



Alina Bronsky  
**You're in it, too**  
192 Pages

Rights Sold: Spain (cast.), France,  
Russia  
ISBN 978-3-423-71844-8

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by Alina Bronsky

192 pages  
dtv Verlagsgesellschaft  
Pub. Date: September 2017  
Sample Translation by Rachel Hildebrandt  
1

Everyone groaned when Ms. Meier said we were going to a reading today. I drew a small army of large and small T's in my assignment book. I couldn't have cared less if we were going to a reading or not. Under Thursday, I had actually scribbled REEDING. Franz laid his head down on his desk and snored. Only Petrowna raised her voice.

"Shut up, you idiots! You'd rather do math?"

Petrowna always managed to confuse everyone with a single sentence, making everything grow quiet for a moment.

Ms. Meier told us to leave our things in the classroom. She would lock the door, so we wouldn't have to worry about our valuables. The real reason was that she wanted the entire class to obediently return to the school with her in order to pick up their bags. Otherwise, half of the class would end up ditching her on the way back. Her intention was clear, which is why almost everyone took their bags with them. Ms. Meier pretended as if she didn't notice. She is a little student teacher and is afraid of us.

I hope our drive doesn't cause her blonde hair to turn gray. When we changed buses, Petrowna bummed two euros off of me to get a chocolate bar from the machine. She gave me half of it. We eventually got to where we were going, and it turned out to be a library.

"A library?" everyone groaned. "Aargh, what are we supposed to do there? Read books?"

"Shut up," Petrowna bellowed. "Where did you think we were going? The morgue?" That didn't really make any sense, but everybody was just confused again, and little Ms. Meier gazed gratefully at Petrowna.

Petrowna has been my best friend since elementary school. We have sat next to each other everyday since the first day of school. During the first recess we ever had, we beat each other up. It was because of children like Petrowna that my mother really wanted to send me to a private school, but my father thought it was never too early to learn about real life. On the second day of school, I came home with a black eye and a strand of Petrowna's blonde hair wrapped around my finger. I had torn it out in our fight. My mother immediately called our teacher, the school director, and the school counselor to warn them that children like Petrowna ended up walking the streets by the age of thirteen. By the third day, we stopped beating each other up, and have been inseparable since then. On Day 4, Petrowna explained to me what my mother had meant by "walking the streets."

Now we're both fourteen. Petrowna has been class representative for two years, and she usually lets me copy her classwork. Unfortunately, she hasn't been allowed to come home with me since first grade.

The library smelled like half-dead grannies and dust. I started sneezing right away, but I didn't have my nose spray with me, unfortunately. "I hope I don't die in here," I said to Petrowna, who replied with: "Wouldn't be a great loss." That's how we talked to each other, but she didn't



really mean it.

Ms. Meier shook the hand of another, just as small and somehow mouse gray woman whose hair had a violet tinge. It was the librarian. A poster hung on the wall, something about Book Week on it.

We stormed into an adjacent room like a herd of sheep. The room was filled with rows of plastic chairs, and we scattered across the space, propping our feet on the backs of the seats in front of us. Some of the students tossed seat cushions and picture books back and forth. Nobody picked up on the fact that the reading had already started, and the librarian was standing up front, talking about something. Ms. Meier sent a pleading look at Petrowna. "Shut up, everyone!" Petrowna yelled.

We then noticed that someone else was there, too. The author.

Relatively tall and skinny, she was sitting behind a small table that was much too skimpy for her long legs. She looked miserable. Her greasy hair was dyed black, and it hung in her eyes. I couldn't make out much of her face. A pile of books sat beside her.

Ms. Meier and the librarian began to clap, like in a kindergarten morning circle. We all joined in, and clapped for a minute, then two, then five. You can achieve quite a lot with very simple things. The librarian blushed. Ms. Meier waved her hands around like a conductor, but we just kept clapping. Petrowna was distracted by a text on her Samsung.

I stopped when my hands started to sting. The others must have reached that point at about the same time, since they broke off to massage their fingers, as well.

