

Sample Translation

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Chewing on my pen, lost in thought. Gazing out the window at snowflakes gently swirling through the fading light of afternoon ... *Quit daydreaming! Concentrate!*

Oh, great – my mother's crack-the-whip method was taking effect. Even when she wasn't around, I could hear her nagging me.

What did I expect from my life? In my opinion, the far more pertinent question was how on earth our German teacher managed to come up with such bird-brained essay topics. Annoyed, I stared at the sheet of paper. “What Do You Expect from Your Life?” Yes, there it was in black and white. But did I even have a say in my life?? My mother should be the one writing this essay. Or my coach. My piano teacher or my teachers in school. Right off the top of my head, I could come up with any number of people who had big plans for me and my life. I wasn't one of them. But I did sense their efforts to make something out of me. Something they could be proud of. After all, they weren't picky: concert pianist, Olympic athlete, Nobel Prize winner – all worthy goals. Top grades were imperative, of course, followed by graduating summa cum laude from a prestigious university. “Average” seemed to be a dirty word for my mother. She didn't say that to my face, but I could tell. The panic with which she polished me, like I was some sort of diamond in the rough. Always with the nagging fear that I would turn out to be just an ordinary pebble. One of millions. No, I was supposed to make my mark. And to be clear – we weren't talking about some faint tracks in the sands of history or a few awkwardly placed footprints on my life's path, but about bold steps toward a better future. For me and all of humankind. So

much for the expectations for my life!

My ruminating was interrupted by the muffled *burr* of my smartphone. Contact with the outside world! Salvation! The best way to escape this torturous essay was to complain about it to my friend Paula. But scarcely had I taken the call than I was met by a chorus of screaming kids. Paula had three younger siblings. It was loud at her house, the doorknobs were sticky, and you had to be careful where you sat down. I loved being there.

“Flo, Flo ....,” came Paula's voice from the background.

Since I knew she wasn't even holding the phone up to her ear, I didn't bother to answer. We were still in phase one of the call: threaten the siblings – create privacy.

“Listen, Ben, if you don't let me talk on the phone now, you can find someone else to read ‘Mopsy, the Sad Giant Monster’ with you.”

For me, a word of encouragement: “Flo, Flo, I'll be right with you ...”

From the chaos front: “Lilly, you take that glue stick out of your mouth this second! Fiiinn, get your lazy butt over here right now!”

Then, suddenly, silence. My ear tentatively approached the receiver.

“Flo?!” Now her voice sounded very near and desperate.

“I'm right here,” I assured her while suppressing a laugh.

“I swear, they're all as peaceful as can be until I pick up my phone, and then all hell breaks loose!” she moaned.

“No worries. What's up?”

“A trainwreck of a homework assignment!” she whispered dramatically.

“Seriously? Your essay?” That didn't sound like the Paula I knew. *That* Paula, I figured, would have no problem portraying the future course of her life in loud fluorescent colors,

without being bothered by minor matters such as realistic opportunities.

“Not *me!*” she clarified immediately. “The little freak is being defeated by Caesar.”

Decoded: Finn was having difficulty with his Latin homework. Today was Monday, and Paula’s mom was at work.

“Should I come over?”

“YES!”

After convincing my mother I’d finished all my homework assignments, I was allowed to leave the house for two hours, even though I didn’t have my vocabulary down pat yet. She probably figured Finn’s Latin emergency was a welcome opportunity for me to review material from the lower levels.

