

Sample translation

***Huid en Haar* by Arnon Grunberg
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Translated by Sam Garrett

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

I

When Violet grows tired of it, of people, of conversation, of the party, when she wants to get away without having to explain, she says, “I have to go to yoga.”

There are moments when it is hard to claim that one has to go to yoga. So there is also the variation, “I need to get to bed. Early start tomorrow.” That sounds perhaps less zealous, but things don’t necessarily have to sound zealous, they only have to be it.

In any case, she doesn’t like staying up late. Two o’clock is late enough for her. She likes to dance, but not till the crack of dawn. On occasion she has imagined a man saying, “Let’s go somewhere else.” But no one ever has. Not that it would be so terrible. You could always say, “I can’t really, not tonight. Some other time maybe.”

Her bed is by the window. When she lifts her head she can look out, she can see a small Amsterdam square with a playground. She likes the view. She likes being downtown.

Sometimes she dances in front of the mirror in her room. It’s not a big mirror, but big enough to see herself.

She has dark blonde hair, dyed light blonde now. She has a lot of hair, and not just on her head. She shaves sometimes, but complete hairlessness is not her thing. She’s not in primary school anymore!

She’d fallen asleep on top of the book she’d been reading, Murakami’s *The Windup Bird Chronicle*. It was a birthday present, from two of her friends. Stingy friends, one book between the two of them. Violet likes Murakami, but the problem with this book is that it’s so big. It’s not easy to take along on the train.

Lying beside Murakami is her phone, and beside her phone lies her bear. For a while she’d figured she was too old for the bear, which she’s had since she was six and which she’s always called Mr. Bear. When she went off to university Mr. Bear moved into a plastic bag, but about halfway through school, regretting that decision, she liberated Mr. Bear from his plastic bag, and since then he has slept beside her as though things had never been any different.

He is badly in need of an operation. Stuffing is slowly leaking from a small hole above his bottom, but she’s been too busy to do anything about it. There’s been no time to find a doll doctor, and it doesn’t seem like a good idea to do it herself. Sometimes she says to her bear, “We’ll sort out an operation really soon. Don’t you worry.”

For the time being, though, her job keeps her too busy for an operation, and things are only getting busier.

Her phone was what woke her. She answers it, still half asleep, “hmmm,” and again “hmmm.” In her dream the phone rang like an alarm clock, and only once she realizes that this is no longer a dream does she murmur, “Hello?”

Now she can feel that her cheek is still on top of the Murakami. She pushes the book off the bed. It falls to the floor with a thump.

That, too, is a bad thing about thick books. They fall loudly and wake the neighbours.

“Oh, it’s you,” she says. “I thought it was the plumber.”

“You thought I was the plumber?” Roland Oberstein asks.

“I thought you were coming to unblock the toilet.”

She makes little growling noises. That forces her to wake up completely.

“Unblock the toilet?”

“I was dreaming about the plumber. The plumber is coming tomorrow. The toilet’s blocked. Where are you, sweetheart?”

“In my hotel room,” Roland says. “How long has the toilet been blocked?”

“Since this afternoon. How was it?”

“It was good,” Roland says.

“Were they pleased?”

“With what?”

“With your speech?”

“Yes, I think so.”

She sighs. She rolls over onto her stomach.

“Is that all?” She’s wide awake now. As though it’s morning and she’s ready to get up. As though she could go bicycling off to work any moment. Sometimes she lies in bed, tossing and turning without being able to sleep. She thinks then about her job, about her boyfriend.

“Yes. That’s all.”

Her boyfriend doesn’t talk a lot, there are days when he’s as taciturn as Mr. Bear. She’d like to get him talking, but she doesn’t know how. She’s tried lots of things. Vacations, romantic dinners, one time she even persuaded him to help her decorate espresso cups, but when they were done he told her he felt like he’d painted enough espresso cups for the next five years. Nor had he talked much while they were painting them.

When she sits at her desk in the afternoon, with a bag of liquorice drops, she sometimes tells herself that she’s tried everything to draw out the warmth she knows he has inside him. He’s like a wood-burning stove she can’t get lit.

“Are you busy with something else? Are you checking your mail? I can hear you typing. If you’d rather answer your mail than talk to me, you don’t have to call me in the middle of the night.”

“I’m not typing,” Roland says.

“I can hear you.”

“I’m not typing,” Roland says again.

“I heard you.”

“I wasn’t typing.”

“Do you think I’m crazy? You call and wake me up and you’re typing. Why do you call me if you’re typing?”

“I wasn’t typing,” Roland reiterates. “And I called you because you called me, and because you texted me. Twice, to be precise.”

“So then why aren’t you telling me anything?” Violet wants to know.

