



**NOTHING**

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**TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH  
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Nothing matters.

I have known that for a long time.

So nothing is worth doing.

I just realized that.

Pierre Anthon left school the day he realized that nothing was worth doing, because nothing meant anything anyway.

The rest of us stayed on.

And although the teachers had a job on their hands tidying up after Pierre Anthon in the classroom as well as in our heads, part of Pierre Anthon remained stuck inside of us. Maybe that was why it all turned out the way it did.

It was the second week of August. The sun was heavy, making us slow and irritable, the tarmac caught on the soles of our sneakers, and apples and pears were just ripe enough to lie snugly in the hand, the perfect missiles. We looked neither left nor right. It was the first day of school after summer vacation. The classroom smelled of detergent and weeks of emptiness, the windows reflected clear and bright, and the blackboard was yet to be blanketed with chalk dust. The desks stood two by two in rows as straight as hospital corridors, as they did only on this one day of the year. Class 7A.

We found our seats without caring to shake any familiarity into the orderliness.

There's a time for everything. Better things, jumbled things. But not today!

Mr. Eskildsen bid us welcome with the same joke he made every year.

"Take joy in this day, children," he said. "There would be no such thing as vacation were it not for such a thing as school."

We laughed. Not because it was funny, but because him saying it was.

It was then that Pierre Anthon stood up.

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“Nothing matters,” he announced. “I’ve known that for a long time. So nothing’s worth doing, just realized that.” Calm and collected, he bent down and put everything he had just taken out back into his bag. He nodded good-bye with a disinterested look and left the classroom without closing the door behind him.

The door smiled. It was the first time I’d seen it do that. Pierre Anthon left the door ajar like a grinning abyss that would swallow me up into the outside with him if only I let myself go. Smiling at whom? At me, at us. I looked around the class. The uncomfortable silence told me the others had felt it too.

We were supposed to amount to something.

Something was the same as someone, and even if nobody ever said so out loud, it was hardly left unspoken, either. It was just in the air, or in the time, or in the fence surrounding the school, or in our pillows, or in the soft toys that after having served us so loyally had now been unjustly discarded and left to gather dust in attics or basements. I hadn’t known. Pierre Anthon’s smiling door told me. I still didn’t know with my mind, but all the same I knew.

All of a sudden I was scared. Scared of Pierre Anthon.

Scared, more scared, most scared.

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We lived in Tæring, an outpost to a fair-size provincial town. Not swank, but almost. We’d often been reminded of the fact. Nobody ever said so out loud, yet it was hardly left unspoken, either. Near yellow-washed brick homes and red bungalows with gardens running all the way round, new grass brown rows with gardens out front, and then the apartment houses, home to those we never played with. There were some old timber-framed cottages, too, and farms that were no longer farms, the land developed into town, and a few rather more imposing whitewashed residences for those who were more almost-swank than the rest of us.

Tæring School was situated on the corner of two streets. All of us except Elise lived down the one called Tæringvej. Sometimes Elise would go the long way around just to walk to school with the rest of us. At least until Pierre Anthon left.

Pierre Anthon lived with his father and the rest of the commune in an old farmhouse at Tæringvej number 25. Pierre Anthon’s father and the commune were all hippies who were still stuck in ’68. That was what our parents said, and even though we didn’t really know what it meant, we said it too. In the front yard by the street there was a plum tree. It was a tall tree, old and crooked, leaning out over the hedge to tempt us with its dusty red Victoria plums, which none of us could reach. Other years we jumped to get at the plums. We stopped doing that. Pierre Anthon left school to sit in the plum tree and pelt us with unripe plums. Some of them hit home. Not because Pierre Anthon was aiming at us, because that wasn’t worth it, he proclaimed. It was just chance that made it so.

He yelled at us too.

“It’s all a waste of time,” he yelled one day. “Everything begins only to end. The moment you were born you began to die. That’s how it is with everything.”



“The Earth is four billion, six hundred million years old, and you’re going to reach one hundred the most!” he yelled another day. “It’s not even worth the bother.”

And he went on, “It’s all a big masquerade, all make-believe and making out you’re the best at it.

