

Sample Translation

Free Fall

(Vrije val)

by Agave Kruijssen

(Baarn: De Fontein, 2005)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

pages 37-49:

Under The Open Sky

After midday the weather changed and fat clouds began to chase across the skies. I'd always seen nature as a gift from God. But as I made my way through that November storm with my two children, I saw how stupid I had been. Only pampered ladies can enjoy nature, not poor people. Nature's beautiful when the sun's shining. Or when you know that you'll soon be able to take cover under a roof and warm yourself up by the fire. But when nature is your home, it is merciless.

I stumbled my way through the forest. After a few miles, there was little sign of the path from the hunting lodge. I must have lost my way somewhere. The trees swished and creaked; I heard rustling and growling in the undergrowth. Bernt became frightened and huddled amongst my skirts. At my wits' end, I picked him up with my free arm. I was using the other arm to carry Koen in a sort of sling. I trudged on like a mule with the two children around my neck and a knapsack on my back. We were making little progress and I had to give up my foolish idea that we would reach an inn before the evening. We would have to sleep under the open sky. Under the creaking trees, amongst the boars, bears and wolves. Where was Mary? Would she even be able to help us here? Or had we now entered into the realm of the forest spirits and the gnomes?

To add insult to injury, it started raining. Dark clouds covered the moon and everything went pitch black. I laid Bernt down on the moss amongst the gnarled roots of an oak tree.

'We'll make a little nest here,' I called as cheerfully as possible over the sound of the wind. The knapsack thudded down from my back. 'Would you get the blanket out of the bag?'

Bernt was a good little boy and immediately did as he was asked. Soon the three of us lay shivering under the blanket. Koen was the only one to fall straight to sleep, but after a little while I heard Bernt snoring gently as well.

That night I dreamt for the first time that I was falling. I was tumbling and turning. Above me I saw a vast starry sky. High up in the centre was the crescent moon that had lit our path when Berend and I had fled to the hunting lodge. The crescent became smaller and smaller as I fell further and further. Then I spun around and what I saw made the blood freeze in my veins. Beneath me the world was in flames. Creatures were writhing like worms in a pot. Naked creatures, screaming and shrieking. They were ablaze. A vile stench rose up. The stench of burning flesh.

Drenched with sweat, I awoke with a start. My heart was pounding.

I immediately knew what it was that I'd seen.

Now I understood where that smell had been coming from.

The rest of the night I lay staring into the darkness, eyes wide open. For a while I heard nothing but the gentle breathing of the boys and the hammering of my own heart.

Horsemen

The first rays of sun were just slipping over the edge of the land, when I suddenly felt the ground shaking.

Galloping horses. At this time in the morning that didn't bode well. I tried to work out where they were coming from. The horsemen mustn't see us. I didn't dare think about what they might do to us. The pounding of hoofs came closer and closer and after a while I heard voices.

Bernt had woken up too. 'What's that?' he asked, his eyes wide with fear.

'Sssh,' I said, pulling him close and making myself as small as possible. The path must run past the other side of the tree. In the darkness I hadn't realised.

Now I could hear the men shouting to each other. Their voices sounded harsh, as though they only ever used them for shouting.

'Where's Willem got to?' one of them shouted.

'He needed a shit,' yelled the other one.

The horses were impatiently walking round in circles on the other side of the tree. Bernt was looking at me anxiously and I put my finger to my lips. Quiet, keep quiet, I gestured to him. But then Koen started, quietly at first. I quickly popped my finger into his mouth, but it was already too late.

'Hey, Dirk,' came a voice, 'did you hear that?'

'What?'

Koen was really hungry and wanted more than a finger. He launched into a wail and I heard the man get down from his horse. Bernt crept under the blanket. I didn't know what to do other than send a quick prayer heavenwards.

'Aha, take a look at this!' said the horseman who wasn't called Dirk.

'What?' asked Dirk again, also dismounting.

'A wench, a tasty little wench!'

I sat there, paralysed with fear, with Bernt tucked a little way under my skirts and Koen shrieking with impatience because he still wasn't getting any milk.

The man looked as though he never changed his clothes. He had a wild beard and was wearing a leather helmet on his weather-beaten head. Under his black cloak I could see the hilt of a large sword. He grinned at me. Brown teeth with black gaps. 'Just look at that,' he panted. I pressed myself against the tree and tried to calm Koen.

Now Dirk decided to get involved. 'Not so fast, mate,' he said. 'A beautiful woman like this is worth money. You can see that, can't you? Keep your paws off!' He was already drawing his dagger.

But the other man was not to be stopped. 'Can't jus' leave a tasty piece like this, can I?' he drooled. I could smell the stench of his breath. Koen was squealing like a stuck pig. Bernt was clawing at my skirts.

'Hell's teeth, Jan!' a third voice suddenly yelled. A giant of a man grabbed my slaving assailant by the hair, pushed him to the ground and kicked him twice in the back. Jan moaned, groaned and coughed: 'Willem, no, Willem, please!'

