

## Erika First

Original Title: *Du veit ingenting*

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I glance cautiously around the locker room after PE. Everyone has to shower naked, even though people have protested and some have tried to just spray themselves with dry shampoo. I look at the other girls – there are big boobs and flat chests, bony ribs and flabby stomachs, jutting collarbones and curvy thighs. If I were a boy, I would've done whatever it took to get a glimpse inside the girls' locker room.

I can stare as much as I want. Most girls are rushing to finish up as quickly as possible and don't have time to look around as they dry off and get dressed.

I stare, and my eyes take in all these naked bodies scrambling into their clothes.

It should've excited me. I should've felt something right now. Something should've stirred somewhere in my body. Maybe heart palpitations, a higher pulse that would be different from the one I had during PE. If I were a lesbian I would've felt it now, standing here with all the other girls. I might as well have been looking at boxes of cereal or watching the weather report, something totally ordinary, because this isn't doing anything for my head *or* my body.

"You're so quiet. What are you thinking about?"

Anna jolts me out of my mental whirlpool, out of the jungle of boobs and bodies and everything girls just *have* and that so many people would do whatever it took to get close to. I sigh.

"Is something wrong?" she asks, but not in an irritated way like before.

I shake my head, fed up.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

Sometimes nothing is the absolute best.

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How does everyone else manage to fall in love? Anna did it in no time at all. All she had to do was sit outside the store on a regular old day and wait for a car and *boom presto* it

happened like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Girl meets boy”, as they say in American rom-coms. I meet boys at school every day but nothing happens. Not even the tiniest bit of excitement anywhere in my body.

I’ve gotten Anna to tell me stories about boys she’s been in love with, I’ve seen movies that are pretty much *only* about love, I talk with Hiro about eternally broken hearts. And yet it’s never my turn. It’s like my body and my heart and my head are just roaming around aimlessly without any purpose. It’s stupid to think about it that way, though. I have Erika, I have Anna, I have my family, I have Hiro in front of a computer in Tokyo, I have subjects I want to do well in, we have sibling-swimming every Tuesday.

And yet it’s like there’s something missing.

It’s never my turn.

It’s like I haven’t learned something that everyone else has.

And now Anna’s on her way onto the train while she leaves me behind on the platform like a passenger doomed to wait here for all eternity.

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Erika and I have something in common: we’re both different. But she was born that way, I wasn’t. She didn’t get to choose. She couldn’t be like everyone else even if she tried. What’s different about her has a name, a number combined with a letter in a big medical manual. For me, it’s just a feeling.

I know what it means to be like everyone else. I tried, but it didn’t work. I tried for years; I wanted the same kinds of clothes as everyone else, I had the same favorite color, took the same selfies, listened to the same bubblegum pop someone had decided everyone should like, I followed the same people on YouTube as the rest of the class, I wanted to be in the loop about the same things, but I felt more and more like it wasn’t me. It didn’t *speak* to me, like into my skeleton or stomach.

And then I could let go. Stop going with the flow. Just be Tina.

The summer before ninth grade, we went on a family vacation to Piteå and ate soft serve in cones with salty licorice topping. I was allowed to walk around town by myself for a little while Mom and Dad and Erika buzzed around each other with soft serve and wet wipes. A little way down the main street, I came across a small alley, free of chain stores and

billboards. Suddenly, a small window lit up. Or – I guess it isn't quite right to say that it *lit up* since everything inside was dark and black. A big mannequin was decked out in a black tulle skirt, a leather corset, and long fishnets. Another had pants with lots of chains, a studded belt, and a t-shirt with bleeding letters on the front. I had to go in.

It was the first time I went inside a store where I really felt *home*. It smelled like incense, metal was blaring from the speakers, and all the clothes were either weird or scary. I didn't really know what I was looking for, but I did smile when the man behind the counter said "hey there!" and I tried a casual "hey" in response.

"Looking for anything special?" he asked. His long hair was in a ponytail and he had black nails.

"If I was then it seems like I came to the right place," I said, a little cooler than I was used to being. I felt like I could be like that here, like the music and the atmosphere warmed me up a bit.

"Feel free to take a look around," the ponytail-man said with a smile.

I stood next to a rack with t-shirts and browsed through every one. Some had band logos, some that I'd heard of, others I'd have to check out on Spotify later. One of the shirts made me stop: it was a drawing of a guy lying behind a sofa, with the text: "I found Jesus – he was hiding behind the couch".

"That one's a bestseller here. That and the Sex Pistols shirt, that one never goes out of style though. Especially with people your age who are discovering punk. They want Sex Pistols. Good place to start."

Did I want a bestseller? Not really. I didn't come to this store to buy something *everyone else* wanted, even though everyone who came here was probably a little weird or freaky in some way. My eyes landed on a sweatshirt with a pattern that looked like thick barbed wire. That one. That one would be mine.

