

'RELATABLE, MOVING AND FUNNY. SUSIN NIELSEN IS SIMPLY WONDERFUL'
SARAH CROSSAN

NO FIXED ADDRESS



● A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN ●
FROM THE AUTHOR OF WE ARE ALL MADE OF MOLECULES

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No Fixed Address is my book of the year'
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This comic novel scores’
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**NO
FIXED
ADDRESS**

Also by Susin Nielsen

My Messed-up Life

Optimists Die First

The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen

We Are All Made of Molecules

Word Nerd

NO FIXED ADDRESS

A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN



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I dedicated my first novel to Eleanor Nielsen, and I dedicate this, my sixth, to her too. Both feature single-parent moms of only children – same as me and my mom. But the similarities stop there. Mom, whether or not you consistently felt it yourself, you always made the ground feel safe beneath my feet. And still do.





November 27, 12:05 a.m.

My leg jiggled up and down. I shifted from one bum cheek to the other. My palms felt damp and my heart was pounding. ‘I’ve never been interrogated before.’

‘You’re not being interrogated, Felix. We’re just having a chat.’

‘Are you going to record it?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘It’s how they do it on TV.’

‘We’re not on TV.’

The cold from the metal chair seeped through my pyjama bottoms. ‘Do cops watch cop shows?’

‘Of course.’

‘But isn’t that like bringing your work home with you?’

Constable Lee smiled. Her teeth were very straight. My Powers of Observation, or P.O.O., told me that she came from a middle-class family, one that could afford an orthodontist. My P.O.O. also told me she enjoyed her food: the buttons on her uniform were strained to the max. ‘Not really,’ she answered. ‘It’s escapism for us, too.’

And we get to shout at the TV if they do something totally bogus.'

'Like what?'

'Like record this type of conversation. We only record a conversation if someone has been charged with a crime, or is a suspect in a crime.'

'Are you recording Astrid right now?'

'I can't answer that.'

Oh boy. I hardly ever cry, but all of a sudden I thought I might burst into tears, right in front of a cop. I think she could tell, because she added, 'I highly doubt it.'

I breathed in. I breathed out. I sat up straight. I tried to look calm and dignified even though I knew my blond curls were sticking out in all directions, because until everything went so terribly wrong I'd been in bed. Plus I was wearing my ancient Minions pyjamas, which were juvenile and way too small. Constable Lee and her partner hadn't given us time to change. 'I'd like to call my lawyer,' I said.

'Let me guess – you got that from TV, too.'

'Yes.'

'Do you have a lawyer?'

'No. But legally I'm allowed one, right?'

'Except you don't need one. You haven't done anything wrong.'

'So I could just leave?'

'I suppose. But where would you go?'

I thought about Dylan. And Winnie. Then I remembered

that I'd told them I never wanted to see them again. 'When will they be done talking to Astrid?'

'Soon, I'm sure.' She stared at me, clicking her pen, open, shut, open, shut. 'Mind if I ask why you don't call her Mom?'

'She says it's too hierarchical.' I scanned the huge room, full of desks and a handful of people, for the hundredth time. For the hundredth time, I didn't spot Astrid.

It'll be OK, I thought-messed her, because she's always telling me she'll receive anything I send her. I don't believe that any more, but under the circumstances, it was worth a shot. 'For the record,' I said to Constable Lee, 'Astrid is a great parent.'

'Good to know.' She tapped on her keyboard. 'I'm going to ask you a few questions, OK?'

'OK.'

'Let's start with your full name.'

'Felix Fredrik Knutsson.'

She typed it into her computer. 'Age?'

'Thirteen. Well, almost. Twelve and three-quarters.'

'Mom's full name?'

'Astrid Anna Knutsson.'

'Address?'

I looked down at my feet. I wore rubber boots, no socks; there hadn't been time to search for a pair.

Constable Lee leaned towards me. Her shoulders were rounded. She did not have good posture. 'When we answered your call tonight, Felix, it did appear as if you were both living there.'

Oh, how I longed for my mom. She would have a plausible-sounding explanation. But I'm not like her. I'm not a natural-born stretcher of the truth.

So I continued to stare at the floor.

Constable Lee started typing, even though I hadn't said a word.

'Felix,' she said gently, 'you can talk to me . . .'

'I'm hungry.'

