

A Brother in Outer Space

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[...]

‘So what are you doing after school today?’

Mina yawns loudly as they stand there by the slender birch trees at the edge of the school grounds. Yellow leaves lie strewn across the ground below them like an assortment of discarded crisps.

‘Not much,’ says Elias.

Their class have the playground all to themselves, almost as if they were having a lesson outdoors. Elias feels a puff of wind flow through his longish hair, but it’s not a cold wind, showing there’s still a trace of summer in the air. He flicks his fringe away from his eyes.

‘I was just wondering...’ says Mina. ‘I’ve got to deliver some of those flyers for Mum again, you know. Do you want to come too?’

‘Sure, why not?’ says Elias.

Mina’s mum is on the residents’ committee, and it’s not the first time Mina’s asked him to come along and do the rounds with her. Running up and down all the flats and dropping a flyer on every doormat is an easy enough job.

A couple of girls from their class walk past, wearing long, light-coloured cardigans.

‘Training today,’ says Olivia, vaguely waving as she passes them.

‘Yeah, I know,’ says Mina. Then she turns back to Elias. ‘I guess it’ll have to be after that, then.’

The classes who’ve still got lessons are sitting inside. Their jealous eyes gleam at the lucky ones from 7C. For the first time it really dawns on Elias that *their* class is the oldest in the school now. It’s a powerful feeling.

‘Mats is coming home tomorrow,’ he says. He can’t keep it in any longer.

‘Oh, really?’ says Mina. ‘Cool. Is he, like, better now or something?’

‘It’s just for the weekend. But he must be getting a bit better if they’re letting him out.’

‘Yeah,’ replies Mina. ‘How long has it been since he was last home?’

Elias has to think about that. To begin with, when he’d just started the treatment, his big brother was at home quite a lot. Before the holidays he even went to school for a bit, but then he gradually got worse over the course of the summer. Recently he’s been in hospital almost the whole time.

‘Several weeks, anyway.’

P.E. is their last class of the day. Elias and the others do some warm-up laps. He’s been looking forward to this weekend for a long time, and now there’s just one class left. Unfortunately it’s the longest one on the timetable. He can feel his pulse rising with every lap of the hall. He gets that metallic taste in his mouth. Only the big clock on the wall seems to be taking things in its stride.

After a while, the P.E. teacher blows her whistle and claps.

‘Alright,’ she says, and tells them they’re going to be split into four groups.

The class stand with their backs to the wall bars. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. Elias ends up in a team with Olivia, Aslak, and Noor, and he’s given a green bib to put on. They sit on the bench and watch while two of the other teams play floorball.

Elias actually likes P.E., but today his whole body feels strange and unfocused. He can’t stop thinking about Mats and all the things they’ll do when he gets home. Maybe they’ll play football. Definitely ride their bikes down to the shopping centre and buy loads of sweets. Watch a scary film together, for sure. Just like they did before everything changed.

The white ball streaks back and forth across the floor. Elias holds his head in his hands and feels a cold draught against his bare calves. Maybe Mats is sitting there in his hospital room right now, looking forward to the weekend just as much as he is?

The teacher blows her whistle again. It’s their turn to play. Elias gets up and starts running around with his stick to the floor. Suddenly he sees the ball speeding towards him like a comet on a collision course. Without thinking, he closes his eyes and shields himself with his stick.

For two seconds, everything falls silent.

Then the cheering starts.

Elias opens his eyes and finds himself looking straight towards Patrick, who’s gaping in terror in front of him.

‘Wow,’ he whispers.

Then Elias sees the ball in the narrow goal at the other end of the hall. How on earth did it end up there? Some kind of miracle must have happened in the brief moment he stood there with his eyes closed. The other members of his team come leaping towards him with their arms in the air.

‘What a goal!’ shouts Olivia, giving him a high five. ‘That was insane!’

Noor and Aslak are right behind her, grinning. Seeing them like this gives Elias a real boost. This weekend is going to be the best in a long time. He can feel it.

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When Elias comes into the living room, his parents are watching TV. He crawls up between them on the sofa, just like he used to do when he was younger. They're watching a panel show and his mum laughs at something one of the guests says. His dad remarks that he misses the old presenters, like he says every time they watch that programme together.

'Do you know a man called Edvardsen?' Elias asks after a while.

'Edvardsen?' says his dad. 'Is that the bloke who lives in Block C?'

Elias nods and munches away at a fistful of peanuts from a bowl on the table.

'Wasn't he a chemistry professor?' his dad asks his mum. 'Before he retired?'

His mum shrugs. 'Retired?' she frowns. 'Sacked, more like.'

'Was he sacked?'

Elias gives her a quizzical look. He remembers the times he's been with his dad to where he works in the castle-like structure at the university that they call the Main Building. It wouldn't surprise him one bit if dusty old professors like Edvardsen were to be found in the dark recesses of that place.

'Why do you ask?' says his dad.

'Oh, no reason... It was just something Mina said.'

They sit quietly while the teams on the show try to guess the odd one out between a mobile phone, a blue whale, a raisin, and the prime minister.

'Are you ready for Mats coming home tomorrow, then?' says his mum, gently ruffling his hair.

'Am I? You bet I am,' he says. He can feel just how much he means it.

'That's good,' says his dad. 'It'll be nice.'

Incredibly, this long day finally seems to be coming to an end. The only thing left for Elias is to snore his way through the night. Easy enough. He might as well get a head start now.

