Seen this?

by

Sigrid Agnethe Hansen

Sample translation

Page 5–7

NOW

The car smells of petrol station hotdogs and warm buns. We’ve been driving for three hours and my little sister is getting bored. She sits in her car seat beside me, kicking.

“Anna, be a love and try to keep your sister entertained, will you?” Mum says from the front seat.

I find a picture book about animals and give it to my sister. The kicking stops and she starts to look at the book as she tears a currant bun into pieces.

I take a quick look at my phone. It says there’s still one hour and nine minutes left to the new house. Google Maps says it’s 303 kilometres from the old front door to the new one. It would take fifty hours to walk it – but who walks for fifty hours straight? I could go by boat too and that would only take three hours. We used to do that before – come here by boat and visit Grandma – but this time we’re driving because we’re not visiting; now we’re going to live here.

“We’ll soon be there,” Dad says from the front seat.

I don’t know if he’s saying that to comfort or warn me.

A rumour travels quicker than any car can drive. A rumour doesn’t need to fasten its seatbelt. A rumour doesn’t get on a boat, eat a hotdog and gaze out of the window or watch the ads on those screens that hang from the ceiling. A rumour knows that what matters is getting where it’s going quickly, and it doesn’t have time to take a long boat trip. The rumour doesn’t wait until the boat has docked, the rumour doesn’t look at the clock, the rumour doesn’t stand around quietly wondering if anybody is waiting on shore. That isn’t how a rumour works. The rumour doesn’t care about kilometres or speed or travel routes – it just wants to get where it’s going quickly and it wants to reach as many people as possible.

Has the rumour travelled on ahead of me? Has it already got there? There’s always somebody who knows somebody else, who knows something nobody else knows. 303 kilometres is nothing.

I think about the rumour and close my eyes. I picture the faces of everybody in my old class. The girls, the boys, long hair, short hair, fringes, side partings, ponytails, loose hair, gap teeth, braces. I see the flush in their cheeks, the blood draining from their faces; I see faces that have something to pass on.

Dad stops outside a yellow house.

“Here we are now,” he says, and my little sister starts kicking again. She wants to get out. Mum can’t unfasten her from her car seat quickly enough.

“You have now reached your destination,” it says on the screen.

I close Google Maps, take a deep breath from my belly and get out of the car.

[p 10-13]

When I wake up I think about King Triton and his daughter. The one who was the little mermaid in the Disney film. The one who wanted to be human and had to live with not having a language, not being able to speak. Somebody must once have thought beings like this existed or maybe, like me, they dreamed about them. Somebody must have pictured that somewhere beneath the surface of the sea there was a life and a world us humans couldn’t be part of.

When I think about it, there are quite a lot of worlds I can’t be part of, but that doesn’t make me dream about them at night. If I did, I’d be kept pretty busy with all that dreaming. Of course some are pretty unrealistic. Living on Mars, or another planet for that matter. I’d never be able to cope with living in a place where it was always winter and you’d end up like a walking popsicle. I don’t have a problem with not being able to be part of these worlds – it’s almost a matter of what is physically achievable. I probably can’t be bothered to become an astronaut or a polar explorer. To do that, I’d have to have lived a totally different life from the time I was small. People who are interested in things like that are already interested from the time they can barely talk. They learn the order of the planets before they learn the difference between right and left, and dress up in spacesuits at kindergarten carnival. The first carnival I can remember, I went as a milk carton. Not because I was crazy about milk but because Dad thought it was a cool costume to make.

Anyway, I’ve never been bothered about outer space. What I’m bothered about is the worlds around me every single day that I’m nowhere near being able to be part of.

Maybe most of all a world where I have a best friend. Or any friend at all who isn’t Grandma.

The kitchen is a fortress of cardboard boxes and kids’ toys. I push my way through a forest of Duplo before stepping straight into a pool of yoghurt. My little sister smiles contentedly as she sits in the chair with Dad, smacking her lips. She still hasn’t learned to eat with a spoon and isn’t all that particular about whether her food ends up in her mouth or on the floor.

“Somebody should set an age limit for being able to eat on your own,” I mutter.

“A very good morning to you too,” says Dad. “Full of morning cheer as ever, I see?”

The question hangs in the air as I look in the fridge to see if there’s any yoghurt for a person who’s fifteen too, not just for a two-year-old. There’s half a litre of cherry flavour right at the back. I try to prise it out from among the various sandwich fillings but the carton falls slap bang on the floor. Little pink patches spread out between my feet.

“Perfect,” I groan.

Dad turns towards me.

“Hey, why on earth did you do that?”

