**The Thunderstorm**

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**Soup Day**

***Craaaaashhh***

**Aurora tells the story**

The crash woke me. I sat up with a start and banged my head on the upper bunk. I do that nearly every morning, just not this hard. It hasn’t been long since I moved to the lower bunk because Kaspian, my brother, is finally old enough to sleep in the top one. Kaspian has been saying he’s big enough since he was three, but he tosses and turns so much in his sleep that dad didn’t think it was a good idea. Dad has given in now, though, and allowed Kaspian to switch places with me. He hasn’t fallen out of bed yet, that wasn’t the crash that woke me.

The crack of my skull woke Kaspian.

‘What’s the matter Aurora?’ he said groggily.

‘Don’t know,’ I replied, rubbing my head. ‘There was a loud bang outside, or I think it was outside, sounded like thunder.’

There was another metallic crash.

‘It’s daddy,’ Kaspian yawned, ‘he’s putting up the ladder.’ And then he turned back to the wall and tucked himself in again.

I had forgotten all about that. The forecast promised nice weather today, so dad would have all of Saturday to paint the house. It takes a long time to paint our house. It’s so big, three floors with four flats. We live on the middle floor, Kaspian and me and our dad, Marinus. There used to be four of us.

I was wide-awake now, so I might as well get up.

Out in the kitchen I was just about to have some oats, when I heard quick steps on the staircase. What was going on? Sirje and her mum didn’t usually come racing down like that.

Then there was a knock and I went over to open up.

‘What’s happen?!’ Enara sounded frightened. ‘Big boom, you know what was?’ She is still learning the language, but she is much better at it now than when they arrived. They are learning so fast.

‘Everything is okay,’ I tell her with a smile. ‘It’s just dad painting the house.’

She looked at me as if she couldn’t understand what I was saying.

‘Painting house?’

‘Yes, painting the outside of our house.’

She thought for a moment.

‘He put paint on this house himself?’

‘Yes, he’s putting up the big ladder, so he can reach all the way up to your flat. That’s probably why it’s so noisy up at yours. He starts from the top.’

‘Ahhh, big ladder! I understand now. Then is good. Bye bye!’

And then she hurried back up the stairs.

I don’t always understand why Enara says or does the things she does, but maybe it’s because she is a refugee. She has been renting the flat upstairs from ours for almost a year now; she lives with her daughter, Sirje. We hardly hear them. The people who used to live upstairs would make such a racket that dad had to give them notice. We couldn’t sleep at night. The house isn’t really soundproofed. Just one household lived here originally, one very big family.

It’s a lot of work for dad to own the house. He has to keep everything shipshape, as well as look after us and work at the library. He has to paint and repair all sorts of things: suddenly a tap stops working, then a window is gusty, the water pressure drops, and so on. Well, he can’t really do anything about the water anyway, it’s up to the water company, but the renters still ask him about it.

Dad has always lived in this house, granny and granddad owned it, and great-gran and great-granddad before them. That’s why mum was the one who moved out.

Madame Iris in the big basement flat has lived here for a long time. I can’t remember anymore who lived in it before. Maybe some other old lady? Or maybe she has lived there my whole life? It’s definitely possible, fourteen years aren’t much out of seventy-something.

She is a pianist. She is always playing, all day long. We can hear it upstairs, but that’s okay. We like piano music. Dad says that she is a famous pianist, and that she used to play concerts at great halls around the world. Now she is so old that she hardly ever comes out.

When I was younger she was often away for long periods, but little by little she was here more and more. Now she often sends me on errands, then she doesn’t have to go out at all. She barely even sets foot the yard anymore. She always used to go sit on the bench in the sun.

Dad says she is a widow and never had any children. She is all alone. She used to be really nice, but now she is always grumpy and unfriendly, except when she wants me to run an errand. It’s as if she then pulls herself together to be nice.

The little flat is where Viktor lives, a melancholy young man. I mean, I say melancholy because he is always wearing black and he looks so sad. He hasn’t lived there for long, but still almost as long as Enara and Sirje. He doesn’t say a word to anyone. He doesn’t go out much either, except perhaps at night, because I rarely see any light at his place.

At noon dad came in to have a bite. His clothes and hands were speckled with blue paint. Brother and I had set the table. He had a big streak across his forehead, which he probably wasn’t aware of.

‘What are you two up to today?’ he asked.

‘I’m building Lego!’ Kaspian said. ‘I’ve made another castle, it’s not finished yet. I’m gonna ask Sirje to come build with me.’

‘I’m trying to finish my essay,’ I sighed, ‘but I don’t feel like it’.

‘Then perhaps you’d rather make dinner for us tonight instead?’ dad smiled, ‘then I’ll help you with the essay when it gets too dark to paint.’

‘Yeah, I’d like that,’ I replied.

Dad hugged us both and laughed:

‘What would I do without you?’

