

Sample Translation

My Last Day as a Genius

(Mijn laatste dag als genie)

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Translated by Laura Watkinson

[pages 41–50]

Mia puts down the TV guide and stands up. The room suddenly fills with dancing spots. She puts her hand on the arm of the chair to stop herself from falling and calmly breathes in and out. The spots gradually fade away and she can see the living room again.

“Does that often happen?”

The voice startles her; she thought she was alone. Her dad’s standing in the doorway.

“No.”

He narrows his eyes like a cat. “You have had something to eat, haven’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Is it your period?”

“No,” says Mia. “Maybe I haven’t eaten enough.”

“Would you like me to make a sandwich for you?”

“I can do it myself.”

“Oh, is that right?” says Dad. “If someone offered to make a sandwich for me, I’d say yes like a shot. It’s been a long time since anyone made a sandwich specially for me. Mieke never does it, so it must have been your grandma. And, as you know, that really is a long time ago.”

“You get breakfast in bed now and then.”

“That’s just toast. So, do you want me to make you a sandwich?”

Mia smiles. “OK.”

She follows him into the kitchen and sits down at the table. She watches as he makes her a sandwich with cheese, lettuce, a sliced gherkin, a bit of mayonnaise and a dab of mustard.

“This is making me peckish too,” he says.

“Why don’t you have half?”

“No, good fathers feed their children first. They watch their children eating and only help themselves to something afterwards.”

Mia takes a bite. “Bet you think I’m trying to lose weight, don’t you?”

“I don’t think anything,” her dad says, sitting down at the table with a pile of test papers. He takes his red pen, which he always has tucked into his shirt pocket, and starts marking and counting. Lumpy jumps up onto the table and lies down on top of the test papers. Dad pushes him aside, but he rolls back with just as much force, clearing a space for himself by pushing the pile of test papers onto the floor.

“Dammit, Lumpy!” Dad curses.

Mia picks Lumpy up off the table and carries him and the sandwich to her room. She slumps at her desk. She puts the plate down and Lumpy snuggles around her neck, purring.

“Ow,” Mia says, but she lets him stay there.

It’s raining outside. Mia picks up her notebook and starts writing. When it’s finished, she reads it out loud to the cat:

*“There once was a man with no nose
Who said: If you choose to suppose
That I’m unable to smell
Then I’ve something to tell
Just wait till my other end blows!”*

Her shoulders shake with laughter. Lumpy digs his claws deeper into her skin to get a better grip.

“I should really write a serious poem, about love or something,” Mia mutters. She leafs back through her book and finds a poem about a wren.

“Listen, Lump. I wrote this one too. It’s a pretty serious poem; it’s actually about reincarnation. I don’t believe in reincarnation, but I wouldn’t mind coming back as a cat. A cat living with a posh family.” She tickles Lumpy under his chin. He stretches his neck out so that there’s more for her to tickle.

Fay and Mia are huddled up in their coats, leaning against the back wall of the school.

“I just want to get out of here,” says Fay.

Mia dries Fay’s cheeks with her sleeve. Her sleeve turns pitch black. “Where do you want to go?”

“Don’t care,” says Fay. “Just as long as we can get away. My PE lesson’s cancelled anyway. Westerlaken’s ill.”

“Oh, then I don’t need to go either.”

“What do you mean? You never do PE anyway,” says Fay. “When was the last time you did PE?”

“I have a delicate constitution.”

Fay blows her nose. Daniel comes over to them. “What’s wrong? It looks like a funeral.”

“Floor’s got a girlfriend,” spits Fay. “How long have you known about it?”

“Since the holiday,” says Daniel. “They met in Portugal.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything about it?” Fay sobs. “You knew that I fancied him.”

“No, I didn’t,” says Daniel. “I had no idea. I thought the two of you were just good friends.”

“He always acted so nice.”

“He *is* nice,” says Daniel.

“No, he’s not. He’s a dickhead!” yells Fay. “And so are you.”

“Hey, calm down,” says Daniel.

“It’s not me saying that. It’s the canaries in my head,” snaps Fay.

Mia puts her arm around Fay. Daniel sits down on the ground beside them. He offers a packet of cigarettes to Fay. “Here.”

