

**BROKEN GLASS
PARK**

Alina Bronsky

B R O K E N G L A S S
P A R K

Translated from the German
by Tim Mohr


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BROKEN GLASS PARK

For Galina, Leonid, and Michael.
In memory of Nadezhda Zotova.

Sometimes I think I'm the only one in our neighborhood with any worthwhile dreams. I have two, and there's no reason to be ashamed of either one. I want to kill Vadim. And I want to write a book about my mother. I already have a title: The Story of an Idiotic Redheaded Woman Who Would Still Be Alive If Only She Had Listened to Her Smart Oldest Daughter. Or maybe that's more of a subtitle. But I have plenty of time to figure it out because I haven't started writing yet.

Most of the people who live around here don't have any dreams at all. I've asked. And the dreams of the ones who do have them are so pathetic that if I were in their shoes I'd rather not have any.

Anna's dream, for instance, is to marry rich. Her dream man would be a judge in his mid-thirties, and, fingers crossed, not too terribly ugly.

Anna is seventeen, same as I am, and she says she'd get married immediately if a guy like that came along. That way she could finally move out of the Emerald and into the judge's penthouse apartment. Nobody but me knows that Anna sometimes takes the tram downtown and wanders a dozen times around the courthouse in the hope that her judge will finally come out and discover her, give her a red rose, take her out for ice cream, and then invite her back to his penthouse.

She says you'll never get lucky if you don't fight for it; if you don't fight, the moment will just pass you by.

"Do you have any idea what Emerald means, you stupid

cow?” I ask her. “It’s the most elegant way to cut a diamond, and a fine gemstone itself. That’s got to be appealing to you. You’ll never live in another Emerald if you move out of this place.”

“You just made that up. They would never in a million years have named this heap of concrete after a diamond cut,” says Anna. “And by the way, when you know too much, you get old and wrinkled faster.” That’s a Russian saying.

As Anna’s judge could take a while, for now she’s sleeping with Valentin, who has a third-rate dream of his own. He wants a brand-new, snow-white Mercedes. First he’ll have to get his driver’s license. Which costs a lot. That’s why he delivers advertising brochures door to door before school. Since the money to be made at that is barely a trickle, Valentin also cleans the house of an old married couple twice a week. The couple lives on the other side of town. He got the job through his mother, who cleans the place next door. Nobody can know he’s a housecleaner—if the guys at school found out, they’d never let him live it down, and Anna would split up with him.

Valentin usually has a look on his face as if someone just shoved a cactus down his pants. I think it’s because he realizes that even if he eventually gets enough money together to take driver’s ed classes and get his license, it would take another two lifetimes of cleaning houses to buy a white Mercedes. And then maybe in his third lifetime he’d be able to hop in and actually take a spin.

Peter the Great, on the other hand, dreams of a natural blonde with dark eyes. He was with Anna before. She has brown eyes but she’s not natural—not natural blond, anyway. Now he’s with another girl, one from his class at school. But it’s less convenient, as she lives downtown rather than here in the Emerald. Since they got together, he complains he spends half his life on the tram. But while he’s on it, he keeps his eyes peeled for other blondes.

He was never interested in me—my hair’s too dark.

My name is Sascha Naimann. I’m not a guy, even though everyone in this country seems to think so when they hear my name. I’ve given up counting how often I’ve had to explain it to people. Sascha is a short form of Alexander *and* Alexandra. I’m an Alexandra. But my name is Sascha—that’s what my mother always called me, and that’s what I want to be called. When people address me as Alexandra, I don’t even react. That used to happen a lot more when I was new in school. These days it only happens when there’s a new teacher.

Sometimes I think I don’t ever want to meet any new people because I’m sick of having to explain everything from scratch. Why my name is Sascha and how long I’ve lived in Germany and how come I speak German so well—ten times better than all the other Russian Germans put together.

I know German because my head is filled with a gray matter shaped like a big walnut. Macroscopically it has lots of ridges and microscopically loads of synapses. I probably have a few million more than Anna—definitely. Besides German, I also know physics, chemistry, English, French, and Latin. If I ever get a B on an assignment, the teacher comes over to me and apologizes.

