

I'm Fine, Thanks - excerpt

[pp 7–28]

First. Friday, May 16th

Ice Cube is rapping in the background about today being a good day. It is pretty good. I speed up on the skateboard, kick a few more times, lift the front wheel, jump, and land on a platform about thirty centimetres higher with the board only halfway on the surface. A frontside 5050 grind. I slide a couple metres, push off, land, and brake. Erik solemnly nods and then grins at his own patronising attitude. I wish I could come all alone to the old weigh station with its plastered walls and an asbestos roof, just two hundred metres from the river and our shack, but the guys also like the spot (understandably) and have been hanging out here for years. Same old, same old. Cars rarely drive by and although the pavement isn't in the best shape, it's compensated by a lack of any adults poking into our business and the side of the building itself (about ten metres wide and five metres high), which Max just started decorating with his artwork a second time. He and Erik covered up last year's original attempt with grey paint a few days ago.

"Check this out!" Erik shouts and kicks his way uphill along the same route I just followed. You've got to work up good momentum to make it, and he has. An impeccably smooth jump, a slightly rough landing on the concrete, a grind, and then back onto the pavement.

"Wow!"

Erik grins happily.

We exchange a high-five and shuffle back to the others. Karl, Ralf, and Robby are standing with wide stances, their arms crossed over their chests, watching Max's every move.

"Somebody come over here and hold this, would you?" Max orders, shaking a can of spray paint agitatedly.

Being the closest, I go over and take the stencil. It depicts a life-sized skater flying over a ramp. The ramp itself is already finished on the wall and looks just like a black-and-white photograph. It reminds me of LA artist Jonas Never's (Max's favourite) "A Touch of Venice" or maybe "California Sun". Max is a huge Never fan. He likes other street artists, too, but Never's something of a guru to him. The graffiti ramp on the wall is even covered in graffiti of its own: graffiti on graffiti. A little duller than it would be in real life, but the image looks brilliant. Crazy detailed. And all with just three layers of grey, black, and white.

Max backs three steps down the slope to the others, cocks his head, squints, and starts giving directions: "Step a little to the left and raise it higher."

"I can't reach any higher."

"Fuck, we're going to need some kind of scaffolding. I can't work like this. This three-legged stool is *no bueno*."

I stay standing on the stool, extending my arms and holding the stencil against the wall.

"I dunno. Maybe I should add more shades. A couple light greys and dark greys... for shadow effect," Max ponders.

"You mean to make it, like, more three-dimensional or something?" Robby asks.

"Nah... more realistic," Max corrects him. "I've got to have a little think. Can you tell it shows evening and the ramp is only illuminated by a streetlight?"

"Like it's kind of dark or something? Sure, I think so. The wall not being white helps a little, I guess," Erik comments.

"Could've been even darker grey," Max murmurs, wrinkling his nose.

"Don't sweat it," Ralf pipes up. "Looks good this way, too."

"You keep your mouth shut! I'll sweat when I wanna sweat, okay?"

Ralf lifts his hands in defence. "Hey, chill, mate."

“Dry your eyes, mate, I know it’s hard to take but his mind has been made up...” Karl sings under his breath, grinning.

“Hey, and you shut your mouth, too!” Max snaps.

They all stand still and silent for a dozen seconds or so while Max comes to a decision.

“I’ve got to make more preparations. I can’t finish it today,” he announces.

We drop all the bottles of spray paint into Max’s backpack while he rolls up the stencil with extreme care. “Stencilling isn’t just some bullshit spray-a-few-blotches-on-a-wall. You’ve got to do your homework, too,” he explains, even though we’ve all grasped that ages ago.

“Should we go to the Bowl?” Erik asks.

I can’t decide what to do myself, so I just stare at the ground and roll my skateboard back and forth under one foot.

“Or actually, let’s stop by our place first. I wanna eat something,” Erik says after a moment’s thought, then turns and shouts at Max, who’s already slung his backpack over his shoulder and pushed off down the weigh-station slope. “Max! Should I talk to my dad about that scaffolding?!”

Max turns his skateboard to the side to brake. “I dunno, maybe. My dad can’t be bothered to organise stuff like that.”

“Alright, I will!” Erik promises and looks over at me.

“I’m not coming right now.”

He gives me a look like I should rethink my answer.

“Maybe later.”

