*Catching Air*

By Neda Alaei

Translated with support from Norla

Can a mother also be a sister?

You’re the one asking, not me.

You – the one who thinks you’re my sister. You say we’re the best sisters in the whole world. You think we’re friends.

1

The bell signalling the start of the school day went off right on time. Thoughts of you float around my head as I count twelve boys and seventeen girls in the classroom.

‘Welcome,’ the teacher says. ‘Welcome to Nydalen Upper Secondary School, and to this General Studies course.’

My gaze searches the room. For a reaction, for a connection.

‘I believe, and hope, that the next three years will be just as inspiring for all of you as they will be for us teachers. These next few years are going to be an important time in your lives, and I am sure that many of you will become good friends, regardless of gender, orientation, religion, culture…’

‘Regardless of what, sorry?’ one of the boys blurts out. ‘Are you trying to teach us how to integrate or something? Like, because I’m Turkish?’ His hand is in the air, but he doesn’t bother waiting for permission to talk.

Half of my new class bursts out laughing, and one of the girls, one with dark, curly hair and golden-brown skin, answers back.

‘Shut up, Ilyas, stop trying to be cool – it doesn’t suit you!’ she quips, and the other half of the class cracks up now too.

I roll my eyes slightly before forcing myself to smile along. There’s one in every class, I think to myself. A class clown. And then I think about how I’m one of the class, one of seventeen girls, one of twenty-nine students. Or I will be, at least.

I can feel my heart in my throat as I go to open my mouth.

‘What, are you scared of failing integration? I heard you’ve got to eat a hot dog wrapped in waffle to pass the exam,’ I say out loud. I don’t bother raising my hand either.

I’m braver than I thought.

Everyone laughs, including the one called Ilyas.

Luckily.

And the girl with the dark curls turns to look at me. Like she’s scrutinising me, assessing me.

This is *my* class, I think to myself. This is *important,* the teacher said, and I feel my heartrate continue to rise along with the laughter in the room.

I pull my sketchbook out of my bag, flick through it until I reach a drawing of myself, one I drew of me as *you* see me – with a tiara on my head, like a princess – and I think to myself that *that* is what the next year will be like. That I’ll walk into the classroom every single day with a tiara on my head, invisible no more.

By the time I look up, everyone else is on their feet, walking around sorting out their timetables, tablets and passwords, while I’m just sitting here.

I go to stand up as well, when I hear a voice right behind me.

‘Whoa, that’s so good.’

I look up to see a girl who has already seen me. She has long blonde hair, and a warm, blue gaze. She’s smiling at me, and I simultaneously lose my breath and feel like I’ve sprouted a pair of wings.

‘Thank you,’ I reply.

Now this is important, moments like this.

‘It looks like you,’ she says.

My throat turns dry all of a sudden.

‘Do you think?’

‘Yes! It’s Samia, right?’ she asks, and I find myself a bit dazed by the fact that she’s noticed me, she thinks my drawings are good, and she knows my name.

‘Yes,’ I answer. ‘And you are…’ I start, before my mind goes completely blank.

‘Jenny.’

‘Jenny, yes. Of course,’ I say.

‘And I’m Maya.’

The girl with the curls, who put Ilyas in his place, appears at Jenny’s side. She holds her hand out, and I timidly shake it.

‘Oh, *you’re* Maya,’ I say.

Maya laughs.

‘Samia,’ I say again, more clearly this time. I breathe out, and feel anything but invisible. I have a place.

‘Join us on the tour?’ Maya asks.

I stand up and follow Jenny and Maya when it’s time to be shown around the school. We’re taken round every floor, every room, every nook and cranny of the building that’s worth knowing about. The teacher explains what and where everything as we walk through the building, but I would imagine that everyone else is paying as little attention as I am.

There are seventeen girls here, and I’m one of them, and the girl with the long blonde hair is also one of them, and the girl with brown eyes and curly hair who isn’t scared of saying what’s on her mind is also one of them.

We check each other out throughout the tour, all of us sharing our first day at upper secondary school together. Our eyes dart around the group, resting on the bodies and catching the eyes of those who we will eventually mix and become one with over the course of the next few years.

I straighten my jumper, tugging it down a bit.

I let my gaze wander too. Searching for someone.

I wonder who I’ll ending up mixing with.

If it’ll be Jenny, or Maya, or someone else entirely.

I get goosebumps just thinking about it.

I conjure up the confidence to wave goodbye to Jenny and Maya at the end of the day, and luckily they both wave back. I’ll show them – both of them – that I’m one of them, that I can be one of them.

Once home, I cast my schoolbag off and leave it on the floor in the hallway, and run into the bathroom. I lock the door and stand still for a moment to breathe in and out a few times, before taking my clothes off and positioning myself in front of the mirror. I lock eyes with my reflection and hold my gaze. Hard and long. Today went well. It really did.

I jump at the sound of a knock on the door.

‘Are you getting in the shower, Samia?’ your voice asks, and I’m reminded that this is the only place on earth where I am never, have never been, invisible.

I continue staring at myself.

‘Yes,’ I answer eventually.

I turn the shower on and let the water stream over my body until the steam fully shrouds the glass.

You knock again.