I’m particularly good at math. When we came to Germany seven years ago, math was the only subject I could handle right away, in the fifth grade. Truth be told, I could have solved the eighth grade assignments. Back in Russia I was in a special math school.

In Germany I couldn’t speak a word at first, but the numbers were the same. I always solved the equations first, and always correctly. I was the only one in class who had any idea what algebra and geometry were. My classmates acted as if they were diseases.

My mother laughed about it and said she found me a little scary. I was always scary in her eyes, though, because I thought

much more logically than she did. She wasn't stupid, but she was too sentimental. She read at least one thick novel per week, played piano and guitar, knew a million songs, and was good at languages. Learned German real fast, for instance—and before that was able to communicate with people in passable English.

Math, physics, chemistry—she was no good at them. Just as she was no good at recognizing when it was time to show a man the door. These are all abilities I must have gotten from my father. All I know about him is that he had multiple doctorates and an unpleasant personality. “You got that, too,” my mother used to say. “And the degrees will no doubt come at some point.”

I'm the only one from our community who goes to the Alfred Delp school. It's a private Catholic school, and to this day I have no idea why they accepted me back then—pretty much illiterate, never baptized, looking completely out of step in a pink wool sweater my grandmother had knitted. Being led by the hand by a mother only able to speak broken English—very loudly, with a ridiculous accent—and who wore her flaming red hair down. In her other hand was a liter of milk in a plastic bag from a discount grocery store.

Along with my mother, hundreds of German Catholic architects, doctors, and lawyers had applied for spots at the school for their kids. All people who practically had *GENEROUS DONOR* written across their foreheads in big letters.

You see, at the Alfred Delp school there's no tuition, but “donations are welcome.” And Mrs. Weimars, the school secretary who peered over the top of her glasses to size up my mother, me, and the plastic bag, must have quickly come to a realistic assessment of my mother's liquidity (as those of us at such elite schools call it).

Actually, after I started attending the school, my mother did give twenty euros the first year and twenty-two the next—

which was all she could afford. She couldn't really afford those amounts, to be honest, but my mother was a fundamentally giving person. “There's nothing I hate more than a leech” was one of her favorite sentences. “It's a quality you hate only in yourself,” I would always answer. “Try hating it in others—like Vadim, for instance.”

In retrospect, I think they accepted me at the school to try to create a little diversity. A lot of doctors, lawyers, and architects got rejection notices for their kids. In the end there were five sections of fifth graders, each one crammed full, and in mine, 5C, I was the only one with an “immigrant background.” In 5A was a kid with an American father, and in 5B another with a French mother. In all my years there I've never seen a single black kid or anyone who looked even vaguely Middle Eastern. So in my class I was the heavyweight when it came to diversity.

On the first day of school my classmates stared at me as if I had just climbed out of a UFO. They asked me questions I couldn't understand at first. Soon I could have answered them, but by then they all thought I was standoffish. It took a while for them to learn otherwise.

Considering most of them had never seen a foreigner up close before, they were all pretty nice to me. One of the first sentences I was able to understand was a compliment about my sweater. Probably out of pity. A little later, when I had learned to talk, count, and write papers and was the only one who put commas in the right places, everyone acted like they were happy for me. And maybe it was sincere.

My mother was always saying I should have friends from school over to our place. But she only said that because she was clueless. She was always inviting friends over. Twice I'd been over to the homes of girls from my class—Melanie and Carla—and I couldn't possibly imagine having them over.

I'm not sure what threw me more: the neatness of Melanie's

room, the scent of the polished furniture—the type of furniture I thought existed only in catalogues or Anna’s fantasies—the fact that they sat around an oval dining room table for lunch instead of in the kitchen, or her horse-pattern sheets. I’d never seen such colorful sheets before. At home we had white or light-blue checked sheets, all of which were old and faded. How you could possibly fall asleep with your eyes flitting around looking at all those horses?

Melanie’s mother, by the way, was originally from Hungary. That came as a complete surprise—for one thing because Melanie had never mentioned it, and for another because she looked more stereotypically German than any other girl in our entire school. She was exactly what foreigners picture when they think of a young German girl—particularly foreigners who form that image from afar, having never been to Germany.

