

At Night I Never Lie

Today is my birthday. The excitement makes me want to throw up.

Maysaa is in charge.

I let her be.

Anything to be left alone.

She's tied a silk scarf around my head so I can't see anything.

"Hey. How long am I supposed to sit here?" I yell.

Maysaa comes into the room, giggling. "Sorry. You can come out now."

"That took forever."

"We didn't forget you."

I get up. I can't see anything. She's tied it really tight, that scarf. I fumble for the door.

Maysaa laughs behind me when I slam into the wall in the hallway. Crash into one of mom's orange trees. Here in Denmark it can only survive inside. Under special supervision.

"How long am I supposed to keep this on?"

"Come on," she says and pulls at me. Touches me. Carefully. "If you don't keep it on, it's not a surprise." She pushes me gently through the hallway.

I fumble my way through the door into the living room. Once again, I hit a big standing plant and almost fall. Maysaa laughs again. Okay, I admit it. It is kind of funny.

"Boy, are you stupid," I say anyway and slap out at her but I just hit the air between us. "Just wait. Soon it'll be your turn." I get up and keep going.

Away from citrus, dirt and leaves.

"And... stop!"

They yell behind me. Full of hope. Happiness.

I freeze.

"Now you can take it off," says my sister excitedly.

I take the scarf off and blink in the sharp light that always shines in the living room. Lampshades are something only used in other people's homes. Here the bulbs have always been naked. It was the same at Grandpa and Grandma's. The bulbs hung from the ceiling and swayed in the heat when a slight breeze pushed the cords. That's how the stories go. When they need to be told. About what was. And they have to be. Told. Again and again.

Mom and Maysaa stand in front of me. Dad stands behind them.

"Happy birthday, Sweetie!" That's Mom.

"Happy birthday," Maysaa grins at me. She has Dad's teeth.

"Happy birthday!" Dad looks at me.

I smile. "Thank you."

"Look," says Dad and points toward the door to their bedroom where there's a brand-new red racing bike. It's decorated with a big bow. "Look here, my son." Dad is proud. He gestures with his hand. Dad's hand is big. Like a plate.

I walk over to the bike enthusiastically and look it over. I feel as if I'm doing well. Of course, I am happy. Surprised. They could have wrapped it up properly, but I can already hear Dad convince Mom that the money for wrapping paper could be spent on something more sensible.

Mom comes over and hugs me from the back. It's weird. She gives me a squeeze. "Happy birthday, my boy. Doesn't it look great?"

"Yes..." I don't have time to say any more before Maysaa takes over. She often does.

"No, it's totally sissy-looking."

I shake my head. She catches my eye.
"Hey, I'm just saying."
"It is not." Mom lets go of me,
"I just think you should have chosen a different color," my sister continues.
Dad interrupts her. Lovingly, yet firmly. "True, it is very red. I thought it was more..."
"Less shiny right?" Mom takes over. "On the screen. The color wasn't so over the top."
I don't care. Now I can bike on away. Tour de fuck you. I run my hand along the saddle. It's soft. Like the skin on... "I really love it."
"It would fit me better," says Maysaa.
Mom and Dad look exasperated. "Maysaa, really..."
"But it would." She doesn't give up.
"I think it's cool." I touch the brakes. "Thank you so much." I turn around and give all three of them a big hug. It's easy with Mom. Maysaa is a bit harder. Dad is impossible.
Mom gets out her phone. "Why don't you get on?"
"Not in the living room," says Dad.
"Come on. Nothing is going to happen. It hasn't been out in the street yet." She's ready with her phone.
I get on the bike.
Mom takes a lot of pictures. "Try biking a bit."
"Oh, come on..." Maysaa rolls her eyes at the ceiling, but laughs when I do as well. Yes! Yosef is biking around the living room on his brand-new red bike.
But best of all is that Dad is laughing too.
I could get an Oscar for this. Two, no, three. I could fill a kitchen cabinet with awards for how good I am at playing a part.

"Have a seat," says Mom.

I sit down at the table in the living room all set with a birthday breakfast. I know that Mom has done her best. She has made it as fancy as she can. It's almost elegant. As if everything is twinkling. There's a basket with freshly baked rolls. Oranges. We always have oranges. That's something Dad has decided. That's the way we remember Grandpa and Grandma. The bike is standing in the middle of the living room.

I reach for a roll. Mom smiles. I cut it in half, butter it, apply marmelade. I look at them. They have freshly baked rolls on their plates, and they have something to drink in the glasses and porcelain cups. There are napkins too. Paper to be used if you spill. Or if you start to cry. From the outside it looks right, I think. We look like a family.

