

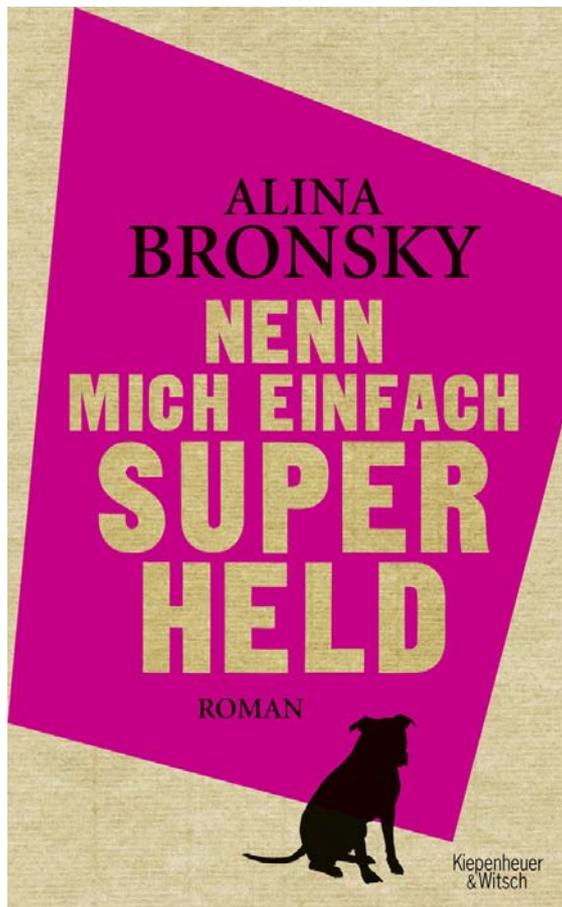
Sample translation

Alina Bronsky NENN MICH EINFACH SUPERHELD

("Just Call Me Superman")

Novel

Translated by Tim Mohr



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I realized immediately that I'd been had. I'd just pulled my hat back down over my forehead and crumpled up the scrap of paper with the address on it—Claudia had shoved it in my pocket, Family Services Center / Conference Room—and tossed it to the floor. I was turning around to head home again when I saw the girl. She looked at me for a second and recoiled. I couldn't blame her. My own mother had to practice for weeks to be able to look at my face without wincing, and this girl didn't even know me. If anything I gave her credit for not throwing up.

Instead of turning around, I lingered in the doorway, pushed my hat back up, and stood there staring at her like an idiot. It slowly dawned on me that I wasn't going to leave. Not now, and hopefully never again. I was going to sit down in the last empty chair, which seemed to be waiting expectantly for me, and I was going to look at this girl. I'd never seen such magical beauty before, those green eyes, that raven black hair—and so sad. She was wearing a very long dress, white with small red flowers, that hid her legs. As far as I was concerned, a short dress would have been fine. Brightly colored reflectors shaped like butterflies and flowers sparkled in the spokes of her wheelchair.

I picked up the crumpled paper with the address on it and stuffed it into my pants pocket. I straightened my sunglasses and with the angry glare of the others on me walked over to the last empty chair.

There were six of us. Aside from me and the girl, there was a longhaired guy with a prosthetic leg, an amorphous doughy figure with a froth of red hair on his or her head (with no apparent disability), a very long-legged queer with a nervous gaze that bounced around the room, and a frowning arrogant-looking pretty-boy who was wearing sunglasses like mine. Though mine were certainly more pricy. He was the only one who didn't turn his face in my direction.

We were each supposed to take a bongo drum and play a rhythm that represented our personality, said the guru as he pulled a box overflowing with pumpkin-shaped objects into the middle of the circle of chairs. Let's do it!

When nobody moved, I thought for the first time that this place might be a good fit for me after all.

The guru was not to be discouraged. He spun slowly around so he could look each of us in the eyes. As expected, he didn't linger on my face for long; it was exactly the opposite when he looked at the girl. I could certainly understand why. What the hell else were we supposed to do here other than look at her? Play the bongos?

