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# Kys Mik

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English excerpt translated from the Norwegian by Megan E. Turney

## CHAPTER 1

Writing about Viking bottoms

‘Are any of you paying attention?’

Our teacher, Rune, slams a handful of papers down onto his desk, a sly smile on his face as he lets his gaze glide across the 23 more or less intelligent heads that make up Eikholt School’s Class 7B.

‘Next week we’ll be starting on the Vikings. Have you heard of them? They’re the reason Norwegians are known for being such peace-loving people!’

‘Ha-ha. Very funny,’ Helga replies loudly and sarcastically.

The teachers let her get away with everything, only because she has the longest blonde hair I have ever seen. Of course we’ve all heard of the Vikings. We are in seventh grade, after all.

Helga stares at Rune with a look of exasperation on her face. Rune stares back, a questioning look on his, while he scratches the top of his head, so a tuft of hair ends up sticking out at a funny angle.

‘So, you *have* all heard of the Vikings then?’ Rune says, phrasing it like a question, even though it isn’t.

Asgeir has his hand so high up in the air that he looks like he’s dangling from an invisible balloon.

Richard prods him in the back.

‘We can all see your hand, Asgeir. *You’ve* heard of the Vikings, at least. Congratulations.’

Several of the others turn in their seats and snigger.

‘Everyone, hello!’

Rune was waving his arms about at the front of the class.

‘We need to concentrate for a bit. I *know* it’s Friday, I *know* you’re all excited for the weekend, and to meet the new girl on Monday...’

He shouldn’t have said that, the class only got even rowdier. Besides, he was wrong – I wasn’t looking forward to meeting the new girl. I hang out with the boys, not the girls. Or, I hang out with just the one boy, actually. But he’s not in today.

‘Shh! Before you go, I need to give you the projects you’ll be doing about the Vikings. We’ll be studying them for the next four to five weeks, and you’ll be working in pairs,’ Rune tells them.

‘I’m with Salsa-Sara,’ Richard declares.

I put my head in my hands and stare down at the desk. Always with the nicknames, but Salsa-Sara – that was a new one.

‘No, you aren’t. Sara’s sitting next to Jonatan, so they’ll be working together. Richard, you’re with Einar.’

Jonatan’s my best friend. Not only do we live on the same street, but we’re in the same class at school *and* we sit next to each other. Usually, that is – but not today. He had a doctor’s appointment and took the whole day off. Super unlucky. For me.

The teacher starts handing out the various assignments. He carries on talking as he walks round the room, and every time he slaps a piece of paper down on someone's desk, a sigh and groan can be heard from whoever's sitting there. Not when he gets to Asgeir though, of course.

'I get to work on a project about the Viking ships? No way, that's awesome!' he exclaims.

Rune claps Asgeir on the shoulder, the expression on his face almost one of pride. As if he's Asgeir's dad. Maybe he IS Asgeir's secret dad? It would explain a lot.

'It won't come as much of a surprise that *I'm* a fan of the Vikings, seeing as they wrote to each other in runes. Get it? *Runes*.'

The whole class groans, but Rune just carries on.

'Sara – you and Jonatan will be working on a project all about runes, so you can tell the class how the Vikings used them to communicate.'

'Runes are boring!' Helga says, but the teacher cuts her off almost immediately, and informs them instead about how they could use runes to write things that were just as rude as that which they could write with their own alphabet.

'Like what?' Richard asks, sticking his chin out.

'Well, a bone dating back to the 1100s was found in the historic part of Oslo a while back, and someone had written a rather lewd message on it in runes.'

'What do you mean by "lewd"?' Einar asks, eagerly.

'On one side, it said "Ole is unwiped behind and he..." which, erm, means that he had engaged in an act of love. With a man. It's just that it was written in a...'

He takes a long pause, like he's trying to hide behind a cough.

'Written in a vulgar way.'

'Ew!' Helga says, looking around, as if trying to get the rest of the class to agree with her.

I am actually on her side, for once. I also draw the line at talking about wiping yourself.

'There's nothing wrong with that, Helga!'

