

Sample Translation

*A Small Chance*

(Een kleine kans)

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My dad was on his way to a war. His bag was already packed; all he had to do was say goodbye.

He often used to go to wars. At least once a year. If you're going towards a war, you really are heading in the wrong direction. What you should be doing is staying as far away as possible. But my dad was a doctor and people need doctors when there's a war on. My dad liked to be needed.

All of my dad's journeys turned out fine. He always came back home in one piece. But I was scared that travelling might be a bit like skipping: it could go really well for a long time, but not forever. Sooner or later, you'd miss your step.

'Don't you worry about it,' said my dad.

That didn't help. Travelling was dangerous; everybody knew that. All kinds of things could go wrong when you were on a journey.

My dad might get ill, for instance. He could catch malaria. Or yellow fever. And there were loads of other nasty diseases besides.

'Oh, Kiki,' said my dad. 'That's not going to happen. I'm perfectly healthy and I've had hundreds of jabs.' He rolled up the sleeve of his T-shirt to show me where he'd had his injections. I stood on my tiptoes and had a look. There was a tiny red dot amongst the freckles on his upper arm.

'Is that it?' I said.

'And I've got pills to take with me,' he said.

Or my dad might get shot. There are soldiers all over the place when there's a war on. Perhaps the soldiers would think that my dad was on their enemy's side. And then, of course, they'd start shooting at him.

'I'm not on anyone's side,' said my dad. 'And a soldier could see that just by looking at me.'

My dad might have an accident. He might drive a car into a ravine. Or his plane might crash.

'Have you heard the story about the man who was scared?' said my dad.

‘Yes,’ I said. My dad had told me the story about the man who was scared loads of times. It was a silly story. The man who was scared didn’t dare to leave his house, because he was sure that it was dangerous outside. Then, one day, a big tree fell on his house and the man who was scared was struck dead.

‘Well then, you know what it’s about,’ said my dad. ‘An accident can happen anywhere. It’s stupid to get yourself all scared and to stay at home. If everyone stays at home, nothing in the world will ever change.’

But still I would have preferred my dad to stay at home. He might get hit by a stray bullet. Stray bullets were worse than soldiers. They did whatever they felt like. They just flew through the air and there was no one to keep an eye on them.

‘Stray bullets don’t exist,’ said my dad.

‘Oh yes they do,’ I said.

‘Don’t you worry about it,’ said my dad. ‘I’ve never seen a single one.’

‘If you see one, it’s already too late,’ I said.

My dad bent down to give Mona a stroke. ‘Hello, old thing,’ he said. ‘Take good care of my girls, won’t you?’ He sighed. Mona wagged her stumpy tail and sighed back at him.

‘We can take care of ourselves,’ said my mum. My dad picked me up. I put my head on his shoulder.

‘You’re getting heavy, Kiki,’ said my dad. ‘I can hear my bones creaking.’

‘Weakling,’ I mumbled.

‘Sweetheart,’ answered my dad. He put me down. And then he lifted up my mum, but only a little way off the ground. I listened. There was no creaking at all.

‘The taxi’s here,’ said my mum.

My dad lugged his bag to the taxi and got in. My mum ran after him. Dad wound down the window of the taxi and gave her a kiss.

‘Love you!’ he called to me.

I climbed up onto the garden wall and raised my hand.

‘Bye,’ I said.

The taxi drove away.

Mona was able to sigh at both ends. Most of her sighs came from her rear end. She did silent but deadlies. Mona’s front end only sighed when you stroked her. And I never did that.

She was old and gross when we got her. No one wanted her, except for my mum.

Mona got a little older and a little grosser every day. She was small and fat. She had short, spiky hair and a stump instead of a tail. She had bulging eyes, big ears and teeth that stuck out under her top lip. And she hated me right from the start. Whenever she got the chance, she would come and be stinky next to me. One day she gobbled up half of my name bracelet. There was only a little bit of it left.

‘So, now your name’s Ki,’ said my mum.

‘I want a new one,’ I said.

