

Sample translation

***Het kabinet van de familie Staal* by Yolanda Entius
(Amsterdam: Cossee, 2011)**

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For additional information on Yolanda Entius and other Dutch writers, please also visit:
- The fiction pages at the foundation website: www.nlpvf.nl/fc/

Pages 9-15

He was a small man, who thought he was big, impressive, wise, better. Better than his mother, who still didn't know how to replace a light bulb, better than his father, who was a wimp, better than the next-door neighbour, who didn't know a thing about cars, better than that bugger at work, better than a labourer, who was, by definition, stupid, better than his brother-in-law, who lived in a rented house, better than his son-in-law, who drove a middle-of-the-range car, and better than his wife, who he claimed he'd pulled out of the gutter.

When he found her, she didn't have a pot to piss in – that's how he put it. And she would give an embarrassed laugh.

She was just as small as him, but while he imagined himself larger, she tended to shrink, so that the difference between them was always as big as he wanted it to be. She went around with a permanent stoop. And when she sat in front of the TV in the evening with her knitting, her trembling little paws with the clicking needles crossed nervously in front of her chest and her dark beady eyes peering at him, she looked just like a mouse.

She, Mouse, was frightened of him and for those first few years she had a full-time job passing that fear on to her children. She succeeded. By the time I was born, all it took to silence us was the slightest of looks, which meant that he was free to enjoy his car, his house and his huge oak armchairs in peace.

Those chairs were really big, far too big for him. Furniture maketh the man, he must have thought when he decided to fill the new bungalow with his blocks of oak. Proudly, he gave his sisters the guided tour. And the aunts, who had not swooned in admiration, because they hadn't realised they were dealing with a table of exceptional stature, were informed of the price of this piece of craftsmanship from Oisterwijk, whether they wanted to know it or not. He tapped his fingers on the tabletop and said, 'Real oak, cost over ten thousand guilders.' And you could see them thinking: why should I care if the table's made of pine or teak, or how much the thing cost? They just looked at each other and held one hand over their mouths to hide their smiles. I actually felt sorry for him. Everyone, except him, could see what an absurd spectacle it was, but, encouraged by the aunts' silence, which he obviously took for stunned speechlessness, he continued to ladle it on: 'So how about the chairs? What do you think?' Quick glances, shrugs. 'Five thousand each. Real leather.' It was as if he

was trying to sell the chairs he had just purchased. He had my blessing, because they were monstrosities.

None of us little Staals fitted into them. We dangled our legs like toddlers over the patterned carpet or slid our bums forward over the calf leather until our feet found solid ground and our necks bent into the crack between the seat and the back of the chair. In fact, you could only sit on them properly if you rested your feet on the copper coffee table, but that wasn't allowed. That was a privilege reserved for him, as were all privileges: scratching your crotch, picking your toes, picking your nose and eating it, speaking out of turn, swearing, calling black people monkeys and guest workers wasters, breaking wind, coughing, kicking the dog; in short, all the things that make a man really big.

That's how I see him now, Kobe, on his throne, one hand down his trousers or picking his toes, the other on the remote control perched on the arm of his chair, his feet up on the copper coffee table. The table's so impractical too – you can't put anything on it without leaving marks, but it gleams like a trumpet and so must obviously have cost a lot. Mouse almost does herself in, polishing away at that table. But she doesn't say anything. No one says anything. We all wait in silence. She's waiting for what's to come and we, the children, are waiting until we're old enough to leave.

And he can see that. He knows we're dying to get out and he hisses at us that we're free to go if we don't like it. He points. There's the door. As long as we know the lock's on the inside. Anyone who leaves isn't coming back.

I was sixteen when I left. I'm forty-one now and, having just beaten the biological clock, there's a child in my belly, a child the size of my little finger.

That's why I'm here.

I haven't told anyone, not even Kowalski, especially not Kowalski. This is something I have to do on my own. When I say on my own, I mean with Luuk.

I left in a hurry yesterday afternoon. I just grabbed a few things and took the train to Paris, where I caught the train to Chamonix. When I got there, I changed onto the local slow train into the mountains. I travelled up along the river to the highest valley, far above the tree line, where the last cows graze.