The teacher's smile looks like it's frozen onto his face. Helga has the ability to start a debate about absolutely anything, and it's both tiring and awkward to watch.

'That's dead gross though! Didn't the Vikings have toilet paper or anything?'

'Oh, yes, *that* – we'll be learning more about that! The Vikings were more hygienic than most people realise. They bathed every Saturday, and they spent a lot of time grooming their beards and hair. But if two men or two women want to *love* each other, there's nothing gross about that. It's completely natural. You all know about the district nursing sister, right?'

'Why hasn't she been to visit us yet?' Helga asks.

Asgeir looks like he's hanging onto that invisible balloon again.

'Excuse me, but they're just called district nurses now,' he says.

'Well done, Asgeir. Of course they are,' Rune responds, looking a bit flummoxed. 'Or how about we just call her by her name? Britt?'

We'd all heard the scary rumours from Class 7A, about Britt who likes to drop tampons into glasses of water and shows the class how to put a condom on a banana. It was our turn next.

'Britt's coming in to talk to you about puberty and sexuality next week. Exciting!' Rune says, his cheeks suddenly flushing bright red.

Embarrassing, more like.

He leafs through some of the papers on his desk, which is when the whispering really ramped up a notch.

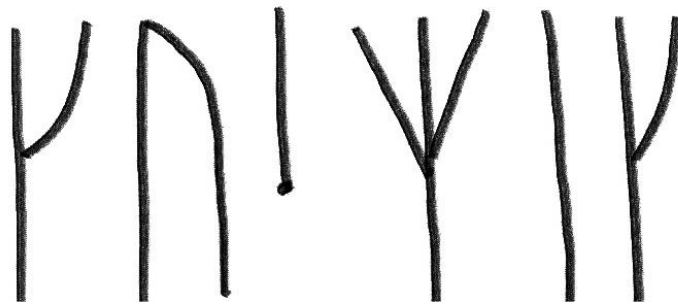
'But I'll admit it, all that with not "wiping behind", that was a bit much,' Rune starts. 'However, intimate hygiene *is* very important.'

Intimate hygiene? What a horrific phrase. Helga turns to me and smirks. Wait, why did she do that?

Because I'm going to have to write about intimate hygiene? Now I wish runes *were* boring, and nothing else. Rune grabs a cloth and wipes over the blackboard.

‘The Vikings used runes to send each other romantic messages too. *Kys Mik*, for example.’

The chalk makes a grating noise as it scrapes across the blackboard, the teacher writing what must be runic characters. A bunch of straight lines that make my whole body shudder. Every single letter feels like I’m being scratched. K Y S M I K.



‘*Kys mik* has been found in several places across Norway. So, what we can gather from this is that the Vikings liked to do a fair bit of kissing. *Kys* means *kiss*, and *mik* means *me*. Kiss me!’ Rune explains.

Yet more groans can be heard around the classroom. So Jonatan and I are going to have to work on a project about wiping your bum and kissing? This is going to be so embarrassing, I just know it. Hesitantly, I raise my hand.

‘Can we swap projects with another group? Or choose a different topic?’

‘Nope, not allowed. You’ll do a great job working on runes though, Sara! Maybe you can start by compiling a glossary, defining a few runic words for us? That’d be good!’ Rune says enthusiastically.

He turns back around and puts chalk to blackboard again, drawing a thick, jarring line under Kys mik.

Poor mik.

I want to get home as soon as the bell goes. I start shoving everything into my backpack, but when I'm ready to head off, I look down and see a note on my desk. A folded piece of paper. I peer round, but no one's looking in my direction. Someone must have put it there. I quickly tuck it into my pocket, trying to make sure Helga doesn't notice. She's completely unhinged, so who knows what she would do? I've never received a note from anyone other than Jonatan before, but it can't have been from him this time. I slip out of the classroom, but hear a voice calling after me.

'See ya, Salsa-Sara!' Richard shouts.

God, he's so lame.

I keep the note hidden away until I've gotten at least as far as the shop. Only then do I dare ease it out of my pocket and unfold it. The paper feels warm to the touch, and the writing kind of looks like runes.

