

TONE E. SOLHEIM

THE BLACKBIRD SINGS AT NIGHT

(SVARTTRASTA SYNG OM NATTA)

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

SUNDAY 17TH AUGUST

EDITH

The display on my radio clock beams out at me from the bedside table.

In just one minute, the whole world is going to be brought to a halt.

00:00.

Monday.

There's a cold breeze seeping from the window to my bed. Clammy fjord air through the rotten windowpanes. I kick off the duvet. Roll up the blinds and peek outside. The fog has settled over Føresvåg like a fire blanket, and I can feel the way it squeezes the air out of my lungs. How it is suffocating me, slowly but surely.

God, I hate this crap little town.

Hate this rotten basement flat we live in now.

Hate the summer that never came.

And to top it all off, school is starting in just over eight hours.

I fall back onto the bed. Stare up at the ceiling, and wait for one minute, five minutes, ten. I shove my fists into the mattress, tighten the muscles in my stomach. I count well over one hundred sheep, but it doesn't help one bit. I turn onto my side. Look over at Eirin, my big sister, who is lying in her bed, snoring. Tufts of her hair dangle from under the duvet, and her toes poke out the other end. Her right hand is still loosely holding onto her phone, which lights up our narrow room at odd intervals. It vibrates softly against her bed.

Rrr, rrr, rrr.

I clench my teeth. Shove my face into the pillow, trying to ignore the images swirling around behind my eyelids, but it doesn't work. The memories keep coming back.

Once again, I see Max standing in front of me. His mouth is wide-open, his eyes are brimming with angry tears. I can see that he's yelling at me, that he's shouting and screaming. But I don't hear a thing. The storm in my brain has made me short-circuit. The only thing I want is for Max to go away. For him to shut that ugly gob of his and get out of my sight. But he doesn't budge. He brings his face closer to mine, pushing and pushing, until- BAM. A bomb goes off inside of me. Shrapnel, glass, and metal. I shove Max away from me. Shove him so hard and so unexpectedly that-

I shoot out of bed. Shuffle out into the corridor and into the kitchen. I fill a glass with lukewarm water and swallow it down in big gulps. The yellow lino floor sticks to the soles of my feet. I hate it here. I hate the light-pink tiles above the cooker, the nasty stench that still clings to the walls. Cigarette smoke and stale food. Mould.

Just for a while, Dad said when we moved here almost half a year ago.

Just for a while, *my ass*.

I slump into the closest seat. Thump my head into the kitchen table, once, twice, three times. I try to get Max out of my head, but it doesn't work. He won't budge. I press my face into my hands. Feel something crackling away inside me, like shooting stars beneath my skin. I bite my cheek, hard. I want it to hurt, I want-

"Edith?"

I hear the door frame creak, a shuffle of feet across the floor.

"Come on," whispers Eirin and puts her arm around my waist. "You can't sit out here all night."

She pulls me up from the kitchen chair, leads me out into the hallway and back into the bedroom. Then she crawls into my bed and cuddles up close to me, tight.

MONDAY 18TH AUGUST

EDITH

I pull my old denim jacket tighter around me. Shove my hands deep into my pockets. The school building looms up behind me, already threatening to crush me like an ant beneath a shoe. And I haven't even gone in through the doors yet.

My thoughts go to my Dad, to the pep talk he gave me before I left home. *You're lucky, Edith, this is a new chance for you. I believe in you, girl. You are going to do great.*

That's what Dad said. That I was going to do great.

He doesn't have a clue what he's talking about.

Next to my right shoe I notice a half-eaten apple. I kick it, watching as it rolls off the road, into the ditch and disappears. Then I scan the schoolyard again. I look past the smoking area, to the new bridge and the bench next to the river. But nope. Still no Johanne. Still no Veronika.

Reluctantly, I head into the lobby. Pause for a moment in the canteen entrance and let the noise from the other freshmen inside wash over me like a wave of ice-cold fjord water.

Don't think, Edith.

Don't think.

I bite my cheek. Focus my gaze on my trainers and set my course towards the table we picked out during our guided tour early this spring - the little round table at the pillar right at the back of the canteen. And there they are. Those traitors. Shoulder to shoulder, hunched over Veronika's phone. Johanne smiles when she lays eyes on me. White rabbit teeth jut out from between her light pink lips. Her new haircut is irritatingly even.

