Anna Maria Praßler

Not Having a Party Is Not the Solution Either

(OT: Keine Party ist auch keine Lösung)

Sample translation
by
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My name is Yagoda, which is Polish for blueberry. Here's a message to any grown-ups reading this: it's not cool to name kids after a type of fruit. Or a vegetable, for that matter. Feel free to spread the word – I know what I'm talking about. Take it from Yagoda Schubert (nine-almost-ten, blueberry hater, address top secret): No fruit or veg names!

Flowers are fine.

I used to tell people my name was Jasmine. That means "flower", and it actually is one, too, with pretty white petals. I saw it on the internet once. But when your name crops up a thousand times in all these enormous files, you can't just suddenly start calling yourself something else. Not even Ms Yıldırım could remember that I wasn't Yagoda anymore.

So I'm just telling myself that berries are plants. That's *almost* flowers. And okay, NOBODY dislikes berries. (Except me.) People in Germany love berries, especially strawberries. They even build whole theme parks for them, places where you can pick some and then go to a playground and a cafe. There was one just round the corner from us, and Dad promised we'd all go there together one day. A proper family outing. But I already knew it wasn't going to happen. That was when Dad had started wanting Mum to stay at home all the time again.

To be honest, I've got A LOT to say to grown-ups. Things that make me REALLY angry. I've thought about writing them all down. But I'd need more pages than there are in my grandma's super-thick Bible. (And that is *seriously* thick: Babcia keeps all kinds of colourful pictures of saints and photos of dead people from her village in it.) Would any grown-up ever read the whole thing? Nope! (Well, maybe Ms Yıldırım. She's a total exception when it comes to grown-ups.) So I'm dropping the whole subject of grown-ups now. I'd rather tell you a bit about myself.

So. My name's Yagoda, and Yagoda means blueberry. Which is pretty much the only fruit I hate. I don't like the colour blue, either. I mean, I REALLY DON'T. What I do like: my pink ear defenders (best invention EVER!), Ty Beanie Boos and sour cherries. And Mum. Oh, and I like tongue twisters too. Like "The blue bluebird blinks." Okay, yes, it has blue in it too, but tongue twisters are allowed. Which is why The Blue Bluebird is on my list of Nice Things with Blue in Them.

I've also got a list of Bad Things with Blue in Them, and guess which one's longer. Exactly. There's feeling blue, and blue flashing lights of the ambulance, and disgusting blue cheese… Also, in German being "blau" means you're drunk, and I REALLY hate it when people are.

4 Days to Go (Today is Monday)

The sun is blazing through the window into the arts and crafts room, and I blink. Closing my eyes helps. Not just against the sun. When I close my eyes, I can be somewhere else. Sometimes, I imagine

I'm in Poland. At Babcia's, in her enormous garden on the edge of the forest. She's a vet and has three dogs. I wish I was with them right now.

Instead of here at after-school care, where Emily, Damian and Nele from my class are gathering around the craft table. Right in front of me. Here comes something stupid. I just know it.

I blink and look down at the table. I push the cap onto the purple felt-tip pen – click! – and feel the others staring at me.

"We've got a question for you, Yagoda!" says Nele, and Damian tries not to burst out laughing. Apparently, there's something about me (no idea what!) that's *super* funny. Great.

"I can, can't I?" And just like that, Nele grabs my arm, pulls it up –

"Hey, what the hell?!" I wrench my arm free and leap to my feet. So fast that my chair starts tipping over. Before it can crash to the floor, Mia catches it. With one hand. Mia sits next to me, and she gives me a smile. Then she goes back to gluing.

I sit down again, even though I'm still furious. I hate noise and loud bangs. But what I hate most – even more than blue cheese, blueberries and every blue thing in the world – is being grabbed.

Nele laughs. "Chill out, Yagoda!" Then she points at my arm. "Nice dinosaur under your armpit. Really cool." She grins. "*Not*," she adds, and all three of them crack up.

