

Translated extract from

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Junky Girl

Translated by Sheridan Marshall

Me? Who am I? I am Alissa. Again. A bit of me is Alissa again, but only a bit, and the rest is Alice. Alice, still chasing through my veins, although I've been clean for a long time. Alice, who has made herself comfortable in my brain. Alice is the voice in my head. Alice is the Jabberwocky who you have to guard against, and Alice is the one who shoots Alissa up. And she doesn't shoot her up gently, she just shoots into Alissa's veins, demanding, greedy, promising.

Alice hates Alissa, but Alissa loves Alice, and she loves her, because only Alice takes her to a world without Alissa. And without Alice. A world with nothing in it, nothing at all. A world where every desire melts away. Absolute reduction. A world without desires is a peaceful world. Perhaps it's not life, but what do you need life for, when all at once there is nothing except for this peace? Deep peace, timeless peace. At the end of the world is redemption, endless and sublime, because time is dead.

And that is the problem. Real redemption only happens when time is dead. But time doesn't just stand still because Alice is shooting Alissa up. Only Alissa and Alice stand still. They stand still for a couple of hours and when they move on, everything is even shittier than before.

And that's why I cover my ears, even though I know that it's no use, because Alice speaks without words, without a voice, without a body. And if she needs a voice or a body, then she just takes mine.

'Shut your trap, shut your gob, just keep your mouth shut, you bitch!', I scream with my voice out of my body, into my body, into my brain. And Alice laughs. Laughs at me. 'Yeah, laugh yourself to death!', I bawl at myself. And I used to be such a nice girl.

This is the battle which I always have, over and over again. It is Alissa Johansson's battle, the seventeen-year-old, washed-out, Avril Lavigne lookalike junk-girl. The ex-junkie heroine, the young Lolita, the hard-edged kid. An old woman, spent, angry, sweet seventeen and unspeakably old.

It was obvious that this day was going to be bad from the minute I woke up. I dreamt I was at Kotti again, the Kottbusser Tor underground station, and Tara was there too. Tara. At that moment I woke up and tears were pouring out of my eyes and the after-effects of the dream seared through me. High voltage. Two thousand volts. Tara will never be there again. Never again. No control.

Loss of control is shit. Loss of control is my constant companion. I hate myself for it. I hate myself so much because I don't have myself under control, because I am not rid of Alice, because my family thinks that I'm Alissa again. I reach under the bed, my hands shaking, and get the blade out. I hate myself for this too, but only when I see the blood in a comforting red line on my arm, do I calm down. Under control. Still alive.

Then I got out of bed quickly so as not to think stupid thoughts and sat down, moved the chair, stood up, walked around, sat down, stood up, opened the window. Spring air. Crocus-country outside. Sun. Sky. Really pretty.

But. I need distraction. Kottbusser Tor. I can't get to Kottbusser Tor as quickly as I used to anymore. Ever since I was sent away to the countryside to a boarding school for the daughters of well-to-do parents, Kottbusser Tor is pretty far away for a seventeen-year-old. But I'd get there somehow, if I wanted to. Good that I don't want to. Only my dreams still want it. And Alice. But now it's daytime. A-levels, I hammer into my skull. You want to do your A-levels, stupid cow. And then explore the universe. You want to go to India and offer up incense sticks in Kali temples. You want that for Tara. India first and then the world. I perch on the window sill with my

netbook on my knee. The sun warms my face. I check my e-mails. My inbox is not exactly overflowing. But why would it? Most of my friends don't give a crap whether anyone is thinking of them. Most of my friends aren't friends. And they can't anyway because almost all of them have something like Alice.

I surf for a bit and am amazed by all the things people care about. And then I stick around on one of these fucked up You're-a-star-too-forums for spoilt little anorexic-bulimic girls and read the blog by Strawberry-Lips:

'Hi, all you sweeties out there. Do any of you have an idea how to get this worn-out hippie-heroin-chic look? Kisses, Strawberry-Lips.'

