

Neda Alaei. *This Isn't Us*

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At home, there's just one rule between Dad and me. It was made after Mum died in November last year, and it's pretty simple.

I don't disturb Dad when he's writing.

It's hard to know which of us created this rule, seeing as it's never been written down, or even said out loud.

He sits at his desk in the living room, surrounded by papers and the sharpened-down pencils he'll never replace.

After he tells me we're having fish gratin for dinner, I jump in the shower. I spend a long time brushing my hair, wondering whether I should blow-dry it, but decide against it when I think about how much noise it'll make. I put my hair up in a tight ponytail before I creep past him and into my room.

I suddenly realise I can smell something burning. I open the door that leads out to the living room, and the smell gets stronger. I've forgotten the food, I think, and check the clock – but I have no idea when he put it in. I run out of the room, past Dad and through the living room into the kitchen, where smoke is leaking out of the oven.

'Oh my God!' I shout as I try to waft away the cloud of smoke.

I try to take out the gratin but my hands are shaking and I burn myself on the wire rack, dropping everything I'm holding.

'Ow!'

The fish gratin and wire rack hit the floor with a crash.

‘What on earth is going on?’ I hear Dad call out.

I turn and look straight into his empty eyes. He’s standing in the doorway, hands planted firmly on his hips.

‘Dad, the fish gratin!’ I start, but he interrupts me.

‘I’m writing, Sanna! Is it so hard for you to not disturb me?’

He obviously hasn’t noticed the burned, blackened dish lying on the kitchen floor.

‘You forgot the food,’ I say in a calm voice. ‘It had started to burn.’

‘What?’ he asks, but I have no time to answer. Suddenly the fire alarm starts to howl, and I press the oven gloves to my ears to block out the sound.

I look at Dad, at the change in his eyes. It’s as if he wakes up from a long time spent in hibernation and suddenly understands what’s just happened.

He lets out a tiny whimper.

I take the oven gloves from my ears and stretch out my arms to catch him as he bends towards me. I hold his long, frail body, rocking him back and forth as we stand there and the fire alarm howls on.

He leans on me all the way into the bedroom. Then he lies down, continuing to shake even after I’ve tucked the duvet around him. I hurry back to the kitchen, climb up onto a chair, and push the button that creates a sudden silence in the room, in the whole apartment, and not least in my head.

Then I go back into the bedroom and sit there until Dad falls asleep.

There’s just one rule between dad and me, I think as I sit at the kitchen table, drinking coffee for dinner. I want to go through his papers to understand what’s going on with him when he disappears like that, but I don’t, and I never have.

When the coffee pot is empty I shuffle into my room, close the door soundlessly behind me and slump into the chair by the desk, where a pile of old homework and assignments is waiting for me. But all the coffee has made me dizzy, and so I pick up my mobile instead, and check Instagram and Snapchat for the thousandth time today.

I check whether Mie has posted anything new, whether she’s done anything exciting during the holidays that she hasn’t invited me to.

Only his dishevelled brown hair is sticking up from the edge of the duvet when I look in on him the next morning. I can hardly even see his forehead.

‘Bye,’ I whisper, and gently run my fingers through his hair. He moves slightly, away from my hand.

I pour what’s left of the coffee into a thermos flask. I get out his mug – it says ‘World’s Best Dad’ on it in green, childish handwriting, from what seems like a hundred years ago.

I find a scrap of paper from my bag and pick up a green felt tip pen to write something, but I’m not sure what. So I draw small heart instead. And a couple of tiny music notes around it.

I put the scrap of paper next to the flask and the mug, today’s newspaper ready beside them.

I count my steps all the way to school – the first day back after the autumn holiday.

I sit down in my place. I stare at the clock on the wall and yawn loudly, regretting that I didn’t make a full pot of coffee just for me. I keep yawning right until the Norwegian lesson starts, trying to pay attention but glancing at Mie instead – my very best friend, who’s sitting on the other side of the classroom. My very best friend, who forgot to say hello to me this morning, and found a new best friend when school started in August. Mitra and Mie sit there stuck to each other, as if they’ve never done anything else.

I wait for Mie to look in my direction, but she never does. So I look out of the window instead, at the empty swings, at the wind in the trees, at the leaves that whizz across the ground. I stare at everything there is to stare at out there, the voice of the Norwegian teacher becoming fainter and fainter, until I finally doze off.

‘Sanna?’ I hear suddenly. I open my eyes. The classroom is silent and empty, and Trine, the Norwegian teacher, is sitting in front of me, her head cocked to one side.

‘Oh my God, I’m sorry,’ I say, getting up to pack my bag. What time is it? What subject do we have next period?

‘It’s okay, Sanna,’ Trine laughs. ‘Tired today? It is the first day back, after all!’

‘Yeah. Or, no. Yes. Maybe a bit. No, I mean – it’s okay. Seriously.’

My stomach rumbles after the big cup of coffee. And a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would probably have sufficed.

Trine starts to smile, and I see that she has dimples.

I’ve never noticed that before.

She looks at me. There's something about her gaze that stays in my thoughts, makes my cheeks hot, as if it's summer and I'm on a cabin trip in Hvaler with Mie. That was a whole year ago now, but still.

'Are you sure?' she asks, and places a hand on my shoulder.

'Completely sure,' I answer, looking away.

For a moment I'm afraid that she can tell everything I'm thinking just by looking at me.

