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This Just Happened

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English sample translation by Adam King

[pp. 5–39]

Time for some proper fun!

I'm like a tornado. I can sprint crazy fast!

How come? Because I'm so FREE. Duh.

Nah.

But my name *is* Frida. Although I wish it were Jenny or Josephine. A bit sorta...softer.

Or maybe just Meghan Markle or Ada Hegerberg.

Nah.

I've just turned eleven and am doing pretty good at school. Or doing good at the things that matter in life, at least.

I wanna be a football player or some kinda wordsmith.

If I get a job working with words, maybe I can come up some completely new ones. I *think* you can do that. Brand-spanking new words that the world has never heard before a certain Frida invents them! Imagine that! How *nog-bogglingly cool* would that be?

But it might be smarter to play football since I'm a kinda super-speedy sprinting all-star.

I hope the rest of my life is gonna be fun.

It's about time for some PROPER FUN!

It's alright not to have fun all the time, cos that's just not possible.

I know a little bit about that already, actually.

Cos has anyone ever said having your Mum is in the cemetery is any fun? Don't think so.

Besides, something has just happened right now which is the complete opposite of fun. Anti-fun. It's like Crappy Crapperson from Crap City has come knocking on the door.

Mrs Snail Mail has moved in!

Not just to spend the night in the guest room, which for a while she was doing a little bit too much, with her stuck-up purple bag plonked on the chair next to the dresser.

Now she's wormed her way into our house with her whole life in tow. With cardboard boxes and bits for the kitchen and straighteners and the stink of her hairspray! And she's not exactly sleeping in the guest room if you know what I'm saying.

She's moved into Dad's room. Sleeps in the double bed next to him.

"WHY DON'T JUST YOU BUY ANOTHER BED?" I yelled at Dad.

That was the first thing I did that morning when it hit me that this was really happening. That morning Mrs Snail Mail came out of his room with her bedhead and a faint smile. I refused to look at her when she tried to catch my eye. I just eyeballed Dad and kept shouting, "IT'S MUM'S BED TOO YOU KNOW!"

It's not like Mum was sleeping in it last week or anything. Not even a year ago.

It's nearly five years since she slept in it for the last time. Almost five years ago she jumped out of bed and did everything like she used to.

I know it's true. Dad told me so.

She would bounce out of bed like it was a trampoline, stick the coffee on and take a shower. Then she would wake me and Dad up, and we definitely wouldn't bounce out of bed, more like slide or float. And then we would eat breakfast while she asked us questions and played word games with us. Even though we were always running late!

I know it's true. I remember it.

Like she might point to her toast and say: *What rhymes with this?*

And then Dad might say: *Kiss!*

But I was quicker and was just like: *GHOST! Toast rhymes with GHOST!* Right first time.

And soon it'll be five years since she said: *Frida, guess what's for dinner tonight!* Then she began miming: puffing up her cheeks and making the sound of explosions, then stomping her feet on the floor. I remember umming and aahing for a while, and then suddenly: BANGERS AND MASH!

Right first time again!

Then she packed our lunches and cycled with me to school, before riding onwards to her architect job, where she drew almost an entire floor of a building before her heart stopped beating. CLICK. Switched itself off. Game over.

Mum flopped over her drawing board. Brown curls spread out across almost an entire floor.

And ever since then there's been no more miming or word games for breakfast.

A fairly ordinary morning

I'm on the start line outside our house with the taste of toothpaste still in my mouth. I snap shut the fasteners between the straps of my backpack. I'm pretty good at sprinting even when the backpack's bumping up and down, but when it's tight up against my body I'm like a *flash of lightning*. It's like it becomes a part of me.

Snap into place, and then ready – steady – sprint!

Frida Freedom whizzes across the footpath! My trainers skid a smidge on the gravel, but then it's straight out onto the pitch and suddenly I'm there in my gleaming football shirt and sweatband. The match hasn't even begun yet but the stands are already cheering! *Free-dom – Free-dom!*

Best foot forward, up on the toes, shimmy the legs, snatch the ball!

Don't back off! Push to score! Give 'em what they've come here for!

Then the ref runs out onto the pitch and...

"There you are." Grass turns back to gravel and the crowd falls silent. I screech to a halt right in front of Maya. She's standing on the footpath and looking at me with her impatient face on.

"Hi Maya!" I pant, "Are we running late?"

"Yep."

"Were you just about to leave?"

"Yep."

"But you didn't!"

"Nope."

"You waited, didn't ya."

"Hm." We start walking and I realise Maya's annoyed at me because I'm late.

"What've you got first thing?" I ask, just to change the subject.

"Maths."

"We've got Norwegian. Always best to have Norwegian first I think. Or anytime, really. I hope we'll be writing stories. Maybe I'll write about that time we were swimming and you didn't dare jump from the diving board." I look over at Maya and rush to add: "Nah! Just kiddin'. Not gonna write about that I mean. But it was pretty funny right?"

"What?"

"You just standing there on the diving board for like a whole year and then getting down again without jumping."

"Nope."

"No? But that's what happened."

"Yep. But it wasn't that funny."

"It might have been funny in a movie or something then," I say, and then it's time to change the subject again cos, you know, I get it. And so even if she's never said yes to it before I still try again. "Do you wanna come with me and visit Alleycat Jack after school today?"

"Can't. Going to gymnastics."

"What? You've started gymnastics?!"

"Yep."

"When?"

"A few weeks ago."

I feel like yelling *Why didn't you say anything about it then?* but then I realise that Maya knows I tried gymnastics once and hated it. Maybe that's why she didn't say anything. I hated that we had to run around in such tight pink leotards and it was all just *light on your toes, girls, light on your toes!* It was Jayne with a Y's mum who was running the whole thing, standing on the sidelines with her pink lips and yelling at us to be light on our toes. She smeared on layer after layer of pink lipstick as we were stretching up towards the ceiling and being light on our toes and then curling up like a *flower*. Huh? Curl up like a flower?! And Jayne with a Y was just like *I am a rose*.

"Is it Jayne with a Y's mum who's running it still?"

"Yep."

"I don't know how you can stand her!"

But Maya doesn't say a word, just keeps walking at the same pace and looking down at the tarmac.

I think about the time Dad picked me up after gymnastics and was like *How was it Frida, did you make any friends?*

Make any friends? How am I supposed to make friends with anyone when all we do is run one after the other and be light on our toes and curl up like a flower? And anyway everyone was sucking up to Jayne with a Y! So how am I supposed to make friends with anyone!

But I didn't say any of that.

All I said is, "I don't want to go anymore."

And then I remember there was *quite* a long pause while Dad gulped and sighed, making those sounds that he always does when he doesn't know what to say, cos, you know, I get it.

"Mum never went to gymnastics, did she?"

"No, Mum didn't go to gymnastics," Dad said, and that was the end of that conversation.

Mum did play football though, *and* she was crazy good at sprinting just like me.