My fist clenches around the bar of soap. I shut my eyes tight, close my mouth and hold my breath. Even though the water continues to cascade out of the showerhead like a torrential rainfall, I try to be as quiet as a mouse. Like I’m not even there. Like this is my secret hiding place and I’d do anything not to be found.

‘Samia, my love? Have you washed your hair? Do you need a hand scrubbing your back?’

Your voice penetrates the door.

‘No, Mum, I’m fine,’ I say.

But you don’t hear.

You knock again, and again, and once more. The door handle moves downwards, slowly at first, as if you’re surprised to find it locked. That is until you start yanking it down, pulling and pulling, harder and harder. My heartrate rises as I hear the lock give out. I recognise the sound of the door opening, and I feel that you are in here with me.

I finally take a breath in.

‘Why did you lock the door, Samia?’ you ask with a titter, as if you’re offended.

You lock the door when you want some privacy in the bathroom, Mum – I want to say, but can’t.

‘How was your first day at school, my love?’ you ask when I don’t respond.

You continue standing there in the doorway, staring at me.

I want to tell you about my class. I want to tell you about Jenny. I want to tell you that I have a feeling that upper secondary school is going to be good for me, better than primary school or lower secondary anyway.

But I don’t. I just want you to leave.

‘Good,’ I say instead, while the water continues to engulf me in a cloud of steam.

‘That’s great, my love,’ you say.

You close the door behind you and come further into the room. You start telling me about your day. And I listen.

Mum’s princess.

You get into bed with me when I’m trying to sleep, and you stay there.

I close my eyes and I’m somewhere else entirely.

My body relaxes, my heartrate slows and beats at a steady rhythm, my breathing becomes deeper.

I pretend to be asleep.

‘We’re like sisters, you and me,’ she whispers softly in my ear, and I squeeze my eyes tight shut again, and it feels like everything’s about to explode. My entire being, the entire universe. Everything that has ever been.

In the end, I fall asleep.

2

‘I’ve made a comic strip about the first of school,’ Kristoffer tells me as we’re walking to school.

We turn and wave at you through the window. You happily wave back, and even blow a kiss at Kristoffer, who’s been our neighbour and my best friend ever since primary school.

‘I drew this young, optimistic guy who’s just started studying Art, Design and Architecture at high school,’ he continues.

Kristoffer is the weirdest person I know. While some people keep a diary or write a blog, or post things on TikTok and Insta, he draws cartoon strips, with himself as the main character.

He’s the one who got me into drawing in the first place.

‘A young, optimistic guy with *a lot* of motivation and a sense of adventure.’

He gestures with his entire body as he wolfs down his breakfast. He fails to notice that the slices of cucumber in his sandwich are falling out as he wild waves his arms around. He does this thing where he holds his sandwiches and pizza slices all wrong. It’s weird and lame, but it’s also *very* Kristoffer. He is, quite simply, a living cartoon character.

He also doesn’t pick up on the fact that people stare at him as they walk past. But he simply does not care.

‘Someone with their entire life ahead of them!’ he carries on, and I can’t hold my laughter in any longer. ‘With huuuuge hopes of finding their dream girl on their very first day of school.’

‘Wow, how ambitious,’ I respond.

‘But my class is full of hippy girls with twigs in their hair and dandelions in their packed lunches,’ he says so loudly that people on the street turn to look.

I smile apologetically at the ones still gaping at us, while Kristoffer rattles on.

‘And they’re not even pretty! Not even if you squint really hard!’

‘Oh what a shame,’ I reply in an over-the-top whiney voice, and wonder whether Kristoffer realises that he’s a bit of a hippy himself. ‘Maybe if you’d made an Instagram account for your comics, like I’ve told you to do a thousand times, those aspirations of yours might actually be a little more realistic.’

He looks at me seriously for a second before he bursts out laughing. He then gets his phone out to show me the new comic. He’s drawn himself with thick eyebrows, freckles and all.

With that orange, flannel shirt of his blowing in the wind.

‘What about you though?’ he asks, his voice back to normal. ‘Anyone you already know in your class or not?’

‘No,’ I answer on an in-breath.

‘Seriously? No one?’

‘Nope. And that’s absolutely fine by me.’

I think about Jenny. And Maya, who laid into Ilyas yesterday.

Kristoffer smiles at me. I don’t need to say anything else because he understands what I mean, understand why it’s fine.

‘There’s this girl though,’ I start, and then hesitate. Like I’m afraid it’ll be obvious just how important this is for me. This whole ‘making new friends at school’ thing.

‘Her name’s Jenny, and she saw a drawing I’d been working on, and she said it was good and that it looked like me. She was cool.’

‘But was she as cool as me?’

Kristoffer shoves me so I almost end up tripping over my own feet.

‘Idiot,’ I say. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘Ooh! I’ve just had a new idea for the next page of my comic!’ he exclaims, and he goes off on one again, but this time, I’m not listening.

We arrive at Nydalen subway station, and my eyes are drawn to the other side of the road. Jenny and Maya are over there, talking to another girl from our class. They’re smiling, chatting, laughing loudly. They hug and kiss each other on the cheek like old, Turkish aunts.

I start when I feel a hand on my arm. I turn, and I’m met with Kristoffer’s intense gaze.

‘Are you listening, or what?’ he asks impatiently, but Jenny’s now waving at me from across the road.

‘That’s her,’ I say, and wave back.

