

I'm five years old.

Almost exactly.

I know that. Five years and a few days and a few nights.

It still feels like it just happened. I was sitting at the kitchen table with Mom on one side and Dad on the other and Eliot and Julia were across from me. And I blew out five candles all at once. They were in the middle of my cake and they were red with a little blue too but only at the very, very bottom, when you looked really close.

A few days and a few nights.

I clear my throat and try to smile, like I always do when I sing. It's my favorite song. *Happybirthdaytoyouuuu*. And if I sing it loud enough, my voice bounces off the ceiling and the walls and comes back to my open arms, where I catch it and hold on tight.

*Happybirthdaytoyouuuu. Happybirthdaytoyouuuu.*

When I sing, I don't hear the TV. A kid's show. I've been watching it almost all day. Just like yesterday. And the yesterday before that. I didn't get to do that before. But I do now.

I stop singing, stand up; it's hard to stay on the floor when my legs want to move, which they do a lot. I hop out of our living room, which is so big. I have to be careful here, the sofa is almost brand new, and the table is made of glass. If I touch it, my fingers leave smudges.

I jump all the way to Eliot's room, where he's sitting at his desk chair with his desk lamp on. He's pretending to read with a book open in front of him. But he *can* read, I know it, he's in second grade now. Eliot's gotten nicer the last few days. Probably because I turned five. I'm not four anymore, I'm big now. He doesn't even push me away from his racetrack anymore, the one he keeps high up on a shelf so I can't reach it. And he

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even let me win twice with the blue car that has a yellow line on its roof. He never did that before.

I always jump on one leg. Just one leg at a time. And if I use two, I go back and do it all over again. I came up with that myself.

Julia has a dollhouse in her room. It's really old. And I'm not allowed to touch it. If I do, Julia runs straight into my room and grabs my dollhouse and shakes it hard. But my big sister is asleep. She's on her tummy and her face is turned away. Julia can't see that I moved the tiny furniture, which is supposed to be on the top floor, down to the bottom floor.

In here I can't hop. Then she'll see me. I have to sneak. If Julia wakes up, if she sees me by the dollhouse she'll scream, and maybe even jerk on my arm.

Mom is sitting on a chair in the kitchen, laughing a little. You can't hear it, but she's smiling while she watches my five-year-old hopping feet. She's been happy for a while now, and it's so nice when Mom laughs, it doesn't matter if it dribbles onto the floor a little when you drink orange juice straight out of the carton, or if you drop a little sugar and flour on the kitchen table because you're baking. I grab onto the edge of the table and pull myself up into Mom's lap. It's always so easy to talk to her. I like to put my ear to her tummy and listen to how her voice sounds deep down inside before it comes out.

After I sit on Mom's lap I like to hop on one leg out to the creaky wicker chair in the hallway, to Dad. He likes to sit there, he reads a lot of newspapers, and it's a little quieter out there with the jackets and the umbrellas. I listen. Yes, it is, it is quieter. And the chair is so big, almost like an armchair. I'm able to squeeze in next to him. I think he likes when I sit there. Then he can still use his arms to flip the pages of his big, rustling newspapers.

Eliot and Julia and Mama and Papa. I think I like them even more than before. I can talk as much as I want. And they listen.

It's fun to turn five.

And then keep celebrating it for a few more days and nights.

I sing it again. *Happybirthdaytoyoooo. Happybirthdaytoyoooo.* I sing it loud, really loud, trying to sing over the knocking on the door. Then

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more knocking, harder this time. Finally I stop singing, and hop down from Dad's chair, and run super fast. I stand on my tippy-toes and jump as high as I can. I'm just able to grab on and turn the tiny bar.

Mom taught me how. I am always supposed to lock the door behind me. The shiny bar should be turned to look like a mouth and not a nose.

And that's the one I'm trying to turn right now.

**A** beautiful door.

Dark, heavy wood, early twentieth century. It somehow belongs with the muted, hollow sound of his knocking that fills the rounded stairwell, echoing off the slightly too steep steps, the high and elegant ceiling, and the flowery wallpaper that grows more lushly realistic on every floor. Ewert Grens, standing in front of an apartment in central Stockholm, knocks again even harder.

“Somebody’s in there. I hear them all day long. I hear it through my living room floor, in my hall, even in the bathroom. You wouldn’t believe how thin the walls are in this building.”

