*On One Condition*

Original title: *På én betingelse*

Written by Neda Alaei, Gyldendal © 2023

English sample translation by Olivia Lasky © 2023

Rights by Gyldendal Agency

Nina.pedersen@gyldendal.no

Anne.cathrine.eng@gyldendal.no

Translation made with support from NORLA

**1**

“Can you take your headphones out, Yousef?”

 I’m in photography class, the first one I’ve bothered going to in a long time, and I’m already bored. I can’t deal with the thought of listening to the teacher talk for half an hour before we’re supposedly allowed to *take photos of whatever we want*.

 I don’t reply. I don’t even meet his eyes but I do what he says.

 He’s spouting a bunch of BS, just like I expected, showing some awkward photos of him and his wife on vacation on the big screen, photos that were taken at *least* ten years ago. As if *that’s* what’s going to inspire us, as if inspiring us is something he’s actually trying to do at all.

 I stop paying attention and check Snap, TikTok and Insta under my desk then sneak my AirPods back in my ears without the teacher noticing. I’ve gotten over 300 likes on the last picture I posted on Insta but it’s still almost a hundred less than the last one.

 I lock my phone, open it, lock it again. Antsy as hell.

 Suddenly there’s noise all around me. People have started standing up and taking out cameras and cords. There’s an assignment on the screen but I don’t manage to read it before the teacher squats down in front of my desk.

 “I know you were disappointed about your grade before Christmas, Yousef,” he says. He pronounces my name wrong. *Yussef*.

 I barely look up to meet his eyes. There’s sympathy in them but not in a good way. More like he feels sorry for me for having thought photography was my thing.

 “You shouldn’t give up, though,” he continues, and I keep my mouth shut. “You’re a creative boy, everyone can see that, but that’s not all it takes to get a good grade in photography. It’s not even all it takes to be a good photographer!”

 He says the last part with a kind of awkward laugh. I know he thinks it’s uncomfortable and weird that I’m not answering, that he has to talk to a wall like this. It makes him just keep babbling on.

 “I mean, you do know that ISO and shutter speed kind of set the conditions for whether…”

 I stop listening. I pull out my phone again, thinking that I’ve become one of *those* kids who ignore the teacher, who doesn’t give a shit. He shouldn’t have given me that D last semester. It’s his own fault he’s being treated like this.

 At the same time, I know that he was the one who set the conditions for the project but I’m the one who didn’t measure up.

 Eventually, the teacher takes the hint. He stands up, clicks the pen he has in his hand a couple of times, and looks around for a new student to torture.

 I don’t read what’s on the screen. I just sit there listening to music and scrolling on my phone. Twelve more likes since I last checked.

 Then someone taps my shoulder. I turn toward a boy whose name I don’t remember. I don’t think I’ve ever even spoken to him. He has medium-long brown hair, a middle part, and big glasses. He looks terrified.

 “Um,” he says when I take one AirPod out. “We’re supposed to do the assignment together.”

 “Okay?” I say.

 “Yeah, I mean… the assignment is to take photos… Photos of each other. We’re supposed to take photos of each other. You and me. If you want.”

 “Okay,” I say again.

 What a shitty assignment.

 The nerd hesitates a bit before he answers.

 “Okay,” he says as well. He walks over to his desk, packs up a camera, and looks over at me before he picks up one more. I nod at him even though I don’t need him to take one for me too. My camera is *way* better than the school’s.

 I get up, put on my jacket, and walk out of the classroom. I can hear him following a few steps behind with two cameras in hand.

 “I’m Elliot, by the way,” he says.

 “Yousef,” I say.

 “I know,” Elliot replies.

\*

“So…” Elliot begins. “Why’d you get into media and communication? I want to be a video journalist.”

 *Who asked you?* I think, but I don’t say it. I keep moving toward Hasle.

 “I want to go to the Middle East, maybe Afghanistan, to interview people there.”

 Elliot keeps babbling even though I don’t reply.

 “Do you have… um… are you maybe from… where…”

 I stop and give him a look to make him shit his pants.