Hippie-heroin-chic look! And without really thinking about it, I write back:

'The best thing to do is just to take H. Snort it, or you can also shoot it up or smoke a foil. Then you take more and more and more and really let it hit, and then you've got everything you need: tired eyes, bluish lips, yellow skin, and the scabs will appear totally naturally once you start scratching. It's so easy, babe, to get the real authentic fucked up style. You can stick all your Barbie-make-up

shit somewhere else. This look is for life. Hippie-heroin-chic look! Go fuck yourself! Junk-girl.'

I press send and then I can't take it back, and I know that I am the biggest shit ever, and really, I did used to be such a nice girl.

That was a long time ago. Feels like ten thousand years ago. Alissa, the youngest daughter of Thoralf and Jasmin Johansson, architect-housewife child, the baby of the family, a product of natural contraception, watched and protected by a family of six successful, hard-working and pious adults. Alissa, the problem child. Alissa, the accident.

Although my childhood was lovely. Really. We had everything. A new car every two years, a big family holiday in the summer and skiing in the winter. And then there was the church community. It was great for children. Lots of kids. Never alone. Endless summer parties. Reddish-coloured Polaroid memories. Lifted up, sheltered and protected in the lap of Christ. As a child you don't analyze it all. As a child you're safe there.

All the trouble started when I entered puberty. Of course when it began I didn't know that adults called it that, no, when it began I was ten, ten like all ten-year-

olds, a child with no idea about anything. I was sitting on the toilet and just as I was going to pull my pants up I saw this spot. Wet, dark, red. Blood. I stopped and stared at the spot. Blood coming from down there couldn't be a good thing. When it started with Grandma that was pretty much it for her. It was already too late for an operation and a couple of weeks later we were all standing at the cemetery crying our eyes out.

All at once my legs became plasticine legs, elastic and incapable of standing up anymore. I held on tight to the cistern. Only ten and I already had cancer, and in a few weeks I would be dead. I asked myself why God wanted to let a ten-year-old die. It wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair. And then it occurred to me: I had eaten Pia's jelly animals. Pia, my eighteen-year-old sister, the only one of my four older siblings that still lived with my parents. My beloved, loyal, pretty, devout, extremely intelligent super-sister. Pia who was held up in front of Alissa every week by our parents as the highest standard of virtue.

'Alissa, follow your big sister's example,' my parents said, when I came home dishevelled, with grazed knees and torn trousers from playing with the boys. No idea why, but I've always like playing boys' games better. They somehow accepted me, although I'm small and

blonde and unfortunately not as physically strong as them. I'm tough and wiry, though, and that's also totally fine, in principle. I now believe that the difference between men and women is mostly an external one, anyway, and the rest is upbringing – and you can drop that.

'Pia has never cut her knees. Pia is a true lady.'

Of course not, I thought. And how would she? If you sit reading the whole day at home and never go anywhere except school and church, how can you injure yourself?

And pah, a lady! I didn't want to be a lady anyway. I thought pirates were cool, but not ladies. Ladies sat around in clothes that they couldn't move in, ladies went to seminars on etiquette so that they didn't scratch around on their plates with their cutlery and weren't stared at by the other guests, ladies were helplessness personified and that was how they controlled their rescuers, and, damn it, Ma was a lady, or something like it. And Pia was doing her best to be exactly the same. Pia, the mummy-clone. At that moment, I hated her. Why couldn't I have a totally normal sister, one who wasn't as hopelessly unattainable as Pia? Of course she herself didn't make any fuss about it. Quite the opposite! When she realized that my parents were reproaching me for not being like her or my other already grown-up siblings with

families of their own, she defended me straightaway, saying:

'Ah, leave her alone!'

Every other big sister would have played it differently, but not Pia. Pia rose above it, just like she rose above everything. And I loved her for it and at the same time hated her just a little bit more, because my Super-sister was so unbelievably amazing, that you couldn't even properly hate her for more than a couple of seconds, without immediately feeling terribly guilty and seeming even smaller and more inferior and meaner than you already felt anyway.

