

I Never Win Anything

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An extract

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Dreaming

Nelle liked school. It was warm there, and they gave you soup and milk. She wasn't so keen on her teacher, though. Bart, that was his name. He had no patience with children. He considered them slow, and sometimes stupid too. He also wore trousers that could be converted into shorts.

All the children were sitting on their seats.

'I have a question,' the teacher said. 'Pay attention! Jan has bought eight apples. But there's a hole in his bag. Three fall out. How many apples does Jan have left?'

Nelle looked outside. She dreamt of apples, and chicken and onion in the frying pan. And chips. And for afters: coconut custard. If she didn't watch out, her stomach would do it again.

Groaaaaar. Yep, there it went.

GROAAAAR!

The teacher clapped his hands in front of Nelle's nose.

'Pay attention, Nilly!' Sometimes he deliberately pronounced her name wrong.

'Now then, is there an answer on the way?'

'Five onions,' said Nelle.

'Onions? The question was about apples! I give dreamers a nil,' he said.

Nelle wasn't about to get worked up about a nil. A nil was nothing. Just in number form.

In the break she could eat at last. Her lunchbox contained a paper frog. On its back it said:

I don't have a single joke handy,

but my belly is full of candy.

Two slices of bread with nothing in between, a piece of hard sausage and a spotty old banana. She ate it all, including the piece of candy. Otherwise her tummy would soon be roaring like a lion again.

Rhyming

'You forgot the cheese, Dad,' said Nelle. She hung her schoolbag on the coat stand. 'There was nothing in my sandwich.'

'It was cheese spread with holes in it,' het father said.

'Oh yeah? I couldn't see anything.'

'The cheese must have escaped. But hey, what did you think of my frog?'

'It was okay,' said Nelle, sounding downcast.
'We'll have a treat tonight, Love,' said her father. 'I promise.'

Nelle only had one sock without a hole in it. And she had two feet.
'Are my holes still in the wash?' she sometimes asked her parents. Boes and Fred were their names.
Nelle's father always had a sore back. His body was too stiff for the work he used to do. He had been a gardener for the city council. But he couldn't do that anymore.
Boes was a singer, but she couldn't find work.
'Do they have cotton wool in their ears?' Fred would ask her. 'You sing like a stream.'
Boes frowned. 'A stream? Is that a good thing?'
'No one sounds like a stream, Boes. But you do. You sound like a stream full of pebbles. It splashes when you sing. Like water.'
'You're talking nonsense, Fred,' said Boes.

Her parents didn't have much money.
'We're rich though, because we've got you,' they told Nelle.
Yeah, yeah.

'Tea time!' called Fred.
'Ta-da! Egg *fried rice* with *green beans*! Did you hear that? Our food rhymes,' he said.
Nelle stared into her plate of pulp.
Fred saw the look on her face. 'All that "I" and "EE",' he said. 'I know what to do with that. We'll add some "IR" and more "EE", then some "OU", and a bit of "AU" too. Get it?'
Nelle pushed the food around the plate with her fork. No, she didn't get it.
'A *squirt* of *sweet* and *sour sauce*!'
He squeezed the bottle over Nelle's plate. 'There you go. How's that?'
Nelle tasted it. It wasn't just tasty. It was delicious. *What a great cook Dad is*, she thought. She ate three platefuls.

Rushing

'Could you fetch a loaf of bread from the corner shop, Nelle? It's almost closing time, so get a move on. Here's a five-euro note.'
It wasn't far to the baker's.
Nelle put on her shoes and shuffled out the door.
'Hurry!' her father called. 'They're closing soon.'
She set off at a trot.
'A big brown loaf please,' Nelle asked.
The woman gave her a loaf, took the note and tossed a few coins back to her.
'Now we're closing, okay,' she said. Nelle was already outside, with a loaf of bread and lots of coins in her hand. Too many, she felt.
She counted and counted again. Then she knocked on the door.
'You gave me too much!' Nelle called through the glass.
But the woman waved her away. 'Tut,' she gestured.
Her husband came out. There was a smell of yeast about him.
'We're closed,' he told Nelle. 'Can't you read?'
'Yes. But I was given too much change.'
'Oh yeah? Are you saying we can't count?'