I pack up my bag and hurry out of the classroom. Feel Trine's warm eyes on my back, all the way home.

At home, Dad is sitting at the kitchen table, gazing emptily down into the cup of coffee he's holding between his hands. I turn off the coffee maker, which smells as if it's burning, and ask him if he's had a good day. He doesn't answer. His mug is half full, but I feel how cold it is when I touch his hand.

How long has he been sitting here like this?

'Dad?' I ask, and he looks up. His eyes are dark – they're missing their grey, green and blue. They're lacking all colour. I think about what it must be like for him to be alone all day.

'How about fish fingers for dinner?' I ask as I take a packet from the freezer. I find a bag of ready-made mashed potato in the fridge. It went out of date in July, but it's probably fine.

'What do you say?' I ask, shaking the bag in front of Dad. 'With lots of ketchup!'

Dad gets up and leaves the room. In a saucepan I whip up the mashed potato with butter and milk, and heat the frying pan, lining up the fish fingers in it. They start to sizzle straightaway, so I turn down the heat so they won't burn.

I find Dad on the sofa. He's staring into space, towards the blank TV screen, at the photo of him, me and Mum hanging on the wall behind it. The picture was taken one summer holiday, when we went on a road trip.

I don't know what I can say to Dad that I haven't said to him before. Actually, I just want to lift him up, sit him on his office chair and wave some pencils in front of his face, the way you would with a small child.

'Look!' I could say. 'Look, a pencil! Maybe you'd like to write something?'

That would at least keep him occupied for a while.

But instead, I turn towards the shelf of LPs, and using my hand wipe a bit of dust off the record player before I turn it on. I browse through the record collection, which consists mostly of Kent, a Swedish rock band my dad loves and which my mum was a huge fan of – a band I also sort of like, even if there’s not many people my age who listen to them.

I pull out one of their older EPs, and put it on.

‘Check this out!’ I call out into the room. ‘You must remember this!’

Or at least, I do. The weak crackling sound introduces the great music – the guitar, the drums, the voice. I close my eyes and imagine them – Mum and Dad. They’ve been to a concert. They’ve paid a babysitter to watch me. I’m standing on my bed, my pyjamas dark blue with stars on them. Dad sits on the edge of the bed and tells me which songs they played, as Mum combs her hair and yawns.

‘We can tell her more in the morning, Mikkel,’ she says, as Dad shoots his arms high into the air, waving them back and forth as he sings.

‘It was the best concert ever,’ he says. He used to say this after every concert they went to, but I believed him every time – that this concert was even better than the last.

‘It was magic. The atmosphere was palpable!’

I remember wondering what that word meant – I’d never heard it before. Dad told me it meant that the atmosphere was so great you could almost touch it, but I didn’t understand how an atmosphere could be something you could touch.

I turn back to Dad, thinking about how happy this music used to make him, but he only looks straight down at the floor. He doesn’t seem to notice the song at all.

I move my body to the melody as I approach the sofa, take his hands in mine and lift them up, pulling him up towards me. He’s surprisingly easy to lift, although his eyes never meet mine.

Come, let’s get away from here

Let’s travel somewhere

Travel far away from here

Let’s be those who disappeared

I sing, even though Dad doesn’t. I close my eyes and pretend that we’re at a concert. My heart swells, warming my cheeks – the sky clears and the sun peeks out from behind the

clouds. The atmosphere *is* palpable, it's magical, *this* must be what Dad meant. Jocke Berg, the lead singer, singing with his eyes closed, and me singing with him. Dad, me and Jocke.

But in the living room it's just Dad and me. Dad, who tears himself free of my grasp, turns off the music, and sits down at his desk.

For the rest of the evening, Dad writes.

I don't disturb him.

Then I hear him go into the bathroom, before he finally closes his bedroom door behind him.

I go to bed, too, but I can't sleep. I check Instagram, and the first thing I see is that Mie and Mitra hung out together after school today. On their story they've posted pictures of themselves drinking hot chocolate with cream, they've used an autumn filter and everything.

Mitra is probably the last person on earth who needs a filter.

I hold my mobile to my chest and look up at the ceiling. Think about how it's always been the two of us, Mie and me, since the very first day of primary school.

We became friends because I was staring at her.

I noticed her from the other side of the playground. A brown teddy bear rucksack, her hair in three pigtails and her front teeth missing. I stared at her blonde fringe, at her fingers closed around each strap of her bag, at her patent red shoes kicking in the gravel.

'What are you staring at?' she came over to me and asked.

That's how we became best friends. And we stayed best friends, right up until the summer before tenth grade, until Mitra had her first day at school before the holidays and sat next to Mie. And then everything was different – at least, for me.

I wonder whether Mie has noticed that everything is different, whether she's thought about how it's a long time since we last hung out together. Or whether she's forgotten, just as she forgets to say hello to me at school.

I look at my mobile again, open my inbox and read the message log from the bottom up.

Since school started in August, it's only me who has asked her whether she'd like to meet up.

Mie mostly answers that she'd like to, but she hasn't used a single emoji since the start of the summer. The last time was when I wrote "Mamma Mie" to her as usual, and signed off

with “Sanna Sunshine”, and she answered with two dancing ladies in red dresses – one with light hair and one with dark.