I go to hug Kristoffer, but realise as I’m leaning that we don’t usually do that, and end up lamely punching his arm instead.

‘Catch you later, okay?’

‘Sure,’ he says, punching me back just as awkwardly.

And then he’s gone, and I quickly cross the road.

‘Hey,’ I say.

Jenny’s eyes sparkle, like she’s happy to see me too.

‘Hey!’ she says. ‘This is the one who can draw,’ Jenny tells the girl whose name I can’t remember.

‘The one who totally burned Ilyas yesterday,’ Maya adds.

I feel a shiver run down my spine as I realise they had been talking about me.

‘Yes, I’m the one they call Samia,’ I say confidently, and glance at Maya. Luckily, she laughs. ‘Samia Undlien’, I add, and even though my voice sounds steady, I regret having said my surname as well, like I’m some adult at a job interview. But it does kind of feel like that, like this is a test.

Jenny and Maya’s friend introduces herself as Dea.

The bell goes and I follow them into first period.

I get my sketchbook out and start drawing. I draw four Turkish aunts. I am one of them.

3

The school day ends early, much to the class’s delight.

A sigh escapes me, a sigh that no one was meant to hear.

I don’t want to go home any earlier than I have to.

Some students start cheering, and the teacher tries to shout over all the noise that the next few periods should be used to get to know each other. *To socialise a bit.*

But Jenny hears my sigh. She looks at me and nods toward the classroom door. Maya and Dea have already gotten out of their seats, and before I realise it, I’ve packed up my pencils, sketchbook, tablet and books, and am following her out of the room.

‘Shall we go to the Starbucks at the university?’ Dea asks.

‘But what if Alfred’s there? That’d be so awkward,’ Maya responds, rolling her eyes.

‘We’re not going *anywhere* where we might bump into that asshole,’ Jenny says, taking Maya’s hand in her own.

‘Who’s Alfred?’ I ask.

It feels like the girls already know each other so well, and I can’t understand why they’re including me.

‘My ex,’ Maya says. ‘He dumped me for someone else.’

‘That dick didn’t deserve you anyway,’ Dea says.

‘Maybe we should go to Godt Brød instead?’ I suggest.

We’ve been there several times, I think. You and me. It used to be our Sunday treat. Going to Godt Brød, getting a cinnamon roll each.

‘Good idea,’ Jenny says, sending me a smile.

After we’ve ordered our Frappucinos and smoothies, I listen to the story of how they all met. Maya and Dea went to primary school together, while Jenny and Maya were in the same class in lower secondary school.

‘And then we all met here at upper secondary, of course,’ Maya says, so close into Dea’s ear that it looks like she’s about to kiss her earlobe.

I shudder, as if I can actually feel her laughing in my ear instead.

‘What school did you go to then?’ Jenny asks me.

She’s the one who asks all the questions, makes sure everyone has a chance to say something – even me, the new one. She’s sitting beside me, her arm brushing against mine each time she goes to stir her Frappucino, even though she only stirred it a minute ago.

‘I went to Bjølsen,’ I answer.

‘Oh! So you know Mitra and the girls then?’ Maya asks.

‘Uh,’ I start.

*Mitra and the girls* are the group of girls from my lower secondary school who would’ve never wasted a second of their time on someone like me. I’m still not sure they even know who I am. But I don’t want to tell my new friends that.

Dea and Maya stare expectantly at me.

‘No, not really,’ I begin. ‘Well, I mean… I do know them, we were in the same year but they were in a different class,’ I add, but immediately regret it.

I’m suddenly scared of being asked any more questions, but luckily none follow. Maya starts telling stories about Mitra that I’ve already heard, like the time she stole a camera from a girl in her class, then completely lost it and smashed it against a wall.

As Maya’s talking, I start wondering whether they would’ve spoken to me if they met me in lower secondary school. Would they have noticed me at all?

I wonder whether we’d have gone for smoothies and Frappucinos together.

Or whether I’d have just been Kristoffer Ámmon’s invisible sidekick.

They certainly wouldn’t have spoken to *him,* that’s for sure, I think to myself when I open the message he’s just sent me on Snapchat. It’s a photo of a comic he’s working on, of him in a classroom. He doesn’t look particularly pleased.

**Kristoffer**: *There is only one thing we say to death: Not today* 😉

**Kristoffer**: *Ps: are you coming over later???*

I promised Kristoffer that I’d go over to watch *Game of Thrones* at his house tonight. But I’ll have to come home to you first, I realise when another message comes through.

**Mum:** *Hope you won’t be much longer at school today, my princess! Come home to me!*

*Ofc,* I write to Kristoffer, and *Coming home soon,* I reply to you.

But first, I am here, I remind myself and turn my attention back to the girls. Dea and Maya have already finished their drinks, while Jenny continues to fiddle with her straw. The cream on top of her Frappuccino has sunk and melted into the rest of her drink.

‘Who are you texting then?’ Maya asks.

‘Your boyfriend?’ Dea asks eagerly.

I tuck my phone away. I don’t want to look rude, or even worse: ungrateful.

‘Oh, no, not at all, just my mum asking when I’ll be home.’

‘But you’ll be there tomorrow, right?’ Jenny asks.

‘Oh totally,’ I answer, although I’m not sure what I’m agreeing to.