 Elliot takes the hint. He stops, thinks, and opens his mouth again.

 “Why’d you get into media, then?” he repeats.

 “To take pictures.”

 “Okay.”

 We stop by the Hasle metro station. The brick wall is completely covered in colorful tags. I pull my camera out of my backpack, take off the lens, and blow off some dust and shit before I start pressing and snapping and taking pictures of the wall.

 “We’re supposed to take pictures of each other,” Elliot says behind me. “If you want.”

 I ignore him and snap a few more pictures before I look down at the screen. I scroll through the photos, unhappy with every single one.

 “Fine, stand over here, then,” I say.

 Elliot stares at me through his big glasses for a second before he starts moving. He stops in front of the yellowest part, standing totally straight like a complete dumbass.

 “Are you just going to stand like that?” I ask.

 He straightens up even more, clearly stiff and uncomfortable.

 I take a couple of pictures with my camera, look down at it, delete two, take three more.

 “Dude, just stand still.”

 I keep shooting, take a couple of steps closer, shoot a couple more. Delete three pictures and take four new ones before handing the camera to Elliot so he can look.

 “Cool…” he begins.

 “Now you can take some of me,” I interrupt when I realize he wants to say more.

 “Okay,” he replies and pulls his camera out of his backpack.

 “Are you… do you want to…”

 “Just tell me where to stand.”

 He points in the opposite direction, wanting me to stand with the metro at my back.

 I get into position, pull my hood over my head, and stick my cold hands in my pockets. I can feel the cold wind through my jacket when the metro passes behind me.

 Elliot snaps a few more pictures before he takes two steps closer and starts shooting closeups of my face.

 “What are you doing? That’s not gonna turn out.”

 He doesn’t respond but keeps shooting. His eyes are enormous behind his glasses.

 When he’s done, he shows me the pictures. I take the camera from his hands and scroll through them. Kind of surprising how good they are. Like… *I* look good.

 “Nice,” I say and give him back the camera. “Guess they did turn out.”

 “Thanks,” he says with a smile, getting awkward right away. “Do you like your camera?”

 “Yeah, it’s sick,” I reply.

 I hand it to him even though no one else is actually allowed to touch it.

 I stand next to him, watching him pressing buttons and trying things out. He lifts it up and looks through the lens, zooms in and out, lowers it again, keeps pressing.

 “Try it out,” I say. “If you want,” I add teasingly.

 Elliot smiles carefully and I smile back.

 He takes a couple of shots before he hands it back to me.

We walk back toward the school in silence. Elliot has his hands in his pockets. He looks cold as he sets one foot in front of the other, trying to keep up with my pace.

 Right by Valle, I see Ilyas and Abdi coming toward us.

 “Yousef, sup, man?” Ilyas shouts from the other side of the intersection.

 I haven’t talked with Ilyas in a few days. He’s such a dick all the time, and even though I know he’s just messing around it *seriously* pisses me off.

 I wave them over.

 Elliot just stands next to me, his eyes fixed down on the ground as he kicks the snow.

 “Um. We’re kind of supposed to get back to edit the photos,” he says as Ilyas and Abdi approach.

 “You can go,” I reply without looking him, but he doesn’t move.

 I fist bump Ilyas and Abdi and get a pat on the back from both.

 “Sup, man? Been a while,” Ilyas says, but he’s looking at Elliot. “Is this your new bestie or what?”

 Elliot clings to his camera, still looking down at the ground.

 “Dude, no,” I reply with a nervous laugh. “This is Elliot. From school.”

 Neither Ilyas nor Abdi looks all that convinced.

 I straighten up and clear my throat. *No way Ilyas is going to mess with me now*, I think and open my mouth again.

 “He’s going back to school now,” I say with a confident and kind of commanding voice.

 And that’s when Elliot *finally* turns and leaves.

 “Bye, Elliot,” Ilyas shouts.

 Abdi just laughs.

 “What the fuck are you wearing?” I ask, pointing at Ilyas’ bucket hat.

 If he’s going to mess with me, I’m going to mess with him.