Fay takes one, puts it between her lips, and then cups her hands around the flame to shield it from the wind.

Daniel lights his cigarette. He takes a deep drag and exhales a big grey cloud, which the wind blows straight into Mia’s face.

“You should see the look on your face! Grossing you out, is it?” says Daniel.

“It’s going to start raining again in a minute,” says Mia.

“If you never try it, you’re always going to think it’s disgusting,” Fay says.

She holds out her cigarette to Mia.

“I think it’d really suit you,” says Daniel.

“How can a cigarette suit someone?”

“It makes you look more confident.”

Mia takes the cigarette and drags on it. She blows out an elegant little cloud.

Fay and Daniel look at each other with a smile. “You have to suck it into your lungs,” they both say at the same time.

Mia inhales the smoke as deep as she can. It quickly spreads through her lungs, which go straight to panic stations. Her lungs send a signal to her brain to say that they’re suffocating. Mia coughs the smoke back out again. She screws up her watering eyes and holds her hand in front of her mouth. Smoking’s painful!

Fay and Daniel are doubled up with laughter.

“Stop it,” coughs Mia.

“We’re not laughing at you,” says Fay. “We’re laughing with you.”

“You’re just like Floor’s girlfriend,” cackles Daniel. “She gets that same dopey look on her face.”

Fay elbows him in the ribs.

“What?”

“We’re not going to talk about Floor,” says Fay.

“Don’t you want to hear how dopey his girlfriend is?”

“No. I don’t want to hear another word about him.”

Mia tentatively takes another drag, but she doesn’t draw the smoke all the way into her lungs. She looks out of the corner of her eye to see whether her friends are watching. Mia puffs the smoke back out. “So how d’you make smoke rings?”

The wind dashes the rain against the window. Mia is in her pyjamas, lying on her four-poster bed with the curtains pulled down around the sides. Lumpy’s sitting

on the pillow, purring softly. The blue quilt is covered with dozens of envelopes with words written on them. They say things like:

For Sander: first girlfriend.

For Sander: wedding day.

For Sander: just because.

She has a notebook beside her and she's chewing on her pen. Her mobile beeps to say she's got a text:

Could you pop back downstairs? We're drawing lots.

Your loving father

Mia takes a deep breath and slowly pushes herself upright. She picks up the envelopes, puts them in a blue box with stars on it and pushes it all the way under her bed.

"Come on, Lump," she says. "Let's go downstairs." She holds up the bed curtains for the ginger tomcat, who follows her. They walk down the stairs together. Lumpy goes to peep outside through the cat flap and Mia walks into the living room.

Dad and Mieke are sitting on the sofa. Sander's on the floor. He's holding the bowl that they use every year at Sinterklaas for drawing lots: it's Grandma's fruit bowl with a tea towel over the top. They each have to pick a name from the bowl to find out which other member of the family they're giving a present to this year.

Mia slumps in the chair beside the window.

"Take one," says Sander, holding the bowl out to her. Mia pulls out a name. "I've got myself," she says and puts back the piece of paper. Sander mixes them up again. Mia takes another one. It says: *Sander*.

Dad takes a piece of paper and reads it. Then Mieke and, last of all, Sander.

"Anyone got their own name?" asks Sander.

"No."

“No one’s allowed to come into my room,” says Mia.

“It’s always locked anyway,” says Sander.

“How d’you know that?”

“Sometimes I might just need something and...”

“Exactly. And that’s why it’s locked.”

“So, the rules for the presents,” says Dad. “Nothing daft like syrup or insulation material.” He gives Mieke a stern look. “Nothing that might explode or start to go mouldy. You’re not to go looking for your surprises. And no finding presents accidentally on purpose.” He looks at Sander.

“You’ll just have to make sure you hide them properly,” says Sander.

“I did hide it properly,” says Dad. “It was behind the washing machine.”

“I do the washing sometimes,” says Sander.

“You do?” giggles Mieke.

Lumpy jumps onto Mia’s lap. He’s inspected his territory and everything is in order. Mia shows him the name on her piece of paper. “Look, that’s who we’ve got.”