Oh man, they've spotted the embarrassing dinosaur patch! Mum ironed it onto my T-shirt to cover the hole under the arm. Did I accidentally raise my arms at some point today? I take care not to when I'm wearing the purple T-shirt with the armpit dinosaur.

A cloud has moved in front of the sun. It's not dazzling me anymore, so I don't need to shut my eyes. But I'd like to. Instead, I start sorting the pens by colour. Except for the blue ones, I push those away.

"Seriously, Yagoda," Emily joins in. "That used to be *my* T-shirt. My mum gave it away to the clothes bank. Because of the hole under the arm!"

Suddenly, everyone's laughing. Mia too? I don't dare look at her.

Shit. Okay, we're poor, and usually I just think: so what? But now I'm thinking: Yes, we're poor, and it sucks. I can feel something prickling under my skin. Like something's trying to get out, maybe tears or a scream. Please let it not be tears! So stupid of me to have left my ear defenders in the classroom…

"We buy almost everything second-hand too," I hear Mia say. Her voice is loud and strong. "It's much better for the environment!"

"Pffff!" goes Damian.

I think buying second-hand is different from going to the clothes bank, where I went with Ms Yıldırım (that's where the iron-on dinosaur came from, too). But it's really nice of Mia.

The others' laughter dies down.

"Ooh, Yagoda's got herself a saviour," Nele whispers. "Mia Hase, saving the planet!"

Nele and Damian giggle.

"Got a problem with that?" Mia asks calmly, looking Nele straight in the eye.

Nele stares back, but apparently she can't think of an answer. "Whatever," she says, turning to Emily and Damian. "Come on, let's go outside!"

Good. Finally.

"You okay?" Mia asks when the three of them are gone.

No, of course not! Nothing's okay when the others are laughing at you. Because of an old T-shirt with an iron-on armpit dino. Maybe I shouldn't care about any of it. But I do.

Dino over the hole in my T-shirt. Holey dino. Holy dino. I giggle.

"So … everything okay?" Mia tries again.

"Do you think a dinosaur would make a good saint?" I ask.

Mia laughs. "Sure," she says. "I mean, they were there before Adam and Eve and the apple, right? So they should all be saints!"

"So let us pray to Holy St Dino!" I suggest.

Now we both burst out laughing. We laugh until we're gasping for breath, and then we just smile, and Mia looks at me.

"By the way, that violet really brings out your eyes," she says. Does she mean the T-shirt? Doesn't she care that it's old and comes from a charity? And my eyes, does she think they're, um, violet?

"Erm, thanks," I reply.

Violet. Sounds better than purple. Posher somehow. Suits Mia. She used to live in a big city. Not Berlin, though, somewhere further away. She's the new girl, has only been in our class for a week, since school started again. Because her dad works here now. Before that, I was the one. The new girl, I mean. Not the one whose dad works here. My dad works too, but not anywhere near here. And that's exactly why Mum and I are here now. Far away.

"I'll sort the blue pencils, okay?" Mia says, giving me a smile. She grabs the ones ranging from sky blue to a dark blue that's almost black and starts putting them in order.

I notice a necklace with a butterfly dangling around Mia's neck. Half a butterfly, actually. Only one colourful wing. Someone else must have the other half. Probably Mia's friend from wherever she lived before.

It would be nice if Mia and I could be friends too.

"Done!" says Mia, pushing the wooden box of coloured pencils into the middle of the craft table. "I'm getting picked up in a minute. See you tomorrow, Yagoda!"

"See you tomorrow!" I watch Mia dart into the corridor and disappear into the cloakroom.

Now I'm the last one in the craft room. The sun's gone too. I scrape bits of dried glue off the table with my fingernail.

"Yagoda? Can you help me with my shoelaces?" I hear a squeaky little voice from the doorway. It's Putzi.

