

Hengameh Yaghoobifarah

Dizzy

Sample Translation by Imogen Taylor

To all the dizzy people out there—and those who hold them

*I want your ugly, I want your disease
I want your everything as long as it's free*
Lady Gaga, 'Bad Romance'

*Knowing the gap between what you want and what you yearn for,
can there be hope in this?*
Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *The Freezer Door*

*Keep trying for you
Keep crying for you
Keep lying for you
Keep flying and I'm falling*
Sade, 'No Ordinary Love'

What does paradise taste of? Ava searches for the answer on her tongue. Runs it slowly around her mouth. Blue gelato and pussy. Her grin warps her face into a cartoon-like grimace. Totally wasted. Her eyes always go so tiny when she's stoned. Lukewarm water runs over her hands as she examines herself in the mirror. Is that what the happiest person in the world looks like? Can you even see happiness? When her bruise-covered arse drew looks of concern in the gym changing room a few weeks ago, she realised how easy it is to confuse pain and pleasure. Sometimes even she has trouble distinguishing between different forms of arousal. Because thrill is the result of simultaneity—like this taste on her palate that's sweet, salty *and* earthy.

She pulls her lips apart and inspects her teeth. All clean. The thick hair that had so doggedly pricked the tip of her tongue has vanished. Discreetly spat out. Not that she's complaining. She likes it messy. She wets a piece of loo roll and wipes the dried gunk from her chin. Smooths her mane of hair with her damp hands. Reaches for the towel. Time to get out. She's kept her date waiting long enough.

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Robin rummages in her bag for her Neroli oil. She runs the roller over her neck and rubs in the scent with her wrist. Then she puts it away and reaches for her phone. Three messages from Ivo. She opens the chat and skims the grey speech bubbles. She isn't in a fit state to work out what her boyfriend wants from her. Time for a brief inventory.

Her head: woozy. Her legs: shaky. Her glass: downed in one. The water: dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. Her white top: wet. Her long-term relationship: a problem for later.

She inspects herself in the mirror over Ava's sofa. Takes a selfie in front of the big window with the tip of the ironwork tower glinting in the distance. The steel A of a metropolis that attracts anyone who'd rather tell their own story than fit themselves into pre-existing ones. Like her for example. Robin takes

another photo of herself, this time with her face turned to the golden hour light. She likes what she sees. Her lips slightly swollen, her cheeks pink, her mullet shaggy. A top she made out of two vests only that afternoon, with a big rip and a drawstring—a piece of rag powerful enough to usher in the hot dyke summer. That’s even with the stains: a black burn mark, because she was holding the joint when they started messing around and ashed on her own chest—and now this water spot.

Robin likes to go all out for the lesbian gaze. Lechy guys are a tedious by-product. Especially since their standard response to rejection is to call out something they think will offend her, like her breasts are too small for her fat belly or she has a face like a gnome. As if she’d looked any different when they tried to pull her. She’s dressed to be fucked, but only by the right people, not by some ugly ass men—and not by life.

Sometimes she curses fate for equipping her with such sharp senses. Chilling on the sofa till Ava gets back is not an option. Her eyes roam the room until they find something to settle on—in this case a fine specimen of a dust bunny at the foot of a standard lamp. Although, given the sheer mass of fluff and hair, we’re not talking just one bunny. There’s a whole community hanging out here, well fattened and ready to fuck with Robin’s head. She closes her eyes. Only seconds later she remembers the filth in Ava’s basin. She’ll be needing those nitrile gloves again before she can get started on her oral hygiene and skincare routine—this time for some hardcore cleaning. Kind of a shame. Ava’s flat is cosy and tastefully done out, but meticulous cleaning isn’t one of her strengths. Which actually makes sense, considering how chaotic she is. The upshot is, you can only stay a short while, preferably off your face—or risk being driven up that cobwebby wall. Robin sighs.