All I know is that, whatever it is, I want to be there. I don’t want to miss anything.

I suddenly feel overwhelmed. I feel like my whole life is, and must, revolve around *this.* And nothing else.

4

Kristoffer’s waiting for me when I arrive – on the safe, *Game of Thrones* loaded on the TV, ready to start.

And by *ready* I mean he’s in full costume. We’re talking beard and coat with a fur collar that looks far too hot to be wearing in late August.

‘What the fuck?’ I exclaim with a laugh. ‘You sure about that costume? It looks warm as hell.’

He’s sat there on the sofa bed, looking up at me, face set in stone and dressed as Tormund Giantsbane. With that red beard he does actually look a bit like him, but I daren’t tell him that.

*‘Any man who must say “I am the king” is no true king,*’ he says, fully serious.

I’m the one who cracks up first – there was a reason why Kristoffer never got the lead roles in any of our primary school plays.

‘Nerd,’ I say as I drop down onto the sofa beside him.

I wrap the blanket around myself, and Kristoffer’s mum comes in with a large bowl of popcorn that we sit between us on the sofa. She smiles and says: ‘Enjoy’ before turning and leaving. ‘Thank you, Hanne Lene,’ I say, while Kristoffer ignores her entirely. I imagine what it would’ve been like if the roles were reversed, if it had been you who had brought the popcorn in for us, and I imagine how you would’ve plonked yourself down between us and eaten all of it yourself.

Kristoffer drums along to the title sequence on the coffee table.

Daenerys comes onto the screen with Missandei, her closest friend. I envision the two of them as me and Jenny. I wonder if Jenny watches *Game of Thrones.*

I pull my phone out and search for her on Insta. I scroll through her photos, zoom in on the ones she’s posted of herself. Kristoffer suddenly kicks me in the leg, and I jump, and before I can do anything about it, I’ve liked one of her posts.

‘Fuck!’ I yell and gape at the screen. I’d liked a photo she posted months ago.

‘Shh,’ Kristoffer responds, without removing his eyes from the screen.

When I look down at my phone again, I see that Jenny’s sent me a follow request. I hold my breath as I accept, and follow her back. A few seconds pass by, and I get the notifications saying that she’s liked several of my photos.

I don’t know much about friends and rules and what not, but I’m quite sure that you don’t go liking people’s old photos. It’s like an unspoken rule. But Jenny does it.

I go back to her profile and like a few more of her photos too. She pretty much just posts selfies and photos with various friends.

‘Who’s that?’

Kristoffer’s sitting far too close, and I lean away.

‘Jenny,’ I answer. ‘She’s the girl in my class I was talking about.’

‘She’s pretty,’ he snorts. ‘Reminds me a bit of Mitra and that lot.’

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Mitra and her gang of friends ruled over our year like they were The Lannisters.

‘Uh, not really,’ I reply.

‘Yeah, but you know what I mean? Like, cool, popular, pretty.’

He grimaces and rolls his eyes at the same time. He looks so daft dressed in that costume.

‘Is there something wrong with being cool now?’ I spit out.

‘No,’ he says, irritated. ‘But that’s not something either of us has ever really cared about.’

I just stare at him without answering.

‘Maybe you wouldn’t be such a nerd if you stopped dressing up like that every time you watch *Game of Thrones,*’ I eventually retort.

Kristoffer stares back at me.

There was a moment of silence, before we hear a knock on the door and you storm in.

5

‘Samia,’ you say, with your fists pressed firmly into your hips. You have a unique way of sounding both sweet and sour at the same time. ‘It’s getting late now, my love. We mustn’t disturb Kristoffer and Hanne Lene any longer.’

Kristoffer and I glance at each other.

‘Up you get,’ you command, like I’m an eight-year-old who hasn’t learned to tell the time yet.

It’s only just turned nine o’clock, but I sigh and stand up.

‘You haven’t forgotten that we agreed to have supper together tonight, have you?’ you ask, taking hold of my hand.

I shake my head, even though I can’t ever remember agreeing to that.

I turn back to Kristoffer and send him an exasperated smile, before following you out of the room. You exchange a few words with Kristoffer’s mum, and I watch as you try to act like her, in the way you stand, the way you speak.

You’re trying to be like her, trying to be normal.

You thank her for having me, and we leave.

We walk from their apartment building to our own next door.

You’ve laid the living room table with waffles and all the trimmings: jam, sour cream and butter.

‘Surprise!’ you shout enthusiastically.

I’m not hungry after eating all the popcorn, but I take a seat on the sofa anyway.

You’ve lit a few candles. They illuminate the room, along with the Netflix logo on the TV.

‘Now isn’t this a little romantic?’ you say, and start loading up one of the waffles with a thick layer of every topping.

You lick your fingers before pushing the plate toward me.

‘You don’t get this over at Hanne Lene’s,’ you chuckle to yourself.

You watch me expectantly as you start smearing butter onto your own waffle. I take a deep breath in before taking a bite. I chew slowly, chew for a long time, try to swallow, but can’t. It won’t go down. It does not taste good. It’s pretty horrible, actually. This is not romantic.

It shouldn’t be romantic.

I manage to swallow it in the end. I can’t leave the rest though, otherwise you’ll just sulk.

