



## **We're Moving Away**

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chapter book, fiction

Age: 7+

*# Humour, moving, family, everyday situations, living in a foreign country, school, relationships*

Eight-year-old Luise couldn't be more satisfied with her life. She attends a totally normal school with totally normal classmates and an incredibly normal teacher. What's more, Luise gets to sit next to her best friend Arabella, with whom she has amazing times drawing cool space-dog comics or doing other things to pass the time. But when her mom and dad, who up to that point had also seemed nearly normal, decide one day – without almost zero discussion – to pick up and move to Germany, the girl thinks they must be off their rockers. For let's be honest: what kind of a reasonable person would move their whole family to a country where they don't speak a word of the language, all because of a job?! How is Luise supposed to get by and find new friends? And what will become of her friendship with Arabella?

The book addresses various pressing issues in contemporary society, but at its core, it manages to be bright and encouraging. It instigates children to accept others' differences and to embrace themselves as they are. The author portrays that everyone can occasionally stumble, but the willingness to learn from such moments helps one move forward in life. Being prepared for mistakes and seeing them as a natural part of life allows for understanding and kindness towards not only for oneself but also for others.

- Book of the month, children's literature blog



## Reading sample

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### 1.

My name is Luise. I'm eight years old. My mom and dad are just like the parents of most kids my age. They'd have been more than enough for me, but a couple of years ago, they decided that baby Rudolf could join us, too. Nobody asked me, as usual. I'd definitely have said no. Rudolf has been a constant pain almost since he was born, minus a couple times when he flashed a really cute smile and hugged me tight. Still, he's annoying for the most part. Mom and dad go crazy over every little thing he does: Oh, Rudolf ate boiled beets! Oh-ho – Rudolf started walking! Oy-oy – Rudolf said 'mommy'!

I'm always walking around, and I yell "mommy" at least a dozen times a day, not that anybody compliments me for it! That baby of ours is totally unnecessary and pointless! And what's more, he hogs all their attention. So, I'm going to stop talking about him and turn the subject back to me.

I'm a totally average girl overall. I don't really stand out for my appearance, except for my hair. It's really dark and impossible to tame, as Mom always says. Dad has puffy pitch-black hair, too; he's the one I got it from.

Nobody else in class has hair like me, not even in my entire school! In preschool, my teachers would sometimes poke their big fingers into my hair and gasp, saying I had such wonderful, puffy curls. Mom's friends weren't any better: they constantly stroked my head and braided my hair into pigtails. Fortunately, no one sticks their chubby fingers into my hair anymore, and I'm really glad it stopped. People started treating me like a normal human being as soon as I started going to school. Now, Rudolf has to put up with all that baby stuff, and believe me – he deserves it!

I guess I haven't had a chance yet to say that I'm in second grade and going into third soon. My class is totally normal. Sure, we've got a few annoying bullies. Sven and Lauri, for instance, who occasionally swipe other kids' pencil cases and hide them. Or stick chewed-up gum on the seat of your

chair – that prank's especially annoying. Luckily, there's also a girl in my class named Arabella, and she's my best friend. Arabella can draw really well and has two dogs at home. Her dad is always sailing around the world and sends her postcards from all kinds of different places. Whenever he comes home, he brings tiny elephant figurines from faraway lands. Arabella's home is already full of them.

In addition to the rest of my totally normal classmates, our homeroom teacher is totally normal, too. Basically, if you keep a close eye on your pencil case and make sure you don't sit on gum, then being at school can be a pretty good time.

I've got three duties on top of going to school. Firstly, because my dad worked very hard to convince me, I go to a robot-building class once a week. Secondly, because my mom worked very hard to convince me, I take saxophone lessons at the music school. Mom's a huge fan of jazz music.

As if those weren't enough, I have to go to yoga class every Saturday morning. But do think that was my own idea and request? No, definitely not! It's only because my mom is a kids' yoga teacher and that somehow means I have to be a yoga student, too. Mom always tries to persuade me by saying it's "our" time together, "mommy-daughter" time. The way I see it, there are lots of other mommies and kids there, too, so you can hardly count it as special time for my mom and me. My kind of mommy-daughter time would be her taking me out for ice cream



and leaving Rudolf at home with Dad. But as always, I'm not given an inch of room to argue. Believe me, I've tried! Oh, right, and the cherry on the cake is that Mom says yoga will help me to better deal with my temperamental nature and find peace in stressful situations. I doubt it.

