

Bahar Bizarre

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1 The new one

I've changed school. Now all the children in my class are new to me. All faces I've never seen before. It'll take me a couple of days to learn their names. I already know my teacher's: she's called Katrien. Miss Katrien has brown hair, tied back in a long ponytail, and train tracks in her mouth. When she laughs, you can see the rails gleaming on her teeth. Miss Katrien said that I needn't be scared and that I was welcome. 'Right, children?' she asked. And the whole class began to nod and whisper in agreement. The room was abuzz with 'yes' and 'of course' and 'why not' and 'welcome'. I stood wobbling, one foot over the other, and smiled at the invisible toes in my shoes. Miss Katrien came over to stand next to me.

'So this is the good news I told you about yesterday,' said the teacher, placing her hand on my shoulder. How cool! I'd never been *good news* before, not since I was born. It was as if my photo was on the front page of the newspaper. Beside the weather forecast, a new world record in something or other and a pop star visiting a distant country.

'What's your name?' Agnes wanted to know. Of course at that point I didn't yet know that Agnes's name was Agnes.

Sometimes I stumble over my words. Then I get all flustered and turn bright red. As if I'm standing on my head, or hanging upside down on the climbing frame. Except I wasn't standing on my head now, I was just standing in my new class, with curious faces in front of me. I got so flustered it seemed as if I'd forgotten my own name. There's nothing I can do about it. It just happens. It never goes on long. When I'm somewhere new, I feel as shy as the squirrels in the park, who prefer not to be seen and disappear into the tall trees at lightning speed. But there are no trees in class to disappear into.

'Well don't keep them guessing,' Miss Katrien smiled, nudging me with her elbow.

'Ba- Ba- Bahar,' I said shyly, so quietly that even the children in the front row couldn't hear.

'Bar-bar?' Ruman grinned. 'What a strange name.'

'She said Bazaar,' Antoine thought.

'No, no. Ba-har,' I repeated, my head as red as a peony.

'Bahar? That's bizarre.'

And then everyone started to laugh, because it rhymes and rhymes are sometimes funny.

'Enough,' said Miss Katrien sternly. 'Welcome, Bahar.'

She pointed me towards the empty seat next to Ruman. ‘Ruman’s nice,’ she added. ‘You’ll get on well with him, Bahar.’

Miss Katrien smiled broadly. Along the rail track in her mouth a train went by.

Toot-toot.

I shuffled over to the seat next to Ruman. And that was the beginning of my first day at my new school.

2 The jobs

‘Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?’ asked Miss Katrien one day.

I found that a difficult question. How should I know now what I’ll want to do when I’m older? I hardly know what I’ll get up to next weekend. Fortunately we didn’t have to answer right away.

‘Before we start thinking about that,’ said Miss Katrien then, ‘I’d like to hear what your mums and dads do. That’ll help us get to know each other better.’

So my new classmates told each other their parents’ jobs. Agnes was first up. She’s an only child, she said, just like me. Her mother is a pilot. She does night flights and is often away for work. ‘Mummy’s above the clouds as much of the time as she’s on the ground,’ she said proudly, with her nose in the air. Agnes probably stuck her nose in the air to be closer to her mum, I thought. ‘When Mum’s above the clouds,’ Agnes continued, ‘I stay with Daddy. He lives in a different house because they’re divorced. Sometimes I’m allowed into the big bed with him. That’s fun, except Dad snores like a bear.’

‘My brother snores too,’ sighed Ruman. ‘It’s awful. When I was younger I often couldn’t sleep because of it, but recently I’ve found a solution. When Mirko is really making too much noise, I put the tip of the duvet in my ear.’

‘And what about the other ear?’ Agnes wanted to know.

‘That’s on my pillow of course,’ said Ruman beaming. He thought himself very clever for that. ‘One ear on the pillow, and the duvet in the other. Look!’ He dipped his left ear towards his left shoulder, covered it with his hand and stuck a finger of his right hand in his other ear. ‘Works every time,’ exclaimed Ruman. ‘Easy-peasy! Now Mirko can snore as loud as he wants, I’m asleep within three seconds of my head hitting the pillow.’

Agnes imitated him. And soon everyone had their head on one side and a finger in one ear. That looked funny. Even Miss Katrien tried it. Did she cuddle up to a bear in bed too?

‘Wait,’ said Antoine enthusiastically, ‘let’s test to see if it really works!’ And he started snorting and snoring dreadfully loudly, but we couldn’t hear it, as we had our fingers in our ears. Luckily no one actually fell asleep.

‘My dad is the minister’s assistant’s employee’s assistant,’ said René proudly when it was his turn. ‘He’s constantly having very important meetings with lots of other staff members.’ Max’s mum works for the city park service. She makes sure all the little squares and parks stay in tip-top condition. Ili’a’s mum sings in the opera. Roxanne’s mum is an optician and Antoine’s father works at a hospital. He’s a doctor and gives injections to people leaving for Africa. Anouk’s mum has burnout.

‘What sort of job is that?’ Agnes asked.

‘Everyone knows that,’ said Ruman. ‘Burnout is an English word for a fireman. It’s simple: fire out.’

