

Sample Translation

*This Is Not a Diary*

(Dit is geen dagboek)

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Translated by Laura Watkinson

*7 February*

This is not a diary.

I just want to make sure that's clear. Imagine someone digging it up in a hundred years' time and thinking, 'Wow! A sixteen-year-old boy keeping a diary! That's so pathetic.'

Well, I'm not pathetic and I don't keep a diary.

This is a notebook.

And the reason I'm sitting here, filling it up with scribble, is that my dad's given me an ultimatum.

An ultimatum is a statement of your final conditions when you're negotiating with criminals, such as hijackers and terrorists. And if they don't comply with those conditions, it's WAR.

I'm not a criminal, even though I do a lot of things wrong. But I've not been doing too much of anything recently.

You might think that not doing things means you can't do them wrong either. But you'd be mistaken. Not doing some things is wrong in itself.

Not telling your school counsellor that your friend's being hit at home is wrong. That makes sense. But not going to school, not eating, not sleeping, not talking, not wanting to do anything, wanting nothing at all, absolutely NOTHING, that's wrong too.

Then you get landed with an ultimatum, from a concerned mummy or daddy, who has your best interests at heart.

‘I don’t give a damn what you spend all day doing,’ yelled the concerned daddy in question, ‘but from now on you will write something in this notebook every single day. Whether you want to or not. Write about something you’ve done or felt or thought. And you’re going to listen to at least one of these CDs every day. If you don’t, I’m going to have you admitted to a psychiatric institution.’ He threw the notebook onto my bed and dumped a pile of CDs on my desk. The dull stuff. (He’s got non-dull stuff too: Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Einstürzende Neubauten.) (Which he never plays anyway.) (Only in the car when he needs to stay awake.) (Or when he’s really, really angry.)

Not that I’m in the mood for that kind of noise at the moment, but still. At my age you’re not exactly dying to listen to Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* or Bruch’s violin concerto. Although I happen to know that the Bruch is a pretty nice piece of music.

I obviously didn’t take it seriously, what my dad said about the psychiatric institution.

Until the next day, when he came to check my ‘homework’. He was furious. (I hadn’t done it.)

He showed me his diary and the appointment he’d made for an initial appointment with a friend of his who was a psychiatrist in Amsterdam. He said, ‘I’ve put up with your behaviour for long enough!’

And: ‘If you want to carry on living here, you’ll have to take responsibility for your own recovery. Write something in your notebook every day and listen to one CD. Otherwise I’m going to have you admitted.’

Recovery.

As though I’m ill.

I thought quickly and wrote in huge letters on the first page of the notebook:

PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT!

and showed it to my dad.

He just went silent for a bit and then he said, ‘You don’t have to let me read it. What I meant was you have to show it to someone occasionally so they can see that you’re writing in it. Marjan maybe, or Fluff.’

I gave him the smallest of nods. To let him know that I’d do what he wanted, but under protest and very reluctantly. So there it is. I probably don’t have any alternative.

Did nothing today.

Did nothing yesterday either.

Or the day before that.

Oh yes. *Listened to Pergolesi. Stabat Mater. (Half a CD.)*

*I thought I'd start with the worst one, get it out of the way.*

*Anyway, it was on the top of the pile.*

*Very dodgy title that, Stabat Mater.*

*But whatever. The music was okay.*

*It made me think of thermal baths in foreign countries. Those beautiful spa resorts with marble arcades and floors, where people go to recover from one thing or another. (And not to socialise with each other.)*

*(Socialising's forbidden in Pergolesi's terminal baths.)*

And the day before yesterday I fried an egg for my little sister.

*8 February*

Long live little sisters.

Long live all of the little sisters all over the world, but mine most of all.

She's seven years old and we call her Fluff, but her real name is Dolores, because that's what my mum wanted. Only it made no sense. Dolores is a name for a fat, fifty-year-old Spanish floozy with blue-black hair and a double-D cup.

My sister had hardly any hair when she was born and what little hair she did have was brilliant white and fluffy. Which is where her nickname comes from.

Did nothing today.