I feel like asking Maya if she knows my mum was good at football and sprinting. But she doesn't like talking about dead people. I tried once and she told me so. But there's loads else I can talk about you know, no problemo for me. "Do you know why Y and Frida go so well together?" I ask quickly.

"Err...*Why why?*"

"No, why Y."

"Umm..."

"Have you got it?"

"Uff..."

"If you kind of crash my name into that letter. Into the letter Y."

"Umm...*what?*" Maya says as she starts walking faster, so I have to walk faster too.

"Friday!" I say, looking across at Maya to see if she gets it. But she looks quite confused and I think the only thing on her mind is whether we're going to be late.

"FRIDA + Y = FRIDAY," I say, but Maya just walks even faster. Doesn't she get it? "Frida-y!" I repeat. "The best day of the week! The day we get to be FREE!" I say, and then I laugh cos gymnastics and *light on the toes, girls* is not exactly what I would call being FREE!

"Hmm," is the only thing Maya says, and then we're there. "Bye," she mumbles in a prickly voice and then walks into her classroom, which is across the corridor from mine. Their teacher loves her job and always starts on time and never lets them go even a minute early.

“Bye Maya”, I say and feel sad as soon as I realise that it was the same as it was last time: I was gabbling on and on and Maya was half-grumpy and mumbling.

Then I walk into my class and see our teacher, who thinks her job is...so-so.

Breaktime

I've sprinted two laps of the playground. Pretty fast, but not tornado fast. It's not actually that easy to be tornado fast when there are people standing around everywhere. What's going on? Since when has everyone just stood there in groups talking to each other? *Helloo!* The swings are free!

Maya's in with the biggest group. She's standing and staring at the one who's talking, the one who's flapping her pink nails around and chewing everyone's ears off – Jayne with a Y, of course, who else would it be? Everyone's standing there staring at her, nodding and smiling, pretty soon they'll be bowing and curtsying too. Pretty gross. I walk over to them and stand just behind Maya.

"Hi, Maya," I say quietly so as not to butt in.

"Hi," she says, shooting me a quick look before swivelling back to Jayne with a Y again.

"It's like my aunt is just *insanely* good at shopping," Jayne with a Y is saying, stressing *insanely*. She says *insanely* all the time! "And then I made an insane amount of new friends... We like went swimming at this awesome place down by the fjord even though it was insanely cold! It was just like I got to know the whole place insanely well. Spikersuppa, for example, that's in the dead centre of the city."

I try to squirm my way in next to Maya, but the circle is jam-packed.

"Maya?" I whisper.

I want to say *Help me out!* But I think that's the kinda thing she should understand without me telling her.

Then Jayne with a Y suddenly says "Eh..." really loudly. "Were you gonna say something Frida? Or was it just one of your weird words or something?"

And then of course she lets out one of her warbling laughs, which she forces out of her mouth as often as she can ever since that time the cool girl in Year 8 commented *Oh, can you laugh like that again please, Jayne? I wish I had such a cute laugh!*

Then it all falls dead quiet. Now there are only a bunch of girls' faces watching me, waiting. Everyone apart from Maya. All of a sudden she's looking at the ground and off into the distance and anywhere else but at me.

"What are you up to?" I ask quickly. They're not getting a single weird word out of me. And no nice ones either.

"We're talking about my trip to Oslo this weekend," says Jayne with a Y, smiling at those standing next to her, "About me going to an insanely cool party with my cousin's class, and... yeah... you know... boys and stuff..."

"Cool yeah" I say, then explosions start going off inside my skull: *Cool yeah?! What a dumb thing to say! Keep your gob shut, Frida!*

"Cool, yeah," says Jayne with a Y. "Insanely cool!" And then she's back warbling again, only this time it sounds totally bizarre, as if she thinks it's a huge hassle to have to force it out every time. "I'm pretty sure you've got time to run another lap before the bell goes," she says.

And then she makes a super-stupid sprinting motion like she's running on the spot with her mouth wide open and glaring, staring eyes. More people start laughing when she does this. Even Maya smiles, unable to hide it. Then the bell rings and there's nothing I can do but turn around and walk back towards the classroom.

Is that how I look when I'm sprinting?

Good lord gorblimey

I open the lid of the mailbox by the gate and pull out three newspapers. It's obviously been a few days since he's been out of the house.

I take a deep breath before pushing open the door.

"Jack?" I shout once I'm inside. I step over two cats lying on the old newspapers out in the hallway, and then I spot him.

Alleycat Jack is sitting in his armchair in the corner. He's wearing his coat, as usual, and his long grey beard – well, it's still long and grey. It's full of crumbs and stains, and sometimes other things too.

"Good lord gorblimey, is that you, Frida?"

"Of course it is, Jack! I brought you your papers," I say, laying them on the table next to his chair.

"Heavens above, would you look at them! Newspapers!" he says, picking one up. "You Frida, you're no featherbrain," he says and shoots me a smile.

"No featherbrain!" I say quickly. *Featherbrain* is a nice word. I actually think Alleycat Jack only uses it so often because he's knows that I like it.

Most of all I just want to stand here and listen as Alleycat Jack flicks through the newspapers, cos when he does he talks to himself and then I get to hear words like *featherbrain*. Words that no one else uses. Like *Stone the crows, what an oaf! A scrimshanker of a politician! An abominable human being! Pull yourself together, you yahoo!! An ignoble suggestion!* That sort of thing.

But when I'm as hungry as I am right now, I can't always hang around Alleycat Jack for too long. Sometimes I get a bit dizzy when I get hungry at his place. Maybe it's because I'm holding my breath most of the time when I'm there. Even if I'm used to the smell, I still can't breathe properly.

"I just came to give you the papers, that's all," I say.

Alleycat Jack looks up from his newspaper and sees that I'm getting ready to leave.

"You're hotfooting lickety-split?" he says.

"Wha...?"

"You're making haste?"

"Umm..."

"You're yomping on the double?" he says.

"Eh... yep, yomping on the double," I say, and then I make my way out. But then I just have to turn around and ask, "What does *yomping* mean?"

"Yomping?"

"Yep."

"Tramping, Frida. Trudging. Marching, if you will."

"Okay! I'm yomping then, on the double." And with that I'm out the door and gone like Yompy Doubleson.

A good heart

Dad's bike is leaned up against the garage. Maybe he's home alone? I check whether Mrs Snail Mail's purple shoes are on the rack in the hallway. Luckily not! I go into the kitchen. "Hi Dad!"

"Hi Frida," he says, looking up from whatever he's working on. Probably his students' assignments or something like that.

"Nice to have the house to yourself for once!" I say with a big grin. Dad's about to say something, but then he stops himself and just grins back. "Is Mrs Snail Mail working late?"

"Yes, she is," he says.

"Good!" I say, without thinking.

"But Frida..."

"Uh huh?"

"She has a name you know."

"Sure she does."

"Well what is it, then?"

"Mrs Snail Mail."