How can she stand it, I thought. So beautiful, and the only girl among all these guys. Had she ended up here because she was in a wheelchair and nobody cared what she really wanted? Had her parents put her up to it? Had she been lied to, like me?

The girl shrugged her left shoulder without meeting my gaze. I did her the favor of averting my eyes and looking instead at the others. They all began to shift uneasily in their chairs.

I sighed and directed my gaze at the Master of the Drums.

It was embarrassing enough that the guru, like me, was wearing a hat. My first impulse was to remove mine. But on the other hand I hadn't been to the barber in ages and the girl was probably having a hard enough time dealing with the sight of me as it was.

Beneath his hat the guru put on a face that portrayed a sort of infinite beneficence. There was something about it that brought to mind an old lady who must have been very cute when she was younger—big saucer eyes that over the years had faded, wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. Set against our grim faces, his cheerfulness seemed somewhat out of place.

"Then I'll do it for you," he said with unbearable placidity. "I'll start with you, Janne."

That's how I learned her name.

I had already suspected that she was stuck up when I saw her small, green eyes. My suspicions were confirmed when she interrupted the guru.

"Stop that," she said. "What could you possibly know about me?"

"Well, then, do it yourself, cupcake," said the guru, rapping a pleasant rhythm on the drum with his knuckles. He smiled so broadly that she blushed.

"I'll start," I said, to get her off the hook. But I was too late.

The kiss-ass in cheap sunglasses had beaten me to it. He had reached up in the air and snapped his fingers.

Marlon was his name, he deigned to tell us. He dragged out the first syllable forever. I looked worriedly over at him. I didn't want to have to share my first name with anyone else. Fortunately, as he moved past the first syllable, it turned out we shared just the first three letters. His voice was calm, almost sluggish, as if he wanted to telegraph with his tone just how cool he was and just how much our company bored him. He'd been blind since the age of seven. That's all we learned. A degenerative disease of the retina, I thought immediately, bad genes, you can never be too choosy about that sort of thing. His family had two dogs, one was this big and the other that big—he held his hands well above the floor. I cringed. For a moment the worn tiles of the conference room seemed to be fall away beneath my feet.

"Seeing-eye dogs?" asked the guru with that typical I'm-actively-listening-to-you face.

Marlon made a gesture with his chin, but it didn't bear any resemblance to a normal nod.

He was very sensitive to smells, he said, pausing dramatically. His nose was unbelievably acute—he could smell what each of us had eaten for breakfast the day before, he said. He asked us to take that into account and pay extra attention to hygiene. And for that reason he was going to change seats now, he said.

The doughy entity next to him exhaled loudly and turned red. I would have felt bad for the person if I hadn't been so disgusted by him or her myself.

Everyone watched silently as Marlon stood, picked up his chair, and went to put it down next to Janne. The fact that the fidgety fag was already sitting there didn't seem to bother him. He apparently couldn't see him. The queer grabbed onto his chair and, still sitting, shifted his way into the middle of the circle. Marlon sat down in the vacated spot and turned his face toward Janne, breathing deeply. His nostrils flared.

Janne lifted her hand. I thought she was going to smack Marlon. Which I would have liked to see. But instead she reached over and waved her long slender fingers in front of his sunglasses.

“You really can’t see anything?”

He grabbed her hand in mid-air. “Stop causing a draft,” he said, placing her hand on his cheek.

I decided not to come here again. Despite the fact that I saw Janne smile for the first time.

At some point the guru hit a gong. We stared at him, wondering what he was trying to signal to us.

“That’s it for today,” he said. The tense corners of his mouth betrayed a genuine sense of relief.