“It’s blue and it’s not heavy,” says Sander.

“The sky,” guesses Mieke.

“Not bad,” says Sander, “but that’s not it. What do you think?”

Sander looks at Dad. He doesn’t call him Dad anymore, but he doesn’t call his father by his first name either. He doesn’t really know what to call him, so he usually just says “hey” or nothing at all.

“I don’t know,” says Dad, opening the newspaper.

“Light blue,” says Sander.

They all laugh. Mia laughs so hard that she goes dizzy and has to hold on tightly to the arm of the chair.

The wind’s blowing hard. Mia hangs on to the fence. The next-door neighbour walks past with her dachshund. His long ears are flapping like flags in the wind.

“I do enjoy a bit of a storm,” she says cheerfully, “but it can be tricky when you’re on your bike. Aren’t you going to be late for school?”

“I’ve got a puncture,” pants Mia.

“Oh no, how annoying,” says the neighbour. “The boys have got my bike, otherwise I’d lend it to you. How are you getting on at school, by the way?”

“I’ve got passes in nearly every subject,” says Mia.

“Life gets so much better after you leave school. It really does. Oh, there’s your brother.”

Sander comes rushing out of the house with his hair all straggly and his clothes clearly pulled on in a hurry.

“You’re really late,” he says to Mia. “Hi,” he says to the neighbour.

“Your sister’s got a puncture. Maybe you could take her on the back of your bike,” the neighbour says to Sander. “A big strong boy like you.”

“Yeah, right,” grumbles Sander, wheeling his bike out of the shed.

“I bet he’ll give you a backie,” the neighbour says, winking at Mia. Then she walks off. “Bye, kids!” The dachshund skips away in front of her, ears flapping.

Sander takes a look at Mia’s tyre. “I could ask... um... Dad if he’ll take us?”

“He’s already left.”

“This early?”

“He’s got something on,” says Mia.

“So, I’m going to have to give you a backie then?” Sander asks impatiently. “You’ll have to hop up here behind me.”

“No, I’m too nervous,” says Mia, sliding on to the luggage carrier.

“I don’t know whether that’ll work.” Sander starts pedalling. “Are you on yet?”

“Yes, I’m here!” says Mia, holding on tightly to the bike.

The journey to school takes twice as long as normal because of the wind, but they get there eventually.

“Madam,” says Sander, stopping in front of the school.

“You’re a sweetheart,” says Mia, as she slips from the luggage carrier. “I love you. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure,” mumbles Sander. “Hey, we really are late.”

He dashes into the bike sheds to put his bike away and then sprints into the building. Mia watches him go, but doesn’t follow him. She sits down on one of the benches, with her head in her hands.

Mickey comes racing up on her mint-green scooter. She parks it up, then checks her make-up in the rear-view mirror. She’s just about to head for the entrance when she spots Mia.

“We’ve got Dutch now, haven’t we?” she asks.

“Not in the mood,” says Mia.

“Me neither,” says Mickey. She’s wearing glittering lip-gloss and sparkly blusher. Her coat’s hanging open.

“Are you skiving?”

Mia shrugs her shoulders.

Mickey sits down beside her. She takes out her pink make-up bag. “What do you learn here anyway? I’d rather... travel around the world or something.”

“With your boyfriend?”

“Oh no, that’s over. I’m going out with that Joram from the club now. D’you know him? You don’t go out much, do you? I see Fay out sometimes, but never you. Chewing gum?” She offers Mia a stick of gum.

“Thanks,” says Mia. “Feel a bit sick.”

“Have you got anorexia or something?” whispers Mickey. “You just keep getting thinner.”

“God, no,” says Mia, chewing her gum.

“It seems to be pretty common, you know. One of my cousin’s friends has got bulimia. She pukes everything back up, but then she eats so much afterwards that she stays at her normal weight. You can’t tell by looking at her. You and Fay are really good friends, aren’t you?”

Mia nods. She wraps her arms around her stomach.

“Want a cigarette?”

“No, thanks.”

Mickey lights a cigarette.

“Can you take me home?” asks Mia. “I don’t feel too good.”