"There you are!" she exclaims. "We were starting to get worried, we thought you had slept in or something."

"You." says Veronika without looking up from her phone screen. "You were starting to get worried."

Someone clears their throat over the school speakers and tests the microphone. *One-two, one-two.* I drop my bag to the floor. Pull up the only free seat, the one next to Veronika.

“I thought we said to meet outside,” I say, sitting down. “It shouldn’t be so unbearably difficult to hold up a deal.”

Veronica puts her phone down on the table. She tosses her long, blonde hair and chews at her gum with her mouth open. Even through all the commotion in the canteen, I can hear her lips smacking.

“You’re the one who didn’t hold up the deal, Edith,” she says sourly. “Not our fault you’re so slow.”

“I’m not fricking *slow*?”

Veronika blows an enormous bubble of gum, then lets it pop across half of her face.

“Actually, yes,” she says, sucking the gum back into her mouth. “That’s exactly what you are.”

Johanne puts a cautious hand on her shoulder.

“Vero, please,” she says. “Do you two *have* to fight today, of all days? Can’t you wait until after school, at least?”

She gives the two of us a pleading look.

“Fine,” I mumble and cross my arms.

But Veronika isn’t ready to hold out any olive branches.

“Oh, *excuse me*,” she spits, shoving Johanne’s hand off her shoulder. “Edith is the one making a big fuss over nothing. I’m just saying it how it is. She can’t blame us when she’s the one who’s late.”

I open my mouth to spit back that two fricking minutes after the agreed-upon time doesn’t qualify as late, but get interrupted by a shriek of feedback from the speakers. I cover my ears with my hands. Johanne and Veronika do the same. The noise in the canteen dies down instantly, going from a waterfall to silence in less than a second. Up on the podium, a man begins to speak. Probably the headmaster, or a school inspector or something. He welcomes us to Føresvåg High School with a smile that’s so cringy it makes me want to throw up. I twist my lips into a pout, then lean as far back on my seat as I possibly can without falling and check my phone for the time.

Only 08:34.

Jesus Christ.

My shoes plod along the hard corridor floor. Loose, mud-stained and flat-footed trainers with worn-out laces. It feels like we’re halfway to the Arctic Circle already, but we still haven’t reached the classroom. How big *is* this school?

Johanne puts an arm round my shoulder.

“How cool is it that we’re in the same class!” she calls out. “Three more years! This is going to be fun, don’t you think?”

I shake my head. The only thing I can think about is how many of our new classmates will have already heard the rumours about me. After all, there have definitely been rumours going round this summer. There are *always* rumours going round crap little towns like Føresvåg.

“Hey...”

Johanne pulls me to the side, away from the main corridor and the other students. She takes hold of my hands and looks me deep in the eyes.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “You can do this.”

“But-”

Johanne shakes her head.

“No buts.”

Then she shoves me through the nearest door, the one marked 1A.

The classroom is a complete mayhem of desks and yellow name tags. The students inside are shuffling around in search of their seats, stepping on each other’s feet, elbowing each other in the stomachs. I linger in the doorway. I can feel my heart beating like a carpenter with psychosis somewhere between my ears. This really is the last thing I need right now. Having to sit next to someone I don’t even know, or worse: someone who *thinks* they already know *me*.

Following Johanne, I throw myself into the frothing sea of students. I hold my breath until I find the desk with my name on it, and cling to it like a life raft. All the while I feel the waves crashing up my legs, the sea salt cracking my skin.

A few minutes pass, then the classroom door slams shut. I glance over at the desk next to me. I don’t know the girl sitting there. She has curly hair and is wearing a dark green polo jumper. A giant woman appears behind the teacher’s desk. Words stream from her mouth, but I drown them out and start fiddling with an old piece of chewing gum stuck underneath the desk. I feel the rock-hard material burrowing in under my fingernails. Eucalyptus, peppermint. Someone else’s saliva.

I’ve almost managed to get it loose when I hear something.

“...a get-to-know-each-other interview,” says the giantess.

Then:

“...presenting each other in front of the class.”

The words hit me like gunshots. Bang, bang, right in the chest. Suddenly, the psychotic carpenter is back, hammering away at my entire body this time. I shut my eyes tight and think about an article I read once, about people who burst into flames for no reason. *Spontaneous combustion*. Why can’t that happen to me?

