

Sample translation from

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Introduction

‘They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn, they outvoted me.’

Dramatist Nathaniel Lee after he was taken to a mental institution around 1684

As a young girl, when I couldn't sleep, I used to lie down on the couch in my father's study. My dad always worked at night, with two chess boards on his desk and an overflowing ash tray. His study was thick with smoke. He was a famous Dutch chess player who'd once beaten Bobby Fischer. In those days my father mainly wrote columns and pieces for the newspaper. He was a bohemian, an intellectual and a heavy drinker and well known in the night haunts of Amsterdam. He never had a normal office job, except once at IBM, but he resigned within a week because the sun was shining and the sun, according to him, would never shine again if nobody enjoyed it. He died when I was fourteen years old.

I had always admired my father, the bold way he lived his life, exactly how he wanted to, and the way he embraced uncertainty. Even now, more than 30 years later, I still miss him, and I wonder what he would think of the world we are living in today. However, when I was a young graduate, I saw sense in trying to build a more stable future for myself and studied law, following in my mother's footsteps. She had been a judge for many years. After my studies, I got a good job with a big political party and later with an NGO. In both cases I earned a lot of money and quickly rose to managerial level. I was the worst boss ever. When people asked me what they had to do, I would tell them to figure it out themselves. It just wasn't for me. Getting up early, working nine to five, the endless number of meetings, thinking in 'unique selling points', there was always something wrong and yet every day was the same. One day, with my father in mind, I resigned.

In 2006 I discovered a different layer of society, which changed my view of the world. I replied to an advert for a job as receptionist at an escort agency and was offered it the next day. I worked in the evenings until 2 am, from a very ordinary flat on the outskirts of Amsterdam. At quiet times I joined the escorts on the couch to watch television. There'd often be a bottle of wine on the table and it would be so much fun that we hoped the phone

wouldn't ring. I didn't go out anymore and hardly ever went outside. Instead, night life came to me.

About a third of the dates involved no sex at all. If a man pays that much for company, he's looking for more than physical release. One of our most popular escorts was a student who was no great beauty. In her free time, she wore designer clothes, preferably Isabel Marant, but when she visited a client, she dressed down, wearing a twenty-euro dress from H&M. According to her, all men were secretly looking for the girl next door, so that was the role she played. In the time she worked for us, she turned down two marriage proposals from clients who wanted to save her.

I don't want to promote prostitution, not at all, but the reason that I loved my job so much is that it introduced me to a secret world of hidden longings. It was a place where the only norm was the anomaly, a free world where going against the flow prevailed, where another way of life seemed possible, even if only for a moment. It was a place of ambiguity. It challenged the norm which is exactly why it's currently under pressure. Now more than ever.

Wholesomeness, order and self-control are of the essence these days. We're expected to eat healthily, the gym is always waiting for us, accusing us, and we ought to cleanse our spirit with mindfulness, pills and self-help books. Everything must be clean so that nothing, no E number, no roll of fat, keeps us from optimal achievement. Ambiguity has given way to an unequivocal story, the moral of which is that we must be the very best version of ourselves. Physically, mentally and morally. *You must and shall be a winner.*

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Here's to the crazy ones... that's how Apple's iconic advertisement *Think Different* began. It was 1997 and until then adverts were about a product to be sold and how it would make you feel. A shampoo, a pair of sunglasses or a perfume that would make you more attractive, more exciting and able to live a better life than the one you had before. But in *Think Different* the product was no longer important. This advert was a personal assignment. An imperative to rise above yourself. Be more like the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels and troublemakers, Steve Jobs' solemn voice instructed us. Be 'a round peg in a square hole'. Be like Einstein, Picasso, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. They were 'not fond of rules' but 'the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.'

In other words: start believing in yourself and you too can change the world. What followed was a whole series of comparable ads. The message

was always inspirational. Motivational. Empowering. *Just Do It!* from Nike. *Impossible is Nothing* from Adidas. *Go Forth* from Levi's, accompanied by Bukowski's magnificent poem '*The Laughing Heart*' – '*Your life is your life, / don't let it be clubbed into dank / submission.*' Or the recent *Dream Crazy* from Nike, with the former footballer Colin Kaepernick: 'Don't try to be the fastest runner in your school, or the fastest in the world, be the fastest ever.' Ordinary is not good enough. It can be better. You can do better. Gillette no longer promises that a razor blade is *The best a man can get*, but wants to make you a better person: *The best a man can be*.