I check Snapchat, and on the story there are pictures of them drinking hot chocolate, of them taking the tram. On the tram it’s hardly appropriate to take a ton of selfies and use a load of emojis and filters and make peace signs with your fingers.

“M n’ M”, the picture says. It clearly sounds better than M and S.

I start a new message.

Hi 😊 Want to hang out some time soon? 😊 😊

I don’t tap send. Instead, I sit up in bed, turn on the bedside lamp and sit there studying my question, as if I’m hoping that she’ll write something first, send me an apologetic message, tell me she misses me, that hot chocolate and autumn filters with Mitra are nothing compared to being with me. But no message pings in, and so I tap send, put my mobile under my pillow, and pad out of my room into the living room, where I fold up the blanket on the sofa, shake out the cushions and sort a few books on the shelves.

I look at the clock – it’s late, and I’m tired, but I don’t want to sleep. I disappear into my thoughts, into the images in my head of all the nights spent awake with Mie, never enough time, always so much to talk about. Never a silence like the one I’m experiencing now.

I creep back to my room. The message has been read.

I sigh deeply before going into the kitchen, where I carefully take out the plates and glasses and wipe the shelves clean before putting everything back again. In the living room I walk past Dad’s desk. I turn on the desk lamp, want to tidy it up. Instead, I rest my gaze on his documents, the sheets of paper covered in flecks of coffee and traces of eraser.

Dad and the words I know nothing about.

Suddenly I hear a faint buzzing from my room. I turn off the lamp before I hurry back to my bedroom and plunge my hand beneath the pillow.

Sure! How about Friday?

I want to answer with a hundred emojis.

Excerpt, pp. 25–41

The following Monday, Mie is already in the classroom when I arrive. She's sitting on her desk, swinging her feet. Beside her is Mitra, the prettiest girl in our year – probably even in the whole school. The first person in our class to *really* wear make-up. She has pink lips and black lines around her eyes. When she laughs, she flicks her shiny, black hair. She looks like she's recording an advert for some fantastic product or other, for girls who will never be as pretty as she is.

I decide to go over to them. Clutch my bag tightly with both hands.

'Hi, Mamma Mie,' I say, because I think it's a nice thing to do seeing as we'll be meeting up on Friday, and it's a long time since I last said it, but judging by Mie's terrified facial expression these are the worst possible words I could have chosen.

Only Mitra answers.

'Hey,' she says in a loud, confident voice, as if she's the centre of the universe – which she probably is. I immediately feel like I shouldn't have disturbed them. She studies me from head to toe, assessing my white trainers with her dark eyes, my blue jeans and yellow sweater. The way she looks at me makes me feel as if I should have worn something completely, totally different. The yellow sweater I'm wearing is obviously all wrong. Ugly. Or maybe just really childish.

And then she looks me in the eyes.

It's so frightening that I look away, fix my eyes on my shoes instead, think that the laces could do with a wash.

The sound of the school bell fills the room. Mie and Mitra turn and move to walk around me, past me. The classroom fills with students and the English teacher comes in; bags are opened, pencil cases are opened, pens, pencils, erasers and felt tip pens, textbooks and notebooks, chairs scraping against the floor, zips, Velcro, the rain hitting the windowpanes, and finally the teacher says:

'Sanna? Are you ever going to sit down?'

I look out of the window for the entire English lesson. Only when the teacher is about to end the class do I properly sit up. Then the classroom door opens, and the head teacher comes in with a boy I've never seen before. His big, brown eyes scan the classroom before

the English teacher says ‘yes, yes, welcome!’ and the boy closes the door behind him and moves to stand beside the teacher’s desk.

I hear whispering and giggling from somewhere to my right – I look across to see Mitra, who is twisting and turning in all directions, her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. I look back at the teacher and the new boy, and then at Mitra again, trying to understand what she’s thinking as she waves her hands before her face as if she’s suffering from heat stroke.

‘Yousef has moved here from Romsås, just a little bit late after school starting in August’, says the English teacher in poor English. ‘But at least he’s just in time for break!’ he adds, laughing at his own joke.

I study Yousef as the English teacher tells us about him.

As well as having big, brown eyes, he has dark hair with wax in his fringe. He’s wearing a hoodie, jeans and trainers, headphones dangling down along his shoulders. He has a rucksack on his back, one hand in his pocket and the other holding his jacket. He looks up and nods slightly as the teacher talks about him – about the move and change of school that was quite sudden for Yousef’s family. When the teacher asks him whether he’s looking forward to starting school here with us, Yousef says yes. Then he walks over to the only vacant space in the classroom – the space in front of me. He hangs his bag on the back of his chair and glances quickly around the room before sitting down.

During lunch break, the class devour him. They flock around him at his desk, as if he were a message in a bottle discovered on the shore. The boys probably want to meet him just as much as the girls, but it’s Mitra who reaches him first, even though I’m the one who’s sitting closest to him.

I move because there’s no longer any space by my desk. I go out into the corridor and put my books in my locker, get out the ones I’ll need for maths. When I get back to the classroom the crowd around Yousef is still just as dense.

I pull a face, rolling my eyes.

The poor guy. I think he’ll have been forced into being Mitra’s boyfriend by the time maths starts. My stomach churns at the thought of how quickly she gets things done, how she constantly gets what she wants, without even having to try. First she took Mie, and now she’ll have the new guy. It’s like she has to have everything!