Dozens of seats scrape against the tiled floor, then mumbled voices turn into laughter, which gives way to an overwhelming buzz. Holding my breath, I turn slowly to look at the unfamiliar girl next to me, who is already looking at me from underneath a halo of blonde curls.

“Ok,” I mumble. “Let’s get this interview crap over and done with.”

The halo-girl’s cheeks burn bright red. She shuffles slightly in her seat. Opens and closes her mouth a few times, biting her lip nervously. And then, as if it were the best thing she could come up with, she reaches out her hand.

“Martha,” she says. “My name’s Martha. What’s your name?”

“Uh, Edith?”

I nod at the yellow name tag that has been taped to my desk. I don’t shake her hand either, because who even shakes hands these days? Instead I pout and wait for her to shove off. Wait for her to turn away from me like everyone else does.

But the girl with the halo just smiles. A smile that beams so brightly I feels like I’m about to get sunburnt.

That’s when it hits me.

She doesn’t know.

TUESDAY 19TH AUGUST

MARTHA

I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Dad's old Ford. I breathe in the comforting aroma of leather seats, cigarette smoke and Wunderbaum. I'm thirteen years old, and music is blasting out of the car speakers. The Beatles, like always. Martha my love, don't forget me, Martha my dear. My curls are still wet from the swimming pool, and I feel tired, warm and peaceful. Beside me, Dad drums his fingers against the wheel. Snowflakes are dancing around in the headlights outside, and if I squint, it's no longer the narrow fjordside we're driving along, but the Milky Way itself, faster than light.

Like always, I don't see us hit anything. But still everything explodes, like a kind of reverse Big Bang. The world starts to spin, the music stops, the headlights black out, and Dad and I are thrown around like ragdolls in a tumble dryer. My body slams against the inside of the car, but I don't have time to notice whether or not it hurts.

Five seconds is all it takes.

One,

Two,

Three,

Four,

Five.

Then it all goes quiet.

I open my eyes to see the folded hood of the car, the windshield shattered into a million pieces. Everything is still so ceaselessly silent, as though we've crashed into a vacuum, a black hole. I try to unbuckle my seatbelt, but my fingers keep slipping. That's when I first get a look at myself and notice that I'm bleeding from cuts so deep they look like they must go right through me. Feverishly, I try to cover them up with my hands - the cut on my upper arm, my throat, my stomach - but my effort makes no difference. Blood keeps pouring out of me, as though flowing out from some bottomless fountain, some endless source.

My feet ache and I can feel my heartbeats through my ribcage.

And then it happens – the same thing that always happens.

I turn to look at Dad.

I look at my lovely, kind old Dad, who was alive just a few seconds ago, but who is now dead.

Dead. Dead-

I can't get last night's nightmare out of my head. Mum could tell from my face that I hadn't slept well the moment I came down into the kitchen for breakfast. But I didn't say anything when she asked about it. Said nothing about how I still dream about Dad almost every night, about how he's still the first thing I think about when I wake up.

I trace my left hand along my jumper sleeve. Feel the outline of the scar that's hiding underneath the soft cotton. I am just about to run my hand along my collarbone to feel for the scar there, when-

"Hello? Earth to Martha!"

An elbow in my side jerks me back to reality, to the sharp sound of the engine and the stuffy smell of the bus. Max gives me an irritated look from underneath his heavy mop of hair. Its dark colour stands out from his suntanned skin and the greenest eyes in the world. One of his legs is bouncing up and down so rapidly that I can feel the vibrations in my seat.

"How are you so calm!" he exclaims. "I still can't believe we didn't get put in the same class yesterday. Do you think we can complain to the headteacher or something? I can't imagine ever surviving the next three years without you, it just wouldn't be right."

"Well, you've managed pretty well without me so far in life," I yawn. "Anyway, I'm too tired to feel stressed. Slept super badly last night."

Max stops his fidgeting.

"Oh no. Are the nightmares back?"

I nod.

"Well, that sucks."

"Yup." I say as the school bus loses speed and pulls over at the bus stop by Vikafeltet. I crane my neck to see who is getting on, but before I can see anyone, I feel Max's hands clamp down on my shoulders. He pushes me down with such an effort that my knees crunch into the seat in front.

"OW! What are you-"

"Ssh!" Max crouches down next to me. "It's Sivert!"

"Sivert? Who is-"

"Shush!"

