



The Words She Leaves Untranslated

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Useful Daughter

Hadara is halfway through translating the school letter when she reaches a phrase she has never heard before.

She reads it twice. It contains words she knows separately. Together, they seem to mean something more formal than their ordinary meanings.

Mama waits beside her at the kitchen table. Her navy tichel covers all her hair, and her long sleeves brush the table as she moves the letter toward the light.

"Is there a meeting?"

"Yes. On Tuesday."

"About the extra lessons?"

"I think so."

Hadara is eighteen. Her family speaks one language at home; she studies in another. She handles shop signs, appointment times, and letters about school trips easily. Mama understands some of the school language too, especially when people speak slowly and leave time for questions.

This letter concerns Hadara's younger sister's learning support. It invites the parents to discuss an assessment and possible arrangements for next term.

Hadara looks at the unfamiliar phrase again.

"What does that line say?" Mama asks.

Hadara gives the most ordinary meaning of the words.



Then she stops.

"I'm not sure that's what it means here."

Mama looks from her to the page.

"Could you come with me?"

Chapter 2: The Phrase in Her Notebook

Hadara writes the phrase on a small card and asks her teacher about it the next day.

The teacher explains what the words might refer to in a school document, then asks to see the actual letter before saying more.

Hadara does not have it with her. It contains her sister's information. She has taken only the phrase.

"The school needs to explain its own proposal," the teacher says. "I don't want to give you a meaning that sounds right but doesn't match their use."

Hadara nods.

"You can help your mother ask for someone who can interpret the meeting properly," the teacher adds. "Fluent conversation isn't the same as knowing every specialist term."

Hadara understands that. She also dislikes it.



For years, being the person who knows both languages makes her useful. When adults praise her, they mention that first. It is a good thing to be good at.

Now she pictures Mama at a table, needing words Hadara cannot provide.

"Could I look up the terms beforehand?"

"That might help you understand questions. It wouldn't make you responsible for interpreting a formal decision."

The teacher offers to help her write a request to the school office. Hadara says she will discuss it with her parents first.

On the way home, she looks at the card.

There is one phrase on it. She imagines all the phrases she does not yet know to write down.

Chapter 3: The Call They Make Together

At home, Hadara explains what she learns. She does not tell Mama the teacher doubts her language. The teacher does not doubt it.

"I can translate ordinary things," Hadara says. "I can't make sure I explain the assessment terms properly. They should arrange someone who can."

"Can the office do that?" Mama asks.

"We need to ask."



They contact the office together. Hadara helps with the request, and Mama confirms what support she wants. Tatty is included in the discussion about the meeting and their questions.

The school offers a later appointment with an adult language-support person who knows the type of discussion and can check unfamiliar wording directly with the staff. The parents accept that appointment. The school explains the person's role and confidentiality arrangements to them before they agree.

Mama asks whether Hadara still wants to come for the beginning.

"You don't have to interpret the assessment," she says. "I'd like company getting there."

Hadara feels relief. Then, unexpectedly, she feels replaced.

The feelings arrive so close together that she nearly misses the second.

"I can come," she says. "And I'll wait outside during the part about the assessment unless you need me for something ordinary."

Mama agrees.

They put the new time on the calendar. The original Tuesday appointment is canceled rather than left as an unanswered commitment.

Hadara folds the phrase card and puts it in her notebook.

Chapter 4: A Question That Is Hers

Before the appointment, Hadara's younger sister asks where they are going.



Mama gives an explanation that fits what the child needs to know. The grownups will talk about what makes learning easier and what school can arrange. Hadara does not add the terms from the letter to make the explanation more impressive.

Later, Mama and Tatty list questions for the meeting. What does the assessment actually say? What help is proposed? How will they know whether it helps? What choices are they being asked to make now?

Hadara writes the questions in the school language while Mama checks that they match what she means.

She is useful here. She is not deciding the answers.

At the bottom, Hadara adds, Will she be all right?

She looks at it for a long moment.

Then she realizes it is not a translated question. It is her own worry.

"Can I ask you about that separately?" she says.

Mama reads it.

"Yes."

They sit together. Mama explains what the family knows and what still needs discussion. She does not promise a result she cannot know. She also does not hand Hadara responsibility for making her sister's future come out right.



Hadara crosses out the line on the meeting list and puts it on a separate page headed Questions I have.

Both pages matter. They belong in different conversations.

Chapter 5: The Chair Outside

At the school, the adult language-support person introduces herself to the parents. Her name is Mrs. Stern. Her gray headscarf covers all her hair; her high-necked dress has sleeves to her wrists.

She asks what language the parents prefer for each part of the discussion. She explains that she will ask the staff to clarify terms rather than guess. The parents can stop the conversation when something is unclear.

Hadara likes hearing that last sentence.

She also notices that Mrs. Stern carries a notebook.

Being competent apparently does not mean remembering everything without help.

Hadara stays for the ordinary introductions. Then Mama thanks her for coming, and Hadara goes to the chair outside the office.

Through the closed door, she hears voices but not words. For a moment, she tries to listen harder. If she can catch a sentence, perhaps she can still be part of the work.

She stops.



Her parents choose to have that discussion with the appropriate adults. She does not need to collect pieces through a door.

She opens the book she brings. She reads a paragraph three times because her mind keeps moving toward the office.

Then she closes the book and asks the receptionist where she can get water.

Waiting does not need to look productive.

Chapter 6: What They Bring Home

After the meeting, Mama and Tatty come out with notes in the language they choose.

They have a plan to consider, not a decision Hadara must make for them.

They arrange a follow-up question with the school before confirming one part of it.

On the way home, Mama tells Hadara the part of the discussion she wants to share. Hadara asks about her sister, not about whether Mrs. Stern needs help with a phrase.

"She asks the staff to explain one term twice," Mama says.

"Which term?"

Mama tells her. It is the phrase from the card.

"She doesn't know it either?"

"She wants to be certain what they mean in this report."



Hadara thinks about that.

She spends so much time imagining expertise as a person with all the answers that she overlooks the person who knows when to check.

"I'm glad I don't try to guess," she says.

Mama squeezes her hand. "So am I."

The meeting does not make every concern disappear. There will be a follow-up, and the parents will keep watching how the support works with the school. Hadara does not take over that watching because she understands the calendar.

At home, her sister asks whether they bring a snack.

Hadara laughs. "We should have thought of that."

She gets the biscuits from the cupboard. It is a job she can do without an assessment term.

Chapter 7: The Next Letter

A week later, a letter arrives about a school outing for another sibling.

Hadara reads the departure time, the return time, and what food to bring. She helps Mama check the permission form. There is no difficult phrase hiding between the sandwiches and the raincoat.

"Can you explain this part?" Mama asks.

Hadara can. She does.



She is not less useful because one earlier document requires another person's expertise. She is also not required to turn every page into an opportunity to prove she knows enough.

She puts the outing letter beside the calendar and leaves the learning-support folder where her parents keep it.

That evening, she finds the folded phrase card in her notebook. She writes a small note underneath it.

Ask what it means here.

Not because all her words are unreliable. Because some important words deserve a question before an answer.