The author said that her name was Leah Eriksson, that she had written five books, and that she would start reading now. There would be time for questions afterward. She literally began to read then. Her voice was very quiet, and some of us called out, "Can't hear you!" Others were whispering, and two of the girls were combing their hair. Petrowna was staring hard at the tree outside the window.

I was the only one listening.

And I couldn't believe it.

What this Leah Eriksson was mumbling was about me.

My family.

My life.

My thoughts.

She had used other names, and a few of the minor details weren't right. But the rest of it was me.

And yet, nobody noticed a thing because they weren't listening. I don't think that even Ms. Meier was listening. She was just happy that everybody was quiet, and she looked as if she were lost in her own thoughts. Maybe she was counting how many years were left until her retirement. I nudged Petrowna, but she misunderstood and shoved me back.

"Are you listening?" I asked, but she kept staring at the tree, as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

I was mad that the others were getting louder. I could hardly understand what the author was saying. I wished that this Leah would stop reading. But at the same time, I was afraid that I might stop breathing if she stopped reading. I reached into my pocket for the coins I had left. I had been stupid to give Petrowna those two euros. Then my fingers brushed against a rolled-up



twenty. I had no idea what books cost.

“Any questions?” Leah Eriksson peeked out between her bangs.

My hand shot up, but others were quicker.

“Why do you do that?”

“How much do you make?”

“What are you doing tonight?”

Leah Eriksson squinted.

I snapped my fingers and shouted over the others: “CAN I BUY A COPY OF THAT BOOK RIGHT NOW?”

Everyone looked at me, even Petrowna. Especially Petrowna. Although she had been known to read a book if she didn't think anyone was watching. She would act like she hadn't been reading, but I always knew.

“What?” I said. “It sounds great.”

Franz acted like he was holding an invisible book and paging through it, a dopey look on his face. Everybody giggled. Leah Eriksson was the most confused.

“I don't sell books,” she replied.

“Huh? Who does?”

“Bookstores.”

“But you have one there.”

“That's my own copy.” She gripped it tightly, as if I wanted to steal it without paying. “I need it myself.”

“I'll pay you for it!”

She stood up, making it clear that the reading and the discussion were both over.

Everybody immediately understood. One half of the class plowed past the purple-haired librarian before clogging up the exit door. The other half tried to open a window and climb out that way. Ms. Meier dashed back and forth between the two groups, sweat beading on her forehead and hands flailing.

I took advantage of the moment and walked up to the author, who was packing her books in a bag. She was two heads taller than me. I tried to peer through her bangs to catch a glimpse of her face from below.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello.” She jumped with fright.

“You read well,” I lied.

“Thank you.” She knew I was lying.

“Like I said, I'd really like to buy your book.”

“Go ahead.”

“I have 20 Euros on me.”

“It costs 14.95.”

I triumphantly pulled the twenty out of my pocket, unrolled it, and set it on the table in front of Leah Eriksson. “Can you make change?”

“I already said that I don't sell books. I write them.”

“I need to go to a bookstore or something?”

She pushed aside her greasy bangs. A pair of steely blue eyes studied me. “It doesn't matter to me,” she replied.



I thought that was a little cocky on her part. After all, she wrote books to make money. It couldn't really not matter to her.

"You should be happy when someone wants to read your stuff."

The pair of eyes slipped back behind her bangs. She snapped her bag shut and hurried toward the door, where the crowd had already dissolved. My twenty still sat on the table, as unnoticed as a flattened bottle cap.

"Hey, you! Author! Leah!"

The dumb cow didn't even look back.

I sat next to Petrowna on the bus and shredded a Book Week flyer I had snagged from a stack on my way out into a thousand little pieces. As could have been expected, two-thirds of the class had vanished after the reading. Ms. Meier stared in resignation at the pitiful remainder who had spread throughout the bus. Instead of being grateful that at least we were returning with her to the school, she looked grumpy.

