

Anne Gröger: Hi, I’m Death Junior but you can also call me Frida

(OT: Hey, ich bin der kleine Tod ... aber du kannst auch Frida zu mir sagen)

Sample translation by Melody Shaw

Chapter 2: You can’t keep on living like this!

Life is precious, and precious things must be handled with care. My parents don’t understand that – or, to be precise, Rudi is the one who doesn’t understand. Lisbeth is on my side, naturally.

‘Every year, 20,000 people die of flu. One in nine traffic fatalities is a cyclist, and three people are killed each year by dog bites,’ I had to explain to Rudi, when he asked me:

‘Shall we build a snowman?’

That was in winter.

‘Would you like to try out your new bike?’

That was in spring.

‘Shall we go for a walk in the park?’

That was three days ago.

Rudi is *so* irritating. It’s been going on for six months now. Since I was discharged from the hospital, he’s suggested almost every day that we *do* something. Outdoors. Outside the house. He *knows* I don’t go out – except for my check-ups at the hospital.

He’s forever telling me: ‘You can’t keep on living like this!’ But I think that’s my own business. I prefer to be on the safe side, and the safest side is at home, in my room. Of course, a bunker would be even safer, but Rudi and Lisbeth won’t buy me one. I’ve asked.

I have to content myself with more modest measures. I’ve covered the corners and edges of my furniture with thick cloth padding. This substantially reduces the risk of bumps and bruises. A full bottle of anti-bacterial spray stands at the ready on my bedside cabinet, along with one dispenser box of face masks, and another of latex gloves. The first aid kit is placed in full view next to my wardrobe. I check its contents weekly for completeness, since the time Rudi stole one of the plasters. Other companions make a more positive contribution. My parlour palm, for example, which purifies the air in my room. A present from Lisbeth, naturally.

Likewise the resistance band I use for exercise every morning. At the open window, I hasten to add. So much for saying I get no fresh air! And after exercising, I let the sun shine on my face for precisely 15 minutes: the prescribed time for my skin type. After all, I do need to maintain my vitamin D levels. Brittle bones are the last thing I need!

‘Are you coming to the playground?’

Rudi really is persistent. And also insane!

‘There are children at the playground’ I explain patiently to him. Rudi doesn’t understand the problem. I clarify: ‘If we consider that the average adult will be ill twice a year, but the average child twelve times, that child is six times more ill, and therefore a six times greater source of infection than an adult. Conclusion: children are a threat to life and limb!’

Rudi didn’t know that. Before he can think through any objections, I add, ‘I don’t want anything to do with children.’

The disappointment is written all over Rudi’s face.

‘But we can play something here!’ I suggest. Rudi smiles, but I know he is thinking yet again what a shame it is to not have a normal child, with whom he can do normal things. Rudi just has me. We both have to live with that.

‘Don’t you want to go to a proper school after the summer holidays?’ Rudi asks, after he’s stared at me in silence a while. A question he could answer perfectly well for himself, but for the absence of any doubt, I reply.

‘Absolutely not!’

I’m very satisfied with my online tuition. My teacher, Christian, with whom I speak every day via video link, is a competent man – at least, most of the time. It was only during the final lesson before the summer holidays that we had a small dispute. Christian actually tried to persuade me that death was a good thing. “Don’t you think that life would eventually become boring?” he asked. “The fact that our time is limited is what makes it so valuable.” It’s an opinion I absolutely cannot share.

Without death, life would be significantly less dangerous. It would be the most marvellous thing in the world if no-one had to die. A solution would have to be found to the problem of overpopulation, naturally, but apart from that, no-one would be sad that someone had died, no-one would be sad that they have to live alone, and – above all – no-one would have to be scared of dying. Death is the worst part of life. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about.

There’ve been exactly seven times when I almost died. Five pneumonia infections. Two internal bleeds. Once, I saw him: Death. I know it was only a dream, but I’ve never been so terrified.

It was two years ago. I was in intensive care with severe pneumonia. It didn’t look good. If I’m honest, things had never been so bad for me. My parents were with me day and night, but right at that moment, they weren’t there. Death was standing not far from my bed. At first, he did nothing, just watched. My eyes were closed, but somehow I still knew exactly what he was doing. Dreams are like that. After a while, I could sense him coming. Closer. And. Closer. I tore my eyes open and stared at him – right in his face. That is, if he’d had a face. I could only see black, but I still had the feeling he was smiling. Strangely, it felt like a friendly smile.

Death was tall. Much taller than me, and much taller than an adult could ever be. He was holding a scythe at his side, sharp and gleaming. I wanted to look away, but my eyes wouldn’t obey me. I wanted to cry out, but my vocal cords went on strike. I could only tremble from top to toe in fear. I didn’t want to die!

