

10

The woman's name is Borgny Klokk. And she talks a mile a minute.

"I'm a singer. And a poet. And a painter. And a professor. Outdoor enthusiast, outdoor critic and botanist. Self-appointed, right enough, but it's still very impressive, if I do say so myself. I've lived here all my life, all on my own. That's impressive too. Ha!"

Borgny sticks her nose in the air like a proud rooster and leans back in her chair. Gro and Ollis are sharing a chair on the opposite side of the table. Borgny's reserved the third in case she feels like putting her feet up.

"You live here all alone?" Gro asks, leaning even further forward.

"Don't interrupt," Borgny snaps, giving Gro a stern look before smiling warmly again. "Well, then. What was your question?"



Gro looks at Ollis. Ollis shrugs.

“I was just wondering whether you really live here all alone.”

“I do. I’ve lived alone my entire life. It’s really quite impressive. No one else has managed it before,” Borgny says.

“You can’t have lived here alone your entire life,” Gro says, crossing her arms.

“Hush, now! You speak so loudly I can’t hear what you’re saying!” Borgny shouts, her hands over her ears.

“Have you never been into the village?” Ollis asks.

“The village? Yes, of course, I go there sometimes to steal food and coffee.”

Gro and Ollis gape at Borgny.

“Stealing’s wrong!” Gro says.

“But I don’t have any money!” Borgny exclaims, irritated. “And if I went during the day and tried to get a job, people would start to idolise me as soon as they shook my hand. They’d start inviting me for porridge and fruit compote, and I don’t want fruit compote, I want peace and quiet!”

Borgny lifts her coffee cup and slams it down on the table three times, driving her point home.

“Peace and quiet!”

Ollis pinches Gro’s thigh under the table, trying

to get her to change the subject. She doesn't want to know what happens when you annoy Borgny too much. Borgny grabs the floral-patterned coffee pot and fills her cup all the way to the brim in one precise movement so that it's close to overflowing. Then she puts her chin on the table, bringing her mouth to the cup to sip the coffee with a deafening slurp.

Gro cautiously clears her throat.

"Is that letterbox yours?" Ollis can tell Gro is trying to sound as pleasant as she can.

"I said don't interrupt!" Borgny says brusquely. She dumps a large spoonful of sugar into her cup and stirs like a woman possessed. Then she leans back again and looks out of the window. Ollis and Gro look at each other.

"Borgny?" Ollis tries.

"Bah!" Borgny jumps and spills her coffee on the table. "Oh, are you still here?" she asks, wiping up the coffee with the sleeve of her jumper.

"Er, we were just wondering whether that yellow letterbox is yours."

"Yes, it's mine."

"We found a postcard for Ollis in it," Gro says.

"Ollis? Who in the world is Ollis? I don't know any Ollis."

"I'm Ollis," Ollis says, raising her hand.

“Oh, you are, are you? I see. Well, it must have got lost then,” Borgny says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Got lost?” Ollis asks, trying not to say anything that might provoke Borgny. They really need to get some answers from her.

“Yes. Lost in the post. Had the wrong address on it or the wrong stamp or something like that.”

“But then wouldn’t it have been returned to the person who sent it?” Gro asks as nonchalantly as she can.

“Only if the person who sent it remembered to write their name and address on it. If they forget to do that, the letter doesn’t have a clue where it’s supposed to go.”

Ollis looks at Gro, who looks just as confused as she is. Borgny sighs dramatically and leans across the table, gazing at Gro.

“Have you ever sent a letter and then found out later that the person it was for never got it?” Gro nods and Borgny turns to Ollis.

“Or have you ever waited for a letter you knew was coming, only for it to never show up? Haven’t you ever wondered what happens to those letters? Well, they end up in my yellow letterbox. I don’t know how, I don’t know why. All I know is that the letters that come here

are the ones that don't have anywhere to go."

Borgny drains the last few drops of coffee from her cup. Ollis and Gro are both so bewildered that they finished their coffee ages ago, even though neither of them really likes coffee.

"Wow!" Ollis and Gro say in chorus.

"Wow, indeed. That about sums it up. Every day I receive post for thousands of people I don't know at all, but not a single one of those letters or cards has ever been for me."

"So what do you do with it?" Ollis whispers, scared that Borgny might suddenly decide not to tell them more.

"Build bookcases, collect the post and sort it into folders on the shelves. Every single day," she says, throwing her hands in the air. Ollis scoots further forwards on the chair.

"So you collect post from the yellow letterbox every day?"

"It doesn't always come at the same time, but I always collect it at eleven o'clock. On the dot. Every day." Ollis and Gro look at each other, eyes wide. That explains why the letterbox is always empty when they get to it. Borgny blinks and squints at the ceiling.

"Apart from today. Today I was a bit late because I got a

bit wrapped up in my toffee spitting.”

They look up at the ceiling, which is completely covered in blobs of toffee. Ollis thinks it's gross, but Gro looks impressed, much to Borgny's delight. But then Gro's eyes narrow. She turns and surveys the kitchen before getting up and sticking her head out into the hall.

“But if you collect the post every single day, there must be loads of it. Where is it? I haven't seen any sign of letters or wedding invitations...”

Borgny slams her hands down on the table so hard that her glasses end up askew.

“No sign of it, eh?”

She gets up so quickly that her chair falls over. Then she storms out of the kitchen. *Living alone your entire life is bound to make you a bit odd*, Ollis muses. She turns to look at Gro, but she looks equally perplexed.

“Come on, then!” Borgny yells from somewhere further inside the house.

