

# Write Your Mother's Name Here

Evan Hugo Tepest

Translation sample by Han Smith

## **PART ONE – YELLOW**

### **The first day**

By the time Alex met her mother at the station, she was already feeling ill. The square outside was empty: no taxis and no rental bikes.

They hugged briefly, their lower bodies held as far apart as possible. Alex pulled away before any chance of her mother kissing her cheek.

As her mother flicked on the POWER button in her Mini, a loud voice blasted out a warning about the heavy traffic in the area. “You look good,” she said, as she manoeuvred out of the parking space, looking past Alex and over her shoulder.

They hadn’t seen each other for more than two years.

A little further on, the factory chimneys rose up above the roofs of the town. Smoke wafted out into the stone-grey sky. There was the river, the Rhine, at its widest, cooling the chemical plants.

Alex closed her eyes and massaged her temples. The fine line between herself and the outside world had somehow dissolved into a haze. It was only two in the afternoon, and she already wished the light could be just a bit softer, and help her sink back into the shadows.

She searched in vain for her travel gummies. Over the past few weeks, she had been losing things constantly: her scarf, a book, literally everything. No matter how long she spent looking for them, the items clearly did not want to be found. It was as if the entire city had taken against her. At the same time, she still needed Berlin as a kind of symbol or promise to herself, to help her get through the coming days out in the sticks. To prove for her own sake that she had now become someone else.

The car crossed the bridge over the tracks. They passed her grandfather Opa Kurt’s favourite pub, and then the town’s first kebab shop.

“How was the journey?” her mother asked, not shifting her gaze from the road.

“That last part takes forever. I’d forgotten.”

“Why didn’t you just drive?”

“I haven’t driven since I was twenty.”

“Perfect time to start again, then.” Her mother accelerated, the engine roaring.

Alex breathed in and out, heavily.

“Something the matter?” said her mother.

“Sorry, I’m just exhausted.”

“Do you need a sweet to suck or something?”

Alex had not actually been eating sugar for some time now. She clearly hadn’t told her mother.

“Just fresh air, don’t worry,” she said.

“Good. I need to take Rozi out anyway.”

Rozi was the extremely anxious dog Alex’s mother had adopted from a Romanian kennel. The two of them essentially never stopped moving.

“Oh, by the way. Your grandmother was out walking recently, and someone asked her how long it might be until you publish another book,” said Alex’s mother. Presumably, this was supposed to sound casual. “Is it – normal – for it to take so long?”

Alex’s first novel had been about a young lesbian who worked as a cleaner for an old gay man with cancer, and who ended up walking all the way from Berlin to Copenhagen on foot for him, to visit the grave of his lover. The lover had died of AIDS. It had sold well enough, and received some good reviews. But her second book hadn’t quite worked out. For some reason, no publisher could see that *Coming of Sex*, an index of Alex’s thirty-eight sexual partners, might be a good investment.

“Feel free to just actually ask me directly what I’m spending all my time doing,” said Alex.

She took out her notebook. She read silently.

### Write Your Mother’s Name Here

*If I’m going to write anything about my mother, I’ll need to write about her town first.*

- *Population – 40,000*
- *Buildings destroyed by bombing in World War II – 97% (fair enough though)*
- *Votes for the far-right AfD party last election – 14.93%*
- *Unemployment rate – 8.4%*
- *One cigarette from the kiosk – 20 cents*
- *One ready-meal at the school canteen – 50 cents*
- *One train ticket to the closest real city – €16.30*

Outside, the clay sports field smeared by in a brown blur. This was where Alex had spent her days ripping open her knees as a child, and fearing she would never score a single goal.

Her mother was now describing the renovations on the house. The swimming pool in the basement was meant to be next, but there was some kind of problem with the builders. There was always some kind of problem with the builders.

