

Sample Translation

Deep as a Swedish Lake

(De diepte van een Zweeds meer)

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Translated by Laura Watkinson

1

Every now and then I scream at myself: ‘No more longing!’

And then afterwards I quietly say: ‘No, longing, you can stay.’

Right now, I’m between the two. I’ve changed, that much is clear.

It makes sense.

I could talk to myself as though I’m a dog.

‘Hesther, calm down!’ I could say.

Or: ‘Be content!’

Or: ‘Stop that whining!’

I could say those things to myself and I could obey.

But, somewhere in the depths, someone else has appeared, who says different things. Who dreams new dreams, and won’t be bossed around, no matter how loud I yell.

A little voice. And that little voice whispers things back to me. Cautiously. Sometimes so quietly it can hardly be heard.

And I think that little voice is an important one. And the more quiet and timid it is, the more essential it seems to listen to it...

Yeah yeah, whatever, you’re probably thinking now.

You were probably already expecting a story to have started by now. Something along the lines of: That morning Hesther woke up and knew for certain that this was going to be a very *different* day, very different than usual.

Take it easy.

You’ll get your story.

You really will.

2

So, here goes:

I did it for the first time in Figeholm.

Yep, that's right – *it*.

Figeholm's in Sweden. We went there, in the summer.

We, that's me and my friend. She's called Monique – Mo – and I'm Hesther (with two h's, but that's not my fault).

We didn't have very much to do with boys, that year. We did look at them, of course, but we both thought there wasn't very much wandering around at our school that was worth bothering about...

OK Hesther, now be honest for a moment. There was this one boy, two years above me, and at first I thought that he had something special about him. Mario. He's not Spanish or anything, though, not at all exotic, his surname's just a normal Dutch one: Versluis.

Mario Versluis has straight, dark-brown hair and a squint. Mario Versluis sometimes talks to girls from the lower years, but it's always on the sly, because Mario Versluis has a girlfriend of his own age, a podgy thing with plaits. I fancied him at the beginning of the school year. But I just can't imagine that now. He turned out to be a member of the school chess club as well...

Anyway, that's enough about Mario.

Other girls in our class did have something to do with boys, though; in fact, it was all they thought about. At break time, they hung around with the group that smoked, outside by the school entrance. One of the girls had even let someone film her.

In the nude, I mean. It was some lad or other in one of the older years. And he'd put the film on the internet, and everyone, absolutely *everyone* at school, had watched it. It spread like wildfire – within a day everyone knew exactly where to

go if you wanted to see Connie van Kleef walking through the living room in the muddy.

In a way I felt sorry for her. Dozy Connie... She left school after that, probably went to work at McDonalds, or Aldi or something, because people like her end up in places like that. Sorry, but that's just the way it is. Connie wasn't exactly the type to go and study medicine when she left school.

I'm not that type either, by the way. There are a few things I can do, though. Drawing, for example. I really am good at that; it's my special talent, so I want to do something along those lines when I'm older.

Mo can draw as well; we both did drawings and we both made up stories. Most of them were about a girl called Ellemieke, and this Ellemieke was constantly getting into trouble. One time her parents rented her out and she had to do it with everyone in the neighbourhood, for money, and her parents got richer and richer and fatter and fatter, and Ellemieke just got thinner and thinner. Another time her friends tied her up and went sledging on her in the snow. And another time she got lost in a department store and was only found two weeks later, by which time she was already a skeleton.

I don't think our parents thought the comic – *The Sad Adventures of Ellemieke* – was very nice.

My dad had said: 'Let them use it to vent their aggression. It's better than doing drugs behind our backs.'

And then he'd chuckled and added: 'I thought the adventure in the department store was a funny one, though.'

Mo's mum had said that we should go into therapy. She'd just discovered a new pile of 'Adventures' lying around on Mo's desk. She was shocked, she said. 'Everyone dies in it!' she cried in indignation. 'And all that swearing! Is it really necessary?!'

So I'm not going to swear in this story. Not out loud, I mean.

If I get the urge, I'll just write:

&%#@#!

And then you can imagine for yourself what I mean.