If she was an emoji, she’d be the one with the enormous heart eyes.

Yousef nods and laughs at something or other that Henrik is telling him.

God, he’s so good-looking.

In the last period, Trine is talking about nouns, verbs and adjectives; the use of the present tense in storytelling and humour in informal speech.

‘This should be repetition for you,’ she says, taking a slurp of her coffee. It smells of Dad, and my stomach rumbles loudly. Trine turns and looks at me, but I turn away to look over at Mie and Mitra instead.

I notice that Mie laughs at everything Mitra says. Mitra has her mobile out and is giggling and pointing at the screen. She flicks her hair over her shoulder every time she leans forward to look; lifts her chin when she looks around the classroom to make sure the teacher hasn’t noticed them.

Yousef is still sitting right in front of me. I can clearly see the small curls he thinks he’s hiding by using wax. I look at the whorl on the back of his head, where the hair parts and grows in different directions. I rest my chin in my hand, disappear into the little I can see of the skin of his neck as he bends his head to look at his book.

But suddenly he turns. His brown eyes look at me questioningly, and my head is full of all the answers I’d like to give him. Trine is standing by her desk, also looking at me. I sit up straight and look around the classroom to see everyone staring.

They’re all staring at me.

‘Huh?’ I say, a little too loudly.

Laughter clangs in my ears and the faces surge towards me as if I’m standing naked on a stage, all the floodlights turned on me.

I look at Mie – she’s probably the only one who isn’t laughing. She looks more embarrassed on my behalf, as if she regrets coming across to me that time in first grade, as if she would happily take it all back if she could, if she’d known this is how it would all turn out. I hear the name “Mamma Mie”, my own voice echoing in my head, and I regret it, regret it, regret it.

Trine lifts an index finger to her lips as she waits for the room to fall quiet. Then she asks me, again, whether I have any opinion on whether the text we’ve just read is written *in medias res*.

I just shake my head. Have no idea what she’s talking about.

Trine asks someone else, and I set my forehead against the desk as I wait for the final bell to ring.

I'm out of the door before anyone else has even managed to get up.

It's been raining all day, the asphalt is wet under my shoes, and I have to watch out so as not to tread on any even wetter snails. Sven, the neighbourhood cat, meows from the back courtyard as soon as he hears the gate open. He's suddenly standing there before me, rubbing his thick, orange fur against my legs.

'I can't let you in,' I say, bending down towards him. 'You don't live in my stairwell, you know that.'

I pick him up and hold him to my face. His coat is so nice and soft.

Sven meows into my ear and licks me on the cheek, before he jumps out of my arms and goes to lie down on a bench. I let out a big yawn as I let myself into A block, check the post box, pull out all the advertising leaflets and take them upstairs with me.

Dad is in bed. There's an empty mug beside his glasses on the nightstand. At the foot end of the bed is a huge pile of clothes. I pick them up, one by one, smelling them before sorting them for the dirty laundry basket.

I wish he could do this himself – wash and fold his own clothes, clean and tidy up the apartment. It can't be more than a week since I last tidied up, but now it's just as messy again.

I sigh loudly as I fold the clothes that have fallen out of the open wardrobe. I fold them until there's nothing left to fold.

Then I stop by the other half of the wardrobe, and I suddenly wish I could fold her clothes too – even though it's not necessary. With a quick movement I yank them all out, slinging them down onto the floor. And discover a rectangular-shaped box at the very back of the wardrobe.

I pick up the box from behind the clothes, which haven't been touched for almost a year. There's a note attached to it. "Sanna, age 14", it says. My heart plays a drum solo as I open the box to discover a brand-new camera inside.

The camera is black and silver with a big lens, and a black strap so you can hang it round your neck. I turn it on, press the button to view the images and see the only photograph that's been taken – a selfie of my mum. Mum, with deep circles under her eyes, and a smile I remember from before she got sick. She's holding a sheet of paper in front of her.

Have a wonderful birthday, dear Sanna! Mum loves you for ever <3

I swallow hard, and turn off the camera as the sound of my heart fills the room. My stomach flips, and it feels as if I'm about to take flight, that I'll fall hundreds of metres down towards the ground.

A year before Mum died, she bought a really expensive camera. I remember that Dad thought it was silly to spend so much money on that sort of thing, but Mum disagreed.

'Sanna, you must never forget to see how beautiful the world is,' she said to me, after having snapped around a hundred and fifty thousand pictures of me while I ate pancakes for supper after spending the weekend at Mie's place.

'Fine, just stop taking pictures!' I answered, covering my face when she'd taken one too many. I took out my mobile and showed her all the photos I'd taken with Mie over the weekend, on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook.

Mum only shook her head.

'Well...' she started. 'I'm not sure that's exactly what I meant.' She thought for a moment. 'You have to really *see* the world,' she said. 'And remember it.'

'I *do* see the world, Mum,' I said, pointing at my eyes before stealing a peek at the number of likes on the last photo I posted, enjoying how quickly the number increased. 'I'm not blind,' I continued.

Mum laughed. She sat down and crossed her legs, and as I continued to enjoy my pancakes with blueberry jam she started to tell me about the world, as she saw it from our living room window.

She told me about the four-year-old girl with red boots, who lived nearby. The girl would splash around in the smallest puddle in the street, the water spraying every time she hopped, and she'd laugh and tremble with excitement.

