

Sample translation from

**Micha Lewinsky**

*Holly in Heaven*

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## THE LAST MORNING

“Good morning”, said Astrid. She bent over to kiss Holly on the tip of her nose. But Holly turned away. She liked these kisses. She liked it – a lot, even – when a strand of Astrid’s hair brushed across her face during the kiss and tickled her a little. She liked her mother’s hair, which was carrot-red, like her own. And she liked being tickled by it. But she also liked to sleep in.

Holly wasn’t particularly good at waking up. This was probably because she wasn’t good at falling asleep either. The two things are connected, after all. When Holly lay in bed at night, she would always remember another thousand things she needed to do. Then she would lie awake for ages, wiggling her toes and fretting that she was supposed to be asleep. When she finally did fall asleep, far too late, the morning seemed to come immediately. And then she would feel annoyed about having to get up.

Holly blinked. The bright light was coming from the open window. Outside, a pleasant spring sunshine shone. Birds were chirping. In the distance, she heard an engine, then a car door.

She knew exactly whose car it was: Uwe's. Uwe, again! Uwe, who was constantly coming to see Mama. Uwe, who had brought Holly colouring pencils, which were beautiful, but also dumb, because they were from Uwe. Uwe could bring her as many pencils in as many colours as he wanted. But he would never be as nice as her real father. Because Holly's real father was very nice. Even though he couldn't make paper aeroplanes. He was nicer than Uwe would ever be.

Astrid gave Holly a kiss on the nose. And then one on her neck. Her hair tickled the inside of Holly's ear.

"Stop it!" cried Holly. But when Astrid stopped, Holly wished she would kiss-tickle her for a little longer after all.

And then, from downstairs, came the sound of the front door opening.

"Hello-hello", called Uwe in his deep voice.

"Hello-hello," Timi's high voice answered immediately, from the bedroom next to Holly's.

She was annoyed to hear her brother say “hello-hello’ as though it were especially funny. Timi really was clueless.

“Hello-hello’, Astrid joined in. Holly groaned. Had they all gone mad?

She heard Timi laugh. He really had no idea what he was doing.

Holly had a plan. And Timi was about to ruin everything. She started to feel angrier and angrier. And just when she was at her angriest, the door flew open. And in came Uwe. With his bald head and the eyes her mother described as “warm”. Warm! As though some eyes were warmer than others. And, even if they were, what on earth would be the advantage of having warm eyes?

“Hello-hello” said Uwe. “Happy Sunday!”

He looked around Holly’s bedroom enthusiastically, as though he’d never been in there before. He admired the disco ball on the ceiling and the poster with the map of the world and the animals on it.

“Hello” sighed Holly. But just once. So that Uwe would notice how dumb she thought he was.

He didn’t notice a thing.

“So, are you pleased to see me?” he asked. Unbelievable. Holly didn’t say a word.

Uwe turned to Astrid. “And you, my darling?”

“Incredibly pleased”, said Astrid. And then she gave him a kiss. Holly quickly covered her eyes with her hands. But not quickly enough. She’d seen it. Her mother had kissed Uwe. Right in front of her, in her bedroom. There couldn’t be a worse start to a day.

“And now I’ll make breakfast” announced Uwe happily. “Do you like pancakes?”

Holly shook her head. Of course she liked pancakes. She loved pancakes. But not if they were made by him.

“Because I make the best pancakes in the world. No one word of a lie.”

He called out to the room next door: “Timi, do you like pancakes?”

“Yes!” answered Timi immediately. As though he’d been waiting the whole time for this question.

Holly jumped out of bed and, without another word, brushed past Uwe and into Timi’s room.

After Papa had moved out, Holly and Timi had been given their own rooms. At first, Holly had been pleased, thinking it was great to have a room to herself. But now she felt it might be better if Timi slept back in her room again. Then the other room would be empty and ready for her father, if he came back. But Mama didn't want Papa to come back. And Timi didn't want to leave his new room.

He was sitting on the floor in front of his bed, playing. He had built something with his Lego that looked like a mixture of a space station and a pirate ship. Holly closed the bedroom door behind her.