These advertisements summon you to liberate yourself from negativity, doubt and uncertainty, from everything that prevents you from excelling. Because you've already got it in you, that better life, that better world, success, happiness, it's all a choice. So choose it.

And there you are, at home on the couch. Your rent is too high, your work too boring, you contribute nothing, you've got a so-called bullshit job and at the same time you're slowly verging on burn-out. You feel you're a loser. You think you're the only one. Because you've so often been called a troublemaker, you've started taking Ritalin. This is today's reality. The crazy ones from the Apple advert? They're now called 'confused men'. Misfits are losers. Rebels buy a t-shirt of The Clash at H&M. And there's not a boss in the world who wants an employee who 'is not fond of rules'. If anyone has proved this, it's Colin Kaepernick, who lost his job because he protested against police violence in the United States. By presenting him as the psychological winner, Nike concealed not only the enormous price Kaepernick paid for his protest but also the fact that this protest ultimately had no effect (other than a million-dollar deal with Nike).

Nike appropriated Kaepernick's social struggle and removed the sting from it. Precisely like Levi's with Bukowski's words. The last thing Bukowski would have wanted with his poem was for you to go through life as an obedient consumer. But now that Levi's has used his words in an advert including images of riots, they've become an empty shell. All that remains is the feeling that the poem invokes but not the direction of that feeling, the anti-bourgeois recalcitrance. What these advertisements declare is not what they intend. It is not freedom that is propagated here but conformity, in the hope that you will continue to buy jeans, trainers and computers in 'dank submission'.

The same applies to the self-help industry. Here too conformity is key. Whoever feels like a round peg in a square hole today, simply needs to read a self-help book – seven steps to success, ten steps to happiness, a hundred things you still must do, a thousand things never to do again. So that you can worm yourself into that hole. What all those self-help books, articles, TED talks, lectures, courses and coaches give you in the end, are rules. Rules to

function better, to last longer and to conform to the status quo. Belonging. Joining in. That is what it's about.

Be positive, walk tall, tidy your house, make your bed in the morning, leave your comfort zone, introduce routines, set priorities, know your strength, work on your weaknesses, listen to others, ignore bad advice, be grateful, smile. But then it must be a real smile, the sort of smile that involves your eyes, that reduces stress. Keep your body and mind healthy, eat superfoods, avocados, exercise, practise yoga and mindfulness, learn to control your anger and anxieties, make a plan, keep to it, because you can do it, yes you can, eat that frog, spark joy, don't give a fuck and think differently!

Just like in the adverts, it's all equally inspirational, motivational and empowering. And just like in the adverts the problem always lies with you. *Think Different, Dream Crazy, Impossible is Nothing*: the idea that the only thing holding you back is you, yourself. So, forget the products, forget the abominable conditions they were made in, forget the world around you and the political and socio-economic structures that govern it. Instead believe in the neoliberal dream in which only you, yes, you alone are in control. If you can play to the best of your ability, even if the load is too heavy – *'Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.'*

The political has been made personal, problems are privatised, and protest is co-opted.

You've started thinking that you're the problem, that it's your fault that you're still not happy or successful and are verging on burn-out. It's a childish way of thinking – children blame themselves for everything, whether it's their parents' divorce or being bullied – and yet you've obediently assumed the message. You've taken a subscription to Headspace. A wrist band counts your steps and an app measures your sleep. You try not to focus on the negative but to be always positive. You ignore the angry faces in the supermarket. If your boss treats you badly, you remind yourself that things are difficult for him too. You keep a gratitude diary.

It's not self-help, no, you call it self-care. You do it out of love for yourself. You do it because you feel that things can be better, that there must be more to life than this. But what the self-help industry ultimately offers is no more than a lot of gimmicks, buffers and life hacks to keep going longer. So that you play the game better and forget how inexplicable this world really is. Because you have learned to suppress your anger and anxiety and to bear what is unbearable.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the prevalence of conditions such as depression and anxiety have risen more than 40 per cent in the last thirty years. Nowadays, depression is the number one disease worldwide. We become increasingly dependent on medicine. What we need

is not pills, nor yoga or gratitude diaries but the realization that we are not the problem here.

