

I'm V-vida

Original Title: *Eg er V-vida*

Written by Tone E. Solheim © Det Norske Samlaget 2024

English sample translated from Norwegian by Olivia Lasky © 2024

Dear diary,

That's how you start a diary, right? I've never had a diary before, but I've seen it in movies and stuff, so... dear diary! Since this is the first time we're meeting, I thought maybe I should introduce myself. My name is Vida. I'm thirteen years old (fourteen in the fall) and I live in (vom) Greendale with my mom. I'm average height, average pretty, and average at school. I'm average at most things, really. Average, average, average.

ANYWAY! Here's some more info about me.

I like:

- Siri (even though she's a butthead and lives in Bergen now) <3
- drawing <3
- comic books (especially manga) <3
- anime (especially Fruits Basket) <3
- Yuki Sohma (he's mine, Siri, ok?!?!!) <3

I don't like:

- ~~— my stupid bushy hair~~
- ~~— that I stutter~~
- ~~— that I'm so boring~~
- ~~— that no one likes me~~
- ~~— being average~~
- ~~— my class~~
- ~~— school~~
- myself (☹️)

Actually, Siri's the one who gave you to me before she moved. She said I should write in you whenever I miss her, so that's what I'm going to do. Or maybe not every time, because then I wouldn't do anything else, but at least sometimes! Now it's 10:34 pm. When I started writing this, it was 10:10. Things I've learned about myself today: I write REALLY slowly.

Good night, dear diary. Talk soon.

Vida

1

I'm sitting waist-deep in the shallows of the little lake at the end of the valley. It's cold sitting like this, but the sun warms my back so I can *just* about bear it. I dig my heels into the muddy bottom and pull my knees close to my chest through the water. I put my dry arms around them, making a kind of pillow I can rest my head on. Warm cheek against wet knee, goosebumps up and down my arms. A mosquito bite under my bathing suit strap itches but I try not to think about it.

It's nice sitting like this, at the water's edge, but Mom will be done at work soon and I promised I'd be home for dinner.

My body feels surprisingly heavy when I stand up. I coax my wet feet into my sandals and tie my towel around my waist. Then I start making my way back home.

Before I know it, there's asphalt under my feet again.

I stop.

I listen.

Everything's so quiet now, in the dead of summer.

Like all of humanity has been wiped out and I'm the only person left.

I limp a little as I make my way down the road. My sandals are chafing against my wet skin and I can feel blisters starting to form, but the asphalt is too hot to go barefoot. So I grit my teeth and take teeny tiny steps.

“Hey!”

A boy’s voice breaks the silence. I stop and look around but don’t see anyone, just green hedges and empty houses. I close my eyes and try to listen extra hard, but all I can hear is the rustling of the treetops and the rushing from the main road a few streets over. Maybe the voice was just in my head? I open my eyes again, grab the towel I wrapped around my waist, and pull it up to my armpits. I’m about to keep walking when...

“Hello?”

There’s that voice again!

I hold my breath and turn all the way around this time, my heart hammering wildly beneath my swimsuit. And this time, I see him. The boy. Sitting on the stairs of the big, yellow house, a skateboard in his lap.

He’s wearing a green t-shirt with white writing and camo shorts. His light brown hair reaches almost all the way down to his shoulders.

I just stand there, staring at him, unable to process what’s going on. I can’t remember the last time someone said hi to me out of the blue. Could he be a mirage from the summer heat? I squint at him and try to blink him away, but the boy just squints back. He smiles at me with his head cocked to one side. It’s a real boy for sure. I wonder who he sees when he looks at me? He probably sees a perfectly ordinary girl with brown eyes, dirty freckles, and curly dark hair. Maybe he notices that my skin’s a little darker than his and that I’ve painted my toenails with apricot-colored nail polish. Maybe he sees me exactly as I am.

However long that'll last.

"Uh," the boy says, wrinkling his forehead. "Are you mute or something?"

I shake my head quickly, sending hundreds of water droplets flying through the hot air.

"N-no," I say. "I... c-can talk."

The words stick to my tongue and split apart on the way out. I hold my breath, waiting for the boy to start laughing, for his gaze to change, for *me* to change. For Vida to disappear and be replaced by *the girl who stutters*, by *that girl from Greendale who can't even say her own name*.

But the boy doesn't laugh. He just smiles.

"Well, that's good," he says.