If they were to exchange Rudolf for a dog, a cocker spaniel or a dachshund, for example, then life wouldn't be too bad. Any kind of dog would do! The breed doesn't matter too much, so long as it doesn't bite! By the way, Rudolf bit me one time! For real! Mom doesn't believe me because Rudolf didn't even have any teeth when it happened, but I know what he did. When Rudolf gets bigger and learns how to listen and speak, then we'll set things straight about who can bite whom and how much in this household.

## 2.

One Sunday morning, usually known as the Oh-Nooo-Mom's-Healthy-Pancakes-Morning!, Dad made us totally normal, greasy pancakes with white flour. I could immediately tell something was wrong: in our home, you only got sweet things when it was somebody's birthday or there was bitter news coming that my parents tried to make easier to swallow with pancakes and strawberry jam.

"Luise, honey dear," Mom said as she stirred her green smoothie. "We've got an idea. Or... well... some news."

There you have it. Just as I suspected – I bet they were going to tell me we'd be getting another Rudolf or that I'd have to go to robotics camp again. It couldn't be anything good. Last summer, there wasn't a single other girl at robotics camp and the boys only ever talked about computer games. I couldn't care less about the subject, because I'd never heard of their games before. What's more, they were all total electronics freaks. I'm certainly not, my dad is. Next time, I'll send Dad to camp, or they should send Rudolf! Robotics club itself is fine, and there are two other girls who go. But I'm never going to that camp again!

"Luise, darling, are you listening?" Dad asked, interrupting my train of thought. He spoke in English,

not in Estonian, because Dad speaks in English all the time. Whether we speak in Estonian or in English makes no difference to my brain – one's just my dad's language and the other is my mom's. I understand both. That's the way it's always been, and there's nothing weird about it. One set of my grandparents speaks in English all the time, too. They're my dad's mom and dad. They live in England and come to visit us sometimes, and we go to visit them sometimes, too.

Dad tries to blabber in Estonian with the neighbors and Mom's friends every once in a while, but they always just reply to him in English. Rudolf can already understand both languages, too, and can blabber in either one. Mom says I used to be a blabbermouth like him as well. I don't believe her.

"Luise, here's the thing. What we wanted to talk to you about is that Dad got a job in Germany, in Freiburg, and it starts this autumn," Mom continued.

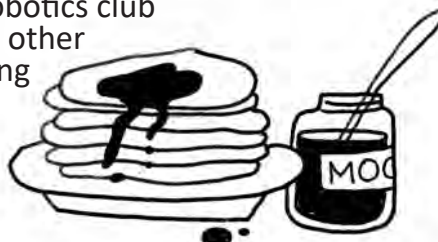
"Oh, wow," I said. I reckoned he'd start taking an airplane to go to work, kind of like when he went on his occasional work trips.

"That means our whole family is going to be moving to Freiburg," Dad added as he served me another pancake.

"What do you mean?" I asked, flabbergasted. "That's your work. My friends and my school are here. You can just go and work there and come home afterward like you always do." I always have to explain everything to them.

"Well, it's not really something you can get done in a jiffy. It's a real job, a several-year project. You see, they're building a smart neighborhood in Freiburg right now. All the houses there are going to be smart, energy-saving.

It's my dream





job, like they came up with it just for me. It's so innovative – I can do so much and it's all fascinating and new! We can test out a smart house by living in it ourselves and programming it to fit our needs."

Dad kept going on and on. Ugh, how he loves technology and saving the world! As soon as anyone mentions artificial intelligence, solar energy, or wind turbines, his eyes light up. Mom says Dad's a man of the future. He's still just a little boy of the future right now, I'd say.

I find all those things insanely boring. Saving the world isn't boring, though, and I do it a little myself, like when I put the caps back on my markers so they last longer and always finish my dessert so it doesn't go to waste. But whenever the conversation turns to technology, I start to lose interest.

"We won't be moving away forever. Just for a couple of years, then we'll come back," Mom reassured me, stroking my head. "I'm sure it'll be wonderful there. I saw online that there are mountains and rivers and really, really beautiful nature."

"I don't care about some dumb mountains and rivers!" I said, pushing my plate of pancakes away. "Did you guys not plan to ask whether or not I wanted to move away? I've got everything I want right here! Arabella is here, my whole class is here, my room is here, my things are here!"

