*Splintered (Splintra)*

By

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Sample translation

[pages 3-5]

The smell of smoke spreads through the bright summer evening, we can smell it from a long way off.

Even closer, shouts and laughter can be heard from the beach, music with a deep bassline. Then I see the campfire. A warm, hazy glow that draws us closer, like moths to a candle.

 People lie and stand around, dancing, drinking. I feel a tingling sensation. This summer holiday is getting off to a perfect start. Only hours ago, we were standing sweaty and red-faced in our traditional costumes being handed our certificates. Solemn and strange. Ten years at school: check. And now, the whole summer lies before us, a perfect blank page. I run a hand through my hair, ruffling it. I feel fine, happy.

 “Mia! Else! Over here!”

Halvor and Jens call to us from the other end of the little white-sand bay. It looks like they’ve got a good head start on us. Else and I raise our hands in sync and wave back.

 “They’re already here!”

 I squint at them. Are hasn’t arrived yet. It’s almost weird to see only Halvor and Jens, without Are. The three of them are inseparable. Just like me and Else. Just like all five of us have been during our years at junior high.

 ‘The fab five,’ the headteacher called us only today, so everyone could hear. God, how embarrassing. But a bit cool too.

 A pinprick of pain stabs me in the stomach. In the autumn, we’ll all be split up. I know I’m going to miss them. These people. My friends for so many years. Every school day for so many years. But we have this summer, here and now. We’re here now, all five of us. The sun bakes, the sea glitters, the music thunders – Oh God!

 Else kicks off her sandals and so do I. The sand is still warm from the long sunny day. I feel the soles of my feet sink into it and dig my toes into its softness.

 ‘So super gorgeous!’

 Else puckers her lips and blows me a kiss before heaving her guitar onto her back. We’re carrying a cooler bag of beer between us. Our shoes are in our free hands. A warm waft of wind from the sea makes our hair swirl. I look at Else out of the corner of my eye. She has that look she sometimes gets – determined, self-conscious.

 We walk with firm steps, greeting our classmates along the way. They sit in groups, almost all of them are here. We smile, yell and toast but carry on past. Everyone knows where we’re headed, everyone knows who we are, everyone knows we hang out with Are, Jens and Halvor.

 I can feel it: we look cool as we walk along with the cooler bag between us, guitars on our backs. Music pours out of a speaker. Deep bass, a voice rapping. We’re wearing new sunglasses, walking in time, walking in shorts, walking in tanks, walking in our own world. We’re in a music video or an ad for some hot product.

 We’re the coolest, freest girls. We know that, and everyone else sees it. We’ve brought guitars and beer. Come on – which other girls have turned up with guitars and beer? Who else got a place on the music program at Bratteberg High School? Only us two.

 Some of the other boys offer us a spot on the sand. We thank them, we laugh, but we carry on. We sit down when we reach the place we’re heading for. Shake our sweaty hair loosely away from our faces, crack open a beer, toast Jens and Halvor happily. They’ve taken off their shirts and already have a bit of colour: Jens the soft brown tan he gets from his mother; Halvor, as always, just red and freckled and insanely charming, just like every summer.

And then comes Are, out of nowhere, and hurls himself at us. He must have followed right behind us without us noticing. We jump and I drop my sunglasses and collapse in the sand with Are on top of me.

 ‘What the fuck!’

 “Get you two classy laydeez! Helloooo!”

 At first I’m angry but then I can’t help laughing. How can anyone get so much fun out of scaring people? He’s brimming with energy and laughing – that hoarse little laugh I always find so infectious.

 ‘Let go of me, you jerk!’ I shout, trying to shove him away, thumping him in the stomach with my fist, pretending to be angry.

 ‘Never!’

 He grabs my wrist, holds me tight and sits on top of me. I frown – what’s going on?

 ‘What are you playing at?’

 ‘I’m not letting you go. Never ever. You’re staying here – no Bratteberg, no music program, no flat-share, okay? You’re not getting rid of me that easily.’

 His eyes twinkle at me like stars. Did he start drinking before he got here or what? My cheeks redden. Suddenly, I feel embarrassed, stupidly bothered. What the heck? I’ve known Are since kindergarten. We’ve been in the same class for ten years. And now I’m embarrassed just because he’s so close to me, sitting on me, holding me. And he’s done that thousands of times before. But something in his gaze is new, more open. Kind of enquiring. I look away, feeling his grip loosen, his smile fade. Without a word, he moves and lets go of me.

‘Sorry.’

The others look at us, a bit puzzled. But it only lasts for a fraction of a second and then everything’s back to normal. I look at Are. He seems perfectly ordinary now.

Else takes out her guitar. She strums a bit but the loud music from the speaker of the group a bit further down the beach drowns out her attempt. She puts it away just as quickly.

 ‘Keep on playing, Else,’ Jens says. ‘Screw that lot!’

