

from:

Ten Past One

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introduced and translated by

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Maja is a typical teenage girl with typical teenage problems – plus the constant fear that the earth is going to collapse beneath her feet. She lives in Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost mining town. Excavations have made the ground unstable, and now the town is being moved and rebuilt. While others accept this as inevitable, Maja cannot let go of the home she grew up in. She hates the LKAB iron ore mine with a passion.

Every night at twenty past one, there are controlled blasts in the mine shafts below. Every night at ten past one, Maja sets her alarm and stays vigilant, with an emergency bag packed and waiting under her bed, ready for the ground to cave in. No one else takes the risks as seriously as she does, so if she doesn't protect her family, who will? As the move looms nearer, and the blasts seem more violent, Maja becomes increasingly stressed.

At first the novel appears to focus solely on Kiruna and the LKAB mine. The landscape of the town becomes a character in itself and is described in great detail, as though the author is mapping out every street and shop for posterity. Like her protagonist, she is unwilling to let her home town be destroyed. It is abundantly clear that many of Maja's feelings about the situation are shared by the author herself. However, the other side of the story is represented by Maja's grandmother, who works in the local council and is staunchly in favour of the move.

Despite a very specific setting, Maja's story has universal appeal. Don't all teenagers lament the loss of their childhood, and feel crippled by their own powerlessness in the face of corporate and government forces? I can also relate to how overwhelmingly protective Maja is of her family, and to her go-it-alone sense of duty.

As the story unfolds, the focus shifts more towards another theme: Maja learning to overcome her crippling anxiety. Terrified at the prospect of losing everything she has ever known, she becomes unable to maintain her friendships and schoolwork, and slides into panic and despair. Teenage mental health issues are treated intelligently and sensitively in this bittersweet young adult novel.

Tio över ett,
Rabén & Sjögren,
2016

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Winner of the August
Prize for children's
and young adults'
fiction in 2016

Previous novels
published by Rabén &
Sjögren:
Hitta hem (Find Your
Way Home), 2012
Ingen annan är som du
(There's Nobody Like
You), 2011
Hej vacker (Hello,
Beautiful), 2010

The author's first
novel:
SMS från Soppero
(Text Message
from Soppero),
Podium och
Nordiska museets
förlag i samarbete
med Samiskt
informationscentrum,
2007



It's just as dark on the journey home as it was on the way in. But that will change before long. Soon it will turn and the days will lengthen until eventually there is sun all day and night. This winter the darkness has felt thicker and blacker than ever before. The brief hours of daylight we get don't really cut it. People wonder how we cope. Well, we... don't. I reckon everybody goes a bit crazy, and feels melancholy or downright depressed during the three weeks of December when the sun doesn't make it over the horizon. Of course it's a myth that it is pitch-black all day long. There's a sort of bluish haze instead of proper daylight, but it's just not enough. Then by the end of December we know the sun is waiting just below the skyline when it starts to colour the sky pink. As if to give us hope.

Last year, when the sun reappeared on 7 January, Julia and I plodded up Luossa Hill to be the first to see it. We only got halfway up before sinking to our knees to bask in the dazzling sunlight shining out from behind the mountain at the mouth of the mine. Of course that's where the sun would rise. Hjalmar Lundbohm and his architects were smart when they built Kiruna; they made sure all eyes would look towards the mountain that sustains us. So we never forget why we live here. When we fly up from Stockholm and see the twinkling lights of Kiruna below, I am always amazed that it was even possible to build a whole town out here in the middle of

nowhere. Surrounded by nothing but mosquitoes, mountains and ice winds.

If it were possible to simply scoop up the entire town and move it three kilometres to the east then maybe I would be OK with it. Because that is what everybody thinks – that a great big digger will come and pick up everything, piece by piece, and rebuild Kiruna exactly the same as it was before, except this time over by the churchyard. That's what I first thought as well, but then Grandma started talking about demolitions and buildings that couldn't be moved. Too expensive. As if LKAB doesn't have money! They're loaded! So the town isn't actually being moved, it is being destroyed and rebuilt. Grandma insists that the town is being moved. Parts of it, at least, but some parts have to be demolished as well. Easy for her to say, sitting up there in her posh house in Lombolo with Granddad. She gets to keep living in her big house on Space Street. All the streets in Lombolo have cool names to do with space. Saturn Street, Planet Street, Mercury Street. In honour of Esrange, our space centre. One time our class got to go out and watch a rocket launch. It was a measly little rocket according to Tania, because her father is a journalist and once took her to see the launch of the huge Maxus rocket.