"That's true, but we can take all your things with us. There will be other kids your age there, a new class waiting, and a new home to boot," Dad explained. "And you know, Germany's chock full of all sorts of great things: zoos, amusement parks, pools, Legolands, and I'm sure something else..." Dad rattled off, scratching the back of his neck.

"Two years is a really long time! Rudolf is two years old, and I feel like he's been living with us for a hundred years already," I argued.

"Well, what if you got that pet you've been dying to have for so long?" Mom asked slyly.

"Really!? Really!? Do you mean I can get a dog, or maybe even a pony!?" I shrieked, wrapping my arms around Mom's neck in joy.

"We were thinking something more along the lines of a hamster or a turtle..." Dad explained. "They're easier to take along on trips or leave at a neighbor's place to take care of whenever we come back

to Estonia for Christmas or go traveling somewhere."

"A turtle?! Ugh! They're not even soft or furry... Arabella has two dogs. Can't I at least have one, even just a tiny dog?"

"One of my colleagues has snails. Would you like a few of those?" Dad offered. And he was completely serious about it!

"You've both gone totally crazy!" I yelled and stormed off to my room.

So what that I have to share the room with Rudolf – I still call it mine.

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## 6.

Just like that, summer was halfway over, and it came time for us to move away.

Dad flew ahead to get everything ready for our arrival. I, of course, hoped he'd gone early to get me a surprise dog and would bring it to the airport to meet us. But just like always, everything went totally different from how I'd imagined it.

Dad showed up at the airport all alone, without even a single dog hair in sight.

My parents chatted about our flight and watched the baggage carousel for our luggage. I felt super drowsy. I'd slept through the whole flight and couldn't tell whether it was all a dream, or we'd actually arrived.

"Oh, it's so exciting – you won't even believe it! We've got a total dream house!" Dad gushed as he guided us from the airport to the tram stop.

We rode for several stops, then transferred to a bus, then walked for quite a long time until we finally came to the top of a hill. In the valley below us was a heap of houses. Well, not a heap, per say, but all laid out in nice long rows. It looked like a bar of chocolate: little boxes, all exactly the same size and neatly lined up.

"This is the smart-house village!" Dad cheerfully exclaimed. "Our new home!"

Mom looked a little hesitant. "Which one is our house?" she asked. "They're all identical cubes."

"It's easy: from this direction, our house is in the third row, fourth on the left. No, fifth. Ah, you'll get a clearer picture when we get closer!" Dad said as he picked up the pace, nearly jogging down the hill with the big suitcase rumbling behind him.

Mom struggled with Rudolf's stroller while I tried to tame my own suitcase, which was trying to roll away at a breakneck speed and pull me along with it.

We careened down the hill to the field of little houses. Down in the valley, they no longer looked like tiny boxes, but full-scale buildings. Some were missing a roof, others were missing windows. Even so, they were all similar white cubes. Construction workers in yellow helmets bustled around, working away like busy bees.

"Alright, now we go down the third street and turn left. The whole neighborhood is still under construction, they haven't had time to put up street signs or house numbers yet. It'll all be ready soon – a work in progress!" Dad said happily as he walked even faster.

We could barely keep up. Once we reached the house, Dad started tapping on a black screen next to the door. It looked like a smart phone glued to the wall.

"Beep-beep-beeeeeep!" went the screen.

"Huh, what's wrong with it? Why won't it let us in?" Dad mumbled, poking at the screen again.

"Beep-beep-beeeeeep!" it repeated.

"Do I have to restart it again?" Dad sighed.

"Was-da-bla-bla...!!!" someone shouted (or at least something like it) from inside. The shouting was in German, but that's more or less what it sounded like to me: "Was-da-bla-bla...!!!"

Dad took a giant leap away from the door.

It swung open and out stepped a woman with long red hair. She explained something and smiled. Dad explained something back and smiled. Mom and I couldn't understand a word they said. The woman closed the door again and as it was swinging shut, she called out: "Tschüs!"

"That's our neighbor, Tina. Our house is actually the fifth on the left, not the fourth," Dad said, nodding towards the next house down the block.

The fifth house on the left looked like the identical twin of the fourth house on the left. There weren't any signs or numbers on it, either. Dad tapped on the identical screen next to the door and something – I couldn't tell whether the door, the house, or the screen – exclaimed, "Willkommen!" Click! The door swung open, and we moved into our new house.

When we stepped inside, the door swung closed again behind us, all on its own. Click!



