

Bjarte Daviknes Klakegg

Ninkolai

Sample translation

12 – 13 – 14 – 15 – 16 – 17 – 18 (years)

Johannes:

Now and then, as the light shifts around the coupé, Johannes takes his eyes off the road to glance over at Nikolai, who is staring out the car window. He's probably daydreaming again. Nikolai likes being quiet. Once they've brought him and his silence into the city, they will be left behind with a silence of a different kind. A bigger silence. It shouldn't be like that. When something is taken away, whatever is left behind shouldn't get bigger. But that's what losing someone is like. Johannes has tried to avoid thinking too much about it, and just let his hands and mouth pulse in time with his heart. This is what it has come to. Let your ears remain open, let your eyes see. He was the first person to see Nikolai.

Johannes catches Inger's eye in the rear-view mirror. Everything kind of worked out in the end. After losing Anja, their only child, Nikolai arrived. Then they were given a fresh start. And they have done their best, despite Inger still clinging on to Nikolai and thinking this is too soon. Thinking that he was wrong to leave school to get a job. It's like she can't see that, no matter what, Nikolai has to move away.

Is Nikolai trying to shut himself off, or open himself up? Once Nikolai is in the city, Johannes won't be able to take care of him any more. A knot forms deep in his belly, just behind the kidneys, makes Johannes squirm uncomfortably in his seat. It's time to take a break and give his back a little stretch. He catches Inger's eye in the mirror again. The landscape has opened up now, and everything looks strange and foreign. Inger is wrong. It isn't too soon for Nikolai to be moving away. This is when they lose him. That's just how it has to be.

N.

Gran and Granddad don't like it. They don't like the idea of me moving away, nor the idea of me moving here. But if there were ever a city that was mine, it would be this one. For a long time, I've felt like my hometown was too small. I was hoping I might get used to it. Hoping that if I lived there long enough, one day everyone would accept me for who I am. But the accident made it clear: There in that tunnel, it could all have been over for me. I can't afford to wait any more. They're never going to see me as Nikolai. They probably don't mean any harm by it, but they just aren't willing to open their eyes. Even if before the accident it had been getting better with Roar and the rest of them, they would have just slipped back to square one.

Everything would have gone back to the way it was.

I'm going to miss the mountains. The fjords. The trees. But it wasn't enough. It was never going to be my home. I appreciated these years living with Gran and Granddad. Especially Granddad. He's the only one who can actually *see* me. It hurts to move away from him. Now more than ever, with him the way he is. But I have to. I don't know if life will be better in the city, but I'm desperate for somewhere I can just disappear.

They've driven me the whole way. Gran wasn't so eager about it, saying that Granddad wasn't up to the journey. I don't have much stuff anyway, so I could have just taken it with me on a bus or a plane. But Granddad was unshakeable. I sat in the front passenger seat the whole drive. After the accident, I can't bring myself to sit in the back.

"Be careful what you wish for."

She holds my arm tight. Granddad is quiet. The man who was always gently pushing me onward, the man who had helped me get to where I am today, is completely silent. Is he regretting it?

"There's no way of knowing whether she'll be here."

"Who?"

"Your mother."

"That's not the reason I'm moving here, Gran. You know the reason. I need some space to spread my wings."

She watches me. Maybe she's searching for another reason. She won't find one.

"Couldn't you have chosen a different city to move to? One that was closer?"

Granddad cuts in:

"Inger..."

He doesn't say another word, but it makes her fall quiet. He stands there with his car keys in hand. Arms hanging loosely at his side. Granddad, always so big and strong. He carried the few items I owned into the building. Took a look around. Said "it's nice here", though I doubt he meant it. My room is tiny and at street level. I'm going to have to keep my curtains closed all the time. There are only grey buildings outside, anyway. It seems like he's struggling with the weight of the car keys in his hand.

"I think it would have been better if you had stayed with us."

"Gran..."

"I know. I'm sorry, Nina. I can't help but stick my nose in. Take care of yourself. Call lots. Come home soon."