Nothing had ever indicated that Pierre Anthon was the smartest among us, but suddenly we all knew he was. He was onto something. Even if none of us cared to admit it. Not to our parents, not to our teachers, not to one another. Not even to ourselves. We didn’t want to live in the world Pierre Anthon was telling us about. We were going to amount to something, be someone.

The smiling door wasn’t going to lure us.

No, sir. No way!

That was why we came up with the idea. “We” is perhaps an exaggeration, because it was Pierre Anthon who got us going.

It was one morning when Sofie had been hit in the head by two hard plums one after another, and she was so mad at Pierre Anthon for just sitting there in his tree, disheartening all of us.

“All you ever do is sit there gawking. Is that any better?” she yelled.

“I’m not gawking,” Pierre Anthon replied calmly. “I’m contemplating the sky and getting used to doing nothing.”

“The heck you are!” Sofie yelled angrily, and hurled a stick up at Pierre Anthon in the plum tree. It landed in the hedge, way beneath him.

Pierre Anthon laughed and hollered so loud they could have heard him all the way up at the school.

“If something’s worth getting upset about, then there must be something worth getting happy about. And if something’s worth getting happy about, then there must be something that matters. But there isn’t!” He raised his voice a notch and roared, “In a few years you’ll all be dead and forgotten and diddly-squat, nothing, so you might just as well start getting used to it!”

That was when we understood we had to get Pierre Anthon out of that plum tree.

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A plum tree has many branches.  
So many endless branches.  
All too many endless branches.

Tæring School was large and square and gray as concrete. It was in two stories and in essence an ugly building, but few of us ever had time to think about that, and certainly not now that we were spending all our time not thinking about what Pierre Anthon was saying.

Yet this particular Tuesday morning, eight days into the new school year, it was as though the ugliness of the school struck us like a whole fistful of Pierre Anthon's bitter plums.

I walked with Jon-Johan and Sofie through the gate into the schoolyard, and just behind us came Ursula-Marie and Gerda, and we all fell quite silent as we turned the corner and saw the school building. I can't explain how, but it was like it was something Pierre Anthon was making us see. As if the nothing he kept yelling about up in the plum tree had overtaken us on the way and gotten here first.

The school was so gray and ugly and angular that I almost couldn't catch my breath, and all of a sudden it was as if the school were life itself, and it wasn't how life was supposed to look but that anyway. I felt a violent urge to run over to Tæringvej 25 and climb up to Pierre Anthon in his plum tree and stare into the sky until I became a part of the outside and nothing and never had to think about anything again. But I was supposed to amount to something, be someone, so I stayed where I was and just looked the other way and dug my nails into the palm of my hand until it hurt good and strong.

Smiling door — Open! Close!

I wasn't the only one to feel outside calling.

"We have to do something," Jon-Johan whispered, making sure the other new seventh graders just ahead of us didn't hear him. Jon-Johan could play the guitar and sing Beatles songs so you could hardly tell the difference between him and the real ones.

"He's right!" whispered Ursula-Marie, whom I suspected of having a crush on Jon-Johan, and suddenly enough Gerda sniggered right away and stabbed the air with her elbow, Ursula-Marie having walked on in the meantime.

"But what?" I whispered, breaking into a trot. The kids from the other class had come disconcertingly close, among them the bully boys who twanged rubber bands and dried peas at the girls whenever the opportunity arose, and my opportunity looked like it was going to arise pretty soon.

Jon-Johan sent a note round in math, and the whole class met down on the soccer field after school. Everyone except Henrik, because Henrik was the son of our biology teacher, and we didn't want to run any kind of risk.

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To begin with, it felt like an age we were just standing there talking about other things and making ourselves we weren't all thinking about one and the same thing. At last Jon-Johan drew himself up and declared almost solemnly that we all had to pay attention.

"It can't go on like this," his speech began, and that was how he ended it too, after briefly stating what each and every one of us knew, that we couldn't go on making like things mattered as long as Pierre Anthon remained in his plum tree, yelling at us that nothing mattered.

We had just started seventh grade, and we were all so modern and so well-versed in life and being in the world that we knew that everything was more about how it appeared than how it was. The most important thing, in any circumstance, was to amount to something that really looked like it was something. And though that something as yet seemed rather vague and unclear to us, it certainly had nothing to do with sitting in a plum tree, pitching plums into the street.

If Pierre Anthon thought he could make us think any different, he had another thing coming.