Shrugging, he waves goodbye and zooms across the bridge with the others. Karl is in the rear wearing a shirt with worn lettering on the back that reads “I <3 sk8”. Then, they disappear from sight. There’s a little over a kilometre to cross to reach town, which is nothing but a couple old Cold-War-era apartment blocks, several fields packed with new housing developments, a schoolhouse, a football pitch, a library, a café, a skate park, a petrol station, a so-called “shopping centre”, and a few other shops. The short commute to the capital and all kinds of other developments are attracting more and more people to the area. Not to this side of the river, though. This is where I live. And this is where the old, abandoned weigh station is. Further on are run-down barns and fields. The river is like a line drawn between the better-off folk and... Never mind.

My mobile is at nine percent battery.

It’s six-thirty.

Next to the weigh station, I find a weathered board that’s mottled grey and splintery. Shiny blotches of oil dot its surface. I pick it up and watch the woodlice and beetles scatter anxiously across the bumpy pavement. Flipping the board back over, I sit on it. The wall is warm from the sun, but the ground is still cold.

A slightly crooked sign at the opposite end of the sea of dandelions marks the town limits. Golden fields of grain undulate beyond it in summer, but right now, it’s still green. A huge island of stones towers in the middle of the nearest field. Alfred said it was made back when people were sent out to collect rocks and tractors scooped them together into that pile and others like it. The soil here is pretty stony in places, though not in the river valley.

It must have been three or four years ago when the guys and I built a fort out of broken-down pallets and sticks on the nearest stone island. We went to that ramshackle hut every day, surrounded by scraggly bushes and raspberry vines, until I was bit by an adder. I didn’t want to go back again.

The guys, and I mean all of them... I don’t know what I’d do without them. It’s hard to explain what I mean, exactly. Meaning I’d have to talk about almost all my days and all the things we’ve done together ever since I was nine. It’d be an insanely long story made up of minute details regarding what we’ve filled the days with. I know it sounds kind of dumb, but sometimes I think about them in connection with the moment I was born—the moment I chose to survive even though I was extremely premature and blue. I looked like a starved frog. Not that frogs are always blue. We’ve got this book that my old man used as a trivet. They gave it to my mum in the delivery ward and tucked between the pages is a photo of me

when I was three days old. The only resemblance I still have are my eyes. Maybe it's logical, I guess—a starved blue frog like that would be hard to love.

And still is.

My birth has nothing to do with the guys, of course, but the way I've thought of it is that back then, I was shown life's contract in super tiny script. A page with two columns, good and bad. The guys, Luna, Merili, and Alfred were in the "good" column. Stumpy and my friends' parents—especially Erik's dad—too. There were other things in the "good" column like the skate park, adrenaline, Alfred's garden, plants, school, school lunches. And a lot of other things, actually. Including people. The "bad" column was nearly empty, deceptively so, and maybe that's why I got duped.

I didn't read the fine print.

Ha. There was no actual "life contract", of course. And I obviously wasn't given a choice. No one is. You're born wherever you're born. Some people are luckier, others less so. But you can still imagine that I signed that contract and made my choice because the good outweighed the bad.

We moved here the summer before I went into first year. Mom still lived with us at first, though she didn't stay long. "There's nothing to do in this backwater. And I certainly don't make enough to waste it all on the petrol it takes to commute back and forth all the way out here." That was more or less what she said. All plain and simple. Petrol was pricey back then and it still is today. I still had my da here, of course.

I think it's clear now why I see Mum so rarely.

I truly and honestly don't feel like dwelling on it, but sometimes I do, anyway, and I'm always overwhelmed by the urge to do something dangerous.

Just as I get up and am about to ride to the Bowl, I hear girls' laughter that shatters the relative silence of the windless evening that's settled over the river valley.

"Hoodies, right, and baggy streetwear," Merili says, obviously mimicking someone, and that makes the girls laugh even more raucously.

Now, they're right next to the weigh station. I should come around the corner and announce my presence, but I wait.

"Huh!" Luna huffs disappointedly when the rumble of their skateboard wheels has faded away.

"They've already come and gone. Without us. Again."

"Really, it's kind of lame of them. They could've waited for us to get back from town."

"Max is never one to wait. If he wants to do something, he does it."

"You're right about that," Luna agrees.

They walk around to the other side of the building.

"Wow," both gasp.

"He's so *good* at it."

"Yeah," Luna answers somewhat dreamily.

"Okay, but what do we do now?"

"It's not that late. We could go to the Bowl for a bit."

I hear the rumble of skateboard wheels on pavement again and am glad I didn't reveal myself. Not that I have any issue with the girls; I like them. I just didn't feel like socialising right now. Still, something changed when they were around and I no longer feel any all-encompassing desire to go to the Bowl myself. I sit back down on the board and pick a scab off my knee. I realize more or less immediately that it was too soon. The droplet of blood swells into a big bubble and starts trickling down my leg towards my sock. I pick a fleawort leaf sprouting from a crack in the pavement, lick it, and press it against the open wound.