'Of course. I should have asked.' She pushed herself up from her desk and hitched her trousers up around her belly. 'We're talking vending-machine snacks. Hope that's OK. Any allergies? Any preferences?'

'No allergies. No preferences. Although I am partial to anything cheese-flavoured.'

Constable Lee walked across the big room. I glanced around. A couple of cops were at their desks. One was reading *Popular Mechanics* and another was dozing.

I swivelled Constable Lee's computer screen towards me. It was an official-looking report.

Name: Felix Fredrik Knutsson

Age: 12

Parent/Guardian: Astrid Anna Knutsson

Address: NFA

I'm pretty good at figuring out acronyms, and this one, given the context, came to me almost right away.

No fixed address.

I felt a ripple of dread. Astrid had warned me over and over: 'No one can find out where we live.' Until tonight, I'd broken the rule only once.

Our cover was blown. I tried to tell myself it wasn't my fault. I'd had no choice; I had to call the cops. If I hadn't, who knows what would have happened?

Still. The bad guys got away. And who was at the police station? The innocent victims. Us.

Two bags of Cheezies landed on the desk in front of me, along with a can of Coke. 'Aren't we a nosy parker,' Constable Lee said as she swivelled the computer screen back.

'No one can agree on the origin of that expression,' I said. 'Some people think it came from an archbishop in the fifteen hundreds named Parker, who asked too many questions. Other people think that's hooey, since the phrase didn't appear till the end of the nineteenth century.' I knew I was rambling, but I couldn't help it.

'You are a fount of knowledge.'

'My mom says I store facts like a squirrel stores nuts.'

Constable Lee tore open a bag of crisps and popped one into her mouth. 'Now. You have to believe me when I say I'm here to help.'

I wanted to believe her. But I kept thinking of my mom, who snorted like a pig whenever a police car drove past. Who liked to say 'Never trust the Man'.

'Which man?' I'd asked when I was younger.

'The Man. It's an expression. It means any man or woman who's in a position of authority.'

So all I said to Constable Lee was, 'Thanks. But we don't need any help.'

'Really?'

'Really. We'll be moving very soon.'

'Yeah? Where?'

'I don't know yet. But I'm coming into some money. The only question is how much.'

'An inheritance?'

'No.'

'Selling some valuables?'

'No.'

'Robbing a bank?'

'Very funny. No.'

'So where's this money coming from?'

'A game show.'

'Well, now I'm intrigued. Tell me more.'

'About the show?'

Constable Lee put her feet up on her desk. 'About everything.'

I studied her face. My P.O.O. told me she was a decent person. Maybe if she knew the truth, she would see that we'd done nothing wrong.

So I poured a bunch of Cheezies down my throat.

Then I told Constable Lee the whole truth and nothing but.



A Brief History of Homes

We haven't always lived in a van.

That only started four months ago. B.V. – Before Van – we lived in a four-hundred-square-foot basement. Before that, we lived in a six-hundred-square-foot apartment. Before that, we actually owned an eight-hundred-square-foot apartment.

And before any of that, we lived with Mormor.

Mormor's House

Mormor means 'mother's mother' in Swedish. She was my grandma. Astrid and I lived with her in her bungalow in New Westminster, just outside Vancouver, until I was six going on seven. Her house was crammed full of knick-knacks from Sweden; she must have had fifty red and blue wooden Dalarna horses. She also had a large *tomte* collection.

Tomtar, plural for *tomte*, are mischievous gnomelike creatures in Swedish folklore. They watch over you and protect your family. But if you don't treat them with respect, they

can also be cruel. They might play a trick on you, or steal your things, or even kill your farm animals.

Mormor gave me my own *tomte* on my fifth birthday, one she'd made herself out of felt. He was ten centimetres tall with a long white beard, a red cone-shaped hat and a red jacket. 'Your own protector,' she said. I named him Mel.

Mormor looked after me when Astrid was at work. My mom had two jobs back then: she taught an evening painting class in Vancouver at Emily Carr University, and she answered phones in an insurance office. 'Once I've saved enough,' she'd say to me, 'we'll get our own place.' She didn't like living with Mormor.

But I did. Mormor took me to the park in the mornings, and in the afternoons I played imaginary games like Pirate Ship and Fort and Outer Space while she watched her shows. Drew, Maury, Ellen, Phil, Judge Judy, the women on *The View* – they felt like friends. And I have Mormor to thank for introducing me to *Who, What, Where, When* with Horatio Blass. It was her favourite show, and it became mine, too.

