

THAT STUPID BOOK

Print 1, 2, 3 and 4 by Unieboek

Republished in 2019 by Droomvallei uitgeverij

Sample translation chapter 1, 2, 3

By Dorith Mous

1

I had thrown my sandwiches in the bin. The thought of them alone, ugh. I wanted a hotdog.

We had a spare hour and never faster had we been at the snack bar.

'We', being Kick, Barbs, Erik and I.

Barbs ordered French fries, Erik had chicken wings and Kick bought a double cheeseburger and a coke. Despite what he eats, Kick is not fat. He works out a lot. Kick boxing three times a week. Kick is not his nickname, his parents actually just gave him that name.

Would anyone ever call their child Tennis? Or Golf?

Wolf is a boy's name though. There's one in my class. He is not at all like one. The contrary actually. Maybe he is internally, but I don't know him so well.

I don't play sports. Although my dad often says that my drumming, rocking back and forth, and ticking on things is almost a sport. Only without a subscription.

I just took a bite from my hotdog, when my cell phone rang.

'Mom calling'. Why was she calling? She didn't even know we were not in class.

I declined the call, and put the phone back in my pocket, but seconds later I felt it vibrating again.

There must be something going on.

'Mom?'

'Ive'.

That wasn't my real name, it's actually Ivan, but I guess even short names can be nicknamed shorter.

'What's going on ma?'

'You have to come home immediately'.

I remained calm. Most people would panic if their mom would call during school, but I didn't.

'Daddy's gone', she said.

Her words didn't really hit me. 'It wouldn't be the first time', I responded.

'I don't trust it. I tried to call, he's not picking up. I'm getting worried'.

A brief silence followed.

I could have told her he had often left. That he had always returned. I could have told her he, being a comedian and professional slacker, wasn't ever really a person to punctually start his show, come home on time and turn in or get up early. I could have said that he had chosen a lifestyle of his own, in which things are never sure and that after this many years of marriage she should be used to that.

I could have said all that. But I didn't.

'I want to go look for him', she said. 'All of us', with whom she meant me and Sis, my ten year old sister. Yes that's really her name. Sis. Just as weird as Kick or Wolf. Or I've.

I took another bite of my hotdog. I didn't at all feel like going to look for my father.

He'll return, at some point, like always. I mean, he still had all day to get home.

I licked a clot of ketchup off my thumb.

'Did he not just get another gig and forgot to tell you about it?', I asked.

'Of course he would tell me that', my mom's voice sounded sharply.

'Or did he tell you and you forgot?'

'Me? Forget? What do you take me for?'

I refrained from telling her it wouldn't be the first time she forgot, even though my dad had hung his BE ON A RAZZLE-schedule on the fridge, with dates and locations on which he had a show. I have got to admit this so called schedule wasn't always up to date and my father frequently forgot to write something new on it, but my mother's memory also wasn't the best in town.

Convenient for me and my sister, when we make her believe she promised something she never actually promised. We don't do this too often, we would feel bad. Although my sister usually feels more guilty than I do, I don't always want to be a spoilsport.

I am enough of one, considering my disorder. I don't think they should call ADHD a disorder, it makes it sound so melodramatic. Melodramatic is a word I didn't know. I learned it when I was playing a word game. Not all knowledge has to come from books. Some of it comes right from my smartphone.

I took another bite. Some of the dried onions fell out of the bun, onto my pants. I wiggled my legs and they fell on the ground. Perfectly in a row of 6.

Row, row, row your boat... It's so long ago I was in first grade, so I don't remember the rest of the song.

In my case, you could easily change the word Attention in ADHD to association: I associate 24-7. I already associated before I knew what that meant. My teacher in kindergarten would have red nail polish on and my mind would immediately start linking that colour to all other red things. I would start thinking about the lid on the toy box, ladybugs, the helmet of the fireman in my doll house, the seat of my tricycle, my mother's shoes, a bloody nose – or the white things that had red on them in the bathroom bin, of which my mother had said it was

used for a nose bleed. I had seen the pack they came out of, and it had said 'pant liners'. I was able to read before going to first grade. Even so, I had missed the y...

