

Ivar Steps Up

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“You’re twelve years old and all you do is loaf around,” Dad says.

He’s on his knees, weeding a flower bed.

“Loaf?” Ivar asks.

Ivar has flip-flops on his feet and a backpack on his back. The backpack contains a towel and soda and a book, plus a ball that can bounce on water.

“Loafing means hanging around without doing anything,” Dad says.

He pulls weeds up from the flower bed and tosses them in a bucket.

“I’m on summer break,” Ivar says.

“For eight weeks,” Dad replies.

He says *eight* as if it’s a really big number.

“You’re old enough to make yourself useful now. Babysit or clean up a garden. You can earn some money doing that.”

“I have plans with Maja. We’re going swimming,” Ivar says.

Dad pulls up something green that he looks at a bit more closely, unsure whether it’s a weed or not.

“The water’s warmer in the evening,” he says.

“It’s important to keep your word,” Ivar says as he leaves.

“Kids in other countries have to work ten hours a day,” Dad shouts after him.

“That’s because they don’t go to school,” Ivar shouts back.

Maja lives just one minute away.

Ivar rings the doorbell and then goes in without waiting for an answer. Maja is standing in the hallway in front of the mirror. Her mom is behind her, gathering Maja's hair in a ponytail.

Maja is wearing a red t-shirt and black pants.

"Aren't we going swimming?" Ivar asks.

Maja turns toward him. Her red t-shirt has white letters across the chest.

Otto's Cafe, Ivar reads.

"I got a summer job," she says.

"Huh? A job?"

"I'm starting today."

"Today?"

"It'll be nice to have your own money," her mom says.

She tells Maja to stand still so she can wrap a hair tie around her ponytail. The hair tie is the same color as the shirt.

"Swimming is free," Ivar says.

"It'll be nice to have my own money," Maja replies.

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Ivar bikes to the beach.

It's the first time he's been there alone. He goes out into the water alone for the first time.

He and Maja usually shiver and shriek and splash. Now he wades out, completely silent.

He looks around. Everyone who's alone wades out silently. Everyone who's with someone else is shivering and shrieking and splashing.

Two women paddle past in a kayak. Kayaking looks fun, with paddles that go up and down, almost like wings.

Two girls are out in the water, tossing a ball back and forth. There's a loud smack each time the ball hits a hand.

Two children are building sandcastles on the beach. They're so young they can't speak, only point and say *ooh!* and *ahh!* but they're still trying to discuss the construction. They laugh together, but then one of them starts crying.

Ivar has no one to shiver and shriek with, no one to toss a ball to, and no one to laugh or cry with.

Ivar bikes away from the beach.

A man on a porch waves down at him.

“Hey, you with the nice bike basket!”

Ivar doesn't have his own bike. He borrows his mom's. The basket on the bike makes him look a little bit like a grandma.

The man comes down with a box with a cake inside it. It's his wife's birthday, but she forgot to bring the cake to work.

Ivar gets twenty kroner straight to his phone in a flash.

When he arrives at the store where the wife works, he gets twenty kroner from her, too.

Now he has forty kroner in the blink of an eye, practically without having done anything at all.

What can he get for forty kroner?

Maybe lunch at Otto's Cafe?

It smells like coffee the moment Ivar opens the door.

Maja is wiping down a table in a corner. She's trying to get some crumbs to stick to the rag.

Ivar grabs a tray and a cheese and tomato sandwich.

He pays Otto at the cash register. Otto is wearing the same t-shirt as Maja, only bigger.

Ivar finds a free table. Maja comes over smiling with the rag in her hand. She managed to get all the crumbs.

"Hi," she says, stopping at his table.

"Hi. How are things going at work?" Ivar asks.

"Fine, but there's a lot to learn. I'm supposed to say hi to customers when they come in. And make sure there are enough cups and knives and forks. And cold water in the jugs. And tidy up and clean. And light tea lights on the tables."

"Are they still called tea lights if the customers are drinking coffee?" Ivar asks.

"I think so," Maja says. "And I learned a new way to make sandwiches."

She points at Ivar's tray.

"The cheese shouldn't lie flat on the bread like at home. It should curl on one side, like a wave."

"Why?"

"Then it's more tempting for people to buy it. And there shouldn't be fingerprints on the cheese either. The menu says sandwich with cheese. It doesn't say sandwich with cheese with fingerprints."

Ivar says it's boring to go swimming alone. Then he tells her about the little job with the cake and how easy it was to earn forty kroner.

"You should start a moving company, then you'll have a job, too," Maja says.

"A job," Ivar repeats a bit hesitantly, like he's testing out the word.