But to return to the jelly animals: it had been Pia's birthday three days earlier and she had been showered with presents. And me, I'd stood next to her wide-eyed and went away empty-handed. That was in principle okay, since in the end it was her birthday and not mine, but I was still kind of jealous and I knew that it wasn't right. Although at Julius's house all the siblings got a little something when it was his birthday, and vice versa. But my parents were of the opinion that a child should learn as soon as possible that sometimes there just isn't anything, and apart from that they thought that going around with Julius wasn't good for me, and only let me go occasionally and extremely grudgingly to his house. In

the end I consoled myself with the thought that I would be eleven in June, and that that wasn't too far off, and that Pia wouldn't get anything then.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Pia's birthday table and the next day, when she was still at school and I was already at home, I crept into her room and stared for a long time at the table where her presents were arranged as though on an altar. My heart was beating loudly. I had no reason to be in Pia's room. I listened to the noises in the house. Ma was vacuuming somewhere on the ground floor and otherwise there was no one at home, and I was far away up in the roof. Good. I was safe for now. I stroked Pia's things carefully with my fingers. The pink MP3 player, the cross made from rose quartz, the pile of books, the bunch of flowers, the soft-toy lamb, the bags of sweets. We only ever had real sweets on special occasions. At Christmas and Easter and for someone's birthday. Otherwise never.

'It's bad for your teeth and your figure,' my parents said.

Just sometimes, if Ma had had a good day, she would bring home biscuits or chocolate from one of the thousands of health food shops, which tasted like wholemeal bread and shoe polish.

And now here was a huge bag with chocolate, biscuits and jelly animals made with real sugar, totally unhealthy and really delicious. I loved jelly animals, and Pia obviously did too, as out of all the sweet stuff, only the bag with the jelly animals had been opened. I stuck my nose in the bag and breathed in the artificial smell. I traced along where Pia had ripped open the bag with my finger; it gaped like a screaming mouth. I just wanted one. Pia had so many. No one would ever notice.

The animals crowded together as my hand went into the bag, as though they wanted to avoid me and seek protection from one another. My fingers extended further and further and suddenly they got hold of one and tore it away from the big herd of jelly animals, and when I dared to open my eyes again, there was an orange-coloured tiger in the palm of my hand. I listened for the vacuum cleaner again, but Ma was still busy on the ground floor. My heart was still beating hard and loudly, but the tiger lay cool and comforting and artificially-orangey in my hand. I stuffed it into my mouth quickly and all at once I wanted more. A lot more. I had hardly chewed and swallowed the tiger before I stuffed my hand in the bag again. And again and again and again. Bloodthirsty Alissa. One more, and another and another, until finally the whole herd of jelly animals had been massacred and the bag-mouth

curled its strange opening accusingly in my direction. How much time had passed? I listened for the vacuum cleaner again. Everything seemed to be fine. Damn. Why had I gone and wiped out the whole bag? Ashamed, I crumpled it up and hid it in my trouser pocket. I tiptoed out of Pia's room and back into my own and was annoyed with myself.

Pia came home later that afternoon and I waited for her to ask me about the jelly animals. But she said nothing. Not a syllable about the missing bag. I watched her all day. But Pia was just the same as always. I decided to confess to her.

Tomorrow.

But the next day I had the feeling all day long that Pia was watching me out of the corners of her eyes and somehow seemed sad.

Now! Tell her, stupid cow!, I said to myself.

But I kept quiet. Somehow the words which I had used the night before to craft a really convincing speech had crept off somewhere and were not to be found. I felt kind of ill all day and slinked around listlessly and when Pia's distressed angelic gaze intercepted me again at teatime, I immediately went mad. I was so angry that I yelled at her out of nowhere: 'Stop your stupid gawking!'

My mother's fork fell out of her hand.

'Alissa!', she cried.

Good. Now Pia would tell all and that was good. Then there would be a bit of an argument and the thing would be over and done with.

But, as always, I hadn't reckoned with Pia, for Pia didn't say anything. Unlike Ma:

'You will apologize to Pia right now.'