‘Can’t be bothered. But who’s up for a swim? Anyone?’ she asks, looking over her sunglasses and wiggling her eyebrows.

Jens and Halvor jump up straight away, dashing out into the waves before I have time to think it over.

‘Oh my God! We only just got here!’

Are opens a cider.

‘Cheers. Here ‘s to ten fucking years,’ he smiles.

‘Pretty crazy, really.’

We fall silent. I think about my first day at school. I remember it so clearly – it’s burnt into my memory. I felt so big, sitting there in the front row and putting up my hand whenever the teacher asked a question. The feeling of Mum and Dad being in the room behind me, by the wall at the back of the classroom. Both of them so proud.

But maybe I remember the first day in second grade even better. That’s when Else started. She moved to the village just at the start of the new school year. The new girl. She acted like a magnet on me. I was drawn to her from the second we met. Totally different from all the other girls in my class. A bit wilder, cooler. There weren’t so many of us girls, only five. Then Else turned up – a wind that swept into the room, I felt it quite clearly. I had to be her friend. I just had to.

I watch Else dive into the waves with Jens and Halvor. She’s a great one for diving, that girl. Dives into pretty much anything – just sets off and hurls herself in. I’m so glad we’ll be flat-sharing, going to the same high school. It feels safe. I can look forward to it all summer instead of dreading it, being nervous. Well. I *am* nervous. But mostly about starting the music programme. The other people in the class are probably really brilliant – including Else.

‘What are you thinking about so deeply?’ asks Are, squinting at me.

I look at him and smile, shaking my head.

‘Nothing. Autumn.’

He nods. There’s a gravity in his gaze.

‘And everything. Kind of how it’s going to be,’ I say.

‘Without me, right?’

His smile is back. He’s trying to sound jokey but I know him too well. A little catch in his voice gives him away.

‘Yeah, that won’t be easy,’ I answer in the same fake-jokey tone. We giggle.

‘Well, I’ll be coming to visit you at Bratteberg anyway, I can easily nip over there. You know, on the moped.’

‘Have you got a date for your test yet?’

Are nods contentedly.

‘Two weeks. It’s going to be soooo great. The bike’s been ready for months., I’m actually looking forward to riding to school and back every day. We’ll see if I get a flat-share later.’

‘You can visit me and Else to see if that’s what you want.’

‘So exciting to be moving out!’

 I smile and nod, feeling a slight flutter in my chest.

‘It’s a shame there isn’t a music programme at our local school, that way you wouldn’t have to move out. Do you think you’d have stayed here if there had been?’

‘Well… yeah. Maybe. I think it’ll be a lot of fun, seriously. I’m ready for it!’

‘It’ll be weird being here without you lot.’

Are looks out at our friends in the water. One corner of his mouth lifts in a half smile, as if he wants to smile but can’t quite pull it off.

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Are suddenly stops playing. He bends over his guitar and groans.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s this damned bump … whenever I have the guitar on my lap. Shit!’

‘bump?’

‘Look,’ he says and points at his thigh, just above his knee.

I sit down beside him and put my hand on the spot he’s pointing to. I jump. A hard round bump fills my fist. I quickly pull back my hand.

‘Christ!’

Are looks at me, forehead furrowed.

‘Chill! It’s only a bump.’

I gape at him.

‘Just a bump?’

‘Yeah?’

‘How long have you had it?’

‘Can’t really remember,’ he says, pretending not to be bothered. He plays a few riffs on the guitar.

‘Stop messing with me,’ I say, giving him a stern look.

“Cheesus. You’re scaring the crap out of me! Since some time last summer maybe. Around the time we left junior high – or, yeah, a bit before that?’

‘Has it got any bigger?’

‘Nah. A bit maybe. Yeah, I suppose it has. Calm down, okay?’

‘No. I don’t want to scare you but you really ought to go and see a doctor. My aunt, she …’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah! I know your aunt’s missing a boob for fuck’s sake!’

I gasp for breath. Are is almost never angry. Almost never scared.

He pulls away from me. The seriousness and anger have come upon him abruptly, coal black.

I feel a stinging sensation behind my eyes. I close them. Then I take his hand. It’s clammy.

‘Mia, what’s the matter with you today. You seem totally unfocused.’

Magnus takes me aside at breaktime and gives me a worried look. We have choir practice the first two lessons and I’m supposed to come in with three others, but I keep dropping out all the time and coming in at the wrong point. The thoughts are gnawing away at me.

Over the weekend I managed to persuade Are to show his parents the bump and sort out a doctor’s appointment first thing on Monday morning. The doctor sent him straight to the hospital in Åsnes. That’s where he is now.

‘I’m just not feeling so good,’ I lie. ‘I’ve got a headache.’

‘You’re really not well, poor thing. I reckon you’d be better off going home.’
I can see out of the corner of my eye that Else is looking at me. Of course she noticed it too, that there was something wrong. I didn’t speak a single word all the way to school, even though she asked and dug and wondered what on earth had happened at Are’s to make me like this. She thought we’d argued or something. That we’d had a major falling-out.

