From *Being Young: Monologues*

(*Til ungdommen: Monologer*)

by Linn Skåber

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**INTRODUCTION**

It’s not easy being in a time of upheaval and change – to be in a state of rearrangement.

Because that’s how it can feel to be a young person. As if someone has rearranged your room without you knowing about it or asking for it.

Suddenly everything is strange, completely different, and you stand there looking around your new room, thinking: what on earth just happened? What happened here? My toys, my feelings, my sense of comfort and security, the familiar smells – where has it all gone? Is this even mine?

Because the room before you is suddenly filled with cool young people’s furniture, hoodies, sanitary pads and stereo speakers – and maybe sitting there, on the cool new sofa that’s replaced your bunk bed, is a childhood friend you no longer recognise, and who’s grown a beard or boobs – who’s changed just as much as you have. And you think: where are my teddy bears? When did I become so interested in cool stereo speakers? My period? Who is that person on the sofa? Where is my room? And who am I?

Some young people like it – the change, the start of something exciting and unknown – while others think of it as the end of childhood and the start of something hard and painful, and perhaps even really scary.

Some young people find adolescence to be so full of curiosity, action, love, humour, excitement, friends, parties and hysterical laughter that they’d be satisfied with just the half of it. Others just can’t get enough.

Some are sick of everything to do with young adulthood before it’s even started, and describe this time using words like loneliness, anxiety, vulnerability, fear, sadness and confusion.

It usually ends up being a good mixture of all these things.

And adults often call it an interesting time, but that’s easy to say when you’re on the other side, looking back from a different perspective.

As I worked on this book, young people allowed me to spend time with them during this important period in their lives. They let me join them in cafés; let me sit in parks and on the waterfront with them. They let me into their rooms and talked to me about what it’s like to be a young adult.

Of course, I haven’t been able to cover all of adolescence and young adulthood – how could I? I’m a grownup and can therefore never really be part of this secret society. But I’ve spent time getting close to young people – they’ve opened up to me and told me a range of lovely, shy, funny and sad stories about how life unfolds in their rearranged rooms.

Some of these texts are based on single sentences that young people have said to me; others have been created by merging various stories; a number of them are based on feelings young people have explained to me, and many of the quotes in this book are reproduced word for word.

All the texts can be used scenically, but I’ve chosen not to include any stage directions. Young people are imaginative enough to find their own solutions should they wish to do so.

During my young adulthood the film *Christiane F.* was released – the movie’s Norwegian title is *Å være ung er for jævlig!*, or ‘Being young is bloody awful!’ Today we’d probably articulate this differently: ‘Being young can be challenging’, perhaps, or ‘Being young can be really demanding’, or ‘Being young can be awfully difficult if you don’t handle it in the right way’. Things like that.

But I think the saying of the eighties is more precise. *Being young is bloody awful*.

Of course it is – you have to go through your first birth since birth. A caterpillar might turn into a butterfly; a sweet yellow chick might become a scabby, half-grown thing with a broken cheep that nobody considers sweet anymore; a little firecracker might hit the ceiling hard, or perhaps become a glorious firework.

All children must become young adults.

Thank you for letting me in. I’d love to come back and see you all again some time.

Linn Skåber

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**3. MY BIRTHDAY WISH**

What do I want for my birthday, uncle Roar?

That you wouldn’t interrupt my aunt when she speaks, or take the piss out of her in front of the entire family.

That you wouldn’t laugh at Mum when she’s sorting the rubbish for recycling.

That you wouldn’t hit me so hard on the shoulder every time you see me, and ask me if I’ve managed to get a girlfriend or whether I’m still just a little gay boy.

That you’d stop driving your monster of a car down from Holmenkollen only to complain that there’s no parking spaces in Oslo city centre.

That you’d treat others with respect and tenderness, including the Romanians who you hate so much because they shit in the parks – even though you’ve never witnessed this and can’t even see any Romanians from your big, white house. At least all the Romanians I know of, who I’ve got to know, use the park toilets.

That you wouldn’t fall about laughing your hoarse, stupid laugh because I’ve just done a school assignment about the environment and development.

That you wouldn’t bully me because I don’t have a beard.

That you wouldn’t curse and scream about how all refugees are terrorists, without ever having met a single one – when you don’t know Selda and Ramee who work harder than any of the rest of us in our class.

That you wouldn’t ruin the atmosphere when our family gets together because you take the piss out of everyone, call them ignorant, unenlightened and naive just because they don’t share your opinions.

That you wouldn’t complain about having to pay tax.

That you and my aunt would get divorced.

That you’d enjoy life, and accept the kindness offered to you, even though you don’t deserve it.

