

Sample translation from

Een week of vier by Laura van der Haar

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She dials the emergency hotline, presses two for English and says the name of the town she lives in, and again when it turns out the system didn't recognize it the first time: Bar-ththe-*lo*-na—she's getting the hang of that Spanish 'c,' pressing the air through her teeth—but raising her voice immediately has her feeling out of breath. She starts to listen to the options and then presses one: *Are you calling to report an infection?*

Ida had briefly thought it was because of her baby. Her little girl is starting to get hair. She's especially aware of that at night, when the baby's little head is nestled into the hollow of her armpit, and she has her arm swathed protectively around her child like a swan's wing. The tiny hairs tickle her chin. When she plants a kiss on that little head, she even feels them tickling inside her nose. The little girl likes sleeping as close to her mother as possible, but she still wants to be able to toss her head from side to side, quite violently sometimes, even in her sleep. Her little arms are safely ensconced: one pressed against her mother's side, the other under mother's large hand.

A warm force, that's what Ida's hand is right now, on top of her child's tummy. Everything is so unbelievably small. Even though she sees her every day, every hour of the day, it still astonishes her. So tiny, and already there are moons on her fingernails. Almost everything fits into one hand—even her little head. Little foot in mother's hand. Thigh in mother's hand. Baby's tiny hand in mother's hand. If someone were to say *three guesses what I just put in your hand?* you wouldn't know, it's that light and small.

Joanes is three months old and Ida is only now beginning to understand her. When she raises her arms above her head and looks off to the side, she's trying to fall asleep. When she sticks out her tongue and makes a smacking noise it doesn't always mean she's hungry. Usually it does. But sometimes she just wants to suck on something for a bit. On a pinky, a washcloth, her own fist or just the air, suckling on the air to put herself to sleep. She can't do that by herself yet, she still needs her mother, who scoops her up into her huge arms and then, in a lulling rhythm, sings that she's a tiny bus driver, a sweet little livewire, oh, her funny little highlighter... It takes at least forty nouns for the little girl to fall asleep, but Ida enjoys it every time. It makes her laugh—the words, her child's chubby thighs, her sweet little tailgater, she calls her, oh my little deputy mayor... She can go on forever—with each new noun she loves her daughter even more. She always goes on for longer than is necessary, her sweet little skyscraper is fast asleep already, little dung beetle, pine needle... If only it was because of her child's fuzzy hairs.

She could easily put Joanes down into the cradle now without her starting to scream—she’s so fast asleep that Ida no longer needs to be careful. She keeps singing anyway, just because it’s so much fun to sing to that plump little face with those puckered lips, those lips that keep smacking even in their sleep—this baby just can’t get enough of life. Ida keeps singing until she could do anything with the little girl lying limp in her arms. Lift up her hand, plant a thousand kisses on that tiny nose, pinch those cool, chubby cheeks, plant a kiss on her slack eyelids, on that little ear that always smells faintly sour from all the mouthfuls of milk that she spits up. She just wants to hold her for another minute—she has to keep herself from squeezing too hard.

She doesn’t put Joanes into the cradle; instead she very carefully lowers her down onto the large bed and then cautiously folds herself around her. She wishes there were a soft membrane running between her arms and her legs so that she could curl up and completely envelop her baby. Nothing has ever fit so perfectly before. Not even the pants she borrowed from her best friend in the twelfth grade, that had made her ass look so good. Or the ring that Rainer had put on her finger a year and a half ago, when she’d still believed that one word could propel them years into the future, that a simple ‘yes’ would fling open all the doors, straight ahead, go go go, all the dominos cascading down.

Now she lives by herself in an apartment in a city where, apart from her yoga pal Nellie and one or two co-workers from the bakery, she doesn’t know anyone, in a country where she can’t seem to get used to the climate, to the laissez-faire attitude of the plumber and the delivery man, the sandwich toppings, how loud the families around her are at night. She’d just started planning the move back to her own country, where she’d at least have the girl she used to live next door to, her grandmother with dementia and maybe, if she were to put in some time and effort, some old friends from university. A climate that she feels at home in, her own language. Whole-wheat bread.

And then came the virus.

When she found herself sneezing as she crawled into bed at night, at first she'd blamed it on her little girl, on the downy hairs that tickled her nostrils when she kissed the crown of Joanes' head. That had to be it, she'd thought fondly. Her sweet little girl was getting hair. In the right light, you could even see a hint of the color it was going to be. Gold and blonde, golden blonde with a touch of strawberry. With one hand she'd sweep it up so that it lay flat across her small, round head. Other people would just see a bald baby, but she could already see the beginnings of a hairstyle and, beneath it, the beginnings of a face—a person starting to take shape. One day, cheekbones would start jutting out from that plump little face. Pores would form on that waxy little nose; cartilage and that one bone in the middle would push their way out more and more. Ida was hoping for a snub nose—even now she couldn't keep herself from pinching it every now and then. Every day a new surprise unfurled. Sometimes, from one moment to the next, Joanes would seem to have grown a few centimeters. Suddenly her head would be bigger. And those teeth coming in—did she have those before?