I looked up at my saviour, but he wasn't much better than Jan. He just seemed to be a little more cunning. He bowed deeply. 'My lady,' he said, 'I know a noblewoman when I see one.'

Koen stopped his wailing and sobbed on quietly. I finally dared to breathe again.

'What's a lady doing all alone out in the wild woods?' asked Willem.

I realised that it was time to tell my story. 'I... erm,' I began. 'I'm a poor widow. My husband was murdered in a raid and now I'm on my way back to my family.'

'I see,' said Willem, looking me up and down from head to toe. 'Family, you say?'

'I told you,' said Dirk, 'that girl's worth money.'

Willem came closer. ‘What kind of family?’ he asked. He smelt of sweat.
‘What kind of family is it that would allow a lady to travel alone?’

I couldn’t come up with an answer quickly enough and he saw through the story. He started chuckling and his laughter became a roar. Dirk and Jan roared along with him. Suddenly he stopped; the others carried on sniggering to themselves. ‘What’s in your knapsack?’ he asked.

A Blanket And One Piece Of Silver

I'd stuffed all of my treasures into the knapsack: an ivory comb, a pair of silver hairpins with pearl ends, silk thread and needles, lace handkerchiefs, rosewater, castor oil, soft cloths to wrap Koen in, woollen stockings for all three of us, a piece of silk. I also had a little spicecake, a flask of red wine and two wrinkled apples. It looked ridiculous now that it was all laid out amongst the withered leaves.

'Huh,' snorted Willem, giving me a searching look. 'Poor widow, eh?' he said, with a broad grin. It was clear that he didn't believe a word I'd said. 'So, her ladyship doesn't really have any family to go to,' he said to his mates. 'She's just some pampered little lady whose gentleman friend has run off and left her.' He came unpleasantly close. I thought I was going to faint.

Then Bernt came out from under my skirts. 'Go away!' he yelled.

Willem stepped back.

A ghastly silence fell. All you could hear was the sound of the wind and a few birds rustling in the undergrowth.

Suddenly Willem started chuckling. 'So,' he said. 'You want me to go away, do you?' He turned around to his mates. 'Spoils the fun, the little ones being there, doesn't it? Take the knapsack and let her go. We're not going to get any money out of this one.'

And so it came that a while later I was walking over the heath with my two little ones, without my knapsack, but thankful that we were still alive. All we had was the blanket, but the rain had stopped and I'd kept the two pieces of silver in my hem. They'd soon be gone as well.

At the first inn we came to, two days later, I spent one piece of silver on the most expensive room, a good meal and a doctor for Koen, who had a fever. We

stayed there a week. Then I decided that I would have to look for work. You know what that means, lord abbot. It's not the done thing for girls of noble birth to work for their money. I hadn't got the slightest idea how to go about it either. There followed a long series of chores and odd jobs, failures and humiliations. Because of course I couldn't milk cows, or polish floors, or scrub, or wash, or weave and spin. At least, not properly, not like a big, strong country girl. I ended up looking after the geese for an old farming woman. I was scared of the geese, which would honk and peck. But I was even more scared of that vicious old woman. She'd needle me the whole blessed day and whenever she got the opportunity she'd hit me with a hot poker. I stayed there for one reason alone: she gave my sons food. But one ill-fated day she became ill and three days later she was dead. Her children detested the boys and me. They couldn't get rid of us quickly enough.

Once again we went on our way, this time as a ragged bunch of vagrants. All we had left was the blanket and one piece of silver. My beautiful clothes had become dirty and threadbare and I looked like a scrawny peasant girl.

You'll be wondering, lord abbot, whether I still thought about God or about Mary. Whether I still said my prayers and whether I went to church. Let me tell you this: when you're poor, you're busy surviving. In fact, that's what occupies you all day. And you're tired, you're dead tired. That's why poor people are easy prey for the devil. You become tired, ill and bad. Goodness is something for rich people, for people who have food to eat. But I did my best not to steal or to beg and I said my prayers every day. I always tried to do something to earn a living. But people paid me for my work out of pity and then sent me swiftly on my way.

I carried that terrible smell of burning with me everywhere I went and the nightmare kept returning as well. Not every night, but particularly at the end of a hard day. Just when I thought I'd had all I could take, it would attack me like a predator in the night. I'd wake up absolutely distraught. One time I knew for sure

that I'd felt the flames of hell. Instinctively I reached for my feet. They were sore and the hairs on my legs were singed.

The time came when no one wanted to give me any more work. Farming folk are suspicious types, and if you live in a remote farmhouse, you've got every reason to be. There are robbers and knights scouring the countryside for what they can take. They haven't got an ounce of respect for the people who work so hard to till the soil. A poverty-stricken woman on her own just brings bad luck. She might even be a witch! I began to fear for my life, particularly when that year's harvest failed. I had to spend my last piece of silver or we'd all have starved to death.

Maybe I would find some good fortune in the city after all. One fine spring day I took Koen by the hand and Bernt ran on ahead of us. The sun was shining upon the open heath and for the first time in ages I wasn't cold.