"Did you hear what she was reading?" I asked Petrowna. "Did you get what it was about?"

"A little. Something about divorce."

"Not just that. It was about a girl."

"Phenomenal," Petrowna yawned.

"No, listen to me. I've been through all those things, just like the girl in the book."

"If you say so." If she keeps this up, she's going to sprain her jaw.

"Honestly, Petrowna. She said the things I always say."

"Every other person babbles the same shit you do."

It felt like she didn't want to understand me.

"What kind of strange name is Leah Eriksson," I changed the subject.

"I bet it's a pen name."

"A what?"

"Her real name is bound to be Claudia Pupsmaus. Her publisher came up with this other name. They're always doing that, making things seem nicer than they are. They want people to think the woman is cool and buy her books, instead of laughing at her."

There was nothing cool about the woman. At the same time, I didn't see anything worth laughing at either.

Ms. Meier swayed through the bus to our double seat.

"I wanted to ask how you enjoyed it, Kim," she said, examining me with a benevolent if-you-try-you-might-get-a-3- look in her eyes.

"Why me specifically?" I was suspicious. What was she trying to get at?

"I was watching you. You listened very closely."

"What else was I supposed to do?"

"I've never seen such an expression on the face of another student."

I automatically reached up to my chin, and patted my nose and cheeks. Everything seemed in place.

"How did you like it?" I asked. Attack is supposed to be the best form of defense.

"I think it is good for teenagers. Seems pretty true to life."

My heart began to pound ominously.



“But no masterpiece,” Ms. Meier added. “Do you read much?”

I should have lied, so she might have felt inclined to give me a better grade. But I was honest: “I never read.”

After school, Petrowna suggested that we go to the park. This was her new hobby: to go to the park and sit under a tree. Since we’re friends, I always go with her. While Petrowna stares holes into the air and occasionally jots things down on her palm, I do my homework. In other words, I copy what Petrowna has already finished during recess.

But today we didn’t have any homework, because of the reading. At first, Ms. Meier had threatened us with an assignment tied to the reading. But then she decided it would be unfair to give extra work to the few people who had actually returned with her to school. I shared her opinion.

“However, give some thought to the book,” Ms. Meier said to us in farewell. “We will be discussing it in detail, and it will be part of your final German grade.”

“Sheeeeeiiit,” Franz muttered, and the other four students still there joined in. “What did she even read? Did anyone pay attention?”

“Uh-huh. Perhaps you should actually read the book,” Ms. Meier remarked sharply, as she looked at me. I looked the other way.

“What was it even called? And what was that lady’s name, the one who wrote it?” Franz grumbled.

“The Experts’ Guide to Advanced Stupidity,” Petrowna snarled, slipping her arm through mine.

We were soon sitting side by side under a chestnut tree with damp bums, because the grass was wet, something we didn’t realize until it was too late. We were too lazy to stand up again. Petrowna had picked up a leaf from the ground and was tracing its fine veins with her fingernail. I was eating my snack. Unexpectedly, my mother had actually packed something for me. She had recently started forgetting to do so. Wholegrain bread with cheese and lettuce. I nibbled the middle out of it and handed the crusts to Petrowna. She never had a snack, not even back in first grade.

“I think I really need to read this book,” I remarked.

“Which one?” Petrowna had already forgotten. She was gazing up through the treetop.

“Did you know this chestnut might be over a hundred years old? It existed before our parents were even born.”

Her nostalgic mood struck me as weird. To bring her back to the point, I showed her the flyer. It announced the names of the authors who would be reading for Book Week, as well as the titles of their books and their headshots.

“Look at what she looks like here, this Leah,” I said. “Totally different than in person.”

“Maybe she washed her hair for the photo shoot.”

“And do you know what her book is called, Petrowna?”

“Don’t keep nagging me about this.”

“Wrong. It’s called: Things You Never Learn. What do you think that even means?”

“No clue. Maybe it goes with something in the book.”

