

Polina's Secret

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Night of the Living Dead

“Are you finished?” I whispered to Joanna.

“Almost,” she replied quietly.

In the darkness, the shadowy figure of my sister rushed past me. She jumped onto the bottom step of the stairs leading to the second floor and waved her arms wildly. When her elbow bumped into the stair railing, it made a loud thump.

Immediately, I cowered deeper into the corner and held the digital camera tightly against my body. Was our mother really sleeping soundly in her room beneath the roof? But then I pushed that thought aside. No, when Mama was as worn out from work as she had been today, a motorcycle could thunder through her bedroom, and she wouldn't even roll over in her sleep. Besides, Joanna and I had closed all the doors. Our plan would work perfectly!

We waited attentively at our posts, Joanna on the stairs and I in my corner next to the door to the basement. We were dangerous, frightful, the terror in the night. Terror at midnight, to be precise. And that meant our au pair had stayed out almost two hours past her curfew.

Man, there was a draft around this door! I rubbed my arms and felt that I had goose bumps from the cold. My pyjama bottoms fluttered around my legs.

Outside a car door slammed shut and a vehicle drove away. A few seconds later I heard steps moving toward our house. Quick, happy steps, shoes with high heels that clicked on the ground.

“Hurry up!” I urged.

“I’m going as fast as I can!” my sister hissed. Her gestures became more energetic. It looked as if an enormous moth was trying to lift off into the air.

Outside the steps drew closer and closer and stopped in front of the door. I imagined our au pair fishing around in her pink purse looking for the keys. Her name – can you imagine? – was Mercedes. The very day she arrived our mother already forbade us to imitate motor noises or squealing brakes when Mercedes walked through the foyer. “It’s a perfectly normal French name,” she had explained. “So don’t make fun of it!”

A perfectly normal name? I don’t think so! Is my name Audi, or maybe Volvo?

Mercedes came from a suburb of Paris. For seven weeks now we had put up with her glittering pink nail polish, her fascination with mathematics, and her habit of clapping her hands together energetically and with irritating glee in the morning while calling “Opp, opp!” That was meant to be “Hup, hup!” and hurry us along, as if my sister and I were trained circus dogs.

Our mother had no problem at all with that, and Mercedes giggled when she saw our disgruntled faces. “It’s just in fun, Eric!” she assured

me in her French accent, smiling sweetly. And she reached out her hands to tousle my hair every time. If there was anything I hated more than math geniuses with glittering pink nail polish, it was math geniuses who treated me like a guinea pig in a zoo.

Well, today the hour of reckoning had arrived, when Mercedes's giggle would be extinguished once and for all! I smiled grimly, lifted the camera, and pressed my back further into the corner.

"Are you finished yet, Joanna?" I whispered.

My sister shook the bottle one last time, and then I finally heard a moist, sucking "Blub, splat!"

"Oh, no!" she whispered.

"What is it?" I asked with mounting anxiety.

"I shook it too hard," came the reply from the stairs. "Eew, that's disgusting!"

Outside, Mercedes was just putting her key into the lock in the front door. There was ringing and jangling. Naturally, she had not only a pink handbag, but also some kitschy bells and silver cats on her keychain.

All of a sudden I was even more nervous. That was usually the case when we were executing one of Joanna's plans. Her ideas were the best, but unfortunately they left plenty of opportunity for blunders.

"We can still get out of here," I whispered.

That was a stupid suggestion, of course. When my sister was in the process of carrying out a plan, she would rather gargle with soap than abandon it.

Sure enough, she promptly hissed back, "Are you crazy? This is going to work. And now be quiet!"

She suppressed a giggle and then I saw her shadowy outline move from the bottom step toward the floor. I didn't contradict her. Now it was too late to turn back anyway. But for some reason, I had a queasy feeling in my stomach. I thought of that "Blub, splat!" That had sounded so . . . violent.

My finger rested on the shutter release of the camera. The front door swung open and Mercedes slipped inside. I could hear her taking off her jacket. There was a quiet clatter as she took off her shoes and let them fall next to our sneakers.