After Mo's mum discovered our comic, quick as a flash we made a new one: a really sweet, cutesy story about a squirrel – *The Happy Adventures of Nuts* – and we left that lying around too, so she would see it, and she thought that one was nicer and that we were 'making progress'. So we didn't have to go into therapy.

What I'm trying to say is that you have to be careful with parents. They hardly ever understand anything. They really do mean well and that, but woe betide you if you ever tell them your *real* thoughts.

You always have to mislead your parents, that much is clear. You should only tell them *what they want to hear*.

Want me to give you another example?

OK. This one time we'd been planning with a few of the other girls in our class to play a trick on a teacher. Mr de Waal. Mr Mervin de Waal, who got called Merv the Perv, because of the way he touched up the girls. He'd got his hands on me once, by the coat racks. I was hanging up my coat and suddenly someone was pressing himself against me from behind. And yes, it was Merv the Perv, and, #@*&#!, I could *feel* that thing in his trousers against my bum!

'So, Hesther... Heh heh... I hope you've done your homework... I might just be planning to devote some special attention to you later today... Heh heh...'

And all that time I could feel his... %#@*#! And I wasn't the only girl he'd tried it on with.

And so we had this plan to get our own back on Merv the Perv: we were going to leave a pair of lace panties on his desk, with a note saying 'From an admirer'. And then the whole class would watch as he went all red and twitchy – it would have been great.

But one way or another, one of the parents found out about it before we managed to do it, and all of us got detention and had to do shitty jobs after school for weeks, sweeping, tidying up, whatever...

Anyway, it was all really stupid, but the worst thing, the very worst thing of all, was that it didn't occur to any of those apparently concerned parents to ask *why* we were so keen to pull that trick on him!

So that's what I mean. We could protest all we liked, but they didn't listen. Because parents aren't really interested. They just don't want any trouble. All they want to hear is that you've made it through to the next school year and that you're a little ray of sunshine in class, the very model of good behaviour.

3

We *had* made it through to the next year at school, Mo and I. We didn't get good reports, but we hadn't been kept back to repeat the year. That was a stroke of luck for me, because I was only allowed to go on holiday with the Kingsbergen family – that was Mo's family – if I made it into the next year.

Mo had an older brother, but he was going hitchhiking to Romania or something like that. So Mo would be going on her own to Sweden with her parents, and that would be boring, and so we'd come up with this idea. My parents were going to Texel, so Sweden was at least better than that. Not that it was my favourite country, no way, we both wanted to go to Mexico or Thailand. But you don't get any choice when you're fifteen, no one asks you what you'd like to do. And so I was allowed to go with them, to Sweden, 'land of the thousand *&%\$#@! lakes' or something, like we could care less.

We'd just started working on a new comic. Ellemieke had been murdered at least thirty times, and we were gradually starting to feel that, as far as we were concerned, she could stay dead. So we'd started making spoofs of well-known comics, the Smurfs, Tintin, Donald Duck...

To start with, a disease had broken out amongst the Smurfs, a sort of Smurf AIDS, Smurfette was the first one to kick the bucket. Thomson and Thompson had got lost in the Smurf forest and had been on the magic mushrooms; their eyes looked kind of like this: @ @, so they had no idea where they were, and now they were catching sick Smurfs to cook over their campfire.

We thought our comic was absolutely brilliant, and we were right in the middle of it, so it really was great that we could carry on with it while we were on holiday.

So what we took was a great big pile of comics, all of those whiney, goodie-goodie comic strips I just mentioned, because we needed examples after all.

'Well, at least that's normal,' Mo's mum had said, when she saw the pile of comics.

‘Yes, we’re studying them,’ said Mo. ‘Fun, eh?’

‘Much better,’ said Mrs Kingsbergen, tightening her lips.

I can tell you I wasn’t all that crazy about the woman before we went on holiday.

But it meant that everything was hunky-dory now; we were still normal girls after all, thank God, her daughter was properly adjusted, the woman didn’t need to worry about her child-rearing skills.

