

# Liar Liar

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## I'm fine

My dad disappeared the morning of my thirteenth birthday. At least as far as I'm concerned. He might have gone late the evening before, or in the middle of the night, but I found out he'd left when I got downstairs in my bare feet, and my mum was sitting at the kitchen table like a sick little bird.

I'd been sent to bed early the night before. My parents had something important to discuss, they said. I could hear them even with the pillow over my head. The words lost their meaning on their way upstairs, but not their intent. Sometimes you hear what a conversation is really about if you don't understand all of it.

They sounded angry, especially my mum, but calm too. They didn't shout, didn't argue, didn't try to prove they were right. They wanted to hurt each other. Their words were sharp knives.

Each sentence slowly descended towards a full stop that seemed to bring the conversation to an end. But then there was always something else. My parents gave each other an earful in any way they could. The voices faded after a while and in the end only my mum was left. It sounded like someone far away, wearily reciting times tables. She had nothing else to say, but wasn't done talking. The gaps between her murmurings got longer and longer until the house was finally quiet, apart from the water humming in the pipes.

I was already drifting into the no-man's-land between waking and sleep when I realised something strange had happened today. Or rather: something hadn't happened. I opened my eyes wide.

'Damn,' I said.

My dad always wished me happy birthday a day early. He would shake my hand and give me a quick wink in passing so no one else would notice. We had a secret, you see.

I was born on Friday the thirteenth, five minutes before midnight. When he registered my birth at the town hall, he put down five past twelve. So, the fourteenth. It was a white lie, he said. Who'd want to be born on Friday the thirteenth, after all? We were the only ones who knew. Not even mum was in on it. We were partners in crime.

He hadn't shaken my hand today. He hadn't winked. My dad had forgotten my birthday, probably because of what he'd been discussing with my mum. I tried to imagine what could be more important than my birthday. It must be something terrible. I fell asleep, my head full of worst-case scenarios.

I jerked myself awake. My heart was beating like crazy. A bad dream evaporated in the dark before I could piece together what it was about. My pillow was warm and clammy. I turned it over. The weight of my duvet calmed me down.

I listened to the last silence, which could be interrupted at any moment by the sounds of morning from downstairs or outside. An unpleasant thought trickled into my head: **something isn't right.**

I reached for the pull-chain for the lamp on my bedside table, and tugged. Everything in my room was where it should be, yet something had changed.

The girl in the bathroom mirror looked at me, dispirited. As if she knew things I didn't. I turned on the tap. I couldn't be bothered to wait for it to warm up so I splashed cold water over my face. The skin on my back tightened.

I took a towel from the edge of the bathtub. The uneasy thought was still there. Mum's mess on the sink, the chair on the landing, the Hoover, left there so often instead of in the cupboard that this was now its place: everything seemed to have changed into the same.

My ears led the way downstairs. I paused for a moment on the bottom step. Then I carefully set a foot on the cold hall floor. Like someone testing ice to see if it will hold. I wobbled to the kitchen on the outside of my feet.

My mum didn't move. She stared straight ahead blankly. She didn't even blink. It's possible then, I thought, sleeping with your eyes open. She didn't realise I was standing there shivering in the doorway, in nothing but one of my dad's old T-shirts. It went down to my knees.

I gently cleared my throat.

'Mama?'

She looked up. It took a few moments for her to really see me.

'Oh,' she said. 'Charlie.'

I waited for her to say *Happy Birthday!* or *Congratulations!* and to whip out a party horn to blow away the nasty thought that had made itself at home under my skull. It didn't happen.

My mum bowed her head and stared at a brown stain shaped like a half moon on the tablecloth. She put a hand on the table and traced the edge of the stain with her index finger, as if it would help her understand what she was seeing.

The house was quiet. My mum and I were alone. My dad always got up at the crack of dawn. He'd usually left by the time I woke up. So even I don't know why I said what I did.

'Where's Papa?'

'Gone.'

The tone of her voice said a lot more than that short, stark word could. I suddenly knew what wasn't right. It was the silence.

My dad hadn't simply left for work. To come back again that evening smelling of rust and oil and to kiss the top of my head, or pretend he was cracking an egg on it before spreading his fingers over the crown of my head as if the egg snot was trickling through my hair. No. That wasn't what my mum meant. Dad was gone. Really gone.

Someone who goes for good leaves behind a different silence than someone who plans on coming home again that evening. A silence I had never heard before, but recognised all the same. So as far as I'm concerned, that's the moment when my dad disappeared. A grey Tuesday morning in November, around half seven.

I shivered. The cold from the kitchen floor was starting to seep into my bones. My mum looked up.