*

Mia and Fay are walking down the corridor and stop to look at the notice board. There are no signs to say that anyone’s off ill. The flu’s passed over and is now ravaging another area. Mia had gone down with a fever and had to stay at home. So had Fay.

“There’s a new guy in 4b. A real hottie. I think he’s just your type,” says Fay.

Mia doesn’t say anything.

“Come on,” says Fay. “Next lesson’s upstairs.”

A stream of kids floods into the corridor. All of them want to be first to get upstairs. One boy roughly pushes Mia out of the way.

“Ow!” yells Mia as she goes reeling. Her hands grab helplessly in the air, looking for something to hold on to.

Fay, separated from Mia by a surging crowd, can’t catch her either.

Mia falls to the floor with a bang. Something cracks.

“Moron!” Fay shouts after the boy. She falls to her knees on the smooth floor beside Mia. “Mia?! Mia?!”

But Mia doesn’t react.

“Can someone help!” screams Fay. “Help her!”

[pages 61–64]

Lumpy has got his thick winter coat now and he’s lying on the window ledge, happily watching the little birds hanging from the balls of birdseed.

Dad goes outside, wearing hat, scarf and coat; the harsh sound of winter comes in through the door.

“See you later,” he calls.

“Bye,” Mieke answers.

“Bye, Dad,” mumbles Mia.

“The snowdrops are already out,” says Mieke. She’s holding a basin of warm water, a towel and a flannel. “More than last year.”

She puts the basin down on a chair beside the bed and pulls back the covers. Mia shivers.

Mieke washes her daughter’s face first. Behind her ears, around her skinny little neck.

“Ow.”

She takes off Mia’s pyjama top and washes her chest. Her ribs can clearly be seen beneath the breasts that had just started to grow, but which now won’t get any bigger.

Carefully she washes her swollen arms. Her hands. There’s a morphine drip attached to her right hand.

Mieke helps Mia to sit up straight, so that she can wash her daughter’s back.

“Painful.”

“Nearly finished. Let’s just put a clean top on you.”

When she’s done that, Mieke straightens up the pillows. The red book falls to the floor. Mieke picks it up and puts it back beneath the pillow. She helps Mia to lie down again.

Mieke carefully washes Mia’s fat, bumpy leg. The other leg is neatly packed up in a brace.

She washes her daughter’s vagina and dries her lower body with a soft towel. Mieke puts clean pyjama bottoms on Mia and washes her slender, white feet last. Then she pulls the covers back up and tucks Mia in.

“Where’s Sander?”

“Round at Cas’s.”

“Why?”

“He thinks about you a lot.”

“What good’s that?”

Mieke strokes Mia’s forehead. “It bothers me that he spends so much time away from home as well.”

“Do you want to get out of here too?”

“No, I want to spend every minute with you that we still have. But he’s your brother. Brothers and sisters are supposed to scrap and squabble. But there’s nothing to squabble about in this situation. You’ve already won. Your dad and I can look after you, but what can he do? He simply doesn’t know what he should be doing.”

“He should be here.”

Mieke sighs.

“As far as he’s concerned, I’m already dead.”

“You mustn’t say that. He thinks about you a lot.”

“If everyone’s thinking about me... instead of seeing me... then it’s just as though I don’t exist,” Mia says slowly. It’s a real effort for her to talk.

Mieke wants to say all kinds of things. Her mouth is open, but the words won’t come. She swallows. “You’ve got another card from Fay’s mum. It’s nice of her to send you a card every day.”

“Very nice.”

It’s dark outside and it’s dark inside, except for the glow of the orange nightlight.

Mia’s asleep. She wheezes in and out. Sander’s standing in the doorway with bare feet. He gets up at four every morning. Then he goes to check whether Mia’s still alive and creeps back upstairs.

Mieke’s doing the washing-up and Fay’s drying things as she walks from the kitchen into the living room, where Mia’s lying, and then back again.

“It keeps me in good shape,” she says, drying a cup. “Hey, you’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“That thing with your nostrils. You look just like a rabbit.”

“It’s because... Do you know why?” asks Mia.

“So, there’s a reason for it then?”

Mia nods.

“Well?” asks Fay.