She told me about the postman, who always took a break in our back courtyard. He'd once bought himself a soft serve ice cream with liquorice sprinkles. He sat down on one of the benches and ate it while listening to music on his mobile phone. He looked both happy and tired at the same time.

I remember thinking that these were stupid things to notice – or to even care about at all. Stupid and unnecessary. Who cared about the postman, or the noisy girl from one of the neighbouring apartments?

Then Mum told me about all the things she hadn't noticed before, but which she suddenly noticed now. To start with I didn't care, but it didn't take long before I also started

to see things in new ways. I watched her suntanned, brown skin turn pale. The way her bustling hair suddenly hung limply around her shoulders.

Mum wearing her red anorak, in the mountains with a flask and hotdogs wrapped in potato cakes.

Mum with a wreath of yellow flowers, her fingers green and laughter in her eyes.

Mum sitting in the shade on the beach, a thick book in her hands.

Mum under a blanket on the sofa with her eyes closed, the sound of the record player in the background.

I took the camera from her hands and took my own pictures.

“Click, click, click.”

I took photographs right up until they had to sell the camera. Dad was right, it was too expensive – and anyway, she wouldn’t be able to use it very much anymore.

I sigh deeply.

Mum. My mum. Had she really meant to give me this as a gift? Was I really supposed to get my own camera? I think of how she wanted me to continue to see the world, even though she was no longer in it.

Dad suddenly grunts in his sleep and I’m pulled back to reality.

I fold up her clothes, just as I’d wanted to. Smell each item, one by one, before carefully putting them all back in the wardrobe. They still smell of her.

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The following day, I take the camera to school with me. I hide it in my bag, but take it out between each lesson, turning it over in my hands, wondering what I’ll take pictures of – what subject I’ll choose when my very own camera says “click” for the first time. I look out of the window and find hundreds of things I could photograph – things I don’t usually notice – but as the lunch bell rings and I go out into the sharp, autumn air, it’s as if my entire body freezes, turning to ice.

I can’t do it.

For our social studies class, we’re in the library. I try to start an assignment about the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but end up just sitting there gazing into space,

at Yousef, who's sitting with Marius and Henrik. At Mitra, Mie and Helene, who are sitting right next to them and continually stealing glances at Yousef.

Then I notice the shelf just next to where the guys are sitting. "Art, architecture and photography", it says under the numbers 18.29-4. I slowly get up, go across to the shelf, and start to look for books about photography. I've already been looking for far too long when the librarian suddenly approaches.

'Would you like a little help?' he whispers in a low voice. He's wearing a striped T-shirt that shows off all the tattoos on his arms. His head is almost bald, although his beard is big. Mum would have said that he was probably a sailor in a previous life. She would probably have taken a photo of him if she could.

'Yes,' I answer, realising too late that I don't actually know what I'm looking for.

So I tell him that I've been given a camera, and that I want to learn how to take pictures.

'How exciting!' he says, passing a hand over his beard as he studies the shelf with me.

I turn to see whether anyone's looking at me. My face flames red when I discover that Yousef is looking in my direction.

'How about this?' the librarian asks as he pulls out a thick book. "Photographic inspiration – how to be a better photographer" it says in big letters on the book's black cover.

I take it, immediately starting to flick through the pages.

Aperture, shutter, ISO, histogram, conditions outdoors, creative shutter speeds are the words I take in, although I don't know what any of it means. Surely this isn't what Mum meant by "see the world"?

The librarian looks over my shoulder, considering the book with me.

'Thanks,' I hear myself say. 'This is exactly what I need,' I add, although I'm not actually sure that this is true.

He nods, turns, and pushes his trolley of books onwards.

Yousef is still looking at me. I meet his gaze, expecting him to look down again, but he doesn't, and so it's me who has to look away.

I turn the pages of the photography book but feel none the wiser, even though they're full of beautiful images of animals, buildings and people. Think perhaps I'm overdoing it a little – Mum said it was just about getting out there, clicking the shutter and *taking* photographs. I don't understand why I can't do it, when I did it once before, with my mum as the subject.

Only when the school bell rings and social studies is over do I remember the assignment about the UN. People are starting to pack up their things, and as I put my camera back in my bag I hear a voice behind me.

‘Cool camera,’ says Yousef, nodding towards my bag.

He has the brownest eyes in the entire universe.

‘Hi,’ I say, my mouth suddenly dry. ‘Yeah,’ I stammer, ‘or, well, I don’t really know. I haven’t...’ I stutter on. ‘I haven’t tried it yet,’ I finally manage to say, blushing.

‘Seriously? Why not?’ he asks, tilting his head slightly.

‘I haven’t found the right subject yet,’ I say. I have no idea where the words come from – but it’s the truth. I just don’t know what to photograph.

‘Ah,’ he says, nodding a couple of times before he continues. ‘So that’s why you’re borrowing a book about photography?’ He takes the book from my hands and starts to leaf through it.

‘Umm, yeah,’ I answer. ‘It’s stupid, I know. But I’m a bit stuck.’

‘You can take pictures of anything,’ says Yousef. ‘A-ny-thing. And anyway, this isn’t the right book for you,’ he continues as he puts down the book the librarian picked out for me.

‘It isn’t?’ I ask cautiously.

‘Nah – it looks well boring. I’ve got a wicked book at home you can borrow. If you like.’

My palms feel sweaty.