A man who doesn't seem at all at home on a high school bus comes lumbering up the aisle towards us, wearing a worn denim jacket and dark green joggers. The hair hanging out from

underneath his baseball cap looks as though it hasn't been washed for weeks. A vague stench of pea soup fills my nostrils as he trundles past us down the aisle.

"What just happened?" I ask when the bus starts up again.

Max waits for the guy with the baseball cap to sit down in the back seat before answering me.

"Sivert, Martha," he mutters. "Sivert happened!"

"But who on earth is Sivert?"

Max wraps his arms around the brown leather backpack in his lap and pulls it in tight as if it were a teddy bear.

"Sivert is a junior and he's bloody terrifying," he whispers. "I heard he once beat a guy to a pulp at the gym because he was spending too much time on the weights. They say he also stole a whole case of energy drinks from the storage room at the corner shop, and that the owner was so scared he didn't even dare call the police."

"A junior? *Him?*"

I twist round in my seat to get a discreet look at Sivert, who has spread himself over the entire back row of seats. His right foot is dangling over the seat in front, so that every time the bus brakes, his shoe whacks the poor girl sitting there on the head.

"He looks like he's twenty years old - *at least!*"

"He takes steroids," Max whispers. "Oh, oh! Are we here already?"

Max releases his grip on his rucksack. Straightens his back, runs a hand through his hair and pats himself gently on the cheeks.

"But let's not think about Sivert," he says, as the bus pulls into the gravelled yard behind the school. "How do I look? Suitably presentable for a new day at Føresvåg High?"

"You're always presentable," I tell him.

"I know," Max grins. "But a bit of validation never hurt anyone."

I double-check my timetable on the way through the lobby. I say goodbye to Max by the book lockers and rush off towards the B-wing and the science department. Just as I'm about to sit down at what seems to be the only free desk, I spot Edith, my interview partner from yesterday, sitting all alone at the back of the class. Her dark hair frames her face like a pair of curtains, and she looks like she could easily drown inside the huge black hoodie she is wearing. I grip the straps on my schoolbag. Feel my heartbeats grow faster, as I realise how sad Edith looks sitting there. She looks like a little blackbird with clipped wings, lost in a sea of cawing crows.

I suddenly feel a strong urge to sit down next to her. I cross the floor of the lab. Take hold of the free seat next to her and try to pull it out from the desk, but Edith wedges her foot against the leg of the chair, stopping me.

“You don’t *have* to sit there,” she says with a cold stare.

“Uh... What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“What Edith means,” shouts a boy from near the front of the class, “is that you would be much safer sitting next to *us!*”

The boys next to him howl with laughter. Edith responds by pulling up her hood. I watch as her face goes from pale white to a deep red, as she disappears even deeper inside herself.

I give those stupid jerks my evillest stare. Then I grab the seat again and purposefully pull it out from the desk. This time, I don’t encounter any resistance.

“Actually, I *do* want to sit here,” I announce as I start taking the books out of my bag. Edith stays silent. Still, I’m sure I can see the hint of a smile in the shadow of her hoodie. A smile that’s worth more than all those jerks put together.

I meet Max in the canteen for lunch. I listen as he rambles on about handsome sophomore boys and boring geography teachers, and how the hot chocolate from the canteen is far too frothy. I’m not quite as talkative, as I’m far too busy looking out for the blackbird girl from science class. Edith clearly doesn’t eat lunch in the canteen, but when I get back to the classroom, she isn’t there either. In fact, she only appears as the teacher is closing the door, together with one of the other girls from class. She and that other girl - Johanne, I think her name is - part ways at the teacher’s desk. Johanne rushes over to her seat next to the wall, and Edith... Edith comes right towards *me*.

“Hey,” she whispers, sitting down.

“Hey,” I whisper back, feeling my cheeks turn bright red.

Why on earth am I blushing?

“Do you have a pen?” Edith asks, almost soundlessly.

“Uh - yeah. Yeah, sure. Hold on.”

I rummage through my pencil case and dig out a dark blue biro. Edith takes it, but instead of noting down what the teacher is writing on the board, she starts drawing on the paper cover of my Norwegian textbook. I follow her pen strokes and watch as they turn into wings, beaks, then a whole flock of birds flapping away across the light green paper sky. Right then and there, I make up my mind that Edith is going to be my friend, no matter the cost.

Sample translation by Bruce Thomson

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