Dad clears his throat. There are crumbs in his beard. Like small snowflakes. "That bike is perfect for when you get into community college. You'll race to success."

"Are you going back to school?" asks Maysaa.

"You probably will too," I whisper to her. I don't feel like doing this now.

She sends me a look.

Mom clears her throat. "Let's not talk about school now. It'll be fine. All of it." She cuts a couple of rolls in half. She needs to do something with her hands. Put them somewhere.

"I'm just thinking out loud," says Dad. "It's just so stupid. You're ruining your own chances!" He's still mad that we both dropped out of high school. Maysaa shortly before her final year. Me in the middle. I was bored. Dad points at both Maysaa and me. The snowflakes in his beard actually look kind of ridiculous. A failed version of Santa. The kind that's spent the last few

months standing in some moth-eaten dress-up clothes down by the entrance to the supermarket and sold cheap dreams to everyone who rushed by with shopping bags. The kind with something in his beard. A mistake in the disguise.

"Dad, I don't feel like doing this now..."

"I have a right to dream on your behalf," Dad continues.

Mom pokes Dad's leg under the table. "Stop. It's his birthday."

"You need to go all the way, Yosef. Do business. Big business."

Dad has said it before. He'll say it again. And again.

"Like you?" Mom is being ironic. She's heard it many times too.

"I'm the boss of thirty men. Supervisor in a huge airport. You don't get there by sleeping on the job."

"But it's strange that you aren't better paid when you have all that responsibility. That's what I think." Mom bites back.

I swallow a bite of the still warm roll.

"That's the union," says Dad. He pours more juice. Empties his coffee cup. "Here the union is everything. It eats up all your money. So you're social." He drinks the juice.

Maysaa corrects him. "You're in solidarity. Social is something else." She smiles at Dad. They share in that way. She corrects him. And he lets her. Daddy's girl. Only Daddy's girl.

"I don't pay that much money to my union," says Mom quietly and reaches for the marmelade.

"And you don't work in the airport, right? It's more advanced there. There's vacation money and a pension too. It swallows it all. But that will be over soon."

"We'll see." Mom looks at Dad.

"It'll be hard for them to do it without me. It'll be hard for them. To lose me. I know that."

I don't feel like listening to this. Not now. That's Dad's thing. All the time. Dad is the one who takes up space. Dad is the one who dominates the room. If it's not Dad, it's my uncle Omar. If it's not Omar, it's Grandpa. Respect for Grandpa. Grandpa's honor. Grandpa's memory.

"When is it exactly that you have to turn in the application?" Maysaa licks the teaspoon clean of strawberry jam.

"On Monday. And then I'll soon be able to call myself the director of the Cooperative Lilac Garden." Dad looks at them all three. There is something in his eyes I don't like. It's a dream. A dream of something else. "Then I'll be the boss of all the supers. Boss of the work schedule. Boss of everything."

"Chief One." I say it very quietly. They don't hear me. At least Dad doesn't hear me.

"And the big boss of picking up the dog poop, right?"

"Maysaa!" Mom looks at her. "We're eating."

"I'm not going to be picking up anything," says Dad. "I'll just be the boss. I'm the one making the decisions."

"First you'll need to get the job, right? There must be an interview too?" Mom drinks tea with sugar cubes. Three, no, four today. She's allowed.

"Omar can't find a better man than me. Who would that be?"

Mom doesn't answer. Maysaa looks away too. I bite one of my nails. Dad has to stay in his dream. I don't live in it. It makes me uneasy. I can't dream along with my dad's dream without beginning to shiver.

"Then we'll have more room," says Mom because she doesn't like the silence when it takes over the living room in this way. When it feels oppressive. "And a garden with a lawn. That would be amazing." She squeezes my hand.

As if I'm supposed to jump up now. Clap. Shout hurray and be all enthusiastic. Because of the garden. The lawn. I can become a proper boy. I can get a soccer ball. Or play badminton. Everyone will be able to see me. Right there. In the middle of the lawn. A part of the family that's really made it. And look now: the perfect dad appears on the stage, no, the lawn. The perfect dad and just the right boy.

"Yes, we'll have free housing and lots of square feet." Dad empties the carton of orange juice. He never asks if anyone else wants more. If Dad wants something, he takes it. And gulps it down. "And then we'll also be able to afford more things." Dad is not done with the dream yet.

"Yes, then I want a bicycle like Yosef," says Maysaa.