 “What do you mean, bro?”

 “You’re always calling *me* a hipster but look at yourself. You look like some white dude from The Bachelor or some shit,” I say. “Cover up, man. It’s cold out.”

 Abdi claps his hands and laughs, but it’s Ilyas’ reaction I’m waiting for. He stares at me for one long second before he laughs, too. Luckily.

 “Whatever, man. Ready for the weekend? Anything you need?”

 “What’s happening this weekend?”

 “Didn’t you hear? I’m having a party, bro,” Abdi replies.

 “What party?” I ask.

 “Oh shit, I don’t think we invited him,” Ilyas laughs, shoving Abdi, who’s laughing his ass off.

 “Shiiiit, man,” he says.

 I can feel my blood starting to boil.

 “No,” I lie. “I just forgot. Lots happening. Friday, right?”

 I can feel my face is starting to get red.

 “Saturday,” Ilyas replies, and I can tell that he knows I didn’t know about the party.

 “It’s gonna be sick, man, you gotta come,” Abdi says. “If you can, that is.”

 “Yeah, man, relax, I’m coming,” I say, a little more impatient than I want to sound.

 I know there’s something or other happening this weekend, but I suddenly can’t remember what it is.

 Whatever it is, though, I *have* to go to this party. I’ll hear about it forever afterwards if I don’t and I sure as hell don’t have time for that.

 “On one condition, though!” Ilyas says. “You bring your own shit.”

 “Yeah, yeah. Talk tomorrow, then?”

 “Whatever, bro,” he replies, but luckily he’s smiling.

Back in the classroom, I see Elliot editing photos of me.

 He turns toward me and smiles cautiously. I nod and smile back.

**2**

My phone vibrates in my jacket pocket as I’m walking to the metro. I find a seat before I take it out.

 **Mitra**: *Are you coming to Abdi’s party on Saturday? Been a while :) miss u*

I don’t open the message. The last time I left her on read, she called me four times in a row. I can’t deal with the thought of her coming to Abdi’s on Saturday. Like… what the fuck does she have to do there, she doesn’t even have anything in common with any of the guys who will be there. It’s been a hundred years since we hooked up for the first time. It was at the beginning of high school or something, and okay, it happened one more time after that, but it was clearly a *big mistake*.

 I get off at Tøyen, pull out my camera, and take a few pictures of the square outside the station. There’s still a Christmas tree here even though it’s January, like it’s something people might want to buy on sale.

 I see that Mom called when I get home. I pretend like I don’t see it and go to the kitchen to get a Pepsi Max when I see the note on the kitchen counter. *Yousef! Tidy up and clean the bathroom before I come home*, it says.

 That’s when it hits me – what’s happening this weekend. Iman. She’s visiting on Saturday and *of course* Mom wants it to look perfect here when she comes.

 And apparently that’s *my* responsibility.

 I take my Pepsi Max into the bathroom, where laundry is hanging up to dry. It’s probably been there all week. I don’t remember though, I don’t normally notice that kind of thing apart from the fact that the door of the cabinet under the sink doesn’t open properly when I’m getting more toilet paper.

 I chug the soda, realize I’m actually kind of hungry, put the can on top of the washing machine, and get started on folding some sweatshirts and t-shirts. None of them are mine. Didn’t she do my clothes, too? Shit, when am I supposed to have time to do it myself? I need to wash some sweatshirt or sweater before I go to the party on Saturday.

 And then she’s there. I don’t hear her over the music in my AirPods, not before she’s standing inside the already cramped bathroom and blocks the door.

 “Sure, I can trade shifts,” she says into her own AirPods as she stares at me intensely. “Yeah, late shift is fine. No problem. See you tomorrow.”

 I keep folding clothes, but the scolding starts the second she hangs up.

 “I told you to clean and tidy up the bathroom and you haven’t gotten any further than this?”

 “I just got home,” I say calmly as I keep folding, making sure to maintain eye contact so she doesn’t complain about that, too. “I started folding laundry as soon as I saw your note,” I add.

 “I guess you think I should do everything myself?”