“I’m not much of a talker,” Roland says. “You know that. When’s the plumber coming?”

“In the morning. I think. You’re typing again.”

“I’m not typing.”

“Would you please knock it off? You’re talking to *me* now. Focus on this conversation. Stop typing.”

“I’m focused.”

Violet is sitting straight up in bed now, Mr. Bear in her arms. He really is in a very bad way. One of his legs is coming off.

“The purpose of a conversation is for people to tell each other things, right? So if you’re not going to tell me anything, why call? Didn’t anything happen that was worth telling about?”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell,” Roland says. “It’s late. I’m tired. I love you.”

“Oh, could you maybe say that with a little more conviction? It sounds like you’re asking for the bloody bill.”

“I love you,” she hears again, but the intonation is the same.

Once she’d thought about joining the air force; she’d wanted to do something almost no one had ever done before, after all there weren’t that many female F-16 pilots, but she’d abandoned the idea.

“I won’t do it again, I promise. But if I don’t call and wake you up, you get angry too. Whatever I do is wrong. I can’t do anything right.”

Would doll doctors be listed in the yellow pages? Such an old-fashioned profession.

“I’m going to try one more time. Listen. A conversation is when two people tell each other things. So what are we doing?”

“We’re having a conversation,” Roland says.

“No!” Violet’s shouting now. “We are *not* having a conversation, because you’re not telling me anything. And I still hear you typing. Would you please stop?”

“I can do two things at the same time. I can type and I can talk to you. I’m tired. If I type now, I can go to sleep later on. I’m saving time.”

“I’m not a time-saving device. I’m your girlfriend, goddamn it!”

“The one does not rule out the other,” Roland says. “A good girlfriend is also a time-saving device.”

“Okay, I’ll run it back. How did your speech go?”

“You already asked me that. Well. I wasn’t dissatisfied, it could have been better. But fine, in fact. The discussion afterwards was a bit tame, though.”

“Shall we end this conversation?” Violet asks. “Or is there something else you want to tell me? Let’s just stop, this isn’t a conversation. It’s nothing. It’s nothing at all.”

“No, I don’t want to stop this conversation. Not as long as you don’t. I don’t want you to be sad. I’ll go on until you hang up. I’m not giving up.”

“So is there something you want to tell me?”

“I’ve already told you everything. Is there something *you* want to tell me?”

“Yes,” Violet says. “Yes, there’s something I want to tell you. I cheated on you.”

She hears Roland laughing.

“Are you laughing?” she asks.

“Yes, I’m laughing,” Roland says.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because it’s funny. Don’t you think it’s funny?”

“No, I don’t think it’s funny, no. I cheated on you.”

For a moment, all is silent.

“When?”

“Oh, so now you’ve stopped typing!” she shouts. “All of a sudden I have your undivided attention! Now the typing has stopped!”

“When?” Roland asks.

“So now the great economist has stopped typing, right?” Violet screams. “Now the typing is over!”

“I’m still typing.” Roland raises his voice now as well. “If you didn’t scream like that, you’d be able to hear me. Listen. I’m still typing. Type type type. All I want to know is: when?”

The desk is small, there's barely room for a laptop. The television takes up too much space. The room has a window, but it doesn't open. Probably to discourage potential suicides. Roland's coat is on the bed. He's taken his shoes off. He likes walking around in his stockinged feet.

He has already tried yanking open the window a few times, even asked for a room with a window that would open, but there weren't any, so he's given up. He'll be leaving tomorrow anyway. So far as he cares, the window can remain shut for eternity.

Since he last checked his mail that morning, twenty-eight new messages have come in. He likes to answer his mails as quickly as possible. Then that's done. The disadvantage is that new messages keep coming in all the time.

There's no end to it. But he likes doing his work well. He never fails to answer mails from his students or his colleagues, even when the contents don't really need a reply. He knows it's obnoxious, but he wants to be the best. Man's calling is to outshine the rest.

"The day before yesterday," Violet says.

He gets up, walks to the bathroom, turns on the light, then walks back to his laptop. The keyboard used to be white, now it's grey. There are strange-coloured spots on it, and he wonders how they got there.

"And with whom?"

"A man."

"A man. Is that all? Just a man?"

"That's all."

"What kind of man?"

Violet designs handbags, women's handbags. They're manufactured in China, but designed in Europe. Sometimes she designs other things than handbags. An attaché case, for example.

During the day she works at a pleasant studio on the edge of town, where people design things that are manufactured in China. On occasion the designers get to go to China; that, it seems, is something of a mixed blessing.

"A man, just a man."

"Do I know this man?"

"No, you don't."

"Are you sure? I know lots of men, including men who you don't know I know."