Ollis and Gro get up and walk along the hall with all the books until they reach another door. Inside, they find a narrow bed with a crocheted quilt and a bedside table with a tiny nightlight. There's a trapdoor in the floor. It's open. They walk over, crouch down and peer down the stairs, their jaws dropping as they gape at the

huge basement. There has to be a million folders down there. All of them are white, and all of them are neatly organised, side by side, on tall bookcases. There's no wall in sight. There are freestanding bookcases as well, at least twenty of them, arranged in rows with folders on both sides.

“How's this for a sign?” Borgny Klokk asks smugly.

“Wow!” Gro says, taking a few cautious steps down the narrow staircase. She jumps down to the bottom and spins slowly so she can take it all in. “Wow, wow, wow.”

Ollis can't believe her eyes. She descends the fifteen steep steps and walks over to one of the rows of white folders, letting her finger trail along their spines. Some of them are thin, others really thick. Ollis tilts her head and sees that all of them have been labelled with names written in loopy handwriting. She squints at one of the thicker ones.

“Kaaarin Gr...ønneberg?” she whispers.

“Yes. I sort every single letter. Every name gets its own folder.” Borgny reaches over Ollis's shoulder to grab a folder. It's big and heavy. Borgny has to use both hands to lift it, grimacing as she does so. Gro sees what she's doing and hurries over.

“Have you tried to get in touch with Karin Grønneberg then?” Ollis asks.

“No.”

“What?! Why not?” she asks, alarmed. “It’s not your post!”

“And I’m not a postman. The sorting’s enough work as it is,” Borgny says, looking up. She pulls several letters out of the folder, all of them with a slit in the envelope.

“You open them too?!” This is almost more than Gro can handle. “You’re not supposed to look at other people’s post! Right, Ollis?”

“Er, hello! I’ve lived here alone my entire life. The post’s the only thing I have to look forward to every day,” Borgny says, sounding petulant.

Ollis shakes her head at Gro. There’s no point trying to instil manners in a woman who can use the fact she’s lived alone her entire life as an excuse, even if that can’t possibly be true. Gro starts walking up and down the rows.

“Is there a folder for Gro Gran?” She ends up on her tiptoes in front of Borgny, her face the picture of anticipation.

“No.”

“Are you sure? There are a lot of folders here... you can’t possibly remember-”

Borgny stiffens, her voice suddenly fierce.

“I’ll have you know I know exactly what is and isn’t on my shelves!”

“Fine, fine...” Gro raises her hands in surrender, trying to calm Borgny. Ollis tries to sound indifferent when she speaks up.

“What about Ollis Haalsen, then?”

As soon as she asks, her blood starts rushing in her ears. Borgny thinks for a couple of seconds before walking along one of the rows in the middle. Ollis’s pulse starts racing. She doesn’t dare watch. Instead, she closes her eyes and just listens to the sound of Borgny rummaging among the folders.

“Ollis Haalsen?” Borgny checks.

“Yes,” Ollis says.

By this point Ollis’s heart is trying to explode out of her chest. She can hardly breathe. She quickly crosses her fingers as well, just in case. She hears Borgny’s footsteps coming closer, stopping right in front of her.

“Nope, no Ollis Haalsen.”

It’s evening by the time Ollis gets back home.

“Who’s your daddy?” she hears from the kitchen as she opens the door.

“Ma!” Ian says. Her mum and Einar laugh. Ollis stands listening to them for a couple of seconds. She

grips the door handle and opens and closes the door again with a crash. She waits. Then she waits a bit more. But her mum doesn't come to investigate. Ollis goes outside again and over to Micro's doghouse, scooping him up and hiding him in her bag.

"Macro," she whispers. "Macrooo..." A pair of sleepy eyes peer out at her.

"Come."

He tilts his head.

"That's right, come on, now."

Macro saunters out of his doghouse and follows Ollis across the yard and through the door. She leads him up the stairs as quietly as she can. She hangs her 'I'm sleeping!' sign from her door and closes it behind her. Delighted to be inside, Micro jumps out of her bag and up onto the bed. He starts scampering around on it in such a frenzy that the duvet ends up on the floor. Macro sniffs it, pleased, and settles down on top of it. Ollis walks over to the small safe on her desk. She keys in 2-9-0-6 and takes out the postcard and the old photograph before carrying them over to her bed. She sits down next to Micro, who wastes no time in licking her face. Macro climbs up as well, making the bed creak and groan under his weight. It's nice, listening to the comforting sound of dogs panting and feeling

warm fur against her cold feet. Ollis looks at the back of the photo. A sailing boat has been drawn in the corner using a ballpoint pen. It's just like the one on the postcard. *It's me*, the postcard says.

But how is this possible?

After Gro spent a whole hour threatening to tell gossipy Nils at the corner shop that a woman living in the birch forest was stealing coffee from him, Borgny had said that they could visit her again on Saturday. They were going to help her collect and open the post – even though you're not really supposed to look at other people's post. Maybe her mum's rule doesn't apply to letters that end up in the yellow letterbox. Or maybe Ollis just doesn't care what her mum says anymore. After all, she's not really sure she can trust her anymore. Ollis hears a creak from the stairs. Footsteps coming closer and stopping outside her door.

"Ollis?" her mum says quietly. Ollis holds her breath.

"Ollis?" she tries once more. But Ollis lies still until she goes back downstairs.

She feels angry all of a sudden. Or is she upset? Either way, she's really confused. She has so many questions. Has her mum been lying to her? Did Borgepa die when Ollis was little? And if not, where is he?