They indicate and pull out of the parking space, and it feels like this is the last time we'll see each other. They looked so old all of a sudden. A guilty feeling washes over me like nausea. I never said thank you. For everything they did for me, everything they gave up. They were never thanked. But this is where I need to be. The person I'm here to find is myself. But now my mum and I are in the same city. When I'm ready, it might be time to try and look for her too.

Johannes:

The glacier's icy branches envelope the mountain like a shirt collar tightened around a proud neck. The altitude here is enough to make your stomach turn, the cliff's edge obscuring the valley below, which has been split in two by Kattaryggen ridge. The mountain range arches upwards all sharp and sudden, it's no wonder it was given its name - the Cat's Back. This mountain is his mountain.

He is used to this mountain, and over the years he has managed to accustom himself to the stomach-turning he feels from the altitude. But something feels different today. It's not just Nikolai. Today he feels like the nauseating feeling has

struck a chord with something inside of him. Spreading across his body like seasickness. After all, it would only take him one step. Not much. Just one step out into the free air, and it would all be over. This prickling sensation in his mind feels more like an itch now. His *imagine if* has become a *maybe*.

He has to take a step back, before crouching down to open up his little daypack. Raisins, a camera and a bottle of water. A white sheet of paper too, covered in quivering lines from a blue biro. So childlike. As if he were twelve years old again. But things are different now. There isn't as much to think about any more. He lifts the piece of paper to chest height and turns it so the writing are visible. He stretches out his left hand with the camera turned towards him, hoping his arm is long enough to fit in his face, the paper, the glacier and the long lake below. It might be asking too much. But he wants Nikolai to be able to see everything. He wants him to miss home. The sun shining down from a bright blue sky. Despite the altitude, it's surprisingly warm. A perfect day for a perfect peak. He stands there with a handwritten note against his chest.

This was their mountain, until the day Inger announced it was a mountain for young people. But he's clung onto it as a yardstick for his health - both his mind and body. Now he doesn't know how many more hikes there will be. Perhaps this will be his last.

The camera clicks, with the paper resting ever so gently in his hand. Then he folds it into an aeroplane, aims at the glacier and sends it off in a perfect would-be arc. Off the glacier and down into the valley. Down where the sun hasn't yet touched.

They say this has been the best summer in living memory. Even with the threat of global warming, the best summer in living memory. But living memory doesn't count for much these days. It's so hard to stand at the top of a mountain and not think about the symbolism of it all. That from now on there's only one path forward.

This is the best place he knows. The glacier, the mountain. The sun. Right now, it feels like everything is shifting in front of his eyes, changing beneath his feet. The glacial branches creeping together like some kind of pincer manoeuvre, the sun burning down as the mountain sways to and fro. At almost fifteen hundred metres

above sea level, it's making him feel seasick. He needs to lie down on his chest and cling to the brittle heather, feel the pull of gravity. Just lie down and hold on tight, as if he's riding some enormous animal.

Inger:

She takes a moment to rest on the arm rail by the kitchen door, a damp tea-towel hung over her shoulder. Johannes is sat in the brown reclining chair by the window, and it's hard to see whether he is reading or sleeping. She has some sharp, clear memories that are impossible to shake. Other ones are soft and light like feathers, and drift away almost the instant they arrive. So strange to think that she never used to think much of him. Now, when she sees pictures from back then, she can't understand what she was on about - he was handsome. He was *really* handsome. Yet at the time, she wasn't looking for anyone, and didn't want anyone on her radar. What was the point anyway? She knew who he was, knew who everyone at her age was, and they just weren't interesting enough. For her, the animals and nature were ample. She would run up to the mountain farms, over the mountaintops, swim in lakelets, stretch across the heather, race after sheep. She would scout for deer, a few foxes, the bear that never came, a wolverine recognisable only by some tracks in deep snow. Yet all the while he was creeping into her vision more and more often. She thought he wasn't much to look at, but he was always there, some or other place nearby. He never scared her, or bothered her. She just didn't care. She got used to his presence though, just as she got used to the pines, the hills and the sheep. And then things sort of ran nature's course. He took on the colour of moss, the shape of the trees, the babbling of a brook, the movements of clouds and the warmth of the sun. And just as she would stroke her hands over rocks, moss and bark, she was soon running her hands across his face. As she felt his eyelids, nose and mouth, it felt like something that had always been here. Just as she had no option but to choose the forest, the mountain and the animals, she now chose him. Like the greening of moss, the splashing of the stream, or the resin of pine trunks, he had rubbed onto her and stuck fast. He had become part of summer, autumn and winter. He had become a part of spring. He was a part of her. That was just how it was. It felt as natural as snow melting in the spring, like how grass grows into summer.