I should, incidentally, mention here that my parents weren’t quite so difficult. Especially my dad. My dad sometimes used to come to me, just to ask how I was feeling. I thought that was nice of him. I was never quite sure how to reply, though; I mean, all I usually said was: ‘Goo-ood.’

And then he’d say: ‘If ever anything’s not quite so goo-ood, you will come and tell me, won’t you?’

And then I’d say: ‘And you’ll come and tell me too, if you’re not feeling quite so good, won’t you?’

And then we’d both laugh...

Really nice.

But over time, we’d been doing that less often. And then when my dad *was* having a bad time, he didn’t come and tell me anything at all. He just got more and more bad-tempered and spent less and less time at home. And when he was at home, he was a bit strange. Like, in the past few months, he’d been washing his hands every other minute, it must have been three times an hour, and sometimes he’d secretly use one of those spray cans for his breath, even though he never gave a toss about it before. He said that he was getting busier and busier at work – he’s a section head in a department store. But now we knew that he was only away so much because he was having problems with my mum.

So that was another reason why it was a good thing I didn’t have to go with them to %#@*&%! Texel. It’s pretty #%&^&\$@! when your parents don’t say a word to each other for most of the day. And there’s nothing you can do about it. I mean, everything you say falls into some sort of black hole. And when they do

finally say something to each other again, because they happen to be sitting opposite each other at the table, then it's just idiotic %#*&%!.

Here's a typical conversation between my parents:

My mum: 'The car's dirty. It could do with a wash.'

My dad: 'Do you think so?'

My mum: 'You can see that for yourself, can't you?'

My dad: 'I'll get it washed tomorrow.'

Silence.

My dad: 'They're planning to start selling DVDs at E&A. DVDs! Of course it was Holkema who came up with that idea.'

My mum: 'Oh.'

My dad: 'Yes. DVDs!'

My mum: 'Blimey.'

My dad: 'Yep.'

Silence.

E&A, that's the name of the department store ('Great choice, great prices, every day – all year round at E&A!'). Should be A&E, not E&A, because the management are always fighting with each other if you believe what Dad says.

But what I actually want to say is that it's all just typical of that generation. My parents' generation. And, of course, the parents of everyone at school; everyone at school has the same kind of problems with them. They're pretty hung-up, those oldies. And they make such a meal out of everything; they never say clearly what they actually *mean*. They're apparently incapable of it. They insist on saying everything in a roundabout way.

When my mum says that the car needs a wash, then it's *actually* criticism of my dad. What she *actually* means is: 'The car's dirty and you should have got it washed ages ago. You've made a mess out of this, like you make a mess out of

everything. You've made a mess of our marriage as well, because you never hug me anymore and you never tell me I look nice. So you're a *%#head, because you just don't care, but I'm going to get even with you. And on top of that, I think you're messing about with someone at work, someone who's younger than I am. That's why you're so rarely at home, even though I've given you everything I had to give.'

So, all of those thoughts are lying behind that kind of comment; that's the hidden message. I know that. I can tell by looking at my mum. I can hear it in the chilly sound of her voice.

But do you think that my dad gets it? Nope. Or perhaps he does, but perhaps he just doesn't want to get involved. Perhaps he knows perfectly well what she means, and he's just playing dumb.

All he says is: 'I'll get it washed tomorrow.'

And then he says that they're going to start selling DVDs of all things in *his* department store. But what he means is that the management are listening less and less to what he has to say, that they just do as they please, and go behind his back, and that he's pretty cheesed off with it. Because he's getting older and older, and his head's getting balder and balder. And he's also saying that everything's slipping through his fingers, including his wife and children. He doesn't seem to understand why that's happening. He *pays* for everything, doesn't he? He's provided a house, and an income, and that *%\$#@#! car? So what's the bloody woman complaining about? Why do the *%\$%# kids keep acting as though he doesn't exist? No, he doesn't understand a thing, because, as he sees it, he works himself to death and all he gets in return is *nagging*. Difficult kids and a disappointed wife.

So that's what's lying behind all of that *%\$#@#! My parents aren't capable of being direct, that much is clear. I understand it, but they don't seem to have a clue. Because they're unable to say anything.