“You did it again” she hissed.

Timi shook his head. “I didn't do anything, honest.”

“You laughed. I heard you.”

“But not on purpose,” murmured Timi. “He said something funny.”

Holly was seething with anger. “Uwe! Is! Not! Funny!”

She had explained this to Timi so often, but he just didn't get it. "Mama likes funny men, she said that herself. And because Papa got more and more sad, now she's found herself another man to laugh with."

But Holly didn't want a different Papa. It was better to have a sad one than the wrong one. That's why she had to bring her mother to her senses. And that meant making her see how unfunny Uwe was. That's why no one was allowed to laugh at his jokes anymore.

"Otherwise Papa will never come back." Holly had explained this to Timi a thousand times. But it seemed he just didn't want to understand.

"Why do we have to make Uwe less funny?" he asked. "We could just try to make Papa funnier."

"Papa *is* funny", Holly stated.

"Do you really think so?"

"He's working on it."

Holly hoped that he was working on it, at least. Because she had given her father a joke book to learn off by heart. So that her mother would notice how funny he was.

“The pancakes are ready!” called Uwe from the kitchen.

Timi jumped up, tripping over his spaceman-pirate-station on his way to the door. Holly only just managed to hold him back.

“We’re not eating the pancakes,” she said firmly.

Timi looked at his sister in shock.

“If we eat his pancakes, it’s just as bad as laughing at his jokes,” explained Holly. “Mama will think Uwe’s the best pancake-maker too. And then she’ll stay with him.”

“But pancakes are my favourite food,” whined Timi.

“When Papa makes pancakes, you can eat as many of them as you want. Then you can be happy and laugh and everything.”

“But Papa doesn’t make pancakes.” Now Timi was properly distraught. “He just made fried eggs that one time, and they had a skin.”

Holly tried to placate her brother: “Papa’s learning to cook. And he’s learning to be funny. I promise.”

“I’ll have starved by then.”



Holly refused to be swayed. Her plan was set. At midday, they would go to the park together. There, they would run into their father, as though by chance. He would tell a joke from the joke book. Again, as though by chance. Mama would laugh. And because she liked funny men, the rest would fall into place. The only danger was Timi. He couldn't be allowed to thwart the plan.

“It's best if, from now on, you don't say anything unless I give you permission,” decided Holly. “Don't say anything, don't eat anything, and above all, don't laugh.’

“You always want to decide everything.”

“Otherwise it'll be your fault if Papa never comes back,’ said Holly. And of course, Timi didn't want that. He wanted to do everything right, to make his big sister proud of him. And so he promised to only laugh when Holly gave him permission.

But he had no way of knowing what an incredibly long time that would take.

## OUT OF LIFE

The pancakes on the table were golden-yellow. A tall pile of warm, fragrant, fat pancakes. The maple syrup trickled down over the sides and formed a glistening, sweet lake on the plate. Uwe looked incredibly proud of his work.

“So, how do they smell? Delicious?” he asked excitedly.

They smelt unbelievably fantastic.

“So-so,” said Holly. She tried not to look. It was easier that way.

Uwe lifted a pancake from the top of the pile using two forks. It gleamed in the morning sun that was streaming into the kitchen through the window. Holly held a hand over her plate so that Uwe couldn't put the pancake on it. Disappointed, he turned to Timi.

“And you?”

Timi looked at the steaming hot pancake. He wanted to tear it from Uwe's hand. But then Timi saw his sister and the threatening furrow between her brows. He silently shook his head and held a hand over his plate too.

Astrid was baffled. “I thought they were your favourite.”

Timi pressed his lips together.

“We don’t like pancakes. At least not for breakfast,” explained Holly.

“Exactly, we only like them later,” mumbled Timi.

“No, not later either. Not at all,” said Holly. “Because they’re sweet. And sweet stuff gives you cavities.”

Astrid looked at Holly in disbelief. Not because what Holly was saying was wrong, but because it was the opposite of what Holly normally said.

Actually, it was pretty much what Astrid herself usually said. That sugar gave you cavities. It was true, after all, from a strictly scientific perspective. But now, coming from Holly’s lips, it sounded wrong.