Now the actual plan began.

Holding my breath, I heard the switch of the lamp on the table in the foyer go "click, click." Nothing happened. Naturally, because I had pulled out the plug a few minutes ago.

Mercedes murmured something in French, then set off. She needed to take seven long steps through the darkness to reach the door to the basement. There – halfway between the stairway and the corner where I crouched in waiting – was the light switch for the hall light.

Five, six, seven.

She glided right past me, very close. Her hair smelled of vanilla shampoo, and her keychain jingled with every step she took. That was convenient; the sound let me know exactly when she arrived at the door

where the camera awaited her. My heart pounded with excitement and I chewed nervously on my lower lip.

I heard our au pair feeling for the light switch. Her manicured nails brushed over the wallpaper. It was a sound that sent a chill up my spine. Then the nails landed on wood. Was that the basement door? When Mercedes pushed down on the handle, there was a quiet squeak of protest.

Startled, I held my breath. Why was she going to the basement? She was supposed to go for the light switch! Had she forgotten that it was on the wall right in front of her?

Now she seemed to remember again, because I heard the sounds as she felt past the doorframe and sighed with relief when she found the switch.

Harsh light flooded the foyer and made me blink. Mercedes still had her back to me and Joanna, but soon, in a second, she would turn around and...

I couldn't stand the tension a moment longer. I carefully turned my head to the side and glanced over at Joanna. And instantly broke out in a sweat.

Oh, no!

My sister lay on the wooden floor of the foyer as if she had fallen, one leg still on the bottom step. Her eyes were hideously rolled back in her head and her tongue hung out of one side of her mouth.

So far, so good.

But. There was way too much ketchup! Not just a few squirts like we had planned, but tons of ketchup. Blood, carnage, a massacre! Joanna had no idea how terrifying she looked! Her entire face, her arms and her t-shirt were smeared with red. The red sauce even clung to her blond hair and dripped from her nose and chin. The entire bottle had emptied itself with a single “Blub, splat!” and the sticky stuff had splattered all over Joanna, the foyer and the white wallpaper.

The wallpaper! Now I was starting to panic. Our mother would hang us by the ears in the basement! And Mercedes would surely have a heart attack. Then she turned around.

Oh, my. When her gaze fell on Joanna, her eyes became wide and round like rubber balls. I was sure her eyes would fall out of her head any moment. Then her face suddenly went white, and her mouth twisted and hung open.

“Click!” went the camera. Had I pressed the button? The flash flared right in Mercedes’s face, but she didn’t even notice it.

And then I almost dropped the camera.

“Aiiiiiii!” Mercedes screamed, and stumbled backwards toward the basement door. “Aaaaaiiiiiiii!”

My ears rang. Surprised, Joanna pulled her outstretched tongue back in and blinked through ketchup-smeared eyelashes. We had heard Mercedes giggle and yell, but so far she had never screamed.

An icy chill ran up my spine. It was a sound that would have taught every monster in every horror film ever made something about fear. And definitely louder than a motorcycle roaring through a room.

By now, Joanna had also recognized how serious the situation was.

“Hey, I’m not really dead!” she called out. “It was just a joke!”

To prove it, she jumped up and stretched out her dripping hands toward Mercedes. That was a mistake.

Mercedes gasped for air, horror stricken, when the blood-smeared corpse sprang toward her, and then she screeched even louder. She stumbled, waved her arms around in circles in the air and . . . her back bumped into the basement door.

The door opened.

“No!” Joanna and I cried in unison. We raced across the foyer. I managed to grab the hem of Mercedes’s denim skirt, but the fabric slipped out of my grasp again.

The last we saw of her was a flapping pink blouse and a foot with pink toenails.

Thundering, rumbling noise rang out as our au pair knocked over the bin of empty plastic bottles that stood on the steps. We heard a clattering, “vump, vump, vump” sound that gained in tempo with each step, followed by a crash. Then silence.