‘Do you like taking photographs, too?’ I ask, regretting it immediately. Of course he likes to take pictures – otherwise he wouldn’t have a book about photography to lend me!

Yousef laughs – with his eyes, his mouth, his entire face.

‘Yeah, I dig it. Follow me on Instagram, it might give you some inspiration,’ he winks.

I glance up at him, but look quickly down again. How is it possible to have eyes so brown?

I put the photography book back on the shelf before I leave.

During maths, I take out my mobile under the desk and try to search for Yousef on Instagram, but he’s already sent me a message on Messenger and a friend request on Facebook.

I look up from my mobile and notice that he's also holding his mobile under his desk.
I accept his friend request and open the message.

Yo! Insta @yousefaziz01 🤔

I send him a thumbs up before opening Instagram, my fingers shaking as I search for his name.

Unsurprisingly, I see that he's already following Mitra and Mie.

I tap "Follow", and just a couple of seconds later he follows me back.

'Sanna?' I hear from up by the teacher's desk. I glance up to see the maths teacher looking at me. 'Do I need to take your phone from you?'

'No,' I answer quickly, 'sorry.' I put my mobile in my bag.

Yousef puts away his mobile too, even though the teacher hasn't caught him. I spend the rest of the class looking back and forth between the back of Yousef's head and the clock on the wall. The teacher sees me, so I pretend to be scribbling down something or other important.

He's already liked several of my pictures by the time I've got home and hidden myself away in the bathroom. Even though I haven't posted many, even though they're boring compared with the photos he takes. I tap to view his profile and scroll all the way down to the bottom.

The photos are of totally ordinary things, like buildings, trees and nature. There are many of people, too – people I don't know, probably from his old school, his old neighbourhood. He's even taken pictures of the underground station. The underground station, of all things! But they're so cool! But it doesn't have anything to do with what filter he's used. Actually, I don't know what it has to do with, but I understand that this is what Mum was talking about when she said I had to see the world. Really see the world, and remember it.

There's no doubt that Yousef notices the important things.

My face grows hot at the thought of Mum and Yousef. Mum would have really liked him, I think, even just from seeing these pictures. I imagine how she would have cocked her head to one side as I told her about how brown his eyes are.

I take the camera from my bag. Mum had brown eyes, too.

There's suddenly a knocking at the bathroom door, and I jump so hard that I almost drop the camera on the tiled bathroom floor.

'Sanna,' I hear Dad say in a quiet voice, followed by a low knocking on the door.

Oh my God – Dad. I didn't even think of him as I rushed in here.

'Yeah?' I shout.

'What's for dinner?' he whispers from the other side of the door.

Oh, shit. Dinner!

'Ummm – what would you like?' I call back. I put the camera on top of the washing machine and place the palms of my hands against the door.

I don't know why I don't just open it.

Dad doesn't answer. And after a few seconds, I hear him leave.

I pick up the camera and hang it around my neck, then scroll through Yousef's Instagram one last time before leaving the bathroom. When I'm sure that Dad isn't watching I put the camera in my room, before I finally go into the kitchen and find some leftovers to heat up for dinner.

After dinner, Dad sleeps on the sofa. I tuck a blanket around him, turn down the volume on the TV and sit beside him for a few minutes before I get up to clear away and wash the dishes. There's a ping from my back pocket as I'm standing at the sink.

Didn't find any inspiration? No likes! Damn 😞

I read his message over and over for what seems like an eternity and a half before I manage to think of an answer.

I did! Your pictures are awesome! So much atmosphere 😊 You're really talented 😊

Then I go back to his pictures again and start to like them.

I like the photo of the grey building with pink writing on it that says, “Life is beautiful”.

I like the picture of the public library, with the fluorescent sign that says, “Openness?”

The photo of the tram stop at Birkelunden, the picture of what must be the schoolyard at his old school, of the doorbells of his apartment block. I scroll through the photos on his Facebook feed, too, all the profile pictures he’s ever posted. And then I notice the latest picture, posted to Instagram just fifty-four minutes ago, and my heart misses a beat, and then two, and then three.

Excerpt, pp. 88–95

Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. *Next Friday-Friday.*

Dad stares into space and I stare with him, trying to see what he sees, as if through a camera lens. Whether he's lying on the sofa or in bed; whether he's sitting at his desk or just looking out of the kitchen window. I look with him, but the only things I see are the layers of dust and dust bunnies, an almost empty fridge, a dirty kitchen counter, wet hand towels, that we're almost out of toilet paper, no more clean mugs, leftovers from dinner that have changed colour. Everything becomes permanently etched in my mind, just like photographs in an album.

It isn't just my maths homework I've forgotten, I realise. The only thing I've remembered during this long week is to get out the old rain jacket from Mum's wardrobe and take the anorak to school with me without anyone noticing.

'Dad,' I say.

It's Friday. *Next Friday-Friday.*

I have no idea why I'm invited, but I am. Mia hasn't dropped any more hints that she knows it's me in Yousef's photo. And now that the anorak is safely back in Mum's wardrobe I have no reason to believe that the invitation to the girls' night is anything other than genuine. If not from Mie's point of view, then at least from Mitra's.

Anyway, I'm invited, and I have to go. I have to. And I will. Even though I should have done my homework, tidied up and washed the dishes and helped out at home.