Luuk picked me up from the train station. As soon as I arrived, he showed me how spectacular the sunset is here. It took me a moment to recognise him (I hadn't realised he'd got older, just like me) and it took a moment for him to recognise me too, even though he knew I would come. He was surprised it was me, but when he heard I was pregnant, he understood.

'How far gone are you?' he asked.

‘Eleven weeks,’ I said, ‘nearly twelve.’

Now we’re sitting inside.

I feel at home here. Wood’s burning in the iron stove. When I look out of the window, I see the lights of the houses on the other side of the valley. Luuk sets the table and puts out pale-blue bowls. They remind me of the Sunday crockery set that we never used. I take a good look at my bowl and see that it doesn’t only look like it – it’s the same set. No doubt about it. Pale blue with a green rim and a pattern of black wings. ‘Hand Painted,’ it says on the back, and ‘Made in Holland, Maastricht’. Where did that crockery actually come from? Did Kobe and Mouse buy it at some point? Was it a wedding gift from one of the parents or the aunts? I don’t know. Even when it’s something as simple as where a crockery set came from, I’m in the dark. But now the crockery set’s here and it looks as though it’s not just been kept for Sundays for a long time now. It’s been used. There are grey cracks in the glaze of my soup bowl, where the dust of years has accumulated.

Luuk serves the soup, tomato soup with meatballs and a salty 1950s taste. Maggi seasoning. I suspect he’s just opened up a tin of Unox soup, but I don’t say anything. I’ve noticed that he can be really insecure. He curses himself when anything goes wrong and he apologises all the time. He slurps the soup from his spoon, the way people do when they’ve been alone for too long and they know there’s no one watching them. It reminds me of Ilse. When she eats, her focus is entirely inward. She systematically cleans her plate until there’s not a speck remaining, like a vacuum cleaner.

Luuk gets up. ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Just leave the soup. It’s inedible.’ He sits down in one of the sagging armchairs by the stove. The stove doors are open. Luuk looks old and wise in the glow of the wood fire. He crosses his legs, folds his hands together and sits in silence. Any minute now, he’s going to light up a pipe, I think.

‘Marriage is a source of misery and many a family breeds sorrow,’ says Luuk. ‘Tolstoy,’ he explains, pointing at *Anna Karenina* on the Tomado bookshelf.

I raise my eyebrows.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” He looks at me. ‘You’ve not read Tolstoy?’

I shake my head.

‘That’s a shame,’ he says. ‘You really should.’

I nod and see that everything is exactly as I’d imagined it, all those years ago: Luuk, old and wise, erudite, talking. Me, listening, keen, eager to learn, the best student in the class. But the soup should be homemade, and there should be lots of other people here, Luuk’s friends, my friends, and the drink should be flowing abundantly.

‘Fancy a drink?’ he asks, as though he’s read my mind. ‘Wine?’

‘Wine, yes. Nice.’

He opens up a 1958 Pommard, sniffs, tastes it, gives a satisfied nod and pours me a glass. He takes a pipe from the inside pocket of his jacket. He leans forward, taps it out over the fire and goes to light it with a glowing splint of wood.

‘Don’t do that,’ I say.

‘What?’ He gives me a puzzled look.

‘That pipe. Now that I’m thinking about it, I’m not sure it suits you after all.’

‘Okay.’ He puts the pipe back in his pocket. ‘I am allowed a cigarette, though, aren’t I?’

‘As long as it’s Gauloises,’ I say. ‘Or Gitanes.’

He takes a pack of Lucky Strikes from his inside pocket.

‘Lucky Strikes are allowed too.’ But he doesn’t need my approval; he’s already lit one up. Smoke billows up to the ceiling in dreamy wisps.

‘Can you do smoke rings too?’ I ask.

‘Of course I can,’ Luuk replies. He puts his head back, purses his lips like a kissing fish and makes quiet popping sounds.

Grey-white circles leave his mouth, one by one. One of the circles hangs over his head. A halo. I imagine what it must look like from above, but then I realise that I already am above. You can’t get very much higher than here.

