

The Summer Everything Happened

by Iben Akerlie

Translated from the Norwegian by Nancy Langfeldt

Translated with support from NORLA

1

“Nora?”

Mum is talking to me from the other side of the door. I don't answer, because I don't know what to say. My breath comes out in short gasps, but I'm not crying.

I hear the door handle click and dive towards my bed. I hide my face in the pillow before mum is all the way inside. She sits down next to me.

“Nora...sweetheart, it will go quickly.”

I shake my head. Mum puts her hand on my back.

“Before you know it, you'll be home again.”

“I don't want to go to granny's.”

My voice disappears down into the pillow.

“You can't stay in the city all summer, Nora, it won't work.”

“But Thilo will be here...”

“Thilo is one year old,” mum says.

She sighs, defeated.

“I'll be at work almost every day, Nora. So will Truls...you will be bored to death...”

“No,” I say, “it's granny's place that's boring.”

I haven't spent much time at granny's. She is hardly ever home, because she's always travelling. This used to be because she worked as a journalist and didn't think Norway was exciting enough, according to mum. Now she's retired but she still travels, to visit all the people she met when she was a journalist.

Another reason I haven't spent much time at granny's is that when we are there, she and mum always start arguing and then we end up going home before dessert. Granny lives deep in the countryside, in the middle of a forest. Her house is so far away from the city that I've often wondered if her living there is some sort of punishment. If she's done something awful that means she has to live there for the rest of her life.

And now I'm supposed spend a whole summer there?

“I don't even know granny!”

Mum waits a bit before answering. I turn halfway round. She pushes my hair away from my face.

“No...” she says, “and that's probably my fault.”

I think about the few times granny has come to see us in the city. We've visited a museum or gone to a café because, when she's finally here, there's always something granny wants to see or do. The last time I saw her was just after Thilo was born. She brought with her a rock hard toy giraffe from Zimbabwe, which mum put at the bottom of the toy box when granny left.

I turn away.

1

“I don’t want to...”

“No.” Mum sighs again. “But you have to.”

Another thing I don’t understand is why granny wants me to visit her at all, when she doesn’t want to celebrate Christmas with us, forgets birthdays and never calls?

Maybe I’m the one who’s done something awful and is being punished? That’s what it feels like. Not that I know what I might have done. I do as I’m told and keep myself to myself.

Mum looks at me, her expression is gentle. As if everything were okay. As if *she* hadn’t ruined *everything*. Inside I’m boiling over, I want to say something mean, but I can’t get the words out. All I can manage is to whisper:

“Get out.”

Mum blinks like she’s got something in her eye until in the end she gets up and leaves.

I wish I was going to a summer camp or had a holiday job, so I could look after myself. Most of all I wish I had a friend, the kind it would be totally normal for me to go and stay with for ages at their summerhouse, but I’m a long way off having that.

I have *nobody*.

2

Two days later our car rolls into granny’s driveway. It’s just as I remember, a green plot surrounded by the forest on all sides with a single road leading out to the rest of the world. There are two houses, a big red one and a little white one, an old well and a kitchen garden.

Granny is standing in front of the red house. She is wearing a wide straw hat, which hides most of her face, but beneath the brim I catch a glimpse of big, square glasses. Her hair is long and silvery grey. It hangs, thick, down her chest and reaches the middle of her tummy. She is wearing beige trousers and a beige cargo vest, which has at least six pockets, over the top of a patterned t-shirt. She has always looked just like this.

Mum and Truls get out of the car with Thilo. I don’t move.

Granny pats mum on the shoulder and extends her hand to Truls. Then she turns to Thilo, leaning forward and pinching his cheek and making a face that is no doubt meant to be sweet, but which makes Thilo wriggle away with such force that Truls has to wriggle after him.

Granny straightens up and looks around. Mum points to the car and says something. I shrink into my seat. Granny waves at me, but I don’t wave back. Then mum starts towards the car and I hurriedly lock all the doors before she reaches it. She stands there, tugging on the door handle. I stare straight ahead without moving a muscle. In the end, mum gives up and goes back to Truls and granny.

They go inside, while I stay in the car. When I at last open the door, it’s because it’s absolutely necessary. The sun has made the car red hot.

I go over to the red house. The patio leads straight into the kitchen. I carry on towards the stairs at one end of the room and sneak up. On the door closest to the bathroom there is a sign saying “*NORA*” in slightly wonky letters. Granny hasn’t gone to great lengths, but the fact that she has made a sign at all surprises me. I open the door and go inside, throw myself onto the bed and stare up at the whitewashed ceiling.

Almost at once, there is a knock at the door. I don’t say “come in”, but someone opens up anyway and peers in. It’s granny.

“Hi,” she says.

I don’t answer.