Thought nothing, felt nothing.

And the day just went by as usual, praise the Lord and worship His Name.

Every day comes to a natural end. He designed that well.

*Didn't listen to any music.*

*Too tired.*

*9 February*

In my opinion, the importance of a mother is seriously overrated. In my opinion. I like that phrase. There's something calm and composed about it.

So it fits me perfectly. The calm composure of an old fart. I was an old fart even when I was three years old. Maybe I was just born that way. My gran says I didn't speak a word or take a step until I was well into my third year. It's not because I couldn't talk or walk. I just didn't like it. Which is apparently very unusual for a child of nearly four years old. And explains my suspicion that I was born an old fart.

Okay, there's some point to nice mothers.

But where do you find a nice mother in this day and age?

(In this day and age. Another of those reassuring expressions.)

In this day and age there are very few mothers who you find waiting for you with a cup of tea when you get home from school.

The happy-homemaker mother belongs to a dying breed. Nowadays you have:

- the ambitious, highly educated mother with a 40-hour working week
- the divorced mother with a 40-hour working week
- the rich mother with a 60-hour fitness and beauty week
- And then there's the welfare mother. But even she's off out all day, looking for work.

Maybe we should start breeding nice mothers in a special reserve.

And then set them free in the wild and let them fend for themselves.

Feeling: tired.

My dad says that tired isn't a feeling. He's wrong. Tired is an awful, all-consuming feeling.

*Listened to Pergolesi. Stabat Mater, just the intros.*

*Classical music itself is okay, but they should ban people from singing to it. Especially women. You have to turn them down really low to make it bearable. (The higher they are, the quieter it has to go.) Pretty hard work, zapping from intro to intro.*

*Made me really tired.*

*10 February*

Okay, I've had a whole night to think about it.

I feel like a slug. A slug that's really slow and constantly in danger of being trodden on.

A slug with no skin, with its nervous system on the outside. And all of its thoughts projected onto its forehead. Just one big news ticker with thoughts for everyone to read, loud and clear.

So that everyone can see what a loser I am, what I'm worried about and **THAT I CAN'T COPE WITH ANYTHING AT ALL.**

*The world is drowning in a sea of senseless noise.* That's the kind of thing that gets announced on my news ticker.

*And Sod off and Do Not Disturb.*

*Why does everyone just keep on stuffing their faces?* That's another of my favourites.

I hate seeing all those big-heads out on the streets, walking around in public, celebrating their existence with croissants and doughnuts, and sometimes entire pizzas in one go.

If you think you're so important that you have to keep on feeding your body, that ugly shell, to make it even bigger and fatter and more obvious, **THEN DO IT IN PRIVATE.** At home on the loo or something. **BUT DON'T BOTHER ME WITH IT.** With your chomping jaws and your smug faces.

*Because I'm worth it.* That's what their news tickers say.

Those thoughts of mine, they're not very uplifting.

And they completely wear me out.

*Too tired today to listen to music.*

PS Haven't left the house for weeks either.

*11 February*

So, mine's dead. (Mother.)

Dead mothers. That's another category.

And you know what? I DON'T MIND.

(About her being dead.)

But it's better not to let my dad see that, because then he'll start watching me really closely again for days on end. To see whether I'm behaving normally enough or if it's time for the psychiatrist.

In my dad's opinion, there are two kinds of not-normal.

There's: not-normal-but-tolerable. And: not-normal-and-

UNACCEPTABLE.

The first category includes such behaviour as:

- staying in bed all day, staring into space
- not talking to anyone
- not going to school and not playing my guitar
- not having much appetite

And not-normal-and-unacceptable includes:

- smoking dope and drinking
- not eating at all
- saying that your dead mother was a bitch and that you're glad she's dead

So I've stopped doing those things.

And I'm not saying anything either. Even if I wanted to, I just can't do it.

I can't get my mouth open.

Luckily, I have that sister of mine. You don't have to talk to her. She just comes and sits in my bedroom now and then and quietly gets on with her own thing. Drawing or reading or recorder practice. I'm not so wild about the recorder, but somehow she knows that. She plays it really quietly and she always stops just as it's about to become too much for me.