‘A new dog or a new bracelet?’

‘Both.’

‘Ki,’ said my mum. ‘That’s quite a nice name.’

She loved broken things. Our front room was full of stuff that normal people would chuck out. We had a mirror with a crack, a sofa with saggy cushions and a chair with a broken back. My mum worked in a shop where they sold second-hand furniture. If they couldn’t sell something, she’d bring it home.

My dad never bothered about things. All he bothered about was people.

The taxi with my dad in drove around the corner. Mona waddled down the garden path on her stumpy little legs.

‘Too late,’ I said. ‘He’s already gone.’

Mona’s rear end let out a sigh.

We were sitting on the sofa with the saggy cushions. My mum and I. And Mona. Mona was snoring on my mum's lap.

'Did you know there was such a thing as stray bullets?' I asked.

'You mustn't think about that,' said my mum. I could tell from her face that she didn't want to think about stray bullets herself.

'But they do exist,' I said.

'I know they do,' said my mum. 'But your chance of running into one is really very, very small.'

'But maybe Dad will run into one,' I said. 'Or maybe a stray bullet will run into him. That could happen. And then I won't have a dad anymore.'

'Anything's possible,' said my mum. 'There's always a chance that something might happen.'

'The story of the man who was scared,' I said.

'That's a silly story,' said my mum. 'Real life's a lot more complicated. I'll try to explain. It's all about chances. Your chance of becoming a millionaire is very, very small, for example. But your chance of finding a coin in the street is quite a lot bigger. You can never say exactly how big a chance is, but you just know that hardly anyone becomes a millionaire. How many millionaires do you know?'

'Not a single one,' I said.

'You see?' said my mum. 'There's your proof. And that's how it works with dads as well. How many kids with a dad do you know?'

'Loads,' I said.

'And how many kids without a dad?'

I thought for a moment. 'Does divorced count?'

'No,' said my mum. 'Kids with no dad at all.'

'One,' I said. 'Jon's dad's dead.'

'Your chance of having a dad is big,' said my mum. 'And your chance of not having a dad is small. So you don't need to be scared that you won't have a dad any time soon.'

'Can you make your chances smaller?' I asked. 'Or bigger?'

‘Yes,’ said my mum. ‘Sometimes.’

‘The man who was scared made his chances smaller,’ I said. ‘And Dad’s making his chances bigger.’

My mum sighed.

I knew that she was trying to help me. But it just made everything more complicated. Now I had to start thinking about chances that you could make bigger or smaller.

I thought about Jon’s dad. The only dead dad I knew. On top of that, I knew three kids with a dead cat. And two kids with a dead dog. And one kid with a dead mouse.

I looked at Mona. I didn’t know anyone with a dead dog *and* a dead dad. A dead dog *and* a dead dad. That hardly ever happened. My mum would call that a small chance. And an even smaller chance was someone with a dead mouse, a dead dog and a dead dad.

‘Can I have a mouse?’ I asked my mum.

‘Why?’ she said.

‘I want a pet.’

‘We’ve got a dog,’ said my mum. ‘That’s a pet.’

I looked at Mona. She was asleep on the sofa. Her tongue was poking out of her mouth. Every now and then she made a slobbering sound. ‘Mum?’ I said.

We went to the pet shop. The boy behind the counter gave Mona a dog biscuit. Then he showed me a box of white mice.

‘Why don’t you pick one out?’ said my mum.

All of the mice had red eyes and bald tails. They were white and they were scrabbling nervously around in the box.

‘How old are they?’ asked my mum.

‘About five weeks,’ said the boy.

‘And how old can they get?’ I asked.

‘That depends,’ said the boy. ‘Two years is quite a long life for a mouse, but sometimes they can last longer than that. As long as you take good care of them.’

‘Which one do you want?’ asked my mum.

I pointed at a mouse that was sitting quietly in a corner.

The boy put his hand into the box and pushed a few mice out of the way.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘You just have to grab hold of him by his tail. Never by the tip, but close to his bum. See?’ He fished the mouse out of the box.