Alex's mother lived in an oversized so-called 'villa' at the edge of the woods, built in the 70s. It had been a time when all anyone was thinking about was expanding as much as possible, somehow fully confident that there would be enough space and prosperity to go round. A time before the stresses of the internet, and minimalistic tiny house aesthetics. Alex could imagine the small town's chattering classes in the 80s and 90s – having wild pool parties and spilling out across the property and terraces, all making out with each other and drinking egg liqueur. By the time her mother had bought the house, the walls had been yellow and the carpets were filthy. Towards the end of her life, the previous owner had lived alone in the eight rooms, smoking Davidoff Golds in the kitchen and living room to her heart's content.

The guest bedroom Alex had been instructed to sleep in was freshly renovated and spacious, and had its own balcony. Her mother had clearly worked her way through the home décor catalogues highly efficiently: petrol-coloured carpet, velvet sofa, a coffee table sporting a mid-century aesthetic. Next to the sofa, a glass frame was propped against the wall. Black-and-white faces of Jim Morrison, Allen Ginsberg and Jimi Hendrix. And the only woman: Janis Joplin. It was distinctly unclear why her mother had decided to bring this collage with her from her old apartment. Alex had made it herself at the age of fourteen, tasked in art at school with 'exploring her identity'. At the time, she had been more interested in listening to Dutch retro rock stations, putting out cigarettes on her lower arms, and disappearing into the tragic biographies of other people than having to think about herself. Her efforts on the collage had scraped her a pass.

A few months later, she and her sister Fritzi had moved out for good.

Alex had only visited the villa once before, when her mother had just married her third husband, Günther. She hadn't seen any reason to come back since. Even as a teenager, she had always been good at getting out of Christmas gatherings and birthdays, and answering approximately one in four calls from her mother.

She had been waiting for an ECG at the doctor's a few weeks before when she had decided, for once, to pick up. Her grandfather, Opa Kurt, had died.

"We're planning to scatter his ashes in Holland," said her mother. "You know how much he loved the sea."

For a moment Alex pictured the yellow Speedos Opa Kurt had always worn on trips to the coast. She had never been especially close to him. She wasn't even particularly sure she had liked him.

“You’ll come, though, won't you?” said her mother.

Her name was called, and she hung up without giving an answer.

“Just breathe and relax,” advised the nurse, still attaching the electrodes to Alex’s upper body and ankles. She noticed several boxes piled up on the table: they were labelled *Big Orange Needle*. Like a line from a poem, she thought.

Back at her apartment, she had examined the marks left on her chest by the suction cups. She looked as if she'd been starring in some kind of tentacle porno.

She decided she would go to the funeral. Perhaps it was just an inevitable hangover from her traditional upbringing. Acknowledging weddings and funerals; calling to thank people for cards. Going through the formalities, whether willingly or not.

So she rang her mother back and booked a train.

The next day, her mother had sent both Alex and Fritzi a text:

*You both need to think about writing a living will. I can make an appointment with my solicitor – it's on me :\* :\* :\**

Nothing was safe from her mother’s mania for micro-management. Not even death.

In the absence of a desk in the guest room, Alex set up her laptop and notebooks on the sofa. She shifted the balcony table in front of the window and spread her papers out on top of it. She read the email from her agent one more time.

*Subject: Write Your Mother's Name Here*

*Hey Alex,*

*Hope all's well. I've got great news!*

*I spoke to Roger from the Swiss publisher yesterday. I'm afraid they've turned down “Coming of Sex” – too niche for them. BUT: They're publishing an anthology early next year, and he thinks you'd be perfect for it. WRITE YOUR MOTHER'S NAME HERE – that's the title. It's part of an exhibition around a dozen women are taking part in, “expressing the unspoken in their relationships with their mothers by transforming their names into artworks”. (...That's literally what it says on the website.)*

*So it's all about what mothers and daughters don't talk about. Apparently, one of the artists sculpted her mother's name in Greek letters out of dog shit, then poured petrol over it and set it on fire. One of the others gave up after two days but still pocketed the fee, and sent an email to the curators just saying: This is my mother's name.*