“Private.”

“You’re going to die anyway.”

Mia wheezes. “Itches... Can’t pick at it... You’re here... Move my nose... that helps.”

“So rabbits have always got itchy noses?”

Mia smiles.

Fay imagines an early morning scene: a meadow full of rabbits who have itchy noses, but don’t dare to pick them, because there’s someone else there. And when you’re a rabbit there’s always someone else there.

“You’ve ruined my mental image of rabbits for good,” says Fay in a serious voice.

“And you’ve ruined my image of canaries... Whenever I see my granddad’s canaries...” Mia stops to take a breath. “I expect them to come out with some story... but they can’t even manage a tweet.”

Fay laughs. “No, it’s only my canaries that do that. Does your granddad know what’s going on?”

“Sometimes... not usually.”

Mieke comes in and takes the cup from Fay. “This’ll be dry,” she says and goes back into the kitchen.

Mieke, Sander, Dad and Fay are sitting at the table. None of them could eat their pudding.

Mieke cleared the table, but then came and sat back down. “I haven’t got the energy to make coffee,” she says. “I’m done in.”

“I’ll do it,” says Dad.

“You always use too much coffee.”

“The more, the better,” says Dad.

“You do the same when you cook,” says Mieke.

“What do you mean?”

“You always make too much. Anyone would think you were cooking for an entire orphanage.”

“You must have said that a hundred times already.”

“I’ll make the coffee,” says Fay, getting up from her chair.

But then they hear a thud. They all turn to look at the bed in the living room. The red book has fallen from Mia’s outstretched hand and is lying on the floor.

Mieke, Dad, Sander and Fay stand around the bed and watch as the last little bit of Mia leaves her body.

[pages 73–78: Fay takes Mia’s red book home with her after Mia’s death and immediately starts reading it. Mia was hiding a terrible secret. Now Fay understands why she should have burnt the book as she had promised her friend...]

16 MAY

No one sees me, because I’m tired. No one sees me, because I stay in my room and don’t want to go outside.

I don’t want to go out on my bike. I don’t want to dance. I don’t dare to be in love. I don’t dare to choose because I’m bound to make the wrong choice!

I’m scared. Every step I take, I’m scared. Scared that my foot will get caught up on something and I’ll fall.

And then I fall anyway. In my head. I stumble over nothing, over something that’s empty and vast.

How can I explain that?

How can I explain that when I look in the mirror I don't recognise myself. I see a girl. Nothing more. The fear and the exhaustion are inside and invisible, but that's the real me. What you don't see on the outside is Mia. The outer shell is a reflection of what should be. And that's what people talk to, but the real me remains invisible. And I don't want it to be like that. It's more than I can stand.

The canaries have settled back on their perch. They're quiet now. There's no point in twittering. Fay has decided to carry on reading until she knows exactly what's going on. She leafs through the book until she sees something else about a doctor.

Maybe the new doctor won't even phone. Maybe he's moved his files and mine's at the bottom of a pile now. So no one knows that I should be going to hospital.

Perhaps I should just go tomorrow. Should I say that I lost the letter?

20 MAY

I sprinkle crumbs on my plate when I'm feeling too sick to eat. That works fine. Dip the knife in the chocolate spread and it looks as though I've got a decent breakfast inside me.

Just the smell of food makes me want to puke.

26 MAY

Daniel gave me a chocolate chip cookie. For no reason. He's nice and he's calm and he's funny. I could imagine going out with Dan.

If I were him, I'd go for Fay; and if I were Fay, I'd fancy Dan. Not Floor.

“I'd never fancy Dan,” mutters Fay. “So did you ever go to the hospital? What happened?”

30 MAY

I've got a plan. It's a brilliant one, even though I do say so myself. The problem is this: I don't feel at home anywhere. Not in my body, not in my bedroom, not in this house, not in this country. And not in the world either. Even when I was a little girl I felt the same way. Homesick, that's what they said when I cried at a sleepover. But it runs much deeper than that. Even when I'm at home I feel homesick. For something that's not here. For peace. For peace without any people. Without any fuss. Without any excitement. And I was stupid enough to tell my parents about it. They didn't get it at all. That I think people are too complicated. That there's too much misery in the world. That I don't belong here. That's the biggest thing of all. I just don't fit in.