And that's why so many old people go to 'relationship therapy'. My dad suggested it once.

‘Shouldn’t we try talking to each other?’ he asked one day over dinner. ‘With guidance...?’

For the first time in ages he sounded sincere again. But my mum didn’t want to hear it. In fact, she just exploded. She yelled at him, saying that she didn’t think it was necessary to ‘go and hang all of our dirty linen in public’. So that was the end of that idea. And since then it’s got quieter and quieter at home. My little brother – a little monster called Vic – stays away as much as possible, just like my dad. He spends most of his time hanging around outside with his dodgy gang of mates.

And as for me, well, I see everything, and I understand most of it. So Mo’s mum thought I should go into therapy.

It’s almost funny when you think about it.

4

I think I've got a bit sidetracked, but I couldn't care less. This is my story. So, we were going to Sweden, Mo and I. Sometime in July. For a little while, I would be able to escape that frosty silence, that black hole at home, and that was a nice thought. But I was worried as well. Perhaps my parents would kill each other when I wasn't there. My little brother wouldn't be able to do anything about it; the boy seems to get more stupid by the day. It's those moronic friends of his – he imitates them. They're constantly trying to out-retard each other.

But I was going to Sweden. I packed a suitcase full of clothes and drawing things. My mum brought me some anti-mosquito lotion; there were lots of them there, she said. That was nice of her. My dad had given me some pocket money, spending money for three weeks. He'd come into my bedroom and said: 'Here you go. Sweden's an expensive country. You need to have your own money.' And he'd given me two hundred euros.

Two hundred! Loads of money. Given the chance, I'd have dashed straight to the shopping centre to buy things. No, not clothes.

Sure, I like to look nice, but I think art stuff is more important. To be honest, I really can't stand those silly cows in my class who only buy things for their bodies. Nail varnish. Eye shadow. Lipgloss. Top. Shirt. Necklace. Bracelet. Piercing. Tattoo. Shoes. Lingerie. Shoulder bag. Make-up. Ankle chain. Watch. Blouse. Hairband. Boots.

\$*@! When you think of all the money invested in the stuff that those silly mares are carrying around on them, it just makes you depressed. And then of course there's the fifteen hours a day in front of the mirror. Night cream. Day cream. Shower gel. Mascara. Hairspray. Facemask. Hair remover. Soap for under your arms. Soap for your face. Soap for between your legs. Shampoo for dry scalps. Hair dye.

It makes me sick, to be honest. All the things those stupid, vacuous borderline retards *think* make them more beautiful. Because it doesn't really make much

difference. The most beautiful girl in the class – Clarissa Panman – could come to school wearing a bin liner and she'd still be the most beautiful girl in the class. The ugliest girl in the class – Chantal van Gorp – could stick on five hundred euros worth of stuff and she'd still look like a freak. That's what I mean. I'm not saying you shouldn't do anything at all. I'm just saying that whatever you try, it doesn't make the slightest bloody difference.

Mo and I are different. We hardly ever go on about make-up, we borrow each other's clothes and sometimes – not often – one of us has something new (usually me, all of my clothes come from E&A). We're both the same height and about the same size. And we used to make up stories. That was simply more important than all of that fashion nonsense. And so we didn't really fit in with the rest of the class, even though we were in on that trick we were all going to play on Merv the Perv that time.

I was packing my suitcase, my mum had given me the mosquito stuff, and then she'd gone off again. Five minutes later, she came back in, a little hesitantly.

'Erm, Hesther...'

'What?' I asked.

'I've got something else for you here.'

I looked. A packet of condoms! Jesus! My *mum* was giving me *condoms*!

'Sweetheart... I know that you... aren't quite at this stage yet... not yet anyway...'

'Mum! Is this really necessary...?'

'I know you think it's a pain, but... Well, you *are* fifteen, and nowadays...'

'Jesus, Mum!'

Nowadays, she said! She must have been reading some article or other in *Cosmopolitan*, about young people nowadays, or something!

'Listen, Hesther... It's just a precaution... I don't want you to do anything stupid, something you'll regret... We've got to have this conversation sometime.'