Mom carried Rudolf into the kitchen to look around while Dad studied some gadget on the wall. I ran straight upstairs because I knew that my bedroom was on the second floor. My very own room – that’s what Dad had promised.

I started opening doors excitedly: a bathroom, a room with a crib (Rudolf’s, I supposed), then a third door, and there it was: my bedroom! A bed just my size, a desk, and my old familiar toys that had been delivered in a moving truck. My room!!! No more crib! I looked out the window. Our street: trees, bushes, a few parked cars, and a row of little houses that were the spitting image of our own. I looked around my room again and clapped in delight. The blinds started going down as soon as I did. I clapped again and they stopped.

Incredible! So that’s what a “smart home” meant!

Dad clearly hadn’t gotten us a dog. I supposed he’d been busy, though, and decided to give him another week before I started asking when it would arrive.

Dad came upstairs and peeked into my room. “How do you like our new home?” he asked.

“It’s pretty cool. I figured out the blinds go up and down when you clap.”

“Uh-huh. Did you already try knocking on the wall, too?” he asked slyly.

“Not yet, but I will now!”

I mustered up all my strength and punched the wall as hard as I could. There was a loud bang, and some plaster fell to the floor. My knuckles hurt so bad I wanted to scream, but I didn’t want to in front of my dad.

“Wowza!” he exclaimed. “You’re supposed to knock, not knock the wall down!”

I felt pretty peeved. My hand hurt like crazy and here he was, worrying about the wall!

“Try a little more softly this time. Knock gently and see what happens.”

I did as he said, knocking lightly. A robotic voice immediately reported: “The time is 9:15 pm, indoor temperature is 24 degrees Celsius. Outdoor temperature is 24 degrees Celsius.”

“Amazing!” Dad declared and waited for me to say something.

“Uh, mm-hm. Yeah, I guess.” I didn’t actually care what time it was or what the temperature was inside or outside.

I zipped open my suitcase and pulled out my teddy bear. The drawing Arabella gave me on our last day in Estonia fell out, too. It was a little picture of a dog – our comic book’s hero Bam, who was flying to a strange new planet.

“Alright, enjoy unpacking. I’m going to go figure out how to get the rooms a little cooler.”

I stroked my knuckles, which still ached a little, then flopped onto my bed and stared at the empty walls and ceiling. A second later, I jumped up again. I got my pencil case from my suitcase, pulled out a roll of tape, and used it to hang Arabella’s drawing over the spot where I’d cracked the plaster a little. If Arabella’s family collected elephants, then I was going to start collecting pictures of dogs and would tape them all up until I finally got a real one!

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## 9.

And then, the dreadful moment arrived: the first day at my new school.

“Here, give your teacher these flowers,” Mom said, shoving a bouquet into my arms.

“But I don’t even know which teacher is mine!”

“I’m sure you’ll recognize her. She’ll be at the front of your classroom – Mrs. Müller,” Mom said.

None of my family had any idea what the first day of school would be like, whether there’d be actual classes or something else. Mom recommended that I haul absolutely every imaginable school material along: notebooks, folders, pencils, and art supplies. Just in case.

Dad walked me to school, and we decided to find my new classroom together. Number 3B was on the second floor to the right.

He ushered me through the door, said hello to the teacher, told her my name, and then disappeared with a brisk wave goodbye.

There I stood at the front of the classroom. Mrs. Müller stood up cheerfully at her desk and said something I couldn’t understand. From that moment onward, those kinds of situations came up pretty frequently in life.

I looked down and remembered the



bouquet of flowers in my hand.

"Bitte!" I said proudly (German for "here!") and held them out to our teacher.

She looked surprised, as if she'd never seen flowers before, but accepted them with a big smile and led me to the third desk by the window, next to a girl with pigtails. I recognized her as one of the kids who'd been by the fountain the day before.

"Hallo," I said to her, and she replied with the same: "Hallo."

The teacher looked at me and said something. Everyone else then turned to stare in my direction. She didn't seem to be asking anything, but just talking about me. And I still couldn't understand a thing. It felt like someone talking about you behind your back but having no idea what they're saying. My shoulders started to quiver. I could only pick out a few familiar words: Estland, English, Willkommen.

When she finished, the whole class yelled in unison: "Willkommen, Luise!"

I wanted to sink through the floor in embarrassment. How should I reply?

"Danke!" I whispered softly.