Joanna had clapped a hand over her mouth in horror, and her eyes shone like enormous green islands in a sea of ketchup. I had to lean

against the wall for support, my knees were shaking so badly. Slowly Joanna lowered her arm, leaving a white handprint over her mouth.

“Is she dead?” Her voice was nothing more than a whimper.

I was much too shocked to answer. All I managed to utter was a shocked gasp. And then I almost fell down into the basement myself for fright. A hand clamped down on my shoulder! In my attempt to jump aside, I banged my head against the wall. Hard.

“What is going on here?” our mother demanded in a voice like rolling thunder. She stood on the stairs, the avenger in a daisy-bedecked bathrobe! Her nose was twitching dangerously. Uh oh. When she was this angry, she has no sense of humor at all.

Accusingly she held up the empty ketchup bottle.

“Well?” she asked menacingly.

“Mercedes,” was all Joanna breathed, gesturing toward the basement. Mama lifted her eyebrows questioningly and stepped to the doorway. She reached past me and turned on the light in the cellar. I closed my eyes and swallowed. This time we had taken it too far. Mercedes would be lying at the foot of the stairs like Joanna had earlier. Her tongue would be hanging from the corner of her mouth and her eyes rolled back in her head. There would be just one difference: Joanna was alive and nervously licking remnants of ketchup from her lips, while Mercedes ...

“What on earth have you two done?” Mama whispered, stunned.

Cautiously I opened my eyes and peered into the basement.

It looked as if there had been an explosion. Pants, shirts, sweaters and towels were strewn everywhere. The laundry basket was next to the empty water bottles and the crate for the bottles had landed in the corner. And in the middle of the devastation lay Mercedes on a pile of dirty, wrinkled laundry, just trying to sit upright. She had caught one of Joanna's striped socks in her big hoop earring, and perched gracefully on her flattened curls was the top part of Mama's bikini.

My stomach did a somersault with relief. Now I understood what that "vump, vump, vump" had been: Mercedes had fallen into the laundry basket that had stood on the basement steps. Then she had ridden down the basement steps on it like a skateboard. Man, had she gotten lucky!

Joanna began screeching with laughter.

"Stop that!" I hissed.

But she giggled and snorted, bent over double and gasping for air. Typical Joanna. When things got really bad, she suddenly started cackling like a hysterical hen. Even when the situation wasn't funny in the least. I knew that was just her way of letting off steam, but other people didn't know that and usually got really angry with her.

Mercedes was no exception there.

"*Ce ne sont pas des enfants!*" she barked in French as she stood up.
"*Ce sont des monstres!*"

I only understood the word "monster." Did she mean us? That must be right: Her index finger stabbed accusingly in our direction, as the ringed sock swayed cheerfully back and forth at her ear. Blustering, she plucked

the bikini from her head and stomped up the stairs. For a moment I was sure she would strangle us, but she only stormed past us, enraged, and ran up the second flight of stairs to her room. All three of us flinched when the door upstairs slammed so loudly that the windows rattled.

Mama crossed her arms over her chest and looked at us without saying a word. Joanna instantly stopped laughing. Without attracting attention, I tightened my grip on the camera and hid it behind my back.

"Well, nothing happened to her," Joanna peeped in a quiet voice. The fetching smile she tried to produce was more gruesome than cute. Even her teeth were smeared with ketchup. Joanna, the vampire!

"We just wanted to scare her a little," I offered apologetically. "It was our ketchup killer plan and..."

Mama's glare made the air grow cold. I fell silent.

"Shower!" Mama said to Joanna. It was only a single word, but Joanna and I both ducked our heads automatically. Behind that word and the threatening tone of voice seethed other, unspoken words. Lots of words. No television until Christmas, for example. Grounded for the next ten years. Exile in a home for delinquent and criminal youth. Or worse.

Mama just nodded at me grimly, as if she had heard my thoughts. Then she turned on her heel and hurried up the stairs, without so much as a further glance at us, to go help Mercedes calm down.