I must admit that Kiruna is a pretty exciting place. If you don't live here, that is. It sure isn't exciting if you do. And no, I haven't climbed Mount Kebnekaise either. Even though it's the highest peak in Sweden and is really close to the town.

The snow crunches beneath our shoes. Otherwise it's quiet. It's been a strange day. I have been waiting for Julia to talk to me again. At least now she is tolerating me walking next to her. I wrap my scarf around me so that it covers my nose. My breath makes the wool damp.

'Aren't you going to tell me what's wrong?'

She sighs. We decided not to take the bus. A bit of walking will do us good. Me especially, considering how unfit I am. The handball girls can run ten kilometres without getting out of breath at all. I'm already panting as we start up yet another hill. Kiruna isn't like other towns that have nice, straight streets on flat ground. A walk around town is like a moderate mountain hike, up and down through meandering estates. They didn't build any straight roads or neat grids, as a way to make the wind slightly more bearable. The architects who are planning the new Kiruna are more concerned with designing fancy buildings and squares. Kiruna has no squares. We ended up with a great big car park outside the community centre instead. Practical, but not quite as spectacular.

Julia sighs again and begins to speak. Her voice sounds croaky, like first thing in the morning.

'My mum has met someone.'

'But that's wonderful!'

She glowers at me and I squeeze out a 'Right?'

'You have to promise not to tell anyone.'

Who would I tell? I only ever hang out with Julia. For about 13 hours out of every 24. But I nod anyway.

'On the internet. She has met a man on the internet. It's so embarrassing.'

I hold my breath for a moment. I don't know what to say.

'A dating site?' I say and immediately hear how stupid it sounds. 'Obviously,' I hasten to add, but the damage is already done.

Julia stamps in the snow and flings her hands out dramatically.

'Why couldn't she just meet some normal guy at Ferrum?'

Ferrum is a hotel in the centre of the town. As it currently stands. Soon it'll be a gravel pit. It has a disco and a bar called Momma's. Carola goes out quite a lot. Julia thinks it's so embarrassing to have a mum who says things like 'go out partying'. I would laugh out loud if my mum said that. Mum might say that she's going for a beer with the girls after work, but never 'out partying'. She stopped going to Ferrum when I was born, thank God. I've seen Carola get drunk at the Kiruna festival. When that happens Julia usually drags me away to a different stage where we can sing, dance and try to ignore her.

I normally sleep over at Julia's when Carola goes out. She doesn't want to be alone. Julia has no full brothers or sisters but her dad has another family. He left Carola when Julia was one year old. He met Sussi a few years ago and they had three kids really fast. Julia loves her half-siblings and even likes Sussi. Julia used to have her grandmother as well, but not any more.

'So what's his name?'

Wrong question.

'Does it make a difference?'

'Nah.'

She goes quiet a moment.

'Mum forgot to log out and I saw him. And read what they'd written.'

She looks like she wants to throw up. I am kind of grateful that this isn't happening to me, and then I feel really bad for thinking such a thing. My parents might not be the coolest in the world, but at least they're average, boring, dependable parents. Mum works at the Co-op and comes home every evening, sometimes late of course, but still. And Dad works shifts in the mine and has missed two Christmas dinners, but we can live with that.

'Did you hear what I said?' Julia snaps and I mumble that it must have been terrible.

She sounds angry, which is not something I'm used to. I mean, she complains about her mother plenty, but this is different.

I don't dare say anything else. I'm just glad that her outburst this morning wasn't about me. At least she still wants to be my friend. Sometimes I think that she can read my thoughts.

'How did the picture of Albin come out, then?'

It hurts a little that she hasn't apologised for embarrassing me. But I try to forget about it and tease her instead.

'You were crazy.'

'Well, someone had to get a picture of him some time. Before you used up all your phone's storage with photos of half an ear. Don't worry, he didn't notice.'