Because I couldn’t move, my heart moved for me. It beat so fast, it felt like it was trying to run away. Unfortunately, it soon got short of breath. It slowed, and the air felt thin. I felt more tired than I’d ever felt before. Tired of life. Deathly tired. I sank deep into my pillows. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

I don’t know what would have happened, had Tobi not come at that moment. Suddenly, he was there, and I felt his hands on mine.

‘Samuel! Don’t die! Do you hear me? DON’T DIE!’

Tobi was crying: I could hear it in his voice. I would have liked to cry with him, but fear had taken away any strength I might have had for crying. I struggled for air. It was so hard to breathe.

Suddenly, I could feel something cool and metallic under my fingers. I knew instantly what it was: a carabiner. My carabiner.

‘You promised!’ sobbed Tobi beside me. And perhaps because you should always keep a promise, or perhaps because my heart was so surprised to see Tobi crying, it leapt into action again, and breathing became a little easier. And Death disappeared.

I fell asleep, and recovered from the pneumonia, for which I was awarded my seventh “survival” medal. I thought I’d made it through the worst day of my life. I couldn’t have been more wrong. A few weeks later, Tobi failed to achieve his sixth “survival” medal.

Now I have two carabiners: my green one, and Tobi’s red one. And a promise I have to keep.

‘You might make new friends at school,’ says Rudi. It takes me a moment to realise where I am. I don’t often think about Tobi – that is, I try not to think about him often. Sadly, that’s more difficult than you might think.

I look at Rudi, puzzled. New friends? Oh yes! I see. Not needed. But to stop Rudi accusing me of being antisocial again, I point to the window and say, ‘I’ve got Frank.’ Frank is the little harvestman spider who lives up in the corner. Lisbeth wanted to Hoover him up, but I stopped her. Frank is totally harmless.

‘That’s not a friend, it’s a spider,’ Rudi says.

‘That’s discrimination!’ I say.

Rudi rolls his eyes. ‘Sammy, you can’t live like this,’ he says – again. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve had to listen to that phrase. But for the sake of completeness, I give him the usual reply:

‘How I live is my own business.’

Rudi sighs. Me too. We’re going in circles. For months, we’ve been like two soldiers sizing one another up, looking for the opponent’s weak spot and trying to get a clear shot. Never with any success. No-one has won this game yet.

‘Oh, do leave him in peace now!’

Lisbeth is trying to put an end to the battle, at least for today. But Rudi isn’t finished yet.

‘Samuel is letting his whole life slip by,’ he says, shaking his head.

‘At least he has a life!’ replies Lisbeth.

Rudi gives Lisbeth a look that clearly says she’s lost the plot. He’s found a new adversary.

‘What about you? What are you doing? You just stand by and watch and let your own life slip by alongside his!’

Lisbeth glances sideways at me and hisses, ‘Not now!’

She leaves the room, with Rudi close on her heels. ‘No? When then?’ he shouts after her. ‘It’ll be too late when we’re dead...’

BANG...I slam the door after Rudi.

‘Samuel! Time to go!’ My bedroom door flies open and there stands Rudi. It’s not time for me to go anywhere, so I stay in my chair. Rudi and Lisbeth have secretly phoned Mrs Lind. I’d have expected that of Rudi, but Lisbeth? At breakfast this morning, they owned up to making an appointment with her for today. Classic ambush tactics, but it won’t work with me.

‘Darling, it’s just a trial appointment. For you to think about whether it’s something for you.’ Lisbeth puts on her most winning smile. Normally, I can never say no to a smile like that, but not today. Traitor!

Bottom line: there is nothing to think about! Mrs Lind and her self-help group can go take a hike.

‘A bunch of sick kids all together in one room. I’m not that tired of living!’

‘Samuel! We’re going now!’ Rudi tries laying down the law. Good luck with that. I’m staying here. What can he do? Put me under house arrest? Haha.

But I don’t want to be like that, so I make a conciliatory suggestion. ‘If you must insist I have friends, buy me a robot! At least they’re hygienic.’

Rudi gives me an evil look. The man is truly incapable of compromise.

‘Samuel!’ that was his strictest tone of voice.

‘Maybe we should leave it for now, Rudi,’ Lisbeth mutters.

‘Let go of me!’ I shriek. Rudi is carrying me out of the room. Or trying to. My hands are clamped around the door frame.

‘Put him down right now!’ Lisbeth has finally remembered whose side she’s on.

‘There is no way I’m just going to stand by and watch Samuel festering in here!’ replies Rudi as he pulls even harder at me. My fingers are gradually slipping.

‘Force is not a solution!’ cries Lisbeth.