I was actually planning to head home and see if I could download the book for free somewhere. Considering that Leah had been so rude, I didn’t want to pay for her book. She

would surely get at least half of the price, if not all of that, and that wasn't okay with me. I'd rather save my money and buy more Döner. But I couldn't wait any longer.

"Do you know where the closest bookstore is?" I asked Petrowna.

"You walk by it all the time, next to Starbucks," she said.

2

It was both good and bad that Petrowna came to the bookstore with me. Good, because everything went better when she was around. Bad, because I had the feeling that this might be one of those things that was better done alone. Like going to the bathroom. Although we usually went to the bathroom together, too.

There actually was a bookstore next door to the Starbucks. I had just never noticed it.

We went in, and a little bell rang as we opened the door. The room was stuffed with bookshelves full of books, tables full of books, and stands full of cat calendars. I had assumed that only old women in big glasses went into places like this. But in the corner stood a sweaty young man in a blazer, and a littler further back was even a girl about our age. She was reading in a large, shiny book that was open in the middle. I wondered who had given her permission to do that, to just read in a book she hadn't bought. She'd get it dirty, and who would want to buy it then?

Compared to the library, it smelled less dusty in here. Maybe because the books in here were new, or perhaps they just had a better cleaning woman.

"May I help you?" A woman with a bun had slipped up to us. A string of wooden beads dangled from her neck. She was wearing slippers, so she probably lived here as well.

I just looked at her. I had no idea how you went about buying books. At Timberlands, for example, I would have told someone my shoe size and what color I wanted. Should I say something like: "I would like to have a 200-page book with a blue cover?"

"We wanted to ask about a book by Leah Dingsbums." Petrowna pushed me forward.

"Leah Eriksson?" The wooden bead woman smiled knowingly.

I nodded. How did she know this Leah?

"Is she famous?" Petrowna seemed to be reading my thoughts again.

"A marvelous Berlin author," the wooden bead woman declared.

"We heard her give a reading," I admitted. My voice sounded squeaky.

"Ah, for Book Week?" beamed Wooden Beads. "How was it?"

"Crappy," Petrowna answered. "Nobody listened. Except for her." And she pointed at me. I stepped on her foot before she could tell the beads why I had been listening. That was my own business.

"You are in a difficult reading age," Wooden Beads replied.

"I wouldn't quite put it that way," Petrowna said politely. The two of them smiled at each other as if they had once been BFFs who had quarrelled, and who were just now starting to talk to each other again.

"Which of Leah Eriksson's books do you want?" Wooden Beads turned toward me.

Like an idiot, I forgot the title. I rummaged in my pocket for the flyer.

"The one about the girl whose parents separate," I said. I blushed as if I were describing the pattern on my underwear to a bunch of strangers.

"Things You Never Learn!" Wooden Beads announced with the smile of a magician



pulling a rabbit out of a hat. “Let me see if we have it in stock.”

She looked something up on the computer, before standing for a few minutes in front of one of the bookshelves. Then she went into a back room. Perhaps there were more books back there. I was sweating. Petrowna picked up a book from a stack that had an ostrich on the cover. Wooden Beads came back, carrying the book from this morning.

“That’s it! That’s just the one!”

Wooden Beads smiled. “Somebody’s happy.”

“Have you read it?” I asked with a funny pricking in my heart. I didn’t want her to have read my story through her thick glasses. Even though I didn’t know her or even want to know her. She also shouldn’t know me, not like that anyway.

“No, but a coworker did, and she loved it.” She took my twenty, unfolding it gently, and then handed me a five and five cents. I felt a pang as I watched my bill vanish. It was an obscene amount of money. I never would have thought I would hand over that much cash to flip through 150 pages. “Would you recommend the book?”

“No!” I cried. “Not at all! Read something else!”

Clearly a little irritated, Wooden Beads stuck the book into a paper bag, and added a complimentary bookmark.