When her spiralling thoughts send doubt and stress spinning through her head, she has to remind herself she’s not only a daughter, sister and friend, but the sum of her desire. She may be neurotic, she may be inflexible, but she’s also the

moan that escapes her when the tip of her tongue touches someone else's. She's the drop that runs down the inside of her thigh when she feels the pressure of another body against hers. And she's the moment when Ava's jaw drops because she realises Robin's slutty outfit was chosen especially for her. Robin fills her glass again and slowly drains it.

She manages to resist the impulse to check her emails while she's waiting—though mainly, she has to admit, because the low battery notification forestalls her. She plugs Ava's charging cable into her phone and lets the juice flow till it's time to leave in a couple of hours. Back to Ivo. Back to work. Back to the daily grind. Until then, though, she wants to let herself go again—really let herself go. Maybe another joint? No harm in rolling one. As long as she's high she can keep reality at bay. She sits there grinding the weed and her arse in time to the slow music.

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Smoke and *faded way too long, baby, I can't even see* drift out towards Ava as she heads back to the sitting room where Robin is lying on the chaise longue rolling another blunt. She looks at Ava as she licks the adhesive on the Rizla—a cheap trick that gets Ava every time, just like it used to in Tumblr GIFs. Her eyes settle on Robin's chest. The silver metal of her piercing is shining through a big wet patch on her top. I see. As soon as the joint is sealed, Ava slips onto Robin's lap and moves towards her face until the freckles look like pixels. She repeats the tongue choreography, with Robin's lower lip as the strip of adhesive. The thin skin vibrates as Robin breathes out. Ava turns to honey for Robin, melting and sticking to her body.

'Lovely,' Ava breathes and means pretty much everything: Robin's lips, her outfit, her own thighs around Robin's hips, Robin's mass of freckles, the music. She's all soft. Robin nods and pulls Ava's chin to her face between two fingers. She could crush it like a rose in full bloom—slowly and pleurably,

but no less destructively—and Ava would readily succumb to obliteration. *And help me lose my mind.*

Is it just on her side that the vibe's this intense, or does Robin feel it too—whatever *it* is? No tunnel now, Ava thinks, and tries to focus on her hands, not her head. Since discovering that Robin finds sex talk cringe, Ava has resisted the urge to make compliments or say anything that might sound like dirty talk. This, right now, is better than anything Ava's ever dreamed of. She's glad she didn't kill herself when she was fourteen—she'd have missed out on everything but the most depressing part. The best is just beginning. She's so blissed out she doesn't even hear the shrill ring echo through her flat.

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delia has to ring the bell three times before ava's voice comes over the intercom.

'hello?'

'it's me, delia. can you let me in for a second?'

'everything okay?'

'yeah, everything's good. i just left my phone at yours. can i come up and get it?'

'oh i see. yeah, sure.'

bzzzzzzzzzz. delia heaves the front door open. maybe ava got stoned and dozed off, they think as they wait for the lift. the doorbell's so fucking piercing—it's woken delia way too early on way too many mornings, but you never know. at least she's home. delia's up shit creek without their phone. it wasn't anywhere when they got home in the late afternoon. not in any of their pockets, definitely not in their flat—and they hadn't touched it on the bike ride to work; they were late as it was and had other things to worry about than looking out a playlist for the road. hadn't had it at work either—checking for messages on their shift was too stressy and delia's boss has it in for them anyway for being unpunctual, dreamy, clumsy and generally unreliable. the job's no fun, but what job is? it's only one of three and delia needs them all.

also, their boss, who's pretty disorganised himself, hasn't done himself any favours by opening his bar on the most chaotic intersection in the city where delia has sensory overload even before their shift's started, from the massive illuminated ads and the thronging tourists and the traffic noise.

at last the silver doors of the lift slide apart spitting out a family of four—a mother and three kids who can't hide their curiosity over delia's appearance. delia, safely ensconced in the two-square-metre box, doesn't catch what they say but breathes deep, inhaling the mix of smells: cigarettes, spilt mustard, washing powder, sperm, wet dog, takeaway and chloé perfume. instant nausea.

delia gets out at the fourteenth floor, which is as far as the lift goes, and takes the stairs to the top storey. they'd like to say this staircase is the creepiest they know, but it would be a lie. also, there's a nice big reward waiting for them at the top, so that even if they were the worst stairs in the world, delia would still climb them as often as they could. even now, the sight of ava leaning against the doorframe sends a handful of fireworks into the pit of their belly.