“I just wanted to let you know, I’ve put some towels out for you in the bathroom.”

“Thank you.”

“And a cup for your toothbrush.”

“Okay.”

“And that lunch is ready.”

I nod, weakly. It seems like she wants to say something else, but then she ducks out, leaving the door ajar, which annoys me.

I wait a long time before I go downstairs. I find the others sitting round the table on the patio. They have nearly finished eating, but there is still food leftover and a place is set for me. Truls is leading the conversation, about something boring that only he cares about, crypto art and bitcoin.

“The genius thing about blockchains...” he says, but no one is listening.

I concentrate on my meal, granny stares out at the forest and mum struggles to wipe food off Thilo’s face.

It’s not that we do anything very exciting in the summer, that’s not why I don’t want to stay here. Mostly we just stay in the city, because mum has to work at the hospital. When she has time off between shifts we go to the beach or drive to nearby places. Once we went all the way to Copenhagen. But this summer mum suddenly has to work even more. Almost every day. It’s called a rotation, apparently. And this year, mum’s had bad luck with it.

Mum is right in thinking I would get bored in the city, but where she’s wrong is in thinking that I won’t be even more bored here.

Granny goes inside to tidy the kitchen and Truls says he’s going for a jog. That leaves just the three of us at the table, but Thilo doesn’t count, so really it’s just mum and me. She busies herself with Thilo, but I notice her eyes on me.

“I don’t want to be here,” I whisper.

Mum stops fussing over Thilo.

“My little sparrow,” she says, as if that’s an answer.

“I want to be at home,” I continue.

“Nora...”

Mum takes off her sunglasses.

“That won’t work. You’re here now. This is the plan.”

“But...”

Mum interrupts me by loudly sucking in her breath, all the way to the bottom of her lungs. She holds the air down there for a long moment before she lets it out again.

“I think you should try,”

“But there is nothing to do here.”

“The summer will go by quickly. And maybe you’ll get to know someone?”

Mum’s greatest wish is that I will get to know someone. She only just manages to hide her disappointment when I get back from school, alone. Now and again I walk the long way home, so I can say I’ve called in on a classmate or stopped at the playing fields with the others. But she knows I don’t have any friends.

She strokes my arm.

“Let’s make a deal,” she says and leans even closer to me, “let’s decide that you will give it a go? And if it’s absolutely not working...if it is totally impossible for you to stay here...then I will come and get you?”

I understand what she is trying to do. She is trying to trick me into saying yes. I feel the anger inside me growing. I should shout at her, tell her she can’t leave me like this, but instead I just get up and run inside, up the stairs and back into the room. This time I remember to lock the door so that no one can stick their head in and tell me where the towels are.

“Nora?”

Mum takes hold of the door handle. She waits for me to answer, but I don’t say a thing.

“Nora!”

Her voice is irritated now but I don't give in. In the end she lets go of the door and leaves. She comes back five times and tugs at the door and calls my name but I don't ever answer. When I am sure the others have gone to bed I sneak out for a wee.

Back in the room I lie there, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling. I think about how mum doesn't seem like herself any more. Mum, who insists on coming with me to swimming and always makes sure the duvet is properly tucked round my feet when I go to bed, who double checks that my lunch is packed and all my homework is done. And now she's just going to leave me alone in the countryside for a whole summer with granny, who I don't even really know?

Fine, if that's how she wants it to be, that's how it will be.

I find my phone and type a final message to mum:

"To Anita. I will be staying with granny, most likely for quite a long time. You can send my passport and other important things in the post. Don't text me back. Goodbye. Regards, Nora."

3

Noises from the kitchen wake me up. The others are eating breakfast. Eventually someone comes up the stairs and soon after there is a knock at the door.

"Nora?"

It's mum. I don't answer. The door is locked but she doesn't try the handle. Instead I hear the sound of something being pushed under the door and when I sit up in bed to see what it is, a small envelope is lying there. I stay in bed, listening to mum go back downstairs.

When it's time for the others to leave, I go to the window and watch through the curtains. They are in the middle of the yard. Truls gives granny a hug before mum tries to do the same, but it goes wrong when granny leans the same way as her. Then they both lean in the other direction at the same time and it gets even more peculiar.

Suddenly mum looks straight up at my window. I let go of the curtain and back up into the room, counting to five before I peek out again. By then, mum is already in the car. Truls gets into the driver's seat, reverses and turns around, before he accelerates forwards and my so-called family disappear down the road, which is soon hidden by tall fir-trees.

We have never *not* said goodbye to each other. Never *not* hugged each other when we go our separate ways. We have *always* said 'I love you' and 'I'm going to miss you'. But now mum is driving back to the city without even waving.