‘Burnout isn’t a job, Ruman,’ said Miss Katrien. ‘Burnout is when you can’t work for a while, because you’re too tired. Because you’ve worked so much that you’re completely empty.’

‘It’s the disease of our era,’ said Antoine, with a face like he was a doctor himself, just like his father.

Anouk shrugged. ‘But things are slowly getting better and Mum feels like doing things again! She’s stopped her old job and gone back to studying.’

Then it was Ruman’s turn. His mum has a pizza restaurant, with a large patio by the river. ‘My favourite pizza is one with a scoop of ice-cream in the middle and chocolate sauce on top,’ he said, eyes gleaming. ‘Mirko invented it himself.’

Miss Katrien looked surprised and frowned, causing a large question mark to appear on her forehead.

‘You must mean a pancake, Ruman,’ she said.

But that remark didn’t go down well with Ruman. ‘Please Miss Katrien,’ he said with a stern face. ‘Never say pancake to a pizza! That’s a scandal. A pancake is an omelette with a bit of flour thrown in, but a pizza... that’s art!’ He began to salivate. The other children laughed. Ruman is funny. Perhaps Miss Katrien is right and he’s not that bad.

‘Pizzas are so yummy,’ sighed Ruman. ‘Know what? I’ll bring pizza for everyone on my birthday. Or even better, I’ll invite you all to our restaurant! On the big patio by the river. And after the meal we can skim pebbles on the water. I’m really good at that. When I’m grown up, I’m going to skim stones as a job.’

‘Skimming stones isn’t a job,’ said Antoine. ‘And anyway, you’re not supposed to be saying what you want to be yourself yet. Parents first. Otherwise I might just as well have said I want to be a surgeon.’

‘And I’ll be a football champion,’ whooped Agnes throwing her hands in the air as if she had scored. ‘Goal! Goal!’

Suddenly everyone wanted to say what he or she would be when they grew up and they all started shouting over each other. It made so much noise that Miss Katrien put her fingers in her ears. I didn’t say anything.

‘Can we say it now?’ Roxanne asked.

‘Only the parents! Only the parents,’ Antoine shouted irritably. He didn’t like people deviating from the plan.

‘But you’ve just said what you want to be yourself,’ Roxanne protested.

Now Antoine’s face went completely purple. ‘I said what I would say, if I were allowed to,’ he defended himself. ‘But since we’re not allowed to say, I haven’t actually said it yet. What don’t you understand about that?’

‘A surgeon,’ repeated Roxanne pushing her glasses higher up her nose. ‘That’s what you said.’

‘Who says skimming stones isn’t a job?’ asked Ruman when it was quiet again.

‘Skimming stones isn’t a job, Ruman,’ Miss Katrien said then. ‘But you’re as stubborn as a stone.’

‘You see,’ said Antoine triumphantly.

‘Perhaps not yet,’ Ruman admitted at last. ‘But that could change some day.’

Miss Katrien said nothing more. She pursed her lips. This time there was no train to be seen. Then it was my turn.

3 My dad's a tadpole

Before I could say what my parents' jobs were, I had to tell them something else. After all, most children have a mother and a father. I don't. And they didn't know that yet.

'To start with,' I said cautiously, 'I don't have a dad.' I looked fleetingly into the class and saw a sea of questioning looks. 'But I don't mind at all as I have two fantastic mums,' I added hastily. 'One has black hair and is called Mama Vero. The other's a red-head and she's called Mams Sophie.'

My new classmates stared at me wide-eyed.

'That's crazy,' said Agnes incredulously.

'No it's not,' I said, 'it's the way it's always been. To me it's completely normal.'

'Why not?' said Roxanne, pushing her glasses up her nose. 'I wouldn't mind that at all. But maybe that's because my dad's so strict. It even drives my mum mad.'

'Oh! I get it,' Anouk suddenly exclaimed enthusiastically as if she'd solved a puzzle. 'Your parents got divorced, like mine, and then your mum fell in love with a woman?'

A number of children began to nod.

'That's possible,' Ruman pondered.

'That'll be it,' said René.

'Ha ha,' Agnes laughed, clapping her hands, 'good thinking.'

'No, no, that's not what happened at all,' I said.

'Or her father has had himself changed into a woman!' cried Antoine, whose father is a doctor.

'You can't turn into a woman,' said Agnes.

'Can too,' said Antoine. 'After an operation.'

'Then what do they do with your winky?' Agnes wanted to know.

'Op-er-a-tion!' said Antoine emphatically. 'Are you deaf or something?'

Antoine easily feels misunderstood. And then he gets angry and sometimes swears. It's something he needs to work on, according to Miss Katrien.

'Listen,' said Miss Katrien then, 'instead of all guessing how Bahar came to have two mothers, wouldn't it be better to just ask her? Then she can tell you herself.'

'It's very simple,' I said then. 'My parents aren't divorced, and my father hasn't been converted into a woman. I never had a father. My father is a tadpole.'

The class went silent as a mouse.

'A what?' asked Miss Katrien hesitantly, 'A tadpole?'