Dad and Mieke looked at each other and nodded. “Puberty,” they said. I think it's more than that. But I don't know how to explain it. I can tell them about it, but they can't feel it, so they'll never be able to understand. So I stopped explaining and started lying. Everything's fine with me. It has been for months.

I could throw myself in front of a train. But that would be really rotten for the driver. Let's be honest: organs belong on the inside.

I thought about jumping from a tall block of flats. There are three of them on the outskirts of town. You can just go right up to the top – and getting back down again is a matter of seconds. But that makes a mess as well. And it's not just the mess; there's also the fact that you've got to lie.

“I’m just going out on my bike. Back in a bit.”

Not being able to say goodbye. Having to do it all on your own, and knowing that everyone’s going to be really angry with you.

I don’t want that. I want to die in a bed with everyone sitting around me. I want to be able to say goodbye. I want them to be angry at the illness and not at me.

If I don’t go to the hospital now and I am really sick, then it’s just going to get worse. And when my body finally gets really ill and exhausted, it’s bound to be too late for any treatment. And then I’ll die!

Then I’ll be allowed to die at home in the way I want. With everyone around my bed, and not alone, walking along the railway line or standing on the edge of a roof.

And no one will be angry, because being sick is something that happens to you. Not feeling at home on this planet is a choice.

“This can’t be true,” mutters Fay. “I was there! I sat next to her at school. In the garden. We sat together every break. In her room. And I didn’t notice anything! Mia would never do something like this! It’s all made up!”

There’s a boy at school and they say he used to be a girl, but you’d never know, to look at him. He really does look like a boy.

It happens quite often that girls feel like boys and the other way round.

They’re born in the wrong body.

I don’t know how that used to work in the past. I don’t think people would really have appreciated it in the Middle Ages if you went around as a girl dressed in boy’s clothes and cut your hair short. You’d probably end up being burnt at the stake.

Nowadays they can sort things out with hormones and operations, so that your outside matches the way you feel inside.

I thought... is it possible that you just don’t want to be a body at all?

That's why, whenever you look in the mirror, you don't recognise yourself. And eating's unpleasant, because you'd rather be light – and have no body at all.

That's why you can't understand life on this planet. You do try to fit in and you study other people to understand what's expected of you. But it's still playacting. You look like a body, but you are fear.

What kind of sickness do I have and what can be done about it?

You can't just give a new body to someone who doesn't want to be on this planet; they need a new soul, and that's not possible yet. So all that remains is death. But who would help that kind of person to die? Who would help a fifteen-year-old girl with no traumas, with good grades and nice parents in a country where no one has to starve?

First of all, you have to get other people to believe you. That it's nothing to do with puberty. That it was there before and that it's been there all this time. You could spend an entire lifetime trying to get them to understand. A life that looks fine on the outside, but which is hell on the inside.

That's why I came up with my plan. The sickness can put an end to this life, as far as I'm concerned.

It's just a pity that I've got to carry on lying.

Apart from that, I think it's pure genius, said the genius modestly about herself.

Fay throws the book on the floor. She throws her pillow after it. And her boxes.

The thuds can be heard all over the house.

There's a knock on her bedroom door.

“Fay? Sweetheart?”

“Leave me alone!”

“Shall I make a cup of cocoa for you?” Her mum puts her head around the door.

“No!”

“I know it’s hard, but you need your sleep,” her mum says calmly.

“I’m not ten years old, Mum!”

“I say the same thing to your dad.”

“He’s not ten either!”

“You just won’t give me an inch, will you?” her mum says, with the same calmness.

Fay bites the inside of her cheek.

“You know how much we love you.”

“Hmph,” says Fay.

“If you need anything, just call me.” Her mum closes the door and walks across the corridor to the main bedroom.

Fay starts slapping herself over the head – with such force that the canaries become frightened and poo all over the place. The inside of her entire skull is covered in splashes of brown and grey. Feathers are swirling all around.

It’s a while before everything calms down. Fay stands up and goes to fetch the red book.