She had freshly cropped, always-neat, chin-length blond hair, blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a crisply ironed jean jacket. She smelled of soap and spoke in a chirpy voice using sentences of mostly monosyllabic words, words that popped out of her mouth like peas. If I hadn’t have seen her in the flesh myself, I would never have believed someone like her actually existed.

Her mom, on the other hand, spoke with an accent—though I didn’t notice it the first time I went over there. Back then my own accent screeched as distractingly as a rusty bicycle. During lunch she stared at me with pity when she thought I wasn’t looking. She asked me questions about the town where I had grown up, the weather there, my old school, and my mother.

I told her that my mother had studied art history, that back home she had acted in a theater group that kept getting banned, that she wanted to find a little company here to join. Melanie’s mother took a sip of water and segued into a different line of questioning: wasn’t life in our housing project dan-

gerous? I told her it was a lot cleaner and nicer than where I’d lived back there. I always referred to Russia that way—“back there.”

Melanie nibbled on her cheese-filled puff pastry and corrected her mother whenever she made a grammatical error. She also told her mother that they’d done a poll in class about what people wanted for their birthdays and seven students had said they wanted new stereos.

“So what?” said her mother, looking at Melanie through narrowed eyes.

“Don’t you understand what that means?” said Melanie, opening her blue eyes wide. “A *new* stereo. Meaning they already *have* one. And I still don’t have one.”

“But you do have one in your room,” I said. I couldn’t talk very well, but I talked a lot.

“That’s just an old system my cousin was getting rid of,” Melanie said. “It doesn’t have any of the features a stereo has to have these days.”

After lunch we went back into her spotless room. She turned on the stereo. I found a stack of old teen magazines and started reading them. Melanie spun herself around on her desk chair and chatted on the phone with another friend. Considering we didn’t have anything to say to each other, we made good use of the time. That evening Melanie’s mother drove me home. When we got there she looked around, unsettled, and insisted on taking me to the door to make sure I got home to my mother.

But my mother wasn’t home. I had a key.

“You should come over again,” said Melanie’s mother, patting my cheek.

“Thanks,” I said, thinking to myself, Not until there’s a new stack of magazines.

After that I looked at our apartment in a different light.

I pictured spotless Melanie in her pressed jean jacket taking

the elevator with me. I pictured the way she would look around, fidgeting, like her mother. The way the scent of her soap would fight with the smell of urine in the hallway—and lose. I pictured her coming through the door of our apartment, catching sight of the couch we’d found discarded by a dumpster and the little table in front of it that would collapse if you even looked at it too hard. Books on the floor. The little TV and stack of videocassettes—even back then nobody had VHS tapes anymore. The cabinet with no door. My stepfather’s socks drying on the radiator. My brother’s sweatpants draped over a chair. We had five chairs, each one different because we’d found them separately, each left out on the street the night before a heavy garbage pickup.

We always ate in the kitchen, except when we had guests over for a party—in which case we had to clear out the main room to be able to fit extra chairs borrowed from neighbors. Our kitchen table was usually covered with jars of jam, letters, postcards, half-empty bottles, and old newspapers. We had twenty plates; none matched any of the others. My mother had bought them all individually at the flea market.

We didn’t have a dishwasher back then, and sometimes all twenty plates would stack up in the sink before my mother washed them up. Sometimes I did it, but not very often. And never when Vadim told me to—the same Vadim who left the frying pan crusted with the remains of his fried eggs. Though when his foul mouth started muttering my mother’s name menacingly, I cleaned up real fast.

I hate men.

Anna says good men do exist. Nice, friendly men who cook and help clean up and who earn money. Men who want to have children and give gifts and plan vacations. Who wear clean clothes, don’t drink, and even look halfway decent. Where on earth are they, I ask. She says they’re out there—if not in our

town then in Frankfurt. But she doesn’t know any personally, unless you count people she’s seen on TV.

That’s why I always repeat the words my mother used to say: I don’t need a man.

Of course, though she always said that, she never stuck to it.