It was good to hear him say that, but I knew what he would do without us. Sell the house, buy a boat and sail across the world. That’s what he secretly dreams of. He thinks we don’t know it, but how many pictures of boats can you have at home, and how much of your free time can you spend rowing a tiny dinghy before everyone gets that you would rather be sailing than doing anything else in the world?

I often make dinner, at the very least when dad has an afternoon shift, and he has those twice a week or more. Kaspian helps, but there isn’t that much you can do when you’re only eight-years-old. Dad is more patient when they cook together.

I’m not great at cooking, or, well, I’m not that good at figuring out how much I should make. Sometimes we have food for several days and other days we have to have bread on the side, because I made too little. But I’m learning. Two years ago I’d never made a meal myself. Mum preferred to cook on her own, and I only ever helped when dad was in the kitchen.

An hour later I flung the essay notebook into a corner and went out to shop for food. Kaspian and Sirje were playing in the room. They’re the same age and in the same class at school.

In the mornings they walk to school together and they play together every day after lessons. In a couple of years that won’t be possible anymore. The other kids will tease them relentlessly and write Kaspian + Sirje up on the board in red chalk and shout after them, and then they will spend less and less time together, just so that the others will leave them alone. In the end they probably won’t talk to each other at all. It’s always like that at school.

I used to walk with Sonny when we were in year one and year two, because we had to walk the same way every day. Now we haven’t said a word to each other for years, though we are still in the same class and he lives just three houses down from us. I really liked Sonny, we had fun together – back then – could talk about anything and build Legos, just like Kaspian and Sirje. I don’t know him anymore.

In the afternoon I asked the two little ones to help me peel vegetables for the soup. It was mayhem to have them both in the kitchen, but much nicer. Not that Sirje is ever any trouble, but there isn’t much room in the kitchen for three people cooking.

They did a good job, though, and when I was about to toss everything in the pot, I could see that we had peeled and chopped far, far too much. I had to get our biggest pot, and it was full to the brim.

‘We’ll be having soup for a whole week,’ I sighed.

Then Kaspian had an idea:

‘We could invite someone to come eat with us!’ His eyes shone, and I knew immediately what he was thinking. Something that wasn’t possible. Mum never came anymore, not since the twins were born. I had to be quick to save the idea, before he got upset.

‘Yes! Sirje, go ask your mum if she would like to come eat with us, and Kaspian, you go down to Madame Iris and ask her to come up. She’ll say yes if *you* invite her.’

‘And Viktor?’ Sirje asked cautiously.

I looked at her a little puzzled.

‘Viktor?’

‘Yeah, he lives here too,’ she insisted cautiously. She isn’t usually stubborn.

‘Sure, go invite him too, there’s plenty of soup,’ I replied with surprise. Viktor had never been up to see us. I’d never even talked to him, though we often passed each other in the corridor downstairs.

‘I can go,’ Sirje said and left the kitchen quietly.

‘But the soup isn’t ready yet. You have to tell them to come in an hour. And, Kaspian, ask dad to stop painting in forty-five minutes. And can you fetch a bag of bread rolls from the freezer? I’ll toss them in the oven to defrost.’

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**Enara tells the story**

I can’t think!

Where is she?

Why did she go?

There is nobody here she could have gone to.

She’s scared of so many things, and only feels safe at home and together with Kaspian.

And she’s afraid of the dark! Why did she go when everyone was asleep and there was barely any light?

I can’t lose her!

Not her too!

And not here! Nothing was supposed to happen here. That’s why we left. It was supposed to be safe.

‘Sirje!’

‘Sirje!’

I have walked all the streets, asked everyone, but nobody has seen her. I’m hoarse from shouting.

Nobody could have taken her, nobody could get in. Marinus says that it was definitely locked downstairs. He always locks the front door. Always.

So lovely of them all to want to help, though they aren’t family.

Marinus is a sad man, something is broken inside of him. He is a friendly and honest man, looks after his children well. I can’t understand why his wife left. Because she could? Back home a wife couldn’t have left. Not with the veil …

I don’t know if I would have flown, if I didn’t have the veil. I loved Rahim, he was a kind, good man. Not a man to send to war. No, I wouldn’t have flown, even if I didn’t have the veil.

And here I am now, and Sirje is gone!

‘Sirje! Where are you?’

She has to be safe.

She’s all I have!

I run back home. One of the others HAS TO have found her.

**Found**

**Madame Iris tells the story**

At first I didn’t understand what it was all about.

The little girl gone? How could she go missing here?

It’s been two hours since Aurora came down to ask if I’d heard anything early in the morning. If the door had been opened or anything.

I told the truth, that I hadn’t heard anything between six and seven, and if *I* didn’t hear the door, then nobody has crossed it. The hinges screech like a viola being tuned, and it sings like the timpani when it slams shut, my glass cabinet vibrates like a triangle. So nobody went through the front door between six and seven, and nobody before then either. I couldn’t get back to sleep after the thunderstorm. Unbelievable how long it lasted last night. Began around three thirty, and the last weak crash wasn’t until past five in the morning.