'I'll be off to my room, then,' he says, getting up.

On the way, he peers into Mats' room. Elias' big brother is football mad; his whole room is full of scarves and posters. Every time they're on holiday somewhere, he wants to track down the local football team's fan shops and buy something from there as a souvenir. 'What am I supposed to do with some stupid plastic ruins?' Elias remembers Mats saying when they went to Athens two years ago and visited the Acropolis. Instead he bought a green Panathinaikos scarf, which he pinned up on the ceiling where it slanted down above his bed. Elias agrees that's much cooler.

This summer was different.

They were meant to go to Italy and had booked flights and everything. But there's no Roma scarf or Lazio strip hanging on the wall. All that Mats got was some washed-out blue hospital pyjamas with trousers that were too short. Instead of the

lilo he found himself lying on an electrically operated bed with white sheets. Instead of milkshakes in tall glasses with red berries and umbrellas on top, it was chemotherapy drugs from a dreary-looking plastic pouch on a drip stand.

Elias stands there in his own room. He hasn't got as much stuff as Mats. He's cleared away most of his toys; after all, he's not a little kid any more. In their place, he's filled the shelves with old radios. It wasn't that long ago that the old FM network was closed down, and people had to get new digital radios. Overnight, their faithful kitchen radio became obsolete. Elias asked if he could have it, and then he took in more of them, from his grandparents, uncles and aunts. There's something about the electronic static you get from old radios when they're not tuned in to any channel. He likes having it on in the background when he's doing his homework. It's relaxing, almost like the roar of the sea or a tremendous storm.

Elias goes over to the window, where he has a good view of much of the neighbourhood. He tries to find the block that Mina was pointing at. Edvardsen's window. It must be one of the blocks facing another way. That would explain why he hasn't seen the mysterious light she was talking about.

Before he falls asleep, Elias thinks of the old man at the shop. The professor. Why did he get sacked? He imagines that room with the red light, all set up like a laboratory. Boiling flasks and test tubes, just like in the science lab at school. What if they've got their own Frankenstein living there? Edvardsen hardly looked very frightening at the shop, but you never know. That's something they've actually learnt in his family this year – unthinkable things can suddenly become real. In the blink of an eye, the whole world can be turned upside down.

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Elias wakes up with a vague feeling that something big is supposed to happen. Then he remembers: today Mats is coming home! He leaps out of bed, even though his dad has said that Mats can't come until after the doctor's round at eleven o'clock. That's more than two hours away. Elias shuffles out to the bathroom and rubs his eyes in front of the mirror. How will he pass the time until then?

After having thought about a couple of less enticing options, such as tidying his room or reading a book, he fetches his tablet and lies down on the sofa in the living room with, in his lap, a bowl of cereal and chocolate milk. He tries watching an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*. The sound of the Hoover makes it impossible to follow.

'Dad,' Elias sighs, exasperated. But his dad is too focused on the cleaning to notice anything else. 'If you're going to do the hoovering, you might as well do it properly,' he always says. He's even worked out a technique for hoovering the

curtains without getting them all twisted or sucking them up into the Hoover's innards. Elias seriously doubts that Mats would be worrying about *that* when he comes home.

Back in his room, Elias finds something approaching calm. The radio static in the background smooths out the noise outside into something he can live with. He opens the browser and types 'scary red light' into the search box. There aren't that many relevant results that come up. There's one desperate person on a forum writing about a red light on a display warning of a server crash. Another person writes about a red glow in their garden, which turned out to be coming from a Coke advert on a nearby bus shelter. Nothing about scary lights from mysterious neighbours. But, then again, it might just be something Mina made up, Elias thinks. She does sometimes have a habit of letting her imagination run wild.

Maybe Edvardsen is just reading old love letters in the glow of a red lightbulb, so that nobody can see him blushing?

Elias smiles to himself and watches another couple of episodes. He almost loses track of time, because then he suddenly hears noises from out in the corridor.

Mats is sitting on a stool, letting his dad pull the heavy boots off his feet.

'Elias,' he says, when he spots his little brother in the doorway, dragging out the 'a' in his name in a cool, big-brother-like way. Elias feels warm all the way to his stomach.

'Hi,' says Elias, raising his arm by way of greeting.

Mats gets up onto his feet, and his mum helps him to stagger through to the living room. He lands softly on the sofa and leans back comfortably, as if he's planning to stay there until after Christmas.

'Are you pleased to be home?' asks Elias.

'Home on probation,' says Mats, as if he'd been let out of prison early. 'We'll have to see if I behave.'

It's strange seeing him in his own clothes again. They look too big for him, almost as if Elias were seeing himself in some bizarre attempt to dress up like Mats.

Their mum sits down on the arm rest and puts a hand on Mats' shoulder.

'How do you feel?' she asks.

'I've felt better,' says Mats, coughing. 'But I've felt worse too.'

Their mum finds a blanket and spreads it over him.

'I think we should let Mats rest now,' she says, turning to Elias. 'And then we'll eat a bit later.'

'Spaghetti,' says Mats with a listless grin. 'That was one of the demands I made if I was going to be taken home.'

Their mum pats him gently on the back and laughs softly.

'Ah,' says Elias. He loves spaghetti, but he can't hide his disappointment at how weak Mats is. It wasn't meant to be like this. They were going to do so much together. Now he realises that it isn't going to be that kind of weekend after all.