He sets the skateboard aside and pushes himself up onto his feet. He limps slightly as he walks toward me, almost like one of his feet hurts, and I wonder if he hurt it falling off his skateboard. It's only when he stops in front of me that I notice his right arm. He's holding it kind of strangely, folded against his chest like a t-rex or something.

"Go ahead and stare," the boy says, adjusting his t-shirt a little. "Get it out of your system."

I blink several times in a row.

"I didn't m-mean..." I say. "I..."

"CP," the boy says. "That's what you were wondering about, right? Why I walk so funny, and why my arm looks the way it does? It's called cerebral palsy. It's a kind of brain injury that affects the muscle control on the right side of my body. Yeah, I've always been like this, and no, it's not contagious."

He says it calmly and without emotion, like it's the beginning of a presentation he's held a thousand times before. I stammer out something incomprehensible in response, feeling my cheeks burning red-hot. Drops of pond water run from my wet bathing suit and down the inside of my thighs.

It tickles.

I clutch my towel.

"I... didn't m-mean to stare," I say.

"I know," the boy replies.

He holds his left hand toward me, the one that doesn't look like a dinosaur arm.

"I'm Viktor," he says. "Do you go to Moltemyra Secondary?"

I nod and take his hand hesitantly, carefully. It's unexpectedly warm and strong.

"And?" Victor says.

"And..." I look at him.

"Your name!" he laughs. "What's your name?"

"Oh," I say.

"Oh?" Viktor looks at me with both eyebrows raised. It strikes me how bright blue his eyes are, a mix of summer sky and peppermint.

"No, I'm... V-vida," I manage, but before I can say anything else, I'm cut off by a woman's voice coming from the back of the house.

"Viktor!" the voice shouts. "Dinner!"

Viktor rolls his eyes.

"Mom," he sighs. "Gotta go. Dad made burgers. But it was nice to meet you. See you at school, maybe?"

“Mhm,” I say.

Viktor turns around and limps back up the driveway. His right foot doesn't hit the ground properly when he walks, almost like he has a pebble in his shoe or something.

“By the way, Vida!” Viktor stops by the corner of the house and waves at me with his left arm. He's still holding his right arm – the dinosaur arm – against his chest.

“Cool name!” he shouts, and I feel my face go up in flames.

2

Summer break goes on and on. I sleep until eleven every day, eat cornflakes with ice-cold milk for both breakfast and lunch, and watch old episodes of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* on TV. Then I put on sunscreen, throw on some shorts and a t-shirt, and go out into the garden. I read manga from the library in the shade of the big apple tree until Mom gets home around six. Every day is the same. Mom goes to work, I eat ice cream in bed, swing on the swings at the playground, and wander around the neighborhood when I can't bear being in the house anymore. Sometimes I go to the lake in the valley to swim. I always take the same route home, the one that goes past the dinosaur boy's house. But I don't see him again.

Mom mostly leaves me alone. She doesn't say anything when I go to my room after dinner and only knocks when she needs help cleaning the kitchen. It doesn't bother me much, though. It's not like we really get each other anyway. But sometimes, Mom has good nights. Then I can borrow her iPad and Siri and I can watch shows together. *My Hero Academia* if Siri gets to choose, *Fruits Basket* when

it's my turn. Not that it even matters what we watch. It's nice no matter what. Because when we're sitting like that, me and Siri, each with our iPads and each other on the phone, it no longer feels like there's hundreds of miles between us. Then things feel more like they did before Siri moved away and left me all alone in the world.

3

But inevitably, it arrives. The Monday I've been dreading. The first day of ninth grade and my first day of school without Siri.

I wake up with a lump in my stomach. I feel nauseous at the sight of the new clothes hanging over the back of the chair and my ready-packed backpack on the floor beside it. I feel nauseous from my own face in the mirror in the bathroom, from the cereal and the cold milk, from the hot air in Mom's car.

When Mom swings into the parking lot by the soccer fields, I'm shaking all over.

"Alright, then," she says and turns off the ignition.

I nod quickly, hugging my backpack against my stomach.

Mom unfastens my seatbelt for me.

"Don't you need to get going?" she continues. "First day of ninth grade. That'll be fun, right?"

"Sure," I say.

I open the door and trip over my pant legs on the way out, but I manage to steady myself at the last second. With my heart pounding between my ears, I make

my way toward the school. I turn around to wave goodbye to Mom, but she's already driven off.

The door to the main hallway is still locked so I go to the girl's bathroom instead. I hurry into the closest stall and sit down on the closed toilet seat. Decades of graffiti in all the colors of the rainbow gleam from the walls. Words of wisdom, doodles, names, and phone numbers. I know them all by heart. In a weird way, it almost feels like coming home.