“So you two don’t like sweet things?” asked Uwe.

“Not for breakfast, anyway,” said Holly.

“And not from you,” mumbled Timi.

Uwe thought for a moment. Then, without saying another word, he went over to the kitchen cupboard and took out the tin of baking

ingredients. It didn't just contain flour, but sugar sprinkles and marzipan too. Holly knew the tin well. Sometimes, when Astrid was down in the basement, she would take it out and look to see if there was anything new inside. And if that something looked sweet, Holly checked to see if it tasted sweet too. And sometimes she checked to see if the sweet things right at the bottom of the tin were still good.

So far, no one had noticed that Holly took such loving care of this tin. She did it just because. Because she liked helping with the housework. In a way, Holly felt like it was actually her tin. But now Uwe was reaching for it. He opened the lid, took out the bag of sugar sprinkles and threw an entire handful over the pancakes. ((Illu 3))

“Do you two *still* not want any?” he asked.

The sugar sprinkles on the gooey pancakes in the morning sun were an alluring sight. But Holly bravely shook her head.

“Shame,” said Uwe. Then he took the little bottle of sweet pearls out of the tin. And tipped it over the pancakes. They were lilac and pink and stuck to the gleaming maple syrup among the sugar crystals.

Astrid giggled. What was there to giggle about?

“And how about now?” asked Uwe.

Timi looked pale. Almost a little unwell. But when he saw Holly shaking her head, he did the same.

Uwe was only just getting started. He scattered chocolate sprinkles over the pearls. And icing sugar. He put marzipan hearts in between. And Smarties. Once he was finally done, you could hardly make out the pancakes beneath all the colourful, sweet garnishments. Holly had never seen anything so delicious-looking in her entire life.

“And you’re totally sure you don’t want any?” asked Uwe deviously. Timi sighed heavily. He gave his sister a pleading look. But Holly stayed strong.

“Fine then.” Uwe turned to Astrid. “And you?”

“Absolutely,” said Astrid. Her giggle had turned into a laugh. She laughed really loudly. And then they did it. They really did it. Right before the children’s eyes, Uwe and Astrid devoured the pancakes. The corners of their mouths glistened with syrup. The sugar

crunched between their teeth. And they laughed with full mouths. Oh, how they laughed!

That was the moment when Timi began to cry.

Once Timi had calmed down again, they set off. Uwe turned up the music and tapped his fingers to the beat against the steering wheel. Astrid had opened the window so the cool stream of air would blow in her face. The children were sitting in the back.

“I’m hungry,” said Timi.

“We’ll be eating soon,” Holly reassured him. “Papa’s bringing something.”

“And what if he forgets?”

“He won’t. I’m sure of it.”

But she wasn’t completely sure. With Papa, you could never be completely sure.

In the front, Uwe turned the music even louder, and Astrid began to sing. Holly couldn’t remember when she had last heard her

mother sing. She had a great voice. She used to be a singer, years ago, but then she'd given it up. Because singing and being a mother don't go so well together. And, of course, Holly was glad she had chosen being a mother. But Holly also liked the fact that she was singing now. And at the same time, she didn't. Because her mother was singing next to Uwe. Or even because of Uwe. And it seemed to Holly like her mother was currently choosing singing a little above being a mother. Holly wanted to sing along and at the same time cover her mother's mouth. That's how beautiful it was, and how terrible.

The park was full of people this Sunday. It was too warm to stay in the city. But not warm enough to go swimming. So everyone went to the park. A few of the older boys were playing football. Two men with long hair were throwing a frisbee back and forth. On the hill by the playground, a large, loud family were grilling their lunch on a garden BBQ set. Paper dragons fluttered in the sky. And a little dog ran around in circles, barking and trying to bite its own tail.

Beneath a large tree at the very back of the park, Astrid spread out the woollen blanket. Timi immediately sat down on it. Holly looked around nervously. She hadn't yet spotted her father anywhere.

“Who wants to play badminton?” asked Uwe.