But what if he did? What if he thinks Julia is the one who likes him? What if he starts to like her? I find myself in a bit of a cold sweat; I'd never thought of that before.

'Are you sure?' I ask.

'Positive.'

I have to take my glove off to wriggle my phone out. It's windy and my hand turns to ice immediately. I show her. And I want to give her a massive hug because she smiles again, at last.

When the harp begins to play I think I must have arrived in heaven. I stand before God and mumble something about being a good person. That I tried to save everybody when the ground caved in and surely that should give me some bonus points. The harp keeps playing and I wake with a start when I realise that it's my phone alarm. Ten past one.

01:10

I sit up in bed and try to adjust my eyes to the dark.

My heart starts beating faster.

There is a howling outside. A gust of wind that hasn't found a straight road to rush through. It wails as it thrashes against the houses.

I wait. Try to take deep belly breaths. Stina showed us how. It isn't good to breathe high up in your chest; if you want to calm down you have to breathe with your belly. It's not helping me calm down.

I lean over the edge of the bed and check that the emergency kit is still in place. The bag of clothes is packed. One day Mum asked me if I had seen her black sweatshirt. I didn't think she would ever miss it. It's so tattered and ugly. I have taken everyone's ugliest clothes so that they won't notice that anything is missing. But I packed a really cute top for myself. Just in case the news happen to come and I have to tell the nation all about how I saved my whole family on live TV.

The bag also contains two pocket torches, a toothbrush each and toothpaste. And two pairs of contact lenses for Mum. I almost cried when I imagined her forgetting her glasses in the panic and having to go through the whole crisis with blurred vision.

01:14

Twenty past can't come too quickly. Waiting is agony. I feel more and more ill with each minute that passes. I huddle into a ball under the cover. My mouth feels dry. Maybe I should put my jeans on just in case? To be ready. I get out of my warm bed and tiptoe to the armchair. I put my jeans on and sit there and wait. I peek out through the blinds and am relieved to see the glow of street lights.

01:16

Dad isn't working tonight. I am so grateful for the weeks when he is on the day shift. Hate the night shift.

Every night they prepare for the blasts underground. Several kilometres below the earth's surface. But kilometres can shrink to nothing if the ground doesn't hold. Then it will fracture, quake, collapse. Liquid explosives are injected into boreholes in the drifts, or mine shafts. Everyone moves to a safe distance. No one can be too close when they set off the explosions – or 'shoots' as they sometimes call them – or for a good while after. Dangerous gases form in the drifts. Then there is a mighty rumble and the iron ore comes loose. The iron ore that keeps Kiruna alive. Dad says it's what keeps the whole country moving. We provide billions of kronor for Stockholm and they think that we live on welfare up here. When in actual fact we are the ones bringing in the money for their new motorways and hospitals in the capital. That's what Dad says. I couldn't care less about money. I just want us to survive.



01:19

Now I've stopped breathing with my belly. I've stopped breathing at all. My fingers are digging into the armrests of the chair and the wind suddenly dies down. As if it is holding its breath too.

01:20

Then the rumble comes from underground and travels up through the layers of rock until it reaches the surface. I want to cover my ears but can't. I have to hear if it sounds different this time. The bookshelf shakes and the window panes rattle. I clench my jaws and shut my eyes. Count the seconds. Then it goes quiet again.

01:21

I open my eyes and the tension in my stomach releases. I want to cry.

The wind is whistling and I look out the window. The mine is still there, and so is the next building. Julia's light is on in her window as usual and the snowman outside has lost its carrot nose. I creep out through the hall and into the living room to look outside in the other direction. Everything is still standing: houses, garages, roads. I listen for sirens but hear none. A solitary council car, on its way to visit some old age pensioner, drives past and I am relieved to see it. Everything is as normal. We have survived another night.

Sneaking through the hall, I forget to watch my step near the toilet door and the floor creaks. I stop and hold my breath. The sound of rustling bedsheets comes from Mum and Dad's bedroom. I walk quickly into my room, pull off my jeans and dive back into bed. I shut my eyes tight when I hear my door being opened slightly. Mum sighs and carefully closes the door again.

It takes a while before my heartbeat slows down. I still want to cry. It has never been this bad before.