After you’ve eaten four waffles and I’ve had two, you clear everything away and wrap me up in the blanket, tucking me in. You sit right next to me, even though there’s plenty of room on the rest of the sofa.

‘So nice that we could spend a little time together, my princess,’ you say. ‘You have to spend some time with me too, you know?’

I just answer with a smile.

‘How was your day?’ you ask, stroking my hair.

‘I went out with some of the girls from my class,’ I tell you. ‘We finished early today, so we went to a café. We went to Godt Brød, actually!’

‘Godt Brød?’ you ask.

Your voice changes, as if something I’ve said has bothered you.

‘It’s nice that I’m getting to know my classmates, don’t you think?’ I ask, but I already know what you think about it.

You don’t think so. You feel like it’s unnecessary. You show how you feel with your entire body as you turn away from me on the sofa and focus on the screen, pressing the buttons on the remote.

I try to shuffle away a bit, but I can’t.

You put *Gilmore Girls* on, and start humming along to the theme tune. It’s obvious why you love the outdated series about Lorelai and Rory so much. They’re like sisters, best friends, as well as being mother and daughter. This is as far from *Game of Thrones* as it’s possible to get. No dragons or supernatural forces. Just a mother and daughter, and the drama of their everyday lives, living as best friends. It’s mind-numbingly boring.

You discovered the series at some point during the summer, and have been obsessed with it ever since. You’re convinced it’s about me and you, even though there are zero similarities between us and them, other than the fact that we’re also mother and daughter.

Lorelai and Rory look alike though. We don’t.

That light, wispy hair of yours. Your round face, round nose and those blue-green eyes.

I have brown curls, light-brown eyes.

I don’t look like you at all.

You’re always telling me that I’m beautiful because I’m mixed-race. The best of two worlds, you say, but I’ve no idea which worlds you’re on about.

I don’t know what my father looks like.

I’ve no idea who he is, or where he is.

I regret telling you about Jenny and the girls. You don’t think I need to be involved in that kind of thing. You don’t think I need friends.

I think of the photos on Insta, of Jenny and her friends. Dea and Maya were in a few. I want to be in them too. I want to be on Jenny’s Insta.

I try again to edge away from you, but I feel completely trapped.

I sit at my desk and draw for a while before going to bed. I draw Jenny’s long, blonde hair. I draw her laughter, still ringing in my ears. I draw myself beside her. I’m the reason she’s laughing, I’m the one she likes.

I check my phone one last time before lying down. Jenny’s sent me an Insta message. She wants to add me on snapchat. A second later and she’s made a group chat with Jenny, Dea and Maya. I squeal with excitement before putting my phone down and trying to sleep.

When I open my eyes again, you’re lying beside me.

6

I’ve noticed that Jenny and the girls are always hugging each other. And there’s always a good enough reason. Like when they see each other at the start of our Social Studies class. Or when our Norwegian class ends. Before everyone’s sat down in the canteen for lunch. When they’re heading home, when they’re going outside, when they’re leaving to go to the loo, whether that’s alone or together.

And then there’s the kissing. Or the *cuddling.*

‘Give us a cuddle,’ Maya says.

I’ve not cuddled any of them yet, but I am practicing with the hugging.

I count the seconds during a hug. Around three seconds per hug, I’d say.

I hug Jenny when it’s my turn.

I hug her, pat her on the back with the palm of my hand.

I inhale the scent of coconut as I count in my head.

Am I hugging her too hard?

I haven’t a clue. I let go when I think it’s time.

‘Do I smell or something?’ Jenny laughs.

Maya holds her hand over her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

‘Oh my God, no, not at all,’ I answer a bit too seriously.

I consider hugging her again just to prove that I don’t think she smells, but I’m scared that if I do, she’ll hear how hard my heart is beating against my chest. Anyway, it would probably be weird, hugging her again straight away. But when can I hug her next?

‘Relax, I’m just messing with you,’ she says as she tucks a rogue strand of hair that had fallen on my face behind my ear.

It sends a shiver down my spine.

You’re the only one I hug. Or, rather, *you’re* the only one who hugs *me*. I never really hug you back. Not properly. Do I?

I’ve never even tried hugging Kristoffer, even though we’ve been friends since primary school. It’s just never felt natural, really. Why would we hug, you know?

Maybe there’s something wrong with me.

I don’t like it when you hug me either, but I could never tell you that. I can’t describe it – what happens to me. It’s like I disappear, my mind just goes completely blank. As if all my thoughts are suddenly locked away behind a large, heavy concrete door that I don’t have the key to unlock. Something tells me that you’re hiding the key. You’re sitting on it, guarding it. In the same way you hide the house key, and don’t let me have my own.

‘You don’t need one,’ you tell me, as if you get to decide what I do and don’t need. ‘I’m always here,’ you say.

The absolute only certainty in this world. In our world.

And it’s true. You’ll be there. Always.

I doodle in the margin of my English notebook while the teacher goes on about something at the front of the class. I draw two people hugging each other. Arms everywhere.

Jenny brushes against me, and I look up. I make eye contact with one of the boys in the row in front. He has dark, tousled hair and round glasses, with black hoop piercings on his ear – one of the boys I noticed on the first day. I glance at him every now and then during our breaks, he’s friends with Ilyas and that group of guys.

For some reason or another, he’s smiling at me.