*Kys mik.*

Me, who's never kissed anyone in their entire life, if we're not counting when my dog jumps up and licks my face, that is. Which we're not. Not that I practise kissing with my dog or anything either, if that's what you're thinking.

Just. Forget. It.

I don't even want to kiss anyone. *Kys mik?* You? No thanks. Whoever wrote that was probably just trying to mess with me. *Very* funny.

*Kys my ass, I think instead.*

## MY GLOSSARY

### Kys mik

Can you believe the Vikings wrote kys mik to each other? I can't. I thought they wrote down more serious matters. Like homework.

Things they needed to remember, like their homework, for example. It's just so nasty, thinking about how the Vikings, who didn't even have toothpaste, actually went around kissing each other. *Want to share your germs with mik?* Other people's germs are disgusting – I can't think of anything worse! Why would anyone ever want to put their tongue in someone else's mouth? Looking for leftovers of whatever they ate earlier? Makes me feel sick just thinking about it. Or makes *mik* feel sick, as the Vikings would say. Maybe they didn't know about bacteria back then? But we certainly do, so we've got no excuse.

I'm never going to kiss anyone, anyway. I swear on it.

*Do not kys mik.*

## CHAPTER 2

### Making promises you can't keep

'Sara? Weren't you supposed to be taking Laika out?'

Mum's looking over at me from the cooker, her eyebrows furrowed, having just caught me on the hunt for something to eat.

Take the dog on a walk, *that* was I was meant to be doing. Laika's already dancing about at my feet, huffing and puffing. If she hears her name mentioned, she'll be at your side in the next second, hoping for either:

1. A treat
2. A walk

Not that unlike myself, to be honest.

'But I'm hungry,' I say.

Laika cocks her head to the side. She's hungry too, by the looks of it.

'Dinner will be ready when you get back. You don't need to take her far, she probably just needs a poo. I can take her on a longer walk later.'

I sigh and peer out the window. Does everyone have to talk about poo today?

It's already getting dark out. I clip Laika's lead onto her collar, shove my feet into my wellies and pull my raincoat off the hook, just in case. In one trouser pocket, a secret, warm note. In the other, a poo bag. The Viking era summed up in just a few words.

The wind was blowing a gale up at Ekebergsletta, and other than the few cricket players using the flat, wooden bat to smack a hard ball across the field, there was no one else in sight. Laika tugged on her lead, pulling us closer to the edge of the forest, the trees of which



were a blazing array of autumnal colours. I pause. Is someone standing in there? That tall, thin, stick-man I've seen videos of on YouTube? A cloud of smoke rolls out from the forest floor. Or fog, maybe.

From in there, in the dark.

It's as if I suddenly *know* that something terrible is about to happen. That something's going to reach out and devour me whole. If I go over there, I'll never make it out alive.

'Come on, Laika. Did that scare you? I understand. You didn't like that at all, did you? And now you want to go home,' I say.

She looks up at me like I've lost the plot. And maybe I have. But Jonatan, who's in the Scouts, always goes on about how we should respect the weather and the wind and what not. And I *very* much agree. Jonatan also says that there's no shame in turning round. No shame!

I'm not in the Scouts. Spending time in the great outdoors means spending a surprising amount of time in the dark. A cold gust of wind blows straight through me. I turn round, even though Laika's digging her paws into the ground. I yank on her lead a few times until she eventually trots to my side and we run home together. Run as if our lives depend on it. And before you know it, they might just be.

I get back to find Mum standing in the kitchen door, waiting for me.

'Did Laika do a poo then?'

'Don't remember,' I reply quickly.

'You don't remember? Didn't you use a bag?'

I slip my hand under the table and let it slide down to my trouser pocket. There was a rustling sound as my fingers came into contact with the black plastic bag. Of course I didn't use a bag. Because Laika didn't have a poo. She didn't get a chance to on the world's shortest walk. I pull my hand out from under the table.

Now I've got a secret in both pockets!

Laika let out one short, sharp bark that made everyone jump.

'She seems a bit agitated. Maybe she still needs a poo?' Mum says.