Mormor was what's called a Lutheran, and she read me Bible stories (but it had to be our little secret because Astrid said organised religion was the cause of all the world's woes and she'd broken up with the church a long time ago). We made *pepparkakor*, which is Swedish for 'gingerbread', and Mormor let me eat balls of dough. At naptime she let me curl up on her cushiony lap and doze while she watched TV.

When I had just turned six, I woke up from one of those naps to find that Mormor was sleeping, too. This was not unusual; she often took a mid-afternoon snooze. So I got up and played quietly on the floor with my Brio train set, which had belonged to my mom and her brother when they were little. After an hour or so, when Mormor still hadn't woken up, I gave her a tiny poke. Her head slumped further down onto her chest. Her skin was grey and cool to the touch. I noticed a dark stain underneath her. It was wet.

I started to giggle, delighted. 'Mormor, you peed your pants!' Up to that moment I'd been the only one in our household to pee their pants.

She didn't answer.

'Mormor?' I knew something wasn't right. But I was little. I had not yet fully developed my P.O.O.

I called my mom. She called 911 and came straight home. But there was nothing anyone could do.

I missed Mormor a lot, and I know my mom did, too. For months afterwards I slept in Astrid's room, and I brought Mel in every night so he could watch over us while we slept. I wasn't taking any chances.

Our Brief Brush with Homeownership

Mormor left everything to my mom. It wasn't as much as Astrid had hoped it would be, because Mormor had wired some of her savings to a Nigerian prince. But when Astrid

sold the house a year after Mormor's death, we had enough to put a down payment on a brand-new apartment in Kitsilano, on the west side of Vancouver.

Even though I missed Mormor, I loved our new place. It was small, but it was ours. The chemical aroma of fresh carpet was still in the air. Everything sparkled with newness. Astrid hung her bold canvases everywhere. We ate my favourite foods for supper, like cheese on toast with pickles and fish fingers with peas.

I started third grade at Waterloo Public School, and soon I had not just a friend, but a best friend. Dylan Brinkerhoff and I hung out all the time, playing with Lego and reading books like *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* and *Grossology*. We even made a magazine called *Stories from Ur Anus!* and wrote articles about UFO sightings and poltergeists. Astrid got another job, answering phones at a TV production company. And Emily Carr, where she still taught two nights a week, was just a short bus ride away.

But a year and a half after we moved in, two things happened.

Number one: Astrid lost both her jobs. It wasn't anything she'd done, not this time. Her evening class didn't get enough enrollment for another semester, so it was cancelled. And the production company went bankrupt.

Number two: Our building started to sink.

Yes. Sink.

It had been built on top of what used to be a riverbed.

The apartment owners were on the hook for the repairs, which were going to cost forty thousand dollars. *Each*.

We didn't have forty thousand dollars. We clung to the place for another year. But finally Astrid had to sell it, at a loss.

The Two-Bedroom Rental

Really it was a one-bedroom plus den. We could hear our neighbours fighting and the carpet smelled funky, but overall it wasn't too bad. It was on the east side, near Commercial Drive, which meant I had to switch schools in the middle of the year. I didn't make any close friends, but on the plus side, I didn't make any enemies, either.

I missed Dylan a lot. We had a few visits, but Astrid didn't own a car and I was too young to take the bus alone. That meant Dylan's parents had to do all the driving, and they had two other kids with busy schedules. After a few months, we lost touch.

Astrid couldn't find any office or teaching work, so she got her first-ever waitressing job on the Drive. I had to spend quite a few evenings on my own. But I had my imagination and my library books, and I watched some of the shows Mormor and I used to enjoy together, like *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*.

One night Astrid came home early. She was fuming. 'This customer kept trying to feel my butt.' (Astrid has always

been a firm believer in talking to me like an equal.) ‘Yet I’m the one who gets punished. Just because I threw a drink in his face so he’d stop.’ That’s when I understood she’d been fired.

We fell behind on the rent. But lucky for us, Astrid became friends with Yuri, the building’s superintendent, and he cut us some slack. A few times a week she would make me dinner, then go downstairs to his apartment for a couple of hours. I guess he was her sort-of boyfriend, even if he never took her out on a proper date.