It’s just like it used to be, when I was drifting off to sleep and I’d imagine writing my name and address on the front of an exercise book:

Bluetit Staal
Koopmanstraat 79
The Hague
Holland
Europe
The World
The Galaxy
The Universe

Once I’d reached ‘The Universe’, there I lay, there she lay, Bluetit Staal, a tiny little creature, in her bed under the window. I had risen up, exiting the building through the roof and, carried by the wind, gone higher and higher, into infinity. I could see the city beneath me, the whole country, the continent and our earth, all growing smaller and smaller. But was it really me who saw all that? That could hardly be possible. I

was lying there in my bed. I was there, with my eyes closed, and I was here, with my eyes wide open, beholding the wonder.

And now it's happening again. I can see myself, even though I'm not here (there are still years to go before then) and I can see Kobe, beneath me.

Kobe beneath me?

Am I seeing that right?

Oh yes, I'm seeing it right.

It's incredible. Kobe has risen up here as well. Kobe, who told me to love only reality, not fiction, not art, not dreams or ideas, not drawings, novels or films; no, only reality. Reality. He said the word in English, probably because he wanted to show that he wasn't just some ordinary bloke off the street, and what he meant by 'reality' was the things that you can capture or count: photographs or the contents of your wallet. But now he's flying over the sea. What's more, we're flying together, together alone, him below, me above. We're floating on the smoke of Luuk's cigarette, and that's no word of a lie.

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In the summer holiday, we fetch our caravan, The Three Musketeers, from the campsite and hook it up behind the NSU. Every year we go to Italy and every year Mouse is so nervous the morning before we leave that we try extra hard to become invisible. The three of us go and sit on the sofa in the front room with our holiday books on our laps, but it doesn't really help. We pack up the NSU and caravan the evening before, so we can leave the next day at the crack of dawn. All Mouse has to do is check her holiday list and lock up the house.

She paces from room to room. Lights off, gas off, window slightly ajar. 'You lot go and wait in the car,' she tells us.

We close our books and go outside. On the stairs, Do and Ilse negotiate about who has to sit behind Kobe and who's allowed to sit behind Mouse. Do wins.

Outside, Kobe's checking the caravan lights.

Ilse flips Mouse's seat forward and slides along the back seat to sit behind Kobe. As always, I sit in the middle, by the 'tunnel', because I have the shortest legs. Do sits on my right.

We hear Kobe fasten the safety chain of the towing hook. He gets in and starts the engine. He looks at me in the rear-view mirror, which gives me a fright. He usually wears his dark glasses and his eyes look like two black patches, just craters. Someone told me one of his eyes was broken. For a while, I thought it was made of glass, an eye you could pop in and out, like a set of false teeth. I imagined him keeping his eye in a glass of water on the bedside table at night. Now I know that his eye is a real one, but it doesn't work. I didn't know if it could move though, along with the other eye, or if it just stared ahead, lonely and miserable. But I do now know. Because it's so early in the morning, he's wearing his ordinary glasses and I can see his eyes. They're cold and grey, and they can move, both of them at the same time even, but right now they're still and they're staring straight at me. I swallow hard. I want to look away, but I don't dare.

'Where's Mouse got to?' asks Kobe.

I'm finally free to look away. I glance around and shrug.

'Do?' Kobe asks.

'I don't know, Daddy,' Do says politely.

But then Mouse shuts the front door behind her. She gets into the car. Kobe puts his foot on the accelerator.

We drive along Laan van Meerdervoort and out of the city. Kobe whistles. Fortunately, he's wearing his sunglasses now. Mouse is fretting and we're yawning.

'Not forgotten anything, have we?' asks Kobe as we drive up the motorway. 'Passport, money, green card?'

Mouse digs around in her handbag. We're wide awake now, because we can tell from Mouse's shoulders that something's wrong.

'The green card? Have I got the green card?' she asks, voice trembling.

'Bloody hell! Have you forgotten the green card? Oh, damn it, woman.'

'I don't know. Maybe it's in my handbag. I could swear you...'

She empties the contents of her handbag into the glove compartment and back again. No green card.