 Her voice is louder now.

 “No, Mom,” I say just as calmly. “I’m going to put this away, then I’ll clean the bathroom. Just like I promised.”

 “You haven’t promised anything,” she hisses. “What have I told you? You get an allowance and everything you want and need, but on one condition, and that’s that you help out at home. But you’re just like your father, aren’t you? Only ever think about yourself.”

 I don’t respond. When she mentions Dad, who none of us has seen since Iman and I were little, then it’s *bad*. I just keep folding her clothes while she babbles louder and louder and gets more and more stressed about Iman.

 “Your sister is coming on Saturday. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Do you want CPS to see how messy it is here? I work all day, do you expect me to do all the housework, too? Do you want CPS to take you, too? Who will be the man in the house then?”

 I don’t have to respond to her. She doesn’t actually want a response. She just wants to say these things, to have an effect on me, to make me feel guilty. Maybe I’ll be a better person then. A better son. But it doesn’t work the way she thinks.

 It stopped working a long time ago.

 But I keep folding the clothes. When I’m done with that, I wipe off the sink, clean the toilet, and mop the floor while music plays in my ears.

**3**

 **Yousef**: *I’m gonna meet the boys tomorrow. Is that OK? After Iman leaves*

I made the conscious decision to wait until Friday to ask her. I press on my phone under my desk but the teacher doesn’t notice anyway. I don’t think he cares if any of us are even listening. There are a lot of others like me who don’t take this photography class seriously. Others who are somewhere else, who have the weekend on their minds.

 Abdi writes in the group chat on Snap and asks if any of us can bring some snacks for tomorrow. Ilyas answers quickly and says he can take care of it but that we have to Venmo him.

 **Ilyas**: *Wallah bro you coming or what yousef?*

Mom hasn’t replied yet. I still respond that I’m coming but that I might be a little late.

 **Ilyas**: *What do you mean bro*

 *You gotta help your mom or some shit*

I roll my eyes. Typical Ilyas to use the “your mom” tactic.

 **Abdi**: *or maybe he’s gonna hang out with that nerd*

**Muhammad**: *hahaha who?!*

 **Ilyas**: *this wimpy little dude in his class*

 **Muhammad**: *whaaaat wallah*

 **Abdi**: *hahaha*

I close Snap, there’s no point in writing anything else before Mom replies anyway. I *am* going to that party, but I can’t exactly say that we’re having guests, either, or that I might have to be home because my sister is coming from the youth home she lives in or that she’s barely been around to visit since CPS took her over a year ago. She’s turning 18 this summer and then I guess she can technically move back home, but neither Mom nor I think she’s going to. Or *does* Mom actually think so?

 I open Snap again and see that Iman took herself off the map. I send her a Snap of my desk and ask her if she’s actually coming since I can’t be totally sure.

 I haven’t really talked to her since before Christmas. She was supposed to visit and spend Christmas break at home in Tøyen, but she and Mom had a fight right before she was supposed to come and then she totally freaked out again. Instead, she celebrated Christmas at the youth home with the other kids who live there, the ones who don’t have anywhere to go, and the people who work there, the ones Mom calls “the Norwegians”.

 Iman answers me with a selfie that only shows half of her face. It says: *obv i’m coming to see my little bro* and a red heart. It looks like she’s outside and on her way somewhere.

 I wonder what it’s like at the youth home. We haven’t talked about it that much. We haven’t talked much in general.

 I write back: *nice*

 I want to write that I’m excited to see her but don’t, and I don’t know why.

 She sends another snap right away.

*Plzzz make sure mom is in a good mood before i get there tho, can’t deal with her stupid face if she freaks out at me*

I smile a little, knowing exactly what she means and what she needs.

 *already doing more chores than should be legal haha*, I write back on a selfie.

She answers in the chat:

 *Haha poor thing*

 *But srsly lil bro*

 *Don’t forget that you don’t haaaveee to live there*

 *Srsly don’t get why you even bother*

I stare at her messages, suddenly thinking about how we used to play PlayStation together. I always crushed her. In Tekken *and* FIFA. We made a lot of noise and Mom always scolded us. But one day Mom scolded Iman extra like she was the one bothering me, and not us bothering each other.