My mom cut my train of thoughts off. 'Your sister is already home', her voice sounded harsh. 'I need you to get here a.s.a.p.'

It seemed like an order. I don't like orders. Speaking of orders, I had a science test that afternoon and I really didn't feel like a test catch. I hate tests. And test catches even more. So I explained: 'I can't leave'.

'You have to', my mom persisted.

In any other situation I would have instantly embraced any reason to skip school, but this time, something held me back. Maybe because my mom was forcing me or because the disappearance of my dad didn't really phase me. I don't like to be forced. Especially when my dad is the reason for it.

'You have to', she repeated. Something in her tone told me this was for real. Even if I would have had ten tests breathing down my neck, this was serious. I got off the phone, took the last bite of my hotdog and threw the plastic holder in the trash.

'I gotta go', I said to my friends.

'Why? Barbs asked.

'I have to go look for my dad'.

'Is he playing hide and seek?' Erik joked.

'Maybe he's in the cupboard', said Kick.

'Or in the blanket chest, laughed Barbs.

They were referring to a show we had seen recently. About people with really weird habits. One woman had to have a blow dryer in her bed, switched on, otherwise she couldn't sleep. Another felt most comfortable sitting in a blanket chest, with the top open. People who ate toilet paper as if it were candy. Even a guy who, every day after work, sat in a cupboard for a few hours, with the doors closed!

My dad would not sit in a cupboard though, or in a blanket chest. My dad wants to be free. Into the wild, the wind in his hair. No job to constrain him, or people.

Yet, he had three people that he had to be there for. Sis, my mom and me.

I would have liked to put myself first in that order, but that's impolite. Plus, I think the order in which I said it, is how my dad feels about it.

Since the moment Sis was born, he just couldn't be away from her. Until he would bail, once again. Upon return he would always kiss Sis first, then my mom and then me. That said, at some point I got to an age where I didn't want to be kissed by my father anymore.

I have always wondered why my dad even wanted kids. Being committed to his wife was already much to ask of him, let alone having two kids. When I asked him, he answered: 'You were just all of a sudden there'.

'Kids are never suddenly there', I told him. 'You have to do things for that'.

'Your mom had to do things for that', he answered.

Then he said that giving birth wasn't all that easy for him either cause skipping a night was no joke. My father always got away with everything, making jokes.

'No, no cupboards or blanket chests', I answered to my friends.

'Just gone'.

'And he didn't say where to?', Erik asked.

I shook my head. 'No, and now my mom wants to go look for him. All of us.'

'Oh...' said Kick.

'Geez', said Barbs.

Erik didn't say anything.

I put on my backpack and got on my bike.

It was mid October and as if the weather Gods didn't want to be misunderstood that it was Autumn, it was raining and storming like crazy.

I came home soaking wet.

2

My sister was sitting on the kitchen table. Her jacket zipped up, her hood up, as if we were heading for the North pole.

'Good, you're here', my mom said. 'Pack your bag'.

'Why?'

'Because we might be gone for a while'.

'But I can't get out of school for long, it's not a holiday week'.

'I already took care of that.'

I studied her face. Normally when she was spitting out little white lies, the left corner of her mouth would tremble. Now it didn't. Did she really master the art of lying or was she actually speaking the truth? You can't just stay away from class, you ought to have a damn good reason.

'I told them you're father is undergoing hardship and I that I need you guys here'.

'But he's probably fine', I responded.

Undergoing hardship... That's almost wordplay, since undergoing also means going under water and a ship can sink.

My mom, who was clenching her lips together, let some air escape and said: 'I have a feeling he's not.'

I took off my backpack, dropped it on the floor, plopped down on a chair and started drumming on the table. I got up, walked to the faucet, drank from it, ran my sleeve across my mouth as I walked back to the chair and sat back down.

'Don't worry, he'll come back.'