Number Three Abandons Ship

The next morning, there was no scent of the crispy toast with marmalade and freshly made hot cocoa that Mercedes usually served us for breakfast. Doors shut, hurried steps clattered in the foyer, but no one called to us. We didn't dare go down to the kitchen. Through the window we saw a taxi stop in front of our house. It was Saturday morning and the street was still entirely empty. Just a bit of dust blew across the pavement. It was ghostly, like in a Western movie. A powerfully built man got out of the taxi and came to the front door. A little later we saw him carrying suitcases. Lots of suitcases with a pink and yellow plaid pattern. He was struggling under their weight, we could see that even at a distance.

"She going back home!" Joanna whispered.

I just nodded. It was true that I had never really liked Mercedes, but now I had a bad conscience. None of our au pairs had ever stayed until the end of their planned stay. But none had ever left so quickly and abruptly, either. Finally, Mercedes rushed into the street with one last bag and got into the car. We ducked back behind the curtain, but that wasn't necessary. Our ex-au pair made no move to turn around and look at the house or us one last time. The taxi accelerated and drove off as if the driver was fleeing the scene of a crime.

We hung out aimlessly in our room for a long while, but in the end hunger drove us to the kitchen.

Our mother sat at the kitchen table staring into an opened file folder. She held a cup of coffee in her hands as if she wanted to strangle it. We just stood there for a few minutes, shifting uncomfortably from one leg to the other, but our mother didn't pay any attention to us.

"No breakfast?" Joanna finally asked in a small voice.

Mama slowly turned her head in our direction. She looked as if she was boiling inside like a sealed pressure cooker just about to explode.

"Breakfast?" she asked in a voice seething with rage and slammed her cup down on the table. The coffee spilled over the top. "What would you like? Cornflakes with ketchup, perhaps?" Her nose twitched. That wasn't a good sign. Not good at all.

I swallowed and took a step backward, just in case. "We'll ... clean everything up," I tried to reassure her. "Even the walls. We'll paint them again. Honestly, we..."

"This really isn't about the wallpaper!" Mama cried as she jumped up. "What were you two thinking? Have you two entirely lost your minds? Do you have any idea how badly your plan could have ended? Mercedes could have been seriously hurt!"

Joanna bit her lower lip.

Feeling uncomfortable, I cleared my throat. "Did she ... say anything else?" I asked.

“Indeed she did! She said that you two are monsters and you wanted to kill her.”

“We didn’t want to hurt her!” Joanna cried indignantly. “She opened the basement door herself. We couldn’t know she’d fall down the stairs.”

“And Joanna just wanted to put a little splash of ketchup on her t-shirt,” I explained. “It’s not her fault that the whole bottle came out at once. Mercedes was just supposed to get a little fright, honest!”

“She said she’d be home at ten,” Joanna continued, warming to her subject. “But when she got here it was almost midnight already! We just wanted to remind her how irresponsible it is to come home too late. You don’t know what’s going on when you sleep. Something might have happened to us!”

“Oh, right,” Mama replied sarcastically. “You could have fallen down the basement stairs, for example.” Then she slammed the palm of her hand on the table so hard the coffee cup jumped. “This is already the third au pair that you two have scared off. Sometimes I think you’re doing it on purpose.”

Joanna nervously shuffled her feet on the tile floor.

“The thing with Kelly’s hair, for example,” our mother continued.

Uh oh. I thought of the photo that was stashed under my bed. It featured the face of au pair number one, Kelly, from England. Usually her unruly curls had been an artificial looking carrot orange. But in the picture she looked as if an extraterrestrial monster with a green pelt had landed on her head.

“That was an accident,” Joanna murmured. Which was halfway true. We had no way of knowing that a little fabric softener added to the bottle of hair coloring would make her curls not only smooth, but also transform them instantly into greenish dreadlocks.

“And Mette?” our mother asked.

Of course, Mette from Denmark. I had a photograph of her, too, that I had taken at lunch one day. Mette had been pale, but in that picture her face was dark red with puffed up cheeks. There were tears in her eyes and pearls of sweat glittered on her forehead.