Holly shook her head. She laid down on the blanket next to Timi and picked up the large newspaper which Uwe had brought along. Behind the newspaper, she could discretely keep a lookout for her father.

“Don't you two want to play for a bit?” asked Astrid.

But Holly didn't want to. “We're reading.”

Timi nodded.

“What's so urgent on the reading front?”

“The alphabet”, said Timi.

Astrid usually always wanted them to read. But now they were in the park, she wanted them to play. She picked up the badminton rackets and went over to Uwe, who was trying to do a handstand on the grass.



“I don’t want to read,” whispered Timi, once Astrid was out of earshot.

“You can look at the pictures.”

“I already did.”

Timi flicked through the newspaper at such a speed that no human being would have managed to read a thing. Not even the world master at speed reading. The speed-flicking was funny, and Holly tried it too. The newspaper rustled and ripped. They laughed and didn’t even notice that a pale, sweating man with smudged glasses was heading in their direction, panting. He was wearing a padded jacket that was far too heavy for the warm day, and carrying a jute bag that was far too full.

“Papa!” cried Holly excitedly when she spotted him. She jumped up and gave him a big hug. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Did you bring food?” asked Timi anxiously. “I’m so hungry!”

Paul put down the heavy bag in exhaustion and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Timi clambered up him and Holly too, making Paul fall over into the grass on his back. Only once Astrid came over did he stand up again.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“He just happened to be passing,” said Holly quickly.

“Really?”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” said Holly. “Say hello to each other properly.”

Her parents gave one another two brief little kisses on the cheek. They didn’t look anywhere near as happy as Holly had imagined.

“Uwe, this is Paul. Paul, this is Uwe,” said Astrid.

Uwe plucked nervously at the badminton racket as though it were a guitar. Holly wished she could grab his hand and take him to the nearest train station. Or anywhere really. As long as it wasn’t here.

“I’m pleased to finally meet you,” said Uwe politely.

“Well,” answered Paul. And then no one said anything else.

“Are you sure this was a good idea?” whispered Timi.

“Just wait and see,” said Holly quietly. And then she spoke loudly again: “Papa brought some food along. He made it himself!”

Now Astrid was really surprised. “Since when do you cook?”

“Well,” said Paul again. “I thought I’d give it a go. After all, people can change.” And then he smiled so awkwardly that his glasses moved upwards a little.

“Apparently so,” said Astrid. And now she was smiling too. They were both smiling. Holly could have hopped and jumped for joy. Everything was going to be okay.

Paul took a pale plastic bowl out of the bag and carefully pulled off the lid. A greenish-brown slop containing little red shreds sloshed around in the bowl.

“What on earth is that?” asked Holly in shock.

Paul said that it was a cold Spanish soup. His tone implied that he himself wasn’t entirely sure. “There are tomatoes in it and cucumbers and vegetables and onion and yoghurt and herbs. And it’s all mashed up together.”

Timi was horrified.

“Great!” cried Holly. “I’ve always wanted to try that!”

Paul knelt down in the grass and poured a little of the soup onto a plastic plate.

“So you just happened to be passing with some cold onion soup in your bag?” asked Astrid.

“Well, actually Holly–”, said Paul. He didn’t get any further.

“I mean, we just happened to be here too,” said Holly quickly.

And then she took a sip of the soup.

Frederik, a boy in her class at school, had once eaten an earthworm. He’d said that the trick was to simply think of something delicious. Not the earthworm. Ice cream, for example. So Holly tried to think about ice cream as she swallowed the soup. But it wasn’t easy. Because as soon as the soup was in her mouth, the ice cream disappeared from her head. Holly swallowed. For a moment, the soup threatened to come back up again. But Holly swallowed again, until the soup stayed where it was.

“Delicious!” she cried, once she’d succeeded. “Papa is such a good cook!”

But Astrid wasn’t convinced. She looked over at Uwe, who was opening himself a beer.

“Do you want one too?” he asked.

But Paul said that he couldn't drink alcohol because of the medication. Because he had depression. Depression was a doctor word for sadness. Holly knew that. Papa had once explained it to her. The doctors had a word especially for sadness. But not for happiness. Because happiness isn't an illness. And doctors only need words for illnesses.