Ever since I decided to kill Vadim, I’ve felt a lot better. I also promised Anton, my nine-year-old little brother, that I’d do it. And I think he feels better now, too. When I told him, he opened his eyes wide and asked, breathless, “How are you going to do it?”

I acted as if I had everything under control. “There’s a thousand ways I could do it,” I told him. “I could poison him, suffocate him, strangle him, stab him, push him off a balcony, run him over in a car.”

“You don’t have a car,” said my brother Anton—and he was right.

“I can’t get at him at the moment anyway,” I said. “You know he’s still in prison. He’ll be there for years.”

“Is that how long it’s going to take?” said Anton.

“Yeah,” I said, “but it’s better that way—I’ll have plenty of time to plan it out. It’s not that easy to kill somebody when you’ve never done it before, you know.”

“It’ll be easier the second time around,” said Anton like an expert.

“I just want to pull it off this one time,” I said. “I don’t want to make a hobby out of it.”

I was relieved that Anton also thought it was a good idea. Vadim is his father, after all. But the little guy hates him just as much as I do. Maybe even more. He had already been a basket case beforehand, because unlike me he was always afraid of Vadim.

These days Anton’s still in bad shape, showing no signs of improvement, and I sometimes ask myself whether all the therapy will do any good at all. He stutters, can’t concentrate in

school, wets his bed, and starts to shake whenever someone raises their voice. All this despite the fact that he claims not to remember anything. I always tell him: count yourself lucky if that's the case. I'm happy I can't remember anything, either—even though I was there.

I can discuss one of my dreams with Anton. But not the other one. Because anytime the word “mama” is mentioned in his vicinity, he freezes and just sits there dead still like a statue—as if he's just been kissed by the Snow Queen. My mother often read us the fairytale of the Snow Queen. She loved Hans Christian Andersen, loved that story in particular. Whenever somebody was mean, she would say they probably had a piece of the mirror in their eye or heart—she meant the mirror from the Snow Queen, the one the evil troll shattered. That's just how she was.

To shield him, I smack anyone who says the word “mama” in front of Anton. Not adults, obviously—I just shout at them. It always works. It's the least I can do for my little brother. Well, that and not chasing him out when he comes crying to my room at night, crawls into bed next to me, and then is so frightened when the alarm goes off in the morning that he pisses on my leg.

I sometimes worry what it will be like after I've fulfilled my first dream and Vadim is dead.

When I was younger, I thought I wanted to be famous, just like everybody else on the planet. I didn't have anything against the idea of having a well-known mother, either, who smiled from the cover of every magazine and was the talk of the town. But then when we did become known, I could have shot them all—all the photographers and cameramen and the reporters with their microphones and little notepads, filming the entrance to our building and knocking on our neighbors', doors to ask how loud it had been that night. Who screamed, who cried, who ran, and whether Vadim had really said

“There's blood in there, don't go in,” and “It's over, get out of here.”

Only when one of us emerged—me or Anton, since Alissa still had to be carried then—would they shut their mouths, shuffle to the sides of the hallway to clear a path for us, and watch us pass out of the corners of their eyes.

I had hoped they would try to talk to me or Anton, because then I would have felt justified in knocking the cameras out of their hands or the teeth out of their skulls. But they wisely steered clear of me—there must have been a toxic cloud hanging over me, like Chernobyl. Then again I figured it was probably for the best that they didn't ask me questions and that I didn't react because my mother was always opposed to violence. And she knew exactly what violence felt like.

The next day she was in all the papers. Her first name and the first initial of her last name—as is the journalistic tradition here—along with her age and a photo. It was a picture she'd had taken with her theater group, a nice picture, her hair red, her face less covered with makeup than usual, a black sweater. Back in those days she'd been a star.

Are you happy now? I asked the picture. Didn't I warn you? How could you let this happen? Why did you marry that asshole? Why did he get to come with you to Germany? Why in the hell did you let him into the apartment that night?

Why? For god's sake why?

You were always a stupid, stupid, stupid woman, I said to her. But how could you do this to me—how could you possibly have been so dumb?

