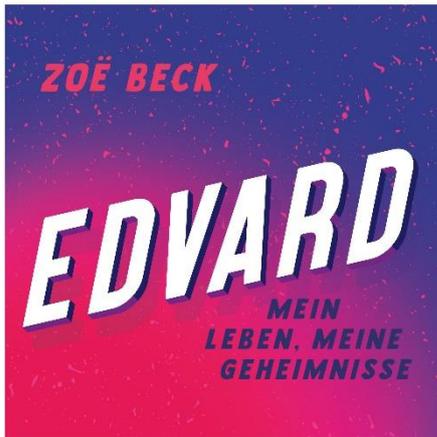


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Zoë Beck

Edvard: My Life, My Secrets

(Original German title: Edvard:

Mein Leben, meine Geheimnisse)

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

pp. 8–19

Thursday, 18 August, 3:32 p.m.

With any luck, I'll die before school goes back. I ran into Henk when I was down at the shops. Henk is in one of my classes, and he can't stand me. He was on his own, and I was just thinking to myself: I hope he keeps his mouth shut now that he's not surrounded by all his mates. Like, because he doesn't have an audience.

But apparently, I'm enough of an audience for him.

He comes over and says: "Hey, dumbass, have you grown, or did aliens swap you with an older brother that not even your parents knew about?"

I've grown ten centimetres. Just like that. It must have happened overnight.

"Get lost", I say.

Henk squawks with laughter. “Oh man, do you know how bad that is? You’re taller than me now, but you talk like a girl!”

“Piss off”, I say.

“Actually, I’ve got a new name for you. I’m not gonna call you dumbass anymore.”

“Drop dead”, I say.

“From now on, your name is “girly boy”! Oh god, I think I’m gonna pee my pants!”

“You’re such a turd”, I say, and make a beeline for the organic supermarket.

I grab a basket and race through the aisles. Just as I take a look over my shoulder to check that Henk isn’t following me, I smash head-first into a shopping trolley parked in front of the pasta section. The trolley belongs to Constanze and her mum.

“Is that not the de Vigny boy?”, her mum says hella loud.

“Oh, hi Edvard”, says Constanze.

I can feel myself blushing. I want to say hello back, but then I remember that I sound like a girl, so I don’t say anything and just keep running over to the cleaning products. From behind me, I hear Constanze’s mum yelling: “Don’t forget to say hello to your father for me!”, before I knock over the display of coffee.

I need to move to another country.

Friday, 19 August, 10:27 a.m.

It's the last week of the holidays and I still don't have any hair on my chest. I also didn't get any muscles, even though I read that at my age, you're supposed to get muscles just like that, even if you don't really do lots of exercise. (I do none.) And my voice hasn't started to break yet either. None of my clothes fit me anymore. Luckily, it's so hot that I don't have to wear long pants. Cos they only go down to my knees. (Well, not quite, but you know what I mean.) I need new shoes too, but not just because my feet are so enormous (also seemingly overnight). This morning, when I was running to the bakery to grab some bread rolls – because my parents had only left me wholemeal bread, *again* – I of course stepped in one of those monster landmines left by the old guy next door's ugly poodle. The old geezer never cleans up his little mutt's crap. Everyone on our street hates him, and everyone knows that his dog is the only one that craps in the middle of the footpath, but no one's really game to give the old codger a piece of their mind. For some reason, no one talks to him, and he doesn't talk to anyone either. Weirdo. Anyway, I might as well chuck my shoes out now, I'll never get them fully clean. That's the seventh time this year that I've stepped in one of that mutt's landmines. I hate that old geezer. And I hate his stupid poodle even more. I need to write to mum to tell her to bring me some new shoes. Size 14, at least.

Friday, 19 August, 5:58 p.m.

I've been thinking. There's only two possibilities. Either all this rubbish about puberty is one big media campaign invented to drive kids like me to suicide, or my parents faked my date of birth, and I'm actually way younger, and all this stuff, my voice breaking and all the rest, will come later.

I'm leaning towards the second option. I wouldn't put anything past my parents.