'No, but...'

'Well then. Off home with you. Quick.'

Nelle walked home slowly. She counted the money again. Eight euros, they'd given her back. Five euros too much! That couldn't be a coincidence.

She took three euros in one hand. She'd give them to her father. The rest she shoved into her pocket. She knew precisely what she was going to buy with that.

Counting

Soon there was going to be a school fair, the highlight being a tombola where everyone won a prize. Miss Mia had been selling tickets for weeks already. When the bell rang for first break, Nelle dashed to the playground.

Phew, Miss Mia was there! She was calling out, 'Last day! Buy a ticket while you still can!'

Miss Mia had hair the colour of honey down to her bum. It made Nelle hungry just looking at it.

'I'd like one,' she said. She handed over her money.

'Great.' Miss Mia took a ticket from the pile. It read 8080.

'Don't lose it,' she said to Nelle. 'This ticket could be very valuable. Best give it to your mother as soon as you can.'

Nelle stood still. She looked at the ticket in her hand.

Five euros. That was 5 kilos of onions. That was a large packet of ginger biscuits from the bakery.

That was five packets of chocolate with nuts in. Ten bags of flour. Which could have made 1000 pancakes for them.

And what had she bought? A piece of paper.

Miss Mia waved her hand in front of Nelle's eyes.

'Nelle? Are you still there? Hurry to your classroom. Otherwise Mr Bart will be cross. The bell has already rung. And don't forget the ticket tomorrow.'

As she ran to her class, Nelle's tummy rumbled. 'You be good and keep quiet,' she said softly.

She stuffed the ticket deep into her pocket.

Tasting

Woyoyoyoyooooong reverberated through the school. That meant, *Quiet everyone – it's about to happen!* The school fair was in progress. There was cake and cola and wine for those who wanted it. And for those with money. Nelle's parents weren't there, but lots of others were. Their faces were red. They shouted and laughed.

Mr Bart had a red face too. He was leaning against the table where Miss Mia was selling slices of cake. They were set out in a colourful row. Nelle stood at the table and graded the cakes. The chocolate cake was flat as a pancake. It got a seven. The banana cake was brown rather than yellow. That one also got a seven. All the others deserved tens.

All good grades, Nelle mumbled at the table, as if she were the teacher.

Mr Bart looked at Nelle.

'A child is like an onion,' he said. 'They have lots of layers. But they're boring enough to make you cry.'

'Just wait until I'm the head teacher,' said Mr Bart. 'Then I'll make men of the children.'

'What about the girls?' asked Miss Mia.

But Mr Bart was already at the next table.

Miss Mia gave Nelle a piece of cake. 'My treat,' she said. 'I baked this one myself.'

Nelle tasted it with her eyes closed. Cinnamon. And apple. And kilos of sugar!
Woyoyoyoyooooong, the gong sounded again.
Nelle licked the crumbs from her lips. It was time for the tombola.

The tombola was what everyone had come for. Even if the prizes were mostly just some knick-knack. A swimming cap. A ballpoint pen. A balloon. It didn't matter. When your number came up, you were happy all the same.

But this year was different. There was a real prize. A trip to an island. By plane. A stay in a hotel. A whole week!

The big prize was a gift from De Boer Tours. That was the head teacher's wife's travel agency.

Book YOUR TOUR with De Boer for double the fun! proclaimed the signs in the school windows.

Nelle never won anything. So she didn't hold out much hope. But you never knew.

Sweating

The gong wonged a third time. Nelle almost fainted. There was only one prize left on the table. The white De Boer envelope. The holiday was inside. It was almost glowing.

There were a few more people with tickets: Mr Bart, Els's parents and Nelle.

'And now... the main prize! The winning number... is...'

Nelle didn't dare listen but she had to.

'Eight,' she heard.

Then, 'Zero.'

Then, 'Eight,' again.