'I have a strange feeling about that', my mom explained. 'Not this time.'

'I mean, then where do you think he is?'

My mom shrugged. 'He could be anywhere.'

'Even across the border?' I asked this, because last year he had left for Germany for a few days without telling us. Although I did think that was super dumb, it's my dad we're talking about. That's what he's like. And typically him, since he loves German speaking countries.

'Yes, he might even be across the border', my mom replied. 'He has stayed in Aachen longer than he had to before. And in Berlin. Or that time he went to Austria to go skiing by himself, remember?' She corrected herself instantly. 'Of course you don't remember, you were four.'

'And I wasn't born yet', Sis added.

'Yes, you weren't.'

My mom zipped her suit case shut, switched off the coffee machine, rinsed the pot and put it top down on a dish towel.

She looked around as if we were travelling around the world and had to leave the house 'winter ready'. She seemed contented.

'Ready?' she asked. 'You as well?' She looked at me with a sense of urgency: you are the man of the house now, I need your help.

I sighed and leaned back. I heard that before. I was always happy when my dad would go on short tours, five days max, so I could return to being a boy. Just a boy.

'What do you want me to bring?' I asked while my right leg started jittering as if it had a mind of its own.

'Clothes, underwear, toothbrush, you'll figure it out', my mom assumed. She closed the drain behind the laundry machine. 'Pack for 4 days', she heedlessly added.

'Four? My voice cracked.

'You never know, it may take that long.'

'But Jolene is celebrating her birthday the day after tomorrow!' Sis yelled.

'She'll celebrate another one next year', mom said.

'How do you know', I commented. 'She could get into an accident and die.'

Sis broke into tears. 'Don't say that, you bully.'

My mom gave me a warning look.

Ever since Sis found her hamster cold and stiff in its cage a couple of weeks back, she has been on the verge of crying for the littlest things.

I packed and in just thirty minutes we were ready to go in mom's rusty old Volvo, a blue Amazon Combi.

We were taking off to where ever in a car that drives twenty two mpg and is as old as my mother; forty four.

On my way to the front door, my eye had caught a picture frame on the end table.

I would prefer the picture had never existed, then I wouldn't have had to write this book. But 'everything happens for a reason', my mother often preaches.

So I did, to find out if she was right.

3

Now, let me explain why you are reading this book.

Before my mother called to tell me I had to come home and join her and my sister on a search for my father, I was in class. In first period Otto, our teacher, had given us the most ridiculous assignment ever. Especially for difficultly educable children or in my case, children with ADHD.

I had already had the toughest time that morning to even crawl out from under my warm duvet last minute and force myself into some clothes (the same ones I had been wearing for days).

I despise even having to get dressed, let alone pick something clean to wear.

'You stink', my mother had commented.

'YOU stink', was my reply.

She has been wearing the same perfume for years and therefore cannot smell it on herself anymore. The result; spraying WAY too much of it on. Bleh! Gross.

With the sound of rain on the windows, I had reluctantly downed my yoghurt, put my lunch pack in my bag and ran out the door to arrive in class soaking wet, like every other student.

Obviously, we all wouldn't want to be found dead in a rain coat. Except Anna, who always brought a rain coat with her in her cycle bag.

Fourteen, a bicycle with cycle bags and a rain coat. Beats me why she hasn't been bullied sick. Well actually, Anna is really hot. With or without a rain coat and after all, she was the only one to arrive with dry hair.

'Besides your normal classes and assignments, Otto started that morning, 'Ahmed and I have come up with a fun, additional assignment.'

Ahmed is our Philosophy teacher. Otto teaches Dutch. Together they are the counsel of our year.

The sound of 'additional assignment' had every student flinch. And 'fun'? That word could not coexist with assignment in the first place. That's what my father used to say. And dad knows best.

Everyone started moving back and forth on their chair. Half of us always does, but this made everyone nervous.

'Do we get extra credit for it?' Kick asked immediately. He was always quick as a wink when it came to getting something extra.

'Upon my forsooth', Otto answered.