‘Do you know Sindre?’ Jenny whispers in my ear.

I feel her breath on my neck, on my skin, and look down at my notebook instead of answering or smiling back. I shake my head slightly and try to listen to what the teacher’s saying, but I can’t resist turning to look at Jenny. She’s smiling. She rests her head on my shoulder. I get the chills when I turn again and am met with yet another smile from the guy in front – Sindre.

‘He looks like Brooklyn Beckham, only cuter,’ Jenny says. ‘And *that* shouldn’t even be possible.’

I try to see what she means. I smile back, even though I’ve probably left it too late.

‘God, the two of you would make quite a couple.’

I have to cover my mouth to stop myself from laughing out loud. My heart practically jumps out of my chest, but I stay quiet.

I’ve never experienced this before, being someone who others can actually picture dating a boy.

‘I don’t think I’m exactly his type,’ I eventually say.

Jenny looks right at me, like she’s analysing my face.

‘Of course you are,’ she responds. ‘Have you seen yourself?’

I feel my face go bright red.

If only Kristoffer could see me now, I think. Sitting here, smiling back at some himbo in class who would never have noticed me before now. But he *has* noticed me.

Jenny leans forward to see what I’m sketching, stroking my arm as she does.

‘Wow, that’s so good,’ she says.

‘You think so? Thanks!’

‘I used to like drawing when I was younger, but I kind of just stopped after primary school.’

I close my notebook without saying anything, not wanting to draw in front of her, suddenly not wanting to draw in class at all.

‘What do you draw, anyway?’

‘Nothing special,’ I reply, and raise my eyes to look at Sindre again.

He’s turned back to face the board, but I can still feel the sensation of him looking at me.

I quickly pack up all my pencils and erasers and put them back in my bag. Next time Sindre looks at me, I won’t be sat here drawing like some kind of nerd. I’m not studying art, like Kristoffer. I take General Studies. I’m not going to be the same person I was before, invisible and quiet. I can draw at home.

I sketch something in my head for the rest of the period instead. I draw a huge, black door with a padlock so big and heavy that no one will ever be able to break it open.

7

**Mum:** *Hi, my princess. I hope your day is going well, and that you’ll be coming home to me soon.*

I flip my phone over without replying.

 ‘Is that a secret message?’

 Jenny jokes with a giggle.

 ‘Oh, no, it’s nothing,’ I respond. ‘I just don’t want to be distracted, that’s all.’

 We’re sitting on a bench just outside. It’s still warm out, and although it’s a little windier than it usually is at this point in August, it’s nice to spend the break getting some fresh air.

 Sindre from our class suddenly appears in front of us.

 ‘It’s Samia, right?’ he asks. He directs the question at me and only me.

 His eyes look so large behind those round glasses. He’s standing there, back straight, chin raised slightly. As if he’s hoping I’ll be a little intimidated by him.

 ‘Yes, this is Samia,’ Maya replies boldly. ‘Why?’

 Sindre shrugs.

‘Just wondering,’ he says. ‘Pretty name. Pretty girl. Had to ask, y’know.’

 Both Jenny and Maya gape at him, and I’m a bit dumbfounded myself.

I’ve never been called pretty before, I think to myself. Other than by you, of course. According to you, I’m the prettiest girl in the whole wide world. But everyone knows it doesn’t count when a parent says it. And it certainly doesn’t count when *you* say it.

I shake my head, mainly to rid myself of the thought of you.

Sindre smiles and says:

‘Yeah – you are,’ before he turns and walks away.

‘Oh my GOD!’ Maya blurts out.

Dea arrives and Maya and Jenny immediately start talking over one another. Maya updates her on what just happened, but I don’t hear what she says. I have more than enough to deal with trying to get my heart to calm down.

What just happened?

‘But seriously, Samia, he’s right – your name is so pretty!’ Maya says.

 I don’t know why I’m blushing again.

 ‘Thank you,’ I manage to say in return, as I try to look elsewhere.

 ‘Where are you from, anyway?’ she asks.

 ‘Er,’ I start. ‘Mum’s from Oslo.’

 Maya lets out a little laugh.

 ‘And your dad…? I mean, what with you having such a unique name and all?’

 Jenny and Dea watch me expectantly.

 Am I really going to tell them though? And risk being *even* weirder than I already am?

 It feels like an eternity by the time I manage to force out an answer.

 ‘I don’t know, um, Mum had me through artificial insemination.’

 ‘Oh my God, seriously?’ Maya exclaims.

 She’s not quite able to hide her shock.

 ‘That’s mad,’ Dea says.

 ‘Wow,’ Jenny says.

 ‘That is seriously cool. Your mum is like, peak *girl power*,’ Maya says.

You always look so proud whenever you talk about it. About how you went to Denmark, about how you made me, picked me, all by yourself. With almost no help.

‘But your name then, where did that come from?’

‘It means to exalt,’ I say. ‘Like, to raise one higher than yourself.’

‘Wow!’ Dea says this time, looking genuinely impressed.

I don’t tell them that I think you found the name in a magazine in the doctor’s waiting room.

‘And I thought *I* was exotic,’ Maya continues. ‘Mum’s from the Dominican Republic, while Dad’s half-Moroccan and half-Danish!’

Jenny doesn’t say much, just studies me even more thoroughly than usual, as if she’s trying to guess where the sperm donor you chose came from.