Next, every student took turns saying something. The teacher addressed me in perfect English: "Luise, how was your summer? What did you do? Please tell us briefly." I was amazed – she spoke English! How cool!"

"I moved here," I replied in English. I could have talked about how I got my very own bedroom and attended dance classes with Arabella at the beginning of summer, but it was like all the memories had been scrubbed from my brain. I was so terrified that getting those three words out was hard enough.

The teacher went on for a long time in German about who-knows-what. Occasionally, she asked the whole class a question and some kids raised their hands. Sometimes, the whole class laughed. I sat frozen like a stone statue. I didn't know when to raise my hand or laugh. Mrs. Müller handed out some papers and our schedule.

After everyone else ran out of the room at the end of class, the only summary our teacher gave me was: "There won't be any lessons this week. We'll learn a couple of songs that we'll perform for the first-grade students. You'll have a chance to get to know your classmates and then starting next Monday, we'll get down to the real learning!"

Well, that was a relief, I thought. For the whole last hour, I'd been peeking out of the corner at my eye at my new classmates. In addition to Elsa, there were a couple other kids from the group that had been by the fountain: the black-haired girl and the boy wearing the football jersey. I wondered – had they noticed me there and recognized me now, too?

When I got back to our house and opened the door, the house shouted: "Welcome home, Luise!"

Ugh. Dad had been programming again and now, the house was greeting us all by name. There was no hope of ever creeping home and hiding under a blanket for most of the day anymore.

"Hey, honey! How was school? What did you find out? What did you all do? Were there any lessons?" Mom asked in a single breath.

I dropped my backpack in the corner of the entryway. "First of all. Nobody else was dressed up nice. I looked like a clown in my white knee socks with tassels, my white blouse, and my black skirt!" I sucked a full

breath of air into my lungs and continued: "Second of all. Nobody else brought the teacher flowers, I was the only one. She didn't even have a vase to put them in!"

I handed Mom the papers our teacher had passed out because I really had nothing better to do with them: each was covered in outlandishly long German words.

"Oh, right. There's no lessons this week, so you can wait a while with my lunchbox, too," I said, handing it back to her.

The next four days were identical in the sense that I still couldn't really understand anything that was being said. Our class met and sang three songs in preparation for the first-graders' welcoming ceremony. It's very hard to memorize something when you have no idea what it means or what you're even singing. I could recite most of the lyrics by the second day, but I still had to sound them out slowly. There were movements that went with the songs, swinging our arms from side to side, which made it almost impossible to read the words on paper at the same time.

One day during recess, my new desk mate, the girl with the pigtails, handed me a pink envelope. I opened it and found a homemade card with a picture of a kitten on one side and the word *Willkommen!* on the other. I already knew that that meant: "Welcome!"

"*Ich bin Elsa,*" said the girl with the pigtails, grinning broadly. She added something else that I couldn't understand. Later, I taped the card up on my bedroom wall next to Arabella's dog drawing.

"*Danke,*" I replied. "*Ich bin Luise,*" I introduced myself, even though she already knew my name.

I realized that I'd been thanking everybody a lot lately. There just wasn't much else that I knew how to say.

Luckily, the first week of real school was focused on athletics!

We played hours and hours of zombie tag. How it worked was you had to tag somebody who would then turn into a zombie and try to catch other kids. What made it hilarious was that at some point, nobody could tell who was a zombie and who wasn't anymore – you just had to run from everybody else like crazy. I was really good at the game. For real! I never trusted anybody (you couldn't tell who might be a

zombie!) and just sprinted back and forth across the school yard. I hid behind bushes and took big leaps over puddles. To my surprise, there were other kids who could run super fast as well.

Before long, everyone knew that I was as speedy as an arrow! As soon as we played our first competitive game, I was picked first for a team. Imagine that! They wanted me, a totally new kid who had no idea what anyone was saying, to play on their team! Amazing! My teammates were constantly arguing and debating amongst themselves, but I only focused on the game because that's all I could understand, anyway. By the end of the week, however, I could understand a few important words like "faster", "throw it here", "catch", "shut up", "good job", "goal", "let's keep playing", "one more time", "stop", "team", "rules", "once", "pause", "your fault", "ready", "get set", and "go"!

One day after an exhausting game of tag, our teacher Frau Müller (that's what everybody calls her: Mrs. Müller), walked up to me with a girl about my age at her side.