Then Astrid met Abelard.

She stopped visiting Yuri’s apartment. I guess Yuri felt hurt, because he stuck an eviction notice on our door.

The One-Bedroom Basement

We moved again, further east, close to Boundary Road. That meant another new school. It was harder this time. Most of the other kids had been together since kindergarten; they didn’t need a new friend.

‘What the heck is in *your* gene pool?’ a tall, pinched-looking girl named Marsha asked me one day.

‘Fifty per cent Swedish, twenty-five per cent Haitian, twenty-five per cent French,’ I replied. ‘Add it up and it equals one hundred per cent Canadian.’

She pursed her lips. ‘You look like a clown.’

It wasn’t the first time someone had made fun of my hair.

When I was younger I'd wanted my mom to cut it all off, but she'd refused. Now I'm glad she did. It's part of who I am. I'm like Samson, before he met Delilah: it's my superpower. And Astrid loves my hair; she says it reminds her of two of her favourite singers, K'naan and Art Garfunkel. She says it's good to have a distinct feature, and most of the time I agree. So I put up with idiots like Marsha, right up to the end of sixth grade. But I didn't like that school. I didn't like our basement apartment, either. It smelled musty, and even on sunny days it was dark. Plus Abelard was there all the time.

Astrid managed to get another office job, at BC Hydro. But that one didn't last either. She told me they laid some people off, and since she was last in, she was first out. But from stuff I overheard, I think it was more than that; I think she got lippy with her supervisor. 'I don't suffer fools gladly,' I heard her say to Abelard, 'and that guy was *such* a fool.'

Two weeks after that, Abelard broke up with her. Which brings me to:

The Westfalia

The van belonged to Abelard.

My mom met him at a day-long meditation retreat. He was the instructor, or guru.

Astrid is still pretty even though she is forty-four. She's tall and slender and has long, wavy blonde hair. I've seen

men's heads turn when she walks down the street. So even though Abelard was ten years younger, he asked my mom out for coffee after the retreat, and from that moment on, they were inseparable. When we moved to the basement apartment, he pretty much moved in, too, parking his Westfalia out front.

Abelard reminded me of Jesus, but only in looks. He had long brown hair, a hipster beard and a moustache. He said he was a Buddhist, and he blathered on a lot about peace and love and tolerance, which would have been fine if he wasn't such a dink. First of all, he mooched off my mom, even though it was obvious that we barely had enough to make ends meet. And second of all, he had a temper. He'd swear at my mom because she threw his yoga pants in the dryer instead of letting them drip-dry, or because she'd accidentally interrupted one of his meditation sessions.

He was an Angry Buddhist.

I couldn't stand him.

One night in July, Abelard told Astrid that he was heading to India on a 'spiritual journey', and he couldn't be 'tethered' to her any more. They fought. I left the apartment and walked around the block ten times. On the one hand, I felt bad for Astrid, because I knew she liked Abelard. On the other hand, I was relieved. She deserved so much better.

By the time I returned, Abelard was gone.

But his Westfalia wasn't. It was still in the driveway. Astrid

told me Abelard had gifted it to her, his small way of thanking her for being such a freeloader.

Now I'm finding out that Abelard has accused her of stealing the van.

I know my mom sometimes embellishes the truth. But any thinking person would be nuts to take Abelard at his word, because the guy is a snake. My best guess is that the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

A week after Abelard left for India, the landlord changed our locks. He'd been trying to get us out for a while because we were behind on the rent. We came home to find our belongings stacked on the front lawn. My gerbil, Horatio, sat on top of the pile, in his cage.

Horatio had been my tenth birthday present. I'd really wanted a dog, so at first I was disappointed when Astrid gave me a rodent. But when I looked into his beady little eyes and petted his soft black and white fur, I fell in love. Even though he couldn't fetch, or run, or do tricks, even though he had a brain the size of a peanut, I adored him. So when I saw him perched precariously on top of our stuff, I lost it. What if his cage had fallen and he'd been hurt? What if the door hadn't been securely fastened and he'd escaped? What if a hungry dog had come along? Horatio didn't *look* traumatised, but then again, it's hard to read complex emotions on a gerbil's face.

I started to cry. Loudly. Astrid wrapped me in a hug. 'It's OK, Lilla Gubben. It's OK.' (Lilla Gubben is one of her pet names for me; it means 'little old man' in Swedish. Apparently, when I was born, that's exactly what I looked like: bald and wrinkly.)