She shakes her head. 'Don't you have it?'

'Of course not. What would I want with the green card?'

Mouse doesn't reply. She empties her handbag again and looks into the bag of sandwiches on the floor by her feet. Of course she didn't put the green card in with the sandwiches, but she has to do something.

'Bloody hell, what a mess. Now we're going to have to drive all the blasted way back. And we'll get stuck in a traffic jam by Koblenz later. Bugger it all to hell! Can't I rely on you to do anything?'

'Can't we go without the green card?' Mouse tentatively suggests.

'Without any car insurance? Are you mad? Absolutely no way.'

I can see the frown on his face in the rear-view mirror. He swings the steering wheel around, navigates the car into a parking space and gets out.

Mouse releases the breath she's been holding. We start to move now as well. Do pulls herself up on the back of Mouse's seat. She pushes me aside and squeezes her head between the seats.

'Isn't it with his driving licence?' she suggests. 'Have a look in his jacket.'

Mouse peeps out of the window to check the coast's clear. We do the same. Kobe's standing on the verge, having a pee. Mouse quickly pulls his wallet out of the inside pocket of his jacket, which is hanging on the chair. She opens it up and sees the green card straightaway.

'I've found it,' she says when Kobe gets back into the car. She doesn't say where and he doesn't ask.

We cross the border at Venlo and drive through customs at walking pace. Kobe taps on the dashboard with his fingernails. Mouse starts to get nervous too. The customs officer holds out his hand. '*Reisepass bitte!*' Mouse hands the passports to Kobe, who gives them to the customs officer. The man nods. He bends down to take a

look at us. He gives us a friendly wink, but we don't react. 'Alles in Ordnung,' he says and gives the passports back to Kobe. We can go on our way.

We're barely five hundred metres past the German border and still not going at full speed, which with The Three Musketeers behind us is about eight kilometres per hour, when I see the first mountains, or rather, I see the snow.

'Look,' I shout excitedly, 'it's year-round snow!' I remember it from last time, the time we actually had to go all the way back from Eindhoven because Mouse had forgotten Kobe's passport.

'Ha, ha, ha,' Kobe laughs. Mouse, Do and Ilse all join in: 'Ha, ha, ha, ha.'

'That's not snow, it's clouds.'

'Is not,' I shout. 'Those are mountains!'

'Oh, no, they're not, you silly fool. They're clouds!'

What does it matter, I think to myself, whether they're snow or clouds, as long as everyone has a good laugh. I decide that I'm going to see the snow again next year when we cross the border.

Everyone's in high spirits all the way to the foot of the Alps. 'In der Schweiz, in der Schweiz,' sings Kobe. The NSU and the Musketeers crawl along the narrow road to the pass. When Kobe has to drop gear on the hairpin bends and the whole caboodle threatens to go tumbling down the mountain, his mood goes downhill too. The temperature of the engine rises and rises as our climb grows slower and slower.

'Shouldn't we give the engine a chance to cool down?' Mouse tentatively suggests.

Oh, don't say that, Mouse, I think. If she'd kept quiet, Kobe could have pulled over without losing face, but now he'll just keep on driving until it's impossible to go any farther. And, sure enough, the higher we climb, the more the NSU struggles. But Kobe still presses on. The needle on the temperature gauge moves into the red zone. Kobe starts grinding his teeth and the vein on his temple is thumping away like a frog's heart. By the time we reach the first fields of year-round snow, the engine's growling and wheezing like a bear with pneumonia. Steam is seeping out through the gaps in the bonnet. We should pull over now, but we'd be blocking the way. There's nothing we can do except drive on until we find a place to stop. Kobe turns on the warning lights.

With its final gasp, the car crawls into a lay-by. The engine conks out and Kobe quickly puts the handbrake on.

The bonnet's rattling away like the lid of a pressure cooker that's about to explode. The car manages to keep its cool, but Kobe doesn't.

'Damn it all to hell!' he booms. He gets out and bangs the car door so hard that I'm scared we're going to go kaboom and fly up into the sky after all.

Mouse is the first to release her breath, then us. I look around. Everything is white now, fairytale.