“He’s bound to climb down when winter comes and there are no more plums,” said Pretty Rosa.

It didn’t help.

For one thing, the sun was still blazing away in the sky, and winter looked like it was a long way off. For another, there was no reason to believe that Pierre Anthon couldn’t stay in his plum tree in winter or not, even if there were no plums. All he had to do was dress warmly.

“You’re going to have to beat up on him, then.” It was the boys I was talking to, for even though we girls could scratch some, it was obvious that it was the boys who would have to bear the brunt.

They looked around at one another.

They didn’t think it was a good idea. Pierre Anthon was solid and thickset, with a splash of freckles on the nose he’d broken one time in fifth grade when he’d butted some kid from ninth down in the town. Despite his broken nose, Pierre Anthon had won the fight. The kid from ninth had been sent to the hospital with a concussion.

“Fighting’s not a good idea,” said Jon-Johan, and the other boys nodded, ending the discussion there and then, even though we girls probably lost some degree of respect for them on that occasion.

“We should pray to God,” suggested Holy Karl, whose father was something big in the Inner Mission; his mother as well, for that matter.

“Shut up, Karl!” Otto hissed. He pinched Holy Karl until Holy Karl couldn’t possibly shut up, but squealed like a hog with its head in a fire, and the rest of us had to get Otto to lay off so that all his squealing didn’t attract the janitor.

“We could make a complaint about him,” suggested Little Ingrid, who was so small we didn’t always remember she was there. Today, though, we remembered, and responded all at once, “What to?”

“To Mr. Eskildsen.” Little Ingrid noted our astonished expressions. Eskildsen was our homeroom teacher, and he wore a black raincoat and a gold watch and didn’t care to deal with problems on any scale. “To the principal, then,” she went on.

“The principal!” Otto spluttered, and would have pinched Little Ingrid if Jon-Johan hadn’t quickly stepped in between them.

“We can’t complain to Eskildsen or to the principal or to any other grown-up, because if we complain about Pierre Anthon sitting in his plum tree, we’ll have to tell them why we’re complaining. And then we’ll have to tell them what Pierre Anthon’s saying. Which we can’t, because the grown-ups won’t want to hear that we know that nothing matters and that everybody is just making like it does. Jon-Johan threw up his arms, and we imagined all the experts, the educators and psychologists who would come and observe us and talk to us and reason with us until eventually we would give in and again start pretending that things really did matter. Jon-Johan was right: It was a waste of time that would get us nowhere.

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For a while no one said anything. I screwed my eyes up at the sun, then stared at the white soccer

goals without their nets, then behind me at the shot-put circle, the high-jump mattresses, and the running track. A gentle breeze was blowing through the beech hedge that ran round the soccer field and suddenly it was all like a gym lesson and a day like any other, and I almost forgot why we had to get Pierre Anthon out of his plum tree. For all I care he can sit up there and yell till he rots, I thought I said nothing. The thought was true only at the moment it was thought.

“Let’s pelt him with stones,” Otto suggested, and now came a lengthy discussion about where to get hold of the stones and how big they should be and who was going to throw them, for the idea was good.

Good, better, best.

It was the only one we had.

# IV

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One stone, two stones, many stones.

They were all piled up in the bike trailer Holy Karl used every Tuesday afternoon for delivering the local paper and the church newsletter the first Wednesday of the month. We'd gathered them down by the stream where they were big and round, and the trailer was heavy as a dead horse.

We were all going to throw.

"Two each, at the least," Jon-Johan commanded.

Otto kept tally to make sure we each took our turn. Even Henrik, the little butter-up, had been summoned and duly delivered his two shots, neither of which came even close. Maiken's and Sofie's were marginally better.

"So nothing's got you all scared, then?" Pierre Anthon hollered as he followed Ursula-Marie's pathetic shots and watched them land in the hedge.

"You're only up there because your dad's still stuck in '68!" shouted Huge Hans, and hurled a stone into the tree. It smacked into a plum, which splattered in all directions.

We hooted.

I hooted with the rest of them, even though I knew neither claim was true. Pierre Anthon's father and the rest of the commune grew organic vegetables and practiced exotic religions and were receptive to the spiritual world, alternative treatments, and their fellow human beings. But that wasn't the reason it wasn't true. It wasn't true because Pierre Anthon's father wore a buzz cut and worked for a computer company, and the whole thing was up-to-the-minute and had nothing to do with either '68 or Pierre Anthon in the slightest.