Later I apologized to her. Obviously it wasn't her who had done this to me. She had just acted the way she always did—she couldn't help it. She was, after all, an art history student and an artist to boot. She was of an archetype that doesn't really exist anymore—a bit more cosmopolitan, a bit more skilled, a bit more refined. And I'll explain that in my book so everyone

knows it. I don't want her to be famous only because she died such a horrid death.

Right from the beginning, I read all the newspaper reports. I would always run down to the newsstand and buy copies of all the papers they sold there. The first few days we weren't at home—the department of family services put us up in an apartment owned by the city. But after two days I told them we couldn't take it anymore. The apartment was completely free of dust, of books, of life. And there was a plastic plant. I said the little kids wanted to go home. It was most important for Alissa. She wasn't even two years old.

We were permitted to go home, where everything was oddly clean in a way it had never been before. We were looked after around the clock by several indistinguishable women with short hair and hyphenated names, and one man with long hair—who also had a hyphenated name.

I can barely remember those days. I just know I talked non-stop about how we had done things *before* and how we needed to keep doing them that way now. How they shouldn't buy any food other than the things we were already used to. Then one day there was organic butter on the table, and I just had a complete breakdown.

I can still remember the look one of the women gave me as I fell screaming to the floor. There was relief in that look. They had been droning on for days about how I didn't need to keep it all inside. How I could give my feelings free rein. Vent. I needed to, in fact.

But I didn't listen to them.

And then suddenly Maria arrived. Cousin twice-removed, with three overstuffed suitcases brought from Novosibirsk. A chance for the *traumatized children* to form a *family* again.

Vadim's cousin, by the way.

I had agreed to her coming—after the experience in the family services-owned apartment, I had an allergic reaction to

the idea of entering any kind of institutional facility. And foster parents weren't exactly lined up around the block to take in three emotionally fucked up urchins of Russian origin. Or to move into the apartment where the half-orphans were huddled in the freshly vacuumed corners like frightened rabbits. The apartment with the door that had recently had more pictures snapped of it than Heidi Klum.

So Maria it was.

Maria is in her mid-thirties but looks fifty. She used to work in a factory cafeteria in Novosibirsk. Maria has calloused hands as big as shovels, with nails painted red. She has short hair, dyed blond and permed, thick legs with varicose veins—though you can't see them under the wool stockings she wears. She's got a dozen floral-print dresses, an ass so wide you could land a helicopter on it, perfume so sickly-sweet it makes you sneeze, a big mouth ringed with red lipstick, chipmunk cheeks, and little eyes.

Kind eyes. In fact, she's nice in general, Maria.

Alissa took to her immediately—boom, just like that. Maria this, Maria that. Mascha, mine, ma-ma-ma-Mama. I wasn't upset with her about it—she's just a little kid.

She immediately took up residence in Maria's boundless lap. She wanted to stay there for days on end. It made Maria nervous because she had a hard time cooking with a two-year-old clinging to her. As if any of us wanted to eat. Anton and I didn't eat for days. At some point he basically collapsed—and I piled on.

I told him that if he didn't eat he'd be put in the hospital. And if that happened Maria would be deemed an unfit guardian and sent back to Novosibirsk. And then we'd be stuck in an orphanage or split up and sent out to foster homes alone.

He ate after that. I sat with him and watched him steadily chewing, his big, round eyes fixed on the white wall. Maria

kept refilling his plate. Anton threw up twice after eating so I told Maria to stick to smaller portions, but to feed him frequently throughout the day. And not to give him such rich food. And to make sure he drank a lot.

Maria was a good cook. She still is. Much better than my mom. Maria knows how to make borscht and other complicated soups. The apartment always smells like food. She makes homemade stocks from chicken or beef, with vegetables and bundles of soup greens. She makes perfectly shaped meatballs and crepes as thin as cold cuts. She discovered sweetened condensed milk at the Russian grocery store around the corner—a delicacy more prized than caviar during Soviet times—and drenches stacks of crepes in it. She makes homemade pickles and black currant jam.

We're doing well, I tell my mother. We're being fattened up nicely. I wish you could taste it all. You were always intrigued by anything tasty, interesting-looking, or out of the ordinary.

In the newspaper article, Maria was described as “the only living relative willing to look after the three children left behind.”