That you’d move to Australia, Alta or China.

That you wouldn’t hassle me about going to the gym to make sure I don’t end up a weakling like my dad.

That you wouldn’t roll your eyes whenever you meet my friends.

That you’d stop raising my cousins to be just like you.

That you wouldn’t make lame, mean speeches disguised as good advice and wisdom.

That you won’t make me so angry I’ll be forced to read this list aloud at my birthday party.

But other than that?

Money, maybe, so I can take my boyfriend out to dinner. Andreas loves Indian food.

**7. THE DISEASE**

Dad says the disease took Mum.

The Disease.

As if he has a name and lives somewhere – as if he were a guest. With a moustache, or a hat.

‘Mr. Disease is coming today, so the cleaner’s been in to get things ready.’

‘You’d better be on your best behaviour, because today Mr. Disease is paying us a visit!’

‘Could one of you get the intercom? I think it’s Mr. Disease come calling!’

We never let him in. We never opened the door.

He just crossed the threshold of our house, blocking out the usual cosy orange glow and turning the lights up to full brightness so we all looked ugly and afraid.

He took away the lovely bubble bath smell that would fill the apartment whenever one of us had a bath. He stole the laughter from between the walls and jerked the carpet out from under Dad’s feet, so that he fell backwards and sobbed like a little boy and wasn’t Dad anymore. He shoved aside the afternoon light, so we never knew whether or not we could look forward to evening. He took away the evening, too, so that all time turned into night, and made the night so cold and black and long and dense that when the daylight came we were so full of darkness we didn’t even know it was morning.

Mr. Disease was rude as hell. He walked uninvited into the home of people he didn’t even know, rolled around like a caterpillar and munched on us and grew. Until he had completely eaten Mum up.

Dad and I picked out a ribbon together. It lay across the heart of red roses, and on it was written:

*We’ll never forget you*.

But across *my* heart is a different ribbon:

*Thank you for all we shared, through thin and thick.*

*Mr. Disease is a fucking dick.*

**8. THE KOMODO DRAGON GIRL**

I have a ring of blackheads around my nose.

I squeeze them, so there are sores there, too.

I’ve got bushy eyebrows – really bushy ones – and they’re short. They stop almost above the middle of my eyes and don’t frame my face at all.

Someone once told me that Marilyn Monroe’s make-up artists had to draw eighty eyebrows a day, on paper, to practice drawing the perfect eyebrow. I reckon mine only look like sketch number two or so in the long road towards perfection.

I’m also really weak. In my muscles AND joints, but that doesn’t mean I’m thin, oh no. I’m one of the fattest in my class, actually. But unlike the other fatties, who are chubby and cuddly and greet the world with a plump smile and good appetite, I’m pretty repugnant, as well as a fussy eater.

I don’t like saveloy sausage or other sandwich meats, but I don’t tell anyone this at birthday parties or other gatherings. I say I’m vegetarian so the mums have to make an extra effort and cater for yet another category on top of those with gluten allergies, lactose intolerance or nut allergies, and the Muslims. Then there’s always plenty of food to choose from, and the birthday parties are at least tolerable for however long they last.

But where was I?

Oh yeah – weak.

Crouch down on my haunches, like this, can’t get up again – no chance. I’ll have to stay down here.

Although I can roll around like a lazy seal, like this, and then get up on all fours and take it from there. But that’s a test of my strength in itself because I’m about as fit as an eighty-year-old pensioner with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Yeah, I’ll stay here on all fours and chill for a bit. Get my breath back, as they say. And here on all fours like this, I think I have a lot in common with a Komodo dragon. Have you ever seen one? The Komodo dragon – the dumbest animal on earth right now, if you ask me. A lizard with a snake’s face and tongue and small, beady eyes that follow your every step. It moves slowly and glumly, its back arched, and likes no one. Not even other members of its own species.

But that’s not the worst thing about the creature, oh no. The worst is that it… well, that it can be pretty quick if it wants to be, but only for short stretches at a time. It can attack, but then soon gets worn out. So what it does to get food is attack a young, sweet and innocent wildebeest, but it doesn’t kill it, no, it just bites and lets go and lets the poor animal run away. The wildebeest, all happy and relieved, hops across the fields beaming with joy, thinking that this time it was lucky. But think again you dumb, happy animal, because you’re infected. The mouth of the Komodo dragon contains so many bacteria – probably about as many as at the back of my mouth, where bits of food get stuck in my braces – that a couple of weeks later the animal becomes so ill that it has to lay down and rest. And then – out of nowhere – comes the crooked shadow, the shadow that’s followed the injured wildebeest for weeks, behind bushes and undergrowth, never letting on that it was there the whole time, only to finally chew the weak, dying, astonished wildebeest to pieces.