"My dad's not stuck in anything, and neither am I!" Pierre Anthon yelled, wiping splatterings of plum from his arm. "I'm sitting here in nothing. And better to be sitting in nothing than in something that isn't anything!"

It was early morning.

The sun was beating down from the east, directly into Pierre Anthon's eyes. He had to shield them with his hand if he wanted to see us. We were standing with our backs to the sun around the trailer on the opposite side of the road. Out of range of Pierre Anthon's plums.

We didn't answer him.

It was Richard's turn. And Richard hurled a stone that cracked hard against the trunk of the plum tree, and another that tore in among the leaves and plums and just missed Pierre Anthon's left ear. Then it was my turn. I've never been good at throwing, but I was angry and determined, and though my first shot ended up in the hedge next to Ursula-Marie's, the second rattled right into the branch of which Pierre Anthon was sitting.

"Hey, Agnes," Pierre Anthon shouted down at me. "You're having such problems believing things matter?"

I flung a third stone, and this time I must have grazed him, because we heard a howl, and for a moment it was quiet up in the tree. Then Otto threw, but too high and too far, and Pierre Anthon began his hollering again.

"If you live to be eighty, you'll have slept thirty years away, gone to school and sat with homework for nine, and worked for almost fourteen. Since you've already spent more than six years being little kids and playing, and you're later going to be spending at least twelve cleaning hours

cooking food, and looking after your own kids, it means you've got nine years at most to live." Pierre Anthon tossed a plum into the air. It followed a gentle arc before plunging into the gutter. "And you want to spend those nine years pretending you've amounted to something in a masquerade that means nothing, when instead you could start enjoying your nine years right away." He pulled another plum off a branch, reclined contentedly in the fork of the tree, and appeared to be weighing the plum in his hand. He took a big bite and laughed. The Victorias were ripening.

"It's not a masquerade!" Otto yelled, threatening Pierre Anthon with a fist.

"It's not a masquerade!" Huge Hans joined in, and launched another stone.

"Then how come everyone's making like everything that isn't important is very important, all the while they're so busy pretending what's really important isn't important at all?" Pierre Anthon laughed and drew an arm across his face to wipe away the plum juice from his chin. "How come it's so important we learn to say please and thank you and the same to you and how do you do when soon none of us will be doing anything anymore, and everybody knows that instead they could be sitting here eating plums, watching the world go by and getting used to being a part of nothing?"

Holy Karl's two stones were sent off in quick succession.

"If nothing matters, then it's better doing nothing than something. Especially if something means throwing stones because you haven't the guts to climb trees."

The stones rained in on the plum tree from all sides. The pitching order was forgotten. Everyone was throwing at once now, and soon Pierre Anthon let out a howl and fell out of the tree, landing with a thump on the grass behind the hedge. Which was just as well, because all our stones were used up and time was getting on. Holy Karl had to be off home with his trailer if he was going to make it to school before the bell.

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The next morning it was quiet in the plum tree when we passed by on our way to school.

Otto was the first one to cross the street. Then followed Huge Hans, who jumped up heavily and yanked away two Victorias with a handful of leaves and a holler, and when there still was no reaction the rest of us followed, jubilant.

We'd won!

Victory is sweet. Victory is. Victory.

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Two days later Pierre Anthon was back in his plum tree with a Band-Aid across his forehead and a whole new range of repartee: "Even if you learn something and think you're good at it, there'll always be someone who's better."

"Pipe down!" I yelled back. "I'm going to be something worth being! And famous, too!"

"Sure you are, Agnes." Pierre Anthon's voice was kind, almost pitying. "You'll be a fashion designer and teeter around in high heels and make like you're really something and make others think they are too, as long as they're wearing your label." He shook his head. "But you'll find out you're a clown in a trivial circus where everyone tries to convince each other how vital it is to have a certain look one year and another the next. And then you'll find out that fame and the big wide world are outside of you, and that inside there's nothing, and always will be, no matter what you do."

I surveyed the ground; there were no stones anywhere.

“Shut up!” I screamed, but Pierre Anthon kept on.