'Mum, I'm really not planning to meet some boy or other and...'

‘I’ll put them down here... Just take them with you. To be on the safe side. It can’t hurt, can it?’

And then she disappeared again. So that was our ‘conversation’ about contraception. She couldn’t *really* talk about it.

And so there was the packet of condoms. Ten of them. Mum seemed to think I was going to start shagging around all over the place or something like that. Perhaps she even thought I already was.

I hesitated for a moment. Then I chucked the things into my suitcase.

I thought – I can still remember this – that Mo and I would have a right laugh filling them up with water or something.

Later that afternoon, Mo’s parents’ car stopped in front of our house. Mr and Mrs Kingsbergen popped into the house; I could hear them talking to my mum downstairs. My mum was speaking with that affected tone that she reserves for people she doesn’t like – basically, the vast majority of the population. Mo was suddenly standing there in my room.

‘Hiya, cowface!’

I grinned. I locked my suitcase. We walked downstairs together, me dragging my feet.

‘Hi, Hesther!’ smiled Mr Kingsbergen. ‘Everything ready?’

‘Hi,’ said Mrs Kingsbergen.

I said hi back. Just pop to the loo. Suitcase in the car, they’d left a place for my stuff in the boot, which otherwise was packed full of Mrs Kingsbergen’s make-up cases. The rest of their luggage was in one of those plastic coffin things on the car roof.

And then my mum suddenly started sobbing.

‘Mum... What’s wrong?’

‘Oh, you know,’ she said, with a sort of twisted smile. ‘My little girl’s growing up...’

‘We’ll take good care of her,’ said Mr Kingsbergen.

‘You can count on it,’ said Mrs Kingsbergen.

My mum hugged me as though I was emigrating to Canada.

‘Mum... I’ll be back in three weeks,’ I said.

She knew that perfectly well, of course, but you have to say that kind of thing when you’re trying to cheer someone up.

And then I almost started crying myself. That’s what happens when one of your parents acts so idiotically. Luckily, I’d already said goodbye to my dad the evening before, when he turned up with that money. To be honest, at that moment I was glad that my spotty little brother was hanging out somewhere with his criminal friends.

Finally we could leave. Mo and I in the back. Ma and Pa Kingsbergen in the front; Pa was driving the first part of the way.

The street slipped away, my blubbering, waving mum disappeared from sight, and for a moment I really did feel lonely and abandoned. But then Mo gave me a nudge and said: ‘If you don’t take that look off your face, you’ll be walking home.’

5

You know, travelling's not that much fun. In fact, travelling's pretty dull. It's nice to be somewhere, is what I'm trying to say.

But travelling long distances, counting down the kilometres, that's pretty *&%#\$@! You just sit there waiting, watching the landscape glide past the crash barriers. As though it's a really dull TV programme: fields, woods, houses, blocks of flats, a few cows... You've forgotten it before you've even seen it.

But fortunately I was sitting beside Mo, and every journey eventually comes to an end, so I shouldn't complain. Mo and I were chatting a bit, but we couldn't say everything we wanted to, because her parents could hear us. I put my headphones on, and the singer from Coldplay filled my head.

Hours later we stopped at a petrol station, where we had some sandwiches; suddenly I was absolutely starving. We were already in Germany.

Mo and I played tag – dead childish, I'll admit it. It was just so we could run about a bit after sitting still for so long.

Mrs Kingsbergen was now on her umpteenth cigarette. And Mr Kingsbergen was talking, he just kept blethering on. He had something to say about almost everything.

For example:

'I think the petrol here's four eurocents cheaper... That's quite a difference on a full tank... Did you see that minibus just? Hippies! I didn't know they still existed... Oh well, this is Germany, of course... Since they opened up the border with East Germany you get all of those old-fashioned types over here, they were suddenly free to travel... Punks, hippies, anarchists... They're all long gone in the Netherlands, of course... Think people go hunting round here...? I've seen a few of those hunting lodge things... By the way, do you know the story of the musicians of Bremen... Have you heard it? It goes like this:'

And he just kept rambling away like that, without getting any response. Mo and Mrs Kingsbergen were both apparently completely accustomed to the uninterrupted stream of rubbish... But I wasn't that bothered by it either. Before long we'd be there, in a little house somewhere, and then we'd be bound to get our own room, a place where we could carry on with our comic, and see what else might happen.