Ida buries her nose in her sweater, trying to muffle the sneeze. The sweater smells good, like the laundry detergent she also uses to wash Joanes' clothes. She sniffs the sleeve and smiles. Music, voices, the vacuum cleaner, the toilet flushing—none of that breaks her daughter's sleep. What will wake her, however, is a sudden loud noise. A door slamming shut, a sneeze.

It works. Her child's little hands make a feeble attempt to take flight but, under her mother's warm wing, she abandons that movement without protesting and sinks back into a deep sleep.

If it had gone no further than sneezing, Ida would probably have ignored it even longer. If it had gone no further than sneezing it wouldn't even have qualified as a symptom. But something strange was creeping over her body—that's what it felt like, the muscle ache that seemed to be marching up from the backs of her knees. Something hot was moving around inside of her, something that slicked her lower back with sweat and gave her the most

bizarre dreams at night. She'd wake up feeling shattered, shattered in a different way than she was used to. Her sleepless nights with Joanes had something cozy about them, pleasantly blurry, warm and snug—but now she woke up confused, sweating, sometimes still half-tangled in a fever dream it took her great effort to shake off, and no amount of water could get rid of that raspy, dry feeling in her mouth. This morning, she'd even been unsure if she'd already woken up at some point earlier—had she already changed Joanes' diaper? And that cobweb she'd noticed on the dresser, between the stuffed monkey and the wall, was that really there?—or if she was getting up for the first time. She walked over to the bathroom to get some paracetamol.

How many people had she had contact with? She'd barely touched anyone, not in a long time. That painful truth now came as a relief. She'd accepted two crates from the delivery service, bought a paper at the Tabacs and taken nine grapefruits from the greengrocer. Had he sneezed into his hand moments earlier? Should she have rinsed off the grapefruits? Not likely. If he had been infected, things would have looked very different around her neighborhood. But the people who'd still dared to venture outside over the past week walked briskly down the street, heads up, swept sycamore leaves off the sidewalk, waited calmly at the crosswalk for the lights to change.

Her yoga pal? They'd hugged. That was before the government had banned physical contact, before everything shut down. They'd joked about it—let's do it while we still can, it'll probably be illegal soon. Laughing, tentative—their friendship was still very new. And besides, they were both young and healthy, right? Was that right? Ida had pointed out that they should be thinking about other people right now, people with weak immune systems—she'd thought it was kind of odd that Nellie, of all people, wasn't more mindful of that after everything she'd been through, but she hadn't given it much more thought than that. No, that wasn't entirely true; she'd hugged Nellie with closed hands, an embrace with balled fists to keep her fingers clean. She'd turned the stroller as far away from Nellie as possible; without being consciously aware of it she'd already taken it into consideration. Because of Joanes, of course. Everything she did, she did with Joanes in mind. Ever since the first reports of the virus, she'd become more careful.

She hadn't even really wanted to go to that petting zoo in the first place, it wasn't much fun for a baby, Joanes would just be asleep in her stroller the whole time. And besides, all those toddlers and parents, wasn't that risking unnecessary exposure? But it had been such a nice day, one of the first truly nice days in a long time—there was still a bite in the air, but the sun was already quite strong and those two currents hadn't yet been stirred together into full-blown spring; it was 2-in-1 weather: vanilla custard with swirls of chocolate, coat off one moment, back on the next—things had still seemed so normal. And no one else ever invited her along anywhere.

Even though it wasn't supposed to rain, she'd pulled the cover down over the stroller. It wouldn't help against the virus, but it would help against the people who wanted to catch a glimpse of the baby, an urge almost no one can suppress—most people will hover over her, far too close, only to manically shriek things like *awww coochoooo*. When Ida had noticed Nellie's son's runny nose, she'd been glad of that rain cover. The boy had gathered a handful of flower petals and wanted to throw them into Joanes' stroller.

'Don't, Gregor,' Nellie had said mechanically, without making even the slightest effort to stop him and without saying *coochoo* to Joanes.

Gregor had clutched the flower petals in a determined little fist, and Ida had eyed that tightly squeezed fist with no less determination.

Normally, I'd never be friends with someone like this, Ida had thought, sitting on the terrace at the petting zoo. She wasn't sure why exactly, but the fact that Nellie was looking at the rabbits in their hutches with an expression that could most accurately be described as disdainful didn't help. Nor did the fact that she called Ida *mi vida*—*Ida mi vida, Ida mi vida*, she'd singsong whenever she saw her. If Ida had her pick of friends, she'd never choose someone like this, but she didn't have her pick of anything here—not even the cheese she put on her bread.