We weren't left behind, I grumbled. And Maria didn't sacrifice some priceless existence for our sake: when you work in a cafeteria in Novosibirsk and you're asked if you'd like to move to Germany to make soup for a few kids, you've hit the lottery.

Particularly since Maria had only briefly been married once when she was young. Maybe twice. She had no kids and no pets—as far as she was concerned there was nothing to tie her to her studio apartment and the cafeteria. That's turned out not to be true. I could have told her so. Back in Novosibirsk she could blather to everyone—and she did. Here she's pretty much damned to silence.

After almost two years here, Maria's German is limited to

about twenty words, things like bus, potato, butter, trash, boil, wash, and fuck you—for the dark-haired teenagers who sometimes whistle and make vulgar gestures at her as she walks past them. Occasionally she tries to group her vocabulary into sentences. That usually doesn't go too well.

When she's shopping anywhere but the Russian grocery store, she has to point to whatever she wants and then write out the number she needs. She always carries a little notepad with her for exactly that purpose. Every time she comes back from the discount market she's bathed in sweat. When she's spoken to on the street, she whimpers and she gets red blotches on her face. I tried for two weeks to help her master the sentence “I only speak Russian.” She carries it around on a slip of paper in her wallet, transcribed phonetically into Cyrillic letters.

We're visited regularly by the hyphenated names from the department of family services. Maria freaks out every time, and I have to spend a long time before and after their visits convincing her she is doing a good job and that she won't have to go back to her job in the cafeteria.

Because as unhappy as she is here in the Emerald, you couldn't get her to go back to Novosibirsk—not even by force. She does dream of one day returning there, but later, with a thin waist and fancy makeup, with a suitcase full of nice clothes, and preferably accompanied by a German husband with a perfectly groomed mustache. He should also be kind and rich and speak Russian—because German, Maria says, is tougher than Chinese. As if she knows.

When I do my homework, she sometimes sighs behind me, muttering, “Studying is important, studying is good. I never used to study, always worked. Even as a little kid. And look at me now. Where did all that drudgery get me?”

“Read something, dumpling,” I say. “It doesn't have to be *War and Peace* right off the bat. Try a mystery.”

“I’m always so tired in the evening, sunshine,” she says. “I forget what I’ve just read and have to keep starting over. It just takes too much effort.”

So every day she reads the latest sheet of her page-a-day calendar—one for Russian Orthodox housewives—with a recipe on it, maybe a diet tip, and once in a while a joke, and that suffices. It makes me roll my eyes, but I make sure she doesn’t see me. After all, she can’t help the fact that she got too few synapses and that she lost two-thirds of the ones she did get working at the cafeteria.

I just worry a little about Alissa. At the moment Maria has a slight intellectual edge over my not quite four-year-old sister, but that won’t be the case for long. I have made reading books aloud a mandatory part of Maria’s schedule. After the first time she read a picture book to Alissa, she said, amazed, “I never knew such interesting books existed.”

She has nothing but love for Alissa. So much so that she was against sending her off to kindergarten at the age of three. She pictured nothing but illnesses and deep-frozen foods. I had to threaten to get the family services department involved to break down Maria’s resistance to the idea of kindergarten. She constantly cuddles and pats my sister and can barely keep herself from sputtering the pathetic phrase I’ve strictly banned from our household: “My poor little orphan.” When Alissa’s not sitting in her lap, she’s standing on a footstool in the kitchen watching meatballs sizzle. She already knows a lot of recipes by heart. Recently she explained to me what fresh coriander looks like and how it smells. “It makes you want to puke,” she said.

Maria’s fear of being shipped back to Novosibirsk has a lot to do with Alissa, too. Separating the two of them would not only break my sister’s heart but Maria’s as well. “When little Ally is all grown up, only then will I feel comfortable leaving,” she says. “I want to raise her and make sure she’s happy and healthy (my poor little orphan).”

Other times Maria says she’ll feel comfortable leaving only once Alissa has found a decent man to marry.

“You’re not a servant,” I say. “And besides, it’s possible she won’t find a decent man to marry until she’s in her late thirties—if she’s lucky.”

