

Translated excerpt

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***Away from there***

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Away from there

Kaija

1.

Kaija stares at the sign next to the school gate.

It says *New High School*. She sees the school building behind the gate, behind the school yard. It doesn't look new.

Kaija stands there and the others walk past her through the gate, they stand outside and chat, greet each other.

Look around to see if they know anybody.

Not Kaija. Kaija takes a deep breath, as if to start

something. As if taking a deep breath would give her courage.

New she thinks, you are not new, she thinks and means the school. I'm the new girl.

She tries to take another deep breath, then the bell rings and the first ones walk inside.

It's not eight o'clock yet, the bell is just a warning shot. She takes a few steps further inside.

Inside means the school area, means behind the gate.

She stops once again, under a chestnut tree that must have been planted, when the school really was new.

Kaija leans against the wall by the chestnut tree and watches the crowd move. First a couple of them, then a few more, stroll, hop and shuffle towards the entrances. All the synonyms for human motion run through her mind.

Kaija doesn't go. Thinks: I'm waiting. I'm lingering. I'm hanging in there.

The bell rings a second time.

Kaija realizes that she is clenching her fists. Her fingernails have left red crescent moons on her palms. She rubs her hands together, the marks stay.

Kaija starts walking while silently counting the steps to the school building, she walks through the door with the others who squeeze past her, keeps counting, keeps walking, up the stairs, gazes at the steps, has one hand on the banister. First floor.

Kaija walks along the corridor and finds the door to her new class.

The door is shut, others are waiting in the corridor.

A couple of them give each other a hug, others laugh, talk. Kaija leans against the wall a few feet away, and looks at her cell phone as if there's something there (there is nothing).

Then a man comes, he takes long steps on long legs, a bunch of keys jangling in one hand and a leather case in the other.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!” he shouts, as he unlocks the door, “Step inside, and let the fun begin!”

Somebody moans, others laugh, everybody heads into the room.

“You!” he says as Kaija squeezes past him. She pretends she doesn’t hear anything, slips into the classroom and looks for a seat. All the desks are facing the blackboard, the room is crowded. Next to the wall, at the back of the class, there’s a single desk by the window.

Kaija quickly sits down at it, then rummages in her bag for whatever, until everybody is seated. The seat next to her stays empty. When Kaija looks up, she sees: All the desks have been taken.

I’m the odd one out, she thinks.

The teacher stares at her. Kaija looks at her notepad.

Then he starts talking, loudly: “Mesdames et Messieurs, Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to another year at this hallowed institution of learning. May it be a good one. I hope you all had a nice vacation, yes?

Fine? Great. Well, it’s over now, it’s now time to educate yourselves.”

Game show host, thinks Kaija.

She squints at her schedule, Mr. Rehberge. Of course he doesn't introduce himself. They probably all know him already, thinks Kaija.

“And we have a new guest amongst us! You back there.” Heads swivel around to Kaija.

“Introduce yourself, who are you, where are you from, what brought you here?”

Kaija looks at her hands, then looks over the heads to the teacher. She clears her throat. A few of them giggle.

“Kaija,” she says.

“Louder,” he says.

“KAI-JA!” she shouts and some more of them start laughing.

“What's her name? Hi Ya?” says a voice in front of her, one of 32 others.

“And what else? Star sign, shoe size?” says the man at the front.

Kaija shakes her head and looks at the desktop.

The first of them swivel their heads back to the front.

Murmurs. “HEY!” shouts Mr. Rehberge, he means the

murmuring.

Kaija waits. When she looks back up again, she sees he is reading the roll book.

“Maybaum?” he says, looking at her.

She nods.

He looks, then asks: “Is your mother...?”

“Yes,” says Kaija.

“Okay.” He nods. He looks at her for another second, then closes the roll book loudly. “On with the text.”

“So wazzup with her mother?” one of the girls whispers loudly to her neighbor. She shrugs her shoulders.

“Lena! Quiet! We’re not starting all over again like last year! We made a deal!” shouts Mr. Rehberge.

Lena giggles. “Sorry!”

“Yeah, right, just play with my feelings.”

Kaija pinches a piece of skin on her forearm for a long time and stares straight ahead. Counts until the pain isn’t pain anymore.

So, how was your first day? her parents will ask.

Did you make any friends? Do you like your class? What are your teachers like? they'll ask.

Kaija stands in the corner of the schoolyard where nobody else is standing.

Did you introduce yourself to the others?

You have to do that, you know?

You'll definitely find somebody who likes the same things you do.

Nobody waited for Kaija after the first two classes were over. Nobody came up to her and said, hi, I'm Lalala, and you're new, come with me, I'll show you around.

Teach you the ins and outs. I'll show you where to stand during the break. Where you can buy something to eat.

I'll show you the best bathrooms that don't stink, where you don't have to wait in line. I'll introduce you to the others, and then I'll ask you what you enjoy doing, and tell you a bit about myself. And then we'll realize that we've got a lot in common.

How nice, thinks Kaija.

She opens the group chat, takes a photo of herself with



her bread, slaps a sticker on it, and sends it off.

Nobody replies.

Kaija writes *First day of school without any of you.*

A GIF with a small child crying.

She stares at the chat. Nobody goes online, no sign of anything, no likes.

She sighs. Then she puts her phone in her bag.

You have to show the others what a great gal you are, dad will say.

Uh huh, real great, thinks Kaija.