If you feel that there's no place for you in this world, Virginia Woolf once said, don't ask yourself what's wrong with you, ask what is wrong with the world that it doesn't offer you more room. In Virginia Woolf's time, about 100 years ago, women were still forbidden to go to a library without being accompanied by a man. In other words, Virginia Woolf needed a man to be allowed to look at the books she herself had written. What do you do in such a situation?

You can try and sneak in by dressing as a man. It's what thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of women have done down the course of history in order to participate. Or – a more modern example – you can try to fight your way in as the exception, perhaps by thinking and negotiating like a man – Lean in, as Sheryl Sandberg said, because Nice girls don't get the corner office, according to Lois P. Frankel.

You can also think fuck this.

If the world keeps telling you you're not good enough, not healthy, smooth, fit, productive, positive or Zen enough, it's time to ask yourself what the hell has gone wrong in the world.

Originally this was what was intended by the phrase 'to be a round peg in a square hole' and it's not from Apple but from the dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley. And he meant something very different to what Apple suggests.

In *Brave New World* humankind has at last succeeded in being continually happy. Pain and grief have been expelled, there's no boredom, despair or loneliness anymore, no fear of death, no stress of choice. In fact, it's precisely the world that so many people want to create for themselves today. But in Huxley's universe this comes at a price. Foetuses are genetically manipulated in an artificial womb. Babies are instilled with correct values by 'neo-Pavlovian conditioning', so that as adults, they can fulfil their destiny in the predetermined job for which they're propagated. The population remains peaceful by enthusiastically using the muscle relaxer Soma: 'One cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments.'

This brave new world is one of work and entertainment, of a tranquil life in balance, without past or future, where people live in the present, in the 'calm ecstasy of achieved consummation'. And everyone is happy with that. Apart from the irritating and cranky Bernard Marx – somehow, something has gone wrong with him.

During a date with Lenina Crowne he asks whether she'd like to be more than just a conditioned slave.

'Don't you wish you were free, Lenina?'

‘I don’t know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time.’

The freedom Bernard dreams about, however, is another freedom. It is the freedom to live aimlessly and unhappily. To be useless, irritating and complaining. What Bernard longs for is the right to be a round peg in a square hole.

Suppose Apple had kept to that meaning. What a fantastic advert that would have been. No images of Einstein, Picasso, Gandhi or King but a little boy screaming in the middle of a children’s choir. A girl having a tantrum. A woman in a cafe who talks to no one. A man at home alone who shouts at his television. Images of invisible misfits, of people who contribute nothing but only disrupt, for example, a world view in which everything revolves around productivity, happiness and success.

This manifesto is in a certain way that advert. What it definitely is not is a self-help book.

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Yes, about a third of the bookings made at the escort agency did not involve sex, because nearly all the clients were ultimately looking for something else. Whether they were young or old, rich or poor, frugal or generous, whether they had a foot fetish, loved dressing up as Father Christmas or only wanted to be cuddled, what virtually every client had in common was that they wanted to be seen. From all the stories of the dozens of escorts I’ve got to know over the years, this is what I have learned.

What we ultimately seek is recognition. A customer wants to be more than a consumer, an escort more than a product, and this applies to everyone else who so often these days is reduced to one of these two. So, it wasn’t necessarily the most beautiful escorts who had the most regular clients, not the slimmest or, on the contrary, the most voluptuous women, but those who were able to see the clients for who they truly were.

Perhaps that is one of today’s biggest problems: we succumb to the gaze of beautiful, successful and happy people, to their view of society. We mirror ourselves on the winners, we follow their Instagram accounts, we retweet their inspirational quotes – *‘If you put that effort in, you’ll get what you want.’* Kim Kardashian. We read their books, we read articles about the seven things that highly successful people do. But do we feel recognised? Are we being seen?

This is a world in which everything is geared to more and better, in which nothing is ever good enough and you can and must always be more productive, consume more, preferably with a smile. At the same time, it is a world where social insecurity is increasing all the time, inequality is growing, safety nets are disappearing and far too many people are living with a chronic shortage of time. In such a world you must not ask how you can improve yourself. In such a world you must ask how you can disrupt a system that brings us all down.

'Be on the watch', Bukowski wrote in *'The Laughing Heart'*, *'there are ways out'*. Those ways will not make you healthier or more successful and certainly won't make you a better person. But it's not about you. It's about changing the world. *Show them what crazy can do.*