"No, Frida... She has a proper name, and I think..."

"Alright!" I say, "But I can't bear to use it."

"Why not?"

"Mrs Snail Mail suits her better."

"Why?"

"Because that's what she is."

"She works in a shop and she's in charge of the Post Office counter there, but she's..."

"So *that's* what she is!"

"She's more than just her job. Her name is..."

"I said I can't bear it!" The truth is her name is horrible. It's completely different from names I like, like Mum's name. It's weird and wrong in every way. Everything goes quiet. I look out the window and sense that Dad's looking at me. He's waiting for something. I know that cos, you know, I get it. But then I hear him start writing again. The fridge is humming and his pencil is scratching away on his papers. But then I get the feeling that I'm not actually finished yet.

"Dad... Why's she your girlfriend?"

"Sorry?" The scratching from his pencil stops. The only thing making a sound is the fridge. *Hmmm hmmm*.

"Why's she your girlfriend?" I repeat, although I really don't want to talk about it at all. At least not when, at long last, it's just me and Dad here. When I say that word – *girlfriend* – it almost makes my brain boil cos I don't want it to come out of my mouth!

"Because... she has a good heart."

"OKAY?!" I yell, turning to face Dad, "So that's why you're with her! So that she doesn't keel over and die from her job and everything else she has to do!" There's no time for him to reply before I go on. "And what's so good about her heart then, if I may ask? Has it got something to do with that green powdery stuff she stuffs herself with every morning, huh?"

"That's not what I meant, Frida. I didn't say *healthy* heart."

"No, I heard what you said! You said *good* heart. Mum had a *bad* heart so now you want the complete opposite. You wish you'd met Mrs Snail Mail straight away so you'd never have met Mum and her bad heart in the first place so you wouldn't have had me!"

"I'm with her because I like her and she's good for me, that's what I was trying to say. But... Frida," Dad says, changing his tone, "I wouldn't change..."

"Sorry but right now I've got to PUKE!" I cut in, cos I can't stand it anymore. "And I don't even know if I'm gonna make it to the toilet!"

So I storm out into the hallway, not cos I feel like puking but because I've *said* so. Along the way I make proper chundering sounds, then I jump into my shoes and run out of the house down to the play area to sprint laps that turn my face a bright blood-red.

I lean in towards the goal, wheezing so hard I nearly heave.

And then they come streaming out with TV cameras and furry microphones. I wipe my forehead with the sweatband and give 'em a little nod to show that I'm alright for an interview even though I'm about to burst.

"Well well, Freedom! Three-nil against Shepherd's Bottom FC, not bad at all! How does it feel to be crowned Player of the Match?"

"Nah...just...we brought it home today and...yeah, it feels good actually," I say, looking out over the stands.

"You seem to be in unbeatable form."

"Yeah... I've been building up and building up over the last year, so..."

"You're finally seeing results?"

"You could say that, yeah."

"How does it feel to hear them cheer your name from the stands all the time?"

"Yeah, no, it..."

"You're probably getting used to it by now, right?"

"Ha, well I don't know about that..." I peek over at the horde of fans with their notepads and pens and I know exactly what they're after if you know what I mean.

"Frida?" The stands empty out and the cameras blink off. "There you are Frida." Dad's standing at the edge of the play area looking over at me. "Can you give me a bit of help with dinner, you think?" I'm about to yell *Can't you even make dinner now, you yahoo?!* but then I realise that it's just Dad and me at home tonight. Us two home alone, alone in the kitchen. Maybe he'll put one of his records on. Maybe we'll munch on some almonds while we're cooking. Maybe it could be the way it used to be, the way it *was*. Besides, my belly's rumbling like crazy. I start shuffling towards Dad.

"What are we having?" I ask. He doesn't say a word. He just makes the sound of explosions and stomps his feet. "Yes!" I say, and then look up at the sky and mime *yes* without Dad seeing. It's just something I have to do sometimes so Mum can be part of our gang again.

"You must be extra hungry now," Dad says, "what with all that throwing up you were doing," then he winks at me.

But I just act like nothing. "Yeah I am in fact," I say. "That's exactly what I am. Extra hungry."

Then we go in.

THAT day

The next day we're sitting in the classroom and everything is tip-top and hunky-dory. Then the door opens. Ginger curls enter first. Then a huge smile and a gap between the front teeth. Next a pair of big brown eyes, an army-green woolly jumper and metre after metre of bright red scarf. A skateboard tucked under the arm. Then a hello and a suntanned hand darting up to greet the whole class. Everyone says hi back, but I'm the only one to raise a hand the same way he does. Cringey for sure, specially cos Izzy looks over at me and rolls her eyes. My hand quickly disappears back under the table and there it stays, beginning to live a life of its own. It trembles and shakes, just won't stop. All the sprint in my whole body is concentrated in that one hand.

The teacher looks completely flabbergasted with every inch of her teacher's face. She hasn't said a word about a visit to the class, not a peep about ginger curls or a gap between the front teeth.

"Umm," is all she says. "Umm... Yes, that's right," she murmurs, and then, "Oh yes, hi there!"

"Hi there!" he replies loudly, smiling, and then people start giggling. I'm laughing too, a little too loudly maybe, cos Izzy looks over again and won't stop rolling her eyes at me.

But then the bell goes – *crazy timing* – and the teacher is bamboozled all over again.

"You can introduce yourself in the next period, okay?" she shouts, drowning out the sound of the bell and the scraping of the chairs.

"Fine by me!" he shouts back, and then he walks straight over to the sink and starts pulling paper out of the paper dispenser, just like that.

Who is he? What's going on?

I need to get out of here. I need to sprint!

On the way out I sneak a quick peek at the guy standing by the sink loudly blowing his nose with mountains of paper, properly *splurging* on it! But I'm just itching to sprint – my body's desperate to get outside.

I'm tornado fast, and when I'm sprinting like this, around the playground with a buzz in my belly and wind in my wings, that's usually all I'm thinking about. Just that I'm tornado fast and that I'm getting faster and faster and faster. Better and better and better day after day after day.

But hang on a minute!

Even if I've maybe *never* sprinted so tornado fast before, all I can think of is ginger curls and that gap between the front teeth. And I'm thinking about the teacher saying he ought to introduce himself afterwards, which could mean that he's joining our class or something!

Then I stop dead, remembering the moves that Jayne with a Y did, remembering the wide-open mouth and the glaring eyes. I look around. Is he out here somewhere? I can't see a single strand of ginger curl or a thread of red scarf. Just the same old normal clothes and hair colours.

So I sprint on until the bell goes again.

Once we're back inside the classroom, they're both there stood up in front of the board, the teacher with her kindest, gentlest teacher's face on and her hand on his army-green shoulder. He glances at her hand and then up at her as if he's wondering whether she's going to let go of him soon, but the teacher's hand stays stuck there and for once we all go quiet without her having to ask. Quiet as mice with our eyes popping out of their sockets.