"Luise, Sanna. Sanna, Luise," she introduced us, gesturing back and forth. "Sanna kommt aus Finnland, Luise kommt aus Estland. Viel Spaß!" Then, she walked away.

Basically, she figured that Sanna and I could understand each other because Sanna speaks Finnish and I speak Estonian. I guess she heard somewhere that our languages are alike.

Sanna and I exchanged questioning looks.

"Tere!" I said to her. I have no idea how to say "hi" in Finnish.

"Hei!" Sanna replied with a shy smile.

That's all we could think of to say to each other.

Luckily, Elsa walked up and invited us both to play hide-and-seek. Sanna was a whiz at the game, because she completely disappeared for the rest of the day.

On Friday, we performed our three songs for the first graders. I made some mistakes, of course, but it wasn't a problem when we all sang together. I opened and closed my lips to the rhythm of the words like a fish, not actually daring to sing. I'd memorized the movements, at least, and swung my arms as hard as I could. I accidentally kicked Miika in the back of the



knee and he yelled out in pain. Frau Müller shot us a dirty look but kept playing the piano accompaniment and the song went on as if nothing had happened. Nothing changed between me and Miika after that, as we'd never spoken to each other before, either.

I'd survived my first week of school and nothing worse could happen.

## 10.

Do you remember when I said that nothing worse could happen? Well, it could.

The next day of school, meaning the first real school day, turned out to be the most awful day of my entire life!

That same morning began with our "smart" house blaring a wakeup alarm an hour early. Deafening birdsong started blasting in every room. Dad got up and rushed to turn off the house's control system. He was barefoot and when his feet slapped against the floor, the house thought it sounded like clapping, which made the blinds start rolling up and down and up and down. It was all a terrible racket.

"I accidentally set the house to wake us up according to Estonian time, but we're an hour behind here," Dad yelled out in a semi-whisper. "I'm going to turn the whole house off. Try to sleep a little longer, there's time!"

Obviously, it was impossible to fall back asleep after a show like that. All I could think about was my rising terror of the first day of school. The blinds had gone all the way up and the sun was shining directly into my eye. I clapped, but the whole house was shut off, so the blinds stayed right where they would and couldn't even be pulled down manually.

I got up and pulled some clothes out of the closet. I'd noticed that all the girls in class wore dresses or skirts. Even though I preferred to wear pants, I took out a dress, reckoning it was a good idea to try and stay as similar to the others as I could for now.

"Gosh darn it, nothing's working anymore! Not the electric kettle or the stove!" Mom sighed as she pushed all kinds of buttons in the kitchen.

I crept past her, grabbed a banana and my lunchbox, and headed out with loads of time to spare before class began. I'd already learned where school was, so I decided to walk there alone that day. It was drizzling outside.

I got to the schoolyard super early, hoping I could read comics in the hallway before class, but when I pulled on the main door, it wouldn't budge. The rain showed no sign of stopping. There was nowhere to go for cover. A few scraggly trees grew in front of the building, but they were so tiny that I could've shielded them from the rain instead.

Finally, the school's director, Frau-somebody, arrived... She came up to me and said something in German, but I honestly couldn't understand a thing. The director could've at least used a word or two that I'd learned last week! I'd have had no problem understanding a color, a number, an order given in a game, or even a day of the week. But she didn't use any of those and not one word was familiar. I continued standing there, frozen. I didn't nod, didn't shake my head, didn't even smile. I just stared at the ground in front of me, embarrassed. Frau Director repeated something, this time more loudly. Why would she think I couldn't hear?! She was standing right in front of me! I gathered up my courage and squeaked, in English: "I can't understand you! I don't speak German!" Frau Director smiled, nodded, and beckoned for me to come with her around the building. Only then did I realize I'd been standing at the wrong door! Now, I found myself at the open front door, which looked exactly like the door at the back of the building. I suppose you're wondering: how could I have known, and how did all the other students already know to use a different door? It turned out that the papers the teacher passed out on the first day of school were pretty important. That's how I should've found out. Unfortunately, that knowledge was of no use to me now. Now, I had to get to class as fast as I could while staying as unnoticeable as possible.

When I entered the classroom, I looked like a wet cat. Water was dripping from my hair.

Our teacher clapped her hands together in shock. I'd have been so happy if it had made all the blinds go down and turned the room pitch black. I shuffled to my seat. Miika, one of the boys who sits behind me, laughed loudly and said something in German. As it turned out, I'd been leaning against the outside of the building and the back of my green dress was white with plaster.