'sorry,' delia says by way of greeting. 'i don't know when I have work tomorrow and if i don't find my phone i can't ring my boss and ask her—or set an alarm so I don't oversleep.'

's'okay,' ava mumbles. there isn't always a kiss, delia's used to that, though a little more joy at their spur-of-the-moment visit wouldn't hurt. 'but i haven't found your phone anywhere. you sure it's here?'

delia nods fiercely. 'definitely.'

ava doesn't retreat a millimetre. 'thing is, i have a visitor.'

'oh, sor

'r

'r

'r

'ry. i don't want to keep you. i'll just have a quick look round, i'm good at finding small things.' that's a lie. they're terrible at it.

ava sighs and lets delia in. 'maybe look in the bedroom, no? I'll be just over there.'

delia follows her into the flat. there's no phone on the bedside table, no phone on the chest of drawers. if it had been somewhere in the bedclothes ava would have found it, because she's changed the bed since this morning—the phone would have turned up when she stripped the sheets. 'hope i didn't lose it on my way to work,' delia mutters, but they're pretty sure they didn't have it with them. the last time they can remember using it was just after they got up. their boss had written saying that a colleague had cried off because of a doctor's appointment and could delia fill in for her. they'd had to go in two hours early.

'i've tried calling, but it must be on mute,' ava says. delia spins round, startled—she seems to have been watching delia all the time.

'i think the battery's flat,' delia replies, crawling around on their hands and knees, patting the carpet.

'it's definitely not in the other rooms. i'd have found it when i tidied up.'

just as delia's about to give up they spot the shiny cracked screen under the bed. 'ha!' they shout, fetching it out and holding it in the air like a trophy.

'okay, cool, that was quick,' ava says, lowering her voice, as if she's supposed to keep delia's presence a secret. has delia walked in on a kidnapping or something?

'are you okay?' they whisper. 'if you're in danger, blink twice, if you're safe—'

'in danger? why would i be in danger? are you high?'

'dunno—i mean, no! i'm not high.'

'wouldn't want to be a bad host, you know.'

a good host would have offered me a glass of water, delia doesn't say; instead they nod with fake understanding. they don't dare ask if they can charge the phone a bit before they head home.

'everything okay in there?' a new voice. delia hears footsteps in the hall, and a small person appears next to ava in the door and smiles at delia from under a black mullet, bleached eyebrows and a mass of freckles. if delia weren't sober enough to know better, they'd be sure they'd just met the human incarnation of the Instagram elf filter.

‘yeah, all good,’ ava says to the friendly elf. ‘everything sorted.’

the elf is still smiling. ‘i’m robin, by the way,’ says the elf.

delia gives robin a clumsy wave. ‘i’m delia.’

‘delia was on their way out,’ ava says, ‘so on that note...’

exactly, delia is about to say, but they don’t get that far because the doorbell rings again.

*

The timing’s perfect. A delivery woman lets Silvia into the building a second after she’s rung the bell, and the lift is waiting for her with open doors. She’s got a good pace going today. Not that she isn’t always speedy—she sometimes jokes that she has an MA in Impatience without even having graduated—but today she outdoes herself. She walks briskly, spurred by anger. For thirteen days she’s waited for Ava, but there’s such a thing as too much—she won’t be messed about with any longer. Time to confront her lover. Silvia takes the last flights of stairs at a sprint. She was in such a rush downstairs that she charged straight into the building and doesn’t actually know if Ava’s in; it’s a relief when she sees her head poking round the door. Silvia knows Ava—she’s not expecting a passionate embrace. But a warmer welcome than ‘What are you doing here?’ would have been nice.

‘I want to talk to you,’ Silvia says, planting herself on Ava’s doormat, her feet a hip-width apart.

‘Not now, I have visitors.’