A voice, pinched and irritated, comes from behind him. Grens doesn’t turn around, doesn’t answer, just rings the bell for a fourth time.

“Someone’s singing—probably one of the kids, I’m fairly certain they have three. And I think it might be a TV too, very loud. It’s been on for at least a couple of days. And not during the day—all night, too. I was the one who called, I live in the apartment upstairs.”

The detective superintendent finally glances behind him. A man, just over forty, arms crossed, the kind of guy he dislikes immediately without really knowing why. The type who puts their ear to the door and listens.

“Happy birthday.”

“What?”

“That’s the song the child sings. *Happy birthday to you*. Over and over.”

The neighbor called in about the strange sounds. And called again when strange sounds turned to strange smells.

“I’m going to have to ask you to return to your own apartment now.”

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“But I’m the one who . . .”

“Yes—and you did the right thing. But now I need you to go back upstairs so I can take care of this.”

Grens waits until he’s completely alone before knocking a third time, impatiently, urgently, as if the muted and the hollow are calling out decisively. When no one opens the door, he bends down to peek through the mail slot, but before he gets there, someone on the other side tries to turn the lock. They don’t manage, but they try again. He can hear a quiet thump on a hardwood floor.

“Police.”

Thump, thump, like someone jumping.

“Police. Open the door.”

A lock that is slowly being turned. A handle that seems to move on its own.

Ewert Grens doesn’t like using a weapon. But still he grabs the gun from his shoulder holster and takes a step back.

Her hair is quite long. Blond. He doesn’t know anything about children, but if he had to guess—she’s four, maybe five years old.

“Hello.”

She’s wearing a red dress. Big stains on its chest and stomach. She smiles, her face is also stained, maybe from food.

“Hello. Are your mom or dad at home?”

She nods.

“Good. Can you go get them?”

“No.”

“No?”

“They can’t walk.”

So strange.

How the stench, sharp, intrusive, a stench he’s so familiar with, which met him faintly as soon as he entered the beautiful stairwell and assaulted him anew the moment the child with stains on her dress and her face opened the door—how that stench doesn’t really become part of his consciousness until he takes a few steps into the hall and is standing in front of a man slumped over in a chair between a coat and a shoe rack.

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“This is my dad.”

A large hole sits on the right side of his forehead. Shot at close range from the front, probably a handgun and a soft-point bullet, half lead, half titanium.

“I told you.”

The other bullet hole is slightly smaller, shot from an angle, just below the left temple.

“See they can’t walk.”

Ewert Grens doesn’t have time to stop her from jumping into her father’s lap, arranging his stiff, unwilling hands so that they’re not in her way, squeezing in between his right thigh and the chair’s armrest.

“Come here.”

“I’m going to talk to Daddy.”

“Come to me.”

Grens has never held a child of that age, and they’re heavier than he imagined. He grabs hold of her shoulders, then lifts her gently.

“Are there more?”

“More?”

“Is it just you and Daddy?”

“Everybody’s here.”

Her mother is sitting in a chair in the kitchen. She seems to have her eyes shut, lips frozen in a smile. Two bullet holes, just like the father—forehead and temple. There’s sugar and flour on the table, her clothes, and the floor. It doesn’t want to let go of the soles of his shoes as he walks across it. Mostly Grens stares at the cake, which sits untouched on the large kitchen table, five extinguished candles, green marzipan.

“It’s mine. My birthday cake.”

“It looks delicious.”

“I blew the candles out myself.”

The two siblings are exactly where the girl says they’ve been for a long time. In their rooms, the sister lying on the bed, bullet hole in the back of her head, the brother at his desk, shot straight from above, bullet hole on the crown of his head.

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That terrible sound. A TV, at maximum volume, a kid's show. Ewert Grens turns it off.

The quiet living room feels emptier.

Too much space for a stench more intense than any he's experienced before.

He sits down on the black leather sofa, as glossy as it is long, puts the girl in one of the armchairs. He looks at her for a long time. She doesn't seem scared, just hums quietly to herself.

"You have a pretty voice."

"Happybirthdaytoyou."

"Very nice. You just had your birthday?"

"Yes."

"Five? Like the candles on the cake?"

"And a few days."

"A few days?"

"And a few nights."

Ewert Grens looks around, struggling to keep breathing, slow and steady.

A few days and a few nights.

That's how long this little girl has lived with the stench.