What I'm trying to say is that travelling mostly involves a constant search for something to take your mind off it, until it all becomes bearable again – until you're back in control of your own life.

6

We stayed the night in a hotel by the sea. And the next morning we drove to a boat, the biggest boat I'd ever seen in my life. We left the car behind in the hold. Then went up the stairs. And then the four of us sat down at a table, next to a window. I'm sure you can picture it.

'Hey, this looks a lot like that ship that sank!' called Mo cheerfully. 'The *Herald Enterprise* or something like that.'

I burst out laughing, and Mo and I started singing the song from *Titanic*, but Mr Kingsbergen's eyes suddenly opened wide and he asked, dead seriously: 'Do you really think so?'

An hour later we set sail.

The crossing was fun. You could walk for miles on the boat; it was full of new decks and places where you could play on the fruit machines or buy things. We looked for Leonardo DiCaprio, and found a boy who looked a bit like him. But he didn't look back at us.

It turned out that Mo's dad was scared of sailing or something. He sat there at the table, all quiet and pale, the torrent of words had finally dried up, and Mo's mum just kept getting perkier and perkier.

'Hey girls!' she called to us, when we popped back to check up on them. 'Could you just keep an eye on my husband for a mo? I think he's left his sea legs at home! On the bedside table, ha ha ha!'

Then she walked off, giggling.

'You OK, Dad?' asked Mo.

'Don't you think the engine's making a funny noise?' asked Mr Kingsbergen.

We sat reading at the table for a good couple of hours, while Mr Kingsbergen drank more and more whisky; after his fifth glass he wasn't quite so pale anymore.

We went looking for Mrs Kingsbergen and found her playing on a fruit machine. She was chucking money into it and then pulling a handle and then she'd swear and push more coins into the slot.

It took quite some effort to get her to come with us. We literally had to *pull* the woman away.

'Mum!' laughed Mo. 'You're addicted to gambling!'

'Don't make such a fuss!' yapped Mrs Kingsbergen. 'Finally I'm getting to have some fun as well – for the first time in ages!'

But eventually the three of us got back to Mr Kingsbergen, who wasn't so scared anymore; quite the opposite, in fact – his cheeks were all flushed and he was waving his arms around as he explained something to a very blonde woman. He looked sheepishly at his wife, who had suddenly developed a rather sour-faced look – or rather, she had a sour-faced look *again*, because actually she'd just got a little bit less sour-faced when she was playing on the fruit machine.

'So,' she said, through pursed lips. 'Found some pleasant company, have you?'

And Mr Kingsbergen said: 'Alma... This is Ula... Ula comes from Sweden...'

'Nice to meet you!' barked Mrs Kingsbergen. 'Sorry about my husband, but he's always like this.'

And right away an argument kicked off.

Perhaps people who are married can never do exactly what they feel like.

In the afternoon, we saw Sweden. I'd expected loads of mountains and fjords, that rugged kind of landscape with snow and pine trees, but forget about it. It was a completely normal coastline. Admittedly, perhaps a bit more empty than the Netherlands, and when we got closer I could actually see a few pine trees. But it was nothing special.

Mr and Mrs Kingsbergen had been quiet for some time by then. They weren't drinking anymore either, just staring grumpily ahead. So Mo and I got them each a Coke. We were still hoping we might see dolphins; we'd been trying to see

some for hours, standing outside, staring at the vague horizon, the salty wind sweeping around our heads.

Mo whispered to me that she was ‘really happy’ that I was going with them.

Slowly we sailed into the harbour. Everyone got up and we all shoved our way back to the hold.

Then we were in Trelleborg and if you really want to know where that is, well, you can just look it up for yourself.

I can tell you one thing: make sure you never go there. It’s an absolute hole. The only, absolutely the *only*, fun thing about it was that they’d planted a row of palm trees along the road by the harbour.

Palm trees in Sweden, I’d never expected that.