 I remember Iman asked me for a favor then. I was almost 13 and had already done more favors for my sister than I could count. Iman was going out with some friends and wanted me to cover for her. She said Mom would believe whatever I said no matter what. She said I had to help her or it’d be hell here, like always.

 I asked if she couldn’t just stop making hell. She rolled her eyes and shook her head before she replied:
 “Easy for you to say,” she said. “You’re Mom’s favorite.”

 I look at Iman’s messages again and am about to answer when a text from Mom finally pops up.

 **Mom**: *On one condition: that you help out, and that the visit goes well.*

I close all the apps without answering Mom or Iman or the boys, turn my music up a hair before I put my phone down, look up, and scan the classroom, pretending I was paying attention the whole time. I jump a little when I look at the teacher’s screen. It’s a huge picture of me. Me with my hoodie up and a serious look on my face, the metro blurry in the background.

 I sneak one AirPod out of my ear.

 “Here, Elliot’s used a shutter speed long enough to give the photo a nice natural light even though it was overcast,” the teacher explains.

 I turn to look at Elliot. He’s alternating between looking down at his desk and up at the teacher and the screen with the photo of me.

 “What do you think, *Yussef*, the fantastic subject of the photo?”

 The teacher laughs at himself, but of course no one else thinks it was funny.

 “It’s… nice,” I reply, not really knowing what else to say.

 “Nice? Can you say a little more about why this photo *works*?”

 “You said it yourself. It’s a fantastic subject.”

 Someone in the class laughs. I look at Elliot again. He’s not laughing, but I see a smile.

 “Yes, sure, that’s true,” the teacher replies to try to get in on the joke. “But do you have any technical terms that can explain why the photo is *good*?”

 I take a breath before I answer.

 “It’s clearly a subject with an intense stare, maybe some people even think he has pretty eyes and probably a toned body beneath that oversized jacket.”

 Now people are laughing louder than they were before. The teacher is struggling not to roll his eyes. He’s trying to keep it together, but I can tell he’s getting annoyed.

 I bite my lip so I don’t laugh out loud myself.

 “Okay,” he exhales. “Anyone else want to contribute something more reasonable?”

 I pick up my phone again and see another message from Mom.

 **Mom**: *Sweetie, I need you to be there tomorrow. OK?*

I sigh and respond the way she wants me to respond:

 **Yousef**: *Of course* 🙂

I put my AirPods back in and turn the music up on full blast. Cezinando sings in my ear: *I’m not your baby. I’m my mom’s prettiest. Her only one.*

**4**

I’m done at school earlier than I thought so I head toward Nydalen after last period. I hang around Akerselva a little, flashing my camera lens and taking some pictures while hoping Ilyas will show up on his way from school to the metro.

 I *am* going to Abdi’s party tomorrow and I *will* show Ilyas I’m not some hipster now. But before that, I need to get Ilyas on his own. Put him in his place a little. He’s not as tough and cool when he’s alone.

Things have been different between us ever since I moved to Tøyen at the beginning of 10th grade. All of a sudden I was hanging out with Marius and Henrik from school and not as much with Ilyas, Abdi, and Muhammad. The gang got split up, but we kept hanging out. Something was a little off, though. Things weren’t really like they were before.

Ilyas became more and more of a clown in my eyes while he thought I became a so-called “hipster” who only hangs out with white people. But what was I supposed to do? There weren’t exactly a lot of people like me at my school. Marius and Henrik were cool enough, but I haven’t really talked with either of them since the end of last school year.

Ilyas clearly doesn’t get the difference between buddies at school and real *brothers*, like he and I are. But ever since the beginning of high school, the whole gang has been spread out anyway. Abdi at Bjerke, Muhammad at Ullern, Ilyas at Nydalen.

Me at F21.

 But even though the gang is split up, Ilyas and I are still the ones who fuck with each other the most.

 “Yo!” I hear suddenly and turn around to look.