Oh, and another thing that's not normal:

A boy of sixteen sleeping in his seven-year-old sister's bedroom because he doesn't want to be alone at night. But oddly enough my dad lets me do it.

Or maybe he hasn't realised.

*Pergolesi. Second part. (Low volume.) Salve Regina in F minor and Salve Regina in A minor. So that worked out well, minor times two. Suits my mood just fine.*

*12 February*

Yesterday I said: ‘doesn’t want to be alone.’

But it’s actually: *can’t* be alone.

I get really scared at night.

Scared.

What of?

Scared of being alone.

But why?

What’s so bad about being alone at night?

What’s so different about being alone during the daytime, for instance?

Being alone during the daytime, when the sun’s shining, is actually a piece of cake.

And when Aunt Marjan and Fluff are bumbling around the house somewhere, it can even be quite nice.

But at night...

Being alone at night, that’s terrifying.

Even when there are other people in the house who are asleep.

Being alone at night, waking up on your own, alone in your room, that’s the ultimate in feeling abandoned.

(But what’s so bad about being abandoned?)

When I’m alone at night, I get absolutely terrified.

Of noises, for example.

I get scared of every sound that I can't immediately identify and I think that someone, a stranger, is prowling around the house.

Which wouldn't even be all that terrible in itself, someone sneaking around the house to nick the computer or the DVD player.

But the person I'm scared of isn't coming to steal something.

They're coming to kill me.

If you read it like that, it looks ridiculous, but it doesn't feel that way in the slightest.

I'm scared they're coming to kill me.

I'm scared they're coming to kill me in the middle of the night, while everyone else carries on sleeping peacefully.

It still looks illogical and ridiculous.

I wish I could laugh about it myself.

*13 February*

No laughs last night.

Took my duvet to my sister's bedroom at half two. Pulled the spare mattress out from under her bed and turned on the nightlight so that I could see her face.

That beautiful little sleeping face and her regular breathing bring me back into the world of safety. I lay the mattress right next to her bed, so that I can hold her hand. If I'm lucky I calm down so much that I fall asleep within ten minutes. But sometimes it takes longer. Then I go and lie beside her for a while, with my arm around her, and I smell her hair.

I hope no one ever finds out about this, because I can imagine that it could create completely the wrong impression. Sleeping in your little sister's bed when you're sixteen, that probably falls into the category of 'unacceptable'.

It reminds me of the time when she was still a baby and you could sit with her on your lap all day. Nothing else mattered when you were sitting on the sofa with Fluff and sniffing her hair. You might have had a row with the boy next door or maybe you hadn't got a Gameboy for your birthday, but none of that mattered anymore. With that baby on your lap you were safe.

I am, by nature, something of a wuss.

'Oversensitive' my mother called it, when she was still normal. (Not that she called it anything else afterwards. What I mean is she stopped bothering about me then.)

Ever since I was a baby, my mother had always explained to me, in great detail, what was going to happen to me. In the sense of: ‘I’m putting your cardie on, because we’re going out shopping in a minute,’ or ‘Your dad and I are going to the pictures later and you’re going to stay at home with Gran,’ and so on.

I don’t know who it says more about, me or my mother.

I mean, why would you think your baby needs that?

But whatever.

When I was two and a half, we drove down to the south of France for a camping holiday.

All the way down there (two days with an overnight stop at a hotel) I was restless because (according my mother) I didn’t know what to expect.

Camping. That doesn’t mean much to a two-year-old. Although it must have been explained to me in detail.

My agitation reached its peak when my mother threw a chewed-up apple core out of the window on the second day of the journey. I reacted as though it was my favourite cuddly toy.

My mother was astonished and asked me what was wrong and I just sobbed, ‘I feel so sorry for the poor little apple...’

Two years old and I felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under my feet. We’d left our familiar surroundings behind, we were on our way to a ‘camping’, whatever that might be, and poor little apples were simply discarded and thrown out of the window.