"Alright everyone – this is Justin, who joined us just before the break. Right, Justin?"

"Right, Just" Justin answers.

"Wrong, just!" Tom shouts from the back row, and the teacher immediately shoots a harsh look in his direction.

"Right – *Just!* Not wrong, just!" Justin shouts back with a smile.

"That's just wrong," says Tom, laughing at his own joke there at the back. A few more of us are laughing too, but I try and look at Justin at the same time so he gets that I'm laughing cos *he* was funny, not Tom.

"Justin is joining the class," the teacher says, "Though I didn't think he was coming until *after* half-term, but he's here now... So that's great." Justin smiles, but quickly glances at the teacher's hand on his shoulder again as if to say *Are you gonna leave that thing there forever or what?* "Could you just tell us a little bit about yourself, then, Justin? Is that alright?"

"It's all wrong!" yells Tom again, but this time Justin doesn't pay any attention to him.

He steps away from the teacher so that she has to let go of his shoulder, then he looks up at her and says, "Sure can."

"Great!"

"What do you wanna know?"

"Maybe a little about where you come from and what you like doing, for example?"

"OK! Well first of all my name's Justin but everyone just calls me Just. And I'm from Oslo."

"Oslo! Cool!" I hear Izzy and Julie whisper to each other, like Oslo is so much cooler than here! It's probably just because Jayne with a Y has been blabbering away at them about the *Spiky Soup* there and is all like: *It's sooo insaaanelly cool in Oslo! Bare parties there all the time!*

"And I like ice lollies...and skating," Just says, pointing to the skateboard propped up by the door.

"Great," says the teacher.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Julie asks without raising her hand.

"Nope," says Just.

Nope, I think, and then it's time for the maths lesson to begin.

Smack in the middle of a maths problem I'm sitting there wondering whether he has a favourite ice lolly. Maybe Calippo, just like me? I'm staring at two numbers all apart at the edge of the worksheet. Two 1s just standing there, straight as arrows, on their own, exactly the same and all alone, in a way. No brothers or sisters hanging around if you know what I mean. I'm thinking those numbers might be a bit like me and Just. A perfect match when it comes to the thing with no brothers and sisters. Wonder if we've got anything else in common?

"Are you getting on with it, Frida?" Suddenly the teacher's peering over my desk, standing in a weird crooked way. I've seen it before and boy oh boy do I not like it. Or the tone of voice that goes along with it either, cos it's always deeper, like she might just as well be saying: *This doesn't look much good, Frida. Are you just sitting there and daydreaming again while the others are getting on with things?*

"I'm getting on with it!" I say. "I'll give it a proper try now."

And then I lean over the desktop to hide the workbook just so she'll stop standing there, cos she tends to walk away whenever I pretend to focus. And that's exactly what she does.

But then I start thinking about his name. *Just*.

It's *everywhere*. We think and say his name every single day, thousands of times, and he doesn't even know it.

I've never thought about that before. But I am now.

Because we do. That's just how it is. I just get it, you know.

It's just part of the our language!

And then suddenly I see that I've written his name in my maths book! *Crap!* I waste no time taking a quick look around me. *Rubber! Where are you when I need you most?!* But I haven't got one. I usually borrow off Izzy, but just now I can't!

But then realise – If I just fix that J a tiny bit, it'll easily turn into a 1. And then the u can be a 0, the s can be a little 8, and the t can be a 4! *Phew!* Lucky his name isn't Alexander...or Maximillian or something.

Then I see the teacher is making her way over to me again, so I rush to start a whole new maths problem on a fresh page and get stuck in. Cos I can do it if I really want to. I'm actually pretty quick. I manage it just in time for the teacher to take a peek and be like, "Great, Frida!"

And then the bell goes.

On the way home

On the way home from school I'm walking a little way behind Martin and Jordan. I don't *normally* walk ten steps behind them. But it's possible I'm doing it today cos they're walking along with Just. I make sure to keep a bit of distance, but I get almost everything they're chatting about.

"Been skating since I was five," says Just, swinging the skateboard up onto his shoulder.

"Five?!"

"My dad was a pro skater back then. Taught me a few tricks."

Show-off, I think at first, but *holy crap!* To think his dad's a pro skater!

"Is he still pro?" I hear Jordan ask.

"No, he's given it up now. He's a photographer these days."

"Photographer?"

"Yep. In Madagascar."

"Wow!" says Martin. "What does he take pictures of there, then?"

"Chameleons," I hear Just say. "But also lemurs and tomato frogs. Whatever he comes across down there."

I almost forget that I'm supposed to be keeping my distance so they don't notice me lurking behind them, but then I pull myself together, take shorter steps and try to imagine that I should be walking a bit more like Mrs Snail Mail. S-l-o-w-l-y. Without the sound, though, without her clumsy plodding. I take my time and tread on my tiptoes and think about Just's dad... A chameleon and tomato-frog photographer in Madagascar! How cool!

Just stops when they make it to the bottom of the big hill, and I'm quick to slam on the brakes too. I come to a halt and then *ziiip* in behind a big rubbish bin.

I hear Just telling them that he lives right over there, behind the church, and it seems like he's pointing towards his house cos I hear Martin and Jordan mumbling almost at the same time, *Oh yeah, over there*.

I don't dare stick my head out, I just sit there and rack my brains. The yellow one or the red one or the white one? Which one of the houses behind the church? Which one? Then they say bye and Martin and Jordan start walking steadily up the hill.

The hill that I'll be going up too, cos I'm just going home really.

But I let Martin and Jordan walk on ahead and stay sitting behind the rubbish bin, counting quietly to myself. I get to 54. That's long enough, surely! I slink out from behind the bin like a shadow, like a sly chameleon in Madagascar.

And then the sneaking starts. Then the spying begins.

Well, I'm not *trying* to spy. I'm just checking which house it is, then I'll head home.

It's the yellow one! I'm standing a fair distance away, but have no trouble seeing him swing into the garden in front of the yellow house.

After standing there for a while and wondering whether to get a bit closer, I spot a pear tree just outside his garden fence with a perfect branch that's just screaming out for me to climb on it.

After maybe ten seconds up in the tree, I spy a woman further into the garden. It's probably his mum. She has a rake in her hand and now she's walking over here, straight towards the pear tree! *Freeze, Frida, freeze!*

She stops at an apple tree just a few steps from my tree, just on the other side of the fence. She sighs loudly and leans against its trunk. I breathe silently, clinging on tight to the branch.

I'm hardly breathing at all. Good thing I've been in training at Alleycat Jack's!

From here I can see her legs super well, her brown workpants going straight down into a pair of long, green wellies. It almost looks like she's one with the apple tree.

She sighs again, and then she begins to speak loudly and excitedly, and it's only then I see Just. He's sitting on an upside-down bucket a bit further into the garden. It seems like they'd been talking about something just before I arrived cos his mum is like, "But imagine, Just, they just sent that little girl out of the country! *Without* her parents, *all* alone! What kind of country do we live in?"