‘Listen, Ava, I don’t care. You owe me an answer.’

Ava rolls her eyes. ‘What do you mean?’

Without stopping to think, Silvia pushes past Ava into the flat. Now she’s here, she’s not going to be put off.

‘Are you fucking crazy?’ Ava calls after her. ‘Get out of here!’

Silvia keeps on down the hall. Two young faces gawp at her. Two young people are standing outside Ava’s bedroom looking somewhat taken aback. Well, well, well. Mademoiselle is so busy cavorting with others that she

can't be arsed to reply to her messages anymore—not even a sentence in response to the dozen messages that Silvia's sent her these last couple of weeks. Silvia screws up her nose and checks out Ava's guests.

'Who are you?' she asks coolly.

They say their names at the same time. Silvia doesn't catch either of them.

'Didn't get that,' she says.

'Robin,' says Robin.

'Delia,' says Delia, rather more timidly.

'I see.'

'And you...'

Robin throws Silvia a questioning look that she finds intensely irritating.

'Me? I'm Silvia.' It's a long time since Silvia introduced herself with such confidence. She turns to confront Ava, but there's no Ava there—only a clatter on the spiral staircase followed by an almighty crash.

*

Ava takes the stairs three at a time. Out. She has to get out. She ignores the stitch in her side. Her mouth fills with the taste of iron, as if she's about to spit blood. Slowly she comes closer to the sky. The first cloud comes into view. Nearly there.

She remembers the exact moment when she first felt ashamed of sleeping with Silvia. It was a few weeks ago, when her mother Jaleh was visiting—a sunny day in June after a grey, humid and migrainy spring. She and Jaleh were wandering around the market near her flat, a charismatic contrast to the covered bazaar where they had been earlier that day, swept along under the vaulted ceilings by the bustle of eager tradespeople and curious tourists. It was a place Ava usually avoided and she'd been relieved to return to her own neighbourhood and recover her bearings. She and her mother sauntered up and down between the stalls. They bought coffee on ice in the famous speciality

chocolate café, a pair of orange gloves for Jaleh on a leatherwear stall and three hundred grams of gluten-free gnocchi for their supper—Jaleh had changed her diet that year and it worked wonders for her joints. Then they stopped to look at a florist's stall. Ava decided to celebrate her recent rapprochement with her mother by buying a lavish custom-made bouquet. It was the first time Jaleh had been to visit in the ten years since Ava had left home. Usually Ava went to see her. A couple of times Jaleh had promised to drive over, but she'd always cancelled at the last minute—once because of a new work order, once because of a relapse.

She watched her daughter jabbing her finger at the most exotic blooms. Ava's bouquets always resembled bunches of morbid alien stalks. As the florist trimmed the stems and added some eucalyptus leaves, Ava let her gaze wander over the market—and found herself looking straight into Silvia's eyes. Shit, Ava hadn't reckoned with her. Their last date was only a couple of days back. They'd clung to each other till late into the night, then Silvia had called Ava a taxi. The driver gave Ava a telling-off for making him wait so long—almost five minutes. Another thirty seconds, he said, and he'd have driven off. Ava felt bad about it and apologised three times, but it had been worth it for the endless deep kiss at Silvia's front door. Sometimes, when Ava's particularly stoned, Silvia's muscular body feels like tentacles, strong and slippery and entwining, her arms and legs equipped with suction cups that suck on Ava's skin. There's no escaping Silvia's desire.

But standing there on the market with her mother, she felt cut off from her feelings for Silvia. They looked at each other for a long time. Silvia was coming towards them—she'd been walking their way anyway—and Ava glanced discreetly at Jaleh to reassure herself that she was unequivocally recognisable as her mother, not her date (same nose, same forehead). Silvia gave her a brief nod. Ava was relieved; she'd have felt uncomfortable introducing her lover to her mother, especially since they're the same age. But Silvia couldn't keep back a quiet hello as she passed. Ava returned the greeting, but without the eye contact or smile that would have given the situation warmth and shown a minimum of respect and courtesy towards Silvia.

‘Who was that?’ Jaleh asked.