Everyone except Janne and the blind guy stood up slowly, as if they were unsure they were really free to leave. Then they all hurried toward the exit. I let the guy with the prosthetic leg go in front of me. I was afraid I’d knock him over. Despite the fact that the prosthetic seemed to be shorter than his real leg, he was extremely quick. Maybe he was one of those guys who trained for the Paralympics. His name was Richard, though there was utterly no reason for me to have remembered it.

I bumped into the doughy creature in the doorway. He felt like a jellyfish. It would definitely have interested me to know what sort of disability he had. It hadn’t come up. Actually, other than each of us giving our first names, nothing had really come up because the nervous queer had spent the rest of the hour crying and trembling. In the end he’d gone and sat in the corner sobbing.

“I’m crazy, don’t pay any attention to me,” he’d said.

The rest of us watched silently as the guru pranced around him with a packet of tissues, a glass of water, and a dropper bottle of Bach’s Rescue Remedy. It was the first time I saw something like insecurity on the guru’s face. Now you know what it’s like, I thought to myself with mean-spirited glee—maybe you should have trained to become a yoga instructor instead, or learned to lead shamanic journeys or something.

The doughboy had fully intact face, arms, and legs, and he could see, hear, and talk. His name was Friedrich.

I stood aside to let him go ahead of me so he could finally head home and I wouldn’t have to look at him anymore. But he did the same thing and smiled up at me. How valiant.

“What kind of a name is Marek?” he asked.

“Polish.”

“Are you Polish?”

“No. The only thing East European about me is my father’s new wife.”

“And who did that?” he asked, gesturing first at my face and then at my hand.

“A Rottweiler,” I said.

“But you can see?”

“No,” I said, peering past him.

Then I turned quickly away so he didn’t somehow think I wanted to chat with him. I went out the damn door and started to run down the hall.

A woman was coming in the opposite direction—not yet old, dollish, and somehow familiar. When she saw me running down the hall she dropped her purse and tried to step out of my way. I had the same impulse and as I tried to avoid her we ended up running into each other. My hat flew off. I picked it up and heard her shriek in horror.

“Please excuse me, I’m so clumsy today,” she said and smiled past me. Her chin was trembling.

I wanted to say something nasty to her. But then I realized why she looked familiar: she had Janne’s face, or rather, the face Janne would have in twenty or thirty years. I said nothing and ran off.

On the S-bahn train I sat in a window seat and pulled the hat even farther down my face. The car filled up quickly. But as always, nobody sat next to me or opposite me in the four-seat banquette.

I kept thinking I saw Friedrich’s tuft of red hair behind everyone who got on the train. Then he would disappear again and I didn’t look around to see where he was. If we ever happened to run into each other somewhere, I did not plan to say hello. As if I ever went wandering through markets or parks or museums or clubs or gyms anymore.

For once I didn’t want to go straight home. I was going to go see Claudia at her office. I wanted to ruin her day as pay-back.

First I had to get past Marietta, whom Claudia always called her right hand. Even though she, like me, was left-handed. Marietta stood up when I walked in and braced herself against the edge of the table as if she needed extra strength.

“Marek.” She looked up at me and her bright red lower lip quivered a little. I wondered for a second what it would feel like to sink into her lips. I hadn’t kissed anyone since the Rottweiler attack. For that alone, every Rottweiler on earth deserved to be skinned alive.

I sighed and took a quick glance at Marietta’s cleavage. I liked her because she started talking to me like an adult before I was even a teenager. And because she treated me as if I were her boss, too. Not to mention the hint of red lace I could see through her not-quite-opaque white blouse.

“It’s nice of you to drop by. Your mother is in a meeting right now. Would you like a coffee?”

“I’m in a hurry,” I said. She stepped determinedly into my path. I shoved her gently but equally determinedly to the side. I didn’t want to hurt her.

“Claudia!” I yelled.

The office was hideous, and I always wondered whether Claudia had purposefully decorated it that way to make clear that she was about work, not window dressing. The hall was long and narrow like an obstructed bowel, the floor covered with ugly gray carpeting, and frosted glass doors rose to the left and right. Between the doors, in square frames, hung paintings that were nothing more than gloomy splotches.