And then another 'Zero.'

She gasped. Eight-zero-eight-zero is what it said on her ticket. Her entire body went limp.

'Here,' she squeaked. But no one heard.

Mr Bart's whooping drowned out everything. 'Hey! Give that prize here. I'm the winner!'

Mr Bart walked forward. With his clammy hand he raised his ticket in the air. It hung limp like a rag. *You see*, Nelle thought. *I never win anything.*

'Ha!' said Bart. 'Can I exchange the prize for money actually? Because I've already booked a holiday.'

His ticket lay on the Jury's table. Miss Stien and Miss Mia looked from Bart's ticket to one another.

'This isn't right,' they said. 'Bart, man. You're out of luck. Your ticket's wet. You were reading the back. Look. Your number is 0808, not 8080.'

Mr Bart turned white. 'Bart the sweat fountain,' echoed in his ears. That's what the children used to shout out to him in his own schooldays.

He looked around, searched for support. But there was no support, because he was wrong.

And he knew it.

Winning

Nelle had been holding her ticket in the air for a while.

'What is it, Nelle?' Miss Stien asked.

'I've got it,' said Nelle.

'You've got what?'

'The right number,' said Nelle.

'Really? Does it say 8080 on your ticket?'

Nelle swallowed and nodded.

Miss Mia walked over to Nelle's table. She read aloud, 'Eight zero eight zero.'
'Yep. We have a winner. Nelle and her family win the De Boer Tours holiday!'
Miss Stien lifted Nelle up. She placed her on the table like a trophy. Nelle giggled. Everyone clapped. Everyone cheered and whooped for her. Nelle could do with winning, all the parents thought. They travelled so frequently already.

Flying

It was as if Nelle was dreaming. When she looked out of the window, she couldn't see anything. The world was below them, but the clouds covered everything. All she could see was a big field of cream. But she wasn't dreaming, she was wide awake.

Beside her were her parents. Two long months, they'd waited, and now they were on their way, at last.

There wasn't a lot of space between the seats. Just enough for a couple of girls in blue. Their names were displayed on their blouses. They were pushing trolleys full of drinks and food.

Their blue girl was called Linda, Nelle read.

'Open up your tray table,' said Linda. 'Then I'll serve your food.'

One, two, three tables swung open.

On a little tray were three plastic bags. Inside were:

- a cheese sandwich,
- a chicken sandwich,
- and pieces of apple for dessert.

'It's as if we're astronauts,' said Boes. 'With all these little bags and that plastic food.'

Nelle chewed slowly and said nothing. It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted.

Fred looked deathly pale. He hadn't wanted to fly, but he *had* to go along.

'You two finish up my bags,' he said.

Then he closed his eyes. He squeezed the armrest.

When they'd finished eating, Boes said, 'Tell us again how it happened, Nelle. With the school tombola.'

'Again?' Nelle asked. 'You've already heard it about 800 times.'

But she liked telling the story. It was always the same story. A story that was true! About a girl who never won anything. And then suddenly she had.

Storytelling

'So...' said Nelle.

Fred nodded contentedly, his eyes closed. He avoided thinking about the fact that they were hanging high in the air.

'So... I ran home quickly. You were sitting on the sofa and I shouted, "We've won a holiday! Come with me to school right now!" And we did. We actually ran. Even you, Dad, with your stiff back. Suddenly it was possible.'

Fred nodded, his eyes a little more open.

At school they gave you a glass of wine and me a cola. For free! And I ate far too many crisps. And so did you, Dad.'

'You can skip that part,' Fred groaned.

'The teacher gave us the tickets. "Everything is paid for," she said. "The plane, the hotel and the food. Have a great trip!" And we clinked glasses. And now we're here,' said Nelle. 'In row 8. Seats 7, 8 and 9.'

'I told you we were rich,' said Fred.
'This is more than rich,' Boes laughed. 'This is stinking rich!'
'Don't shout, love,' said Fred. 'You'll startle the pilot.'