'Ew, Mum! Don't talk about poo at the table!'

Susanne slams her little fist down and points at Mum with a stern look on her face.

Mum and I share a quick look and try to hide the fact we both want to laugh.

'No one to blame but yourself this time,' I tell her.

Susanne continues with her drawing. She's pretty talented, I've got to admit. But she's super annoying as well. She loves homework, and makes Mum give her pretend homework when she's finished doing her actual homework from school. Nerd.

We're quite the opposite, the two of us. I often can't find my books when it's time to do my homework, and I have what my teacher likes to call a 'thousand-yard-stare'. 'Reality calling,' he'll say when he catches me staring into space. 'That's enough daydreaming for today.' But Mum says there's nothing wrong with daydreaming. She's forgetting one thing, however: daydreams can also lure you into the dark nooks and crannies of your mind. It's like, in my imagination, there's a little girl driving her teeny tiny electric car around my body, making all the decisions without my getting a say. Sometimes it's like she parks up at a drive-in cinema in my brain and presses play on a horror film, without asking me first. Films an eleven-year-old should not be watching. Like when I'm trying to sleep, for example. And Mum'll come along and tell me to stop thinking about scary things and to start counting sheep instead. About a thousand sheep should do the trick. But sheep are so boring, and before you know it, they've got long fangs, sharp claws, red eyes and are deadly. Because at night, they prey on people like me. And then I can't sleep, of course.

'Are you off in one of your dreams over there? Dreaming about a boy, perhaps?' Mum teases.

‘No! Ugh, you’re so annoying.’

Dreaming of boys? As if. I wasn’t daydreaming anyway. I was day-nightmaring. But I’m not exactly going to tell her that, am I?

‘No, no, it’s fine, I won’t pry,’ Mum says.

She waves her arm in the air like she’s batting away the question, and then winks at me in that lame way adults do.

‘I wasn’t thinking about boys!’ I repeat indignantly.

Will she ever get it a rest?

‘You know you can talk to me if there’s anything on your mind, right? Whether it’s about boys, or your body, or whatever. So much happens at your age...’

I ram my fingers into my ears.

‘Lalalalalala! There’s nothing on my mind!’ I yell at the top of my lungs.

But there is something on my mind. Whoever it was that put that note on my desk. I glance over at Mum. She’s making her way across the kitchen with a big pot in her hands. She rests it on the table, pulls out a chair and sits down.

‘You need to eat,’ she says, nodding over at me. ‘You seem a bit hangry?’

She phrases it like a question, even though it isn’t.

She lifts the lid of the pot and reveals – porridge, even though it’s Friday. That’s not right. Isn’t Friday pizza night?

‘Dad’s out having a drink with a few work buddies tonight, so I thought porridge would be a bit easier.’

‘A bit more boring, you mean,’ I retort.

Susanne’s already grabbed the sugar bowl, a look of delight on her face. Porridge!

‘I completely forgot, I have somewhere to be,’ I say out of nowhere.

Mum raises her eyebrows. Can she tell I’m lying?

‘With whom?’

‘I said I’d have dinner at Jonatan’s tonight,’ I say.

It’s Friday, so there’s a good chance they’ll be having something more exciting than porridge.

‘Oh, *Jonatan*. You guys have *so* much fun together at school, do you not?’ she says, emphasising almost every other word.

‘Stop, Mum. *Stop.*’

What is it with adults? Always droning on and on about things I’m not in the least bit interested in. I’m only eleven. The youngest in my class, in fact. And in five weeks I’ll be twelve. And then it won’t be that long until I’m a teenager. 365 days plus 35 days equals... whatever. It’s more than a year away, anyway. Mum’s already given me a book called ‘Your Body’s the Best’, but unfortunately for her, I’m not even close to finding blood in my pants or having heart palpitations.

Other things I’m nowhere near doing:

- Buying the same clothes as all the other girls
- Giggling
- Wearing mascara
- Writing boys’ names everywhere

The other girls in my class do that – write boys’ names on absolutely everything. On the cover of their school-books, in the margins of a page, in the gravel outside school on the playground, on walls, on their arms. They’ve come up with this whole guess-the-guy game. One of them will draw six dashes, for example, and you then have to guess which boy they’re thinking of by filling out the letters of their name. Jonatan is seven dashes. A lot of

people think it's eight because they don't know that he writes his name without the 'h'. But I know. Only because we're friends though. Nothing more.