Behind one of the doors Claudia’s voice thundered. I had to smile. A Godzilla-like shadow fell across the frosted glass, then the door sprang open. Claudia swept out wearing a custom-tailored suit. The skirt was way too short

for a fifty-year-old. Her makeup was sloppy, her mouth was scrunched up, and sparks flew from her eyes.

“Do we have a problem?”

“I don’t. But you. You lied to me.” I didn’t care whether her client could hear me or not. “It’s not a private tutorial on getting my high school equivalency. It’s a god damn support group for cripples with some pathetic wannabe showman in charge.”

“Sounds perfect for you.” She put the palm of her hand on my chest and shoved me away from the partially open door. Behind the door it was awkwardly silent. Even so, Claudia refused to lower her voice. “I am with a client, so it’s not a good time to get hysterical. Take your meds and settle down.”

“I only took that medicine for a week—and only because they said it would help with the pain. And that was a year ago!” I raised my voice a bit more. Didn’t want the client to have to strain to overhear us.

“Oh, right. Well, then, let Marietta make you a coffee and then go home.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Why did you lie to me, why did you lie to me! Why do you always say that?”

“Tell me why.”

“Would you have gone otherwise?”

By this point I’d allowed myself to be shuffled into the screened-off waiting area, where there was a coffee table with little sparkling bottles of mineral water and orderly stacks of magazines about outdoor living. I slumped down into one of the chairs next to a box of toy blocks. The chair gave a feeble groan.

“I’m not going to go back, just so you know.”

“Fine. Just rot away at home.”

She yanked painfully on my one undamaged ear and then disappeared again behind the frosted glass. The door clanged noisily shut and vibrated, causing the adjacent doors to vibrate as well. Claudia’s apology echoed in the hallway.

With an understanding smile, Marieta offered me a cup of coffee. I sloshed about half of it on my pants. I still couldn’t smile back properly—my lips hurt and the skin strained across my entire cheek as if it had been stitched together too tightly.

In the car she held the hand with the cigarette out the window and flicked the ash in the wind. The wind blew it back onto her arm and it clung there looking like dandruff. I was waiting for her to pepper me with questions about the cripple support group. And for her to pretend to be interested in the disabilities of the others and then to say that I should count myself lucky because I could walk, see, and hear, that the world offered so much more opportunity to me. She hadn’t gone through that routine in a long time.

“Claudia,” I said. She looked over at me, surprised at my tone. “If you were a girl, would you run away from me screaming?”

“I am a girl.” She turned the radio off and put a CD into the slot in the dashboard.

“That’s why I asked.”

“You know the old fairytale.” It must have been one of her yoga CDs. The car filled with a strange kind of groaning sound. Claudia turned down the volume until it was just a quiet hum.

“What fairytale?”

“Beauty and the Beast.”

I bit down on my lower lip until it tasted salty and still I couldn’t feel a thing. There was a time when Claudia kept saying that I didn’t look bad at all, that I was almost as good looking as before, that I didn’t need to hide myself. That my problem was only in my head. That I had just convinced myself that I was deformed. “Look at yourself in the mirror—you’re not ugly at all,” she’d said time and time again, trying to hold my head still when I turned away from my reflection. “Life is not over because of a few scars, Marek.” She said it so often that I began to think I might actually believe her if she repeated it another ten times. Or fifteen. Or a hundred.

And now she was saying Beauty and the Beast. I looked silently out the window. Outside it was nighttime. I had waited in that screened-off corner, bent over a hunting magazine, until it got dark. Marietta had long since gone home and Claudia nearly locked me in the office. She had gasped and grabbed her chest when I called to her from my spot behind the room divider.

“At least take off the damn sunglasses.” She tossed the cigarette away and then pushed the button to close the power window. “You don’t want to ruin your eyes on top of everything else.”