Landing

'Look! there's a big pea floating in the water,' Nelle pointed. The island was far below, a green rock amidst the blue.
'It's more like a pancake,' said Boes. 'With herbs.'
Fred didn't look. He just wanted to land.

'Fasten your seatbelts, please,' said the pilot through the loudspeakers. 'Commence landing!'
Once on the ground the pilot had to brake hard. Everyone was thrown forward, just like on fairground ride. The plane drove on towards a low building.
When the engine went quiet, everyone clapped. Only Fred didn't join in.
'I'm never doing that again,' he said.
'You'll have to,' said Boes. 'Because we're only here for a week.'

In the bus to the hotel Nelle sat with her nose pressed to the window. The sea was bluer than blue. The houses were whiter than white. And Fred was still greener than green.

Nelle squeezed her mother's arm.
'Look, there it is.'
Their hotel! White with blue shutters, same as the brochure. Hotel Spido had three stars. There was a swimming pool and a garden. And within a count of one-two-three you could be on the beach.
At last Fred was able to smile again.
'Not bad,' he said.
'Far from bad,' said Boes.
'We have no words for this,' they chorused.
'I do,' said Nelle. 'It's the most beautiful spot in the universe.'

Swimming

Behind the reception desk hung a photo of a man. Spiros, it said underneath.
And then the man himself came hurrying up. He was wearing a vest and smiling broadly.
'Welcome!' he said. 'I'm Spiros of Hotel Spido, and you will be staying in room 8. Pleased to meet you!'

In room 8 there were three beds and a wardrobe. There was a small bathroom with a shower.
'Holes are in fashion here,' said Nelle, pointing to the fishnets on the wall.
'Throw me three holes then,' said Fred, 'because you should know I'm going in the water. Swimming's good for the back.'
Nelle bounced on the bed.
'Me too, Mum,' she said. 'You did pack my yellow bikini, didn't you?'
'You already put that on this morning, remember?' said Boes.
This morning?
That seemed so long ago.

The swimming pool was shaped like a figure of eight, with a deep end and a shallow end. Fred was already lying in it.

'It's warm, Nelle! Come on in!'

Nelle counted to ten. All the hairs on her arms were standing up. She needed someone to pinch her because this must be a dream.

The she dived into the blue. And it wasn't a dream, it was real! And wet.

She swam laps, like a goldfish in a bowl. And her father spat and splashed like a whale. Soon the bowl would overflow.

'Are you two coming out?' Boes asked sleepily.

They did, but only hours later.

Eating

It was so warm on the island. It was so beautiful. Best of all: the food was so delicious. Nelle and her parents were sitting at the table. They fetched food from the buffet. As much as they wanted!

Spiros comes to apologise to every table. He was wearing a proper shirt with sleeves and a collar.

'No fish this evening,' he said. 'And no meat either. A thousand apologies.'

Boes waved away his worries.

'Come on man! Look at those mountains!'

'Mountains?' Spiros asked. He looked through the window but couldn't see any mountains, only the tangle of palms around the swimming pool.

'Mountains of rice,' Boes pointed. 'Mountains of tomatoes and mountains of cheese. And there: olives, hot peppers, spinach pastries, cucumber, bell peppers, omelette with mint.'

Spiros looked at them happily. 'Doli! Doli!' he cried.

'Doli? What does he mean?' Nelle asked.

'Hurray?' Fred guessed.

But Doli turned out simply to be a name, the name of Spiros's wife, who was coming over to their table.

'Happy guests!' Spiros told her, and he pointed to Nelle and her parents. Nelle was poised over a plate of pastries. Her nose wasn't used to so many scents.

'Can't you decide, Nelle?' her father asked.

A girl came to stand beside her. She pointed to a dish.

'You have to taste that,' said the girl. 'Milk tart with lemon.'

'Here you are at last,' said Doli to the girl.

'This is Mara,' said Spiros. 'Our child of the sea.'

Lying

They spent the next day at the beach. Swimming and sunbathing, that's all they did. Well, apart from digging. Nelle and Mara dug a deep hollow in the sand. In the hollow they made a table and benches. So now the hollow was their house.