"It's nice to have your own money. Then we can buy something," Maja says.

Ivar nods.

It's nice that Maja uses words like *we*.

We.

Ivar bikes home and says he wants a summer job, just like Maja.

“That’s great,” Mom says.

She suggests he hang up a flier at the store.

Ivar finds a piece of paper and a marker and sits down at the kitchen table. Mom walks around telling him about all the jobs she’s had. She’s cleaned and dusted, planted and picked, fried and cooked and raked and baked.

Ivar can’t fry or cook, but he does have a bike with a basket.

He writes in big, bold letters:

NEED HELP MOVING

ODDS AND ENDS?

Beneath it, he writes his name and phone number.

He holds up the piece of paper and looks at it.

Now, the piece of paper is a poster.

He goes out and puts the poster in the bike basket. This will be the first thing he moves.

There’s a bulletin board in the store between the door and the cash register. He puts the poster up next to a flier about someone needing a dog walker.

Ivar stops by Maja's on his way home.

When he rings the bell, he sees there's something weird with the doormat. It's not lying flat like before. It has a curl on one side, like a wave, or like the cheese on a sandwich.

"The wave makes people want to stop by," Maja explains.

"You said waves make people want to eat," Ivar says.

"Cheese, yeah. But not doormats. Doormats with waves make people want to stop by. And here you are!"

"I would've come anyway," Ivar says.

He tells her about the poster he made.

"It'll be nice to have your own money," Maja says.

They go out to the garden.

Maja has made up a new game.

"Stack eight stones on top of each other. And get a berry to sit on top," she says.

Ivar runs around to try to find big, flat stones, but most of them are small and crooked. Maja times him.

"Clock's ticking, almost a hundred years!" she shouts.

Ivar finally manages to get the eighth stone to rest on top of the seventh, but it's wobbly.

He hurries over to a bush and picks a currant. But the stupid berry won't sit still on top.

When it's Maja's turn, she squeezes the berry flat.

"That's cheating," Ivar says.

"No one said the berry had to be round," Maja laughs.

Maja's not easy to beat.

Mom made a huge stack of pancakes for dinner to celebrate that Ivar will be working.

Dad puts syrup and bacon and blueberries on the table.

Dad's the one who picked the berries in the forest last year.

"Mmm, yummy blueberries," Ivar says, smacking his lips.

"You came to help too, do you remember?" Dad asks.

"Yeah."

"But you ate everything you picked," Dad says.

Ivar eats quickly, drinks three big glasses of juice, and exhales happily.

Mom looks at him and smiles.

"It's great you're going to work, Ivar. You're going to grow a lot from it."

Dad says:

"It's good to make yourself useful. Maybe you'll even figure out what you like to work with so you'll have a head start on the others at school."

Ivar doesn't reply.

"But even though you're going to work, you can still help out more at home," Mom says.

"I clean my room once a week," Ivar protests.

"You move things around. That's not cleaning," Mom replies.

"And I unload the dishwasher!"

"Only when I bug you about it. And you put things in the wrong cabinets!"

"There are too many cabinets," Ivar says.

"You leave crumbs in the jam. And how many times have I told you not to turn your socks inside out before washing them?"

"The socks turn *themselves* inside out when I pull them off," Ivar replies.

Dad clears his throat and puts his fork on his plate to show he's done.

Ivar wonders if he should take the last pancake. But the last one is really the first one, and never as good.

"You've gotten an allowance for a few years now. A hundred kroner a week," Dad says.

"Yeah," Ivar replies.

"What do you think of that arrangement?"

"It's a nice arrangement," Ivar says.

"But now you're twelve years old."

Dad says *twelve* like it's a really big number. Like he's talking about floors in a house.

"So that's the end of that," he says.

"End?"

Ivar looks at his parents.

"No more allowance?"

Dad shakes his head.

"No, that'll continue. A hundred kroner a week."

"Good," Ivar says, but he can see that Dad is about to come out with a *but*.

"But," Dad says. "This summer, *you* will be paying *us*!"

Mom nods to show they're in agreement on this.

Ivar looks at the big plate in the middle of the table. The plate is almost empty.

He's the one who emptied it.

"I didn't know that allowance gets reversed when you turn twelve," he says.

"Now you know," Mom says.

"But how will I get money?"

"You're working this summer, aren't you?" Dad replies.

Mom and Dad clear the table. They put things in the dishwasher. They wipe down the counter and the stovetop and the table. Ivar sits in his chair and stares straight ahead.

"What do you think of the new arrangement?" Dad asks.

"It's not as good as the old one," Ivar replies.