“Okay, then when she gets her diploma,” she says. “That will be a happy day for me, too.”

For her “diploma” is a magic term—like “capital gains tax” or “paracetamol.”

She would die for Alissa. That’s not to say she has anything against Anton. She tries to cuddle him, too, but Anton won’t let anyone touch him. He just keeps retreating until his back is against the wall. And at that point Maria realizes she should let go of him. A few months ago I watched as he told Maria about his day at school. She sat at the kitchen table with her chin in her hand shaking her head in amazement.

Maria’s afraid of me and that has its advantages.

From her perspective, there are plenty of reasons to be in awe of me. Not only can I speak Latin and French—which are about as relevant to her life as speaking Martian—but I can also speak—and this is something much more concrete—the language in this damn country. I explain the lay of the land to her and take her shopping, where an interpreter comes in very handy. I know how to fill out all the paperwork to apply for welfare and for children’s benefits. I’m usually around when workers from the family services department are scheduled to visit. I always offer her the highest praise. When I have to translate a question for her, I always start thinking up the answer to it immediately.

Maria is paralyzed with fear anytime she has to deal with officialdom. Faced with anyone who gives off even a whiff of government authority, she feels as insignificant as an ant. She’s even deferential to machines that dispense tickets for the public transportation system. And whenever a plainclothes ticket

controller comes through the bus and announces a ticket check, she rushes to rip hers out of her purse so quickly that she sends her lipstick and tampons flying around the nearby seats, an awkward smile plastered on her face all the while.

“Take it easy,” I say, if I happen to be there when it happens. Then I crawl around on the floor to collect her things as Maria sits there frozen, the fake smile still on her face after the ticket controller has walked past her.

“I would never have guessed he was a ticket controller,” she says, amazed. “With long hair and an earring—like a member of the Beatles. I can’t believe the way they are allowed to dress. What did he have hanging from his ears?”

“An MP3 player,” I explain.

“A what?”

“For music.”

“You’re going to be just like your mother,” she says one time during an incident like this.

“What did you say?”

She puts her hand over her mouth. She starts to shake, her bloated body quivering beneath her flower-print blouse, terror in her eyes, tears starting to drip down her cheeks—or is it sweat?

“What did you say?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she says. “Nothing.”

I lift my hand. I’m not sure what I’m about to do. My fingers curl into a fist. But there’s no more sense in hitting Maria than in taking a whip to pudding. So I slam my fist against the window.

Nobody turns around. Not even the bus driver, despite the fact that normally they shout at anyone who so much as touches a seat with their foot.

The window doesn’t break, but it hurts my fist and I let out a howl.

Suddenly my face is buried in Maria’s chest and I can barely

breathe. She wraps me up with both arms and also manages to rub my head and back. Her hands feel big and warm.

I close my eyes.

“It’s okay,” she says as my lungs fill with her perfume. “Everything’s going to be fine. Everything is all right. Don’t cry, my precious. You’re my strong little girl.”

“Shut your mouth,” I shout, but it comes out as a groan. Maria stops talking.

We get out of the bus downtown to exchange the watch Maria bought two days ago for five euros. It had stopped after one day.

After that I buy a bus ticket for Maria for the return trip and wait as she gets into the bus.

I don’t get on with her. Instead I hop on a tram with no ticket—I’m not afraid of the ticket controllers—and go to visit Ingrid and Hans.

It pains me to see their house. I could never tell them why—and wouldn’t want to. It’s a beautiful two-story house surrounded by a garden that’s gone to seed, which would be reason enough to like it.

But what makes visiting them difficult is the fact that my mother loved this house and its garden. She visited it many times, and once, when Ingrid and Hans went to a spa for a month, she and Harry house-sat here together. Actually all of us moved in here for those four weeks—my mother, me, Anton, and Alissa. And Harry, who beamed during those weeks in a way he never did otherwise. We were all his guests, sort of, and hosting us made him proud.

Of course, it wasn’t really his home anymore. Finally, in his early thirties he had managed to move out of his parents’ place. Must have been about a year and a half before he met my mother. After he left home he lived in a studio apartment in a student neighborhood—a fourth-floor walkup. I went there twice. It was a nice little place.