"Sure," I say, getting up. Putzi's in Year One, and I couldn't tie my shoelaces when I was in Year One either. That's perfectly normal. Most kids at school think Putzi and I are sisters because we always walk to school and back together. But we just live in the same place.

As soon as we've put on our shoes and signed out, I take Putzi by the hand and bounce down the stairs, tugging her along. Putzi is always exhausted in the afternoons, so I make up stories to help us get to the bus stop in time. Right now, we're being chased by dinosaurs.

Just before we reach the bus stop, we bump into Mia and a man with a hat, big glasses and tattoos. He's heaving Mia's schoolbag into a car parked by the side of the road.

"Look, Dad!" Mia shouts. "Yagoda and her sister are allowed to take the bus on their own too! Why can't I –"

"Hello, ladies," Mia's dad says.

We stop and forget all about dinosaurs: Mia's dad is grinning at us and giving an exaggerated bow. Then he takes off his hat and waves it around. Okaaay …?

"It's a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, ladies," Mia's dad says. "My name is Jakob, but you can just call me Jakob!"

"Very funny, Dad!" Mia looks at me and rolls her eyes.

Yep, this is embarrassing. But it's also very nice of Mia's dad to pick her up! And to introduce himself.

Mia leans towards me. "That's what happens when you spend all day counting birds … That's Dad's job. That's why we moved here!"

Counting birds is a job?

"So what about it, Dad?" Mia insists. "Can I take the bus too? Please?"

Her dad sighs. "If these two are going the same way, I suppose the three of you can take the bus together."

"NO!" Putzi screams.

Mia's dad looks at her, flabbergasted.

"Good idea, I mean … in general," I say quickly, giving Putzi a stern look (does she have to be so dramatic?). "But, um … we're going the other way."

Mia frowns. "You don't even know where I'm going. Where do you live, then?"

"Don't forget, we're UNDER-COVERS-AGENTS!" Putzi whisper-shouts in my ear. (If you think it's impossible to whisper and shout at the same time, you've obviously never met Putzi.)

She knows the word is "undercover"; she just thinks "under covers" is funnier. Also, she has almost given us away, and that's not good!

Mia looks at me questioningly.

"It's just a game," I say quickly, pushing Putzi away. "We live a bit far away, so, to pass the time on our way home, we're sometimes … agents on a" – I roll my eyes – "suuuuper cool mission."

Now Mia's definitely going to think I'm a total baby! Thanks, Putzi.

Putzi slips her hand into mine, and at once, I'm not angry with her any longer.

"Agents sound great," Mia's dad says, smiling so that the little wrinkles around his eyes dance. They look like ripples on water. (I've been to the seaside with Babcia a few times and I loved it there. And no, the Baltic Sea isn't blue, it's almost always grey. Thank goodness!) "But listen, Mia." Her dad sighs.

"You don't know your way around the city very well yet, and I don't think you should be taking the bus on your own just now. Besides, you're only nine –"

“Yagoda’s going to be TEN soon,” Putzi pipes up proudly.

“Cool!” says Mia. “When’s your birthday?”

“In four days. Friday. The last day of August.”

Mia smiles. “Am I invited?”

“What?!” I stare at her in horror.

“Erm, I just meant …” Mia falters. “I mean, you don’t have to invite me, of course. It was only a question. Just in case you’re having a party and … well, erm, I really love parties!”

“Me too!” Putzi squeals, tugging at my arm. “I LOOOOOVE parties!”

Just then, the bus comes round the corner.

“We have to go!” Putzi shouts and runs off.

“Of course!” I call to Mia as I stumble after Putzi. “Of course you’re invited, Mia!”

Biggest mistake ever.

3 Days and 23 Hours to Go

On the bus, Putzi leans against my shoulder. She yawns but doesn’t stop talking about how amazing it is that I’m having a party. And how amazing it is that she’s got a friend who’s about to turn ten, and so on.