‘Is it a male or a female?’ asked my mum.

The boy held the mouse in front of his face. ‘A male, I think.’

‘And we want a cage,’ said my mum.

‘Of course,’ said the boy. ‘And you’d better take a bag of sawdust and a nest box. I’d also recommend that you get an exercise wheel. And a water bottle and a food bowl, of course. And perhaps a toy.’

My mum was a bit shocked at the thought of so many new things. ‘A cage and some sawdust,’ she said. ‘And an exercise wheel. And a water bottle. And that’s it.’

The boy fetched a plastic cage with ventilation holes in the top. ‘This kind of cage is the best,’ he said. ‘It won’t leave sawdust all over the place. But never put it in direct sunlight.’

I nodded.

‘And a bag of mouse food,’ said my mum.

At home, I put the plastic cage in my room. On the windowsill. The mouse ran up and down anxiously. He sniffed at the water bottle and at the exercise wheel. I put my hand into the cage. The mouse sniffed at my fingers. It tickled a bit.

‘Squeaky,’ I said. Carefully, I took hold of the mouse’s tail and lifted him out of the cage. I held him upside down. I could see the bottoms of his paws. They were pink.

I'd just come back from school. My mum was sitting on the sofa, with the telephone.

'Is something up?' I asked.

'No, not at all,' said my mum.

'Yes, there is,' I said.

'There isn't. Really.'

I sat down beside her. 'Is it something to do with Dad?'

She gave me a nudge. 'Don't be so daft! Where'd you get that idea from?'

'You know,' I said. 'You just sitting there like that. It's odd.'

'I'm waiting,' said my mum. 'For a phone call from your dad.'

'I want to talk to him too,' I said.

Mona came and sat down between us. She did one of her stinky sighs.

'How's your mouse?' asked Mum.

'He's called Squeaky,' I said.

'Squeaky and Kiki,' said my mum. 'A matching pair.'

We sat beside each other on the sofa for a while.

'You don't need to wait, you know. I'll give you a yell when your dad phones.'

My mum knew that I couldn't stand waiting. Especially when there are two of you waiting. That feels a lot more like waiting than waiting on your own. When you're on your own, you can pretend you're just enjoying sitting there on the sofa. Or you can go and lie on your bed. You can stroke the dog or read a book.

I got up to go to my bedroom. Mona stretched out on the sofa, with her paws in the air. Ready to get a stroke from my mum.

It was hot in my bedroom. The sun was shining on the windowsill. The inside of the plastic cage was damp. Squeaky was sitting in a corner. I picked him up by his tail, then let him go on my arm. He scabbled his way up onto my shoulder. He was a bit stinky, of mouse pee.

Downstairs, the phone rang.

‘Kiki!’ called my mum. ‘Keeeeeek!’

I put Squeaky in his cage and ran downstairs.

Mum was holding the phone. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, yes... yes... No... No!... Same here. Really, really nice. Almost bikini weather... Not so bad... No, not really... Honestly... Great... Tuesday?.. Yes, that’s fine... Here she is... Bye... Bye, sweetheart...Yes... Bye... Bye... Byeee.’

She handed me the phone. ‘Dad?’ I said.

‘Hi Keeks. I hear it’s nice weather.’ Dad’s voice sounded really close. Almost as if he was in the room.

‘It’s hot,’ I said.

‘Same here,’ said my dad. ‘But we had some mist this morning.’

‘What about now?’ I asked.

‘It’s lifted,’ said my dad. ‘Kiki?’

‘Yes?’

‘I miss you.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘I’ll phone again on Tuesday.’

‘I miss you too,’ I said. ‘And I’ve got a mouse.’

‘A real mouse?’

‘Oh, Dad,’ I said. ‘Of course it’s a real mouse.’

‘Great,’ said my dad. ‘Hey, Kiki, I’ve got to go. Bye!’

‘Bye,’ I said. ‘You will be careful, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said my dad. ‘You too, eh?’