“You put cayenne pepper in her pudding and Tabasco in her applesauce,” Mama said sternly. “And that was certainly no mistake!”

“That was self defense! She couldn't cook!” Joanna protested. “We were starving to death.”

“She cooked very well,” Mama contradicted her.

“Yeah, broccoli pasties with almond cream!” I said. “And glazed duck breast in orange sauce. Who eats stuff like that?”

Mama shook her head and raised her hands in desperation. “Why can't you just be perfectly normal, well-behaved children?” she groaned. “Now I have to find yet another au pair.”

“But we don't need one,” I muttered defiantly. “We can take care of ourselves just fine.”

“Oh, really?” said mother in a sharp tone. “So you two can create mountains of soap bubbles in the bathroom again to turn the garden into a winter landscape?”

Well, I thought that had looked fantastic!

“And secretly watch movies all afternoon instead of doing your homework?”

Okay, she had us there. Unlike our mother, we knew how to program the DVD player. And so once in a while, we had recorded a horror film or two at night and watched them after school.

“And so you can build another zip line from upstairs down to the foyer so you can get to the bus stop faster in the morning?”

Involuntarily, Joanna scratched her scarred knee. She had taken a bad spill that time and had to be taken to the hospital in an ambulance. Her knee had to be stitched up. Six stitches. But the zip line would definitely have worked if the stupid clothesline hadn't broken.

Our mother crossed her arms. “No way!” she said, shaking her head. “There's no way I can leave you alone during the day. I have absolutely no desire to worry the entire day at work what you two are up to here at home. First thing Monday morning I'll call the agency. They'll have to find us a new au pair as soon as possible.”

Mrs. Schmidt Steals the Show

This time our mother was dead serious. Just how serious was made clear on Monday, when Mrs. Schmidt arrived at our apartment. She used to be a teacher, but stopped working two years ago. Joanna had a theory that she hadn't retired, but had been fired for mental cruelty. She lived just a few houses away and spent her days being enraged that she didn't have students to order around anymore.

"I've been told that you're not allowed to watch television for six weeks," she said as she stepped into our living room. Then she made a beeline for the television, pulled out the antenna cable, calmly rolled it up and stuffed it into her vest pocket.

"Hey!" Joanna protested. "You can't just steal our cable!"

"Want to bet?" Mrs. Schmidt replied, and smiled such a friendly smile that it gave me chills. Then she snatched up the remote control, too.

It turned into the worst time of our lives. We weren't allowed to go outside to play. The television was out and Mama made no moves at all to get back the cable and remote control. Instead we were doomed to listen to classical music on the radio.

Under the watchful eye of Prison Guard Schmidt we did homework until we couldn't stand to hear her voice anymore, and dreamed longingly of riding our bikes in the park. Even our goldfish Elvis, who swam his rounds in an aquarium in the living room, seemed to be staring at us in commiseration.

Mama was no help, either. She just brushed us off wearily when we complained at night. She did retreat to the living room later with the telephone book, though. We heard her making phone calls for hours, trying to find a new au pair. But she didn't find one. Not on Monday, not on Tuesday and not on Wednesday either.

"Mercedes has complained about you and the word's gotten around," she said despondently. "They're saying it's dangerous to life and limb to live with us. There aren't any agencies in a fifty-mile radius that are willing to find us an au pair."

In light of Mrs. Schmidt, that was really not good news. On Thursday I locked myself in the bathroom and secretly read the T.V. guide so I would at least know which films we were missing at the moment.

On Friday we could hardly wait for Mrs. Schmidt to leave the house, although we had no idea what we were supposed to do all weekend with no television and not being able to leave the house.

"What do you think?" was our mother's reaction as she came home from work in an astonishingly good mood, with a twinkle in her eyes. "We'll paint the walls in the foyer – we'll never get those ketchup stains out anyway. After all, everything needs to be in tip-top shape when our new au pair arrives next week!"