I snap a picture of one of the walls and send it to Siri. I wait a little while for her to respond, but she doesn't even open the message. I sigh, imagining Siri showing up at her new school with her rainbow backpack and brown and purple hair, not to mention enough confidence to fill a whole swimming pool. I imagine her new classmates flocking around her, including her right away. Because Siri is easy to include. Easy to like, easy to talk to. The *total* opposite of me.

I shove my phone back into my pocket and stay put on the toilet seat, quiet as a mouse, as the minutes creep by. For a long time, I don't hear anything besides my own breathing and the dripping from the leaky faucet that never gets fixed. But then...

"Oh my gosh, *stoooooop!*"

Aurora's voice finds its way into the girl's bathroom all the way from the playground outside. I quickly pull my feet up onto the toilet seat and double-check that the door to my little stall is locked.

"Stop pretending," I can hear Ole Kristian saying. "I know you like it!"

Aurora laughs – fake, loud, and bubbly. I lean my back against the cold cistern. Her laughter doesn't work on me, but the boys in the class seem to love it. They swarm around her like bees around an open flower. I hear other people's

voices, too: Peter, Jana, Miriam. Eventually, there are so many voices I can't make them out from each other.

I sit on the toilet seat until the bell rings, until I hear the others disappear into the hallway. Only then do I dare to go out. With my backpack on my back and my eyes fixed on the floor, I sneak into the classroom and sit down at the first free desk I can find.

Our teacher, Eirik, is already there. If I look to the side, I can see his legs over by the whiteboard. Dark sneakers and wide-leg jeans, the same jeans he wore all last year. Eirik is nice. I like Eirik. He always gives me time when things get jumbled up in my mouth and listens to me when I have something to say. I feel my shoulders lower a little, I feel my breathing easing up a bit. As long as Eirik is here, the others can't bother me. Maybe this Monday won't be so bad after all?

I take a pen out of my pencil case and start doodling on the back of my notebook. I barely even notice that the classroom falls silent around me and that there's another set of legs standing beside Eirik's.

"As you all can see, we have a new member of our class this year," Eirik says. "Everyone, this is Viktor."

Viktor.

I stop drawing.

I look up and right into the smiling face of the boy from the summer. His light brown hair is still just as long, but today, he's pushed it behind his ears.

"Hi," he says cheerfully. "I'm Viktor. Half human, half dinosaur."

He makes a kind of growling dinosaur sound as he tries to stretch out his right arm – the dinosaur arm – without much success. Several of the boys start to laugh. My grip tightens around my pen. I feel a slight twinge in my stomach.

“Viktor just moved here,” Eirik says, a little louder than necessary. “I know you’re all going to do your best to include him in the class. Viktor, you can sit at that free desk over by the window.”

Viktor nods and picks up his backpack. As he limps across the room toward the desk behind mine, I hear even more laughter, not just from Ole Kristian and Peter this time, but from some of the girls, too. I feel myself getting dizzy, even though I’m not the one they’re laughing at. Viktor sits down at the desk behind me. I know I should turn around and say hi, show him he’s not alone the way Siri did with me. But suddenly, my body feels as heavy as a sack of potatoes, impossible to budge.

It takes everything I have to turn around. Over by the whiteboard, Eirik is talking about something or other. The schedule, maybe, I don’t know. Viktor meets my gaze right away and smiles like we’ve known each other forever, and not only met just once before. I open my mouth to whisper a hi, but nothing comes out.

“H-h...” I say. “H...”

I turn back to the front of the room, my cheeks as red as freshly boiled beets.

Because Viktor has a dinosaur arm and a pebble in his shoe, and I can barely manage to get out a single word.

We’re never going to survive the week.

*

The bell rings for the first break. I go to the woods behind the school and move stealthily between the trees like the outline of a shadow no one can see. The damp grass tickles my ankles and the edges of my socks get wet. On the way back, I climb

up on the big rock at the edge of the woods. I peer down at the third graders milling around the play structure like tiny ants, at the first graders who are still sitting in their classrooms.

It rains at lunchtime. I go to the music room, which is never locked, and eat my sandwich with my back to one of the radiators beneath the windows. There's a pile of copies from different songbooks on the teacher's desk. I leaf through them on my way out. You Are My Sunshine, This Land is Your Land, Oh Susanna. There's a hair lying across the chorus on one of the sheets. I try to brush it away, but it's stuck to the copy.