

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays

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An extract pp 5-21

Original title Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry
Publisher Querido, 2018

Translation Dutch into English
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1.

My brother holds his fork and his knife at the ready. He's hungry, he says.

'I'm not,' I say.

I think it's much too hot for hot food.

There's an exclamation mark on Alan's bare chest.

They've cut into his chest three times now, but it looks like just once, and he's still alive.

Boom boom goes his heart, to the left of that scar.

No, boom boom goes half of his heart.

2.

The microwave goes ping behind my back, but my mum doesn't put anything on the table.

She sits down and plants her elbows next to her plate. She says she wants to discuss something with us.

'Keep calm,' she says to Alan, and she holds her hand in front of his face, as if he has already talked far, far too much, while Alan is very calm and sits still and breathes.

She takes his knife and fork off him.

Then she puts her elbows back on the table and rests her chin on her hands. She looks away from me and at a mark on the table. It's the shape of a fish.

She takes a deep breath and says my dad and his Cruz want to do things differently from now on.

I say, 'Mum, do it without the introduction.'

Without the introduction, she says that Dad and his Cruz think I'm unmanageable.

That's not news.

The suggestion that follows is new though.

They feel that it would be easier if I didn't spend the weekend with them every week. They think every two weeks would be better. Or every three. They think I'd prefer it too.

I would, wouldn't I?

It doesn't sound like a suggestion. It sounds like something that we're going to do.

But they still want to know what I think about it.

I look away from my mum and at the white plate in front of me.

There's nothing on it, but hey: look closer. Suddenly there's a piece of tough meat there, one I didn't ask for.

I say, 'I'm not unmanageable. I'm just a bit difficult sometimes.'

'They're not my words, Bianca,' says my mum.

'No,' I say. 'But you could tell Dad he's wrong.' My voice trembles.

Mum shakes her head and pretends to smile.

'I'm just telling you what he said,' she says. 'Then you can discuss it with him and Cruz later, when they come to pick you up this afternoon. You decide. You know you're the kind of girl who should come with an instruction manual, and I take that into account. You wanted to hear it without an introduction, so I didn't package up the message. I'm just using the word that they used.'

Unmanageable.

I push my plate away.

I look at Alan, who has picked up his fork and his knife again and is holding them next to his plate like two soldiers, making them wait for food from the microwave.

'What about him?' I say to Mum, nodding at Alan.

As far as I'm concerned, he can do whatever he likes with the cutlery. Even if he holds the knife dangerously close to his face and almost pokes his eye out.

Alan looks at me. He sighs. He doesn't want to know what I think.

He does listen to Mum's explanation though.

She says nothing will change for him.

'It's the only way, what with his health problems. The boy's nine.'

Mum means that he's only nine, but she says it like he'll never be ten.

I roll my eyes. Oh dear.

Mum and drama.

She's been having lessons for a few months. You can tell.

Alan feels the pressure to act out what he's heard. That he's a sad, sad worm, poor little boy. A pathetic little thing. A defenceless little creature.

He hangs his head over the back of his chair and groans and says, in the voice of Stewie from *Family Guy*, that he's hungry. He says he could eat a whole meatloaf. He could gobble up an entire jar of hot cherry sauce, no problem.

Riiight.

He's already drooling at the thought.

Mum puts her finger on the white pill next to his glass. She pushes it towards him.

'Great,' she says. 'Then start with this.'

She takes the fork and the knife from his hands, one and then the other, and puts them beside his plate. She says the food is on its way and that she'll be happy if he has two, three, four mouthfuls.

'Bianca and I have almost finished our discussion now.'

Alan has the throat of a wolf and the stomach of a mouse. When there's nothing on his plate, he acts like a big man, but when it's served he always thinks it's too much and he just gives up.

I stare at Mum, and I ask her with a look if she expects me to go ping any moment now, as I've had a minute to think about the new plan that Dad and his Cruz have come up with and ultimately / all things considered / of course / it's fine / no problem / super.

She waits.

I'm silent.

No ping.

I don't think it's fine. I have something different in mind. A completely different plan.

She leans towards me, as if I just said something she didn't quite catch.

'Don't act like you look forward to the weekends, Bianca. I don't have the impression you're going to miss them, are you? You were happy enough in May when they said they'd rather come and pick you up on Saturday instead of Friday. Even one and a half days in the same house as them is too much for you.'

'They don't live in a house.'

'They do live in a house. They live together with lots of other people, and the building has a roof, so it's a house – and that's your dad's choice.'

'And his Cruz's,' I say. 'Okay, then.'

I shrug.

A building that used to be a warehouse, with hardly any walls inside and where just about everything belongs to everyone / yes okay / that's a house / it has a roof.