As usual, Petrowna wanted to go to Starbucks, especially since we were so close. Petrowna once declared that Starbuck was, in her opinion, the epitome of wealth and stability. For this reason alone, she was grateful to her parents for immigrating. In her Kyrgyz village, she would have been given, at most, black tea with butter in the afternoon by some aunt or another.

“Gross,” I said. “With butter?”

“Yep. Tradition. Because it’s so cold where we lived. And fat keeps you warm.”

However, today I wanted to be alone with the book. I felt like it was thrashing around in the bag. But Petrowna had stood by me while I bought the book, and I wanted to something nice for her. She really liked Frappuccinos, and I wanted to get her one. It was more than she could afford.

So we went to Starbucks, and with the change I had left, I bought her a Frappuccino and myself a muffin.

“Hurry up,” I said. “I don’t have all day.”

“Do you have a date or something?”

“Yes. No.”

“Do you need to keep an eye on you Mama to keep her from jumping out a window?”

“Just because there’s always so much drama at your place doesn’t mean you can project stuff onto the rest of us.”

“Why are you so obsessed with this weird book?” Petrowna changed the subject. She was the only one allowed to make jokes about her family. When it came to the rest of the families in the world though, nothing was off limits as far as she was concerned.

“There’s something off with this book,” I said. It almost felt as if I were a little afraid of it.

“Do you want to maybe read it first and tell me what happens in it?”

“I’m not your slave.” Petrowna took a sip from her cup.

As I sat on the streetcar home, I pulled the book out of the bag.



There were no real chapters with headings, just numbered sections. Boring. It started out with a girl walking into a kitchen and finding her mother standing in there, counting calories. My mother did that all the time. When she cooked, she weighed everything in little bowls on the kitchen scale, and if she had too much, the mother in the book would spoon the oats back into the packaging. Then she would enter the calories into an app on her iPhone. Just like mine. There was one small difference: The mother in the book was blonde, while mine is brunette. Regardless, I was so caught up in the story that I missed my stop and had to walk back fifteen minutes.

At home, my mother was standing in the kitchen, weighing oats. The shocker was that she was blonde.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“I went to the salon,” she said.

“I can see that.”

“And... what do you think?”

“It’s okay. A little gray.”

“Gray?” She ran to the mirror, horrified, but came right back looking concerned. “What do you have there? Drugs?”

I hid the book behind my back.

She turned back to the counter and spooned a few oats from the bowl back into the packaging.

“Why do you do that?” I asked. “I don’t want my mother to be skinnier than me.”

“How was school?” she asked, as if she hadn’t heard me.

“We went to a reading.”

“Nice.”

She couldn’t have cared less.

I looked in the fridge and caught sight of a bowl of reduced-calorie chicken broth. I crumbled a little dry bread into it and put it in the microwave. While I waited, I opened the book again.

I don’t want my mother to be skinnier than me, I read.

I grabbed the book and dashed into my room, leaving the bowl in the microwave.

I stuck the book under my pillow and stretched out on my bed. My heart was pounding.

The Ikea flowers that bloom in every other children’s room were also spread across my sheets. How did Leah know what my room looked like? The sentence itself explained. Because every other kid’s room looked like this.

We had learned in ethics that one-third of today’s marriages ended in divorce. I wasn’t exceptional on that count either. But at the same time, I remained convinced that I was unique. At least, I hoped I was. My thoughts were my own thoughts. My sentences were not spoken by every other girl.

Or were they?

I had to keep reading, but I was scared to do so.

The next morning, I felt as if somebody had stomped all over me. Although school didn’t start until third period, I was still flattened out in my bed. I could hardly open my eyes, and I was in





the crummiest mood ever. I had kept pulling the book out from under my pillow to read another section, and then I would get upset and slam it shut again. I tried to go to sleep. Either I couldn't manage to do that, or if so, just for short periods. Regardless, I kept finding myself awake, at which point I would reach for the book.

The book told me how things were going to go in my life. I didn't want to know.

There was still a spark of hope that this Leah was wrong. But she had been right about so many things. She had described me. There was no doubt about that. And she was ahead of me.