“Why not admit from the outset that nothing matters and just enjoy the nothing that is?”

I gave him the finger.

Pierre Anthon just laughed.

Furious, I grabbed Ursula-Marie by the arm, because Ursula-Marie was my friend with blue hair and six thick braids, and that was definitely something. Blue, bluer, bluest. If my mother hadn't expressly forbidden it, my hair would have been blue too. As it was, I had to make do with the six braids, which weren't particularly impressive given my fine, wispy hair, but at least it was something.

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Only a few days passed before Jon-Johan again summoned us to the soccer field.

There were no good suggestions, but loads of poor ones. None of us was listening to Otto anymore and if he hadn't been the strongest in the class, at least since Pierre Anthon had left school, we all would have laid into him.

Just as we were about to break up and leave, not being able to come up with anything anyway, Sofie stepped forward.

“We have to prove to Pierre Anthon that something matters,” was all she said. Yet it was plenty for we all knew right away what it was we had to do.

We set out the very next day.



Sofie lived at exactly the point where Tæring stopped being town and became countryside. Behind the yellow-washed house where Sofie lived with her parents was a large field with an abandoned sawmill at one end. The sawmill wasn't used for anything anymore and was to be torn down to make room for a recreation facility the town dignitaries had been talking about for years. Even so, nobody was really counting on that recreation facility, and although the sawmill had gradually fallen into disrepair, with broken windows and holes in the roof, it was still there and was exactly what we needed.

At lunch recess we all handed over our one- and two- and five-kroner coins to Jon-Johan, who ran the entire way to the hardware store, made our purchase, and ran all the way back again clutching a brand-new combination padlock.

There was some discussion about what code to choose, since everyone thought their own birthdate provided the most suitable combination of figures. Eventually we agreed on the fifth of February, being the day of Pierre Anthon's birth. Five-zero-two were the numbers we all concentrated on committing to memory, so much so that we forgot about our homework and about paying attention in class, and Mr. Eskildsen started growing suspicious and asked if our heads were full of sparrows or whether we'd just lost whatever little it was that had been attached to our necks.

We didn't reply. Not one of us. Five-zero-two!

We had the sawmill, we had the lock, and we knew what we had to do. Nevertheless, it was a lot harder than we had reckoned. With Pierre Anthon being in some way right about nothing mattering, there was no easy thing to start collecting something that did.

Again, it was Sofie who saved the day.

"We just play along with the idea," she said, and gradually we all found our own ploys to help us.

Elise remembered when she was six and had cried when an Alsatian dog had bitten the head off her doll, so she dug out the old doll and its chewed-off head from the boxes in her basement and brought them along with her to the sawmill. Holy Karl brought an old hymnbook that was missing its front and back and quite a number of its hymns, but nevertheless ran with no other defects from page 27 to page 389. Ursula-Marie delivered a pink ivory comb missing two teeth, and Jon-Johan chipped in with a Beatles tape that had lost all sound, but that he had never had the heart to throw out.

Others went from house to house asking if they could have anything that meant something. One or two doors were slammed in our faces, but we were also given the most wondrous things. The old folk were the best. They gave us china dogs that could nod their heads and were only slightly chipped, photographs of parents long since dead, or the toys of children long since departed into adulthood. We were given clothes that had been treasured and worn to threads, and even a single rose from a bridal bouquet, thirty-six years old.

The rose, however, made us girls somewhat fainthearted, because it really was something we felt mattered, the white bridal dream with the wedding bouquet and the kiss from the man who was to be ours forever. But then Laura said that the lady who had given it to us had gotten divorced only five years later. And since many of our own parents were also divorced, if indeed they had ever been married at all, that dream clearly wasn't worth our time.

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The heap grew and grew.

In just a few days it grew almost as tall as Little Ingrid. Nevertheless, it was still short of

meaning. We all knew that none of what we had collected mattered to us, really, so how were we supposed to convince Pierre Anthon that it did?

He was going to see right through us.

Squat. Zilch. Nothing.

Again Jon-Johan called us together, and it wasn't long before we had to admit that certain things did matter to us, even if it wasn't much and even if they weren't all that important. Still, it was better take than the one we had.

Dennis was the first. He brought a whole stack of Dungeons & Dragons books he had read over and over and almost learned by heart. Otto, however, soon discovered that four of the series were missing, and he said that Dennis was going to have to give them up too.