The Lady

The people of Amersfoort are strange, but maybe the same can be said of other cities as well. I'd spent my whole life in the countryside and hadn't the faintest idea about life in the city. I'd been told that the city was teeming with wicked people who treat each other badly. Life in the city is based on money and money must have been invented by the devil.

I hadn't even got through the city gates before a lady addressed me. At least I thought she was a lady.

'Child,' she said sympathetically, 'Whatever do you look like! You must have had a terrible time of it, because I can see that you're really a decent lady from a good family.'

I was dumbfounded at first, but then hope sprang in my poor heart. Was it possible that goodness still existed? Had Mary taken pity on my children and on me? I told the woman everything she wanted to know. Well, nearly everything. I didn't tell her I was a runaway nun, of course. I trotted out my old story: that I was a poor widow, that we had been attacked and that my husband had been murdered. I left the family out of it this time. It was a much more pitiful tale if I had no family at all.

'You poor lamb!' said the woman. She was wearing a red woollen cloak and her hair was concealed beneath a stylish hat. 'I can't bear to see this. Please come to my house. My sisters and I will be happy to entertain you.'

Imagine that you've fallen into the water and you're about to drown. You're desperately gasping for breath and at the very last moment someone throws you a rope. Would you ask what their intentions were? Would you first check to see whether they were of unquestionable conduct? Or whether they went to church?

I didn't ask her any questions. I couldn't get over my good fortune and even though I was dead on my feet, I took my boys and dashed after the lady. If I'd

been paying proper attention I'd have spotted that beneath her cloak the back of her skirt had been taken up so that you could see her beautiful ankles. If I hadn't been so full of my own good fortune, I'd have noticed that other women were giving this lady a wide berth. And then I'd surely have seen the eager expressions on the faces of the men we met.

Too Thin

The lady and her sisters looked me up and down from head to toe. ‘First of all, a bath,’ said Camelia, a lily-white maid with red hair and cherry lips. Her round breasts were just about spilling out of her dress. But still I didn’t have the slightest suspicion.

Together with Koen and Bernt, I disappeared into an enormous tub full of warm water and beautifully scented oils. We re-emerged as shiny as eels. Then we were dried with soft cloths and given clean clothes to wear. For the boys it was a real treat, but for me it was a miracle. I’d never experienced anything like this, so much warmth, so much cheerfulness. Poverty didn’t exist; nightmares were far away. Even the burning smell dissolved in the scent of the bath oil.

The lady who had taken us to the house was called Magdalena. She walked around me and gave me a friendly tap on the cheek. ‘Young lady,’ she said. ‘You haven’t been taking good care of yourself. I don’t know whether we’ll be able to put this right. Your breasts have gone saggy and your stomach’s wrinkly.’

Another of the ladies had started to plait my straggly hair. Magdalena took a strand between her thumb and forefinger and said: ‘My lady Beatries must first take some time to recover. No well-heeled gentleman wants a scrawny bag of bones with fluffy hair.’ She smiled. ‘Don’t take it ill of me, Beatries, I’m just telling it as it is. Do you know what we’re going to do? You can stay here and lend a helping hand: help my sisters bathe, plait their hair, prettify their dresses. And Bernt is old enough to be our page. Maybe even Koen will be able to make himself useful before long. So, what do you think?’

My jaw dropped in surprise. I suddenly understood where it was that we’d ended up. This was a brothel, a whorehouse.

I hesitated for a moment. I could still leave now. I looked at Bernt and Koen. Finally clean, warm and contented. I ran my hand over the soft bath sheet that lay around my shoulders like royal robes. My whole body smelt of roses.

‘Thank you, Magdalena,’ I said. ‘I’d be happy to stay.’

I made sure that I remained a scrawny bag of bones, because I didn’t want to become a lady like Magdalena and Camelia. I didn’t want to end up between the sheets with all sorts of portly well-heeled gentlemen. I might have been a sinner, but I was no whore.

Yet there is something that I need to say. Nowhere outside of the nunnery did I encounter such warm-heartedness as with Magdalena and her sisters. I couldn’t resent the men for enjoying their visits. It was always such a happy house; it was beautifully clean and nowhere else did people hop into the tub so frequently. It was their way of washing away their sins.

That place certainly changed my view of people. Gentlemen who sat in the front pew at church on Sunday, buying their place in heaven with generous gifts, even respectable men of the cloth, would regularly pay visits to the ladies. I still blush when I think about it. Apparently they didn’t think the sisters were so sinful that they should avoid them. But everything changed when people started to become ill.

The plague destroyed everything. The first bodies hadn’t even been buried when Magdalena ran in panic through the house.

‘Take everything you can carry,’ she shouted. ‘You’ll see: we’re the ones who’ll get the blame. Whenever things go wrong, we get the blame!’

With bag and baggage, we stole out of the gates as soon as it was dark. Suddenly, the sisters were no longer sisters. They all went their own way.

That night I had the nightmare again for the first time in ages. Life during the daytime would not be greatly different.