I struggled against my desire to flip to the back of the book and read the ending.

Instead I sent a text to Petrowna. Crappy night. The book is off limits.

Petrowna responded immediately. U're crazy.

My three alarms, which had just stopped beeping, started back up again.

Petrowna wrote. When R U going to get here.

I jumped out of bed and looked for my pants. I found them under my bed and pulled them on. No time to wash up or look for new clothes. In the bathroom, the dirty towels were tumbling out of the hamper. It was different in the book: They had a Croatian cleaning woman who came to wash and iron everything, even their socks.

The kitchen was empty. A cup of cold herbal tea was sitting on the table. I drank it up, before grabbing the last shriveled apple out of the fruit basket and a new twenty from the drawer. Over the past few weeks, we hadn't necessarily had much to eat in the house, but fortunately, there was always money lying around, so I was able to buy a Laugencroissant on my way to the subway.

I stuck a couple of random notebooks into my bag, added the book to them, and dashed out.

The idea came to me on the subway. I had opened the book once on board, although I only needed to travel three stops. I was less scared to keep reading in a full subway car than I was alone in my bed at night. The girl in the book - who was still unnamed at this point - suddenly decided to skip school in order to visit her father. I thought, why not? If my mother could ditch her kitchen duties, then I could do whatever I wanted.

I shut the book and got off the subway.

My father moved out two months ago. He had initially "arranged for a cramped, stop-gap solution" until he found "something decent," as he called it. In any case, he had given me the address and said that I could come by any time. I had never done that, though not because I blamed him for no longer wanting to stay with my mother. I just didn't know how you were supposed to act if you were visiting your father who lived somewhere else.

Other kids in my class had more experience with things like this. Many of them had two bedrooms, and every Monday, they would gripe that they had left their favorite shirt in the laundry at the other parent's home. And their math book was always in the wrong place, which is why they had unfortunately been unable to do their homework. But I wasn't used to this. I was probably the next-to-last one who had had parents who were still living under one roof, even if that couldn't have lasted for long. Only Petrowna's parents were still together, and that was only because they kept their marriage alive by yelling all the time. No wonder they never got bored with each other. My parents simply weren't dramatic enough for that.



My father's new address had been easy to memorize.

My phone vibrated.

*Where R U?* Petrowna again. Crap, I'd forgotten to let her know. I had never done that before.

*I'm not coming today*, I typed. *Sick*.

Petrowna: *U were fine just a minute ago*.

I, desperate: *Something just hit me*. Now I was even lying to her, which made my stomach start to hurt. Before today, I had only ever lied to my parents, never to Petrowna.

I rang the doorbell on an old building, the front of which looked a little rundown. I just picked a random bell. My father's apartment was in the building off the back of the courtyard, which didn't have a doorbell. The front door buzzed, so I pushed it open and walked in past a row of mailboxes and a fountain. It actually looked pretty nice inside. Unfortunately my last name wasn't on any of the bells on the rear building.

If I hadn't read the book, I wouldn't have known what to do. But the girl in the book knew that she needed to ring the uppermost bell, if she wanted to get to her father. He was living in one of the attic apartments, which were less popular because of the slant to the roof and easier to get, mainly because they had no elevator access. I searched for the right button and heard a bell go off through an open window somewhere over my head.

When I reached the top, my legs ached from all the stairs. The door was open a crack, and behind it, I could hear a vacuum. I walked right in and ran into a fat woman in red leggings. She cut off the vacuum and smiled at me, as if we had known each other forever.

"Papa?" she asked.

"My father supposedly lives here," I said a little stiffly.

"Papa not here. Comes." She led me into the kitchen, pushed me into a chair, and briskly made me a cheese sandwich.

"Face like Papa," she said, pinching me on the cheek and pressing the bread into my hand.

It was spooky to sit in a strange kitchen while a vacuum ran in the next room. I stood up and looked out of the window into the small inner courtyard with its trash cans. My father's Lucky Strikes were sitting on the window sill. They were, at least, a small clue that I was in the right place. The cleaning woman stuck her head through the door. "Papa comes. Tay?"

