybe I don’t really want any answers. I just want to go home to Oslo.

“Well ...” Grandma says. “I don’t know much, but many people with mental illness live good lives. I’m doing everything I can to get Dad to find help. I’ve heard of many people recovering with medication, counselling or both, but he needs to be assessed. Without help, things could go badly for Dad.”

It doesn’t sound like Grandma is holding out hope that Dad will be one of those people who copes well. And you’re not supposed to think that way when you’re a mum.

“I’m heading back,” I say.

I brush most of the dirt off my face and body and walk purposefully along the path. The soles of my feet no longer care as much about the gravel and spruce needles. I don’t bother waiting for Grandma because I know the way now. I was just blinded by panic before. Dad always says I inherited his good sense of direction. Mum’s the one who wanders around and doesn’t know the difference between north and south. I feel angry and strong, and it’s kind of cool.

Of course Dad isn’t a psycho. He’s just different. And different is good. Doesn’t everyone say that? He’s the best in the world at diving and works as a security guard and caretaker in a large building where important people work. He has lots of friends and is really popular with the ladies.

I suddenly realise I’m talking aloud to myself as I walk. Maybe I’m nuts, too. Hahaha. Nothing would surprise me. But no, Grandma’s wrong. Psychos are kept in madhouses. Dad is just *different*.

I find Dad sitting on the blanket just like Grandma sat on the path. With his knees tucked under his chin. He has his arms wrapped around his legs and is staring out at the lake. The blanket is wet now.

“Alright?” I ask.

“Yes. Sorry if I scared you. I won’t do it again.”

“It’s fine,” I say.

I don’t know what to do with myself. I don’t want to sit on the wet blanket but sitting further away would seem like I was making some sort of point.

“Ah, waffle time, I think,” Grandma chirps.

Saved by the bell, I think. That’s what Ina always whispers at ballet when Andrej discovers we’ve run over just as we’re working on pirouettes on pointe.

We eat in silence, but the mood is okay. Grandma doesn’t twitter too much and strokes my cheek before giving me a whole waffle smothered in jam. Dad doesn’t clench his fists or jaw and tells a funny story from work.

“He was stressed out of his damn mind,” he says with a chuckle.

The days drift lazily by, and I gradually find an okay rhythm. I sleep in and get up to scrambled eggs and orange juice. I miss my phone quite a lot, but not as much as I’d feared. Our trip into town is coming up anyway, so everything will be sorted soon. I can hold out until then. I’m reading the books I brought from Oslo, and I’m looking forward to going to the library in Säterstad.

Grandma stops by almost every day to make dinner.

“I get to listen to so many audiobooks in the car,” she twitters when Dad alludes to the amount of time she’s spending with us. “I’m retired now, you know. I have all the time in the world.”

I almost asked Grandma to get me a charger, but I didn’t in the end. She already does so much. She keeps asking me if there’s anything I need, but I always say no.

“I have everything I need,” I lie.

I’ve borrowed Dad’s phone a few times to message Mum. Since it’s Dad’s phone, I don’t feel like I can write everything I really want to write. I’m afraid that something will be interpreted in the worst way by Dad, so it’s mostly short messages about warm, lazy days. Mom responds with positive emojis. She seems to be having a nice time. I don’t think she misses me that much.

We haven’t taken the boat out again, but I’m more than okay with that. Dad and I “bathe” in the sprinkler on the lawn and play wally volleyball afterwards. Wally volleyball is a kind of volleyball with no rules other than that the ball can’t hit the ground. We always start giggling so much that one of us drops it, but we usually manage to keep it going for quite a long time before that happens. Dad spaces out sometimes, but I’m pretty sure there isn’t any

alcohol in the cabin, so it doesn't worry me too much. I just give him the alone time he needs, and then it passes. I've even started going for short walks by myself in the forest around the cabin. I'm no Ronia, the Robber's Daughter, but when I sit on my usual stump and listen to what I have learned is a chaffinch, I feel *in touch with nature*, as they say. It's a bit boring, but not that bad, either.

Tomorrow, Gunnar will drive his bus along the road just down from the cabin, and I've made a list of everything I need to get in town. There's no way of knowing how easy it'll be to get a charger and new books. The pointe shoes are waiting for me at the post office in the ICA shop, and I'm looking forward to breaking them in. Andrej specifically said that I had to train my feet this summer. *They need to be strong in August*, he said. *Weak feet can't take minutes of bourrées on pointe*. I hope that means I have a chance at a solo in the Christmas show. There's enough space in the living room here to train, as long as I push the table against the wall.