I only calmed down after my mother told me a story about a little bird that would soon find the apple core and eat it all up, yum yum, and the little apple would be really happy then, because it had been able to help out the hungry creature.

I'm still just the same.

As when I was two, I mean.

I'm really happy my mother was buried instead of cremated.

I'm really happy that the worms have eaten up her body and that my mother was able to help out the hungry creatures.

*Stabat Mater. Somehow or other, it calms me down.*

*Just hope no one at school finds out about it.*

*Religious music by Pergolesi. That's like doing yoga. When you're 16.*

*And a boy.*

*14 February*

Maybe that's what scares me most at night.

That no one's keeping an eye on you.

That no one's worrying about you.

That no one notices you.

That you might as well be dead.

*15 February*

I'm always tired.

That doesn't seem to be normal either.

Not even for a sixteen-year-old. If I get up at ten, for instance, and go for a shower, I'm so tired afterwards that I have to go for a quick nap before I can have my breakfast. Spending time with people is what makes me most tired, even if it's someone who used to be my friend and even if it's just for a few minutes.

Even Aunt Marjan coming to ask me what I want for dinner can be too much. I love Aunt Marjan, that's not the problem. Well, honesty compels me to say: I *loved* her. I know that because I remember sentences like that. Literally, the words I said to my dad were, 'I do love Aunt Marjan. Really.' (That 'really' is an essential part of the statement. And it sounds pretty defensive. Probably came after the umpteenth row about me being rude or something.)

And I can see that she's nice and kind. Fluff's mad about her. But I don't remember the actual feeling. I don't remember any feelings at all.

Is that even possible? Remembering a feeling? To love. I love, you love, he/she/it loves.

I was really bad at grammar and spelling in primary school.

And at maths and geography. That was partly because I just wasn't interested in anything. Sometimes I tried my best and then, surprise surprise, I suddenly got a smiley-face sticker on my work. But most of the time I didn't get any more than a tick or two.

Which is why they wanted to make me go to vocational school instead of the grammar school.

‘He’s just not making even the slightest bit of progress,’ was the sensitive observation from my teacher Mr De Boer.

My mother still used to interfere back then.

She even got half a day off from the mental home for a meeting with Mr De Boer.

She said to him, ‘The fact that you can’t manage to make the lad enthusiastic about anything has more to do with your capability than my son’s. He’s going to grammar school.’ And then she got up and left. She spent the rest of her day off with me at the funfair. She was in one of her ‘cheerful’ moods. Which were always accompanied by her splashing loads of cash on silly, fun stuff. We ate sweets and candyfloss and I nearly puked up on the waltzers. After the fair she bought me two pairs of Persol sunglasses. (Dead expensive.)

Fortunately we don’t live in Amsterdam and, if your mother absolutely insists, you can still go to the grammar school in our town, no matter what your teacher says.

And I was happy about that. Because Luuk, my best friend, was going to the grammar school too.

*To love.*

*Right now I don’t love anything at all.*

*And so I can't even decide what I want to eat.*

*None of it matters at all.*

*And it's been that way for weeks.*

*16 February*

It started on Fluff's birthday.

It was her seventh.

I wasn't feeling good that day, so I stayed at home in bed. Actually I'd been feeling shit all week.

I picked Fluff up from school so she didn't have to go to the childminder. She was really happy to see me.

I told her we were going to do something fun because it was her birthday and that she could choose what we'd do.

She wanted to go to Mum's grave. And take flowers.

HELLO, FLUFF! I said SOMETHING FUN!

Just the thought of it made me feel sick, but I didn't let her see that. It was her birthday and she really wanted to do it. You could see it in her eyes. We went on the bus, because my mother's grave isn't nearby. Thank goodness.

We bought roses. Red ones. Fluff's orders.

There were a lot of weeds on the grave. Apparently no one had visited it for a long time. We worked together to tidy it up a bit and I put the flowers in a vase. When it was time to go, Fluff said, 'Bye bye, magic mummy, I'm so happy I'm your daughter.'