She beamed at us, set down her briefcase in the foyer, and hummed as she went into the kitchen. A piece of paper our mother had laid on the sideboard next to her keys caught my eye.

On it, written in a shaky hand and half smeared by rain, I read:

NEW: DUNAY AGENCY,

O PaiR GIRLz

FIST KLASS FER HAUS, LIKE THE KIDDS

YOU TELEFONE:

Then came a phone number two feet long that began with the numbers
0038.

“*O pair girlz?*” Joanna asked with astonishment. “*Like the kidds?*”

“*Fer haus?*” I said, equally baffled.

It seemed that Mrs. Schmidt might not be the worst possible thing that
could happen to us.

The New One Makes a Splash

I knew from the very first that there was something fishy about the new au pair. Not that she looked particularly odd. No, she actually looked quite nice, with straight dark brown hair and eyes like translucent green glass marbles. Although it was only March, she wasn't wearing any shoes, but went barefoot. She was wearing jeans that flapped around her legs and a t-shirt with "Bongo-Boogie" written across the front. She held a very small travel bag in her hand. Water flowed from her hair, the t-shirt, the jeans and the suitcase, but that was only logical: It was raining buckets.

"Welcome!" our mother cried effusively, offering her hand. "Oh my, you're completely wet! Come inside, quickly!"

The new au pair slogged into the house and looked around without uttering a word. The freshly painted walls seemed to impress her greatly. More than they did us, anyway.

Our mother was growing more excited by the minute. "So, there we are, finally. These ... these are the twins. This," she said, gesturing toward my sister, "is Joanna. And here," she continued, waving her hand in my direction, "is Eric. They're both in the fifth grade."

"Very interesting," the au pair said politely with a heavy accent. But her green eyes skimmed right over us with as little interest as if we were nothing more than badly chosen foyer decorations.

"Yes. And this, children, is Polina Shush ... Shush ..."

“Shushnatovkovitzkova, please,” said the au pair in a dark, raw voice.

“Yes, of course,” replied our mother. “Polina comes from Izmail, that’s a lovely city in the Ukraine, right on the Danube River. Polina’s going to stay with us until the end of August. And of course we’re going to do everything in our power to make sure she feels right at home with us, isn’t that right, kids?”

That last sentence was a crystal clear warning to us.

But we were already much too curious to scare Polina off right away.

The name alone - ***Po-li-na Shush***-huh?-what?-***koval***!

“Would you like to see the rest of the house?” our mother asked. “Oh, no, of course you’d like to change into something dry. You’re probably freezing, aren’t you?” And with a glance at Polina’s bare feet she added, “I ... ah ... might have a pair of slippers for you.”

Polina shook her head. “See house, please,” she said.

We had already experienced several of these house tours. Though none of the other au pairs had left behind wet footprints in the foyer. And normally, the newcomer would try to say something nice in each room. They would point to the astonishingly ugly vase from grandma, for example, and cry, “Oh, how lovely!” Or they exclaimed how comfortable the sofa in the living room looked. And they smiled the entire time as if they had to win some beauty pageant and tried to start conversations with us, which, of course, we stubbornly ignored.

Polina didn’t smile a single time. She didn’t utter a word. She didn’t so much as look at us, but studied the table and chairs with great interest.

“Look, Polina! Isn't that a pretty vase?” Joanna piped up after a while. Polina glanced at the vase and then looked at my sister as if she seriously questioned her sanity.

“Your room is upstairs,” my mother explained at the conclusion of the tour. “It's a cozy little room. From the window you can see right into the yard.”

And if we didn't have an au pair, it would be my room again, I thought morosely to myself.

Polina was just about to follow our mother out the door when she discovered our little aquarium. She stood still, pointed to the fish and threw me a questioning glance.

“That's Elvis,” I answered her unspoken question.

She nodded contentedly, waved at the fish and said “Hi!” Then she left the room.

“Excuse me, did I just hear that right?” I whispered to Joanna. “She said hello to a *goldfish*?”