I often wonder the same. But every time I ask, you get so put out about it.

*Why are you asking?* You always say. *Am I not enough, is that it? Do you want to swap me for someone else? Am I such a terrible mother?*

I was well aware that it was just the two of us of from a very early age. You’d cut ties with the rest of your family long before I arrived, long before you picked me out like a product on a supermarket shelf.

‘That’s honestly so cool, Samia, what your mum did,’ I hear Jenny say.

I realise her hand is resting on mine, on my lap. She squeezes it, and even though she doesn’t squeeze it that hard, it feels like my hand is going to disappear into hers.

‘She’s like, showing that she doesn’t need a man, and *that’s* somethingI can get on board with,’ Maya states. ‘Maybe I’ll do the same someday.’

And I’m suddenly very pleased that I shared what I did, even though *you* aren’t exactly the definition of *girl power.*

\*

I drop by Kristoffer’s on my way home to tell him what happened.

‘He’s not *as* attractive as everyone makes him out to be though,’ I point out, but even I can hear how unconvincing I sound.

‘But is he as attractive as Kristoffer Ámmon?’

Kristoffer pushes his chest out and straightens his back.

I roll my eyes.

‘Seriously, Kristoffer,’ I say impatiently.

‘He’s *definitely* not as attractive as Tormund Giantsbane though!’

Kristoffer pulls out that stupid sword of his and starts ferociously fencing around the room with it. With sound effects and the whole nerd experience. I’m glad the mood is lighter than it was the last time I was here, so I pick up one of the erasers off his desk and lob it at him.

‘Can’t you be serious for like, two seconds?!’ I say, almost shouting.

‘Yeah yeah, relax,’ he says with a laugh.

He puts the sword aside and looks at me for a second longer than I like, before answering properly.

‘Okay. So, he seriously said you were pretty?’

I nod. I almost can’t believe it myself.

‘But,’ he says, hesitating for a moment, ‘there must be something seriously wrong with him… because you’re about as pretty as Drogon!’

‘Ahhh!’ erupts out of me and I chuck a pen at him this time.

‘Alright, alright, sorry,’ he laughs, protecting his head with his hands.

There’s a knock on the door, and Hanne Lene peeks inside.

‘Hey! Do you guys fancy a sandwich?’

‘Yes please,’ Kristoffer answers. He’s engrossed in his comic strip again, and doesn’t even look up when Hanne Lene comes in.

I catch myself wishing that you were more like Kristoffer’s mum. I pull my phone out, which I’d put on silent, and see that you’ve called me eight times since I got here.

‘No, but thank you,’ I smile politely. ‘I’ve got to get home.’

‘No problem, Samia. Say hi to your mum for me!’ Hanne Lene says before disappearing behind the door again.

I sigh. You could at least get a job, I think. Something to do, something to get up for, that isn’t just me. Then you might not call me eight times in one afternoon.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I say with a sigh.

I roll my eyes as I show Kristoffer my phone screen.

‘That’s fine, I’ve got plans tonight anyway,’ he says.

‘You do?’

‘Yeah, with someone from class.’

Wait, what? Does Kristoffer seriously have plans to hang out with other people?

Before I get a chance to ask anything else, he says:

‘But take a sandwich for the road though.’

And carries on drawing.

\*

I get home to you waiting impatiently at the kitchen table. The whole room smells like cooking, and the extraction fan over the hob is on full blast.

‘Is it so hard to check your phone?’

‘Sorry,’ I say as I take the last bite of the sandwich I grabbed as I left Kristoffer’s. ‘My phone was on silent. I was just visiting Kristoffer.’

You soften a bit, but the muscles of your face are still taut.

‘And what have I said about putting your phone on silent?’ you ask, like I’m a child who’s forgotten to ask for permission to leave the dinner table.

‘I know, I know, noted!’

You turn to look at me right as I finish chewing and start brushing away the breadcrumbs that have landed on my jumper. Your expression changes immediately.

‘Is Hanne Lene feeding you now? She thinks I can’t feed my own child, does she?’

You don’t wait for me to answer. You proceed to stomp around the kitchen with loud, forceful movements, before picking up your dinner plate and marching out of the room.

\*

I pull my sketchbook out before going to bed, have a look through some of my old and new drawings, and think about how much I improved throughout the last year of lower secondary school. I drew all the time, back then – at home and at school. I send Kristoffer a snap of one of my old drawings, but he doesn’t respond. I check the Snapchat map and it says he’s not been active for a while, and he’s not at home either, but is somewhere in Sinsen.

I get the urge to send the same photo to Jenny instead, or maybe Maya, or Dea even. Maybe to the group chat.

I hear Jenny’s voice in my head.

*You’re so good at drawing.*

But I want to be more than that. I want to be good at something people think is cool. I want to be someone else, something else entirely.

I continue drawing, but can hear Sindre’s voice in my head.

*Pretty girl, pretty girl, pretty girl.*

I draw a pretty girl, but whatever I do, I can’t get her to look like me.

8

When I go to shower after school the next day, there are no clean towels in the cupboard where they’re meant to be.

‘Mum, do we not have any fresh towels?’ I shout through to the kitchen.