'Are you alright?' she asked. 'I'm afraid there's nothing to eat.'

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Cold.'

My mum attempted a smile before looking down at the half-moon shaped stain shaped on the tablecloth again. She was wearing yesterday's clothes. I wondered if she'd been sitting there all night.

'I'm going to get ready,' I said.

My mum nodded, even though she hadn't really heard what I'd said.

## Yum

Granny Sonja's door was ajar. I pushed it open. I'd barely set foot in the house when I heard her calling from the living room.

‘Hey, it’s the birthday girl!’

She was sitting at the table. I slid my bag off my shoulder and sat down on the only chair that wasn’t full of crumpled laundry or a pile of magazines.

Granny Sonja lived around the corner from us. I dropped by every morning on my way to school. Unless I overslept. That happened quite a lot. I had a hard time getting up in the morning. Especially in winter, when the warmth of my bed felt like a safe embrace I didn’t want to break off. On days like that I would knock on Sonja’s window and wave, without really stopping. Then she would point to her wrist and gesture that I better get a move on.

To the end of the street, around the corner, across the road. Watch out for the cars that drive like maniacs around there. Down the alley that leads to a small gate in the corner of the school playground. If I was unlucky it would already be locked and I’d have to walk the long way round to the main gate two blocks away.

‘Tea?’ Granny asked, already filling my cup.

I regretted my choice of clothes, which I’d thrown on without thinking. The jumper dug in under my arms. The skirt was too short and not warm enough for the time of year. What’s more, I wasn’t in the mood for looking girly, not today. I tried to figure out whether I’d still have time to go home and change into trousers. I looked at the clock above the door. No, too late, I decided. Granny Sonja saw me fidgeting in my chair.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked, peering over the top of her glasses.

‘Uh-huh,’ I replied.

I wanted to tell her about this morning. How everything had changed yet still remained the same. About the silence my dad had left behind. But how do you explain something like that without sounding like a nutter?

‘Help yourself,’ Granny Sonja said, tapping the biscuit barrel with the nail on her index finger. The newspaper was spread out in front of her. She carefully turned the page, making sure it was lined up precisely with the previous one. She held the corner with one hand as she flattened the paper with the other.

She didn’t really read the paper. She examined it closely, to try and find a story worth reading. She never found anything, but carried on looking, day after day, with the kind of patience only old people have.

‘I’m still in touch,’ she often said. ‘I know what’s going on in the world. Nothing I haven’t seen before.’

Every now and then she would read out a caption under a photo. Then she’d chuckle or shake her head. I fidgeted with my skirt, tugged at my jumper, blew on my tea.

‘So?’ Granny Sonja asked, turning another page. ‘How does it feel to be thirteen?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘Pff.’

She laid her forearms flat on the table, one hand on top of the other. She kept peering at me over the top of her glasses. I pretended I was wearing glasses too and looked back the same way. She raised her eyebrows. I raised mine. She sniffed. I sniffed too. She took off her glasses. My imaginary glasses came off too. She nodded. I nodded.

Granny Sonja squinted. She slowly put the glasses back on the tip of her nose. Meanwhile she kept looking at me sternly. She was challenging me.

I knew she wouldn’t really get angry, but I didn’t dare push my luck. I attempted a smile. It was just as real as my glasses. Sonja let out a satisfied grunt and leant over her newspaper again.

‘There.’

She pointed, without looking. On the edge of the table was a small package wrapped in dark blue paper. I hadn’t noticed it before. I picked it up between my thumb and index finger. It was as light as a feather.

'You might think it's stupid. Open it later, so I don't have to see your face.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'I don't know what to get you anymore. You're growing up so fast. I can't keep track.'

She shook her head as she turned the page.

'Adolescents. I don't get them. How they're put together. Never have done.'

'I'm not an adolescent,' I said, although I wasn't sure whether it was true. 'Not yet.'

'If you say so,' Granny Sonja replied.

'I say so,' I said.

'I lost your father for a while too. It started when he was about your age. Didn't get him. I'll wait, I thought. I'll just wait it out. After all, puberty's a type of illness that goes away again on its own.'

'I'm not suffering from anything,' I said.

'Just you wait,' Granny Sonja replied.

I put down the package. Slid it across the table until it was right at the edge. There was a knot in the wooden tabletop. When I was little I had drawn a circle around it in pen. You could still just about make it out.

'He's gone,' I said softly.

Granny Sonja looked at me over her glasses again.

'I know,' she said, just as quietly.

I wondered how she could know. Perhaps my dad had dropped by before he left. To say goodbye to her. And not to me. I suddenly felt a bit queasy.

'Your mother phoned,' Granny Sonja said, as if she'd read my mind.