'Could you make tea, Mara?' Nelle asked. 'And I'll make cookies to go with it.'

They set to work.

The tea was delicious.

The sand cookies were the real deal.

Once they'd had enough of the beach, Nelle and her parents went back to room 8. Nelle grabbed paper and a pen. She drew lines on a large sheet of paper.

'Look: 7 boxes,' she said. 'For the 7 days we're here. Each day that's passed, we'll cross out.'
'Oh nice,' said Boes. 'You can cross out the first day already, because yesterday has already passed, hasn't it?'
Nelle took her pen and drew a yellow line through the first box.
'There you go,' she said.
'You can go ahead and do the next one too,' said Fred. 'It's evening now, after all.'
'Hey, Dad, not so fast! The day isn't over yet. You're forgetting the most important bit.'
'Oh yeah,' said Fred. 'What could that be? Cleaning your teeth? Washing your hair? Kissing my feet?'
'We haven't eaten yet!' says Nelle.

After a plate of pasta, followed by ice-cream for dessert, Nelle couldn't manage anymore. Her parents were having one more drink. Doli and Spiros joined them at their table.
A fat cat came prancing over to them. Nelle stroked its long fur.
'That's Kiko,' said Doli. 'Our only help. A workhorse! He cleans like the best of 'm.'
'Cleans?'
'Yes,' said Doli. 'He cleans. He can get at everything. He doesn't need a sponge, with that tail of his like a duster. He's clever and neat. I do all the rooms with him.'
'That's great. And sweet of the creature too.'
Kiko meowed, as if to say, *No need to thank me*. Then he suddenly slumped onto his side and fell asleep.

'Can we go back to the beach?' asked Nelle. Mara was jumping up and down beside her chair.
'It's too late,' Boes told her. 'Tomorrow's another day.'
'Just for a little while?'
'Room 8 is waiting,' said Fred.
'Just five minutes. Come on!'
'Wait. Did you hear that?'
'What?'
'Yes, now I can hear it properly. It's your name. Your bed is calling you, Nelle.'
You're lying, Dad, Nelle was about to say, but Spiros and Doli said they are about to hit the hay, and that it was Mara's bedtime as well.
So they wished one another good night.

Indulging

Nelle half woke up to a voice, one she recognised. But whose was it again?
'I want a view of the sea! And slippers beside my bed! A dressing gown, and little soaps!'
Nelle's eyelids fluttered. Was she dreaming? Her parents were still asleep. She dosed off again herself.

The sun woke Nelle. Needles of light pricked her skin. *Wake up, sleepy head!* the light said. There was a note on her bed:

*We're sitting at breakfast, Nellie.
Join us and fill your belly
Or we'll eat everything
(apart from the skin).*

Nelle rushed down the stairs. She hastily took a seat at table 8.

'What skin didn't you eat up?' she asked.

'That was just for the rhyme, Silly Billy,' said Fred.

Boes rolled her eyes. 'Your father likes those little games,' she said. 'You know how he is.'

'By the way,' said Boes, 'someone else has arrived. A familiar face, but I don't know where I recognise him from. A nasty man, a right bossy boots.'

'A loudmouth,' said Fred.

Nelle was only half-listening. She was savouring her egg. Then she ate cheese with honey, and flat bread with jam. She ate until she was full to bursting point.

Spiros was hurrying busily to a fro. The sweat was already pouring down his chin, and through the holes in his shirt.

'Let's clean up our own table,' Boes suggested. Fred and Nelle cleared another couple of tables. Until all the plates and cups were stacked in the kitchen.

'Thank you!' chorused Spiros and Doli.

'Thank *you*,' said Fred. 'For the strong coffee and all the tasty food. Now we're off for a swim. Race you to the beach!'

Blaring

Off they went. Without waiting for Nelle. Without their towels.

Nelle dashed back to the room. On the stairs she shot past a man's legs. Two hairy calves. They looked like wigs creeping up the stairs. But Nelle was in too much of a hurry to stop. And a good thing too!