"I'm sorry," said Uwe, about the depression.

"It's not your fault," muttered Paul. "Or not just yours, anyway."

And then Timi also tried to take a sip of the cold soup. But he didn't know the trick about the ice cream. So once the soup was in his mouth, he immediately spat it out again. The soup ran down over his chin and dripped onto the blanket. Timi coughed and tried to wipe the rest off his tongue.

"Don't you like it?" asked Paul.

Timi looked anxiously at Holly. He knew he was supposed to like it. So that Mama would think Papa was a good cook.

"It slipped out of my mouth," he said eventually. "That always happens to me when something's delicious."

As proof, Timi took a bite of a piece of bread, chewed around on it a little and then let it drop back out of his mouth onto the blanket.

“Do you see? When something’s delicious, it flops out of my mouth.”

“That’s disgusting, stop that at once!” said Astrid.

Holly didn’t want to think about the soup any more. She changed the subject.

“Papa, tell a joke!”

“Why now?” asked Paul in confusion.

“Because you can!”

Paul didn’t seem so sure that he could. He scratched his head. And he was almost about to say “well” again.

“When did you start telling jokes?” asked Astrid in confusion.

“Since forever,” answered Holly quickly. “Didn’t you know that? Papa is really funny.”

Timi nodded enthusiastically. He had shoved a handful of grass into his mouth to get rid of the taste of the soup.

Paul thought for a moment. And then he began to tell a joke.

“Okay then. Three men go to see a fairy. The fairy says that the men have three wishes. I mean, each of the men has three.”

Holly feared that her Papa might have picked too difficult a joke to begin with. Three men and three wishes, that could take a while. And besides, Mama didn't like it when only men featured in stories. She was allergic to that.

“The first man wishes for a beautiful house. The second also wants a beautiful house. But the third wants something different. He wants to constantly jiggle his head back-and-forth.”

Paul wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Haha!” cried Holly. “To jiggle his head back-and-forth!” She laughed as loudly as she could. And Timi tried to laugh too. But then Paul said that the joke wasn't finished yet, and they immediately stopped laughing. Paul continued. “The fairy asks what the second wishes are. The first man says that he wishes for a beautiful wife. A clever, beautiful wife. A nice, clever, beautiful wife.”

As he said that, Paul looked at Astrid. And Astrid looked at her shoes. And then Paul turned around and didn't continue with the joke. "Sorry, I'm feeling a bit sad now," he mumbled.

Holly jumped up and hugged her father. She even patted him a little on the back. Like football coaches pat their footballers on the back when they've hurt themselves. So that the footballers can quickly carry on playing again.

"But it's not sad, Papa. It's a joke. It's funny. It's a funny joke, and you're telling it so well."

But Paul didn't want to carry on.

"Come on, we're going to the bathroom," said Astrid to Holly. She took her by the hand and pulled her along with her.

"But I don't need to go."

"Yes, you do," said Astrid in a voice that refused contradiction.

Astrid walked with Holly through the park and over the road to the kiosk, where the toilets were. She knew Holly didn't need to go.



And she didn't need to go either. She just wanted to speak with Holly without anyone else hearing.

"Sweetheart, this isn't okay. You can't just summon Papa here when I'm with Uwe. Papa is ill. It's not good for him."

"He's ill because you left him," said Holly angrily. "That's the only reason he's depressed. If you weren't with Uwe, he wouldn't be so sad."

Astrid said that this wasn't true. That Paul had been sad even before that. That there were things grown-ups had to decide for themselves. Without the children. And that adults being together or not was one of these things. She stroked Holly's hair.

"I understand, of course I do, that you'd prefer it if I was still with him. But it's simply not possible, Holly."

"But why not? You're just not trying hard enough. He's really funny."

Astrid shook her head. "He's not funny. But that's not the reason."

"The joke wasn't finished yet. It would have gotten funny. You said you love funny men."