"What?"

"Want tay?" She pointed at the tea canister on the shelf.

"No, thank you."

"Papa soon comes."

I nodded. I didn't like her talking about him that way. He wasn't her Papa.

To fill the time, I pulled the book back out. Just for a change, I pulled off the dust jacket and studied the inside cover. It showed a picture of Leah Eriksson, but to be honest, it was night and day between this picture and the person in the library. Everything really was a lie.

My phone chirped. Petrowna. U have to make up the math work.

I answered: Thrilled. I turned back to the cover

Since I had nothing better to do, I read the text printed under the glamour shot, which I should have done long before now. Leah Eriksson had been born in Frankfurt. She majored in biology, and had been unable to get a job after graduation. Because she was embarrassed at



the prospect of telling everyone about what a failure she was, she started to write young adult novels and had become very successful. That's what it said. I didn't believe that though, since I didn't know anyone who read books. How many would she have to sell in order to make a living? Maybe she had a rich husband. At the same time, she didn't look like someone who would even have a partner.

The text on the back cover was short, so I opened the book back up. It was at least more interesting than the newspaper lying on the table. The very sight of all those letters made me feel a little woozy.

I didn't hear my father return. I was reading about all the outrageous things that happened to the girl in the book. Something like that would never happen to me, I thought. My father wasn't that stupid. Was he?

"Daughter," my father cried, his voice almost desperate. "This is a surprise."

He was right about that. I jumped in fright and stuck the book behind my back. No idea why. Maybe I just didn't want to be caught reading it.

The thing was that my father was not alone. A woman was standing next to him. She wasn't black as night, just as I had been reading in the book. She was sooner brown like milk chocolate. This made it a little hard for me to guess her age. She had to be older than twenty, but I didn't know any more than that. It would have been too obvious if I had tried to look it up in the book. She was wearing clothes that looked as if they had been handmade. Her giant earrings jangled, as she smiled broadly. I wouldn't have cared about any of it - neither the jangling nor her clothes - if my father hadn't had his arm looped around her waist.

"Oh," I murmured. There was nothing else I could say at that moment.

"This is Alicia." My father pulled the woman closer against him, although she hadn't given even the slightest hint of running away.

"And this is Kim Josephine. My big daughter."

My heart skipped a beat. Big daughter. How many other kids did he have besides me? I stared at Alicia's stomach, but it was hidden under her striped shirt. I tried to smile back. She stuck out her hand, and I shook it.

My father looked back and forth between us. His smile made me worried. People only grinned like that if they were about to have a heart attack.

Then he did what he always did when he didn't know what else to do. He invited us out to eat.

There was an Indian restaurant around the corner that had a business lunch menu. My father said that everything was reasonable between 12 and 3. I also didn't like the fact that he even brought this up. Normally he didn't pay attention to what things cost. We sat down at a booth, he and Alicia across from me. I ordered fried duck with rice and a soup as an appetizer, since I was so hungry. I also helped myself to food off of my father's plate, chicken in a coconut-peanut curry sauce. Alicia had ordered something vegetarian.

She didn't stop grinning at me with her snow-white teeth. My father didn't stop playing with her knee under the table. I acted as if I didn't notice.

"How long have the two of you known each other?" I asked.

"How's Mama?" my father asked at the same time.

Bad timing, that's what I should have said to him right away. Didn't he watch any TV?



Alicia's smile grew a little stiff.

"Not good," I said. "She doesn't get up in the mornings anymore. She doesn't eat, which means there's usually nothing for me to eat either. And I don't have any more clean socks."

"At your age, I washed my own socks," Alicia replied.

My father and I looked at her. She bit into a lettuce leaf.

"I can send Marija over," my father said. "You already met her. Our Croatian cleaning woman."

As he said this, I realized for the first time that he really no longer lived with us and that things would never again be the same.