N.

Nikolai walks in my footsteps. He lives in my thoughts, in my movements, and his workings are in my fingers. He sticks on my tongue like a taste I can't forget. Then, if I am silent, if I stand here in complete and utter silence, if I hold my breath, close my eyes and empty myself entirely, I might look like I'm Nina. Even though I'm Nikolai. But even if I shut him out completely, he oozes out of my pores like ditchwater, soaking my clothes and marking my footsteps. He's the only constant in a world that's crumbling away.

It isn't like putting on a costume or squeezing into another body. It's like with buildings: How they almost change their appearance in front of your eyes, in a quick, fleeting movement becoming bizarre, before turning familiar again, like in a dream.

N.

Roar is back. I haven't seen him for a few days. He's been out picking blackcurrants in the garden and has left a blackcurrant fingerprint on the white button of our black doorbell. As I open the front door, he smears the berries across my flat chest with greedy hands, staining my white t-shirt. As I stand there, teetering on the doorstep. The smell of blackcurrants, garden and bare feet on wet grass drifts up towards me. He runs his hands over my body, down my stomach, over my belt, my flies. He pauses there. Turns his hand around. Clamps down. Not hard. Almost tentatively. He stares at me. Smiles. Whispers:

"Gay."

Gran shouts from the kitchen:

"Nina! Shut the door. You'll let the cold in. Either stay here or go outside."

Roar replies in a higher pitched voice, like mine:

"Okay!"

Then he spins on his heels and scarpers away.

Then it's quiet. Complete silence. I teeter on the doorstep. In. Out. It's quiet inside. Quiet outside. I wanted to explain. That it's not you. It's me. The cold metal of the doorstep sticks fast to my feet. Wet grass in my nose, blackcurrant dew in my eyes.

(...)

N.

The steps creak from my barefoot steps on the cold woodwork. A yellow dress with white flowers flutters around my scabby knees. I walk past the mirror in the hallway without looking. I can't bear seeing myself like this. Not yet. Gran is turned with her back facing me, rinsing a fish on the kitchen counter. She doesn't see me. I tiptoe over, arms at my sides. She still hasn't turned around. I could stand here. For a long time. Just breathing.

"Nina?"

She asks with a raised voice. Perhaps she thinks I went out again. She turns around and jumps.

“Nina!”

She doesn't say anything else, just looks at me. Her eyes are blank. Staring until they can't stare anymore.

“Nina...”

It's soft. She says the name so softly.

“Wait here, Nina.”

She washes her hands quickly, shaking them off as she hurries across the kitchen floor. She brushes a damp hand across my shoulder as she passes me. Opens the cupboard in the bathroom. Comes back with a brush in her hand.

“Could I brush your hair?”

I nod. She gives a sniffle. It almost sounds like she has a cold. She combs and combs. Like she's hoping that each brush will make my hair longer and cover up my split ends. Then she takes a step back to look at me. Her eyes survey me from top to toe, mesmerised.

“Wait here, Nina. I need to get Granddad.”

She closes the door behind her. Runs out into the yard. I've never seen her like this before. I squint my eyes, and the kitchen disappears as the window gets bigger. The world is filled with light and horizontal lines. Granddad comes in. Gives me a look like he doesn't recognise me.

“Do a twirl, Nina. Look at her, doesn't she look nice?”

He stands with his boots on in the doorway between the kitchen and the corridor. He must have thought it was something important. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Reaches up with his hands and grabs onto the door mantle. Stares at me. Right into my eyes. He doesn't look me up and down like Gran, but looks dead into my eyes.