That's when I pick up the envelope and flip it over in my hands. There is nothing written on it and it's not sealed. I glance inside and see a folded up letter full of lots of words I don't want to read right now. I go to the bedside table and put the envelope under a thick book which was there when I arrived.

Then I go downstairs. The door is wide open to the bright morning. It's cool inside but I can feel that it's going to be a hot day.

Breakfast is laid out on the round kitchen table. It's set for four and one plate is untouched. I am starving and help myself greedily while hoping that granny won't appear. I feel like Goldilocks, stomping around in the bears' house, eating up their food and sleeping in their beds. As if I'm not really welcome.

I still haven't seen granny when I go out into the garden after breakfast. But her cat, Misse, is sitting in the yard, staring at me. I stare back. In the end the cat turns its back and walks towards the little white house. I follow.

The cat makes itself comfortable on the steps and I try the door. It's unlocked. I step into a little hallway that splits the house in two. It smells stuffy. A door leads to either side. First I look through the door on the right – a little bathroom. The door on the left leads to a bedroom. Not exactly a normal bedroom but there is at least a bed there, in the middle of the room. All around the

bed are piles of books, folders, newspapers, and loose sheets of paper and writing pads are slung about. There are even more books and folders on a shelf along the wall. On the wall towards the hallway three masks are hanging, they look African, or maybe South American. I'm not sure but I know that granny has travelled a lot and she's probably been to both places.

The bed is made. When I fluff up the duvet a cloud of dust floats upward. I open the window and discover granny. She is in the middle of the yard, looking at me.

"Does someone live here?" I shout at her.

Granny mumbles something and shakes her head before turning to the red house and going back inside.

I sit on the bed and test out the mattress, like Goldilocks did. I ease a folder down from the shelf and open it at random. A newspaper article. The paper is yellowed and the font is a little old fashioned. The headline reads: "*The Taliban close in on Kabul*".

Below the headline is the name the article's author: "*Wendy Andersson, Middle East Correspondent.*"

It's granny. The article is old, from 1996. That's long before I was born, when mum was about my age.

I turn the page. Another newspaper article: "...Wendy Andersson reports from war torn Afghanistan. Among Kabul's buildings, wild dogs run free...the noise of machine guns and tanks has quieted and when the dust settles the destruction will be visible..."

Under the article is a picture of an overcrowded car full of men holding guns and another picture of a man holding two children close, as if to protect them.

I close the folder and put it on the floor before I pull down another. It's also full of old newspaper articles, mostly about war. I skim through them and then take down the next folder, which is full of old plane tickets and receipts from which the numbers have faded to almost nothing. There are several notepads in there too but the writing is so hard to read that I give up.

At the end of the shelf is a smaller folder and when I open it, I'm confused. At first I think I'm looking at a picture of myself. But then I realise it's granny. She looks younger. Her thick hair hangs down either side of her face and her glasses are square. The colours have faded but...the thick hair is red, not grey. I have never considered that granny's hair hasn't always been grey. And I definitely didn't know that it used to be red, like mine.

My hair is flame red, as if my head were permanently on fire. It means my skin can hardly tolerate the sun, because I'm so pale. Once I got sunburnt in March. And in the summer I get thousands of tiny freckles all over my body. Even though I don't like my freckles, I love sunshine so sometimes I just let it go and stretch out so the sun can burn me as much as it likes.

I look around the room, it's cosier here than in the red house. Somewhere I can be alone. But I realise that, if I'm going to stay, I'll need to tidy up. First I push the piles of paper onto the shelves. Then I sweep the floor with an old broom I find in the hallway and wipe the surfaces with a cloth. All the tidying helps keep my thoughts off mum and how angry I am with her.

After a while I notice I'm hungry. Food is the problem. I can't survive without it and I can't get my own. I will have to eat with granny or at least eat granny's food. I should maybe talk to her a little bit too.

When I get to the kitchen in the red house, the table is set for lunch and granny is sitting on one side of the table without having touched a thing, even though it's guaranteed been ages since she sat down. She looks up from the newspaper.

"Would you rather eat outside?" she asks.

I nod and we start carrying all the stuff from the kitchen out onto the patio. Pâté and pickled cucumber, which is the best thing in the world, and caviar and egg, which is the worst. A large parasol shades the table and chairs and when I sit down I sink into the soft chair. Tidying has tired me out. Granny puts a glass of juice in front of me. I grip the glass and drink it all in one gulp.

“So, you’re moving out into the white house?” asks granny.

“Yes,” I answer.

Then it’s quiet for a good while before granny says:

“You didn’t say goodbye this morning.”

I don’t answer.

