

The strangers

It is mid-July 2018. An ordinary day in the summer holidays. Loukina is out walking near Lausanne, stealing a few cherries and thinking about the next school year, which will be her last. Next summer she will go to university, maybe in Zurich. Images of forest fires have been flashing up in the news. It is unbearably hot. In Sweden, the trees are burning like matches. Children in hundreds of small villages all over the world hear about it too. How can this go on, they wonder. And some young people in Zurich are having similar thoughts while people jump from the high walls of the footpath to cool off in the Limmat river. The same goes for their peers in Uganda, Australia, the Philippines, in Brazil, Mexico, England, the US, Ireland and Scotland, in Italy, Finland, Japan and Germany, in Ukraine, Bangladesh, in Kenya and Argentina, all of them having these worries. They are all around seventeen, the same generation. Balder is in Holland, and he too, has a frown on his face; he will be moving to Stockholm in the next week, to spend a few months there as an Erasmus student. And there they are, spread across different parts of the Swedish capital: Tindra, Isabelle, Ell, Simon, Mina, Minna, Edit, Eira, Morrigan, Mayson, Melda, Edward, Astrid, Vega, Ebba and Greta; and so on and so forth. They don't know each other yet, any more than the other young people do, but they soon will. Some have been going to the same school for years, without noticing each other, or they have passed each other countless times in the metro stations in the city. They share the same fear and the same fury. The adults are wrecking the environment. They are systematically destroying the planet.

In Mynttorget, the square at the edge of Stockholm's Old Town, it is still quiet. If you look closely, the two huge flowerpots seem to be slightly tense. Waiting. They are watched by the oversized blocks of stone which form the royal palace wall, bordering the square. They too are waiting. Something is coming. And not just a forest fire. They are waiting for the "Fridays" to come and give them an important role.

Fridays For Future doesn't exist yet, but they all exist as individuals with their worries. They sit in their rooms, looking at pictures of floods and droughts on their phones, absurd images of forests being cut down and bleak coal mines. And of politicians not doing anything. They still feel powerless. What are they supposed to do? They don't even have the right to vote yet – how can they change anything on their own?

In the coming autumn, the evenings in Stockholm quickly get shorter, including in the square in front of the palace. Then the evening light shines through the windows of the most expensive flats in the country, which are visible from the square. They have a view of the bay which shapes central Stockholm. Standing at those windows, the opponents of these teenagers enjoy the thing that costs so much: the breath-taking experience of nature. It is here and in similar houses in Sydney, New York, Tokyo and Frankfurt that we find the bosses of BP, Exxon, and Shell, but also the financial speculators who make money from coal, gas and oil, the media moguls, and a few politicians, too. They own a large proportion of the world's wealth – in Sweden as in other countries (Cervenka 2022). They can control where investment goes and what is produced, and how. Soon the children will gather into a crowd, equal in number to the power brokers of the “fossil society”. At least one or two of their own children will be among the demonstrators.

But there is a much bigger actor, one that is far less conspicuous. It is the rest of the population, who are walking past the children in the square in front of the palace, a whole variety of fellow citizens. The young people turn to them from the beginning. They want to change the situation by inserting themselves into the workings of power, using their bodies to jam the mechanism. Often, when I meet these young people in the next months, I think: they are so brave to do this every week in spite of their fears, plucking up the courage to go to Mynttorget every Friday (and to all the other squares across the world) and stay there for seven hours, accepting that they might be punished at school. And my other thought is: we need the older ones, people like you and me. Many people are still hesitating but are interested; a good number of those have to join them. Between the teenagers and those who are directly responsible for this fossil economy, ideology and politics, there are all the rest of us. This book is also about them, and especially about those who remember the climate briefly, frown worriedly, and then don't know what they are meant to do and just carry on as usual. If all of us join the children and strike or take political action, the course of history might change.

But we haven't got that far yet. There is still nothing for us to respond to. It is still July 2018, and the young people don't know anything about each other. One of them has something planned, though. On this same summer day, while Loukina eats cherries and Isabelle works in an ice cream kiosk, one of their peers is sitting on the wooden boards of the veranda in Stockholm, with a piece of wood in front of her that is supposed to become a placard. It's clear what it should say: "School strike for the climate". The "for" has to fit into the small space between the other words, which squash it from above and below. It is symmetrical, clear, and distinct.