A party! What was I thinking? Sure, it would be cool – but there’s no chance. No. Chance.

On the other hand, *if* I throw a brilliant party and Mia comes, she’ll become my friend for sure.

I chew my bottom lip and look out of the window.

There’s Poland, right over there. For real. Just a few steps away, on the other side of the river called the Oder (which is also German for “or” – a river or what?).

Now we’re driving past pretty brick houses. Then past huge blocks of flats, tower blocks and supermarkets that look like giant shoeboxes.

The bus stops, and only then do I realise it’s our stop. The doors are about to close again when I jump off, holding Putzi’s hand.

A little later, we open the metal gate to a big courtyard with a few cars parked in it. Behind it is our house. Well, not really *our* house, obviously. And it’s not just any house where Putzi and I happen to be neighbours. It’s a women’s refuge. It’s not a whole house, either, just one floor of a big building. Only women and their children live on that floor. Usually, there are more children than women. So sometimes I think it should really be called a children’s refuge. Luckily, it isn’t. That would sound mega-embarrassing, like an oldy-worldly nursery, and I’m nearly ten.

Anyway, Putzi and I live here because … well, it's like this:

"My dad was naughty." That's what Putzi calls it. Luckily for her, she doesn't seem to know what really happened. I'm sure "naughty" isn't the right word. I don't know what he did, but it must have been something terrible. As for my dad, he used to flip out (a lot, and then even more than that) and hit Mum. So we fled. For the second time.

I've had a birthday at the women's refuge before, my fifth. That was the first time we were here. Ms Yıldırım was brand-new, and we were the first people she looked after. A few weeks later, Dad promised he'd change and never hurt Mum again. That there'd never be any more shouting and banging at home and I'd never have to crawl under my bed, trembling (and still hearing everything). So we went back. Things were okay for a few years. Or sort of okay. Until one day, putting on my headphones, screwing my eyes shut and imagining myself somewhere else just wouldn't do the trick.

That's why Mum and I have been living at the women's refuge again for the past six months. Putzi, her mum and her sister have only been here for four weeks. Ms Yıldırım sometimes calls me *alter Hase*: that's "old-timer" in German, but literally it means "old hare": funny, right? Only it's not funny for Putzi: whenever she hears that, she starts crying because she misses her pet bunnies. Pets aren't allowed in the women's refuge.

Neither are strangers. We're not allowed to tell anyone our address. Nobody can know where we live; otherwise our dads might find it out and come here. So I can forget about having a party here. That much I know already.

But I promised I'd invite Mia!

"Right, listen, Yagoda," says Asma, leaning against the doorframe. Behind her, in the kitchen, some vegetable stuff is sizzling on the hob, smelling absolutely delicious. "For a party, you need music – preferably a DJ or a proper band. A cool venue, obviously. Oh, and invitations for your guests. And definitely a piñata."

Asma is one of the women here, but she's still young. Before she came to the refuge, she went to vocational college, and she's into the same music as Putzi and me. Taylor Swift[AB1], that is. Asma likes hanging out in the living room, where the books and puzzles are and where we kids sometimes play games. Some of the women just stay in their rooms all the time. Which is fine. Putzi's mum, for example. I've never spoken to her. To be honest, I don't even know what she looks like.

"Do you want costumes?" Asma goes on. "Decorations, definitely. Party favours – like, little presents for the guests. And what about food? And drinks?"

"No alcohol!" Putzi shouts. She's sitting next to me at the dining table, drawing rabbits. That's pretty much all she ever does. Alcohol is banned at the women's refuge. Putzi knows that: her mum nearly got kicked out two weeks ago because of some sparkling wine.

I write down what Asma says. I know I can't invite Mia to the women's refuge. Never ever. And I know just as well that Mum isn't going to find some amazing place and throw me a party. But I like doing things myself. I really do. That's not the problem. The problem is money. As always. I mean, I need money for practically everything on this list:

- Music (DJ? and? haha!)
- A cool venue
- A theme (ok, that one's free!)
- Invitations for the guests
- A piñata and decorations
- ~~Costumes~~ (never mind, it's not Halloween)

- Little presents for everyone (?)
- Food and drinks (BUFFET!!!)