Granny can be very direct. Once, when we were at a café in the city, she went right over to a man who was talking loudly on his phone and asked him to keep it down. Even though it was probably the right thing to do and lots of other customers were happy that she did it, I thought it was embarrassing. Another time, she shouted at a teenager for jumping the queue at a museum. That was embarrassing too. Mum was annoyed because she feels like granny thinks she’s better than everyone else. And that it’s not always granny’s job to speak up.

Granny scrutinises me from the other side of the table.

“I guess I’m not great with kids,” she says.

“What?” I say.

Granny closes the newspaper.

“That’s what your mum thinks too,” she carries on, “that I’m not great with kids.”

I don’t know what to say.

“I’m not a kid,” I try.

“Haha,” granny laughs.

Did I say something funny?

“No, okay,” she says, “let’s go with that.”

It’s quiet again. I take a far too big bite of my sandwich.

“But what are you, then?” asks granny.

I chew. Swallow.

“I don’t know,” I answer, “A kind of...in between person, maybe?”

Granny smiles. I still don’t understand why what I’m saying is funny.

“And what do in between people do all summer?” asks granny.

I shrug my shoulders.

“Go fishing?” she suggests. “Swimming? Exploring?”

I look at the forest. It looks frightening but I know it isn’t really. It’s just a forest, with trees and moss and green bilberry bushes full of unripe berries.

“Don’t know.” I repeat.

“I suppose in the city you spend all day with your friends?”

“Not really,” I answer.

Granny keeps her eyes on me for a while before she says:

“Hm. Well then, we will just have to wait and see what comes around.”

Then she flaps the newspaper open again and drifts away.

An hour later, granny’s eyes follow me from the patio as I walk towards the forest. I feel her gaze on me even when I’m long out of her sight.

In the forest, the sunshine doesn’t burn as intensely. And it’s quiet.

I try to go straight ahead, but get the feeling that I’m curving slightly to one side. When I look back, there is forest behind me as there is forest in front of me. It’s hard to remember specific things. It’s not like in the city, where one building is orange and the other is pink and I almost always know where I am or how to get home.

Suddenly the forest opens up. In front of me is a clearing full of tall grass and flowers. It lies there like a lake, framed by the dark forest on all sides.

“WOOOOHOOOOO!” I howl and run into the meadow with my arms outstretched.

When I’m about in the middle of it, I let my neck fall back and my eyes meet the sky for one second before I’m blinded by the sun. I spin round and round.

“WOOOOHOOOOOOOOO,” I shout again, “SHAAAALLLAAAABAAASSSS!”

I fall backwards and just lie there.

“NOTHING MEANS ANYYYYYYTHIIIING!”

It’s okay to be an idiot when you’re on your own.

“EVERYTHIIIING IS RUBBISH!” I holler up at the sky.

Quiet. There is no echo in the forest.

The shapes of the clouds gradually become clear as I get used to the sunlight. One of them could be a fat cow. I fill my lungs with air to shout again, but suddenly, I freeze.

“HEEEEEELLLLLOOOOO!” shouts another voice, deeper than mine.

I stay where I am, totally still, my ears pricked up. All around me are the usual sounds of the summer, insects buzzing around, the wind rustling in the treetops. But then I hear the sound of footsteps.

I lift my head three centimetres off the ground and peer to the right. A boy is standing there.

“Hello?” he says again.

He comes closer. First I think, this is like the moment before it goes really wrong for silly women in horror films. Then I realise it doesn’t feel like a horror film, because it’s warm and lovely and summer, and the boy looks kind. He’s wearing a blue t-shirt and denim shorts. His hair is dark and his fringe covers his whole forehead. It feels like time stops, or like we stop time. We stare at each other, I don’t know how long for and I think he smiles.

I get up and want to say something, but I lose my nerve, because I’m already very embarrassed, so instead I turn around and run towards the trees without looking back.

Not before I’m deep in the forest do I look over my shoulder. No boy.

I don’t know which direction I’m heading in. I hope I haven’t run in a circle. I am sweating at the thought of how embarrassing it would be to meet the boy again right after I ran away from him.

There! Granny’s red house is visible through the trees.

I speed up and run into the yard at a brisk pace. Granny comes out onto the patio at almost the same time as I plop down into one of the chairs.

“Well?” she says, sizing me up through her square glasses.

She is wearing her sun hat and when I peer up at her, the hat shades the sun in such a way that the rays of light create a kind of halo around her. I have to squint to find her eyes.

She carries on:

“What did you discover?”

She sits down and the sun hits me right in the face. I squeeze my eyes together.

“Nothing,” I answer.

“Hm,” says granny, “that’s strange.”

I try to open my eyes again.

“You would have thought there would still be a lot to discover, for an in between person, that things would still have a bit of novelty. Even the forest, which is so like itself.

She picks up a newspaper. Whether the forest is new to me, I don’t know. But that I met a boy in there who made me feel all weird inside, definitely is new.