My mobile is at eight percent.

It's five minutes after seven.

I try to decide what to do with the evening. The whole weekend stretches ahead. I don't feel like studying and don't want to go home yet, either. My stomach reminds me that

there are at least twenty jars of jam, some kinds of juices, and other pickled goods in Alfred's basement. And potatoes! Right! I could fetch some potatoes, peel them, and fry them. The mere thought of food makes my mouth water.

I kick my skateboard into motion and roll past our house that'll be collapsing at any moment. (I know "house" is an overstatement, but I sometimes use the word anyway.) Next comes the concrete bridge with rusty railings, Alfred's gate, and his front door. The first thing I do is light a fire in the kitchen stove. Next, I harvest some onions from the garden and dice them. The potatoes turn golden brown on the sizzling pan. He had a good stove.

Later, I wander around Alfred's garden and pluck a couple weeds out of habit. As twilight falls, I connect my phone to the charger and fall asleep on Alfred's dark red velvet couch.

Second. Saturday, May 17th

When I get home the next morning, Da is sitting at the kitchen table and drinking in nothing but a faded AC/DC shirt and underpants.

"Well, where've you been, baggy-pants?" he asks and laughs uproariously at his own joke.

"Alfred's place."

"Why'd you disappear there? That geezer kicked the bucket."

He's genuinely surprised. His jaw hangs open and his bloodshot eyes bulge. True comedy. I don't really know what to reply—he's well aware that I go there every day. Without exception. And that I sleep on Alfred's couch at least eight nights out of ten. Or hasn't he noticed? Not even that!? Weird. Their indifference hurts and at the same time, it doesn't. The pain is number than it used to be, anyway. I wonder if I'll end up feeling indifferent someday. Totally indifferent.

"Not like I'll hear a single sensible word out of your mouth," Da grumbles and guzzles wine straight from the bottle. His skin is swollen and red, his eyes are swollen and red, even his fingers are swollen and red. And he reeks so badly that the whole house stinks.

"Where're you goin'?!" he shouts at my back as I walk away. "Come an' sit down; I'll pour you a cup!"

What a generous offer.

"We'll talk man-to-man! Your da wants to chat with you!" he hollers. "You hear me?!"

I know everything he'd say already.

"Your mum went to the shop!" he yells after me. "She'll be back any minute!"

As if it'd be any better with her here, I think, and know I can't stay. First, they'll drink together, and then they'll argue over money, or Mum won't drink but they'll still have a screamingmatch. I grab my skateboard and leave.

"Hey, don't go," he slurs anxiously as if he actually gives a damn about what I do.

I skate towards the centre of town. But before I make it over the bridge, I notice an SUV parked outside Alfred's gate. The boot is open, and someone is grabbing things from inside... I slow down. It's that guy again. He's been visiting frequently and this time, he showed up with cans of paint. Or cans of something else—I can't really make out what's on the labels. And it looks like he showed up with that woman again.

I should've guessed they'd be coming. This was a pretty close call. I left Alfred's place barely a quarter of an hour ago. I recall that I heated the stove a little last night. Just to make the place a little less damp. I suppose could've cooked potatoes on the electric griddle, too. I wonder if they'll notice? In any case, I still stashed my pillow and blanket away in Alfred's room. Didn't leave anything lying around. I don't think.

I tuck my skateboard under my arm and walk back to the other side of the river. There, I hide it under a bush and run to the little bridge. It's actually more of a footbridge: Alfred's own craftsmanship with a handrail and everything. His garden stretches across the opposite riverbank and even spread down to the slope.

Before reaching the little bridge, I duck behind a spruce tree and freeze. The woman

is leaning over the tulips on the opposite side of the water, barely thirty paces away, a blissful expression on her face like Alfred's when he really liked something. She stands up again and starts walking back towards the house. Then, she stops and stares attentively at something on the ground.

"Tobias!" she calls out to the man still unloading all kinds of stuff from the SUV.
"Tobias, come here for a minute!"

Suddenly, I realize what she sees and a shudder passes through me. She's standing right where I weeded dandelions a couple days ago.

"Look," she says to the man before he actually gets there or can see what she's pointing at. "Somebody's been weeding. Look, dandelions." She lifts a wilted plant with a dangling root that's at least fifteen centimetres long.