I glance at the clock ticking on the kitchen wall. It's only a little after four o'clock. I have a few hours to do the shopping and cleaning, to make dinner. To figure out what to wear.

But first I have to do the shopping.

I kiss Dad on the forehead and rush out of the door. I jog down all the stairs, push the gate hard and disappear out into Herman Foss' gate. Run down the street alongside the yellow school building; sprint down eighty-five steps until I reach the Rema 1000 supermarket. I grab a blue shopping basket and hurry into the already busy store.

Milk, bananas, coffee, laundry detergent, toothpaste, toilet paper. Anything else?

I stop by the frozen foods section.

I'm going on a girls' night. With Mie. And maybe Yousef. And many others. I have to go, seeing as both Mie and Yousef are going. I don't know what might happen, but *something* might happen, and I have to be there when it does.

I have to be there if Yousef is there.

A man puts a large loaf of bread in the slicing machine, gets out his mobile and stares at the screen while the machine grumbles away beside him. He scratches his thigh, the sound of nails against denim.

A little girl is sitting in a shopping trolley. She picks up a yoghurt and throws it down onto the floor. The yoghurt bursts and her mum gasps, picks up the yoghurt and wipes the floor with the girl's scarf.

'I said RED!' the girl cries at her mother, and her mother sighs so loudly that I think the entire store must be able to hear it.

Frozen fruit, frozen vegetables, frozen pizza.

I take two Grandiosa pizzas from the freezer and put them in my basket.

Find some hand soap, pasta shapes and today's newspaper for Dad.

The greenest broccoli I can find.

I stand by the crisps for half an age. Shall I take salt and pepper flavour? Or are they more the paprika type? Should I choose Superchips, with thirty per cent less fat? Do they care about that kind of thing? Or will they get mad at me, and think that I think they're fat? No, she said low-fat.

My God, what am I even doing?

I close my eyes, stretch out a hand and grab a bag. Sørlandschips. Everyone likes them, right? I read the back of the packet. How many calories is too many?

God, I have no idea!

I pay with Dad's debit card, which I always keep in my wallet, put everything into two carrier bags and run back up the stairs.

In the back courtyard Sven is meowing, but I rush past him. Empty the bags onto the kitchen counter as my mind finally catches up with my body.

'We're having pizza today!' I shout into the living room.

I take out a dish cloth and start to scrub the kitchen counter while I preheat the oven. Look at the clock – four thirty, quarter to five, five o'clock. If we eat at around five thirty, I'll still be able to make it there by around half past six. Or is it good to be a bit late? I shouldn't get there too early, anyway.

I walk past Dad at his desk as I make my way to my room, thinking that he doesn't care, that he won't notice I'm gone – he won't spare me a single thought for a single moment all night. He'll be just fine without me – I won't be disturbing him, just like every other night.

As long as I give him food, as long as I make a pot of coffee, so he has enough to do this evening. And anyway, he has all his documents and papers. He has everything he needs.

But what if he needs me?

No, I can't think like that.

I take out one dress after another, but just throw them on the bed. Polka-dotted, striped, with flowers – everything is wrong. The clothes I had nothing against wearing before just aren't right now. Not when it's Mitra who has invited me, not when Mia has practically stopped being my friend altogether. Not when Yousef is coming.

Dad doesn't notice me even when I walk straight past him and into his room, their bedroom.

I open the wardrobe while keeping an eye on the door, but he doesn't notice that I'm standing in front of her clothes for the second time this week.

Each item, one by one – a pair of trousers, a sweater, a top, a skirt. I smell everything, all over again. I touch her dresses, hold the skirt in front of my body. My toes curl on the cold floor. And then I find it. The perfect dress.

I can remember Mum wearing it. Light blue with short sleeves, pockets in the fluttering skirt. A brown leather belt around the waist and a neckline that's cut just right.

I can't help but admire my reflection in the mirror. I twirl around, and the skirt of the dress turns with me. It's a little longer than I'd like, but it doesn't matter. It's perfect. It was Mum's, and now it's mine.

I pull out my hairband, letting my long hair fall down, twisting around to see how it falls down my back. But then I put my hair back up in a ponytail. Surely I can look nice with my hair in a ponytail, too? And anyway, I can't risk wearing my hair down.

In the kitchen the pizza is done. I cut it into pieces, burning the tips of my fingers and cooling them with my own spit. Then I wipe my hands on a tea towel, put the bottle of ketchup under my arm and carefully carry the two large plates out into the living room, where Dad has moved from the desk to the floor. He's sitting there with his head in his hands.

I wonder whether he'll notice the dress.

'Dad,' I say.

I repeat it, but he still doesn't answer.

I sit down beside him, straighten my dress.

'Dad,' I say again, placing a hand on his shoulder.

The clock on the wall ticks. I'm almost running late, but luckily I've already changed – I've even bought the groceries. I just have to brush my hair, and maybe find a nice piece of jewellery from Mum's wardrobe. Should I put make-up on? Of course I should put make-up on! What if Yousef actually comes!?

Tonight I'm going to take pictures – there's no doubt about that. Maybe, if I'm really wild and brave, I'll ask someone to take a picture of us together. Maybe.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach at the thought.

'Shall we eat some pizza?' I ask eagerly. Dad doesn't answer, but he turns and looks at me, at my dress, at its neckline.

I pick up a piece of pizza, its melted cheese steaming. Pick off a piece of pepper and put it in my mouth. Chew and swallow.