Me: 'Never!', and I crossed my arms over my chest, and Pia: 'Oh, Ma, just leave her!'

That unbearable magnanimity yet again. I could have puked.

'Fine. If you won't apologize then go to your room right now, and think about your behaviour.' Ma stood up and cleared away my half-finished plate into the kitchen. I felt the tears of defiance shooting into my eyes and the horrible lump in my throat. But I stood up and went away and that was it. I had not apologized and Pia kept quiet with calm, insufferable forbearance.

And now, two days later, I was in a right mess. Thou shalt not steal. Seventh Commandment. I had transgressed against it and now I simply had to die. But I wouldn't back down now. Everything was screwed up anyway. With shaking hands I took off my pants, showered, stuffed the pants in my trouser pocket and went out. I wandered along Knaack Street for a bit and

casually dropped the telltale knickers into a rubbish bin. Then I retired to the park. Considering that I only had a very short time left to live, I was extremely calm. And for the first time Alissa Johansson doubted the existence of God. What sort of God set a stolen bag of jelly animals against a ten-year-old life?

In the following six days I was intensely preoccupied with death, or rather, with what I considered to be death. What I knew of death was limited to Grandma's more or less sudden departure two years ago. And my family had really kept everything from me. All I had gleaned was that Grandma was bleeding down below, two visits to the hospital, a grandmother who was getting paler and paler, and the funeral, a hole in the ground, a coffin with flowers and the assertion that she was now in Heaven and would soon be much better off. Perhaps I would soon be much better off, but really my life at the moment wasn't that bad. At least in principle. And besides, Grandma presumably hadn't even stolen anything.

And then, six days later, there was suddenly no more blood and I could hardly believe my luck and thought that perhaps God had given me a chance to straighten everything out again. And that day I went to Pia and

confessed everything. And Pia grabbed me and kissed me on the cheeks and seemed really happy. She gave me a bar of chocolate and I was seriously confused but at that moment I loved my big sister very dearly and thought I must be the happiest child in the world.

Alice sniggers. She sniggers at how unworldly I was and how naïve. She also sniggers about God, as Alice's God is a totally different one.

I hear myself laughing. Perhaps it's also Alice, or possibly both of us, and at the same time I long to go back ten thousand years, to when I was still Alissa. And only Alissa.

But then I started bleeding again. I was terrified again, but not as much as the first time. And this time I spared myself the disposal of pants in Berlin's public rubbish bins and just threw them into the wash with my other clothes and waited.

And I didn't have to wait long. The next day my mother came marching in with the pants in her hand like a trophy and a serious look on her face, which was almost funny.

'Alissa, darling?'

She stood in front of me and I immediately regretted having given up the public bin strategy. Things to do with the body were not exactly freely discussed in our house and now she was wagging the knickers around and I wished that the stupid things were on the moon, or even further away, and me along with them. She didn't need to force out any comforting words on my account, I knew the score. This God they were always talking about in church was not exactly a kindhearted one.

'We'll have to go shopping tomorrow.'

What sort of an announcement was that then? What was there to buy? My shroud, or what?, I thought.

'And we'll take Pia too,' my mother added.

'Pia????!!!', I said. 'What do we actually need to buy?'

'Child. You need a bra. Now that you've got your periods.'

Periods? – No way, or...?!, I thought and had to restrain myself from smacking my forehead with the palm of my hand. And why a bra? A bra for nothing.

'Aha, okay,' I mumbled and barricaded myself in the bathroom. I ripped off my clothes and examined every square centimeter of my body in front of the mirror.

How feminine can you actually be?, I asked myself. I had already wondered for a while about the new hair

growing in places where I'd never had any before. Cancer! God, how stupid! Irritably, I observed the triangle between my legs where a dark fuzz had formed, and my gaze travelled further upwards until it came to my breasts. There was a slight swelling there. A suggestion of hedgehogs' noses. Oh God, if it was already like this at ten, how big were they going to get? Damn. And all this when I'd always much rather have been a boy anyway, and wanted nothing to do with all that female bullshit...