"You don't know him."

He nestles the receiver between ear and shoulder and opens the small closet with its three coat hangers. They're stingy here, even with coat hangers. Still clenching the phone between shoulder and ear, he hangs up his coat.

Roland Oberstein is happy, as he would readily admit, because he wants nothing he cannot get. What he wants he can get. What he can't get, he doesn't want. So simple is the recipe for happiness. And the idea that, in the end, happiness probably amounts to little more than comfort, contentment, the absence of suffering, doesn't bother him in the slightest.

Of course he has ambitions he hasn't realized yet, but he lives in the expectation that many of those ambitions will someday be realized.

"And why? I mean, are you in love?"

Roland Oberstein is sitting at his laptop again. There wasn't one urgent mail in the whole bunch. Still, he needs to reply to them all. He forces himself to be exacting, to provide aftercare. That's the word for it: aftercare.

There is no reply. "Are you in love with him?" he asks again, the way you might ask, "So how was the movie?"

This conversation is not taking place according to the familiar rituals, and therefore it excites him. Not just in the sexual sense. A few years ago, when he discovered two unknown letters and a postcard signed by Hayek, he had been excited too. Unfortunately, the letters were a disappointment. They would not make him world-famous.

"No, I'm not in love. That's not why I chose him."

"Chose him. Did you choose him? Oh. So why did you go to bed with him? If you don't mind my asking? If you weren't in love?"

"Do you have to be in love with someone to go to bed with them?"

He thinks about it. He has said things on this subject before. Only he can't remember exactly what. Every now and then he likes to make pronouncements on the subject of sex. Speaking about it is sometimes more gratifying than the deed itself, which is always a confrontation, often imperfect, something that can really only exist thanks to the power of the imagination.

"No, I don't think you do," he says.

"It was a provocation."

"A what?"

Roland closes his laptop. Usually he can read emails or the paper while he's on the phone, but not now. It's late. He's too tired. He had been drinking different wines at the same time, followed by a glass of grappa. But that's not it. It's not the grappa, it's not the wine, nor is it the late hour. It's the pictures that he sees, that he generates, his girlfriend naked in the arms of a man. If he stops to analyse the pictures, and analysing things is what he does, he has to admit that the presence of the other man bothers him less than his own absence. He wasn't there, that's what bothers him. He missed something.

"A provocation."

"Is sex a provocation?" he asks.

"Umm, it can be. Yeah, I think so. Sometimes."

She sounds cheerful, not sad at any rate. She sounds wide awake, too.

“And who needed to be provoked?”

“You.”

“Me? Oh. That explains a lot.”

So he *had* been there after all. Present in his absence. But it sounds contrived, the analysis - in so far as you could call it that - doesn't convince him. Where was he while she was lying in that man's arms?

He waits for her to say something else, but she doesn't seem to be planning to tell him anything else. The conversation has apparently come to an end.

“So what now?” Roland asks.

“I don't know.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“What I want you to say?” Violet replies. “Christ, don't you feel anything? Your girlfriend cheats on you and you ask her, ‘What do you want me to say?’ Is that love? Is that passion? Do you care? Do you care at all about me?”

She doesn't sound cheerful anymore. She's talking loudly. His phone is bringing him the penetrating voice of despair.

The day before yesterday, what was he doing the day before yesterday? He was at the conference. There was a dinner. He sat down at a table with two empty chairs. “Is anyone sitting here?” he'd asked. “You are, now,” an older historian had replied jovially, before resuming his monologue on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Lea had been sitting to the right of him. She had tossed him a few ironic glances during the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact monologue. He hadn't been sure whether the ironic glances referred to the pact, to him, or to the historian who was holding the monologue.

Halfway through it they had stood up and gone out for a breath of fresh air. Lea had whispered: “I can't take any more of this.”

“Wasn't that sort of in bad taste?” he asks.

“What?” Violet says.

“You cheating on me while I was at a conference about the Holocaust, wasn't that rather disrespectful?”

“What do the two things have to do with each other?”

“Well, quite a bit, I'd say. I'm at a conference about the Holocaust, you're my girlfriend, and while I'm at that conference listening to readings about the annihilation of European Jewry, while I'm consorting with people who don't think about anything but that, you cheat on me. Did you tell him that?”

“Who?”

“The man. Your man. The new man.”

“What was I supposed to tell him? He's not my new man.”

“When you two were lying in bed.”

“That's right.”

“Did you tell him? My boyfriend is at a conference about the Holocaust.”

“No, of course I didn’t say that.”

“Or weren’t you in bed? Did you do it standing up?”

“I’m not going to answer that. This is just too ridiculous. It’s none of your business.”