I'm also looking forward to visiting the shop that sells sweets I've never seen anywhere in Oslo. There are no liquor stores in Säterstad, so the worst that can happen is Dad buys himself a beer and says: *Am I not allowed to enjoy myself a bit, too? Besides, there's hardly any alcohol in this stuff*. I've come up with a plan in case that happens. I'll go with him into the shop and keep a close eye on him. Even if it annoys him. If he puts beer in the trolley, I'll say it straight out. I've even practised while sitting on the stump in the forest: *I'd really appreciate it if you stayed sober while I'm here. We both know you always get drunk when you drink. You won't be able to stop until you've drunk everything you've bought*. I hope I don't have to utter those sentences, because then he might get really angry. He doesn't think children should interfere in adult matters. Dad doesn't like to be told off, but then, who does?

Dad and I sit in our lumpy armchairs discussing what to buy in town tomorrow. The evening is scorching hot, so he sits in just his underpants, and me in my bikini. We each have a glass of cola with ice cubes, and a two-litre box of crushed caramel and almond ice cream sits ready on the table. Both of us like it when it's melted a little so that we can give it a stir before eating it. The TV is on, but we're mostly concerned with our list. Dad will call Gunnar tomorrow morning to agree on the exact time for the trip. Gunnar wants as many people as possible to use the bus when he drives it, so he tries to find a time that suits as many people in the area as possible. With each passing summer, there are fewer and fewer people on the bus.

I feel a little sorry for Gunnar. Last year it was just Dad and me every time. None of the others we used to ride the bus with need it anymore. Everyone drives a car.

I think the thought of civilisation is making both Dad and I a bit giddy, and Dad chuckles merrily as I write.

“We have to stop by Säterstad Konditori to get some of those goddamn amazing greasy pretzels!” he says, and I make a note. “The laundrette!” I add.

“Soda!”

“Chocolate pudding!”

“Eggs!”

“Bacon!”

“Pointe shoes!”

“Rolls!”

“Tropical juice!”

The suggestions come thick and fast, and I scribble them down. Dad is about to help himself to ice cream when his phone rings. He uses the ringtone that comes with the phone, and he’s never figured out how to turn down the volume.

We both jump. Of course, he knows exactly where he’s put his phone. He gets up and bounds over to the mantelpiece.

“Hello, Dag speaking.”

Dad listens quietly for a few moments. Someone is probably talking on the other end, but I can’t hear them. Then he goes into the kitchen and closes the door behind him.

I don’t help myself to ice cream. I have a sinking feeling that something is very wrong. Why else would he close the door? I start to shiver and go into my room to put a hoodie on over my bikini. The doors in the cabin are thin, so every time Dad says something, I hear it.

“Oh?”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“But ...”

The person he’s talking to talks much more than him. That much is for sure.

“But I can’t—”

“But Ellen’s here.”

“What do I tell her mum?”

“Shit.”

“Couldn’t you have told me sooner?”

I’m really cold now. I put the woolly jumper Mum knitted for me on over the hoodie and go back into the living room. There I stand in the middle of the room. It’s quiet in the kitchen, but I can tell he’s there. I can almost hear his jaw clenching. He clicks his tongue. That either means he’s concentrating, or he’s zoned out. I hold my breath. Who was on the phone?

He comes into the living room but walks straight past me and over to the window. He stands staring out for a long time at what was once a lake view but is now just forest.

“Someone’s coming to visit, Ellen.”

My feet are starting to freeze. I’ve never heard him use that voice before.

“What? Visit? Who? Dad!”

I shuffle over to the window and try to catch his eye. My teeth are chattering. Dad just stares and stares, and it’s impossible to know where he’s looking.

“Shit,” he suddenly whispers. “Shit.”

“Shit what?” My voice is high and whiny. “Why’s someone coming to visit got you so wound up, Dad?”

I’m seconds away from pummelling his muscular arms with my cold fists to get his attention when he suddenly turns to me and says:

“You’re not an only child, Ellen.”

At least a thousand thoughts flash through my head at the speed of light. Who? Where? When? How? Brother? Sister? But all I manage to whisper is a good old-fashioned: “What?”.

Dad gently takes me by the arm and steers me over to what Grandma calls the “sitting area”. It’s just an ordinary two-seater sofa against the wall with a tired coffee table in front of it. Dad and I never sit on that sofa. We only use the worn old armchairs in front of the TV.

But we’re sitting here now. Dad obviously has something important to say. The chill spreads through my body. I pull my long, cold legs up under the hoodie and woolly jumper, and even pull the hood up. Dad is sitting in just his underpants and looks frozen, too. I’ve never seen anyone use the scratchy woollen blanket lying over the arm of the sofa, but nothing about this is normal. My father, the furnace Dag Hoff Hansen, takes the thick, stiff blanket and puts it over his bare thighs.

“Er ... you have a half-sister, Ellen.” He looks down into his lap as if trying to work out how the blanket got there.