Why couldn’t I just tell Else? My thinking was totally irrational. As if it was more likely to be something awful if I told anyone about it. As if the reality would be worse if I said what I was scared of out loud. So idiotic. So I said nothing. And I say nothing now. Just walk.

It’s strange letting myself into the flat in schooltime. The light falls in through the window, casting a strip full of glittering dust across the floor. I sit in the strip. But it vanishes almost at once. Then I go and lie down on my bed. I’m scared. I pull my duvet around me.

I must have fallen asleep. The room is dim and dark when I’m woken by my phone ringing.

‘Hi. It’s me.’

‘How did it go?’ I whisper.

‘Not so good,’ he answers.

We go quiet. I can hear his breathing, uneven.

I can barely breathe myself. Something hard has filled up my entire chest. There’s a grey prickling in my head. I picture him in a dimly lit hospital room, tired after examinations and tests.

‘Have you found anything out?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it…’

I can’t bring myself to say the word.

‘Yes,’ Are repeats.

‘Don’t say the word.’

‘Cancer,’ says Are.

He says the word. He says it again.

Else and I sit on my bed, huddled together. We’ve pulled our legs up to our chests, with our arms around them. I lean my head on Else’s shoulder. A song from last summer comes out of the speaker. I shut my eyes, enter the memory. The very best summer memory. I want to go back there. It’s warm and I feel the deep bass in my chest. Are is holding me. He’s holding me. So that I won’t lose my footing, won’t vanish into the crowd of people and hands and bodies. Now it’s my turn to hold on to him.

‘We have to hold him up,’ I whisper to Else. I feel her nod gently. Feel how my hair is wet from her tears. Part of me regrets that I didn’t tell her about the bump. But what difference would it have made? None. It would have been just as real. It *is* just as real.

‘How?’ she asks into thin air.

It isn’t a question. It isn’t a single question. It’s a thousand questions and there are no answers. Maybe it’s night. Maybe still evening. Maybe it’ll be morning soon. We don’t know, we just sit there.

‘Can you stay here with me tonight?’ Else asks.

‘Sure,’ I answer, feeling my body relax a bit more. It’s dark in the room, dark outside. Autumn is spreading across the landscape out there.

I doze off. Hear Else sniffing and texting Jens. Now and then she whispers to herself, cursing. Then I vanish, dreamless.

It’s good to wake up in Else’s bed, to be close to someone right now.

At first I don’t understand what’s going on. Why I’m sleeping in Else’s bed, fully clothed. I feel a weight in my body, as if there’s something I need to remember, something that isn’t good. Then I remember. And it’s as if something snaps in my head. A connection, a fuse of some kind that breaks right off.

Else comes into the room, freshly showered. A sweet smell of balsam drifts over towards me.

‘I decided to let you sleep. How’re you feeling about school today?’

School. My body feels heavy as lead. A deep sigh escapes me.

‘Mia. You have to try and think that it’ll all work out fine.’

I nod. It’ll all work out fine. It will. I don’t need to be so scared.

‘I’ll come to the second class, instrument rehearsal, okay? I just can’t face the first class. Not history. Not today.’

Else walks over to the bed and strokes my hair. She doesn’t say anything.

We smile bravely at each other and then she leaves. I get up. Bustle about. Then I find:

a cup of tea

a crispbread

a sheet of white paper

a pencil

a memory

a poem

I get a Snap from Are. Three faces shine out at me: Are, Jens and Halvor. White hospital walls around them. So good to see that they’re there, that Jens and Halvor have gone to visit him. Of course they have. They live there, after all, in the town, near the hospital. And that’s where Are is now. In the picture he’s smiling. Jens has an arm around his neck and is rubbing his skull, a murderous expression on his mug. Halvor is behind them, with his V sign and buck teeth as usual. Ah, those three! The photo brings tears to my eyes. Their smiles, their silliness. The fact that all three of them are together.

Later I text Are.

*How’s it going?*

*Not much fun tbh. Straight to chemo. Right away. Poison, kind of. Aargh, it’s killing me!!*

*Oh, Are! That’s awful!*

*Well, I landed myself a stay in the capital. I’m heading straight to the cancer hospital in Oslo.*

*What?! But you’ve only just been hospitalised!*

*Yup. It’s a big deal, this. Apparently, I’m pretty extraordinary.*

*You certainly are! <3 So I won’t get to see you?*

*Nope. But I’ll be back.*

*Of course. I’d just have liked to give you a hug and wish you luck and all that.*

*I’d have liked to get that hug.*

I hesitate over the next message. I don’t know what to write. I want to write that I love him, that I love him so very much. But it sounds so much like a goodbye. As if I won’t ever get to see him again. So I just send him a few hearts instead.

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