"Who'd be weeding here?" he scoffs.

"But some has! Can't you see?! Where'd this come from, then?!" the woman insists.
"Somebody dropped it here. And look: fresh dirt as if someone were digging with a trowel."

"Maybe birds? Or a cat?"

The woman snorts. "Oh, be realistic! What birds? What cat? Someone's been working here systematically. And it's not the first time I've spotted something like it, actually." She snickers. "Last time, I thought it was like Alfred's ghost was helping out a bit in the garden. It seemed odd ever since we came—everything was so pristine the moment that spring sprung. The leaves were raked, the compost boxes were emptied, and even I suspected that the compost had been spread out in just the right places. Isn't that weird? Uncle Alfred couldn't have done it; his health was too poor last summer already. He was even hospitalised once in autumn. And there are so few weeds! I'm 100% certain that someone's been tending to the garden. I just don't know who."

"Nor do I. A garden fairy, maybe?"

The man smiles, eyes the dandelion root, and continues. "But it's a good thing."

The woman stares at him intensely. "Good or not, it's strange. Right?"

"Listen, I'm going to finish up now and close the boot."

"Okay. But isn't there anyone you can think of?"

"No, how could I? Of course not."

The man walks away, leaving the woman staring at the flowerbeds. She shakes her head and smiles at some thought in her head.

The house's front door slams. I lower a branch slightly to get a better look and spot a girl in a white coat walking towards the woman. "Mum," she says in a whiny voice.

Huh, must be their daughter, I think. More or less my age.

"Are you listening!? When are we going to go?"

"But we just got here," the woman replies.

"What'm I supposed to do? My room's like a loo. There's nothing for me for me to do here."

"You can help your father. Or me."

"In these clothes?"

"I told you to bring a change."

"But I didn't."

The woman is visibly straining to suppress her irritation. "Then read a book! Or study, if you want. Do whatever you please."

"I didn't bring anything with me."

"Take a book from Alfred's shelves."

"I don't want to read!"

"Honey, enough. I told you to do whatever you want. Take a walk into town; maybe you'll meet some of your future classmates."

The girl snorts spitefully.

Instead of reacting, the woman changes the subject.

"Look at how pretty these tulips are! Aren't they? They're everywhere. Look, they're even pushing their way up between the flowerbeds and in the middle of the grass. I suppose that's the moles' doing."

I understand what she means. I think it's actually a water vole that carried narcissus bulbs around while digging its tunnels. The girl glances at the flowers and nods. Her voice turns from whiny to sad. "It's so unfair that I have to move here. I don't want to! I'll never see my friends again. I don't know anybody here. Don't you two understand!?"

The woman stops admiring the flowers and turns towards her daughter. "But we've discussed it so much. We simply couldn't turn down this inheritance. You know I've dreamed of having a garden like this my whole life. I'd like to open up a gardening centre here. We'll renovate the house and you'll see—it's going to be such a beautiful home. You're bound to find friends and the school here isn't so bad at all."

That sends the girl into tears. I can't see very well but can tell that she's buried her face in her mum's neck. Her shoulders heave; she blubbers and says she already has friends and a beautiful home.

I want to slip away but don't dare to move a muscle. And I don't know what to think about the girl's conundrum. It's just such an alien situation to me. If I had a dad who spent his days active and sober or a mum who loved plants and cared for her kid, then maybe I'd understand. But I don't know what it feels like to have to leave a normal home—I've never had one myself. No, I can't sympathise. To me, she seems whiny and spoiled and like she's making a big deal out of nothing.

I grunt and wonder how on earth someone couldn't want a house and grounds like Alfred's? The garden is huge, has a rich assortment of plants, and is well kept. The house is over a century old and has high ceilings and thick walls. Alfred told me it used to be a dairy—a place that took in milk from big farms and villagers. They made cheese, cream, and butter, and distributed it to the people working the collective farm. Downstairs worked women in white gowns and headscarves. When Alfred was still quite young, the farm's management granted him an upstairs room to live in. He stayed there for years and years. Some other men lived in the adjoining rooms. The main room, stairway, and first floor spaces constantly stunk of sour milk. Now, the building has the scent of muddy boots, old clothes, and the dried bunches of herbs hanging from the ceiling in the main room. It smells like Alfred's life.

I stare blankly at the river that separates me from the house, the garden, and the new owners, one of whom can't seem to grasp just how lucky she is.