A curved spine, a slow, bow-legged walk and a bacteria-infested mouth. Yeah, we’re quite alike, the Komodo dragon and me. I don’t bite, but I can torment Mum for weeks with silence, harsh comments and one-word answers until she breaks down and cries in confusion. But I don’t bite her – and I usually say I’m sorry, because I don’t mean to be cruel. I just am.

**9. RICHARD**

Richard, that’s enough! Richard!

That’s enough now.

He’s crying, Richard. His nose hit the ground. He’s bleeding.

Richard. He’s not getting up.

Mind his head! Shit. He’s crying, Richard! Stop!

RICHARD!

What’s going on? What the hell is wrong with you? You’re standing there kicking someone who’s lying there on the ground, covering their head and crying? How sick is that? Have you thought about how sick it is to be capable of something like that, Richard? And don’t say that he’s the idiot – ‘an idiot with loads of problems,’ as you like to say.

He’s not an idiot, Richard, and he doesn’t have loads of problems.

He has one. He met you!

Actually, it’s the same problem all three of us have, Joar, Lenny and me. We met you. We’re such cowards. Sticking to your side like suckerfish on a shark. I make myself sick.

Are you okay, Trond? That’s your name, isn’t it? It’s a nice name – I have an uncle called Trond. I just want to apologise on behalf of my mate over there – yeah, the guy with his chin on his knees. You see, he’s a bit shocked because someone stood up to him. He’s not used to it. Neither are we. It’s probably the first time it’s ever happened, actually. Imagine that, Trond – the first time since kindergarten. It’s about time, don’t you think?

Here we go:

Richard seems really big and tough, he’s stocky and built after all, but really he’s just a lonely little boy. You can almost see it on him. Look, when he stands like that with his head cocked to one side. Like a big baby. A big, disappointed baby. Richard is never satisfied, always unhappy. Nobody really knows why – but we can guess. It’s probably the betrayal he suffered an early age. Richard’s dad – who’s also called Richard – was a really weird guy. He was there at the birth of his second son, carried him at his Christening and gave him his own name, before he cheated on his wife with someone he met at the supermarket and left her, Richard and his brother. And even though Big Richard – the dad – beat up his wife and two sons at breakfast and dinnertime almost every day, his leaving seemed to create a vacuum in the apartment. A hole in the house. A hole in life. A hole in Richard. Richard’s dad never came back, no matter how much Richard cried or how drunk his mum got or how much Richard’s brother beat Richard for reasons he didn’t understand and could only guess at. Maybe they blamed Little Richard for the fact that Big Richard left? Maybe it was his fault. Maybe that’s why he got beaten up. He didn’t know. Had no idea why his brother hit him.

Probably just like you today, Trond.

And every time Richard’s mum shouted at him, or called out or whispered his name, there was a sorrow in her voice, a longing for the man who left. A hug goodnight that should simply mean ‘goodnight’ became ‘come back to your family, Richard’.

And so Richard was raised on loss, grief and the feeling of being abandoned.

And so that’s how he went out into the world – to kindergarten, school, the schoolyard and the forest – with his sorrow and longing. And out there in the big, wide world he met us, Joar, Lenny and me. Three losers who were longing for a shark to latch onto, sad shark or not. A shark is a shark when you need one to hang onto – one who can frighten the rest of the world. So there you have us. The gang that floats around and lives only to make others scared of us, so our leader will be as much like his dad as possible and not miss him so much. We scare little girls, get up to no good, pull the legs off ants, steal, lie and ride our bikes around, shouting.

But I’m tired of it. Really sick and tired of it. No more. I’m tired. Go away, Richard. I’m done.

‘I can walk you home, Trond.’

That’s what I should have said.

But instead I thumped Richard on the shoulder, laughed with him and the others, and left Trond to get up alone. Swam on with the guys, over towards the tower blocks.

**12. FEMINIST**

You’re asking me whether I’m a feminist?

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… who sits quietly with her hand raised while the boys in the class answer, but if the teacher lets three girls in a row speak the boys fly into a rage and ask: ‘Are you only asking the girls now, or what?’

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… who knows that I’ll probably earn less than the boys at my workplace, even though I’ll do exactly the same job.

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… who knows that every right I have has been fought for by brave mothers and sisters and forefathers (I write ‘forefathers’ because nobody ever says ‘foremothers’), who refused to accept that their descendants would be treated like them.

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… whose best friend, Kahdra, has to be home by five o’clock in the afternoon while her brothers are allowed to hang out at the shopping centre until way past ten at night.