The clock on the wall continues to tick.

'Mmm,' I say.

My mobile buzzes. My heart almost leaps out of my body.

I remember the day at the start of ninth grade, not long after I found out that Mum was ill, when it was Jahaira's birthday and she invited me to a girl's night and sleepover. I'd packed my pyjamas with the stars on them – they still fit, even though they were actually a couple of sizes too small. Both Jahaira and Maryam gave me a weird look when I put them on. They were wearing hot pants and tiny tops that only just covered their boobs. I stiffened, suddenly understanding that it was time for some new pyjamas, regardless of whether or not I had a mum who was sick. That was no excuse.

It was Mie who broke the silence. She laughed gently and patted me on the shoulder.

'Oh, Sanna,' she said, and straightaway I felt myself soften inside. 'You're so coooorny!'

She'd never do that now.

I sigh. I don't want to be corny.

I think about Yousef. What will he be wearing tonight? I imagine us reaching out for the crisps I've bought, both of us at the same time, taking hold of the same one and realising with a start as we get close to each other. Yousef letting go, offering me both the single crisp and the rest of the bowl. Me smiling, but chewing with my mouth closed, my hair fluttering in the wind as if in an advert on TV.

A fan blowing fake wind through my hair and everything. I'm even prettier than Mitra.

‘What are you doing tonight?’

The sound of Dad’s voice interrupts all the dreams in my head.

I turn towards him. He looks at me again, at my dress, my body. He looks me in the eyes with his dark gaze.

‘I...’ I start. ‘I’m going to a girls’ night. At Mie’s place,’ I continue. My voice sounds guilty, but I don’t know why. Where I’m going doesn’t really matter to him, does it?

Dad’s eyes quiver, and looking at him almost makes me lose my breath.

‘Are you...’ he sobs. ‘Are you going to a party?’

His lips begin to tremble.

‘Party?’ I ask.

Tears begin to roll from his eyes.

‘No,’ I answer desperately. ‘Dad. It’s a girls’ night. At Mie’s place.’

Dad gets up, and my body follows him.

I drop my plate of pizza. It lands upside down on the white rug. I discover red ketchup stains on my dress.

But dad doesn’t notice this. He looks only at me as the tears continue to stream down his face.

‘Y-you,’ he sobs uncontrollably. ‘You can’t leave me.’

His whole body shakes, his mouth a frightening grimace. He lifts his hands and takes hold of my shoulders, shaking me before he pulls me to him, holding me tight. Tense arms, deep and heavy breathing, so close to me, right into my ear.

My body stiffens when I think of the last time he held me like this.

I feel sick, want to throw up, but close my eyes instead and hope that I’ll disappear, evaporate, completely vanish from the entire universe. Try to think of anything but reality.

In the background I hear the sound of my mobile buzzing on the living room table.

Excerpt, pp. 124–126

I say *Dad* hundreds of times as I stand in the doorway, say *Dad* a hundred times more before I bend down and touch him. He's warm, he's alive, but he won't wake up.

Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad.

There's blood on his forehead, there's blood in the toilet bowl, the toilet seat is up. His trousers are around his ankles, the top of his butt crack peeking from under his boxer shorts. His glasses are shoved up onto his head – why are they on his head like that?

'Dad, please,' I beg, and my voice is trembling, but not as much as my hands as they touch his body, as they shake him.

Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad!

I take out my mobile and wonder for a moment whether I should call Trine, but it isn't me who needs help. I call 113 for an ambulance and explain what I think has happened – that Dad has fallen and hit his head against the toilet bowl. I tell the operator about the blood, at the same time noticing some small, yellow stains on the bathroom tiles.

It smells like urine.

'Hurry!' I shout, after giving them the address.

I lay down on the floor beside him, but pull up his trousers first – they can't find him in here like this. I hug him and smell him, breathing him in, missing him.

The ambulance arrives. There's the sound of hard boots coming up the stairs, and three men come in and crouch down beside Dad. Our bathroom is too small and I'm asked to leave the room. I stand just outside, shifting my weight from foot to foot. Throw my arms around myself, tightening my hold as if I'm trying to stop myself from falling.

One of the men says that Dad must have been *dehydrated* when he fell, and I see that his lips are dry, that he hasn't had anything to drink in a long time, and it's my fault, oh my God, it's all my fault.

They pick him up, lay him on a stretcher. And then he wakes up and looks at me, his eyes sleepy.

'Sanna,' he whispers, and I hurry over and take his hand.

One of the men starts to talk to him, but I don't think Dad and I are paying attention.

'Yes?' I answer, fighting to hold back the tears. I have to be strong for him.

'My notes,' he says, lifting his free hand and pointing towards the hallway and the desk.

I turn and see that his desk drawer is open.

My legs turn to jelly under me, and I let go of his hand.

Two of the men carry him away – he holds my gaze until he’s out of sight. The third man turns to me and sighs, looking at me with concern. He says that “it must have been hard to find my dad like that”, and that it was “so good that you called for help”, and that by the way, “everything will be fine”.

I nod.

‘Would you like me to call anyone for you? Your Mum, maybe?’

I think of all Dad’s documents – the sheets of paper full of stories and poems, of thoughts and dreams. I burned them all.

I shake my head. Say that I’ve already called her.

That Mum will be here soon.

*