 Ilyas comes out of the school, just like I expected. He’s walking with a girl I know he has a thing with, but there are two guys I’ve never seen before with them, too.

 I lower my camera while I keep staring at Ilyas who says bye to the girl and the two others before he’s finally close enough that I can say what I’m thinking.

 Now’s my chance to get back at him, even if only a little bit.

 “What’s going on, are you and your *sharmouta* like, support buddies now or what?”

 “Huh?” he answers, confused, but he bumps my outstretched fist.

 “Those two guys,” I say, nodding in their direction. “The *goras*.”

 I don’t usually say that kind of thing. Normally Ilyas is the one who does that.

 “Come on,” he scoffs. “Don’t try to act all cool. It’s *really* not a good look.”

 I’m about to say something else but his phone rings and he answers.

 “No, *anne*, I’m not far. Yeah, I promise. No. I’m gonna pick it up, I said. I said I promise!”

 It’s quiet for a few seconds before he starts going off in his mother tongue. He goes from calm to pissed in two seconds and it riles me up so much that I take a step closer, ready to fuck with him even more, right as he hangs up.

 “What’s up?” I ask.

 I’m almost right up in his face now, but he acts like he doesn’t care. He’s always been like that, acting like he doesn't give a shit about anything besides himself.

 “Does mama’s boy need to get home, is that what’s up?”

 I’m sinking to his level, using the “your mom” strategy to provoke him.

 Ilyas finally looks up from his phone and starts laughing.

 “What the hell is your problem?” he says, but I can tell he’s embarrassed.

 I know he hates comments about his mom.

 “Do you have to go home to be your mom’s little bitch? Shit man, that’s embarrassing.”

 Ilyas finally takes a step closer.

. “What the fuck is your issue, man?”

 I can smell his cologne, that conceited little shit. He thinks he’s all that just because he uses Axe. Thinks all the girls want him just because he’s a Turk.

 “Duuuude!” I shout so loudly that people turn to look at us.

 It’s exactly what I want. To mess with him a little.

 He shoves me but I don’t move, both feet planted firmly on the ground. I don’t shove back. Just exhale forcefully through my nostrils.

 “I mean it, bro,” he says. His voice is calmer now. Controlled, kind of. “Ever since you moved from Romsås you’ve been a little shit. What is it with you? What the fuck is your problem?”

 I don’t reply. I just keep staring at him while I feel my pulse throbbing in my ears.

 “Pffft,” he says in the end. He takes a step back from me and pulls his phone out again. “I don’t have time for this. Gotta head anyway.”

 He starts to leave, but then he turns around suddenly, points at me, and shouts:

 “You can come to Abdi’s party tomorrow on one fucking condition. That you’re not on your fucking period anymore!”

 He turns again and I can see him shaking his head as he walks toward the metro.

 I stand there and take a deep breath, letting the cold air fill my lungs. My fingers are frozen around the camera I’m still holding. It’s starting to get really dark and I notice I’m hungry and tired, but I still feel pretty good.

 I’m actually looking forward to the party tomorrow now that I put Ilyas in his place.

 That Turk can’t mess with me.

**5**

It’s Saturday. I kick the snow off my shoes before I go into the hallway and hang up my jacket. I can hear noises coming from the kitchen. I can hear her stress all the way out here.

 “Hi,” I say as I enter the room.

 Mom is scrubbing the kitchen counter even though I knew she just did it yesterday.

 She barely reacts, lifting her eyes but not meeting mine before she’s back at the counter with the rag and spray.

 “Where have you been?” she asks.

 “Just out with the camera.”

 She doesn’t respond. Just keeps scrubbing.

 “What can I do?” I ask, because when she’s this quiet, it’s *serious*.

 “There’s nothing more to do now,” she says calmly. “I got a text. They’re on their way.”

 “Already?”

 Shit, I thought I had more time. Totally forgot to keep track.

 I take a step forward, take the rag and spray bottle from her, put the spray bottle back in the cabinet, rinse the rag, and wring it out.

 She stands there, watching me. Her eyes dart around.