It had stopped snowing. The air was dry and bitterly cold. I listened to the squeaking noises that accompanied each step I took. The streets of the housing development where my parents and I lived were deserted. But there were lights on in most homes. I’d known nearly all our neighbors ever since I was born. Paula and her family lived two streets over. We’d met in elementary school. Back then it was just her and her brother Finn. Not long after his birth, Paula decided that her need of siblings had been more than fulfilled, and that actually, she was cut out to be an only child. Although she never tired of emphasizing this, her parents added Ben and Lilly to the nest, making her the big sister of three. According to Paula it was the worst thing that could have befallen her. *Just off hand, I could come up with a couple of alternative worst things, but hey, what do I know? Me, an only child.*

In my view, Paula’s family was hugely entertaining. Over there, nobody spoke of chaos until the escaped gerbils in the house started multiplying like crazy. Or when Ben flooded the

entire upstairs with the water pipe he'd installed all by himself. The everyday mayhem of young children throwing up in dresser drawers, lighting firecrackers in jam jars, or keeping secret worm farms under beds was normally met with shrugged shoulders. And just as Paula relished the peace and quiet in my house, I loved the colorful confusion that reigned in hers.

“So great that you're here! The little genius is upstairs in his room, pouting,” Paula greeted me, dragging Lilly along in a headlock while energetically wiping her face with a washcloth.

I peeled off my jacket. Things seemed a little tense.

Paula jockeyed her roughly into the bathroom. “When I say, ‘Wash your face,’ then that means without causing a tidal wave. Comprende, amiga?” Lilly started whining.

Quietly, I slipped up the stairs.

When I opened the door to Finn's room, the reek of his pubescent glands clobbered me. Someone really should start work on isolating the gene that's responsible for the simultaneous development of sweaty feet and aversion to fresh air. What a worthwhile scientific contribution that would be! Finn, totally oblivious to the stench, was hunched in front of his computer, ignoring me and my attack of asphyxiation.

If there was anyone who was almost like a little brother to me, it was Finn. I'd practically grown up with him. But without all the arguments and sibling rivalries. Our normally relaxed interaction with each other was something Paula could not fathom. Ten minutes with him in the same room would have her mulling over medieval torture methods and harrowing death rituals.

“Hey, I heard there might be a couple of problems here. Is that right?” I attempted to insert myself into his consciousness.

In vain. He just kept pounding away on the keyboard. The rapid-fire clicks simply

confirmed what I already knew: Only the pungent-smelling part of him was still here. His spirit had long since vanished into a parallel universe. Askendor, an imaginary land full of gnomes, dragons, warriors, and magicians. According to Paula, it was Finn’s true home. Where there was no school that forced him to take part in something like a social life. No family that got on his nerves, no responsibilities, no pressure, and, I assumed, no Latin, either.

“Hello-oo. Earth to intergalactic outpost ...!” I attempted again.

“Just a sec,” he muttered, without once taking his eyes off the monitor.

Hurray, we’d made contact! Briefly, at least.

Then he hammered like crazy on several keys simultaneously and growled, “Take that, you loser!”

The next second, he suddenly relaxed and sank, exhausted, back into his chair. *Heart attack at twelve?* Or just the end of a battle? Two deep breaths later he straightened up, satisfied with himself.

“We showed ‘em.” He yawned heartily.

“Hello, Flo!” he greeted me then, as if I casually dropped by his room every day just to say hi.

“Um, problems? Latin?” prodding him. Why had I always thought Paula was exaggerating whenever she complained about having to explain every little thing to him outside of his imaginary world?

He choked out a series of rumbling sounds that were no doubt intended to communicate his horror, which could not be put into words. I was not impressed. I emphasized my indifference to his unarticulated expression of opinion by listlessly examining the ends of my long brown hair. He decided to lay off the sound effects.

Instead, he batted his eyes at me. His dark brown eyes nearly shone. *Hey, forget it! I know your sister!* I couldn't count the times I'd seen Paula manage to melt ice with the help of those fetching looks of hers. *Is this little twerp trying to soften me up?*

“Hey, Don Juan, save it for someone who actually gives a rap!” I rebuffed him.

Right away he dropped his head, contrite.

“Come on! With just a tad more motivation we could have been almost finished by now,” I said, trying to steer him back to the business at hand.

His resistance was crumbling. “Can I do something first?” he asked meekly.

“Are you maybe going to get your brain out of the safe?” *A person can always hope!*

“Nah!” He sat up straight again, put his hands on the keyboard, and, astounding for a twelve-year-old, started typing methodically.