Mum isn't letting up about the porridge and staying at home together, so we can have cosy girls' night. World's worst Friday, thank you very much.

Hearing my phone go off down the hall, I run after the sound, fish it out of my coat pocket and see *Jonatan* on the screen before answering it.

'What?' I say.

That's just how we talk to each other. Not that polite, I suppose, but who cares? Not Jonatan, at any rate.

'Want to come over?' Jonatan asks on the other end.

'Yes, heading out now!' I reply, reaching for the door handle.

How lucky that he chose that moment to call.

'No you are NOT heading out now!' Mum's miffed voice shouts from the kitchen.

'I've just got to eat some slimy, lumpy porridge first,' I tell Jonatan, glancing back at Mum, her mouth now turned upside down.

The door to the neighbour's house opens immediately – Jonatan had clearly been waiting for me. A delicious waft of spices hits me at the door. Like my nose is being tickled, almost.

'Noodles?' I ask, even though I can smell the answer.

'Yep.'

'Jammy sod,' I say.

Everything at Jonatan's house is a little bigger and a little better than at mine, but I'm not *that* jealous.

'You can have the rest if you're hungry?'

Jonatan points at my jumper – I look down and see a large lump of porridge glued right in the centre of my jumper. I flick it away and slip my shoes off. When I bend over, I can feel the note sticking into me in my trouser pocket. I mustn't lose it.

'Are you sick?' I ask, remembering that he'd been to see the doctor.

Jonatan lifts a finger to his lips and leans over to whisper in my ear.

'I need to you about something first.'

He looks so serious that I want to burst out laughing.

'You haven't created a new world, have you? What's going on? Did you steal something from my house?' I ask, ready to fire off a hundred more questions.

Last time we played Minecraft together, we found the perfect place and I built a crazy nice house. The nicest house you've ever seen. But maybe he couldn't wait and played on it without me?

'No, I mean it. I seriously have to warn you about something.'

'Huh?'

Does Jonatan look a little different? He's talking quite quickly, like he's in a rush.

'Mum says she wants a word with you, wants to *persuade* you to do something, but I know you won't want to do it, or can't... and that's *totally* fine with me. But she won't let up. So you've got to say no, okay? It's honestly not a problem. Just say no!'

'What're you on about?'

I don't understand a single thing he's just said, and before I can ask any follow-up questions, his mum, Jane, appears in the hallway.

'You two, I wondered if we could all have a little chat?' Jane says, without even saying 'hi' or anything first.

Jonatan sends me a 'what did I say' kind of look, and we reluctantly follow her into the living room. Like there's something going on in there that we don't want anything to do with. But we don't know what it is. Or, to be more precise, *I* don't know what it is.

‘Is chocolate milk okay?’ Jane asks, suddenly nipping back into the kitchen before we’ve had the chance to answer.

Yes, I think to myself, more than okay, but I daren’t say it out loud. Because Jonatan said I should say no.

His mum comes back in with two glasses of chocolate milk regardless, and we all take a seat on the white corner sofa that we never sit on. We usually hang out on the old grey one downstairs, in the basement. That’s where the PlayStation is, and as long as his older sister, Juni, isn’t home, we stay down there and play Minecraft. You know the kind of people that say they were born with a pair of skis on their feet? Well, not to brag, but Jonatan and I were born with Minecraft in our heads. And controllers in our hands.

‘It’s important that we all stay calm,’ Jane says. She then lifts the teacup up to her mouth, a smile fixed to her face.

I suddenly feel the urge to move my leg. The heel has come off the ground and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. It starts to bounce up and down of its own accord.

‘Sara, Sara, Sara,’ Jane says, but in a warm kind of way.

Jonatan rolls his eyes. He drains his glass of chocolate milk in one big gulp. That boy is always so thirsty. He doesn’t do it to show off though. Jonatan doesn’t do anything to show off. It’s one of the reasons I like him so much.