The girl rests her head against the woman's shoulder and the two walk away towards the house, arms wrapped around each other. Watching them go, the weight of the world collapses over me. I feel more abandoned than ever before and don't want to go home. I sit down on the riverbank and hold my head in my hands. What'll happen when they finish their renovations and move in? Alfred's garden and house have been more of a home to me than the hovel where my old man sits around boozing and where Mum stops by once a month if we're lucky. I wasn't afraid up until today, but now, I am. It's no longer a theoretical possibility or a non-existent twist, but more like an inevitable train speeding on schedule. Soon, it'll arrive. The fear turns my insides cold. I can't silence it with reason, either, because the more I think about the situation, the worse it is.

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The bridge and riverbank are visible from Alfred's garden from a certain angle, but the family's inside at the moment. I creep out of my hiding place and run home. Not inside, but around to the back of the house where there's a ladder and a decrepit hatch leading to the attic. I haul my skateboard up with me. It may be old and worn, but Da has pawned off lesser things for a fiver.

The attic, which is nothing more than a low space beneath the roof (which leaks at one end), is rather bare. It's where I keep clean clothes in one plastic bag and my school things and library books in another. There are two good reasons for storing things in the attic. One, the air up here is fresh, meaning my stuff won't start to stink, and two, it's sometimes better not to show my face downstairs.

I decide to study first. I've got a maths test on Monday.

Music is blasting and the bass is thumping downstairs, but Da is still able to holler over it. In the afternoon, I hear the rumble of a car when Mum drives away. Less than half an hour later, Da's pals show up—the village drunks Pauly and Belly. I'm used to muting all those noises in my head.

I spend the whole day up in the attic. I'm hungry. I'm longing to go to Alfred's place and cook. Finally, at six o'clock, I can't hold back anymore. I climb down the ladder and amble to the little bridge. There's nobody in sight, but the SUV is still parked out front.

I wish they'd leave already.

As if my thoughts are answered, the girl stomps out of the house, hands jammed into her pockets, and stands crankily next to the vehicle. At least ten more minutes pass before her parents also emerge.

They all get into the SUV and drive away.

Finally.

I take the key to Alfred's house, which I wear on a string around my neck, and walk a short arc to the front door. Just last evening, I wasn't afraid to openly walk in and out of the house, but now, I keep my eyes peeled like a burglar. I know all too well that I should stop coming by anymore, but I really don't have any other option. At least no good option.

The neatly trimmed spruce hedges almost conceal the house and garden entirely; the street is empty. I slide the key into the lock and turn it.

The house is different: barer, and there's an unfamiliar smell. A whole row of big black bin bags have popped up along the hallway, each packed full of Alfred's old clothes and sheets and household goods. A lump rises to my throat. This little piece of Alfred is apparently destined for the dump. Possessions that enjoyed a long life; things he loved and kept. Lining the opposite wall are jars of putty, sacks of plaster, tools, and five-litre cans of paint. The living room rug has been rolled up and leaned against the wall. Tables, cupboards, bookcases—everything that can be disassembled has been. Alfred's books are stored in boxes, the curtains have been taken down, and my footsteps echo when I walk around the room.

I grab Alfred's photo album from a box of books and head to the kitchen. I've got a clear picture of the grocery situation: in addition to the potatoes, jams, and juices hidden away in the basement, there should be macaroni and two tins of meat in the larder. I breathe a sigh of relief to see the latter are still there. There was no need to worry. People like them prefer finer cuisine.

The kitchen has been tidied, the tablecloth scrubbed, dishes are drying on the rack, and the sink is cleaner than I've ever seen it before. I light a fire in the stove and leaf through the album while waiting for the water to boil. Only older photographs, black and white with serrated edges, are fixed to the pages by the corners. The rest are loose and stuffed between the pages in a thick bunch. The stack contains lots of funeral photos but also faded colour images of flowers and gardens that Alfred snapped on his travels. Finally, I find a photo with all three of them: the woman, the man, and their daughter.

Written on the back is:

*Have a wonderful birthday, Alfred!
Congratulations!
From: Tobias, Mari, and our teensy Iti Isabel*

Tobias, Mari, and Iti Isabel, I repeat to myself, and stare at their faces for a while. The man and women look very young. Iti is maybe two years old and wearing tiny jeans, a pink shirt, and her hair in two mousy braids. Tobias is tall and slender and has friendly eyes. Mari has short, somewhat wavy hair and a big grin that brings a smile to your own face.

And yet, the picture still makes me feel terrible. My stomach starts to ache, maybe out of hunger. I shake the tinned meat out onto a pan and pour a quarter of the pack of macaroni into the boiling water. I knew how to cook a meal like this by the time I was more

or less six years old. Ten minutes later, I'm eating.