“I'm just going to tell the others.”

“What do you mean? Are there a couple of other dwarfs in danger of flunking you're going to invite over?”

Death stare. Only when the screen started flashing was I released from his visual voodoo vilification. Finn's imaginary friends were again demanding his undivided attention.

“Holy craparoni! No way!” he burst out. “So, when are we gonna be finished with this b.s.?” The question was directed at me.

“Depends how dense you are. And when we start. I don't have all day either, you know.”

He ran his hands through his reddish-brown hair. Now it stuck out wildly every which way.

“OK, let's get started.” He yanked out a footstool from under his desk for me to sit on. Then he extricated his Latin text and a bedraggled notebook from a pile of garbage which, on

closer inspection, revealed itself to be a rat’s nest of schoolbooks, notebooks, sports shoes, a variety of clothing pieces, food, pens and pencils, comic books, CDs, and an astounding amount of junk. *Hmm, interesting system of organizing.*

He showed me a scribbled mess that was supposed to be his translation. I examined the text. It seemed not to bother him in the least that his sentences, as far as I could decipher them, made no sense at all. Meaningless strings of words separated by randomly placed periods. That’s all it was.

All the while I was giving him my cursory diagnosis, he kept glancing over at the computer screen. I tried to make him aware of the existence of tenses; he just kept nervously tapping his pencil.

“Finn, this isn’t working. Either you shut that thing off and concentrate or we quit right now!” *Well – starting to sound like a hard-nosed schoolmarm here!*

“No, no, I’m concentrating – really!” he protested, though even now he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the screen.

“That’s it!” I jumped up and headed for the door.

“Stop, just hold on a second!” he yelled in desperation. “If I flunk, Mom’s gonna take my computer away.”

“Not the worst idea.” *Show no mercy.*

“You don’t understand!” OK, he was right about that.

“It’s taken us forever to fight our way up to this point,” he started in, although I hadn’t asked for an explanation. *Do I look as though I’m interested in the fates of non-existent dwarfs?*

“In half an hour we have a meeting with the most important tribal leader in the country.”

“Oh. Can he explain Latin to you?” I asked, fed up. Downstairs, things had become

peaceful again. Paula would surely have time now. And I really did have more interesting things on my mind than the troubles of Finn’s shrimpy pals. My hand was on the doorknob when he tried another tack. A desperate one. He started begging!

“I just wanna go to the clearing with the others. It’d take no more than five minutes, max. Then we have to wait anyway.”

And there it was again – the puppy look. Lucky for him I was in a save-the-dwarfs mood.

“Okay, okay, but be quick about it!” Reluctantly, I sat back down on my footstool and paged through his Latin book.

“Finished!” he called cheerfully after a couple of minutes.

“That really was quick,” I had to admit while stealing a quick look at the screen. “You’re having a cookout?” *Seriously?! I’m wasting my time here so the dwarfs can roast marshmallows!?*

“No, it’s dark, and in case you haven’t noticed yet: We don’t have any electric lights.”

“Isn’t there a coffee shop or something where you can meet?”

Curious, I inspected the trolls gathered around the campfire. I had to admit, they were kind of cute, with their long ears and their wild, stick-up hair. They had thin arms and legs and disproportionately big hands and feet. One of them was giving a passionate speech. His eyes seemed to be shooting sparks, and those gigantic hands of his were gesticulating like crazy.

“Did somebody steal the little guy’s shovel, or why is he so upset?”

“That’s Sankor, our leader.”

“If he keeps that up, he’s bound to have a mini stroke any second!” I declared as I watched the little Rumpelstiltskin, fascinated.

“Don’t worry, he always acts like that. You should hear him yell.”

“Hear?” I looked at the text field at the bottom of the screen, where you could read the dialogue. “How can you hear him?”

“Speech option. But the voices all sound really tinny.”