I didn't look up. I focused on the knot with the circle around it.

When had Mama phoned? First thing today? Yesterday evening? During the night?

'It was coming, of course,' Sonja said.

I made a sound that could have meant anything. So as to disguise the fact I didn't know what she meant.

'I'll bet you're angry.'

'Angry?'

'At your father.'

I glanced at her for a fraction of a second and then back at the knot.

'No,' I said. It sounded a bit like a question.

'No?'

I was angry, yes, but not at Papa. It was awful that he'd left without saying a word. My mum's fault. She'd scared him off with her nagging. According to her, my dad couldn't do anything right. Even if he dutifully did what she said.

'Wouldn't be strange,' Granny Sonja said.

I sensed a serious conversation looming. I didn't have time for that. And really wasn't in the mood either. Granny Sonja could make me say things I didn't want to say. She had a knack for that, worming things out of me. I never saw it coming. Before I knew it I'd be blurting something out I'd rather have kept to myself.

'Gotta go,' I said.

'Already? You haven't touched your tea.'

'I really need to go. I'm running late. Sorry.'

Granny Sonja raised her hands a bit before letting them drop onto the newspaper.

'School,' she said. 'Very important. It's important to be on time.'

'Yes,' I said as casually as possible. I was never entirely sure if Granny Sonja was pulling my leg or not.

'Very well. Call round later? I'll bake a cake.'

I inhaled and held my breath. To stop the first thing that came to mind escaping, and the next. Granny Sonja's cakes were inedible. Really gross. I think she did her best to make them as vile as possible. To see whether her visitors would dare say something. She enjoyed watching them as they took the first bite, wanted to spit it out, but then forced it down their throat after all. 'Homemade,' she'd then say with mock pride. So the person would respond, 'Really? I'd love the recipe.'

Granny Sonja looked at me. Now I knew for sure. Underneath her straight face, another face was laughing.

'A proper birthday cake,' she said. 'With candles.'

She was casting out a line. I didn't bite.

I said, 'Nice.' And 'Yum.'

'Run along then,' she said.

I stood up and picked up my bag.

'Don't forget your present.'

I grabbed the package from the table.

'Bye, Granny.'

'Happy birthday!' she called when I was already in the hall.

'Thanks!' I shouted back, closing the door behind me.

I tore off the blue paper as I walked. I never had any patience when it came to unwrapping presents. The way my mum opened a parcel got on my nerves. It took forever. Fiddling with the tape so as not to rip the paper. Unbearable. Why did she have to do that? Not because she wanted to reuse the paper, which disappeared into the paper bin, neatly folded. She did it to annoy me. I couldn't think of any other reason.

I was holding a little box made from black shiny plastic. The gold letters on top were so curly you couldn't make them out. I opened the lid. On a bed of velvet were two earrings with cobalt blue gems. My favourite colour. I stopped and laughed out loud. Granny Sonja sure knew what to give me. I couldn't wait to show Liv.

## It doesn't matter

It was drizzling. Thankfully, the gate was still open. The caretaker was trudging across the school playground. When he walked past me he rattled his keys.

'Just in time,' he grumbled. 'As usual.'

Liv spotted me from a way off. She was standing by the bikes, getting wet without a care in the world. She raised her clenched fists to shoulder height and made small cheering movements.

Hurray, she mouthed. She hadn't forgotten. Of course she hadn't forgotten, it was Liv.

I held up the black box as we walked inside.

'Look,' I said. 'From Sonja.'

'What is it?' Liv asked.

I opened the lid and showed her the earrings.

'Your favourite colour.'

'I know.'

'Sonja's the best,' Liv said. 'I wish I had a granny like that.'

'I'll bet,' I said with a grin.

I put the box in my coat pocket.

'Aren't you going to put them in?' Liv asked.

'Later.'

I didn't feel like making myself pretty.

'You'll get my present later,' Liv said. 'But for now, happy birthday.'

She put her arms around my neck. My back became long and stiff. Liv was hugging a lamppost. She let go of me and took a step back.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

My head became heavy. It drooped down and I shrugged my shoulders.

‘Hey,’ Liv said softly. She touched my arm. ‘Is something up?’

‘My dad’s gone,’ I said.

‘Gone?’

‘This morning.’

‘He’ll come back. Simple as. He always comes back.’

I shook my head.

‘I don’t know. It’s different this time.’

Liv sighed.

‘Today of all days,’ she said.

‘Yep,’ I said.

‘Couldn’t he have chosen another day?’

‘I know.’

Liv tried to look through the hair hanging in front of my face.

‘It’ll be alright,’ she said, her head tilted to one side. ‘Anyway, happy birthday. Especially now.’