After dinner, I spend time out in the garden. I know I'm not allowed to do any more gardening and it almost hurts. Alfred would've been having his busiest time of the season and I would've lent him a hand.

If my mates knew what I think about this garden and that I secretly come out here to weed and putter around, they'd think I'd gone loopy. I don't blame them. One time in ecology class, Max turned to me and said, "You gay or something?" Max regarded basically everybody as gay back then, especially anyone who didn't drink beer or swear almost every other word. He only asked because I'd gotten a perfect score on my homework and the teacher was pleased with me. Of course, I shouldn't have poured more oil on the flames by saying I liked plants. That was Alfred's saying. He'd always say: You don't need to pour oil on the flames if you don't want a big bonfire. In short, I do like plants, being outside, watching the circle of life, dirt, bugs, and generally anything that has to do with horticulture. And I've read all kinds of books about plants, even an eighth-grade biology textbook from cover to cover. That's just for me to know, though. The guys don't need to find out.

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Our form mistress Elise Känukukk shows up ten minutes late. Just as everybody's about to give up and clear out, she marches in, breathless.

"Has everyone who's going on the school trip signed their names?"

She waves a sheet of paper in the air and most of the class murmurs yes.

"Okay. Hendrik, I didn't see your name. Aren't you coming?"

She gives me a curious look. I conjure my usual indifferent expression and inform her I'm not.

"You have better plans?" she asks.

Karl raps under his breath, "For generations we been dealt bad hands with bad plans, prove your dedication by hoppin' out Grand Ams..."

"Karl Johannes!" teach shouts and claps her hands in exasperation. He shoots her his usual grin.

"Yes," I say and look down. I know exactly why she's asking.

But teach is already continuing, telling the class what to bring along and where they can spend the night if they stick to the original itinerary. I manage to totally mute the sounds in my head. I think about what happened in February, before Alfred was taken to the hospital.

I was absent, for starters.

Teach, being the responsible individual she is, called my mum and asked if something had happened. She didn't immediately reveal that I hadn't shown up for school. Mum naturally replied that nothing had happened to me. Teach then demanded to know why I wasn't in class and my mum played the most absurd lie in her whole lie collection. What I mean, of course, is the lie she used on that occasion fell far below her lying prowess. Mum told teach that we'd gone on holiday to France. Can you imagine? A guy who doesn't own a single pair of trousers without holes in the knees goes with his mum on holiday to France. A mum he sometimes doesn't see for months at a time. Just to make things perfect, Mum casually forgot to tell me about that lie and teach interrogated me. "Oh, so you went to France?" she asked, clearly not believing the assertion. The question caught me so off guard that I was left speechless. Then, she asked me about a whole bunch of sightseeing attractions there and pressed me on whether or not I visited Paris, too.

No, I didn't.

No, I hadn't gone to Marseilles, either.

It was like a breaker flipped inside of me. I couldn't bring myself to lie even though I probably should have.

"So, you and your mum didn't go to France, then?"

“No.”

“Then why did she say you had?”

“Mum’s like that sometimes.”

“Like what?”

I was silent.

I could have told her I don’t know why Mum said that. It would’ve at least been partly true, but I was silent. My mum lies a lot and without shame. Sometimes her new lies fit earlier ones, sometimes not. Somewhere in the depths of her hazy, vague fantasy world, I’m doing alright. She’s not interested in me the way I actually am, anyway.

“If you weren’t on holiday, then why didn’t you come to school?” our form mistress asked.

There was nothing I could say in my own defence, so I stayed silent. Even though Alfred taught me everything I knew about plants, even though he was a mentor and a role model, even though he meant more to me than my own mum and old man combined, he still wasn’t a relative. Is helping a neighbour when he’s sick a good reason for missing school? Without parental permission or their knowledge...

No, ‘course not.

“Make sure that’s the very last time, then. I want a written explanation from your mother about why you were absent. And bring it straight to me.”

I typed the explanation on Robby’s computer at his house, printed it out with his printer, and scribbled Mum’s signature at the bottom. I’m a master at forging it. Then I called Mum, read her the account of the virus and fever I’d come down with, and told her to stick to the story.

I haven’t missed a single day since. Not one class. Not even when my friends pressured me to take a break and skived off themselves.

“Think about both options! You’d be sleeping six to a room in Riga!” our teacher shouted over the din. “And by next class, you need to decide which route we’re taking!”

Teach pulls me aside afterward.

“Hendrik, I’m very disappointed that you can’t come.”