‘Oh, no one. Just someone I know.’

Looking back, Ava feels shame. It’s not her lover’s age that she finds embarrassing, but the fact that she can’t stand by her desire when it comes to it. She has no trouble flexing on her gang that she has a MILF—not that Silvia has kids—and she does so regularly, maybe a little too regularly. She even asks herself sometimes if she fetishizes Silvia because of her age—but, of course, the age-gap attraction can also go the other way. Think of all those older men with women young enough to be their daughters. She and Silvia have never talked about the impact of the age gap on their relationship. Why should they? Is it necessary to haul every aspect of sexuality onto a theoretical level? Don’t we all ascribe a disproportionate amount of sex appeal to the tiniest things? A mole, an accent, small ears, dark down on an upper lip? Sure, Ava finds the age gap between her and Silvia hot, but she doesn’t reduce her to her age. At the same time, though, she’s not sure she’d be interested in Silvia if it weren’t for that age gap.

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On the roof of the tower block, Robin stops to catch her breath, winded after running up the stairs. It’s only then that she hears a panting sound and realises the others have followed her. No sign of Ava. Delia’s leaning against the door, red in the face, their hands propped on their knees. Silvia cranes her long neck and peers about her—she makes it look like a stretching exercise. *She moves so gracefully she must work out every day*, Robin thinks, and wonders if she’s being ageist.

‘Avaaa!’ she yells, as loud as she can. She tramps over the roof. It’s flat up here, but rambling and mazelike. There’s something ulcerous, she thinks, about the tower block. For the first time she notices that the building isn’t just a long rectangle but a sprawling complex—some of it at different heights. Small columns, boxes and satellite dishes are strewn over the roof,

transforming it into a perilous labyrinth. The lighting here is erratic. In some places the metal reflects the light of the setting sun with such force that it hurts your eyes if you look at it for too long. Other corners are so dark that it's hard to tell what's shadow and what's concrete—where it's solid underfoot and where's best avoided.

'Fuck's going on?' Delia mutters.

'Good question.' Silvia's standing, legs apart, some metres away, shielding her eyes from the sun with her arms. Something about her reminds Robin of a PE teacher she had in Year Eight, who complimented her on her figure when she lost eight kilos over the summer because of a stomach ulcer. Minus the fake tan, maybe—Silvia looks too eco for that. Robin fights her hasty dislike of the woman; she needs to focus on the present. She paces the length of the roof, yelling Ava's name.

Rights Inquiries

Inka Ihmels (she/her)
Aufbau Verlage GmbH Co. KG
i.ihmels@aufbau-verlage.de

And wonderful agents in
following territories:

**Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia,
Montenegro, North Macedonia,
Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia**
Corto Literary Agency
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andrea@cortoliterary.com

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Luciana Villas-Boas (she/her)
LVB&Co. Agência Literária
luciana@lvbco.com.br

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marie@bamlitagency.com

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eavloniti@ersilialit.com

Hungary
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Balla-Sztojkov Literary Agency
ballalit@ballalit.hu

Italy
Barbara Griffini (she/her)
Berla & Griffini Rights Agency
griffini@bgagency.it

Israel
Geula Geurts (she/her)
The Deborah Harris Agency
geula@thedeborahharrisagency.com

Netherlands
Linda Kohn (she/her)
Internationaal Literatuur Bureau BV
lkohn@planet.nl

Poland
Anna Kolendarska-Fidyk (she/her)
AKF Literary Agency
akf.agency@hot.pl

Romania
Simona Kessler (she/her)
Simona Kessler International
Copyright Agency
simona@kessler-agency.ro

Russia, Ukraine
Maria Schliesser (she/her)
Literaturagentur Maria Schliesser
schliesser.maria@gmail.com

**Spain, Portugal, Latin America
(except Brazil)**
Amair Fernandez (she/her)
International Editors' Co.
Agencia Literaria
amaiur.fernandez@internationaleditors.com

Turkey
Amy Spangler (she/her)
AnatoliaLit Agency
amy@anatolialit.com