'How is it OK?' I wailed. 'We have nowhere to live!'

She gripped my shoulders and made me look at her. 'Don't you worry. I will figure something out. I always do.' And that brings me to:

Soleil's House

Astrid started phoning her friends to see if someone could put us up for a few nights.

Something my P.O.O. has taught me over the years is that my mom is really good at making friends, and even better at losing them. So I wasn't super surprised when Ingrid said no. Or when Karen hung up on her.

Astrid thought for a moment. Then she said, 'I'll try Soleil.'

Soleil was one of Astrid's students in her painting class at Emily Carr, and a fellow mom. They'd become fast friends. Then, two years ago, they had a huge fight.

I heard the whole thing from my bedroom. It started out as a celebration because Soleil had sold another painting, this time for a record sum. But after they'd finished a second bottle of wine, Astrid started talking about the mediocrity

of the masses, and how she couldn't understand why boring, bland work like Soleil's was selling while her superior abstracts weren't. Soleil left in tears and they didn't speak again.

Until now.

'She says we can stay with her for a bit,' Astrid said when she got off the phone.

She looked just as surprised as I did.

We packed everything into the Westfalia and drove to Soleil's new house near Main Street and King Edward. She was waiting for us in the driveway of a big modern home when we pulled up. Astrid whistled quietly. 'Someone's moved up in the world.'

Soleil smiled when she saw me. She's tall and broad-shouldered and has a friendly face. 'Felix, you've grown so much.' Then she gave my mom a lukewarm hug. 'Astrid. How are you? What happened?'

'Last-minute "renoviction" by a scumbag landlord.' I almost had to admire how effortlessly the lies rolled off her tongue.

Soleil helped us carry everything into a bright, spacious basement. A painting of yellow roses hung on one wall.

'I remember that,' said Astrid. 'You painted it at Emily Carr.'

'And you told me it was "technically fine, but emotionally dead". You didn't think I was living up to my full potential.'

Astrid's silence filled the room.

I watched Soleil's pale skin turn bright pink. 'My rose paintings have become my bestsellers. I can't seem to keep up with demand.'

My P.O.O. told me we were heading into dangerous territory. 'Would you like to pet my gerbil—' I asked, but Astrid spoke before Soleil could answer.

'I'm happy for you, Soleil, I really am.' I breathed a sigh of relief. Until she added, 'Your work is perfect for corporate lobbies and boardrooms.'

Oh boy.

Soleil wound her arms tightly across her chest. 'Arpad's parents are arriving at the end of the week. But you're welcome to stay until then.'

'You didn't mention that before,' Astrid said.

'I'm mentioning it now,' said Soleil, her gaze fixed on the yellow roses.

Soleil and her family had plans for the evening, so Astrid and I walked over to Helen's Grill and ordered the all-day breakfast for supper. I felt anxious. Not having a place to live can do that to a person.

The waitress brought us our plates. 'Why do breakfast foods always taste better at dinner?' Astrid asked.

'It's a scientific mystery.'

We ate in silence for a while. Then Astrid said, 'I have a fun idea.'

I looked at her, my mouth full of scrambled eggs.

‘We’ll live in the van. Just for a few weeks, until I find us another place. Think about it, Felix. It’ll be the ultimate summer vacation. The freedom, the adventure . . . My favourite book when I was nineteen was *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. It’ll be a blast.’

I thought about it. The furthest I’d ever travelled was to Victoria; my entire class had visited the provincial parliament buildings when I was ten. Marsha had pulled my hair on the bus, the whole way there and the whole way back. ‘Could we travel? Go across BC? Or maybe as far as the Rockies?’

‘Of course.’

‘Can we afford it?’

‘For a month, yes. I have some savings.’

‘If you have savings, why did we fall behind on the rent?’

Astrid popped a strip of bacon into her mouth. ‘The landlord was gouging us. The number of times I asked him to repair things that never got fixed . . . He *owed* us a few months rent-free for the crap we put up with.’

‘Oh.’

‘So, what do you say? Ultimate summer vacation?’

I wasn’t convinced. But I didn’t want to be a party pooper. ‘I guess so. Sure.’ We high-fived to seal the deal.

And that brings me to the beginning of August.

To the day we started living in a van.