(I have another theory: They don't *know* my date of birth because they actually found me in a basket somewhere, after my real parents abandoned me. That would explain everything. *Everything.*)

The whole hair thing gets to me the most, because I'd pinned a lot of hope on it. I've always been the skinniest one in the class. Now I'm even skinnier than the others, but I'm a few metres taller than them and have a voice like a mouse. That would have been okay if I at least had some hair on my chest. Henk, for example, doesn't just shave his beard every morning, but also his armpits and his chest. (And Arthur told me once: "You don't even want to know where else he shaves". I don't want to know where else he shaves.) ((Maybe Henk's parents also faked his date of birth, and he's actually two years older than he thinks he is.)) (((Just to make things clear: I *do* have hair. Just not on my chest.))) (((((And I'm not talking about the hair on my head.))))))

Over the last few weeks, I've tried everything to get some hair to grow on my chest so that I can shave it off. I even washed myself every morning with Dad's caffeine shampoo and let it soak in for ages on my chest, because the bottle says that it's proven to promote hair growth. I don't know how I'm supposed to survive my next visit to the locker room.

Yesterday, I begged Mum and Dad to just send me to another school, but Mum just goes:

"Edvard, this is already the fourth school you've been to. We've tried everything: Waldorf,

Montessori, and the private boarding school. And at boarding school, you even switched from the language and arts programme to the maths and science one. Now you're at a bog-standard state high school, and that's where you're going to stay for the next five years."

"Four", yelled Dad. "There's only twelve years of school before they graduate."

"Four", said Mum tersely.

"Well you could at least let me repeat the eighth grade", I whined. "My grades are a joke anyway!"

"Yeah, but that's not because you're too stupid but because you always overcomplicate everything", Dad says.

"I don't overcomplicate things, I just wanted to repeat a year!" Which didn't even work out in the end.

"Just forget it", said Mum and Dad at the same time.

There's nothing I can do. School starts back in ten days. And I have to be there, no chest hair, no muscles, and arms and legs that are way too long.

And they'll call me "girly boy", because Henk tells them to.

Constanze will think I'm a joke.

My life is over.

(Edit: I stepped in poodle poop again in my new, size 14 shoes. Mum's like: "We're not throwing them out this time.")

And I was like: "But I trod in poodle poop!"

And Mum was like: "In new shoes. Just clean them off."

And I was like: “But I have no idea how to get stinky poodle poop out of the tread of my shoes.”

And she’s like: “Well you’ll just have to learn. That’s all part of growing up.”

And I was like: “Can’t we just tell the old geezer that he has to buy me new shoes? After all, it was his mutt, and he didn’t clean up the footpath.”

And Mum was like: “Then go over and talk to him.”

LOL. As if.)

Saturday, 20 August, 4:43 p.m.

Today we drove to a farm for a holiday.

“The boy should do something nice in the last week of his summer holidays”, Dad had said to Mum after he’d lined it up. “And as a bonus, he’ll learn some life lessons, and realise how important it is to live sustainably.”

(He didn’t know I could hear him.)

Of course, Mum was super into it straight away. Which is why I’m now sitting here on an organic farm up near the Baltic coast.

We parked the car in the nearest reasonably sized town and dawdled over to the farm on rental bikes. They gave Dad a cargo bike, so he had to carry all our bags. He was wobbling from side to side the whole way, even when he was going in a straight line, and his face was bright red. No idea why we didn’t just drive all the way in the car. At first I thought Dad was worried about his shock absorbers. But the road in seemed perfectly fine.

From a distance, the farm looks like a postcard: red bricks with thatched roofs, white lattice windows and green doors. As soon as we ride through the front gate, though, the postcard evaporates. The whole place reeks, there are animals walking around everywhere (I even get attacked by a rooster!), behind one of the buildings I spot a massive pile of manure, and the farmer and his wife look like they’ve just wandered out of the stables.

And I’m supposed to shake their hands!

“We just got out of the stable”, says the farmer.

“Oh, how wonderful”, Mum gushes.

“So, young man, this must just about be your last holiday with your parents, no?” the woman says with a wink. “Before you’re flung into the real world. So when do you start university? Or are you going to do an apprenticeship?”

I give her a surprised look, because I have no idea what she’s on about, and whether she’s trying to make fun of me. “I’m about to start the ninth grade”, I say, and now it’s the woman who looks surprised.

“Oh, sorry. I thought ... But once I heard your voice I could tell that you’re ... It’s just that you’re already so ...”, she stutters, apologising.