Astrid sighed. “I do love him. Even when he’s not funny. But I love him a different way to before. Not how I love Uwe. I know that’s difficult for you to understand, but it’s how it is. And it can’t be changed. I’m happier with Uwe than I’d been with Papa for a long time. And he wasn’t happy with me anymore either. None of that did him any good. He has to look after himself right now, do you understand?”

Of course Holly understood. She understood that her mother was only thinking of herself and her own happiness. And not for a single second of Holly or Papa or Timi. They all needed Mama. Uwe didn’t need her at all. Holly understood that.

“Sweetheart, we’re still a family,” said Astrid.

“No! If you’re with Uwe, we’re not a family. We’re broken. And I don’t need to go to the bathroom!”

Astrid tried to hug Holly. But Holly pushed her away.

“I love you so much,” said Astrid.

Now Holly had tears in her eyes. That was all she needed.

“Well, I don’t love you!” she yelled. That was a lie. But Holly was so angry she wanted to say something bad. As bad as what her mother was doing.

“I don’t love you even a little bit,” said Holly again.

And then she turned and ran away. Away from the kiosk and the toilet which no one needed, away from her mother, right across the street.

“Holly!” cried Astrid behind her. And then again, much quicker, much louder, much higher: “Holly!”

Holly knew that things were serious when her mother’s voice broke like that. She turned around. But now Astrid wasn’t saying a word. She was just staring at Holly. Her mouth and eyes were wide open. Holly remembered her dream about flying and the seagulls that had tried to say something to her that she couldn’t understand. And by the time Holly understood, it was too late. This time, she wasn’t able to jump aside at the last moment. The delivery van with the inscription “Bread from the Baker” drove right into Holly. ((  
Illustration 4 detached))

## WELCOME TO HEAVEN

Holly tried to open her eyes. But they were already open. Shimmering darkness surrounded her.

“Hello?”

Although it was very quiet, Holly could barely hear her own voice. As though her mouth were in one place and her ear somewhere entirely different.

She tried to steady herself against the walls, but the walls were slipping away from her. Everything was slipping away from her. She was slipping away from herself. Really slowly at first, then quicker and quicker. Like going through a tunnel or a water slide. But she wasn't getting wet. And she wasn't going forwards or backwards either. More like inwards. She was being sucked along, or pulled perhaps. It was really very difficult to describe. You'd need to have experienced it.

In any case, eventually Holly found herself in a blue, bright room. There were no windows and no lamps, and yet it was still light. The light came from nowhere, from all sides. Holly had to squint in order to see anything.

“Hello,” said a friendly voice. “Welcome, Holly.”

Holly turned around. And then she saw the woman. She was slightly plump, with red cheeks and small golden glasses behind which her friendly eyes twinkled. Perhaps she was a nurse? Holly wondered whether she was ill. But nothing hurt. And the woman didn't look like a nurse. She looked more like a decorator.

Although, decorators wore white overalls. Holly knew that. But this woman was wearing blue overalls. And a matching top. Perhaps she had fallen into a bucket of blue paint. Holly found all of this very confusing.

“How are you?” asked the woman.

Holly tried to say something. But her throat was dry. She first had to check whether everything was still there. Her legs, her hands, her voice. Everything was where it was supposed to be. Only Holly herself wasn't where she belonged.

“Where am I?” she asked tentatively.

“You're in heaven,” said the woman. And then she laughed, very suddenly, like other people sneeze. “Sorry, I always forget to say that. Welcome to heaven.”

Now Holly knew that she wasn't sick. She was dreaming. She had to be. All she needed to do was wake up, then she'd be lying in her bed. Where was her alarm clock? Now, when she needed it most, it wasn't beeping.

Holly pinched herself in the arm. It hurt a little, but she didn't wake up.

"Why am I here?"

"You died," said the woman in blue.

Holly thought for a moment. Why would she have died? That didn't make any sense. She was far too young to die. But then she remembered the bakery van. And her mother's face at the side of the road.

"I can't die," said Holly. "Sorry. This is a misunderstanding. I have to go back."

"That's what everyone thinks, but unfortunately it's not possible. You can only ever go forwards. Even when you're dead."