‘Push the seat forward,’ I say to Ilse. She pulls up the handle and folds Kobe’s seat in two.

‘What are you going to do?’ Mouse asks anxiously.

‘Play in the snow,’ Ilse replies.

Mouse frowns. ‘Stay in the car for a bit, eh?’ she says.

We wait.

On our way to the pass, we drive by walls of snow that are metres high. Finally, we’re allowed to get out.

We hang around the tempting stalls where you can buy red penknives with a silver cross on and key rings with carved St. Bernards and metal plaques of the Italian and Swiss coats of arms to put on your walking stick. We keep a careful eye on Kobe and Mouse. Kobe has his head under the bonnet and Mouse is opening a bag of sandwiches. It doesn’t look as though we’re going to get anything from the stalls. Ilse walks over to the snow. I follow her. She bends down, picks up a handful and goes to throw it.

‘Ilse,’ sighs Do, looking over at Kobe, ‘don’t do that now.’

But Ilse still throws the snow, not at me, but at Do. Do turns around just in time and the snowball bursts on her back.

‘Do, Ilse, Blue! Come on!’ It’s Mouse.

She’s posing elegantly in front of The Three Musketeers. Kobe has fetched the camera. He tells us to go and stand beside Mouse.

‘Smile,’ says Kobe.

We smile.

When we reach Turin, we find ourselves in a traffic jam leading up to a roundabout at the hottest point of the day. All around us is a sunlit mountain of honking metal, floating on a sea of hot tarmac. Mouse has the map open on her lap. The curls that have escaped from her bun cling to her neck.

Kobe is casually dangling his left arm out of the window and drumming his fingers on the paintwork. The rhythm of his drumming suggests another explosion is imminent. Petrol fumes fill the NSU. Do’s got a tickly cough. She keeps swallowing. She puts one hand in front of her mouth and clears her throat as quietly as possible. We’re getting closer to the roundabout.

‘Left or right?’ asks Kobe.

‘Uhhhhhhhhh,’ Mouse groans.

‘Left or right?!’ Louder this time. ‘Left?’

‘Uhhhhhhhhh.’

'Right?'

'I don't know, Kobe.'

'We have to decide now!'

'Straight on.'

'If we go straight on, we're going to end up in Turin and we'll never get back out again.'

Mouse looks around, in a panic. 'We're already in Turin, aren't we?'

'No, we're on the outskirts.'

Mouse looks up from the map to the blue signs above the road, and then from the signs back to the map. She turns the map around, and again and again, looks at the signs once more, but there's no doubt about it: she has no idea where we are or which direction we should be going in.

'Left or right? I need to know now.'

'Left,' Mouse guesses.

Kobe presses his nose against the windscreen and looks at the signs above.

'Milan?'

'Um, Milan. Maybe, yes, could be, Milan. Yes, let's make it Milan.'

'Is Milan where we have to go?'

'Well, we have to go to Carmagnola.'

'Carmagnola's not on the signs. The signs say Turin.'

'Torino Mirafiori, yes. But I still think that we... Perhaps we should... Maybe we've already missed the...'

'Chambéry or Milan?'

'Um.'

'Now!'

'Milan, then.'

'Milan? Is Milan right? Do we have to go to Milan? We don't have to go to Milan at all, do we? Milan's in completely the wrong direction.'

Kobe turns on the indicator and yanks the steering wheel.

'Kobe!' Mouse calls anxiously.

Behind us, people start angrily honking their horns. On our right, a man gesticulates and points at his forehead.

'Bloody tosser!' yells Kobe. He changes gear, squeezes his car into the line and pulls the map from Mouse's hands.

'Bloody hell, can't you do anything? Do I have to do everything myself?'

He holds the map over the steering wheel, pushes his glasses up on his nose and starts looking.

'Kobe, the brakes!'

Kobe slams on the brakes and just manages to avoid a collision.

‘Just keep your nose out, woman,’ he says to Mouse.

We follow the flow of cars. Kobe has no idea where to go. Now and then he throws a look of desperation at the map, which he still has clamped between his thumb and the steering wheel. Then he decides to follow a car with a Dutch number plate – and that’s how we end up in the centre of Turin.