In front of her is something resembling a lawn, the remains of a lawn. A few dried up tufts surrounded by lots of dusty earth.

For sure you'll make a whole bunch of great friends here.

You'll get used to it here.

And then you'll never want to leave again.

Strangers are just friends you haven't met yet.

Kaija sighs again, then the bell rings for the next class.

Is it possible, Kaija thinks, she has math with Mikesch,

is it possible for a person to stay alone forever? That you don't meet anybody? That you just stay by yourself at school?

Is that possible? she thinks, she has German with a woman with short hair and black glasses who hasn't mentioned her name because the class already knows her.

Kaija has the schedule in her bag.

Does that make you invisible?

During the next break, Kaija sneaks over to the spot she'd found during the first break. The teacher's lounge is on the other side of the school building. She knows that.

Stop by during the break, if you need anything, Mom said.

Kaija looks to the left, there's the rest of the schoolyard, it's noisy. She looks to the right, there are the bikes.

Looks at her cell phone. Nothing.

Two more hours.

Kaija chews the inside of her cheek.

She outlines nine boxes five times on checkered paper and colors in the individual squares.

She counts the seconds.

She hears herself breathing and tries to be more quiet.

Hears that the last two classes have been canceled. Hears how happy the others are.

Hears things getting packed, everybody leaving, chatting. Laughing too.

Kaija puts all her things back in her bag, closes it and hangs it over her shoulder. She leaves, doesn't pass by anybody, because everybody has already left, including the teacher who was just sitting there, invisible, Kaija thinks, it goes faster than you think.

(...)

2. (...)

This used to be mom's room. Her windows.

Kaija empties her rucksack, puts the books on the windowsill behind the desk.

She takes the flattened cartons, clamps them between her upper body and arms, but still one of them slips. She

balances everything in the hallway, then very slowly she walks down, step by step, but halfway down the stairs first one, then all the cartons slip out of her arms and down the steps.

Kaija sits on the step panting.

She shoves the top carton with her foot until it lands at the bottom.

Stamps her foot loudly and looks around to see if anybody has heard her.

She gets up again, walks down the rest of the stairs and then takes the cartons down to the cellar.

Kaija is in the cellar for the first time. The light goes on and illuminates everything. Kaija breathes a sigh of relief. She leans the cartons against a wall, and at some point they just stay put. She looks around. Just a cellar that smells of dust and old cartons. Of time.

There's a key in a door, she pushes the handle down.

Open. Kaija thinks of old children's books. Adventures.

Gold and ghosts. She turns on the light in the next room.

Sees old skis, an air mattress, a tricycle. Preserved fruit

so pale she doesn't have clue what it is.

The next room is so cluttered that Kaija takes three steps backwards again.

Furniture. She wrinkles her nose at most of the pieces.

But then she finds a chest of drawers standing at the back wall, painted green and white.

She opens the drawers, jiggles them around.

Stops.

She runs into the garden to the workshop. "Can you help me carry it?" she asks dad.

He follows her into the cellar.

The chest of drawers is heavy, but it is lighter without the drawers, and now Kaija has a new piece of furniture.

As she stands in the room, she feels dirty and sweaty.

Even so. Dad nods and goes back into the garden.

Kaija fetches a bucket of warm dishwater, a rag, and then cleans the dresser. It smells musty. Old. Like something forgotten. Like a cellar.

She sits on the floor in front of the dresser, then skips down the stairs, out onto the terrace, and cuts as many

sprigs of lavender as she can. She puts the lavender into single socks that lost their partners. She puts everything away in her dresser, then places two pictures on top of the dresser and suddenly the room is new.

Sits on the bed facing the chest of drawers and suddenly realizes that she's smiling.

4 (...)

At some point, dad shouts up to her that food's ready.

Kaija sneaks down the stairs and checks if mom is back home. Then she goes into the kitchen.

Dad is at the stove, mom is outside on the terrace and stretches her arms up towards the sky. Then she bends her upper body forward. Kaija walks onto the patio and sits down at the garden table.

"The golden child," says mom upside down.

"That's me," says Kaija.

Mom squats and puts her hands together in front of her chest.

“Am I a bad mother because I didn’t ask how you’re doing and how your week was?”

“Am I a bad child because I didn’t ask how you’re doing and how your week was?”

“Don’t be silly.” Mom stretches one leg out to the side.

“I’m the parent thingamajig. You just have to be the kid thingamajig. Child thingamajigs only have to experience things.

And then the parent thingamajig asks about them. And listens to everything.”

“I see,” says Kaija.

“Because we parent thingamajigs don’t experience anything ourselves. And if we do, it’s way too boring.

Totally unspectacular.” Mom lifts her butt to the side and stretches out her other leg. She grimaces.

“So you wouldn’t recommend becoming a grown-up?” asks Kaija, looking inside where dad is setting the table.

“One out of ten stars. Do not recommend. Would not buy again.” Mom is hanging upside down again with her legs spread wide apart.

“Driving’s fun,” says Kaija.

“Not at all, it stinks, it’s dirty, it’s dangerous and it’s bad for the environment.”

Kaija nods and looks into the garden and says: “Vote.”

“Harrumph,” says mom.

“Alcohol?” asks Kaija.

“Meh,” says mom.

“Okay, then I’ll just stay a kid thingamajig.”

“Me too,” says mom. And sits on her butt, puts the soles of her feet together, and presses her knees to the floor.

Mom is a butterfly and leans her torso over her legs.

“Time to eat,” says dad from the patio door.