She studies my face while I pretend to inspect a brochure about Riga sightseeing on her desk.

“I haven’t met your mum yet. Nor your dad.”

Lucky for her. Teach drives twenty-five kilometres to school every day and therefore knows practically nothing about local matters.

“I want to fix that. I’ll come visit you at home...”

She unlocks her phone and appears to open the calendar.

My head is spinning.

“Yes, let’s do it at the end of May. Tell your parents I’ll come on the twenty-seventh at five o’clock. I’ll send an email, too.”

She taps on her laptop’s keyboard to look up the address. “Yes, I’ve got the contact information here.”

It’s an email address that I created and occasionally check from Robby’s computer or the school library. She looks up and directly into my eyes. “Is everything alright with you?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s just... I don’t know if my parents will be home. Da is traveling to Finland for work in late May and Mum will be in the city then.”

“Are you saying you’re going to be left all alone at home?”

“No. Grandma visits us.”

The lies roll off my tongue just as fluidly as they do for Mum. The truth is that I don’t have any grandmas, nor any grandpas. None. My mum and da grew up in an orphanage, which is where they met and made me.

“Okay, but I’d still like to speak to your mother. You can arrange for her to show up somehow, can’t you? Tallinn’s not that far away.”

“I can ask, but maybe the hour won’t work for her. She’s always booked in the evening. She can come to school during the day.”

“I’ll write her. Have her check her schedule and get back to me.”

“Okay,” I say with feigned casualness and hurry out of the classroom.

All I can think about the entire rest of the day is the upcoming visit. I have to make absolute sure to avoid her showing up at our door, though I doubt I can coax Mum to come to school. She hates places like that. What’s more, I don’t know what condition she’s in. She hasn’t been to rehab in ages and from what I gather, she quit halfway through the last time two years ago. Would she even agree to make that sacrifice for me?

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Somewhere nearby, a car door slams loudly, followed by the low rumbling that old vehicles make when their silencer isn’t in good working order. I’m wide awake and hope it’s at least seven o’clock. Why did I wake up so early again? As if a biological alarm clock went off. I’m anxious; afraid that I’m already late for school.

It’s Friday.

I’m glad my old man didn’t come yesterday. I hope he won’t be here when that child-protection agent or social worker or whoever shows up.

The kitchen looks so different with the flower-patterned curtains that I freeze in the doorway. Another jar of jam stands in the middle of the table. I grudgingly open it and stick the first spoonful into my mouth. Nasty thoughts have been worming their way into my head over the last few days, just like yesterday and earlier in bed. More than anything, I wish I could go somewhere else. Come right in and poke around when nobody’s home. The last thing I want is to watch them discover that there’s no electricity and that our only fridge is outside and wouldn’t even work if the power was turned back on. When that person comes... there’s nothing I can do to stop them. I can’t even close the front door because it’s off its hinges. It’d be really nice to not be here. Make all your triumphant revelations without me! My presence wouldn’t change anything, anyway.

I stare into the mirror. A big red pimple has appeared on my cheek and my superpower of eating a whole jar of jam in one sitting has abandoned me. Today, I already feel sick after the fifth spoonful.

My thoughts drift back to the child-protection agent... Left uncared for. Emotional abuse. I learned those words back when I was in nursery school; I’d overheard them. Mum always disagreed with such talk. She argued that I’m not coddled and things like those are different in every family. She claimed that I was absolutely fine; that I wasn’t mentally underdeveloped; that, sure, I was thin, but aren’t there too many fat kids, anyway? “He’s constantly running around everywhere—got no chance to plump up.”

I pull on my backpack, grab my skateboard, and decide to kill time at the Bowl.

It must be even earlier than when I left yesterday morning. The only car I see before getting to the Bowl is Erik’s dad’s, and I know he always leaves for the city very early.

For starters, I do some 180-degree frontside ollies on level ground. I turn, land backwards... turn, land backwards, and so on until I reach the opposite side of the park. Then, I do nollie frontside and right after that try a nollie backside flip.

It was only while teaching Iti that I realised how hard it is to talk about what I do, exactly. All those names that are in a foreign language for me and descriptions of turning at different degrees might have sounded like Arabic to her. Sometimes, she just laughed and rolled her eyes. What I mean is that it’s way easier for me to just do them than talk about them. How can you explain something that’s stored in your muscle memory and has been a cinch to pull off for ages?