Dennis blew up and told Otto to mind his own business, that we all knew that wasn't part of the scheme, and we were so mean, all of us. But the more Dennis yelled, the more the rest of us maintained that the books plainly mattered a whole lot to him. And hadn't we just agreed that it was the things that meant most to us that had to go on the heap if it was ever going to convince Pierre Anthon to climb out of his tree?

When Dennis had first handed over the last four of his Dungeons & Dragons books, it was as if the meaning started to take off. Dennis knew how fond Sebastian was of his fishing rod. And Sebastian knew that Richard had a thing about his black soccer ball. And Richard had noticed how Laura always wore the same African parrot earrings.

We should have stopped even before it got this far. Now it was somehow too late, even though I did what I could.

"This isn't going to work," I said.

"Ha!" Gerda scoffed, and she was pointing at my green wedge sandals that I'd spent all summer persuading my mom to buy me, and that she'd only just gotten me recently for half price in the sales.

I knew it was going to come. And to be honest, that was probably why I tried to stop the whole affair. It would only be a matter of time before someone got around to my sandals. The fact that it was Giggling Gerda, little bye-baby-bumpkin, only made things worse. At first I tried to pass it off, as if I hadn't even noticed what it was she was pointing at, but Laura wasn't letting me off the hook.

"The sandals, Agnes," she said, and there was no way out.

I squatted down and was about to untie them, but then I couldn't get myself to do it and stood up again.

"I can't," I said. "My mom's going to ask where they are, and then the grown-ups are going to figure the whole thing out." I thought I was smart. But I wasn't.

"You think you're any better than the rest of us?" cried Sebastian. "What do you suppose my dad's going to think I've done with my fishing rod?" As if to underline his words, he grabbed hold of the line and fishhook that dangled from the heap.

"And what have I done with my books?"

"And where's my soccer ball?"

"And my earrings?"

I'd lost, and I knew it. All I could do was ask for a few days' respite.

"Just until summer's over."

There was no mercy. Even if they did let me borrow a pair of sneakers from Sofie, so I wouldn't have to walk home barefoot.

Sofie's sneakers were too small; they pinched at my big toe, and the way home from the sawmill was a whole lot longer than usual. I was crying as I turned into the street and walked the last part the way up to the house alone.

I didn't go in, but sat down in the bike shed, where I could be seen neither from the street nor the house. I pulled Sofie's sneakers off my feet and kicked them into a corner. The image of my green wedge sandals on top of the heap of meaning wouldn't go away.

I looked down at my bare feet and decided Gerda was going to pay.

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It took me three days to find Gerda's weak spot, and during those three days I was sweetness itself with her.

I had never liked Gerda. She had a way of spitting when she spoke, even more when she giggled, which she did almost all the time. Besides that, she would never let Ursula-Marie alone, and Ursula-Marie was my best friend and so very special, not only because she had blue hair and six braids, but also because she only ever wore black. If my mom hadn't kept on sabotaging it all by buying the garish clothes for me, I would have worn only black too. As it was, I had to make do with one pair of black pants, two black T-shirts with funny slogans in English, and one black woolen undershirt that was still too warm to wear yet here at the beginning of September.

But now it was all about Gerda.

I swapped hair elastics with Gerda, whispered with her about boys, and confided to her that I had warmed a bit to Huge Hans (which wasn't true in the slightest, but though you're not supposed to lie, this was what my older brother referred to as *force majeure*, and even though I wasn't quite sure what it meant, it definitely entailed that right now lying was okay).

The first two days didn't yield much. Gerda didn't seem to be especially fond of anything. (Perhaps she had seen through me. There were some old paper dolls her grandmother had given her, but I knew she hadn't played with them since we were in fifth grade. At one point she showed me a picture of Tom Cruise, who she was swooning over and kissed every night before going to bed. Then there was a whole stack of romantic novels, with doctors kissing nurses and living happily ever after. I admit I wouldn't have minded borrowing them occasionally, and Gerda would probably have stifled a tear or two had she been made to hand them over, but it was still just trifles, nothing that truly mattered. Then on the third day I found it.