His mum gazes into thin air as she speaks. "I heard it on the radio this morning and I just can't let it go!"

"Have you talked to Dad?" Just interrupts, even though she's so upset about the little girl from the news.

Now the excitement in her voice dies away and she's not staring up at the sky anymore. She's looking at Just instead.

"You don't have to ask me every day, Just. You know it's not as simple as just picking up the phone and calling."

Sure, I think to myself. Calling Madagascar can't exactly be the easiest thing in the world! And it probably costs a bomb.

Then I see them heading inside, and I clasp onto the branch. *Don't say a peep!*

"What was your class like, then, my boy?" she says just before they walk through the entrance to the patio. She ruffles Just's hair.

And then something happens inside me. There's something about the way she says *my boy* that makes my chest thump, the pounding spreading up towards my throat.

My boy.

My girl.

Even though it's feels like forever, it's one of the things I actually remember about Mum. She would call me *my girl*. A lot.

My girl.

Maybe she ruffled my hair like that whenever she said it too.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Once they've gone inside, I hop down from the tree. I wonder about sprinting up the steep hill, but I end up just walking.

I think about Just's phone calls with his dad in Madagascar. What they're like. How often they can speak without it costing an arm and a leg and that sort of thing. If the line crackles when they talk.

And then I think a bit more about me and Just having like no brothers and sisters. Zero. Zilch. So in that sense we're totally alike.

But I don't know if we've got anything else in common.

His dad's in Madagascar. My dad's in Norway. Not exactly the same, to say the least.

His mum rakes the garden. I've got a rake. In the shed.

Actually I've got nothing to offer when it comes to mums.

A mum in heaven, maybe. It's hard to know.

And Just and I don't look alike. There's not a single curl or a brown eye round these parts. My hair's way too blonde and wispy for us to look alike even a tiny smidge.

On the way up the hill I wonder if there's a living soul in this whole town that looks like him at all. Don't think so. And that's a pretty good thing, actually.

[pp. 160–185]

Party

Nearly everyone is here, and nearly everyone has brought their own skates. Tom and Becca have to borrow theirs, so it's good there's a place that lends them out in the park. They also lend out hockey sticks and boogie boards.

Most people are wearing warm clothes, puffer jackets, that sort of thing. Many have got Santa hats on, which is Christmassy enough. I'm wearing my mum's woolly hat. Since it's just plain green, I'm also wearing a hairband with reindeer antlers on top of it. It's a tiny bit cool and a tiny bit dumb. But that was the most Christmassy thing I could find in our fancy-dress box. Mrs Snail Mail said I could borrow a furry red coat from her niece, but no-thank-you-very-much. Wouldn't exactly be easy to skate around on the ice rink then, would it?

I look out over the sea of classmates. Holy moly, there are quite a few of us! But I can't see Maya. Or Jayne with a Y.

For a split-second I close my eyes and hope Jayne with a Y is ill. At the same time I worry about her not coming cos if Jayne with a Y and the rest of them are into the party, they might start being into me too.

"While we wait for everyone to arrive...!" Dad suddenly yells towards the gathering lined up alongside the ice rink, "Can I just remind you that it's not so unusual to get cold toes when you're ice-skating. At least I know of *one person* who has a tendency to get *very cold*," he says, looking over at me.

Stop it, Dad! I shriek inside my head, trying to act like nothing's wrong.

"But anyway," he goes on, "if you get cold it might be wise to take a break from skating. If so, it might be fun to grab this little buddy here!"

He's holding a red boogie board up in the air. *This little buddy here?* I can't decide whether it's funny or just plain weird. I look around but no one seems to think it's *stupid*, at least. I just hope they don't think I'm one of those people with extremely – *abnormally* – cold toes.

"There's a very nice sledging run here, as you probably know," Dad continues, pointing to the big slope next to the ice rink.

"Cool!" I hear someone right behind me say, and I recognise that voice!

I swivel stiffly on my skates and end up looking straight into two big, brown eyes. Just is clearly very pleased, and I see that he's hooraying what Dad is saying. That alone makes me tingle all the way up my spine. Then he looks at me and wastes no time whispering in my ear, "Awesome party, Frida!"

And even though I'm a little bit worried that he's just being nice, I'm blushing more and more and just have to turn away again. It's at that very moment that Jayne with a Y flounces into the park. Maya and Livia are right behind her. Jayne with a Y shrieks, "Insanely cool! Check out that disco ball!"

And then everyone turns around. A rustling sweeps through the crowd as people clasp their eyes on her. *Oh! Wow! Check it out!* That's cos Jayne with a Y obviously doesn't care about practical ice-skating clothes... It's more important that everything glitters! She's glimmering from head to toe. Everything is pink and white, except her tights – which are sparkling purple. She has tonnes of flashing pink beads on top of her snowy white woolly hat, just like a disco ball.

Nobody's looking at Dad anymore. Nearly everyone's watching Jayne with a Y, and she knows it too cos she waves to everyone and tips her head to one side and forces out her warbling laughter. I bet she showed up late on purpose just so this would happen! *Insanely pleased with the attention*. Then she sits down on the bench and laces up a pair of *pink* dance skates. They look brand new. Maybe she's not much of an ice skater after all?

"Alright, folks!" Dad shouts, "It looks like everyone's here now so we wish you all a warm welcome to the jamboree!"

Party, I think to myself, please say *party*!

"THAAAANKS!" shouts Tom, who's now standing right in front.

"First of all you're all free to do whatever you like," Dad continues, "and a little later on perhaps there'll be a competition!" He says the last part with a nod and a wink so that everyone understands that there will *definitely* be a competition. "And after that there'll be food, cake and hot chocolate."

"Cool," I hear Just say again, and I send a mental thank you from my mind to his. This is gonna be good. I can feel it in my bones. This is gonna be the *coolest party of all time!*

As I'm about to hop onto the ice, someone prods me on the shoulder. I turn around with a smile cos I'm thinking to myself this is obviously Just. But all of a sudden that someone is very tall and very pink. I clasp my eyes on pink lipstick and long eyelashes that flutter like mad. It's *light on your toes, girls*. Jayne with a Y's mum. What's she doing here?

"Hi Frida!" she says, and I gulp.

"Umm. Hi?"

"I brought a few bags of marshmallows for the hot chocolate!"

Jayne with a Y's mum is holding up four large bags.

It tumbles out of my mouth without thinking. "Why?"

Overhearing her, Mrs Snail Mail cuts in with, "Oh no but that's so kind. It's very good of you to help out."

"There's no need for her to stick her nose into my party though," I mutter quietly to Mrs Snail Mail and skate out onto the ice.

But when I turn around again I see that *Light on your toes, girls* is on her way back to her car to leave. Thankfully she's realised that she ought to stay away.

The ice rink is split into two. On one half there's a regular rink for pirouettes and dancing. On the other half you can play ice hockey. I've borrowed Dad's hockey stick and am raring to go!