‘What we want to talk to you about, *isn’t* bad, and it’s actually quite normal, all things considered,’ Jane continues, but I notice that her eyes are glazed over now, as if she can’t bring herself to look right at me.

I knew it. She’s got something scary to say. Whatever it is, it’s not going to be good – you usually just blurt out good news. If you’ve got something good to tell someone, you don’t faff about getting them chocolate milk first.

‘Damn it,’ Jane says, waving her hand in front of her face, as if trying to blow away the tears that were presumably threatening to make an appearance.

Are they moving? Uh oh, *that’s* what this is about. Of course! Maybe Jonatan’s parents are getting a divorce? And now they’re moving away. Maybe they’re moving to Stavanger, where his dad’s from, or even further away. Another country, perhaps? Dad always tells me not get carried away, to stop fixating on the worst-case scenario, but I can’t help it. I don’t *want* to get carried away, but the thoughts carry *me* away. Jonatan’s mum is holding his hand now, patting the top of it with her own – she stares at the hand as she starts talking, as if it’s listening.

‘We were at the hospital today,’ she begins.

The hospital? Someone’s sick. Someone’s dying! I was right! No wonder the thoughts had come to carry me away!

‘And while we were there, we found out that Jonatan has diabetes. But we have to remember to all stay calm,’ Jane adds, her voice going all high and weird on the word ‘calm’.

‘I’m calm,’ Jonatan says.

He shakes his head in exasperation.

I keep my mouth shut, and try asking him a thousand questions with my eyes instead.

I’m not calm.

His mum doesn’t stop there – she goes on and on in that shrill voice, through in and out breaths, talking about insulin pumps and diabetes type 1, about measuring and blood sugar, and I can’t get a word in edgeways.

‘I’m not dying,’ Jonatan says with a smile.

Like he’d read my thoughts through all his mum’s babbling.

‘You’re not dying.’ Exactly what Mum and Dad say to me whenever I get scared of the dark. ‘You’re not in danger, and you’re not dying.’ But that doesn’t mean that being scared



of the dark *isn't* scary. Is that what having diabetes is like too? I wish I could ask Jonatan more about it without his mum being there.

'There's just a lot to get used to, at the start,' Jane says, but it sounds like she's mainly telling herself that.

She takes her phone out and swipes across the screen to show me a website dedicated to information about diabetes. While she's pointing at things on the phone, she explains how the whole class will be learning about the disease too, but I've stopped paying attention. The most important thing, above all else, is that Jonatan isn't moving away. No one's getting divorced, no one's dying. Jonatan just needs to start taking some medicine. Otherwise, everything's the same as before. As long as we stay calm.

'And seeing as you are Jonatan's *best* friend, of course, we were wondering if you wouldn't mind helping him out a bit, at the start?'

I nod, but can't bring myself to say anything. Of course I'll help. But it's pretty difficult staying calm when my body refuses to. Everything's racing about inside me – in my heart and my head. Maybe in my stomach as well. That certainly doesn't feel calm. Feels like there's something running round and round in circles in there, like a petrified hamster. On acid.

'You don't need to,' Jonatan butts in.

'It's fine, of course I can help,' I say with a cautious smile.

'Oh, fantastic! Then you won't mind helping Jonatan on his next Scouts expedition then? Help him keep an eye on his measuring and remind him to eat, that kind of thing. The doctors said it was very important that he carries on doing all his usual activities. And you know how much he loves the Scouts?'

You bet I do. He goes to every meeting, every single Thursday, and never misses an expedition either, even if it happens to fall on the same weekend someone in our class is celebrating their birthday.

‘He’s been on every expedition this year and has taken on lots of responsibilities, so he’ll be promoted to Assistant Patrol Leader soon, isn’t that right?’ Jane continues.

Jonatan nods, swelling with pride, and not doing a very good job of hiding it.

‘We call it “ass” for short,’ Jonatan says.

‘But I really do think it’s too soon for him to be going off into the woods alone. It’s only three weeks away. But if you were willing to go with him, then he can go.’