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… who has to live with the president of the United States saying ‘Grab them by the pussy’ about my fellow man (I write ‘fellow man’ because ‘fellow woman’ isn’t a phrase), and now people don’t even care that he said it.

You’re asking me?

Girl 16… who has grown up in a world where an entire movement is needed to make society understand that girls shouldn’t be abused and raped at work.

You’re asking me?

Go ask a wolf instead.

Go ask a wolf whether it’s in favour of wolf hunting.

**22. WHEN ADULTS TALK ABOUT LOVE, IT SOUNDS SO EASY**

When adults talk about love, it sounds so easy.

Well of course it’s easy. They’re adults.

But it’s strange they don’t remember how hard it used to be.

They say: ‘It’s normal to feel that way’ or ‘There’s plenty of fish in the sea’ or ‘Relax. It’ll pass’, but none of it helps. Right now, I’m young. I can’t relax.

It won’t pass. By the time it passes, I won’t be young anymore.

The adults sit there with their self-confidence and words, their experience and lives and big houses – but what have I got? The hand in my pocket and 120 kroner on a card that Mum tops up.

I can’t say:

‘Could I invite you out to dinner tonight, Emilie?’

Or: ‘Shall we just have a quiet night in at my place tonight, Emilie?’

I can’t.

If I did that, I’d be an adult.

If I did that, I’d be a dickhead.

I’ll just hang out down at the football pitch instead. Spend the evening on the green grass. With the guys, and the girls will come over, and we’ll talk about the weekend and Oslo City and something the girls from Hasle have said. We agree with Emilie.

The girls from Hasle are idiots.

I don’t mind it, really. Standing here like this and making idle chit-chat. But every now and then I just want to say something bigger, something more to you. I want to be Romeo:

She speaks:

O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art

As glorious to this night, being o’er my head

As is a winged messenger of heaven

Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes

Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him

When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds

And sails upon the bosom of the air.

That’s what I want to say. Sometimes.

But I’m not Romeo, and I don’t have the words.

I’m Jens, and I have to be home by 10 pm.

**26. I SAW YOU ON INSTA**

I saw you on Insta.

It looks like you were at a party. Were you? Have you started going to parties? It looks really cool whatever you were doing. Do you remember the Friday nights when we used to stay in at my house and eat pizza and dream about all the parties we’d go to? We promised each other – do you remember? – that we’d never be the kind of lame teenagers who just sit there and think they’re so cool.

‘I’m going to be as childish as I want to be!’ you said. You look childish in the photo from the party, which is good to see (winking emoji), but you also look so damn grown up. Your friends look so cool. They have long hair like yours, and everyone around you is pouting. A close up. Your mouth is open. I hope you’re singing.

125 likes. I can see why.

I saw you on Insta.

At the concert – the outdoor one. It looks so freaking awesome. I mean, OMG, did you stand right at the front? Your new friend’s dad probably got you tickets – doesn’t he work with stuff like that? I think you once said so. The guys on stage look pretty cool, too. Not exactly kids’ stuff like Marcus and Martinus, is it? Oh God, I think I’ve still got one of their CDs up in the loft. Have you still got yours? Well actually I know I’ve still got mine. I was up there looking for something the other night and when I found the box of CDs I sat there going through them for a while. For ages.

231 likes. I post a star as well.

I saw you on Insta.

You post a lot, and I can understand why. You do so much cool stuff. Are you down by the water in Sørenga in that photo? It looks like it. AND YOU’RE SWIMMING! It must be freezing cold, I can see it in your face. You never liked the cold. My aunt lives near there – do you remember when we visited her at Tøyen? And how we went back to my house and ate the pizza rolls she gave us? No, you probably don’t remember, it was ages ago. It’s only me who has the memory of an elephant. It doesn’t look like you’re eating much junk these days (that’s a compliment, by the way – you look great).

114 likes. That’s not that many really, for such a cool photo. I think it deserves more.

I saw you on Insta.

You’re in the bathroom, taking a selfie in the mirror. You look like Rhianna. Only prettier.

200 likes, without mine. Now there’s 201.

I saw you on the tram.

Only through the window, just for a moment. You banged on the glass and smiled a huge smile when you saw me. It felt so good – I was happy to see you, too. It was raining, so we were both wet through. I almost couldn’t see you through the raindrops on the tram window. You weren’t wearing any make-up, maybe you’d just been to the gym? You put your hand up to your ear before the tram moved on, as if I should call you

one day,

some time,

later.

1 love.

**27. NO MORE**

I can’t take any more – can’t be arsed with any of it. I’m done. Don’t want it. Put it out in the hallway. You can have it. Come and collect it after the weekend – or before, if you can.