'Her father isn't a human being,' René whispered secretively, pointing at me open-mouthed. 'Do you guys hear that?' He'd gone completely white at the thought.

'Impossible,' said Ruman, resolutely shaking his head, 'it doesn't work without one. You *have* to have a father. Always. Al-ways.' He stretched out the second al-ways like a piece of chewing gum. 'There always has to be a sperm.'

'That's true,' Miss Katrien affirmed, 'you always need a sperm cell to make a baby.'
'Like a seed,' said Antoine resolutely. 'It doesn't work without a sperm, and an egg.'
'That's right,' said Miss Katrien, 'a sperm cell and an egg cell.'
'Oh, that,' I said, 'you mean my biological father? The sperm donor? A friend of Mama Vero donated the sperm. He lives in Santiago. That's the capital of Chili. All the way on the other side of the world. I saw him once in a photo with Mama Vero, but I've never met him. I look a bit like him. His name is Kike and he provided the sperm.'
'I told you she was weird,' whispered René. 'Bahar is bizarre. Her father's a frog called Kicker. Kicker the Frog.'
'Croak, croak,' said Antoinex.
Everyone laughed, except for Miss Katrien.
'If you want to croak, you can go to the woods,' she said angrily. 'This is a class not a pond.'
A freight train thundered over her teeth. Her voice was stormy.

4 How Mams became a rock star

Sometimes I see things not everyone sees. Crocodiles under my bed, cauliflowers or laughing faces in the clouds, and ghosts when the streetlight shines through the curtains onto the wall in my room. Sometimes I see a train clatter along the rail tracks in Miss Katrien's mouth. And once in a while my mouth moves faster than my brain. Then I say things I haven't thought through. Sometimes I say something before I've thought it at all. And I like nothing better than making things up. That's what happened when Miss Katrien asked what my parents did.

'My mum's a rock star,' I said beaming. 'She plays in a rock band.'

It's always been Mams Sophie's dream to travel from city to city and roam the stages of the world. So it wasn't a complete lie. And it would have been perfectly possible, if her father had allowed her to take drumming lessons as a little girl. But Grandad Job hadn't thought that a good idea. He felt that drumming was not for girls. However loudly Mams complained, she wasn't allowed. So it's not like it's Mams Sophie's fault she's not a rock star.

Not long ago Mams Sophie did start drumming lessons. You should *always follow your passion and it's never too late to learn*, Mama Vero had said to encourage her. She'd read it at the hairdresser's a couple of weeks before. In a weekly magazine at the top of a big pile. Mama Vero secretly tore out the article and then put the magazine back at the bottom of the pile. She came home with a whole load of new curls in her hair and a newspaper clipping in her handbag. Barely a week later the whole hallway was stuffed with drums and cymbals.

The first time Mams started drumming, the vase of flowers fell off the kitchen counter and the neighbours rang the doorbell to ask what was going on. It really makes an infernal racket when she's drumming. Like an elephant doing the washing up. We've since found a solution: when Mams Sophie starts drumming, we put the vase of flowers on the floor, and then Mama Vero and I block our ears. Like Ruman when his brother snores. But of course we don't tell her!

The entire class was still staring at me open-mouthed after I said that my mother was a drummer in a rock band.

‘So what’s your mother’s band called?’ asked Roxanne.

‘I’d like to know that too,’ said Miss Katrien.

‘The... the...,’ I stammered, ‘The Mamas.’

Making things up is fun when you get going.

‘A drummer,’ said Antoine full of admiration.

‘A good drummer is really important. It’s the drummer who keeps the whole band together. Without a drummer there wouldn’t be much left of the song. A bit like when ...’

‘Pizza without yeast?’ Ruman guessed.

‘A plane without wings,’ thought Agnes.

But that wasn’t quite what Antoine meant.

‘Just like a song without a drummer,’ said Antoine.

‘I used to play the piano,’ sighed Miss Katrien, ‘but then I moved house, and now I don’t have a piano anymore.’

‘Did you forget to bring it with you?’ Ruman wanted to know.

That made Miss Katrien laugh.

I thought it sad that she didn’t play the piano anymore. Did Miss Katrien not realise she had to follow her passions? Then her face brightened again. ‘Know what, Bahar? Sometime soon we’ll invite all your parents to come and talk to us about their jobs. Then we’ll definitely have to get your mother to come and tell the class about her life as a rock star, and perhaps she can play a solo too?’

A drum solo in class! Everyone liked the idea and there was a hum of ‘yes’ and ‘of course’ and ‘why not’.

What a deep hole I was digging for myself. My hands were clammy at the thought.

‘What do you think, Bahar?’ Miss Katrien asked.

Then I said cautiously that I liked the idea, but that it wouldn’t be easy, as Mams Sophie was away so often.

‘So yes...’

‘You can ask her anyway,’ said Agnes and everyone nodded. You can always ask, everyone seemed to think. Then there was no way out.

‘I’ll ask her when she gets back from Florida, and before she leaves for Martinique. Because she has really important gigs there.’

‘Agreed,’ said Miss Katrien.

That’s how Mams Sophie became a rock star. The train tracks in Miss Katrien’s mouth glistened. As if it were summer and the sun shining down on them.