I swerve on my skates and nudge into Just. Words hurtle out of my mouth before he disappears.

"Doyouwannaplayhockeywithus?"

"Maybe later on," he yells, skidding away without a hint of self-control.

"Okay!" I yell back, and launch into a tussle with Martin.

The hockey match reaches a blistering pace and a little while later the sound system starts blaring. All of a sudden the person in charge of the music – DJ Snail Mail – turns up the volume super loud. Everyone stops and realises that something's about to happen. *Last Christmas, I gave you my heart...* My body's boiling hot even though my feet are freezing. The music pumps all the way to the heart, and suddenly I'm seeing everything in a completely different way. The disco ball, which is a suspended above the ice from a rope strung between two trees, is sprinkling glittering light over everyone and everything. To be honest I didn't think Mrs Snail Mail had it in her. Outdoor ice-skate Christmas disco parties are awesome!

But then I see Jayne with a Y striking a pose on the ice rink, one hand on her hip and one knee bent. Like a shimmering supermodel, she's standing there waiting for the group of girls – her fan club – to join her. And here they come, gingerly, in their pink puffer jackets, hobbling across the ice. Let there be dance!

Then they're under way, almost all the girls from the other class plus some from mine. I freeze and stare. Jayne with a Y must have been rehearsing before the party. She looks like a professional figure skater. Her problem is that she's just way too full of herself.

I see that many have done the same as me, gone to stand and stare from the sidelines. Some of the boys are clapping their hands. She's got an audience and it's not fair! The ice queen, the Barbie princess, is soaking up all the attention.

She does pirouette after pirouette. She's making a real song and dance of it! Suddenly some of the puffer-jacket girls who were dancing with her in the beginning are also standing on the sidelines to watch. And then, through the middle of them, Just suddenly sneaks his way forward. I can see the twinkling in his eyes and the gleaming gap between his teeth. Everyone's gawping in amazement as though they're wondering if it's even possible to dance so well. But the only one who can't hide his enthusiasm is Just, cos suddenly he starts whooping, "Wow! You're so good, Jayne! Awesome!"

So...is it even possible?

Then DJ Snail Mail switches songs. *All I want for Christmas* booms across the ice. Jayne with a Y is still almost going it alone out there, and it's obvious that I'm not the only one thinking that's not alright cos the music gets turned down and Dad yells, "Musical statues! Everyone has to be out on the ice and moving. The point is to stand totally still when the music stops. Anyone who moves is out, and there's a prize for the last one standing!"

Lots of people shout, "Yoo-hoo!" and everyone skates away from the sidelines.

"The hockey gang too!" Dad shouts.

I hold the hockey stick in my hand like a trusty dance partner and start spinning around.

And then it's back to the start of the same song and... Let the competition begin!

I-I-I don't want a lot for Christmas / There is just one thing I need...

Some people are barely tottering forwards, picking up their feet like they're wearing ski boots. Others are holding onto each other so they don't fall over. A few are brave enough to actually ice-skate while others just spin around in a circle, ready to turn as solid as a brick wall when the music stops.

Our PE teacher always says that we should dare to take risks when it comes to musical statues. It's boring if everyone is always getting ready to freeze. I hear her voice in my head and try out a pirouette. It doesn't go too badly, but the music is still playing.

Then it stops and I'm super-quick to freeze. Yes. Perfect. Some people are out, but quite a few of them do a pretty good job. Me probably best of all.

We keep going. I can't help noticing that Just is circling around a certain sparkly person. We carry on with musical statues and the blood rushes through my veins.

Jayne with a Y manages to look cute and happy even if she's concentrating hard. Pirouettes and big risks – and all the while she smiles away to herself as if she's in charge of the music, as if she's deciding when to pause it and so can be completely chill.

Just is smiling back at her and it's just not okay. It's actually the opposite of okay! Because *she's* smiling, and *he's* smiling, and even though she's smiling at others as well, her smile lingers a little longer on his big brown eyes. As if that wasn't bad enough, I can even hear her laughing. Warblingly cute and waaay over the top! I look at DJ Snail Mail. What's she playing at, isn't she going to stop the music soon? It's time to take the ice queen by surprise and kick her butt out of the competition.

DJ Snail Mail stops and starts the music a few more times, and several more people are out. One time I almost twitch, but I manage to keep control. I concentrate like crazy and hang on in there. All the boys are out and then I see that there are only four of us left: Jayne with a Y, Livia, Izzy and me.

We swerve around and I boogie along with the hockey stick.

Just says, "Ha ha, cool dance partner!" and points at the stick as I skate past where he's standing. And so I do it more – I dance a bit harder with the hockey stick and check if he's watching. He's looking at me a bit and at Jayne with a Y a bit.

I'm holding the stick with both hands, and when the music stops I freeze in a perfect position with the stick above my head, my hands stretching up towards the sky like I've already won.

Izzy isn't able to hold it and is straight out of the game, so there are three left. The music thunders and the disco ball glitters. Jayne with a Y is clearly an expert at keeping her concentration and spinning pirouettes at the same time. From the corner of my eye I can see Tom standing by himself over on the other half of the ice rink, where we were playing hockey. He's stopped watching us. Instead he's swinging the club like a golfer doing some practice swings. But just then he hits the puck and it comes whizzing over in my direction. It actually lands right in front of me! Even though I'm getting ready to freeze when the music stops, I can't leave that puck alone. Maybe it's a sign? And before I think about what I'm doing I raise the hockey stick and give it a huge whack. It's a perfect strike and the puck soars through the air at a crazy speed. Then, just as the music falls dead, we hear a *THUMP*. The puck lands smack-bang in the middle of the ballerina's forehead! Jayne with a Y tumbles backwards and slumps down onto the ice. Not a sound. Not a twitch. A stone-cold statue.

One, two, three seconds pass, and then *WAAAAAAH!* Jayne with a Y clasps her forehead and screams like no one has ever heard before. It's as far from cute, warbling laughter as it's possible to be. What have I done?

Everyone rushes over, Dad and Mrs Snail Mail included. They gather in a ring around her. The screaming stops, turning instead into dramatic, painful whimpering.

"Did you see what Frida did?" asks Livia, who's at the edge of the circle.

More voices reply eagerly with, "*She did it ON PURPOSE!*"

Then Izzy says, "And did you see the look in her eyes?"

"She looked crazy!" continues Livia. "She aimed for her! She was *trying* to hurt her."

"So *insanely* nasty!" I hear Maya say.

They're talking as if I'm not there, even though they know I can hear everything they're saying.

But then the worst of the worst happens cos suddenly Just is standing right in front of me and his eyes look different, they've got an anger that I've never seen before. "Are you a *total idiot* or what? Are you *completely twisted*?"

He stares at me for a few moments before disappearing over towards Jayne with a Y.

I wish the ice rink was on a lake so I could drill a hole in it and vanish, so it would wash me off the face of the earth and away from this crappy life.