One young adulthood, in like new condition. Free to anyone who can collect it.

It’s not much. Just what you see here. It’ll fit in the car. Two or three boxes, some sneakers, some unused Friday nights and a gift voucher for Zara. Just take it. I’m not going to use it, anyway.

Or, well, one of the boxes is heavy. This one. You’ll probably need several people to lift it. Probably quite a few people, actually. The box says ‘Expectations’ on it. I’ve written ‘Handle With Care’ on it, here, because everything that’s in it is so fragile. But just ignore that – most of it’s already broken.

You could try gluing it? You might manage to put it back together again. It was pretty nice when it was new. Actually, it was pretty great, once.

If you don’t have much to do one evening, for example, and so empty the box’s contents on the kitchen table and put it back together, like a jigsaw puzzle, you’ll probably get an idea of how cool it was when it was new. Once.

Of course you and I both know that it’ll never be exactly like new again, but if you’re patient and curious you might carefully put the pieces together and see the Friday afternoons emerge, friends who might call, parties I might get invited to, the people who smiled and who I thought were interested in me, the dreams I thought might be achievable and the ski jump at the edge of the forest where I thought I’d have my first kiss. It’s all there, all of it, just in pieces.

I’m not home when you arrive. I’m out on the streets, as I usually am. I head out at around seven and just walk until I see the yellow light. That yellow light.

Of course it’s best if it’s on the ground floor. Then all I need to do is crane my neck a bit to peek inside, but I’ve occasionally had some nice moments on first and second floors, too. But then there has to be a hill or a rock or – yeah, something to stand on outside. And then come the guests. The women often have their hair all done up because it’s Friday. And even through the window you can tell how good they smell, how polite they are – they kiss each other on both cheeks and then hold each other by the elbows, like that, as if they’re so happy to see one another they don’t want to let go. Then they let go anyway and are given tall glasses filled with bubbles and golden light. I tend to move then, to get a better view, because that’s when they usually go into another room. It’s amazing how pretty the light is when it comes from such big chandeliers. Gold – a golden light. And that’s when they start to talk around the table, and then I’d give anything to be inside and hear what they’re saying. But I can guess. I think they’re talking about books they’ve read and plays they’ve seen at the theatre and about war and politics and ex-husbands and dreams and feelings and Italy and cheese and Trump and work.

And nobody cries, and nobody has to hold each other’s hair back because they’re puking, and nobody walks off and leaves someone standing alone, and nobody thinks anyone is an idiot because they said something stupid, and nobody fails to call the next day.

They’re just normal. Adults.

Who says you have to? Who decides? I don’t want my adolescence. I think it’d be better off with someone else. It stands and looks at me like a fat, English bulldog, slobber drooling from its mouth and with wide, hopeful eyes: ‘Can we go for a walk? Can we go for a nice, fun walk? Is something going to happen soon? Isn’t *anything* going to happen soon?’

No, nothing is going to happen. Not a damn thing happens. My telephone never rings, time stands still, and the weekend is just a sticky, slow-moving mass.

Mum and Dad think I’m at a party. Mum and Dad don’t know I’ve given up. They don’t know about the boxes I don’t want, the slobbering bulldog, the girls who don’t call. My endless longing for normal conversations and golden light.

Inside it’s almost time for desert. Soon they’ll serve up something they spent a long time making and clap their hands together and laugh with the host.

My mobile has no missed calls and it’s almost 9 pm.

Take the boxes then, please. Take the boxes, the dog and everything that’s broken. I’m going to go home, go to bed, and hope that I grow up.

Fast.

**30. CARRY ME**

Dad.

Will you carry me?

Close to you.

There.

The way you used to do.

In a duvet, up from the sofa and into my room,

without me waking,

without me falling,

and then so quietly lay me down on the bed,

carefully.

Because you don’t want to wake me, even though I’m awake –

because I am awake –

but pretending to be asleep so I won’t have to brush my teeth.

Dad.

Can’t you lift me up?

Just a little.

Like that.

The way you used to do.

As if I were a delicate kitten,

while I breathe,

while I purr,

and then finally wrap me up in my duvet,

carefully.

‘Snug as a bug in a rug’ as you tuck the duvet under me,

so I’ll be warm,

as I smile because you and I both know I’m wide awake.

Dad.

Won’t you hold me?

In your arms.

The way you used to do.

When I was smaller and easy to lift,

easy to handle,

easy to like,

and just hug me for a moment,

carefully.

My cheek against your cheek and saying goodnight isn’t scary after all.

Carry me like that,

So we can forget, both of us,

That I’ll soon be too big to carry.