We’re quite the attraction. On the left and the right, nimble Fiats and scooters loaded with laughing girls and boys overtake and nip in front of us. They stare, laughing and pointing at us and our caravan. Secretly, I wave back.

We go round and round a roundabout with a huge fountain in the centre. It’s like being at the funfair. Fine drops of water spray onto the windscreen, which has become a patchy mosaic of yellow and red insect blood. Kobe turns on the windscreen wipers. They draw semicircles of dead flies and their shit. He gives a squirt from the washers and I see the rainbow in the mist of water. I nudge Ilse and point.

‘The rainb...’ Do takes my hand.

‘Quiet now,’ she says, without making a sound.

Mouse stares ahead like a waxwork. She looks as though she might just melt away. We lie flat on the back seat, so that Kobe can’t see us. Sweat puddles in the dips of the imitation leather seat. I gaze up at the blue sky, the branches of the trees and the roofs of the houses and I fall asleep.

I’m woken up by a very loud ‘Bloody hell!’

I sit up and see that we’re back at the same spot where, two hours ago, we had to decide between Chambéry, Turin or Milan.

The campsite’s by the beach. We spend the whole day lying in and beside the sea. We don’t need to bother about Kobe and Mouse; they’re away all day. Walking or having a bite to eat somewhere. Usually they don’t come back until the evening, and then Mouse appears like a movie star in high heels and a white bikini, standing in the shade of the vine roof on the campsite. She calls to us that dinner will be on the table in half an hour.

If we’re unlucky, Mouse spends the late afternoon clearing up the caravan and the awning, and Kobe comes onto the beach.

Do is lying on her towel in the sun. She wants her front to be just as brown as her back. Ilse and I go brown naturally, mostly on our backs. We can’t swim yet, but we’re snorkelling without armbands on our tummies in the surf. We walk along like crocodiles, with our hands on the bottom, looking out for little fish and starfish. We don’t find any starfish. Now and then, a shoal of silver-grey baby fish swims all the

way up to the beach. It's important to keep calm and not chase after them. You have to just let them come. If you stay very still, they start nibbling your arms. And we can stay very still indeed. Our snorkels are perfectly motionless in the water. But then we hear Kobe's voice:

'Tiiiiisuhhhhhh.' Very far away. 'Cooome ooout ooof theeeere!'

Ilse looks at me through her diving goggles with big, bulging eyes. She shakes her head. Her blonde hair sways in the water like seaweed. We carry on snorkelling, as calmly as possible, and pretend not to have heard anything, but Kobe knows what we're up to. I can see his plastic sandals and his hairy calves coming our way over the pebbles. Water splashes in Ilse's snorkel. She pops up, spluttering. Her feet try to find solid ground. She presses her knees together and crosses her arms over her swimsuit. Water's splashing into my snorkel now too, so I have to come up as well.

Kobe grabs Ilse by the arm and pulls her to the beach. She's crying. 'Don't be such a baby,' Kobe yells. 'Go on! Swim!'

He pushes her onto the shingle, grabs her by a wrist and an ankle, picks her up and hurls her into the sea. Ilse screams as she flies through the air. She falls into the deep water, metres away, with a loud splash. She goes under, comes back up, goes under again and thrashes her arms around. Behind her, the sun lies like an orange on the sea. I look at Do and Kobe, who are watching from the beach, shading their eyes with their hands. No one does anything. Floundering and spluttering, Ilse manages to make her way back to the beach. Kobe has already walked off.

Do fetches a towel and rubs Ilse dry. She promises Ilse that she can play with her inflatable ball all day tomorrow. That evening, we're going in the car to a nearby town. Kobe's whistling. He's in a good mood. So am I. I'm in a good mood because I'm wearing my favourite yellow trousers (if I pull on the legs, they slip down far enough to show my blue bruise) and Kobe's in a good mood because he's got something to patch up with Ilse. He's singing a song about a little bird in the forest who couldn't poo because 'he had a feather stuck to his bum bum'. Cheerfully, he taps his right hand on the steering wheel. 'He chirped no, and he cheeped oh, he sang: oh, what shall I do do? I don't think that I can poo poo.'