Happy Christmas. Sort of.

The day after the party I wake up at the crack of dawn – or maybe, when I think about it, I haven't slept at all. It feels like I've spent the whole night trying to wipe out everything that happened yesterday. But sadly, that's just not how it goes. Every time I try to wipe out the memory, I just remember it more. And whenever I think about the word *just*, I just think more about JUST.

It was like I turned into a zombie after what happened to Jayne with a Y. I remember shuffling over to the bench as she was whimpering, and I remember what everyone standing around was saying: "...Check out that bump! ...Get some ice... Take her home?" And I remember Tom yelling, "Actually, what was the prize?" – but he never got a reply. And when I sat down to take my skates off, I heard Dad shouting that everyone could take some pizza twists and cake before they left, but that it was probably best to bring the party to an end... And when I heard that, I pulled my shoes on in a hurry so I could get out of there before everyone came over to the table where the food and hot chocolate was. I sprinted home before anyone noticed cos I just couldn't deal with any more looks and comments. And I didn't feel like eating a single piece of cake. I didn't even get a chance to say sorry! And neither Dad nor Mrs Snail Mail asked me how I was doing. How unfair! How mean of them!

When they came home a bit later on and found me under my duvet in my room, they tried to make up for it by talking till I got a hole in my head. Asking me how I *felt*. What I was *thinking*. That it was a shame it ended like that and blah blah blah. *Shame?* It was a CRISIS! The complete opposite of a cool, trendy party. Mrs Snail Mail tried saying something about how good I was at skating, and even though it was nice that somebody finally said so, everything was still just crap. I wish there had never been a party in the first place!

And when Dad said something like *I understand if you don't want to talk about it right now, Frida. But if you do want to talk, you know I'm here, right?*, I just SNAPPED.

"YOU'RE HERE? I can see that you're here! Can't you just shut up?!"

It was then that they finally realised they ought to get the hell out of there and leave me alone.

Now I'm lying in bed wondering if there's actually any point in getting up *ever again*.

Suddenly Dad is standing next to me with his sad face on.

"It's Maya," he says, handing me his mobile and shuffling away in his slippers again.

Maya, I think to myself, and break out into a sweat when I remember the look she gave me as I was taking my skates off.

"Hello?" I say, squeaking like a mouse.

"Hi," says Maya, sounding grumpier than usual.

It goes quiet for a moment, but then she asks in an angry voice, "Well, how does it feel to almost kill someone?"

"WHAT?!" I shout, sitting up with a jolt cos all of a sudden I'm terrified.

I'm imagining that Jayne with a Y's bump has grown huge, that she's concussed and maybe got a brain tumour or something even worse. Dad and Mrs Snail Mail said she got better again pretty quickly but maybe they didn't want to tell me the awful truth? *Frida, we have to tell you something terrible... You're a killer!*

"Becca got sick from the food," Maya went on.

"Becca?"

"She was farting like crazy."

"Farting?"

"Yep, and she had stomach cramps. Her mum had to pick her up actually."

"Sheesh!" I say, cos I don't know what else to say. But then Maya explodes.

"Did you know that Jayne with a Y and Just are together now?" There's a whistling in my ears and a crackling in my brain. "They kissed in the hut," she continues.

"Kissed?!" I yell down the phone into her ear. Maya is quiet, not a murmur. Silence and tingling. "Was that all?" I ask, my voice still pretty loud.

"Yes, actually," she says.

"Actually?"

"Well... I think you were *insanely* nasty to Jayne," she says. I feel like throwing the phone against the wall, or at least yelling that there's no need for her to repeat herself *cos I heard what she said yesterday!* "And so does Livia," she continues, and then I hear a voice in the background, and then I get it. She's with Livia! The two of them together. And it's probably Livia who has made her call to tell me about Just and Jayne with a Y.

"Which hut?" I say, cos I'm totally confused. "And when?"

"The hut at the top of the sledge run. A few people stuck around after the party."

"Eh?"

"Yeah, a few people from both classes. And then Jordan's big sister arrived."

"But didn't Jayne with a Y go home cos of her forehead?"

"She was going to, but then Just got a lump of ice for her to put on it and then she was lying in his lap in the hut, and then she started feeling better."

"But how do you know they got together?!" I ask.

"Err, well... they *kissed* in the hut while everyone was watching."

"Okay?"

"And then they were holding hands afterwards when they left."

"Did you see them?"

"Yep. We're sure they're girlfriend and boyfriend now."

"We?"

"Livia and me."

Silence forever.

And then after a pause that goes on a bit too long I say, "WellyouknowwhatIdon'tevencare," and cut off the call.

Christmas holidays

The days go by at a snail's pace. Since when did holidays start passing so slowly?

I'm sitting on the sofa with a Christmas magazine when the phone rings. Dad sticks his head out from the kitchen and holds out his mobile for me. "It's Just from your class," he says, and I freeze, before I break free from the sofa and walk over like a robot, taking it from his hand and back with me into the living room.

"Hi..."

"Hi, it's Just."

"Yeah?"

"Are we going to pay a Christmas visit to Alleycat Jack one day, like we said?"

I'm trying to figure out if he's pulling a trick on me. And since he doesn't say a word about the party, I actually think he might be. Besides, he doesn't sound totally normal.

"Um, no... I don't think I can after all."

"You can't?" Silence with a whiff of roast turkey. Blood sprinting through my veins. "Why not?"

"We've got so many people coming over at Christmas that I probably won't have time." I speak as quietly as I can so that no one in the kitchen can catch a word of what I'm saying.

"Okay," he says, and I feel like snapping back with an angry suggestion: *Take the Glitter Princess along with you instead, I'm sure she'll be INSANELY happy about the stench at Jack's place!*

But I don't say a peep. For ages.

"Bye!" I say as hard and as fast as I hang up. He's got no chance to even start saying goodbye.

I can tell from his voice that it was definitely a trick. My head's been overflowing since the crappy party: *Are you a total idiot or what? They kissed in the hut while everyone was watching. Are you out of your mind? We're sure they're girlfriend and boyfriend! Are you a TOTAL idiot?!?*

He probably just wants to play a dirty trick on me so him and Jayne with a Y, *the romantic couple*, can get their revenge.

I sit down on the sofa and open the Christmas magazine again. But the only thing I on my mind is *Total idiot!* I put it back down. I feel like I'm itching all over and I don't know how I'm supposed to be able to think about anything else. I get up. I can't bear this Christmas smell for a single minute more!

At first I just stand up straight. Then I suddenly grab hold of the biscuit tin on the table. My whole body is twitching with the urge to send it flying. I've got a crazy desire to hurl it, maybe into the fireplace so the biscuits shatter into a thousand perfect pieces. But then I get another idea.

"I'm going for a walk," I shout into the kitchen without waiting for an answer, just walking straight out into the hallway and hopping into my shoes. I take the biscuit tin along with me.

"Happy Christmas, Jack," I say as I come into the hallway and the stench hits me.