“Nikolai always looks nice.”

“Of course, but especially nice today?”

He chews on something. Keeps staring at me.

“You always look nice, Nikolai. No matter what.”

Then he gives me a wink. In one flowing movement he shoves off the mantle, turns around and walks out, letting the door swing shut behind him. I can't get my head around the idea that they're almost the same age. He seems so young.

"But especially nice today, Nina. You look especially nice today.

She stands there, staring at me. Granddad is still inside my head. Wink. Click. With just one eye, he took a picture of my inner self. The dress is scratchy. The fringe itches on my forehead. Gran walks over and holds on tight to my shoulders with both hands.

"Nina, Nina, Nina."

She doesn't say anything else. Gets a strange look in her eyes. Then she lets go and walks back to the kitchen counter. She lets out a whisper as she brushes past, so quiet I can barely hear it:

"Almost like seeing your mother."

N.

The ceiling is like a white blanket, sinking down towards me. Slowly, almost imperceptibly. It reaches the tip of my nose just as I'm about to fall asleep, spreading over my eyes, nose and mouth. I can't breathe. I can't get to sleep. It's me, but it's not me. The house is still. Not a sound. Only the clock. And the wind. The creaking of the house. Granddad's snores. How can this flesh be mine and not mine simultaneously? How can this skin be mine and yet still belong to somebody else? I can't breathe. I can't sleep. This is me, and this is not me. Like the dog next door painted black. A moth squeezed into a cocoon.

I numb myself. Let my eyes close so that I can be here, inside him. Developed over the years, cell by cell, bit by bit. A body as hard as steel, and light as feathers. But they call me a rabbit. Wrinkle your nose, stretch your face. The person beneath the surface is struggling to break free. Feel with every cell inside the body, each and every fibre of the being that this is me. Fix the unfixable. Turn mould into water, south into north, shadow into flame.

Granddad says that one cannot exist without the other. Like two sides of paper, like a birch with both he and she on the same root. But I'm not a birch and I'm not a sheet of paper. I'm not Ymir from the sagas. The world isn't made from my

flesh, nor the fjord from my blood. My mind is not the clouds that drift across the sky, even if Granddad says it must be so, since my mind is constantly floating around up there.

The gulls, oystercatchers and even the bats are flying closer and closer. They circle down, like they're reconnoitring, uncovering. This is me, but it's not me. My mind and body are taking different paths, loosely held together by a lump in my throat, bobbing slowly up and down.

Johannes

Every time he falls asleep, he falls into a new life. He has always wondered what it would be like to become another person. But not like this, not like... Waking up with someone else's breath in your mouth. Now he dreads going to sleep every evening. After all, he doesn't know whose life he is going to fall into. But sleep claims him eventually. The person he becomes is running after a tram. A tram driving on tracks that unzip, leaving behind a deep fissure in the streets. The further he falls behind, the more the Earth's crust opens up, until it swallows him up completely and he jolts awake with a stranger's raspy breath in his mouth.

(...)

N.

Tiny little droplets race through the streets, dotting me so that it makes puddles in the gym reception. It's good to be outside. Hanne and I aren't doing very well. I can't even speak to her about home, it just gets tangled up with my memories of Roar. I'm avoiding the changing rooms and only ever switch over my shoes before tramping, soaking wet, into the gym. Hanne doesn't really like me training with weights, or that I want to build muscles. Nor that I want to be flat-chested. It's all so confusing. It feels like she's blaming me for not completely being Nikolai, truly and utterly, but at the same time doesn't want me to take steps towards that end. She averts her eyes whenever we see operations on TV. She can't bear to look. Knives splitting skin, the red meat peeking out, all the guts. It's fascinating. She can't bear the thought that I want to go under the knife. But she doesn't like the way I am now either. That I can hold all this. It's not simple, but it's not complicated either. I'm not the one she wants. I can't tell whether she wants Nina, or a Nikolai that's done and dusted. I don't think she even knows for herself. But I do know that I can't take much more. This has to end. The right thing is about to happen. The wrong thing is coming to an end. I don't have any faith in her. It just isn't there anymore.