*Amazing, right? Deadline's September, but I'm sure you'll manage. The contributor fee is €1000.*

*I KNOW, I KNOW. You hate mother-daughter books with pictures of women on the cover. I get it. But I really think this is something different. They pretty much only publish art books anyway – 100% it'll be more subtle.*

*I really think it's a great opportunity. Something to keep you on the radar after the novel. And then hopefully we'll find a publisher for "Coming of Sex" too. It can't be just French women who get to write about sex forever... ;)*

*On that note,*

*Mille bisous,*

*Jenny x*

Alex was still sceptical. But she did need the money. She also knew it would be good for her to have some kind of task to focus on while she was visiting.

The only minor issue was that what Alex and her mother *didn't* talk about pretty much covered everything. To have any real sense of what counted as unspoken, they'd have to actually be speaking to each other in the first place.

\*\*\*

The house was quiet. Alex's mother was at a doctor's appointment; Günther was still at work. Only the whir of the washing machine broke the silence.

Alex knew she needed to get on with writing, but nothing had come to her. Nothing to spark the project. She switched on the light in the hallway and went up to the second floor. She stepped into the room her mother used as an office.

She checked the desk first: just instruction manuals and bills in files. She read the spines of the books on the small shelves. *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, various crime novels. A single, battered paperback Goethe.

Alex sprang back when a notebook with a thin black band around it fell out from between the volumes into her hand. Oh. Hadn't her mother once mentioned she had kept a diary while she was pregnant? Alex suddenly felt as excited as she had when she had crept into the room at school for books that had been deemed 'inappropriate'.

*Monday, 14 July 2010, 5 p.m.: Change oil. 6:30 p.m.: Italian lesson.*

She flicked through it all. Just times and appointments. She sighed and slipped the book back between the others. She hoped it was the same slot she had originally taken it from.

On the bottom shelf there were photo albums. There was a single loose photograph, as well: a landscape image of three children, all more or less the same height. Fritzi was on the right, with her plaits and a gap between her teeth, and Alex was on the left in her yellow Borussia Dortmund kit. And in the middle, there was a boy in glasses: their stepbrother, Georg, a wide grin across his face. Alex suddenly felt enraged by how naïve they all looked. How completely unprepared they were for what was coming.

In her mother's room, on the neatly made bed, lay the teddy bear. A few years before, her mother had sent it to someone who did toy repairs. His eyes and a patch of his fur had been replaced.

Alex could remember precisely what had happened when Georg had once been playing with the bear. The teddy had become Godzilla, attacking Georg's miniature garage, while several of his police cars and fire engines had been attempting to fight the monster off. Her mother had banned Georg from watching TV for a week. He would have been seven years old.

On her mother's bedside table there was a pillbox with dividers for each day of the week. Alex opened up the Saturday compartment. A triangle-shaped yellow tablet with a rounded hollow in the middle. A capsule containing a whitish powder. A long red pill with a groove stamped into it.

The bedroom window looked out over the fields that spread out beyond the one-way street. They seemed somehow less green than she remembered. Here, too, it was warmer than ten years before, let alone twenty years before.

Life in the city felt very far away.

\*\*\*

An hour later, her mother was standing at the kitchen island, washing two apples in the sink. Alex couldn't remember ever eating fruit as a child.

"How was the doctor's?" she asked, sitting down on one of the stools.

"Oh, fine." Her mother turned off the tap and now picked up the apple cutter.

"What was it actually for?" said Alex.

"Just a check-up."

She arranged the slices in a semi-circle on a plate and slid it in Alex's direction. "Took no time at all, really. But the level crossing just took ages."

The washing machine beeped from the basement. Alex lifted a slice of the fruit but did not bring it to her lips. Her mother began to rinse the cutter.

"I wanted to get petrol too, but even diesel's so expensive at the moment. I'll have to try in Holland instead."