And then something weird happened. I got this sick feeling in my stomach and my whole body went limp. I said, 'What do you mean?'

And Fluff said, 'Well, if she hadn't been my mother, I wouldn't be here.'

I remember thinking that she must have been reading self-help books or something. And after that it's all a jumble.

It was a sort of short circuit in my head. An electric discharge. I saw flashes of light and I couldn't think anymore.

Or talk.

Or even walk, for that matter. Fluff said later that she had to drag me all the way to the bus stop.

When we got home, Aunt Marjan was there.

I went to bed.

We all thought I had a migraine.

*17 February*

She jumped in front of a train.

My mother.

And I felt most sympathy for the cleaners from the railway company who had to scrape her out from under the engine.

Sunday morning, 29 August, end of the summer. It was beautiful, sunny weather. The garden doors were open. I was putting covers on my new schoolbooks. Gran was helping me. She was looking after me and Fluff, who was two at the time. My dad had been called urgently to Vogelenzang for the umpteenth time. I wasn't worried about anything at all. I was really looking forward to starting at my new school.

When Dad got home, I knew straightaway that our lives had changed for good. So did Fluff. She stopped playing with her cuddly toys, walked over to Dad really calmly and took his hand. My dad sank onto the sofa. He sank onto the sofa like a failed soufflé. That really is exactly what it looked like. The despair was dripping off his shoulders.

I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in having my good mood destroyed. So I carried on covering my books and, luckily, Gran did too. Even though I knew better, I hoped this storm would soon blow over. But then Fluff said, 'Not nothing, Daddy?'

Ever since she'd learned to talk, Fluff had used those words when things got too much for her, when she was too tired to keep her eyes open and to know

what she wanted. When you asked her if she wanted a bottle or a sandwich, she'd just shout, 'Not nothing!' And you knew that you had to get her into her bed as quickly as possible.

My dad sat there nodding a bit stupidly for a while and then he said, 'Not nothing, Fluff.'

That meant my mother was dead.

Dead.

Over and out.

End of story.

No more mother ever again.

Not nothing.

I carried on covering my books, but Gran stopped helping. Dad sat down at the table and told us all about the unsavoury details. I thought that was pretty dumb of him, because Fluff was there, looking at him with big, wide eyes.

She heard everything and even though she was only two and maybe didn't understand it completely, she stored up all of the information inside herself. All those stupid, shitty little details. *Where* (Vogelenzang, near the psychiatric centre, where my mother had been living in a therapeutic community for eighteen months. My aunt said they do it on purpose. Building psychiatric hospitals along railway lines.), *what time* (8.50, the train from Haarlem to Leiden), and *how long a delay it had caused* (an hour and a half).

To shut my dad up, I said that thing about the cleaners. That I felt most sympathy for them. I was careful about how I said it, because of Fluff. (At that point I wasn't aware of the danger of the psychiatrist and the two kinds of not-normal.)

My dad stood up and slapped me in the face, really hard. He still regrets it even now.

I didn't give a toss.

I heard a slap, but I felt nothing.

My gran started screaming and my dad started crying, and my sister and I went upstairs to watch TV. Nickelodeon or something. Something stupid. With the sound off.

I understood perfectly: the slap in the face had actually been meant for my mother.

*Salve Regina in F minor. With Andreas Scholl.*

*Countertenors sound pretty cold. Cold and austere. Actually rather beautiful. But a bit dead, without the natural vibration of a female voice.*

*18 February*

It was not a migraine.

And it didn't go away.

What I mean is, the headache disappeared, but the rest didn't. It was like a really bad flu. One of those where the fever makes your legs give way, but without the temperature. I couldn't do anything at all. Not even get up out of my bed to shower. All of my muscles ached and all I wanted to do was sleep.

On Friday afternoon, my dad called our doctor. (An emergency.) He said I was probably exhausted and advised my dad not to push me too hard.

But it wasn't exhaustion either, because all that sleeping hasn't helped one bit.