"Good choice," the ponytail-man said as he put the sweatshirt in a bag. "Thanks for stopping by. Come back anytime," he said with a smile.

I knew that I was going to dream myself back here often.

Later, Anna told me that she noticed the sweatshirt when she was new in our class. It stood out from everything the other kids were wearing – pastel blue and light yellow and anonymous gray. I sat there with my tattoo-pattern-sweatshirt and thick layer of eye makeup just waiting for someone to come over and look straight at me.

I have a lot to thank the sweatshirt for. A best friend, for one, even though I lied to Anna and said I bought it online. If only the ponytail-man at the strange and exciting store knew that. I follow them on Instagram. Sometimes I've thought about sending a message to say hi and thanks for everything the sweatshirt helped me with. But they probably get messages all the time, and I guess a message from a girl in Norway wouldn't be that interesting to them anyway. He'd said thanks for stopping by, though. That must have meant something. An open door to something more.

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We have sibling-swimming every Tuesday. Unlike PE, I don't actually *wish* I got my period right before. Swimming is my favorite thing Erika and I do together. I pack our swim bags then Dad drives us to the indoor pool. Mom braided Erika's hair so it'll be easy to shower before and after.

"We're going swimming!" Erika exclaims in the car on the way there. She's so happy. She loves going to the pool. She's like a dolphin in the water. If it's true that every person has their own element, then Erika's is definitely water.

Dad drops us off and we go inside, tapping our armbands against the machine at the entrance. There are light-up shoes and Converse scattered all helter-skelter in the girls locker room, both big and small. I can hear gleeful squeals from little children's voices and mothers shouting "We have to shower first!" Erika makes her way to the row of lockers we always use. She stops before she gets to the regular locker. It says "Sortland" on a blue nameplate. It's being used. A girl who's a little older than me who's unpacking her things.

"That's my locker," Erika declares.

The girl looks at Erika with one eyebrow raised as if she didn't want to hear what was just said.

"We'll find another locker," I say.

"But it's MINE!"

Now Erika might get stuck. I need to think. *Fast.*

"Come on, this girl is using the locker. It's fine, there are tons of free lockers. We're going swimming now, remember?" I say, gently tugging at Erika's hand. I can tell she's starting to get worked up, but also that she's trying to contain it.

"Let's go swim, come on, we'll go down the slides and dive and everything," I say. I can feel all the stress building up in my body.

“You can have my locker,” the girl says suddenly. “It’s fine.”

Erika’s anger didn’t get the chance to start. Now she’s happy again. She turns to me as the girl takes her things and finds another locker.

“My locker!”

“Erika, you know sometimes other people have to use this locker. It’s all up for grabs, and no one owns lockers here.”

But now Erika’s getting undressed, now she’s doing everything she’s supposed to and this particular battle is one I feel like I don’t have time for right now. We’re going swimming. We’re going to have fun. This is what we’ve been looking forward to. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the other girl giving us a sidelong glance. I give her a thin-lipped smile in return. “Thanks,” I say. She looks away quickly and focuses on herself.

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In the water, everything disappears. All the episodes, all the stress. Here, Erika can do what she wants without worrying about how many people there are around her. There aren’t that many others at the pool today, just a few grown-ups practicing the crawl, and two people in the shallow end who are practicing the breaststroke. I haven’t seen them before. It looks like a big brother and a little brother. The youngest is making quite a bit of noise, splashing and shouting, but Erika doesn’t seem to mind. I turn toward them every once in a while to make sure everything is okay. It looks like the older brother has things under control, clapping when his little brother manages to take a few proper strokes. They look happy. Water is good for people, I think. In the water, Erika is free. She learned how to swim when she was six. Now she’s ten and can swim both on her back and stomach. She can float like a starfish and she can swim underwater. Sometimes I sit on the edge and just watch her. I watch how she moves, plays, swims, jokes around, enjoys herself. She can *do* this. She excels at this. *Imagine if everyone could see this*, I think as I dangle my legs in the water. *Then no one would think she was different*. I dismiss the thought with a wave of my hand. It doesn’t help to think that way.

“Look at me!” Erika shouts, adjusting her goggles. She wants to show me a trick where she throws a little red ring that she dives down to find. I count the seconds, but not many pass before she’s above the surface again.

“Nice, Erika!” I shout, clapping. She claps like a satisfied little seal. I let go of the edge of the pool and swim over to her.

“You’re so good at this!”

“I *am* good at this,” she grins. She’s extra cute with those goofy goggles, the rubber sticking to the area around her eyes.

“You’re like a dolphin,” I say proudly.

“No, like a starfish!” she says, flipping over on her back. I do the same. We float side by side and no one can bother us now. If only we could just lie this way all the time. Without worrying about school and the internet and hearts that don’t fall in love the way they should.