It was while we were sitting in Gerda's room drinking tea and listening to a tape her father had just given her that I discovered Gerda's weak spot. We'd spent the two previous days at Gerda's mother's place, in the room she had there. It was filled with girls' stuff, all sequins and tinsel. Now we were sitting in her room at her father's place, where she stayed every other week. It wasn't the stereo tape deck or the inflatable plastic armchair or the idol posters on the walls that made this room different from the one at her mother's place, for she had a stereo tape deck and an inflatable plastic armchair and idol posters on the walls there, too. No, the thing that made the room at Gerda's father's place special was that in the corner stood a very large cage with a very small hamster inside.

The hamster's name was Oscarlittle, and Oscarlittle was what I declared the next day that Gerda had to give up to the heap of meaning.

Gerda wept and said she was going to snitch about me and Huge Hans. I howled laughing when she told her it was just something I'd made up on account of *force majeure*. That made Gerda cry even more and say I was the cruelest of anyone she knew. And when she had cried for two hours and was still inconsolable, I started having second thoughts and thinking maybe she was right. But then I saw my green wedge sandals on top of the heap and wouldn't budge.

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Ursula-Marie and I walked Gerda home to get Oscarlittle right away. We weren't giving her any chance to get out of it.

Gerda's father lived in one of the new row houses. They were gray-brown and built in brick,

least the outer layer was, around the concrete, and all the rooms were fitted with large, easy-to-open windows. ~~The row houses lay at the other end of Tæring, where until recently there had been meadows full of gray-brown sheep.~~ The fact that the house was at the opposite end of Tæring made the walk long and exhausting, but the main thing was the large windows. Gerda's father was home, and Oscarlittle had to be smuggled out.

Ursula-Marie went with Gerda into her room, while I stood outside ready to receive. Oscarlittle was handed through the window, and I stuffed him inside an old rusty cage we had dug out for the purpose. Gerda herself just stood sniveling in a corner of the room and refused to lend a hand.

"Shut up, Gerda!" I snapped eventually, unable to take any more of her whining. "Or there's a dead hamster going on the heap!"

It didn't make Gerda stop sniveling, but it did quiet her down enough to make things tolerable again. And for her to leave the house without her father catching on.

Oscarlittle was mottled white and brown and actually fairly cute with his trembling whiskers, and I was happy not to have to do away with him. The cage, on the other hand, was heavy and unwieldy, and the road to the sawmill unendingly long. We should have borrowed Holy Karl's trailer. We hadn't, so we took turns carrying. Gerda too. There was no reason for her not to take her fair share of the aching shoulders Ursula-Marie and I were getting. It took an age to reach the field and the sawmill, and Oscarlittle squeaked the entire way as if I really was going to kill him, but eventually we got there and could put the cage with Oscarlittle down in the half-light inside the door.

We let Gerda line the cage with some old sawdust, and after she had given Oscarlittle an extra portion of hamster food and a bowl of fresh water, I climbed up the stepladder and placed him and the cage on top of the heap.

I climbed down again, dragged the ladder away, and stood to admire the heap with the cage like a star slightly crooked on top. Then I noticed how quiet it was in the mill.

Quiet. Quieter. All quiet.

It was so quiet I suddenly couldn't help but notice how big and empty the place was, how many cracks and crevices there were in the concrete floor that could just be picked out beneath the dirt and the sawdust, how thick the cobwebs were that clung to every beam and joist, how many holes there were in the roof, and how few windowpanes were still intact. I surveyed the surroundings from one end of the mill to the other, up and down, down and up, then finally turned my gaze to my classmates

They were still staring silently at the cage.

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It was as though Oscarlittle had added something to the heap of meaning that neither my green wedges, nor Sebastian's fishing rod, nor Richard's soccer ball had been able to. I was pretty pleased with myself for having come up with the idea, so it stung that the others seemed less than enthusiastic.

It was Otto who came to my rescue.

"Now *there's* something that's got meaning!" he exclaimed, looking away from Oscarlittle and toward me.

"Pierre Anthon's never going to top that," Huge Hans added, and no one seemed to be protesting.

I had to bite my tongue not to blush from pride.

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It was getting late, and most of us had to be getting off home for supper. We took a final admiring look at our bulging heap, then Sofie turned off the lights and closed the door behind us. Jon-Johan put the padlock on, and we hurried away in all directions.

It was Gerda's turn.



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