“Which one are you?” I asked, carefully tapping the joystick. A red-haired dwarf fell backwards off his tree stump. I couldn’t help laughing.

“Hey, cut it out!” Finn barked at me.

“Oh, adorable – you’ve got red hair!”

He snorted dismissively and rolled his eyes. “So, are we gonna study now or do you wanna play some more?” he asked irritably.

“Oh, I forgot – you can hardly wait!” I baited him.

Ignoring my sarcasm, he grabbed the Latin book, fished a sheet of paper out of the printer by his feet, and looked at me expectantly.

“Are you just going to lie there now? Like a bug on its back that can’t turn over no matter how much it struggles?” I inquired, pointing to the screen.

Without taking his eyes off me, he pressed a key. The dwarf jumped up and sat down next to his buddies again.

“Satisfied?” he grumbled.

I went through the first sentence with him. His effort not to look at the game reduced his concentration considerably. I turned the monitor so that only I could see the screen.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he complained immediately.

“Nothing. I’m just keeping tabs on it for you.”

“Sure about that?” The disbelief in his voice had an undercurrent of insolence.

“Of course. Can’t be all *that* difficult. A few dwarfs are sitting around the fire and waiting

for another one.”

He drew a deep breath. But before he could protest, I raised my hand. “Shh! Or I’ll turn it off completely.”

He accepted defeat and during the following half-hour, really did focus on Latin. I dutifully checked the screen every couple of minutes, fighting the urge to knock the little ginger-haired pipsqueak off the tree stump again, and corrected Finn’s mixed salad of endings.

Suddenly there was movement in the small group on the screen. As if on cue, the dwarfs all turned to look at the forest. Only then did I make out a dark figure that stepped out from behind a tree.

“Are there people who play with you too, or is that just a big dwarf?” I asked, and Finn immediately turned the screen to him.

“That’s Thosse von Baar,” was his sole comment. Judging from the reverence in his voice, von Baar was a very, very great dwarf. Then he switched on the loudspeaker next to the monitor. I could hear the campfire crackling.

“Sankor, Gnome of the Episteme ...,” came the voice from the loudspeaker. It really did sound tinny.

“Gnome of the Episteme?” I repeated, amused.

“Yes! We’re not dwarfs, we’re gnomes!” Finn shot back, nettled. *O, however could this difference have escaped me?*

The next instant, Finn was fully immersed in the game.

What on earth was so enthralling about this? I nearly dislocated my neck trying to make something out. While Thosse von Baar continued speaking to the dwarfs, I caught a glimpse of him.

“Sharp!” I blurted out.

Finn’s expression let me know that good looks were totally irrelevant in this game. Still, I’d shown enough interest that he turned the screen a skosh in my direction. It was enough to recognize that Finn must have changed the perspective in the game. The angle was now more from above.

“What’ve you done now?” I wanted to know.

“Reconnaissance function.” *Okay, just go ahead and assume I speak this gamer jargon fluently.*

I watched how he used the left-right arrow keys to shift the inset back and forth, and the up-down keys to zoom in on details.

Then I heard Paula calling him. In a booming voice. That girl could guide a rowing eight across the finish line, without a megaphone – from the shore! Finn still managed to ignore her.

“Finn? Are you deaf? Paula’s calling you. There’s a phone call for you downstairs.”

He reluctantly stood up. As soon as he left the room, I turned the screen to me. *Well then, let’s just see what’s going on here!*

The graphics were incredible. Everything looked so real. The campfire flames flickered and snapped as though they really could give off heat. Each time the gnomes moved, their shadows leapt across the dark tree trunks, and you’d have sworn you could walk into those forest depths.