‘Me too,’ I said. ‘You too?’

‘Me too,’ said my dad. ‘You too?’

‘Me too,’ I said. ‘You too?’

‘Me too,’ said my dad, ‘but I’ve really got to go now. Love you!’

‘You too.’

I heard a click and then a long beep. ‘He’s gone,’ I said to my mum.

She nodded. ‘Come and sit down, eh? Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘In a minute,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to go upstairs first.’

‘Can’t you do whatever it is later?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Squeaky’s cage is in the sun.’

‘You mustn’t do that!’ said my mum.

‘I know,’ I said. And I ran upstairs.

For a little while, I didn't think about my dad. I made a nest box for Squeaky out of a wooden pencil case. And I read a book about the police for my talk at school. When I'd finished the book, I knew for sure that I didn't want to be a policewoman. And that's what I said at school. That was my talk. I told everyone that I didn't want to spend all day dealing with problems. I was more interested in being a hairdresser or a pilot. My teacher gave me nine out of ten, because I'd expressed my own opinion.

When I got home, Mum was standing in the middle of the front room, sawing away.

'I got nine out of ten,' I said.

'Great,' said my mum. She was leaning with her knee on a small cupboard. It was on its side and it had only two legs left. 'It's for you,' said my mum. 'For beside your bed.' She patted the top of the cupboard. 'Squeaky's cage can go here.' She took her knee off the cupboard and opened the door. 'And his food can go in here. Or a book. Or something else.'

'Why are you sawing the legs off?' I asked.

'They were wobbly.'

I wanted to say that I didn't like old stuff. But actually it was all right. With the legs off, it made quite a handy little cupboard. 'OK,' I said.

My mum carried on sawing. I went and fetched the phone so I could call Marie. Marie had been my friend for ages. But I didn't see her all that often. She did violin lessons and gymnastics and she was hardly ever at home.

'Dad could phone at any moment,' said my mum. 'Will you keep it short?'

I put the phone down. 'It doesn't matter anyway,' I said. 'Marie won't have the time. She's got to practise her somersaults today.'

My mum sawed off the last leg. She carried the cupboard upstairs and put it next to my bed. Then she started vacuuming.

My dad didn't phone. Mum took the phone with her wherever she went. Into the kitchen when she was cooking and then into the garden, because we were eating outside. Later that evening she took it upstairs. She put some dirty towels into the washing machine, she told me to clean my teeth and she shook out my duvet. The phone didn't ring.

'When Dad rings, you have to wake me up,' I said.

'No, I won't,' said my mum. 'You should just go to sleep. He might call really late or not at all. He may call tomorrow.'

'I can't sleep,' I said.

My mum shut the curtains. 'It smells of mouse in here,' she said.

'I'm not going to sleep,' I said.

My mum took the phone downstairs and I listened really hard. I could hear all kinds of noises: footsteps, the television, the cupboard door and a woof from Mona. Squeaky was scratching around in his cage. I could hear him gnawing away at something. Then he ran around in his exercise wheel for a while. I had put the cage on top of the cupboard. Squeaky was making so much noise right next to my head that I couldn't really hear what was going on downstairs.

Next morning, my mum said that my dad hadn't phoned. He didn't phone that day either. The telephone rang a lot, but it was usually my gran, phoning to ask if we'd heard anything from my dad yet.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Nothing,' said my mum. 'Dad's somewhere in the back of beyond, so perhaps that's why he can't get in touch with us. That happens all the time.'

'You can use your phone anywhere,' I said. 'Even in the back of beyond.'

'That's not true,' said my mum. 'You can use your phone anywhere here, but not where Dad is.'

'So, where is he then?'

'Somewhere where he can't use the phone,' said my mum.

'Where?' I asked.

‘He’s on his way somewhere. He’s travelling and he can’t use the phone.’

‘But I want him to phone!’

‘Now, you listen to me,’ said my mum. ‘Dad’s going to phone. He left for a small hospital, somewhere far outside of the city. He’s probably still on his way there. Everything’s going to be fine.’