Joanna was so dumbstruck that she just nodded mutely.

A little later we tiptoed to the door of Polina's room and peered through the crack of the door while she unpacked her bag. Actually, unpacking isn't the right word. She opened the bag and took out the lone piece of clothing inside it. Ladybug red with black polka dots.

“That's unbelievable!” my sister murmured. “She came all the way from the Ukraine for six months and she only brought a bikini!”

Oddly enough, now it was our mother who got nervous. On the first afternoon she called every half hour to ask how we were getting along.

"Great," I said each time, glancing at Polina. "She ... uh ... hasn't broken anything." Which was true. For hours, she hadn't done anything but stand at the living room window and stare in fascination at the laundry that was hanging from the clothes line in the yard and fluttered in the wind. Since she didn't make the slightest move to gather the laundry and bring it in, Joanna and I did it for once.

"Maybe we should reconsider having her, after all," our mother muttered when she came home that evening and saw how Polina turned on the vacuum cleaner and immediately jumped onto an armchair when it started to roar.

"This will work!" we reassured her. "Everything is fine, really!"

Mama lifted her eyebrows in disbelief.

One complaint from us would have been enough and she would have sent Polina packing. But Joanna and I were already firmly resolved to give her a chance. She was definitely better than Mrs. Schmidt. Much better, in fact, because life with Polina was turning out to be more interesting than we had expected.

And that was in large part because she took almost no interest whatsoever in us.

We'd never experienced anything like it! Usually the au pair would do anything to get on our good side. Polina, on the other hand, found other things much more fascinating than us. Bed linens, for example.

“Dry and nice,” she said approvingly in her odd accent.

Joanna and I looked at each other in astonishment. Maybe she slept on clammy potato sacks at home? Or in winter she just dug deep under the mud to keep from freezing?

Polina also stroked her fingertips over wallpaper, towels and carpets with great fascination. Even in the kitchen she found new attractions. Flour – especially when it wafted through the air in a cloud – pleased her greatly. The flying sparrows outside the bathroom window were amusing, the fan in the bathroom was astonishing, and the hair dryer even elicited cries of excitement.

With our mouths hanging open we watched as she used the hair dryer to dry the plates and glasses she had just washed. Then she ran an index finger squeaking across the glass to make sure that not a single tiny drop of water remained.

“She’s crazy!” was Joanna’s verdict after two weeks. We stood outside the bathroom door. Polina had locked herself inside and was having a fine time in the bathtub, where we heard all kinds of suspicious splashing, gurgling and sloshing. We had no idea what she did in there, but every time she had been in the bathroom it looked like a Brazilian rain forest in there: clouds of steam, puddles on the floor and the bath mat transformed into a squelching, sopping swamp. It wouldn’t have surprised me if I had stepped on an irritated crocodile on my way to the sink.

When we asked her what she had been doing in the bathtub, she just shrugged her shoulders. In fact, it was hard to get an answer from her

about anything. Sometimes she looked at us as if she had to think really hard to remember who we were. And when she did condescend to speak with us, her answers only led to greater puzzlement.

“Are there townhouses where you come from, too?” we pestered her. “Why don’t you have vacuum cleaners and sheets and blankets? What kind of work do your parents do?”

“Work?” she asked.

“They have to earn money, don’t they?”

“For what, please?”

It was beyond belief. “Well, to be able to buy things and to pay for things!” I cried. “CDs or movies or pay the rent or take vacations.”

Polina just shrugged her shoulders.

“But what do they do all day, then?” asked Joanna.

Polina shrugged her shoulders again. “What every man do.”

She stood up. That was a clear signal that for her, the discussion was over. She sauntered over to the aquarium and dipped a finger in the water. Elvis immediately swam over and bumped into her fingernail. A few air bubbles issued from his greedily snapping mouth.

“Ha ha,” chuckled Polina. “You funny fish, Elvis!”

And then the door slammed shut and she was gone again. And once again, we were left behind, clueless.