A few seconds, that's all I need to decide that I'm not in the mood for the rest of this conversation. They never learn: first they decide something without me, and then they ask if I think it was a good decision.

This time it's a no.

I am not in the mood for my brother, who acts first as if he's a starving animal attacking his plate and then pokes at the meat a few times before asking for a sandwich – and getting one too.

I am not in the mood for juice that looks like blood.

Or for having to eat carefully because the cherries stain and the kitchen is white and new, and look how beautiful and green the paper plant is.

I push back my chair. The feet screech on the tiles.

Mum clutches her head.

Perfect.

I say, 'I'm not hungry.'

'You have to eat.'

'I don't,' I say.

Mum says to my back that I have to stay here. That I need to eat or I'll be hungry later. That I shouldn't be so antisocial. That a friend of Alan's is coming over to play. And that this friend has a very special mum. And I'll be over the moon, because I *know* the woman. Honestly.

She swears that I do.

'You think she's *faa*abulous.'

I don't respond, so she changes her tone.

She says I'm being unreasonable. That if this carries on, she'll have to admit my father and his Cruz were right.

I stop at the foot of the stairs, with my hand on the rail.

Unmanageable.

Mum doesn't say the word, but it still goes through her mind.

There's so much I want to do and so much I want to say, but I take a deep breath in and then breathe out again very slowly.

Alan says, 'I can hear her breathing. She's still alive.'

'Yes,' says Mum. She takes his plate over to the pan of cherries on the hob, and she asks him how you pronounce his friend's name again. 'Jezz?'

Alan says a name that sounds like it.

'Right,' says Mum. 'Like that.'

They giggle together.

I'm not staying here. When the two of them giggle like that, I always start to feel a bit light-headed.

I slap my jeans pocket.
Have I got my key?
Yes.
I open our front door. Then I pull it shut behind me.
I don't want you to think I'm angry, but I don't mind if you do think I'm angry.

3.

Mum calls me *wild*.

She says, 'I know what you're feeling. I was like that too when I was about your age.'
She used to have to let off steam at the slightest thing too, or she'd start throwing stuff.
I know what steam is, but she has no idea how I feel.
She's comparing me to a spoiled child lying angrily on the floor, kicking its feet and yelling no,
no, no.

She's got it wrong.

I'm much more wild than she thinks, with one difference: I make hardly any noise.

When I get home later, she'll ask me where I've been.

She'll want to know if I was careful. Did the walk help and is all the steam gone now?

Am I, um, manageable again?

I'll say yes.

I'll describe a walk I didn't take.

You'll see me pointing. Under her arm. I'll cross the bridge with my finger. Then point to past the library. Make a curve around the retirement flats and tell her about people I haven't seen. Or I'll say I hung out at the playground and went on the swings.

She goes to acting lessons – I don't need them.

She'll look into my eyes and I'll look back and go on making things up until she thinks: Bianca's heading in the right direction. She doesn't have it easy, but I'll be glad if things get just a tiny bit less difficult every day.

If she only knew.

4.

When I slap my pockets to check if I have my key and then close the front door behind me, I don't go off for a little walk to let off steam.

When I've shut the door, I go right.

Before the playground, I turn right again, and then again.

I walk halfway around the block.

Then I go back to ours, through the gate at the bottom of the garden. I stand there in the shade of the bushes.

No one notices me.

At first, I used to press my back against the concrete wall and then wait a few seconds, plucking up courage.

I'm not crazy about little creatures.

Now I don't wait though, because it doesn't help. I squeeze my eyes shut and carefully push my body between the hedge and the wall.

My shoulder first and then the rest.

I have to be careful not to scratch my skin on the concrete. There are bolts sticking out here and there. My clothes get caught on them.

There's always a moment when I'd rather go back. Because some insect is buzzing or moving its leg. Because something feels itchy or sticky. There's all kinds of crackling and creeping and crawling going on.

Sometimes it's like the hedge doesn't want me there.

A branch pokes me in the side.

Clear off, clear off.

The hedge was there first.

He was already here when we moved in.

Someone once stuck a shovel into the ground to dig a hole and plant the beginnings of a hedge. Someone once thought: one day this is going to be a hedge that no one will be able to get through.

Well, they weren't counting on me.

At a certain point, the concrete wall isn't there anymore. That feels weird.

Hedge is the only thing around me. Dust and greenery, cobwebs, prickly wood. It's as if I've been thrown into the top of a tree, and I don't know what's left or right or front or back.

Then I count to three, because I don't want to be trapped inside a bush forever.

Three two go.

5.

And then I'm standing, still alive, on the piece of ground that no one knows is there.

It's not that big.

I can't lie down there full length.