‘You don’t know where Dad is,’ I said.

‘I don’t know exactly where Dad is.’ My mum took a map from the cupboard and opened it up on the table. She pointed at a river winding its way across a green piece of the map. Her finger followed the river to a pale-blue patch. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Somewhere near this lake. I know roughly where Dad is.’

‘But you don’t know exactly where he is,’ I said.

‘No,’ said my mum. ‘Not exactly, because he’s travelling.’

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I dreamed about stray bullets. There were loads of them. They were flying through the air in a swarm. Each of the bullets had little eyes, a mouth and a nose with a sharp point. They looked a bit like sharks, but only from the front. They were whistling. Not with their mouths. They were making a whistling sound all by themselves. Very high. And very loud. It made my ears hurt. It woke me up.

It was dark. Squeaky was gnawing on a corner of his nest box. There was no other sound. I got out of bed and went to the other bedroom. Mum was snoring quietly. I curled up beside her under the duvet, in the place where my dad should have been.

‘Mum?’ I said.

My mum woke up. ‘What’s up?’ she mumbled.

‘I had a dream,’ I said.

‘What about?’

‘About stray bullets.’

My mum sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. ‘Oh sweetheart,’ she said.

‘I don’t want to go back to sleep,’ I said.

‘Was it scary?’

‘It had only just started,’ I said. ‘But it might carry on when I’m asleep again.’

My mum yawned. ‘Then we shouldn’t go back to sleep. Not right away.

Would you like a cup of tea?’

I snuggled up next to her. I didn’t want a cup of tea.

‘How about a story?’

‘No way,’ I said.

‘No, of course not,’ said my mum. ‘That’s childish, isn’t it?’

‘I want Dad to come home.’

‘Me too,’ said my mum.

For a little while, we didn’t say anything. We just snuggled together in silence. My eyelids kept drooping. Not far away, on the edge of sleep, the swarm of stray

bullets was still flying around. Quickly, I opened my eyes as wide as they would go.

‘Mum? Don’t you ever get angry with Dad?’

‘Why?’

‘Are you always fine about him going away?’

My mum thought for a while. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m not always fine about it at all. When I met your dad, he warned me. He said that I should look for another man. A stay-at-home man. But I didn’t want another man. I wanted your dad.’ She smiled. ‘And Dad wanted me.’

‘Why isn’t Dad a stay-at-home man?’

‘You know why, don’t you?’

I didn’t answer. Of course I knew. But I still wanted to hear it from Mum.

‘He wants to go out into the world,’ she said. ‘He wants to help. He thinks that there are enough doctors here. He knows that there are too few doctors in other countries. Countries where there are earthquakes or floods.’

‘Or wars,’ I said.

‘That too,’ said my mum. ‘Wars.’

‘But what about us?’

‘When you were born, your dad promised to stay at home. He really did do his best. He got a job in a hospital. But...’

‘But what?’

‘But there was too much war,’ said my mum. ‘I knew that your dad wanted to go away.’

‘To help.’

‘Yes,’ said my mum. ‘To help.’

‘And so you said that he could go away again.’

My mum just sighed.

I sighed back. But I didn’t really understand what our sighs were supposed to mean. I could hardly keep my eyes open.

‘So we made an agreement back then,’ said my mum. ‘Dad would go away again, but not as often. And not for so long. Because he wanted to be with us as well. He wanted to have both things: to go away and to be with us.’

‘Did you never want to go with Dad?’ I asked.

‘Oh no,’ said my mum. ‘Oh my goodness, no. Heaven forbid.’

We sat there quietly for a while, snuggled up together. Outside, a bird started singing. Now and then I dozed off a bit, and I had to keep stretching my eyes wide open.

‘What should we do now?’ I asked.

‘There’s not all that much we can do, Keeks,’ said my mum.

More and more birds were starting to whistle now. I thought I could close my eyes for just a moment. Without falling asleep. But when I opened them again, it had got a lot later. It was light outside. My mum was asleep beside me.