“Thank you,” she says, and I suddenly want to do much more for her.

But neither of us manages anything else because the buzzer sounds, and Mom takes a deep breath before she goes to get the door.

“Hello!” I hear from the stairs.

It must be the CPS woman Iman has with her.

“Hi… sweetie,” I hear Mom say.

I quickly put the rag away before I go out into the hall. Mom is standing there, hugging Iman. Iman looks at me over her shoulder, already looking strangled.

The CPS woman is old, maybe 50, and has curly brown hair. She smiles, looking touched by the mother and daughter hugging.

I give the woman a small wave and say “hi”.

She takes a step inside, not kicking the snow off her shoes before she comes toward me with her hand outstretched.

“Hi there, Yousef,” she says and introduces herself.

I take her hand and smile politely with tight lips.

Iman has taken off her shoes and gives me a quick hug and ruffles my hair just like she always used to. I used to hate it, but this time I just lift my hand quickly, fix my hair, and smile at her.

“What’s up, lil bro? Shit, you’ve gotten *big*,” she says as she continues into the living room.

She looks older, too. Like she’s skipped a few years. Grown up at the youth home.

Mom has covered the living room table with an Arabic blanket she doesn’t normally ever use. She’s put out fruit, nuts, and small cakes in big and small bowls and has tea in a big pot.

The living room is cleaner and tidier than I’ve ever seen it, and I realize I probably should’ve dropped the photoshoot today in particular and helped Mom instead. She’s really worked hard.

“You’ve made it so terribly *cozy* in here!” the CPS woman exclaims.

Suddenly I don’t remember what her name was. In any case, she sits down in Mom’s regular spot on the sofa, but of course Mom doesn’t say anything. She seems calmer now, but it’s for the CPS woman’s sake more than for Iman’s.

Iman sits next to the CPS woman and takes out her phone.

Mom isn’t going to lose it. Not today. Not after Iman decided to ditch us at Christmas.

“Dinner is almost ready,” she says, and I feel guilty right away since I wasn’t home to help.

“How nice,” the CPS woman says. “Have you made something ethnic?”

“Ethnic?” Mom asks with a nervous laugh.

“Something from your homeland?”

Mom is quiet for a moment before she answers.

“I made couscous with lamb.”

“That sounds wonderful. Don’t you agree, Iman?”

“Sure,” she replies while continuing to tap away on her phone, just like she’d been doing since she sat down.

I can tell by the look on Mom’s face that she’s disappointed. She knows that couscous dish used to be Iman’s favorite.

**6**

Mom is carrying more plates and glasses than she can handle. I take some of them from her but she won’t meet my eyes.

 I follow her into the kitchen. It’s cold and dark in there, and the sound of nothing fills the apartment after Iman and the CPS woman got up and left.

 Mom scrapes off the plates. Couscous and lamb right into the bin.

 “Mom,” I say. “I can do that.”

 “No,” she replies. “Just clean up the rest in the living room.”

 She still won’t meet my eyes. I take a breath before I do what she says. I *have* to do what she says if I want to go out tonight.

 I pick up tea and coffee cups, cutlery and banana peels, pistachios no one was able to get the shell off. Used napkins and an almost-empty teapot.

 I blow out the candles on the table. They didn’t have time to burn down before the visit was over.

 Iman didn’t say much. She mostly just sat on her phone. The CPS woman did most of the talking. The one whose name I still can’t remember. Something typically Norwegian like Bente or Mette. Something like that.

 Mom answered everything the CPS woman asked about and no one really spoke to me. I just stared at Iman, trying to read her, trying to figure out how she’s *really* doing.

 She doesn’t seem interested in anything at all, not Mom, not me. I know she’s trying to punish Mom, in a way. By being quiet, by ignoring her. But doesn’t she think about me? Does she ever think about how *I’m* doing?

 “Yousef!” I hear her voice from the kitchen and snap out of my thoughts.

 I take as much as I can carry and hurry over to her.

 Mom has put everything else in the dishwasher and is impatiently waiting for more things to clean up.