"Okay, Sweetie. Dad hasn't gotten the job yet." Mom flattens the empty carton.

Dad looks at his watch. "Alright! I need to get going – out to my airplane men!" He laughs. He still has crumbs in his beard. Santa Claus is going to the airport. There are so many children somewhere out in the world who need him now. Especially when Christmas is over. Of course, we don't celebrate Christmas. We only celebrate birthdays. We don't fast either. Everyone thinks we do. We cheat. We only fast if Dad talks to Omar about it. When Dad talks to him, we are a different family.

Mom shakes her head at Dad and lovingly brushes away the crumbs.

Then Dad gets up from the table. "Ouch!" He quickly touches his back.

"You really need to ask them for a standing desk. I've said it before; you should tell them."

Mom gets up too.

"Sure. Now it'll soon be over." He kisses Maysaa on the cheek and Mom on the mouth.

"Goodbye, my flowers." He stands there for a moment, not sure what to do with me. Finally, he rests one hand on my shoulder.

I don't like it. That big hand on me. It holds me in place. Forces me towards Dad's ideas.

"It'll all be fine. Happy birthday, my boy. Seventeen is something too."

I don't answer.

He doesn't leave. He keeps standing there. He doesn't let go.

I shrink.

That makes him lose his grip. Finally.

"My big, big boy," says Dad then and leaves the room, heads for the hallway, finds his coat. The Santa suit has to wait. It'll be the airplane clothes today. He needs to take the metro too.

It gets very quiet.

Mom, Maysaa and I remain at the table. With the bicycle in the middle of the room.

"Do you think Dad will get that job?"

Mom nods.

I look at Maysaa.

"Cool," she says and looks at me.

"I hope so anyway," says Mom. "As long as Omar..."

"As long as Omar what?" Maysaa interrupts her.

"Doesn't find any fault."

"He won't. We are 'one big happy family'." Maysaa says in English, laughing. She has those teeth. Like a guinea pig. Small, sharp. Almost like a child's teeth. Teeth that can still gnaw through anything. Cut it in half. Destroy it.

I feel as if they are both looking at me.

As if I could be the reason that Uncle Omar doesn't want to hire Dad. His own brother. Omar wants the Lilac Garden to be more like his vision of the world.

"Too bad you don't want to be celebrated tonight, Sweetie. I can make fatayer? And a Snickers cake? You love that." She looks at me. She changes the subject. Tactical. She braves the current and sails through that silence.

"I vote for Snickers cake." Maysaa pushes her plate away. She never finished her food. She's always busy trying to lose weight. At least she's planning to. Every morning. By lunch the plan has gone by the wayside. Then it'll be tomorrow. Or on Monday.

"But I don't feel like any birthday stuff this year," I say.

"Are you sure, Yosef?"

"Yes!"

She catches my eye.

"And now you don't need to ask any more, all right?"

"Okay, okay." Mom paddles to shore.

I get up quickly. I'm not heavy and clumsy like Dad. The chair legs glide across the floor.

Later I sit in my room. The music fills me. The bass. The drums. The beat. It hits me. It flattens me if I turn it up loud enough.

On the wall hangs a worn dart board full of holes. On the floor is a small aquarium with fish. The goldfish look at me through the glass. They can remember all of eight seconds. I've read that somewhere. Eight seconds. Otherwise it's sensations. Basic needs. Situations that constantly appear to be new because their brains are so small. I look at my Kamala Kham poster. It's probably pretty pathetic to have her on the wall. In a way. I don't care. I've thrown the pile of comics on the floor. I don't feel like reading them anymore. I don't feel like throwing them out.

My feet are bare, and they keep the beat with the bass. I can feel the sound. It penetrates me. And offers a rhythm, a punch, right there. Below the waist.

I lie in my bed, wearing only jeans. I have headphones on. I turn the volume up even higher. It has to push me into the darkness. Into a world of water, where I, like the goldfish, will remember only eight seconds into the past. I don't need any more. Eight seconds. No past, no future, memories are like scars. Marks on the skin. I could call one of the goldfish Allan. Then he could swim around in that small, closed basin and have that be his memory.

I locate the telephone with its white cover. I make sure I'm alone. That no one can see me.

I zoom in, enlarge. See everything that I cannot be.

Then I look to see if there is someone in there who looks like me. There are many. Everyone in the water is faceless. It's only if you're a real Allan type that you show everything off.

Allan looks at me from his wet window.

What's up, Yosef? Are you scared?

I look at him.

My uncle Omar has his co-op and his mosque.

Allan has his aquarium.

But what about me?