Luckily, nobody but Miika and his desk mate laughed. Frau Müller spoke a couple of sharp words to them and the boys fell silent. I could still feel their eyes on the back of my neck. All I could do was sit there in my soaking dress, blushing. Elsa flashed me a sympathetic and well-meaning smile. I glanced at her notebook. Elsa, 3B, Mathematik. Oh, right. Mathematics.

I could barely count from one to ten in German, how on earth was I going to get by in this lesson?

Luckily, Frau Müller passed out worksheets and told us to work independently. What a relief that numbers are the same in both languages!

I focused on the math problems until I noticed that Elsa kept bumping me with her elbow. And I kept accidentally bumping her back. What was going on?

It turned out that Elsa is left-handed. I, of course, am right-handed. The result was us incessantly knocking our elbows together – her left with my right. We both giggled when we realized what was happening. It was nice to laugh; I hadn't in such a long time. Frau Müller looked up and scolded us. Well, to be fair, I don't really know what she said. Elsa hunched back over her worksheet and focused on solving the arithmetic problems. I did the same. Elsa's pretty neat, I thought to myself. I was lucky to end up sitting next to her. From then on, we tried to angle our elbows away from each other.

The math problems were easy: addition and subtraction with carries. I was pretty average at math and hadn't stood out much at my last school. Whenever I did make a mistake, it was usually from being careless, as my teacher said.

At home, Mom was always amazed by how well I could divide absolutely any number by two. For instance, if there were five strawberries, then they could be perfectly divided in half: three for me and two for Rudolf. If there were seven cabbage patties, then two for me and five for Rudolf. In my world, there wasn't anything that couldn't be divided by two.

I finished my worksheet at the same time as everyone else and felt like the day might still turn out to be more or less normal. Class ended and I'd managed to survive. Even my clothes were slowly starting to dry. Elsa smiled at me and said, "Lecka, Frühstückszeit!"

She rummaged through her backpack



and pulled out her lunchbox.

Snack time. I took mine out, too. The teacher turned on talk radio to play in the background. I opened my lunchbox. It contained dates, tomatoes, and two wrapped bars with a picture of a dog on them. Elsa, who had just opened her own lunchbox, stared at mine, aghast. She slammed mine shut with a click!

"Nein, nein, nein," she whispered.

What had I done wrong this time?

I peered over at Elsa's lunchbox. It contained a sandwich sliced into two triangles.

Elsa kept her hand clamped over the lid of my lunchbox and peeked back at the boys behind us, as if trying to hide something from them.

Then, she whispered something long and complicated to me. Oh, how I wished I could've understood what she was saying! There was only one word that I could recognize: Hund, "dog".

Had Mom really packed me a couple of dog treats?

Elsa took one of her sandwich slices and handed it to me. I shrugged, thanked her, and bit into it. I was starving. Quickly, I stashed my own lunchbox in my backpack. Why did these things always have to happen to me?

I focused on the voices on the radio, trying to think about something else. It was my second week at school, and I still couldn't understand much German. I looked around the classroom. Everyone was munching on their snacks and listening attentively. Every now and then, they'd all laugh in unison, even the boys in the back row. I felt like an alien from another planet. It reminded me of Arabella's drawing of our space-travelling dog.

Suddenly, I missed her like crazy. It was still summer vacation in Estonia and school wouldn't start until next week. Arabella was probably playing with Sofia, maybe even starting work on a new comic strip. A tear rolled down my cheek and splashed on the desk. Elsa noticed. I quickly wiped it away and turned to stare out the window.

When I looked back at my desk, I found a tiny picture of a kitty and a heart that Elsa had drawn for me. The kitty was gorgeous. I said "Danke" again and slipped it into my folder. I guess Elsa really likes to draw cats.

Snack time ended and we packed our things. When I stood up, the boys behind me started laughing loudly again.

I glanced over my shoulder. Although the back of my dress was more or less dry, there was a big wet spot on my bottom as if I'd peed my pants. How awful! I felt like sinking through the floor in shame!

Elsa glared at the boys and said, "Hhhh, Miika und Bennet!"

Another girl stepped up, handed me her sweatshirt, and motioned for me to tie it around my waist.

Elsa introduced her. "Heidi. Heidi ist nett."

I tried to commit the word to memory: nett. I'd definitely look it up when I got home.