That hug, she thinks to herself when she doesn't just feel a sneeze coming but also notices a quiver in her throat. A tiny itchy spot, as if a sharpened pencil-tip is pointing it out to her: look, right here there's a tickle that's impossible to ignore, no no no, don't get distracted now, look. Right. Here. A tickle that's got to get out one way or another, that can't be dispelled with a sip of water, not even by clearing her throat. Her eyes start tearing up as she tries to swallow down the cough as long as possible.

She knows the symptoms by heart; everyone does. It starts off like an ordinary cold, something you wouldn't normally worry about: a sore throat, a slight cough, whatever. But even at that stage some people have trouble breathing, and if you don't take action it runs amok inside your body. She wishes she could call her mother to ask her what to do. To be told that it's nothing, baby, don't worry so much—how's our little girl? Our little girl is doing great, Mom, she'd often whisper when she thought of her mother, out and about in the sun, at night in bed—she'd imagine Joanes having a grandmother and herself having a mother. Things are great, Mom, you're right, it's probably nothing, I'll see you soon. She'd try to toss off that goodbye with the carelessness of someone whose parents were still around, but it always ended up sounding jubilant: see you soon, Mom! She wishes that Rainer wasn't Rainer, but the Rainer she'd once thought he could be: the father of her child, the man she'd followed here, with whom she was supposed to have discovered this crazy country. He could have been her family. She wishes there was someone who knew her, really knew her,

someone to share this responsibility—she can almost feel it pressing down on her shoulders and her chest.

‘Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?’ she says to Joanes, and she carefully touches the tip of her index finger to that little nose, which almost looks like it’s made of marzipan.

Joanes. Little Joanes. If Ida has the virus she needs to take action right away, she should report to the hospital immediately, and... no, stop, don’t even go there, it’s allergies. *Don’t worry so much, baby.* She looks back at Joanes, at *her* baby. Joanes is becoming. That verb has never before been so clearly visible, and this becoming is taking place so slowly that with every new incarnation Ida finds herself thinking: that’s right. That’s exactly as it should be, as if it’s always been that way, even though it’s only been that way for a moment. Looking back, it had all gone so fast—from pea to shrimp to baby to child, Ida’s not sure quite when it happened, but one day Joanes was her child. One day she no longer said, ‘I have a baby,’ she said, ‘I have a child.’ Of course that child had been there from day one, it was just that Ida was registering it more and more. And it would continue like that: her child would gradually come into clearer relief, gaining detail and definition, something that had always been there would become more and more apparent, like a blueprint endlessly taking shape, coming to life, into fully-fledged being.

If this was the virus, she should be calling the emergency hotline right now, setting things in motion—they’d have to come pick her up, she’d have to go meet them downstairs, she wasn’t supposed to touch the driver, no, no, she knew that, she’d heard the instructions on the news at least twenty times, she would observe the required distance, put on the hazmat suit. If this... no, no, don’t go there—*joder*, she says, the curse word Nellie loves to use all the time. If she really had the virus, she’d have to arrange childcare right away, make sure there was someone who could bottle-feed her little girl while she was gone, someone who’d fold her into her swaddle blanket, who’d sing ‘sweet little oil-tanker’ to her. It was too bizarre to even think about. Someone who, in the time it would take to get her own body back in order, would be willing to rock her child to sleep, sometimes as many as nine times in a row, without sighing even once, not even if they were hungry or tired or

in a hurry. She'd have to leave her apartment there and then, without giving Joanes another bath, without making the bed, without vacuuming.

Nonsense. How long had it been since that hug with Nellie—five, six days? She tries to do the math—it had been a weekday, she'd been surprised about all the parents building sandcastles without a care in the world, waiting for their child at the bottom of the slide, getting in line to buy another coffee. Didn't they have jobs? Or did they work at night and this was their free time? But then how come they all looked so fresh? The generous levels of sunlight every day? Siestas?

Because Nellie hadn't offered, Ida had joined the line to get two coffees and an apple juice. She'd tried not to seem too worried and she hadn't really wanted to ask, because she felt like it should be obvious, and because she didn't want to confront Nellie with her loss, but she couldn't help herself. Maybe she'd wanted to emphasize that there were things that could go wrong—Nellie was always so absent-minded, Ida did want to mention that Gregor might try to throw things other than flower petals into the stroller, that a dog might pee against the canvas, that these were strange times, she wanted to tell her that the brake didn't work that well anymore, and that a sudden gust of wind might...

'Will you watch Joanes for a minute?' she'd asked.