

Counting in Swedish

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THE SCHOOL SWARMED with kids, all speaking Swedish too fast for Kelsi to understand. Everyone took their shoes off outside the classroom, so Kelsi did, too.

A smiling woman with a blond ponytail greeted Kelsi at the door to Room 3. “*Hej (hay). Jag heter (ya hay-ta), Gunilla.* I’m your teacher.”

Kelsi smiled back. She had practiced Swedish at home with her mom, so she knew that meant, “Hello. My name is Gunilla.”

“*Hej, Gunilla,*” she said. It felt strange to call her teacher by her first name, but Mom had told her that they did things differently in Sweden. “*Jag heter, Kelsi.*”

Mom greeted Gunilla, then kissed Kelsi’s cheek. “Have a great first day, honey! I’ll pick you up after school.”

Now Kelsi was on her own. She took a deep breath.

The classroom looked cozy, like her classroom in Wisconsin, with beanbag chairs in one

corner and posters of children on the walls. But instead of individual desks, this room had round tables with four students to a table. At least I don't have to sit alone, she thought.

A few of the children went to a rack at the back of the room and grabbed headphones. Gunilla must have seen Kelsi looking confused because she explained, "The headphones are for when you need quiet."

It seemed to be okay to talk in groups when Gunilla wasn't teaching.



Gunilla walked Kelsi to a table with three other children. "Ida, Sanaa, och (awck) Lukas," she said and pointed. Kelsi recognized that the word *och* meant "and."

"Hello," Lukas said.

"Hi," Kelsi said, surprised. "You speak English?"

Lukas laughed. "*Bara lite (bah-rah lee-teh).*"

"Leet?" Kelsi tried to say the new word like Lukas.

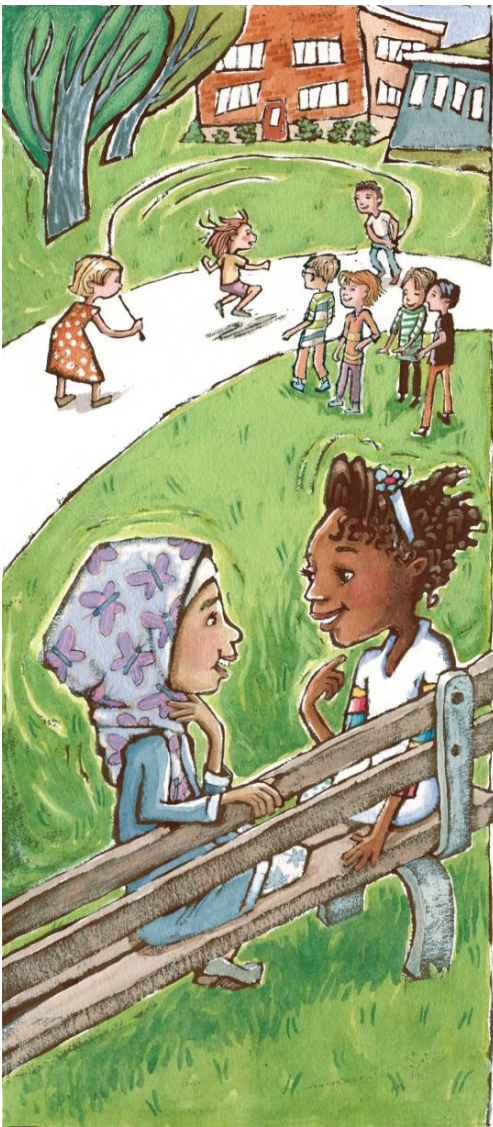
Lukas pinched his fingers together so they almost touched. Ah, *bara lite* must mean "a little," she thought.

Ida, the girl in the pink shirt, giggled and said something in Swedish to Lukas in words that Kelsi didn't recognize. Sanaa didn't say anything, just ducked her head.

When their family moved to Sweden, Kelsi was excited. She and Mom learned to say *hej* for “hello” and *hej då* (hay doh) for “goodbye.” They learned Swedish numbers, colors, and letters. Kelsi even had Swedish language lessons in the afternoons, but after her first day Kelsi realized she needed many more words. How would she learn them all?

The next day at school, Gunilla spoke in Swedish all morning. Sometimes she translated for Kelsi, but most of the time Kelsi didn’t understand. Now and then, Ida smiled at her, but nobody spoke to Kelsi much because she didn’t speak Swedish.

During recess, Kelsi stood at the edge of the play area watching Ida and Lukas jump rope with their friends. She noticed a girl sitting alone and decided to sit beside her. She had seen the girl in her morning class, but she couldn’t remember her name.



The girl didn’t look up when Kelsi sat down. Today, she wore a silky blue headscarf covered in purple butterflies. The scarf hid her hair and shoulders, and her hands were shaking a little. Maybe the girl was nervous, too.

Lukas waved to Kelsi and then pointed at the rope. Kelsi had jump roped a lot at home. She wanted to join, but her head was so full of Swedish it felt like it might burst. She shook her head no.

“*Hej*,” Kelsi said, glancing at the girl beside her. “*Jag heter*, Kelsi.”

“Sanaa,” the girl replied quietly, finally looking at Kelsi. “*Inte svenska* (in-teh sven-skah)” That meant she didn’t speak Swedish.

Kelsi pointed to herself. “*Inte svenska*.” Sanaa’s dark eyes opened wide. They were like coals, with dancing flecks of golden brown. She pointed to herself. “Iraq.”

“Am-eee-ri-ka,” Kelsi said, trying to make herself sound Swedish.

They both laughed.

“Your scarf is really pretty,” Kelsi said, touching her own hair and then pointing at Sanaa’s. She struggled to find the word, “*Söt* (*seht*). . . pretty.” “Hijab,” Sanaa said, tugging at the end of her scarf.

Now that there were two of them who didn't speak Swedish, Kelsi felt a little braver. She pointed to the kids jumping rope and Sanaa smiled, nodding in agreement. Kelsi grabbed Sanaa's hand and together they joined the others.

"*Hej,*" Kelsi called. "*Ja (yah)?*" *Ja* meant yes. It was the only way Kelsi could think of to ask if they could take a turn jumping rope.

"*Ja,*" Ida agreed. She nodded and made room for Kelsi and Sanaa in line.

"*Ett, två, tre (ett, tvoh, tree),*" Kelsi counted with the other kids, just like she had learned with her Mom.

"*Ett, två, tre,*" the others counted when it was Kelsi's turn. Sanaa followed right after her, the purple butterflies on her scarf fluttering in the wind.

