

B. E. Hopkins  
519 Atlantic Ave.  
Brooklyn, NY 11217

1,400 words

## Every Little Thing

B. E. Hopkins

"Just pick one, Dawn! They're all the same..."

"They are not!"

"Just hurry up and choose, please," the girl's exasperated mother urged.

Her nose lightly touching the glass front of a display case at the Café Konditorei Neuhaus, Dawn Anselm continued to stare at a bewildering assortment of delectable pastries, only one of which she would ultimately be allowed to eat. Having to choose was almost unbearable, and so she took yet another little break from her difficult decision making, turning to her mother and asking absently: "Where are we meeting Alan?"

"Daddy, darling..." The mother checked her watch. "We've only got half an hour. Now come on, sweetheart. Pick one, okay?"

Normally, the little girl would have remarked impetuously that her mother's reply was not actually an answer to her question, but even as she had posed it Dawn had once more become entranced by the rows upon rows of pastries, anaesthetized by the sweet smell wafting from the behind the counter, and dreamily pacified by sugar-coated fantasies of eating every last potentially creamy, custardy, or chocolatey morsel arrayed before her. She held her top and bottom lips between her teeth and bit them together, punctuating the pain of indecision.

Already, on the short walk from Claudia Kaufmann's house down a small, cobbled backstreet of Kaiserslautern, her mother had ruled out all things custard- or jelly-filled. Dawn was wearing that day the pretty sky-blue jacket she had received for her fifth birthday, a jacket which she was particularly fond of, and her mother knew what a scene it would be if Dawn were to, God forbid, drip a blob of something on it. And so, passing the Berliners and Napoleons and Linzertortes by, Dawn had worked her way down the first three sections of the display case to the far end, where she had been confronted by a myriad of lovely Brötchen, millions of them (or so it seemed, due to the mirrored back and sides of the case, which reflected them upon themselves into infinity)—each exactly like the others and perfectly arranged; each with a crisp, golden-brown top; each an inviting pillow of sweet bread; each of them exactly like the others yet

excruciatingly distinct and differently desirable; and some hiding a yummy stripe of rich, dark chocolate.

The mother rested her hands atop her swollen belly and sighed wearily while waiting for her daughter to decide. Noticing that the German gentleman behind the counter was staring at her, she pretended that one of the pastries had suddenly caught her eye and bent down to take a closer look. When the old man leaned over and asked her something in German, she stood up again and smiled at him, shaking her head slightly as she often did when she had no idea what the locals were asking her.

As though coming to from her pastry-induced hypnosis and having just heard the earlier reply, Dawn tugged the bottom of her mother's jacket. "But where, Mommy?"

The mother touched her daughter lightly on her little blond head. "Back at the base, sweetie..."

"We get to ride the bus again?" asked Dawn.

The man pointed to the mother's belly and said something slower and louder. "Oh, she'll decide," the mother replied, taking a stab at it. "It just takes her a little while." The man grinned broadly and nodded with feigned understanding.

From below the counter, Dawn announced in German that she would like the chocolate Brötchen in the right front corner, please. The man opened the back of display case. Having pointed

out exactly which one she meant, the little girl turned again to her mother and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"How come you can't just talk like them?"

Her mother opened a small change purse and fished around for a fifty-pfennig piece. "Well, I don't get to play with little German girls every day, do I?" she replied, a touch defensively. She set a coin on the counter.

"He's asking about the baby!" said Dawn. "When he'll be here..." She then stood up on her tippy-toes and began speaking breathlessly in words her mother couldn't understand, explaining that the baby was already a month overdue and that nobody knew when she would have a new little brother to play with but that she was excited to see the new baby and play with him and that her mother was getting very tired of carrying him around in her belly all the time and that it hurt her back and she wished he would just be born already. The old man chuckled and began to wrap up the Brötchen.

"Hmm," the mother remarked casually as she watched him, "that one's a little smooshed, huh?" The man looked up briefly and winked, then continued to wrap it. She turned to her daughter: "Dawny, look. Don't you want one that isn't smooshed?" Absorbed now in looking a small fleck on her jacket, Dawn nodded her head vacantly. The mother gestured for the man to stop wrapping. He looked at her and furrowed his brow.

Dawn translated to him that they would like another one. What's wrong with it? he wanted to know. But Dawn couldn't think of a word for smooshed, and so instead she hummed curtly and insisted he replace it.

The man unwrapped the pastry and put it back into the display case. "Find a nice one," Dawn's mother told her.

This time Dawn was quicker to decide. Almost at once, she pointed out another exactly like the first but without the dimple in the side made by the man's thumb. She picked, in fact, what seemed to be the smoothest, roundest one in the case, and the slightly flawed one took its place.

As her mother paid for the Brötchen, the man shook his head in sympathy and smiled warmly at her. In words the mother vaguely recognized, he wished her the best of luck.

Half-listening to their exchange of money and goods and mutually incomprehensible words, Dawn stared at the Brötchen that she'd asked to be returned amid the others. She gazed at the lonely little smooshed Brötchen, and now the others did seem all the same. Suddenly, only the one with the indentation seemed real.

Just about anything can become the center of a child's life, and Dawn could imbue any object in the world with life. In that moment, the pastry became the center of her universe. And she felt an overwhelming guilt for not accepting it. She felt

terrible for it, as though it were a person who could feel bad for not having been chosen. Tears welled in her eyes. Even though she knew it was a little silly to feel so bad about a Brötchen, she couldn't help it. It wasn't the roundest Brötchen, and that was why she loved it. Without having ever touched it, she suddenly, desperately wanted it back. Entirely without meaning to, she found herself crying.

"Momma," she shouted, "Momma, Momma!" pulling roughly on her mother's jacket. "I want the first one! I want that one!"

"Oh, so now you want the smooshed one!" her mother scoffed, prying Dawn's fingers from the bottom of her jacket.

Dawn appealed frantically to the man behind the counter, saying that she'd changed her mind. Without a word, he again exchanged the Brötchen.

"Good," the mother said. "Great." She took the wrapped-up pastry from the man and handed it to Dawn. "So are we ready finally?"

A sudden change came over the mother's face. A look of surprise. Then one of recognition.

"My water just broke," she said.

Marion Dorn walked into her children's room. On one side of the room stood Dawn's bed, next to it was a small desk, and next to that a new crib. She swaddled her two-week-old son in a downy

blanket, laid him in the crib, and (despite the fact that he'd already drifted off to sleep as she'd carried him in from his bath) set a mobile spinning above him.

The room was too small for two children. They would have to move soon. Alan hadn't even finished repapering the walls. But Marion felt like they were finally a real family. Still, she wished they could go home.

She straightened up the clutter of coloring books on Dawn's desk and collected an assortment of crayons. Arranging them in their box, she opened a drawer to put them away. Inside, she found something wrapped in nice tissue paper.

Marion picked it up and unwrapped it: a stale chocolate pastry with a small impression in its side.