‘I won’t be alone. The other Scouts will be there too?’

‘You *have* to have someone there who won’t be distracted by all the competitions. Someone who’s solely there to remind you to do your measuring and take your medicine. Sara’s just said she’ll do it, and I am *so* pleased you will,’ Jane says, letting out a long exhale.

She looks at me and smiles, a brief smile though, before taking her glasses off and rubbing the corner of her eye.

‘At least Jonatan’s not scared of needles, thank God,’ she adds.

She didn’t ask what I was scared of.

‘I don’t need a babysitter,’ Jonatan says with a pause between each word.

He looks at his mum like she’s the child that needs comforting.

Jane shakes her head slightly. She smiles, but there’s a sadness behind her eyes.

‘It’ll all work out, and you’ll get to grips with all the equipment and measuring eventually. Will you show Sara how your insulin pen works? As I’m sure you don’t want *me* going on your trip with you, do you?’

My hands are clenched round the almost empty glass of chocolate milk. There’s a big, dark lump of chocolate powder left lying at the bottom.

Jonatan’s staring at me. He looks *even* sadder than I feel, if that’s even possible. We’re like Birk and Ronia stuck on either side of Hell’s Gap. But I’m nothing like Ronia Røverdatter. I’m just regular old Sara who is, unfortunately, a huge wimp.

I understand what Jonatan meant now when he said I should say no. That he would be fine with it. But that’s not true. He’s dead keen to go, but I’m scared to death!

‘Can you believe the two of you have been best friends since nursery? You were so cute! Wait, let me see if I can find a photo...’

‘Mum...’ Jonatan groans, getting up.

He clearly wants to get away from his mum, insulin pens and old childhood photos.

‘And it’ll be so much fun for the two of you, going on this expedition together! The cabin’s a bit basic, but at least it’s got a fireplace! That’ll be cosy!’

Maybe *you* should go then, if you think it sounds so cosy, I say inwardly. I try to smile normally though. Which isn’t exactly easy when you feel like you’re about to burst into tears. Because I don’t think it sounds cosy in the slightest. In fact, I can feel my stomach tightening into one big knot already.

And I couldn’t give a damn about the fireplace!

My mind wanders to the Scouts’ cabin, up there in the dark forest, in the dark night – up at Otter Burrow Cabin. I’ve only ever seen it in the daylight, when we’ve been on our regular Sunday walk through the forest. Even then, in the middle of the day, it looked dark and oppressive, just a large pile of almost black logs. And if you go right up to it and peek through the windows, what do you see? Your own face staring back at you, like a pale ghost reflected in the glass. Otter Burrow kind of rhymes with utter sorrow. Coincidence? I think not.

Jonatan’s got diabetes, but I’ve got something too. Something you can’t take medicine for. Because what I have, *isn’t a disease*. Even though it feels like one. A phobia of the dark. I am deadly afraid of the dark. That’s actually why I’m not in the Scouts myself. You have to spend time outside in the dark, deep within the forest. Jonatan’s not scared of the dark, and he loves being in the Scouts, and the forest, and knives and axes and ropes. Even though he knows I’m scared of the dark, he doesn’t understand how awful it is.

No one understands.

Jonatan's been talking about the expedition for months. He's been looking forward to being an 'ass' ever since he was a wolf cub. I can just see him now, with his soft fur and scruffy, fluffy ears. A little wolf cub that yelps and whines and howls, who's sick and needs his friend to help him. And that friend, is me. Imagine though, if something does go wrong on the expedition, and his best friend isn't there to save him from certain death. All that way inside the forest, surrounded by Scouts more concerned about getting their badges than helping one another. I don't have a choice. I have to be there for Jonatan. Even if I have to put my own life on the line.

'I'll go,' I say, trying to make my voice sound a lot more sure about it than I actually am.

Am I really going to force myself to go all the way up to the cabin, deep inside the forest, with no adults, in just three weeks' time?

No.

I can't do it!

My own voice echoes around my head, as if reminding me of the idiotic thing that just came out of my mouth.

I'll go.