When the washing machine beeped again – one, two, three – she rushed out of the room without another word.

Even when she looked online, it wasn't easy to figure out exactly what the pills were. The long one with the groove could have been ibuprofen. Or lorazepam – for anxiety and panic disorders.

Yellow pills, she read, were often antidepressants; apparently, people with depression were supposed to like yellow. *Yellow can signify light and life*. Alex wondered if her mother could really be depressed. Nothing could be further from her than *lacking drive*. But Alex, whose tablets were round and white, was not depressed in the most typical sense, either. She didn't have any problem motivating herself to exercise, work or get out of bed in the mornings. She tried imagining herself asking her mother about the pillbox. Why not? "Hey, do you reckon we both have agitated depression?"

The idea was so absurd that she actually laughed out loud.

It all made her think of something. A few weeks before, she had had to collect a parcel that had been delivered to her neighbour, a lawyer who was nearing retirement. The man had taken the opportunity to regale her with his tragic life story from the 90s onwards: how he often couldn't get himself out of bed each morning, and would call in to his office to work on files at home. Just as Alex was trying to leave, he had invited to come back for dinner soon. She hadn't been quick enough to think of an excuse.

"You need to learn to accept you can't always please everyone," said Jenny. "Maybe you should even actually seek out a rejection."

"Rejection?" Alex had said. "Don't I get enough of that as a writer?"

"Confrontation is hard, but it's worth it," said Jenny, with total conviction.

The next evening, Alex stood at the door of her neighbour's apartment for a full five minutes. It suddenly became completely impossible for her lips to form the words she had rehearsed in the stairwell. She was paralysed by the stress she would cause him by refusing to do what he had hoped and expected. She went back to her apartment on the first floor without knocking.

She had read that certain hormones could stop the human jaw from opening – preventing both chewing and speech.

In this same intensely physical, bodily way, talking to her mother now seemed just as impossible as turning down her neighbour's invitation.

\*\*\*

After sitting down to eat with her mother and Günther – dark bread and sliced pickle; updates on Rozi, work and the house – Alex lay on the bed and masturbated. She tried to make herself think of nothing. Her hand circled harder and harder, but she felt both numb and overstimulated. She was sweating. She had been taking the antidepressants for two weeks now, and whenever she had tried to touch herself, she had come up against this nebulous barrier. She had felt this way in the past as well, during sex she had had while very drunk: it was as if she was seeing herself from the outside. Like her body was experiencing desire, but her consciousness was somewhere else.

She wiped her hand on the bed cover and reached over for her phone. Her new background for the screen was the photo of the three smiling children. Georg, Fritzi and Alex. A reminder not to get too comfortable here, perhaps. She opened the Netflix app, chose a documentary on hip-hop, and went into the bathroom. She cleaned her teeth carefully with two different brushes. The pink basin was made in the shape of a shell.

Tupac's voice drifted from her phone:

*And since we all came from a woman... Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman.*

The hairdryer was a black fold-out travel model. Alex plugged it in, lifted her t-shirt, and began blowing the air across her stomach, up and down and left to right. After a few minutes she turned it up to the second setting. She sensed her breath slowing and steadying. The dryer gave off a strong smell of burnt hair. She hoped the plastic wouldn't melt.

*Things my mother and I apparently have in common:*

- *An extreme fear of horror films, cf. our respective nightmares after watching The Exorcist*
- *Star sign (a.k.a. Pisces)*
- *Sensitive knees (no running on asphalt)*
- *Favourite school subjects (German and Maths)*
- *A clear preference for walking or cycling over using public transport*
- *Passable singing voice*

- *A childhood reputation for never sitting still, cf. the shared nickname 'Wibbelstätz'*
- *Escaping into books as children: Anne Frank's Diary (my mother), Harry Potter (me)*
- *Occasionally, while climbing stairs in public buildings, suddenly imagining falling with fatal consequences*