“Which bed did you use, anyway?”

“My bed.”

“Your bed. Weren’t there other beds available? Couldn’t you have gone to his house? Or doesn’t he have a house? Is he homeless?”

“No, he’s not homeless.” She sounds fatigued now. The way she does when he makes jokes that he wouldn’t say to other people, only to her.

“Did you use a condom?”

“Yes. Obviously.”

“It’s not all that obvious. So you had condoms in the house?”

“A couple of old ones lying around.”

“Oh. Does he know you have a boyfriend?”

“Yes, I told him.”

“What did he say?”

“I suspected as much.”

“Is that all?”

“Are you going to tell him?” Violet says.

“Who?”

“That’s what *he* asked me. That’s what he said. Are you going to tell him? Before he left. He was putting his coat on. Then, suddenly, he said, are you going to tell him?”

“And what did you say?”

“Yes.”

Him, that’s him, Roland Oberstein. There was something he needed to be told.

If a customer is to make the right choice, he has to obtain the right information. The problem is that the manufacturer and the seller of the product often know more than the customer. The customer has an information lag, which he must then do away with. At least, that’s the theory.

He is a customer who is now discreetly trying to do away with his information lag.

“And what did he say to that?”

“I wouldn’t want to know.”

“Is that what he said? That he wouldn’t want to know?”

“That’s what he said: I wouldn’t want to know. Those were his words.”

Why wouldn’t you want to know something? Does he want to know about this? How can you be sure that you know everything?

Beside the television is a mirror in which he can see himself. He doesn’t understand why anyone would hang a mirror above a desk.

“Well, then I guess we’ve taken care of that,” Roland says while looking at himself. He doesn’t know whether he sounds light-hearted or is only trying to sound light-hearted.

There are days when he considers himself a fairly attractive man. On days like that, he suspects, he exudes a peculiar kind of satisfaction. But he would never describe himself as self-centred. Far from it. Good days are rare. Even for someone who knows that you should want nothing that you cannot get.

“Is that it?” she asks. “Isn’t there anything else you want to say?”

“Anything else? No, I mean, it’s a story. It’s an exciting story. That’s how I see it.”

“Exciting?”

“Yeah.”

“I went to bed with another man, and you see that as an exciting story?”

The way he’s sitting there, his laptop in front of him, holding the telephone, that’s what he sees. Violet thinks he spends too much time looking in the mirror. On occasion she has accused him of being vain, but then who isn’t? Looking in the mirror can also be a sign of insecurity. He looks to make sure he hasn’t missed something, a dab of shaving cream, a crumb, a streak of ink from his ballpoint pen.

Exciting is when the final result is still unknown, but even in the worst of cases remains bearable. A fatal illness is not exciting, because the final result is already known. Hoping against hope is tragic, but not exciting.

“Are you crying?” he asks.

“No. Yes. I’m crying a little.”

“That’s turning things on their head,” Roland says. “I’m the one who should be crying.”

Despair takes time, and if there’s one thing he doesn’t have it’s that: time. He should slot it into his organizer. Maybe this winter he can set aside a weekend for despair.

“So why aren’t you crying?”

He thinks about it. The moral superiority of his situation appeals to him.

But he can’t cry. It doesn’t work.

Movies make him cry sometimes. On rare occasions.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Like I said, I see it as an exciting story. The other man. You. The two of you. Naked. The bed. The condom. It’s like porn, but then different. That’s why I’m not crying.”

“That’s absurd.”

“What exactly is absurd?”

“The way you’re reacting.”

Before he goes to bed, he’ll take a shower. A long, hot shower. And then he’ll go to sleep. His plane leaves for home tomorrow morning. He will reflect, he will work, he will answer students’ queries, with a well-mannered dose of sarcasm if necessary. His happiness is imperturbable. His happiness lies in his own imperturbability.

“So how am I supposed to react?”

“I don’t know. That’s up to you. What do you feel? Do you feel anything?”

Roland thinks about it. He hears the toilet flushing in the room next to his. Feel. Once at a party, a colleague from another faculty, a teacher of ethics, told him, “You act as though emotions are worthless. A wee bit arrogant.”

He doesn’t like parties. Before you know it you find yourself beleaguered by ethicists who can’t handle their own feelings. Or professors who have ignored you for years but who, in a drunken state, reel off an unintelligible monologue.

“What did he have to say about Mr. Bear, anyway?” Roland asks.

“Who?”

“That man. Your man. What did he say about Mr. Bear?”

“He said, what’s that bear doing here? Or something like that. He thought it was funny that there was bear in my bed.”

“I bet Mr. Bear didn’t like that,” Roland says slowly, almost dreamily. “I bet he didn’t like that one bit.”