[…]

"You also need a theme for your party. And some fun games to go with it," Asma reminds me.

I don't really like games. I prefer doing real things. But a theme would be nice.

"Chased by dinosaurs!" Putzi shouts. "That could be a theme, couldn't it? Dinosaurs."

"Erm … good idea, Putzi," I say carefully, and Putzi beams. "But to be honest … maybe –"

"A Taylor Swift party?" Putzi suggests. "We could drink Old Fashioneds, like in her 'Getaway Car' –"

"That's alcohol," Asma cuts in.

"Really?" Putzi looks shocked.

What kind of theme would Mia like? I know she plays the cello (it's like a violin, only bigger). That she'd love to be allowed to take the bus by herself. And that she's nice.

What kind of party would Mia enjoy?

"How much money can you actually spend?" Asma asks, poking at her pot of rice and veggies. "How much have you got?"

"Erm … well …"

Asma looks at me. She tilts her head. "Oh, Yagoda, no cash, no bash. You know that, right?"

Yep, I do.

Suddenly there's a huge lump in my throat, and it's getting bigger and bigger. I clench my teeth to stop myself from crying. But my eyes fill with tears anyway. I turn away so Asma and Putzi can't see me. No crying!

Thing is, we haven't got any money. That's why we go to the clothes bank. Mum's been working at a DIY store for six weeks now, but she's still got debts to pay off. We're looking for a flat we can afford. But there aren't any. Haven't found one so far, anyway. It's all pretty complicated.

Why can't things just be simple for once? I'm turning ten in four days and I want a party. A proper one. A real party with Mia.

Maybe we'd become friends.

[…]

2 Days and 22 Hours to Go

I'm in Ms Yıldırım's car on the way to Ingrid's. Which is quite an unexpected development. As soon as I came into her office, Ms Yıldırım's husband rang. Some kind of emergency; Ms Yıldırım had to rush off and check on her mother-in-law. But she needed to talk to me, too. So she took me along.

In the car, she finally tells me why she wanted to talk to me: she can only spare an hour for my birthday party on Friday afternoon, she says. After that, she'll have to leave for an important appointment.

“It’s such a shame,” she says. “Yagoda dear, I’m so sorry!”

On Friday, she’ll find out just how much of a shame it is. The party is going to be *way* cooler than she thinks. But to be honest, it’s okay. Grown-ups have appointments, even special grown-ups like Ms Yıldırım. And Mia’s coming, after all. It’s fine.

Outside, the city slides past: blocks of flats, railway tracks and signs pointing to the national park. Ms Yıldırım parks outside a group of allotment gardens. She’s still going on about that appointment on Friday. How unfortunate it is. How she absolutely has to go.

I follow Ms Yıldırım into the allotments, only half listening. We walk past these tiny houses – dachas, Dad would call them.

“Ebru?” somebody asks. “Oh, Yagoda, hello! What are you two doing here?”

I spot Ingrid standing by a garden fence and wave to her. Ingrid has short, bristly, grey-blonde hair and a big grin, and she’s really nice.

“You’re up and about already?” Ms Yıldırım asks in surprise. “I thought you’d had a fall!”

“Is that what my son told you?” Ingrid hugs Ms Yıldırım and gives me a nod and a smile. “I was moving a few boxes while I was on the phone to him and pulled something, that’s all. It was fine after a few minutes. My son is such a drama queen!”

Ms Yıldırım looks at Ingrid, sighs and smiles. “Right. I’ll help you with those boxes, okay? Show me where they’re supposed to go.”

Ingrid nods sheepishly. “Thanks, Ebru.”