"Good lord gorbliney, Frida! How canny of you to pay a visit," he says, smiling toothlessly. *Canny.*

I put the biscuit tin on the table next to his chair. He looks at it, mutters a thank you and gives me a smile. But then I get the feeling that he's looking me up and down.

I don't usually have any problem chatting or coming up with something fun to talk about, but all of a sudden I'm completely sad and empty. I just stand there looking around and I don't want him to look at me that way, inspecting me.

"Stone the crows, Frida, what's happened to you?" he asks with worry in his voice.

Is it *so* obvious? I think to myself. Can he really see that I've become the least popular, most miserable creature on the planet?

I'm about to lie, telling him I've had a cold or something over Christmas, that's why. But as I open my mouth it suddenly pours out of me. Everything. I tell him about the party and the puck to the forehead. I tell him that Just and Jayne with a Y have got together. I even tell him that I lied about how Mum died. And that I thought Just wanted to be my friend, but that he just felt sorry for me the whole time... Everything that I had never meant to say to another living soul pours out of me. Alleycat Jack scratches his beard while he listens. Nodding and listening and mulling it over.

"It'll work itself out, Frida," he says after a long while. "It always works out for people like you."

"How can you say that?"

"Because you're no featherbrain!"

The cats are looking at me now too. I feel like I've been cornered by the whole gang.

"And even though you're upset that Just has fallen lock, stock and barrel for this flappy-armed girl, you ought to be a bit happy about it too."

"Happy?"

"Happy *you* avoided all this boyfriend kerfuffle. Believe me, it won't last too long, and once it's all over it's hard to keep up the friendship. That's how it goes, almost every time. I think he'll come to his senses and go for friendship, Frida. And I don't mean with *her*."

"Jayne with a Y," I say, "Her name's Jayne with a Y."

"And I think you should do the same," he continues. "Focus on friendship – because friendship is worth more than gold. Real friendship lasts!"

"But not with friends who are only there cos they feel sorry for you," I shoot straight back.

"No, not those kinds," he says and starts rummaging around in the biscuit tin with his long, filthy nails. "I'm talking about a real, solid friendship, Frida. A friendship you don't give up on, one that can take a blow or two!"

He paws a few of the cakes before deciding on a wafer that crumbles into his beard as he takes a bite.

"You want one?" he asks, his mouth full of wafer.

"No thanks!" I say quickly.

It's quiet while he eats the wafer, but then I have to ask, "What does lock, stock and barrel mean?"

"Lock, stock and barrel? Well, it happens to the best of us. Falling head over heels in love, that is."

Happy New Year

Dad and I have been to the supermarket and bought a ham. Luckily for us there was just one left.

Mrs Snail Mail was convinced we would be too late. *Well this is what you get when you don't plan well enough in advance!*

But we've got a ham and an almond cake in the bag. AND loads of super-long sparklers! I bound out of the store, but come to a sudden halt.

They're standing there, almost like they're trying to block our way out. The mother with her big woolly sweater and, next to her, a certain person with a short name. *Alright, alright, just calm down, act cool.*

"Hello hello," Dad says. "Merry Christmas!"

"And all of a sudden it's happy new year too," says Just's mum, laughing.

"Yes, happy new year," says Dad.

Just tries shooting me a little smile, and I nod back quickly.

"You've had a full house this Christmas, I understand?" says Just's mum.

"Um, no, all quiet over at our place," says Dad, looking at me. "Just the two of us and..."

"Mrs Snail Mail," I say softly before he has time to say her name.

"Oh right," she says and looks at Just, thinking it over. "Yes, same with us, just him and me." She laughs as she ruffles Just's hair, just like she did in the garden that first day.

Why isn't his dad here with them to celebrate Christmas? Doesn't his job in Madagascar even let him go home for the Christmas holidays? Or maybe he didn't *want* to come home? Maybe they're getting divorced or something? I remember what Just's mum said the first day, that it wasn't as simple as picking up the phone. Maybe she didn't *want* to talk to him?

His mum won't stop ruffling his hair, but Just just squirms away from her and looks in a different direction. Then I hear him say in his quietest voice, "We really have to hurry up, Mum, Grandma's coming soon."

"Yes, true," she says and looks at us. "And Grandma needs help carrying everything! This year's supply of homemade redcurrant jelly," she adds with a huge smile.

It is like the words thunder in the air between us, like a waterfall that no one can stop. *Redcurrant jelly?!*

And suddenly there's a waterfall inside me too. I feel the blood rushing at lightning speed and every part of my body is thumping. I'm thinking about the prisoner Dad was telling me about. The prisoner who loves redcurrant jelly. About his mother who had promised to make extra.

And then I remember the look on Just's face that time on the stairs when I joked that Dad worked in a prison for teenagers and Just just got super-weird and ran off.

I look up at Dad. He's trying to smile at Just's mum, but it's the stiffest smile I've ever seen. I feel how hot I am down my spine and how cold it is in the air. How dry my mouth suddenly is. Dad swivels his head while his feet fumble on the spot as if he's wondering which way we're going to go. He looks totally confused and it's clear he wants to get out of here as soon as he can. I want to get away too, but I'm glued to the spot and can't budge an inch, can't make a sound. But Just's mum can, she can make a sound. She obviously hasn't noticed a thing and is just blabbing away happily. "Once a year she comes with a car-load of the stuff. Lucky us!"

She's laughing as she speaks and then starts walking towards the supermarket entrance with her arm around Just's shoulder. He wriggles free while she smiles and turns to us again.

"Have a good New Year's," she says. "Say hi to everyone at home!"

"Thanks, same to you," says Dad, and then he starts walking too. *Fast*. And it doesn't seem like he has the slightest intention of waiting for me. I have to run to catch up with him.

My chest is pounding as I eyeball Dad and say, "A car-load of redcurrant jelly?!"

But Dad just nods so I carry on in a kinda loud whisper, "Did you hear that or what?"

Dad doesn't look at me, just looks straight ahead. "Yes," he says and gets that look that doesn't exactly invite more chit-chat.

It rushes out of my mouth before I can stop it. "Is that your prisoner? Is Just's dad your prisoner?"

"Stop it, Frida, lots of people love redcurrant jelly," Dad says sternly, and then walks even faster.

I'm about to say something else, but then I stop. Dad just keeps on going.

Although there are definitely lots of people who love redcurrant jelly and whose mums make huge quantities of it, there can't be *that* many, right?

I think about Dad's reaction when Just's mum was talking, how weird he became.

And then something dawns on me: *professional secrecy*. It means Dad isn't allowed to say anything about the prisoners inside the prison. Did he say something he shouldn't have said? Cos why else would he be so weird just because she was talking about redcurrant jelly? He sort of became a completely different person. Was it because the redcurrant-jelly man in prison is Just's dad?

Is it *the prison* that's not so simple to call?

And has Just's dad never been in Madagascar?

Has he been lying all this time?