Just like my dad, Otto is the kind of person who loves old fashioned words and phrases. Me being son and student of such kind, should hate it, but I secretly don't. With an emphasis on 'secretly'. I would never admit that out loud.

When Otto opened his mouth to speak again, these words followed:

'You
are going
to write
a book'.

It was as if a bomb had gone off.

'You can't be serious!' Barbs yelled.

'Dead serious', Otto calmly responded. Otto is a very calm man. He never blows up. Even when we fly across the class room like a bunch of slinkies, he won't get mad. That's his power. With one look he can make us all listen.

'Born to be a teacher', my dad had said after they first met.

I hope I'm born for something else. I can't imagine graduating and choosing to go right back to school to learn how to teach. What loser does that?

'A book?' Barbs shouted again.

Barbs was dyslectic and would most probably even write book backwards. And 'bore' instead of 'robe'.

'Yes, a book', Otto said with a smirk. 'And this is why.'

He stood spread his legs into a strong stance, folded his hands together and inhaled deeply:

'Writing is sitting down
Sitting down is concentration
Concentration is focus
Focus is reaching your goal
Reaching your goal is development
Development is getting to graduate
Graduation is success
So focus, is success.'

Otto had a big grin on his face. 'That almost sounded like a commercial for a self help program', he added.

Kick got angry. 'Success?!' He got on his chair, jumped onto the table with both feet and jumped off again. This he repeated a couple of times.

'Stop it!' Erik yelled off the top of his lungs, which made the class room break into chaos. Barbs closed off her ears.

Otto raised his voice. Just once.

Everyone listened and sat back down. I don't know how he does it.

'So, a book', Otto continued. He looked us all in the eye. Fifteen times a second. It seemed like a minute.

'You can describe someone's life on paper. Including all ups and downs and with all imagination you possibly have in you, how cool is that?'

Cool. That wasn't a word expected to be used by Otto. Rather 'marvellous' or 'superb'.

'But we are not writers, we don't know how to do that!', Barbs defended once again.

She folded her arms and frowned. 'I won't do it. Cause I can't. You are the one who always tells us to develop our talents. I don't have a talent for writing.'

Her combativity was as animated as that of a ninja in a Japanese comic book.

Otto smirked. 'Did I mention that you can make it non-fictional? This way you can write about the Tour de France, the fashion industry, how to make jelly, or the influence of a slug on the environment'.

Most probably nobody was going to write about slugs, but the word 'fashion' lit up some girls' eyes. We were all handed a piece of paper and put to work. We had to write a scheme, put down some keywords and come up with some possible titles.

Reluctant I started my day, now loathingly I put my pen down on the paper and started writing.

THAT STUPID BOOK, I wrote down on the top of the page. I continued: This is the stupidest book you will ever pick up. It's so stupid, I'm wondering if you should even pursue to read it. If you do anyway, you can't say I didn't warn you. Cause this IS the stupidest book ever. I swear...

Otto stopped at my table. He pointed at my sheet and said: 'It's "more stupid"'.

Agitated I squeezed 'more' in front of stupid and crossed out the 'est'.

I didn't want to get this stupid task. Writing a book. And such bullshit to even give that assignment to someone with an attention disorder!

The book had to be at least twenty pages, Otto told us. So twenty times five hundred words.

That's ten thousand words: ten thousand too many if you ask me.

'You can write more than twenty pages if you like', Otto added.

The class kicked up a row.

Otto continued: 'If you never try, you never will succeed.'

He had a point there.

When shortly after the bell rang, Kick, Erik, Barbs and I went to the snack bar and this is when my mom called.

I prayed the Lord that my dad would turn up quickly and this trip wouldn't take too long, I had better things to do. Writing a book for example. Even that got me more excited than to go look for my missing father.

But as soon as I stepped into the car, I realized: searching for my dad and writing a book could be combined. Kill two birds with one stone.

So if you're reading this book, you've got my dad to thank for it. You can decide for yourself if you think it's a stupid book or not...