I glance at my surroundings. Nobody’s walking along the sidewalk towards school yet. I smirk at myself because I don’t usually go to the Bowl so early like some crazy fanatic. Luckily, there’s a real park that surrounds our skate park, too—the old manor gardens. All kinds of residential buildings ranging from luxurious villas to terraced houses and apartment blocks are farther off. I can imagine the uproar there’d be if things were a little different and people had to hear the rumbling of our skateboards and other noises all the time.

I kick off towards the metal-edged concrete block where Luna did her last nose slide. Usually, I grind frontside 50/50s on it, but today I do a couple nose slides before glancing back at the street.

Deciding that was enough for now, I skateboard to school. I spot a woman with a bunch of keys approaching and duck behind a corner. She'd be sure to ask some kind of questions or at least eye me suspiciously.

I plop down on a leather couch in the break area and start charging my mobile. I find out it's twenty to eight. Iti hasn't texted; maybe she never will again.

Me: There's something wrong with my mobile, Iti. It switches itself off every now and then. Last night was pretty busy and I couldn't charge it, either. You alright?

Me: The guys and I are gaming tonight, it's our game night or whatever. Nothing big but already like kind of a tradition. Robby and I are at Erik's place, Max and Karl at Ralf's place. Ralf and Erik even have special gaming rooms. We play Rocket League. Three against three

Me: You like gaming?

Me: I'm actually a little worried, sort of. About what'll happen next. See, Alfred and I were friends. I went there all the time. And he helped me out

Me: If I don't reply again or something then it's because of my phone, okay

Even though I've pretty much gone full disclosure about all that stuff, Iti still doesn't reply. And she's on her phone almost constantly. Maybe five minutes pass before my mobile vibrates.

Iti: OMG! Dad called, he just got to the house. And guess what: all his tools were nicked! Like, all of them! Some were even rented

I'm overwhelmed by momentary panic as if I myself were caught stealing.

Iti: Dad's pretty wound up. And know what else? He said he saw you there one morning. Were you there or something?

The mobile buzzes in my palm. So, he did see me. It's impossible he could think anything else. Of course he suspects me.

Iti: I know you didn't take anything, but it'd be good if you talked to Da. He's a constable.

"A constable," I murmur to myself.

Iti: You'll talk to him, yeah?

Me: Yeah, sure thing. I was there. It was Monday morning. I'd forgotten something.

Iti: Explain it to him. I'm sure he'll calm down. He said he'd take fingerprints.

It's all too much. My stomach churns as the mobile buzzes in my hand. I feel like bunking off from school. I jump to my feet and kick the couch. A first-grade girl stares at me wide-eyed. Other students have shown up to school. I sit again, rest my head in my hands, and force myself to settle down by repeating all kinds of things to myself.

You haven't nicked anything.

Iti doesn't believe you're a thief.
Nothing's changed.

I remembered the banging of car doors that morning and the rumbling of the broken
silencer. I'm almost certain that's when it must have happened.

"Yo, Hank," Ralf says, plopping down next to me. His mouth stretches into a big yawn,
and he starts scrolling on his iPhone.

I stare at my own mobile, too, though the screen's blank.

"You want one or not?"

Ralf is holding a Snickers Duo pack and waving it at me. I was so spaced out that I
didn't even notice.

"Oh, yeah. 'Course."

Ralf yawns again and starts lazily describing his evening. He goes on about how
their team is definitely going to trounce ours tonight because he and Max and Karl play like
clockwork together, but I'm barely listening. Then, my mobile buzzes again and I check it.

**Iti: Da's coming to school. He just wants to know if you heard or saw anything. He said the
thieves must have had a car. There was a lot of stuff and the things were heavy. Some kind
of demolition tool, a jackhammer or something. Crazy heavy, I guess**

"Well, there you have it," Ralf teases, elbowing me. "Robby's right. You are chatting up that
bird Iti."

"Gawp at your own mobile," I reply. "And I ain't not chatting up nobody. We've just
been texting a little... about when I can teach her more skate stuff and whatever..."

"Skate stuff," he repeats, grinning.

Luckily, he's not the kind of guy who can be bothered to wind anybody up for long.
Instead, he rummages in his pocket. "Want some gum?"

I accept that, too.

I give myself a little mental pep talk, the main message of which is that everything's
going to turn out fine. In reality, I'd like to be alone and think. I don't know what about,
exactly, but I just feel that way.

The first bell rings.

"Oy! Earth calling!" Ralf says, waving a hand in front of my face.

I lift one corner of my lips in a smirk.

"Let's go."

After we've taken just two steps, Ralf stops and grabs my sleeve. "You tell me if there's
anything up with you. We can help you, understand?"

"Sure."