

The longest day

In a few days I'm going to be ten – yes, the big one-oh. Ten!

When I was five or six I used to think that ten-year-olds were big and strong and fearless, and here I am, ten, almost. Almost big and strong and fearless. Almost. I'm working on the no-fear thing. I guess I'm still a little scared, though I'm scared of different things now.

When I was five, I was afraid we'd be... but maybe you don't want to know. I don't want to make *you* scared. Then I'd have to carry around guilt, and I think that's an adult thing to carry around. I'm not even ten yet.

When I was six I had my last winter birthday, we were living back home, and the seasons down there are the other way around. My birthday was also the shortest day of the year, June 21st, the end of autumn, and I was so grateful for my birthday because it cheered me up in the middle of the year, right when everyone was grumpy, complaining about the short days, about the cold (somewhere between four and fifteen degrees, Mum tells me), about having to wear a thick sweater indoors because the heating never really seemed to kick off with enough strength to reach the entire house. Mum used to turn the oven on, sometimes for baking, sometimes just for the heat, she would hang up my school clothes on the oven door, then bring them to bed, so that I'd slowly pull off my pyjamas and get dressed, my uniform nice and toasty. I'd get out of bed and usually I'd have hot chocolate waiting for me and some crackers, bread always too expensive and reserved for special occasions, like my birthday.

In school everyone sneezed and coughed but we never – ever – missed school. Maybe because Mum paid lots of money for it and wanted to make sure I used every minute we had paid for. She did mention money more often than anything else, so that's my explanation for every decision she ever made, including our move here.

It's June 17th now, only four days until my birthday. I think I know what I will get, because Mum asked me to make a list and I included only three items, all very sensible (that means we can afford them) and Mum smiled when I handed it to her, instead of frowning (like last year, when I included a... well, now I feel kind of silly saying it out loud but, yes, I included a tablet; there – you can raise your eyebrows, but can't a nine-year-old dream?). What will

she pick from the list? The suspense is killing me! I can't sleep. I blame it on the long days and our sensible curtains.

We have bread for breakfast every day here. E-V'RY DAY. We even have juice, like, actual juice, not that super-concentrated thing you add water to and then, when you drink it, you're not entirely sure what fruit it's supposed to taste like. It always looks orange but the taste always makes you wonder.

It's the end of spring where we live now, and my birthday is now the longest day of the year. And did I mention I'm turning ten? Part of the plan was to stay up late; Mum has accepted that I won't fall asleep because the sun is out until almost ten at night, so I think she can't expect me to doze off with the light squeezing past the curtains – they're not that great at keeping the room dark. We were planning on ordering food for lunch so Mum didn't have to cook (can you believe that?). We were also planning on watching a movie after dinner. We were not planning a party because Mum says it's not safe to bring people in, because she works and takes the train, and goes to people's houses, and no, it's not safe to bring people into *our* house. Actually what she said translates better as "it's not sensible".

But now Mum says that maybe she'll have to work on my birthday after all. Half a day maybe, probably. She says she has told them it's my birthday, but will they understand? It's tricky when they know how much they pay you and how much you need it, Mum said. I told her not to buy me a present to save money but she says that's crazy (she's probably bought it already). Now I'm lying in bed and I can feel her kiss my forehead and I can hear her say, "I'll be back soon," and I know she won't be back until six or seven tonight, and today she's supposed to find out if she has to work on Saturday or not, and all I can do is stay home and do my homework and call the grandparents (but not yet, it's too early because of the time difference) and eat my bread and be grateful and wait and wait and wait to find out whether any of the plans we made will come true, or whether once again Mum will need to be sensible.