When I'm not asleep, I'm usually lying on my bed. Staring up at the ceiling. I don't feel like playing computer games or reading a book. For some reason I just don't seem to be able to keep my attention focused. Sometimes I go for a walk around the house. I try to think about nothing. And since *The Ultimatum* I've been writing in my notebook EVERY SINGLE DAY and listening to my dad's classical moan-and-groan funeral music ALMOST EVERY DAY.

*The Pergolesi's pretty bearable, by the way. Really helps me not to think.*

*(I mean thinking in the sense of letting your own thoughts drive you completely crazy.)*

*Weird that noise can still be calm.*

*19 February*

I don't remember much about the funeral. Except having a row with my dad because I didn't want to go. It was on a Thursday and fell in the middle of the camping holiday for my new school's induction week. I really didn't want to miss out on that for HER. She'd already messed up enough things in my life.

Of course, I ended up going to the funeral. Aunt Marjan persuaded me.

'Well, do it for us then, Bou! We can't do without you on such a difficult day.'

'Who's "us"?' I snapped.

'How about your dad, your sister, Gran and me, for instance?'

Fluff and Gran. I couldn't abandon them. I had to be there for them.

(Well, physically there anyway.)

My dad came to pick me up very early that Thursday from the campsite in Den Bosch, together with Fluff and Aunt Marjan. He had asked me if I had anything I wanted to say at the funeral. I certainly did. I had to let him read it beforehand, so I gave it to him in the car. Marjan was driving, Fluff and I were in the back and Dad read what I'd written. I can still remember most of it by heart.

*Mum,*

*I'm glad you're dead.*

*To be honest, I'd often hoped it would happen, but now that it actually has, it's all a bit of a bummer.*

*The big question that's bothering me is: Why NOW?*

*Why not a few years ago when Fluff was two months old and you just vanished overnight? Remember? You didn't leave a note, nothing. Just Fluff, in her cot, screaming with hunger.*

*Dad, Gran, Aunt Marjan and the police looked for you for weeks. Everyone was at their wits' end.*

*And when you finally turned up, (honestly, Mum, you looked like a half-dead sheep and you smelled just as bad), we all thought:*

*Here we go again.*

*If only we'd given you an injection right there and then.*

*And I'd be having fun with my new class in Den Bosch right now.*

*So long, Mum.*

*Hope this is the last time you'll bother us.*

I must have been really furious.

My dad gave a deep sigh, folded my speech up carefully and then said in a voice that sounded as though he hadn't slept all week, 'Okay, Bou. You've made your point. But please, do me a favour and don't read it out at the funeral. Because, believe me, you'll regret it later.'

I don't know if I believed him or not.

But I already regretted it a little bit. Because of him. And those slumping shoulders.

I don't remember anything about the service at the cemetery. I don't remember who spoke or what they said. I don't remember the music and, strangely enough, I don't even remember whether Fluff was there.

I just remember Gran crying and crying. Silently and without stopping. I still have nightmares about it:

I'm alone at home. The doorbell rings. I open the door. Gran's standing there, crying. I let her in and go to make her a cup of tea, try to start a conversation with her, ask her what's wrong and that, but she doesn't say anything, she just keeps on crying and the tears make a puddle around her feet, which gets bigger and bigger. I fetch bowls and buckets and saucepans for her, but she fills them all up and I start to panic, because the whole floor is flooded by now and she's going to make the fuses blow. In the end, I ask Gran if she wants to carry on crying outside, because I don't know how to cope with the flooding. Gran does as I ask, she goes outside, but it's now pitch black and it's pouring down. I try to get rid of the tears with brooms and mops and all sorts. I feel terrible because I've sent my gran out into the storm. When all the water has finally gone, it turns out that Gran's salty tears have eaten away at the wooden floor. There are holes in it and it's slowly starting to crumble.

When the funeral was over, a taxi took me back to Den Bosch.

But there was no point.

I went straight to the dormitory and lay down on the bed with all of my clothes still on. (Including my shoes.) I didn't get up again until the Alpha Tours buses came to pick us up on Friday evening.

*Pergolesi. Stabat Mater. I'll take the countertenor with his cold, dead, emotionless voice.*