The two of them go into the little house, and I stay on the terrace. I can hear Ms Yıldırım and Ingrid banging about and moving things around inside.

“Leave it, Ingrid, I’ll do the rest myself,” Ms Yıldırım finally says.

Ingrid comes out onto the terrace. “Lovely to see you again, Yagoda,” she says, pulling out a chair for me. I sit down.

“Do you live here?” I ask.

Ingrid nods. “Yes, I moved in this week. Even though my son doesn’t approve. He wants me to give up my independence. My landlord kicked me out, and now –”

“… you could just move in with us, Ingrid.” Ms Yıldırım pokes her head out of the dacha window.

“You know that would never work,” Ingrid replies with a snort. “Me, living with you! Under one roof with my son!”

“But you’re not allowed to live in this dacha!” says Ms Yıldırım. “The allotments are for gardening and picnics only, for a weekend stay maybe, not for living, you know that!”

“You and your rules,” Ingrid mutters.

I can’t help grinning. Yep, Ms Yıldırım sticks to the rules. Always. (Okay, most of the time.) I know that, too. What I don’t understand, though, is what’s so terrible about moving in with her. I think living at Ms Yıldırım’s would be really lovely.

“You haven’t even got running water here, Ingrid!” Ms Yıldırım says. She’s getting worked up.

Ingrid stays calm. “I’ve got everything I need here. And I’m not changing my mind, Ebru. Not even for you.” Then she turns to me. “How about some apple juice, Yagoda?”

I nod and look around. The grass in Ingrid’s garden is long. I like that. I spot a few raspberry bushes. Next to them is a small tree. Sour cherries, yum! Behind the bushes, I can see a pond glistening. Ok, more like a muddy pool, but I like the duckweed. I can see why Ingrid wants to live here. Her garden is really lovely.

“I hear you’re turning ten soon.” Ingrid puts a glass of apple juice in front of me.

I nod. “Yeah, on Friday.”

“We moved here, to this town, on my tenth birthday,” Ingrid tells me. “That was ages ago.” She giggles and winks at me. “Ages and ages!”

“Oh, I know,” I say, making a serious face. “Just after the dinosaurs died out.”

Ingrid pretends to be offended for a second, then she laughs.

“What was it like?” I ask. “When you first moved here?”

“Well, back then, I wasn’t the only one who was new. *Everything* was new,” Ingrid begins. “Nobody had ever lived in our flat before us. We were the first people to turn on the central heating – I think our block was one of the first to have it at all. It felt like the whole town had been built just for us. There were children everywhere. Loads of them. My Mum and Dad were chemists; they worked at the refinery like most of the parents, and the town belonged to us kids.”

What Ingrid is describing sounds like the exact opposite of my experience. These days, everything in town looks a bit old and grey. Hundreds of women and children lived in the refuge before Mum and me. And I don’t really belong here. I’m not even allowed to tell anyone where I live. As if I didn’t exist in this town at all.

I breathe in the warm summer air. It’s so lovely in Ingrid’s garden! Nothing like the grey town. The sun is getting low, and its soft evening light catches the windowpanes of the dacha and reflects off them onto the black water of the little pond, like fireflies dancing above the water. I wonder if floating candles look as pretty as that…

And suddenly I know: I’ve found my party venue. I’m going to have my birthday party in Ingrid’s garden on Friday! Colourful lanterns would look SO COOL in the bushes, and I could hang my piñata from the old carpet-beating frame! Maybe Mia and I could sit in the cherry tree and –

“Are you doing anything at four on Friday, Ingrid?” I ask. “I’m having a party.”

“And am I invited?”

I nod. When I tell Ingrid about my plan, she laughs at first. But then she says it’s brilliant! I ask for something, and someone actually says yes. Someone helps me. Wow. This is good. Really good!

“It’s been far too long since I had a proper party at the dacha,” Ingrid says. “Will there be a buffet? Do you like beetroot pâté? Mine is to die for!”