“What? I have a sister?” I gently kick his thigh, trying desperately to make eye contact.

Dad coughs his smoker’s cough before continuing: “Yes ... or no ... er ...”

“Yes or no, Dad?!”

We’re both sitting with our backs to the wall, and it’s hard to see what his face is doing.

“Yes, I had a daughter before you were born, Ellen.” His nicotine-stained fingers scrape his hair back. Over and over again.

“Had? Is she dead?”

I lean forwards to catch Dad’s eye, but now his face is in his hands.

“No! Christ!”

“Well, then explain! Jesus, Dad!”

My teeth are chattering annoyingly loudly, but Dad probably has other things on his mind.

“Oh, Ellen. Why does everything have to be so damn hard?”

“What?” A fire ignites in my chest. “Like telling me I have a sister? That I’ve had one all my life? Are you a complete idiot?!”

Chattering teeth and a fire in my chest. I want to go home to Oslo. *NOW*. This isn’t normal. I’m going to tell Mum that I don’t want to come here anymore, and that she and Dad will have to work something out. Fuck the weeks I have to spend here every summer. This has to end.

Dad suddenly jumps up from the sofa and starts pacing. “Shit, shit, shit! Sorry, Ellen! Damn it! Why does everything have to be so difficult? I just want to work! Holidays really aren’t my thing! But here Mariah’s mother comes, stressing me out, and you’re always fussing about calling your mum, and my mum’s here every damn day, and everything’s somehow supposed to be so lovely just because it’s a holiday! Like, what the hell? What’s going on with all these crazy women in my life?! Sorry, Ellen, but ... FUCK!”

My teeth stop chattering. Something else stirs inside me. A burning sensation.

“So her name’s Maria?” My voice is calm.

“Yes,” Dad replies. “With an H. Her mum was like a dog with a bone with that fucking H. Some Ethiopian thing. But whatever, the H is the least of it.”

Dad stands breathing heavily for a moment before walking over to the mantelpiece to roll himself a cigarette. Then it's like a new Ellen bursts out of me. My heart pumps hot blood out to my limbs, and I rise calmly from the pointless sitting area. I can feel my heart pounding, but not with anxiety this time. I'm pissed off. I can feel it through my entire tall, broad being as I stride over to the fireplace where he's standing.

"Have you ever stopped to consider whether I asked for any of this? Hm? Whether I asked to be born? To make you a dad? If I'd been able to choose, you'd have been the LAST PERSON ON EARTH I'D HAVE CHOSEN! Everyone I know has a dad who's better than you! Even Jesper's drug addict dad is more responsible than you!"

I'm suddenly roasting, so I strip down to my bikini again. If he can do this shit in just his underpants, I guess I can do the same in a bikini.

Dad seems to deflate a little. He stares dumbfounded at me as he keeps rolling. His hair is sweaty, and his fingers work lightning fast. There's not a sound to be heard in the cabin. There's no wind outside, either, so I can hear the crackle of the rolling paper when he takes a puff.

"Either way, she's coming tomorrow, Ellen. Her mother probably needs a break or something. We'll have to make the best of it."

It's almost impossible to sleep. My room is hot as a frying pan, but I'm still freezing. Do I really have a *sister*? One called Maria with an H?

Dad completely clocked out after that rollie, making himself completely unavailable for questioning. The only thing he bothered to tell me was that the girl is fifteen years old and lives with her Norwegian-Ethiopian mother in Grønland in Oslo. Like, that's all there is to it. I probably asked him twenty questions, but he just stared out the window in response or said he didn't know or remember. And that I had to stop making such a damn fuss. I've never longed for my phone like I do now, but there's no way we're making our trip into town tomorrow. We have to stay in to meet *my sister*. Jesus.

Did Mum know? Grandma? I lie on my back and shiver. The weird, stiff blanket from the *sitting area* is spread on top of the duvet, and I've put my hoodie and woolly jumper back on. I wonder if Mariah gets as cold as me. Maybe we look alike? If her mother is from Africa, then probably not.

I must fall asleep for a bit, because I dream that we look exactly alike and that we get *sisters* tattooed on our upper arms. But when I wake up, I feel the same way again, like everything is just lies and a deception. Maybe the person who called Dad is crazy. Maybe

fifteen years ago she pretended to give birth to his kid but actually gave birth to a random neighbour's daughter? What do I know? Ina trusts her parents. Really trusts them. Ina always counts on the adults around her to be knowledgeable and reliable. To have all the answers and to keep promises. I've never thought that way. I kind of take what I can get, and anything good is just a bonus. I feel a tear run down towards my ear. What a crap excuse for a life. I lie there, pointing and flexing my toes under the covers out of old habit. I picture the pointe shoes lying in their box in Säterstad and feel more alone than ever.