Holly wasn't understanding a word. This had to be a mistake. It had all happened too quickly. The woman had to have made a

mistake. It had to be a dream after all. Holly pinched herself in the arm again. It hurt, but nothing changed.

The woman looked a little tired. She held a matt, slightly shimmering ticket out to Holly. “Don’t lose this. You’ll need it for your onward journey.”

Holly took the ticket. She didn’t know what to do with it.

“Look for Line 9. The driver will take you to your destination.”

Perhaps the woman was insane, thought Holly.

“I’d really rather go back. My mother is down there. If I’m dead, I’m sure she’s sad.”

“I know,” said the tired decorator. Her tone was friendly. Almost a little regretful. Then a lamp began to flash on and off next to her desk.

“Oh, we’ve lost track of time chatting. Don’t worry too much.”

She pointed towards a door which Holly hadn’t noticed until this moment. The lamp next to the desk was flashing quicker and quicker.

“You have to go now, the next person is already on their way. It’s busy today.”

Holly didn’t know whether she was supposed to shake the woman’s hand. She was already leafing through her paperwork again.

“Look after your ticket. And it’s best you don’t speak to anyone out there. Sometimes there are some strange characters.”

Holly figured that people didn’t shake hands in heaven. She opened the door.

“All the best,” said the woman.

And then Holly was outside.

Only once she had closed the door behind her did Holly notice how quiet it had been in the blue room. Now, all of a sudden, she was standing in a gigantic hall full of people and vehicles. The tumult, the seething and teeming, made Holly turn back around in shock. But the door she had just come through was no longer there. There were even more people behind her.

Holly had never seen so many people all in one place. In her entire life, she had probably never seen as many people as there were here



in this moment. Holly thought back to the holiday when she had stuck chewing gum beneath the seat. The airport departure hall had been big too, and full of people. But not as big as this hall. And certainly there hadn't been as many people.

An announcement rattled from the loudspeakers: "Attention, all the newly dead from Lines 3 and 18 please proceed to Station D. Your bus will depart in a few minutes."

Holly couldn't see the bus station. But she could see a pygmy family in war paint. And a captain with a parrot on his shoulder. She saw a butcher, a postwoman and a group of soldiers with guns. She saw policewomen, and women with colourful headscarves, men with hats and some without hats. She saw blondes and brunettes and people large and small, crawling babies and teetering old people. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. And everyone had a ticket in their hand, like Holly.

Holly felt rooted to the spot, captivated by everything around her. And then, from somewhere right behind her, a horn sounded out. Hopefully not another delivery van, thought Holly. But when she turned around, there was just a large, stubbly elephant, which prodded her with its trunk. Holly stepped aside. The elephant

trumpeted in gratitude, then trotted on. Only now did Holly notice that, among all the people, there were a great number of animals too. A group of African zebras were trotting among Tibetan monks. A herd of thin, tall cows were overtaken by a swarm of flies, which in turn were following an American football team. A man with small, round glasses stumbled over an armadillo, and a dark-haired girl standing alongside giggled. Holly giggled too. And then she noticed that the dark-haired girl had noticed they were both giggling.

The girl was about the same age as Holly, perhaps a little older. She had high cheekbones and a beautiful, arched nose. Her stained dress looked like an old costume from Holly's grandmother's dressing up box. The girl actually stood out quite a bit, thought Holly. And yet she had almost overlooked her.

“Is everything okay?” asked the girl.

Holly wasn't sure what she was supposed to answer. The decorator had said that she shouldn't talk to anyone here. Perhaps this girl was dangerous.

“Can't you speak?”

Holly decided to stay silent. She turned around and walked away.

“Hey! What’s wrong with you?” called the girl. “I ask you something, and you just walk away?”

Holly continued on without turning around.

“Hello? Are you deaf?”

“I’m not talking to you,” mumbled Holly.

“Yes, you are,” said the girl.

“No, I’m not,” said Holly.

“So why are you talking to me, if you’re not talking to me?”

Holly paused. “I’m only talking to you because you keep talking to me. But that doesn’t mean I’m talking to *you*.”