We don't really want to, we're still angry, but we can't help laughing. That makes Kobe even more cheerful.

'Come on,' he says as we pass an ice-cream man. 'We'll have an ice-cream.'

He finds a space and parks the car.

Kobe walks off in front. We scurry along behind. 'You can have as much as you like,' he says generously.

I take hold of Mouse's hand. 'Will you make sure we're allowed to choose?'

She gives my hand a squeeze. 'I'll do my best,' she whispers.

That doesn't ease my mind. 'Or you can order for us. I want lemon and strawberry.'

'Chocolate and mocha for me,' whispers Ilse.

'And I'll have melon and fruits of the forest,' says Do.

But it's too late. Kobe's already ordered.

He thrusts a cone of chocolate, pistachio and tutti frutti into my hands. Exactly the flavours I don't like. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

'I want lemon,' I say.

'Stop whining and eat your ice-cream.'

I shake my head.

'Eat it!'

Reluctantly, I lick away at my ice-cream. I gag as I swallow down the last piece of slimy fruit from the tutti frutti.

We drive on in the darkness. Kobe takes the curves of the narrow road beside the sea at high speed. To our left are the approaching headlights of oncoming cars, which blow their horns as we miss them by a hair; on the right is the drop into the inky-black waters of the Mediterranean. I have a funny feeling in my stomach. I take a very deep breath and suddenly feel a desperate need to poo. I tap Mouse on the shoulder and ask her to ask Kobe to stop.

'Are you sure it can't wait?' she says.

I shake my head.

'Kobe, Kobe, can we just stop for a moment?'

'She can wait,' he growls and puts his foot down.

Once we're in the town, I tell them again that I really need to go, but Kobe refuses to stop at a café.

'What do you think I am? A moron? Have you seen those prices? They're a bunch of rip-off merchants, these Italians!'

We walk and walk through the town. Normally, we have to go in front, but now we're following behind, with me bringing up the rear. We can't keep up with Kobe. The town looks very bright and cheerful: people sitting outside at tables, with pretty lights. 'Bambina,' they call out to me. And I'd like to reply, to say something to them, like that I'm not called Bambina, even though it's a really nice name, but all of my energy is focused on my bum and my bowels. I'm doubled over now and I'm doing my very best not to let it all go.

Mouse tries again. 'Come on, Kobe,' she says. She's having as much trouble keeping up with him as the rest of us.

'Why the hell didn't that child go to the toilet at the campsite?'

He turns around. I'm facing him now, bent over. With my hands on my knees, I try to explain that I did go at the campsite and that I can't hold it in any longer and then I feel the poo running down the legs of my favourite trousers, down my thighs and into my sandals.

I make up my mind never, ever to laugh at Kobe's jokes or songs again.

Ilse is the prettiest of the three of us, which makes her Kobe's favourite. She has wild, curly, gold blonde hair, a real mane, which Mouse ties back in a ponytail because otherwise it becomes completely tangled up. Even so, it gets so knotty that Grandma, Kobe's mother, comes round once every few weeks to brush out the knots or cut them out. Ilse has to stand on a chair in the middle of the room and Grandma walks around her, combing and clipping. It takes her hours.

Being Kobe's favourite mostly involves disadvantages. When Ilse and I have a row, she gets the blame, which just makes me feel guilty. At first, I thought it was because she's older, but now I think that it's because she's the prettiest and the nicest. She's higher than Do and me, so she has farther to fall. It works the other way round too. She still believes it when Kobe's accidentally nice, so when he falls, he has farther to fall for her than he does for us. Her disappointment irritates him and just makes him even angrier. So when Ilse and I make any noise or have an argument, he storms up the stairs and starts hitting her. That's the way I see it.