I scouted all around the terrain, zooming in here and there. *Is there really a spider crawling on that leaf?* Then I caught sight of Thosse von Baar. A pretty darn convincing character. I wasn’t sure what made him so attractive. Maybe it was the perfect balance between dangerous threat and casual decorum. The black cape, the massive boots, the shimmering sword

handle that flashed from under the cape with each movement – a formidable figure through and through. I had no trouble imagining him as a powerful, relentless warrior. And then that wild black mane falling way past his shoulders, and the determined, merciless mien. *Yikes! No one you'd want to meet in the dark.* But the way he led the meeting was at odds with the image of the instinctual fighting machine. Prudence and intelligence in an imaginary figure? I'd never seen an online role-playing game before. Was it usual for the characters to be so polished? I zoomed in a bit. *Hats off! Someone has really done a bang-up job with their game character!* His face was every bit as self-contradictory as his aura. His well-defined features – the chiseled chin, the high cheekbones – were fascinating. Not over-the-top masculine, just shamelessly stunning. Suddenly I caught my breath. *Was he staring at me?* I flinched. That wasn't some bland glance in passing. He was really staring, quite angrily, even!

Startled, I drew back from the screen a little. With no appreciable success. It seemed he could still see me. I thought I even saw how he moved slightly in my direction. My skin started tingling. Slowly, carefully, I put my finger on the down key and zoomed away from his face. *Sorry, didn't mean to be so intrusive.*

But the scowling eyes were still locked on me. Cautiously, I moved to the right. His unwavering gaze followed me. *Would now be a good time to freak out!?* To make certain it wasn't just a coincidence, I leaned to the other side. Sure enough. His eyes tracked each movement I made. His stare bored directly into my pupils. *This isn't technology anymore! This is creepy!* I didn't even dare blink anymore. I sensed beads of sweat forming on my forehead. *Don't be silly! Just shut your eyes!* It was bizarre, but I couldn't manage to close my eyelids. He had me on some sort of visual hook. And he just kept giving me that dark stare. *Extremely intimidating!* Then all at once he took his eyes off me and rejoined the conversation around the

campfire. I exhaled, relieved. Had I been holding my breath the whole time?

Just at that moment, Finn came storming into the room.

“Finn,” I whispered, “can anyone in there see me?”

Obviously amused, he grinned at me. “Oh, sure they can, and did you know that they’ve discovered that the earth is flat, after all?”

“No, seriously! Does that work over a camera, like Facetime or something?”

“Well, no,” he answered hesitantly. I could tell he was wondering what had happened here in the last few minutes.

“He was just looking at me.” I kept my voice down, as if he could hear us, and motioned discreetly to Thosse von Baar.

“Who, this guy?” Finn asked loudly, poking his beloved flat-screen monitor so energetically that a dark circle appeared. I almost expected Thosse von Baar to duck, but nothing happened. Other than Finn now had the upper hand.

“Oopsie! Gee, hope I didn’t hurt him.” He grinned at me patronizingly.

I snorted contemptuously. *Idiot.*

He waved his hand around in front of the screen. “Those are animations, just ionized gas, not real people.”

His arrogance was really getting on my nerves. After all, I knew what I had just experienced.

“Oh, animations? Derived from the Latin verb *animare*, translated as ‘bring to life?’”

Knowledge could be so cool, I realized with satisfaction as Finn started gawping for air like a fish on land because he couldn’t think of a snappy comeback. But following my brief triumph came the stale taste of spitefulness. I was being such a snot to Finn only because what

had happened was so eerie. But my brain demanded a logical explanation. Now!

“Maybe the player controlling him can somehow, through him, see into your room,” I whispered. Computer technology wasn’t exactly one of my strong suits.

“Thosse von Baar is an NPC,” Finn explained to me. *Huh? What?*

My ignorance was so obvious that I didn’t need to ask for an explanation. “A non-player character. It’s a personified control program of the gaming operator’s to keep tabs on the course of play.”

Oh, jeez, could I get any more pathetic?! I had let a personified control program scare the crap out of me! It must have just been an optical illusion.

“By the way, Paula’s asking when we’re finally going to be finished up here,” he remembered to report before immersing himself in his game again.

My eyes returned to the translation, flawless and nearly complete. Only one sentence was missing. Well, he’d just have to mess that one up by himself. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.