Hang on…

If someone came through the door *while* the thunder was rolling, then I wouldn’t have heard it!

If the child isn’t in the house, then she could have left during the thunderstorm. The front door locks automatically, so she certainly could have gone out.

But why would she go out in the middle of the rumbling thunder. I mean, nobody wants to be out in that.

Could she have gone out just to see, out of curiosity? And then the door locked behind her?

Good god that must be what happened. I should go stand by the front door so I can catch them as soon as they return. If they haven’t found her, then I have to let them know that she probably left at that time. That might help them guess where she went.

Or maybe she comes home on her own, while they are away.

I have to go find my warm coat and take a stool with me out to the staircase, so I can be there when she gets back, or the others.

But it has been hours since the thunder stopped … Where could she be?

It has been ages since I wore this coat. Have I even been out the door since before Christmas?

I don’t think so.

Good grief it’s dusty in here! Why do I keep all these coats? I certainly shouldn’t be keeping Ilario’s. They’re still perfectly usable, perhaps Marinus fits one of them. Ilario always wore this one onboard the Maristela.

What’s that?

It sounds like somebody crying!

It has to come from outside! I have to hurry out.

Oh these old legs are so weak – blasted body!

Don’t remember the front door being this heavy!

No, nobody is here and there is no crying either. My ears are perfect, the only bit that still works. I must have imagined it.

Am I losing my marbles? Hearing voices?

I’ve lived here for fourteen years and I haven’t met a ghost yet.

It was real crying – a child sobbing!

Oh god, is she dead, is she a ghost?

I have to go get that coat.

There it is again, the crying!

Someone is at the door! I have to hurry to them. Need to know if I’m the only one who can hear this, if I’m going mad.

‘Viktor? Is that you?

And Aurora and Kaspian.

I’m so glad you came!

Come! Come inside and tell me if you can hear it too.

Yes, right here by the wardrobe. I can only hear it when I’m standing here.

Can you hear it too?’

**Aurora tells the story**

What’s wrong with Madame Iris? She looks in a real state.

And she wants us to come inside. It’s been a long time since we did. She has been watching like a hawk that nobody comes into her flat. Has been standing in the doorway every time she talked to us, as if she wanted to make sure that we didn’t look inside. I don’t think I have been to her place since the Christmas before last. She always used to invite us in.

Strange. Everything is just the way it always was. Everything is in exactly the same place.

What has she been hiding?

Why has she covered the grand piano with a sheet?

What on earth is in the wardrobe?

**Kaspian tells the story**

Wow, she is letting us in!

Sirje can’t be in there; Madame Iris would have said something.

So why do we need to come to her place and why do we have to look inside that old wardrobe? It smells funny.

What’s that noise?

‘That’s Sirje!

Sirje! Where are you?’

*I’M IN THE BOMBSHELTER*

**Viktor tells the story**

What’s wrong here?

Why can I hear the girl crying under the floor?

This is like a scary story we read at school.

It terrified me.

‘Iris! Where’s the girl?’

Kaspian: Sirje! Where are you?

Sirje: In the basement.

Kaspian: How did you get down there?

Sirje: I’m in the bomb shelter.

Kaspian: We don’t have any bomb shelter!

Sirje: But I’m sitting in it!

Iris: How did you get in there?

Sirje: Through the trapdoor. But I can’t get it open now.

Aurora: I know! She’s in the crawl space! She went through the coal hatch!

Kaspian: But daddy says we’re not allowed in there! It’s pitch-black, and there could be wild cats.

Are there any wild cats in there, Sirje?

Sirje: No!

Viktor: But why did you go down there?

Iris: Have you been there since the thunderstorm?

Sirje: Thunder?

Aurora: Oh shut up everyone, you can ask all your questions when she’s out. She’s been sitting there forever, let’s get her out as quick as we can. Sirje, can you crawl back over to the hatch, I’ll open it for you. The only way to open it is from the outside.

Sirje: No! Don’t go out!

Aurora: Not go out? Why not?

Sirje: The bombs might hit you!

Kaspian: Bombs? What bombs?

Sirje: The war! The bombs! The ones that came tonight! Stay there! Don’t go out! I don’t want you to die too!!

Viktor: But Sirje, there is no war here …

Sirje: I heard it!

Aurora: (*whispering*) I’ll go out and get her. You stay here and keep talking to her, until I get to the hatch.

**Marinus tells the story**

I hope she is back home safe and sound.

Look, there is Enara. So she hasn’t found her either. Poor woman. Can’t bear the thought of how terrified she must be.

What is Aurora doing? Why is she opening the coal hatch? Odd thing to be doing right now.

Oh but look! There is Sirje! Very much alive. Oh god, what a relief!

‘Enara have you …’

She has seen.

She is racing over! Oh no, her veil has come undone! Hope she doesn’t trip over it.

It fell off.

Oh but … she is much younger than I thought, younger than Ylva, and me too.

What is happening?

She didn’t have a hump – she has wings!

***She has big blue wings!***