She grabbed the towels and slid down the bannister. Mara was waiting for her at the bottom.

'Are you coming to the beach?' Nelle asked. 'My parents are having a race.'

Boes won, but that was normal. Fred had rheumatoid arthritis and a belly, whereas Boes was slim and supple as a snake. She waded straight into the sea and swiftly swam away.

'I'M THE WINNER, I'M THE BEST SWIMMER!'

A lifeguard came running up. He had a whistle around his neck and a loudspeaker in his hand.

'DON'T PANIC,' he blared at Boes. 'I'M COMING.'

He threw the speaker onto the sand and dived into the sea.

'Ha ha, darling,' Fred called out, 'He's coming to save you. Turn the volume down a notch.'

Boes swam away with rapid strokes. The lifeguard blew his whistle again. Then he swam crossly back to the beach.

'SING MORE QUIETLY PLEASE,' he called through his speaker.

Digging

The waves made wild leaps. Mara and Nelle jumped over them. The water swept them off their feet. But they fought back. They struck at the foam. Yet they couldn't beat the sea down, whatever they did. The water roared like a dragon, and it spat too. Mara and Nelle screamed. 'Are you coming too, Dad?'

'No,' said Fred. 'I'm only going to swim in the swimming pool. The sea's too cold for me. I don't like ice baths.' He lay stretched out on a towel. Only his nose was still moving.

Boes lay down next to her husband. The sun warmed them. They nodded off to the sound of the sea, and to Fred's snoring.

'Shall we bury them,' Nelle whispered into Mara's ear.

Mara liked that idea. They got straight down to work. First one of Boes's feet. Sand on top and pat it down. Gently! Because Boes was asleep. Mara poured sand over the other foot. The wet sand was lovely and cool. They worked at it for a good hour. Until only two heads remained poking out of the sand. And you couldn't see them, because they were covered by hats.

Suddenly a long shadow fell over their spot. It grew chilly on the beach. Those hairy legs were the ones Nelle saw before, on the stairs.

But wait a minute... Is that...?

Sunbathing

'Well, well, well! If it's not our Nelle!'

'Hello Mr Bart,' said Nelle. 'You're here too.'

'I booked with De Boer Tours, yes. The one you won the big prize from. What bad luck!'

'Bad luck? No way,' said Nelle. 'Massive good luck!'

'Good luck? You call this hotel good luck?' Bart asked.

'No. It's called Hotel Spido,' said Nelle.

Mara giggled.

'Oh? Is that funny? There's not even a real cook. It's ridiculous!'

'But Doli cooks like a chef,' said Boes from under the hat.

'And Spiros does his best too,' a deep voice added.

Bart peered around.

'Hard workers, those folks!' said the deep voice.

Bart looked around him anxiously. 'Did you hear that too?'

'Yes. That's my parents,' said Nelle.

She picked up their hats. 'Here they are. This is my mother. Her name's Boes. And that's my father, Fred. I'm afraid they can't shake hands with you.'

'And you are?' Fred asked. He blew a grain of sand from his eyelashes.

'I'm Bart, Nelle's teacher. Good girl, when she's not daydreaming.'

'Dreaming is healthy,' said Fred. 'Look, without Nelle we wouldn't be here. This island is lovely.'

'The island is nice, yes. But the hotel's a joke. I booked a room with a sea view. And what do I see from my window? Palm trees!'

'Palm trees are magnificent!' said Fred.

'I want to see the sea. Not a bunch of tall spindly trees. I've already tried calling De Boer Tours. It's their fault. But my phone doesn't work properly here.'

Fred cleared his throat. 'You're blocking the sun, dear Sir,' he said. 'Could you just step to one side?'

Bart sniffed. He took a step to the left.

'Oh, and another step, please,' said Boes. 'Because you're blocking my sun now.'

Then they both closed their eyes.

'Game of sea tag?' Mara suggested. 'You're it!' She tapped Nelle and ran off, straight into the water.'

'Well, I'll be off then,' said Mr Bart.