You don’t answer, and when I come to you instead, I find you with my schoolbag – that you’ve taken from my room – and you’re rummaging around in it elbow-deep. I wonder what you’re looking for, but know there’s no point in asking.

‘Mum,’ I say again, and you finally look up. ‘Towels?’

‘Oh, yes!’ you laugh. ‘I washed them earlier. They’re hanging up to dry.’

I don’t say anything, just turn to head over to the drying rack in the living room, but you stop me.

‘Are you getting in the shower?’ you ask, standing there, studying me. As if it’s up to you to judge whether I need a wash or not.

I nod.

‘Just get in,’ you say, ‘I’ll bring you a towel,’ you add, and expect me to jump into motion while you stay where you are, scrutinising me.

I feel like a doll at an exhibition, walking into the bathroom knowing I can’t even lock the door behind me. You still haven’t fixed the lock after you broke it last time. I turn the tap on. I buy myself some time by letting the water run over my hands. I fix my eyes on my own reflection, but strain my ears as I wait to hear you coming with the towel, so I can be in here in peace.

Luckily, you bring me one a second later, and you let me close the door behind you.

I turn the tap off and get undressed at high speed, like you do in the changing rooms at the gym the second all the other girls are looking the other way.

The warm water just manages to cover me fully by the time you let yourself back in. I turn away from you, but I can hear you, smell you, feel the walls close in as I stand under the showerhead, my arms wrapped tight around my naked body. I close my eyes, travel lightyears away from you, away from myself.

I screw the nozzle round to turn the heat up, and wait for the glass to fully mist up. I hear as you open and close a cupboard door behind me, hear you spray something, hear you wipe down the mirror as you continue to prattle on.

It gets harder to breathe.

‘Mum,’ I interrupt. ‘Can you leave? I’m trying to shower.’

‘What was that?’ you shout over the sound of the water.

I breathe in the damp air around me, feeling both cold and unclean yet warm and soapy.

 ‘Nothing,’ I answer, almost as a whisper.

‘Want me to wash your back, my darling?’

You open the shower door before I have a chance to answer. The steam escapes, leaving me standing there, cold, but not alone.

\*

You stroke my freshly-washed hair while I try to do my homework in my room.

 ‘You are so smart,’ you boast, bending down to kiss me on the forehead.

 I smile and try to make it look as genuine as possible, even though I can still feel you on my skin – that suffocating shower, those long minutes.

 ‘My smart princess,’ you add, kissing the top of my head again. ‘I’m just going to do a bit of cleaning up, but you’ll shout if you need anything?’

 I nod.

 ‘Thanks, Mum.’

 Your face breaks into a wide smile.

 You’re always so proud when I call you Mum. As if you need to hear it to confirm that it’s true.

 My phone screen lights up as I get a notification, and I see that Sindre’s sent me a Snapchat request. My heart stops as I stare at his name – I wait just long enough so that it’s not weird when I finally accept it. A photo pops up. A selfie with his glasses sitting right down on the tip of his nose, AirPods in his ears and a pen in his mouth.

 I hold my phone to my chest. I feel the butterflies in my stomach as I realise that he might *actually* be cuter than Brooklyn Beckham.

 I take a selfie, but instead of sending it to Sindre, I send it to the group chat with Jenny and the girls. I write: *Sindre just added me on snap*, with a few heart-eyes emojis.

 They reply with a stream of heart-eyes emojis within a matter of seconds.

 I find his profile on Insta. Scroll through endless selfies and photos that others have tagged him in. Have a read through all the comments and heart emojis people have left.

 I roll my eyes at the number of girls that have commented on his posts.

 *Kristoffer is typing…* pops up at the top of the screen, and I open our chat.

**Kristoffer**: *I did it!! told a girl in my class that she was pretty*

*like that guy in your class did*

*Know what she said????*

*‘I know’*

I stifle a laugh, and send four–five ‘laughing-so-much-I’m-crying’ emojis back. I try to imagine Kristoffer going up to a girl and saying what Sindre said, in the same way – but I can’t. Kristoffer’s a lot. He can *do* a lot. He can draw, he can dance, he’s good at school. The guy can even *sing*. But anything cool, well – that, he can’t do. He could never be like Sindre.

 I draw a new bad-ass version of Kristoffer in the margin of my notebook, Kristoffer flirting with a girl. The girl is looking at him like he’s a total moron. In the next drawing, Kristoffer’s head is swapped with that of a donkey.

 *Kristoffer is typing…* appears again.

 **Kristoffer:** *long story short, we’re going on a date*

 *so that actually works, that did y*

 *you can tell that guy in your class and say thanks from me*

My heart sinks a good metre in my chest. I drop the pencil I was holding, and it rolls across the floor.

 ‘You dropped your pencil, my love,’ I hear right behind me.

 I hadn’t noticed that the racket from the hoover had stopped.

 You look at me suspiciously, until I stretch my arm out and take the pencil from you.

 ‘Thank you,’ I reply, while wondering why you’re back in my room.

 ‘Don’t spend too much time on your phone though. Get your homework done so I can brush your hair before you go to bed,’ you tell me, and disappear into the hallway again.

 I put the drawing of Kristoffer aside, and instead, start drawing a girl in the shower. I draw the bathroom tiles. I draw the girl with long, dark hair. Her hair is heavy, and it grows longer and longer with each image. In the end, it’s just black on black on black.