“Why?” I said. “ Maybe things don’t always happen for a reason.”

I wasn’t trying to be funny, I meant it exactly the way I said it, but he laughs anyway, and sometimes his laughter can make me forget I’m hungry. But not today, not now. Now I’m just hungry and that makes it even more irritating that the cherry yoghurt is spilt on the floor, useless and spreading.

“Are you nervous?” Dad asks.

I wonder whether to be honest or tough. I opt for the first and nod.

“I get it. I’d be pretty nervous too if I were you.”

I shake my head. Not everybody has a dad who understands as much as mine does.

“Where’s Mum?” I ask.

“Somebody at work felt ill so she had to go in a bit early.”

I see. That explains the chaotic kitchen.

“But if I know her, there’ll be a little note in your lunchbox.”

Lunchbox, yeah. I’m in Year 10 and Mum still makes my packed lunch. I open the lid and find a little note she’s written: “Good luck Anna! It’ll be great. Here’s a joke you can tell the others. ‘Oh, what lovely teeth you have!’ ‘Yes, I got them from my mother.’ ‘What a stroke of luck that they fit so well!’”

I don’t know if Mum thinks I’ve suddenly been transformed into a new person, the kind of person who clears her throat and makes a speech at lunchtime on her first day at a new school. Maybe I’ll get there. But first they’ll need to understand that I’m not a joke.

[page 43-44]

BEFORE

I found out more about Lars. I found out that his body consisted of about 70 per cent water, as well as blood, skin, cells, hair, flesh, subcutaneous fat and muscles. I knew that he lived 50 per cent of the time with his mum and 50 per cent with his dad. I knew that he had at least two close friends. He wore size 43 shoes, was around 180 cm tall and was born on the fourth of the fourth. After our first conversation, I started counting all the times we talked and although I didn’t have a stopwatch running, I tried to keep track inside my head of how long the conversations lasted. After that time I sang Happy Birthday, he realised that I could maybe be one of the people who were on his side. What sort of a side was it? I didn’t know very much about that when I smiled at him, counted quietly to three and started singing “Happy Birthday” to a person who absolutely didn’t have a birthday on that day.

“Have you done your science?” he turned to me.

Of course I’d done my science – what else would I be doing with my time apart from science?

“Er, yeah, I have,” I said, counting soundlessly from ten upwards.

“I don’t think I really get osmosis,” he said, raising a hand to fix his fringe. His hair was meant to look messy. Suddenly I had an urge for some chewing gum.

By now I’d counted to twenty.

“Haven’t you heard of Google?”

I was trying to be funny but I don’t know if I pulled it off. In any case, it wasn’t the answer Lars was hoping for because I saw him roll his eyes a bit before turning back to the blackboard.

I didn’t want to stop counting, I wanted to carry on, I wanted Lars to realise that I really, really wanted to talk to him, so I said, “Do you want some help understanding it or what?”

His waxed fringe turned back towards me again, his lips widening from a closed smile to an open one.

“Of course I want some help.”

I started counting again, from one, and then he held my gaze. I realised that for the first time ever I was sitting having lengthy eye contact with a boy. And then he said:

“Of course I want some help from you.”

With the emphasis on *you* – and suddenly I didn’t know what number came after ten but I knew that the sight of his carefully mussed fringe was one of the most gorgeous things I’d ever seen.

[page 73-74]

BEFORE

One day, Lars turned to me. This time it wasn’t to ask about science. He drew a breath – I could see his chest move – then he jumped right in and asked:

“What’s your Snapchat name?”

For a millisecond I wondered why Lars wanted to add me on Snapchat. After all, I only ever took pictures of the neighbour’s puppy and the odd picture of myself with a puppy filter. The next millisecond I pictured what it would be like to have Lars a bit closer, and not just when I was sitting behind him in class. To have him in my pocket. Just a swipe away. Maybe this meant I should stop posting all those puppy pics.

“Do you like puppies?” I asked.

Lars frowned.

“That’s a weird name. Can I maybe just scan your Snapcode?” he said as he rummaged in his bag for his phone. A power greater than myself grabbed hold of my insides and squished them all up together into one enormous stomach flip.

“Here,” I said, holding up my phone with my code.

“There,” he said, after adding me. He seemed pleased – wet his lips and looked at me.

“I like puppies.”

He paused for a second.

“Especially puppies like you,” he whispered before the teacher started talking about the speed of light in a vacuum – a speed that couldn’t possibly be any faster than the rate my heart was pumping out blood right now, but there just weren’t enough scientists who could be bothered to spend their time measuring stuff like that.