And that's because, even though Ilse might be pretty, I'm clever, not that you can tell by looking at me. Just like Do, I've got straight, mousy hair that hangs down in curtains past my cheeks. Carrot hair, Kobe calls it. But I don't know how he came up with that. You'd think that carrot hair should be orange, or even leaf-green, for all I care. But I know what he really means. Do and I are ugly, but I'm lucky enough to be good at school. That's because of Do, who teaches me English words, and because of the teacher, who I'm secretly in love with. I get good marks in my school reports, which means that, three times a year, Kobe's proud of me. Not when I come home with my good marks, but on birthdays, when the aunts come to visit. When I show Kobe my eighties and nineties, he doesn't say anything. He just glances at the report, writes his signature, and he writes it so big that, to my horror, it goes all the way up to the boxes for the numbers. Then he gives the report to Mouse, who puts it on the sideboard, and they fetch it down when there are visitors. My report gets handed around and the aunts say 'ooh' and 'ahh'. They almost applaud – that's how wonderful my report is, how high my marks are, way higher than my cousin's. That's what pleases Kobe most. He absolutely gleams with pride. The way he shows off my marks, anyone would think he got them himself, or at least spent hours helping me with my homework.

Do is unlucky enough to be not just ugly, but thick as well. At least, that's what Kobe says. Like Mouse, she has the honour of being as thick as two short planks, or, as he says, 'too dumb to dance for the devil', which is an expression that I don't really get (dancing for the devil must be quite a challenge), but Do takes it to heart. That's why she ran away, with Napoleon.

We've bought a house on a new estate in a big village, a home for a 'luxury family'. Do is at domestic science college. She has a room for herself now. That's a good thing, because she doesn't have much of her own. She has carrot hair and pimples, *Tina* magazine, one or two friends we never get to see, posters of Neil Diamond over her bed, which Ilse and I think is pretty daft, and she has Napoleon.

Napoleon belongs to her. She got him for her birthday. She looks after him, she gives him water and grain and she puts fresh sawdust in his cage. But she didn't give him his name. Kobe did. And that name was Napoleon. Who was apparently a Frenchman. A French general who Kobe's nuts about. The general might have been a man's man, but this guinea pig is just like us, quivery and timid. You can see his heart beating through his thin fur. But now he's gone, along with Do. Ilse and I watched them go from our bedroom window.

First we saw Kobe give Do a right old telling off. It started with a tree, a post and a hammer, and it ended, as usual, with swearing from Kobe and tears from Do. And then we saw her walking down the garden path with a carrier bag and her satchel in one hand and Napoleon's cage in the other.

She's been gone for over two hours, but Kobe and Mouse haven't noticed yet. They might realise at any moment though, of course, which is why Ilse and I would prefer to stay in our room. We imagine them going to look for her and not being able to find her. Then they call the police and they start searching for her with helicopters. We hope the police won't be able to find her either and that Kobe and Mouse get really, really worried and then Do comes to the school playground tomorrow to tell us where she is and we promise not to give her away. But I don't think Do will do that. We've been pretty mean to her too. We said some stuff about Neil Diamond and about her pizza face.

'I think she's hiding behind the shed,' says Ilse.

She's standing on the bed, her forehead pressed up against the window.

'Really?'

'I think I saw a tuft of her hair.'

I go and stand on the bed too. I look at the shed. There's gravel on the roof. I can see the fence, Kobe's new car, a Volvo, the top of a tree. I can't see Do. I pull my stool from beneath our table, put it on the bed and carefully climb up onto it. The stool wobbles and I have to hold on to the curtain rod. Part of the wall and the roof of

our neighbour's shed come into view, but the path is still beyond my range of vision. I lie down on the bed, close my eyes and imagine Do sitting against the wall. I make her hair orange, I make her knobby knees red, the bars of Napoleon's cage are blue, and I leave Napoleon as he is: black and white.

'We're just going out for a walk,' I hear Mouse shouting upstairs from the hallway.

They go through the front door and I hear it close behind them.

'There she is, there she is!' cries Ilse.

Do comes dawdling down the garden path to the kitchen door. She shuffles up the stairs. Ilse leaves the bedroom.

'You just spent the whole time hiding behind the shed,' she says accusingly.

'Didn't!' shouts Do. She shuts herself away in her room.

That was stupid, I think, so stupid of her not to go through with it.