Her husband shows us our rooms. Mine is miles away from Mum and Dad’s, which is nice. But before we get there, the farmer tells me I’ll have to run through half the building to get to the toilet, and suddenly it doesn’t seem so great anymore.

“Just a few years ago, the toilet was still outside, down the back”, says the farmer.

“Haha, nice one”, I say.

“He doesn’t believe you”, says the woman, who has just appeared out of thin air with a pile of fresh towels.

“In winter, when it was really, really freezing, you could see steam coming off your pee”, says the farmer.

“As if”, I say.

“It was a pit toilet, and back in the day, my parents used to use newspaper when they ran out of toilet paper.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, that’s all over now anyway. Now we have this wonderful compost toilet in the house.”

“You’re pulling my leg!”

“No I’m not, do you want to see?” He walks almost the whole way back down the hall and flings open the bathroom door with a proud look on his face. It’s in a tiny little room. The toilet doesn’t look like a normal toilet, it’s more boxy. He opens the lid and I stare into the darkness. “Can’t see anything. It’s all black.”

He laughs out loud.

I keep staring into the black hole. But apart from a black abyss, there’s nothing to see. “Well where is the flush?”, I ask.

“There is none. It’s a com-post toi-let.” He just about spells the words out.

There’s no way I can’t use that thing. “Do you have another toilet?”, I ask.

The farmer laughs again. “Come on, I’ll show you your room.”

He leads me through the corridors. Then he shoves me into a dingy little room. It’s about the size of a shoe box. They’ve squeezed in an enormous, terrifying closet made of dark wood.

At first, I think I have to sleep in the closet, because you couldn’t possibly fit anything else in the room. But then, in the haze behind the closet, I see a bed made of wood that is just as dark. A few inches below the ceiling, there is a narrow window like the kind in a cellar.

It’s opened just a crack. It doesn’t smell good at all in the room. “You’ve got the pigsty beneath you”, says the farmer. “Maybe you’d be better off shutting the window. And if it’s dark outside and you’ve got the light on, you’d better leave it closed, otherwise the mosquitos’ll come in.”

The farmer lady squeezes past us and buries the bed under a pile of enormous white blankets and pillows. “Now you should be nice and comfy”, she says to me.

“It’s thirty degrees outside”, I say. “I’ll suffocate under all of that.”

“It gets colder at night here than it does in the city, my boy”, she says, and ruffles my hair. Standing up on her tiptoes to do it.

Saturday, 20 August, 6:15 p.m.

My parents' room is massive. It's so massive that a family of ten could live in it without ever having to see each other. Also, it actually gets some natural light. And it doesn't reek. It's really not fair. I ask them if they've seen the toilet, and Mum starts going on and on about the wonders of compost toilets.

“And where am I supposed to go to the bathroom?” I say.

“If you really need to go, you can go anywhere”, says Dad.

“Not me”, I say.

“Just you wait”, he says.

Oh, and another thing: I can't actually see the coast at all, because it's another mile away. Like, it's not like you can just walk there or anything. (Dad was like: “Oh, great, so you can just walk there!”)

Tomorrow, I'm *allowed* to watch them milk the cows. I said that I wasn't exactly *dying* with interest. Like, those are real, living, mooing, filthy *cows*, and we all know what they're capable of. But Mum goes: “Things don't always seem interesting right away. Sometimes your interest needs to be awoken.”

“*Awoken!* I'll tell you what needs to be *awoken*. Me, if I'm gonna go watch a cow get milked at five o'clock in the morning”, I say. “That's really bad for my biorhythm. I'm not an early bird, I'm an owl.”

“An owl?”

“There are two kinds of people”, I explain, summoning all my patience. There are people who wake up early, the early birds, and the others are night people, like owls. I am *definitely* an owl.”

“An owl?!”

“Yes.”

“Where on Earth did you come up with that one? An owl!”

I shrug my shoulders. Sometimes I really wonder how my parents ever got through school. Supposedly they even graduated.

“Well, I’m always really tired in the morning, and at night, I’m wide awake.”

Mum stares at me for a while and breathes in a really weird way. Then she says: “The country air will do you good. So will being close to nature and animals.”

“It stinks here”, I say, and I see the farmer roll his eyes as he walks past.