 I set the garbage, teapot, and cups on the counter.

 “Why do you always take so long?” she asks and starts sorting out the recycling before giving up and throwing everything in the garbage. “You can’t do anything. You can’t even help me clean up.”

 “I’m helping, Mom,” I reply. “Don’t you see that I’m helping?”

 I’m trying to sound calm.

 She doesn’t reply, and that normally means I’m right.

 I shake my head impatiently, standing next to her while she cleans up everything I brought in from the living room. I take my phone out of my back pocket, where it’s been for a surprisingly long time. I have a million notifications, Snapchat and Insta, some missed calls from Ilyas and Abdi and one from Mitra that I just ignore.

 I open a video Snap without the sound on, knowing the party is in full swing and that it’ll total chaos long before midnight just like it always is. I see cigarettes and drinks in every corner and there are so many people there isn’t actually room for any more, but I’m going anyway. Even if it’s just to get out of here and even if I have to deal with Mitra when I get there.

 I’m going to show Ilyas that you can’t mess with me.

 I write in the group chat on Snap.

 **Yousef**: *Hope you’re ready for me. On my way soon*

I go to the bathroom and pee, wash my hands, and put a little product on my fingers. I can tell from my fade that I should’ve done something with my hair earlier, but now I just fix my bangs after Iman messed them up, both when she came and when she left.

 “Talk later,” she says, but she didn’t look at me when she said it.

 She looked pretty tired, actually.

 I wish I knew more about what Iman was thinking, what she was really feeling, how she’s actually doing at the youth home. Like… I wish we talked more about that kind of thing.

 “Later,” I said, and then they were gone and the silence came back, as if the sounds and the voices had never even been here at all.

 Mom stood in the hallway after the door closed, straightened the doormat, shifted around some shoes. She looked tired, too. It wasn’t until she heard the main door closing that she moved, walking past without looking at me.

 When I come out of the bathroom, she’s standing in the hall with her arms crossed.

 “Well,” she says. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

 “Say what?” I reply as I start putting on my shoes.

 I wonder if she can hear in my voice that I can’t deal with this right now, that *I’m* tired, too. Has she ever thought about that? That I’m tired of pretending everything’s okay. Tired of always being there for her when it doesn’t give me a single thing back.

 “And where do you think you’re going?”

 “I’m going to Abdi’s. I told you I’m gonna meet the boys tonight.”

 “I said we could discuss it after Iman had left.”

 “Yeah? You said *on one condition*: that I helped out and that it went well. Now she’s gone. What else is there to discuss?”

 Mom doesn’t reply. She just watches me as I put on my jacket and stick my AirPods in my ears.

 I take out my phone and see that Ilyas sent a selfie of himself, Abdi, Muhammad, and some others.

 “It’s too late to go out. You have to stay home,” Mom says.

 I look at her. Her gaze is stern. She shifts her weight from her left foot to the right as she wraps her arms tighter and tighter around her body.

 I put my phone in my jacket pocket before I respond.

 “No,” I say.

 “What do you mean, *no*? You have to help me vacuum.”

 She’s so strict and stern but also so weak and broken.

 “Vacuum? Now?” I practically shout. “To quote you: it’s too late! People don’t vacuum this late at night. Besides, it’s Saturday. I’m not gonna just sit at home all night.”

 “I don’t want you to be in Stovner,” she says.

 “Huh?”

 “It’s a bad neighborhood.”

 “What are you talking about?” I ask. “WE are from Stovner!”

 I know she just wants me to stay so she doesn’t have to be alone. Because Iman is gone and because she’s probably upset and needs people around her. But it’s not a good time.

 “You know what I mean, Yousef!”

 I start to laugh.

 “You’re insane.”

 She goes quiet and looks at me, her eyes blazing.

 “Who raised you to be so disrespectful to your mother?” she asks in a voice so quiet it’s almost a whisper.

 I can feel my blood starting to boil, just like when Ilyas gets on my nerves, when he doesn’t take anything seriously and thinks life is just a fucking game.

 “*You*, Mom. *You* are the one who taught me that.”