I don't know whose the piece of ground is – or was. Maybe it's part of our garden, maybe it's the woman next door's.

I discovered this spot when I was eight and looking for a ball and everything seemed even bigger than now.

Under a layer of leaves and soil, there is a tile floor, from a shed that was once there.

On one side, the concrete wall is suddenly there again. On the other side, there's the hedge and a fence that used to be blue.

The place is mine, but I share it with / ha ha / the creatures in my hair and in my clothes.

The tickling and the itching don't go away if you scratch.

Usually I get bitten somewhere too. I always have bumps from mosquitos or from some other bug that was defending itself.

Part of the fence is loose. I pull one of the planks towards me and squeeze myself through the gap.

Behind the woman next door's chicken shed, there's a forgotten chair.

The woman herself is kind of forgotten too.

As soon as I'm sitting on the chair, I can breathe again. All that time, there were bricks in my pockets and I can finally take off my jacket / that's how it feels.

'Are you sitting comfortably?' I ask myself.

The answer is oh yes.

I'm sitting comfortably, here under the neglected trees in someone else's garden, next to the neighbour's old compost heap, behind her shed with the chickens in it, the beanpoles and the allotment with the lettuces that look like they've exploded, and the plastic playhouse from *Frozen*, which has been there for years, so all the colour's come off it.

No one knows where I am.

The woman next door never comes any further than the chicken shed. She throws scraps inside or opens a hatch to collect the eggs, and then she goes back into the house.

Occasionally she drags a deckchair into a patch of sun. If I peek through a hole in the wall of the chicken shed, I can see her lying there.

After fifteen minutes, she's had enough of the sun. She puts the deckchair back in the shed and goes inside. She locks the door behind her and sometimes she puts the blind down.

As long as I'm sitting here, I'm nowhere.

No one will ever find me.

6.

Today the chickens don't make a peep. Usually there's one that clucks, as if she's warning the others.

Look out, girls, look out. That child is back again.

If I listen carefully, I can hear Mum and Alan's voices behind the trees.

I can't make out what they're saying, even if the sliding door to the kitchen is open.

Alan will have swallowed down a bite of the meatloaf by now. Maybe his breath smells of cherries. Or maybe he asked for a sandwich ages ago.

With apricot jam, please, Mummy.

He likes doing that: wanting something that Mum doesn't have in the house. He knows it'll make her feel guilty and she'll say 'I'm sorry, sweetheart,' and be extra nice to him.

7.

Our doorbell rings. I expect to hear the shriek of Mum's chair / yes, there it is right now.

Then it's quiet for a long time.

It's still too early for Dad's deep voice.

Dad and his Cruz have said they'll come and pick me up at some point in the afternoon. The afternoon has only just begun.

First lunch has to be finished, the mouthful of meatloaf, the sandwich without apricot jam.
The dishes need to go into the dishwasher.
Dad and his Cruz still have to prepare themselves for me.
They can't handle me yet, it's too early.
I hear Alan singing and yelling. Then someone else starts singing and yelling even louder than him.
It must be that friend of his.
The son with the special mum / good / great.
Leave me alone.
I'm just going to sit on my old chair for a while, being unmanageable.
I often stay here for more than an hour. When I need to think about Mum or Dad, or about the two of them together, when they were still together, or about Cruz.
I keep a few things in a plastic box in a bone-dry hole between the fence and the chicken shed.
A Capri-Sun and a packet of raisins.
I took the Capri-Sun from our fridge and the raisins out of the cupboard, so it's not stealing.
There's also an old biscuit tin that I keep photo albums in, and a few pencils and some scissors and a notebook that I use for writing and drawing. Sometimes I write a few sentences, about how I'm feeling.
Sometimes I just write one word. Then I make the drawing around it a big one. I'm very good at drawing flowers and plants that don't really exist.
I have some big fat scrapbooks in my room. I keep them at the bottom of the wardrobe. It would be noticed if I brought them here.
The photo albums are all together inside a case. They're albums that Mum ordered online.
One of them is from when she was a little girl.
Another is from when she hadn't known Dad all that long. You can't tell from the photos that they'll have children. You also can't tell that they won't stay together.
Plus there's an album from when I was already born. Alan comes along halfway through. Our house is in those photos.
Whenever I see our house in a photo, I feel sad. I don't know why.

8.

Alan sounds like a little bird from a cartoon. His friend I've never seen before is saying something too. Their voices climb into the sky, above the bushes and the trees, up over the fence and the chicken shed.
I tell myself I'm not curious.
I know I'm lying.
Of course I want to see who this mum is who I think is so fabulous.
Should I start to come back from my walk?
Even before I've answered the question, I'm already standing up.