‘Nor is staying in here,’ responds Rudi, dragging me into the hall. My fingers have failed. So has Lisbeth. Has she not figured out she’ll get nowhere with Rudi using words? I worked that out a long time ago. I scream and stamp as loud and hard as I can. But Rudi won’t let go. Finally, the penny drops and Lisbeth wades in, grabbing me by the arms and pulling me out of Rudi’s grip. But he’s still got my legs held fast. I hang like a tug-of-war rope between them. They’re glaring daggers at one another, and neither will give in. I’m not having this – time to put my foot down, so to speak.

‘You’re hurting me!’ I scream. Not true, but it achieves the desired result. Rudi and Lisbeth let go. Together. I manage to catch my balance, narrowly avoiding crashing to the floor. Wondering which one of us actually needs the psychologist, I dart back into my room.

‘It can’t go on like this,’ I hear Rudi’s voice in the hallway. As I slam my door closed, I have to agree.

Chapter 3: Frida

Lisbeth comes in to say good night. I guess Rudi doesn’t dare. Fine by me, I’m still mad at him. I scrub the cloth as hard as I can over my desk. Twenty times back and forth. It feels good. There is nothing more relaxing than cleaning. My parlour palm looks a bit droopy. I wipe its leaves. Lisbeth places a hand on my shoulder.

‘Samuel?’

I continue cleaning.

‘Rudi meant well.’

I turn to the window. You can scrub glass harder than you can a houseplant.

Lisbeth sighs and gives me a goodnight kiss. I wipe it away. Lisbeth sighs again. ‘Don’t be too long, okay?’

We both know this will take a while yet. Lisbeth leaves.

No! No! No! I’ve caught Frank with my antibacterial spray. He’s fallen out of his web and is lying on the windowsill, twitching. That’s Rudi’s fault!

I try turning Frank over gently with my finger. No luck. Maybe he just needs to dry out? I blow on him softly. No, that doesn’t help either. On the contrary – now he’s not moving at all. What should I do? I have no clue about first aid for spiders.

Suddenly, something flashes beside me. A scythe swings through the air, and cuts Frank in half! I stare at the little harvestman, with all his legs stretched out. He still appears to be whole, but ... I touch him with my fingertip. No reaction. Tears well up in my eyes. Can it be true? Frank is ... dead.

‘That was fun!’ says a cheerful voice behind me. I turn, and freeze. Standing in front of me is a figure wrapped in a black robe, and holding a scythe. A thousand thoughts race through my head, but I can’t get a grip on any of them. My brain is in freefall, and all I can do is stand and stare. The small figure does the same. Finally, one thought pauses long enough to lodge in my brain: I’ve seen a figure like this somewhere before ... but where?

No, that’s not possible! It was just a dream. To be precise, a nightmare. I don’t manage to progress any further in my thoughts, as the scythe slips out of the figure’s hand and whistles past my ear. I hear an ‘Oops!’, then the world goes black.

The good thing about fainting is that you wake up totally relaxed. The bad thing is: the relaxation instantly disappears when you remember why you fainted. When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is the scythe held sideways right in front of my nose, and the fine mist of my breath on the blade.

‘He’s alive,’ the little figure observes, and I can’t quite tell whether it’s disappointed.

Yes, I’m alive. Just. As long as my heart doesn’t leap straight out of my chest. The last time I was this scared was when ...

Oh, the figure has noticed I’m awake. It’s looking me in the eye. I stare back. We’ve been here before. I try to say something, but my voice sticks in my throat. The figure, on the other hand, seems to have had an idea. In one swift movement, it jerks its robe off, and out steps – a girl.

‘Hello!’ she smiles.

My brain has lost its grip on reality. My thoughts are racing around in circles like a headless chicken. ‘This can’t be real! It’s impossible!’ my brain announces.

Since my neural circuits are clearly out of action, the emergency protocols kick in and fire up the primal instincts. Their order is delivered: Flight! I finally unfreeze, leap up, and flee to the farthest corner of my room. The girl watches me, but doesn’t follow. She stares at her hands and arms in fascination, as though she’s never seen them before. She runs her hands down her legs, bends over to touch her feet, pulls at her toes, then stands up straight again. She lifts her T-shirt with its huge skull motif and pokes her bellybutton. She laughs. Well, I may not be quite playing with the full deck, but she is definitely several cards short!

Oh! Oh! I think this girl can read thoughts. She’s reaching for her scythe. But – phew – she’s only using it as a mirror. She gazes at her reflection in the blade, stares deep into her eyes, inspects her nostrils, squints into her mouth, then runs her fingers through her hair. Finally, she comes to a conclusion.

‘Wow! I look great!’

And with that, the inspection appears to be at an end, as the girl puts her scythe away and turns back to me. My primal instincts take the wheel again, and I do what I should have done several long minutes ago: ‘L I S B E T H!’ I shout at the top of my voice. Within seconds, Lisbeth bursts into the room, and with complete disregard for disinfection protocols – sometimes, there are more important priorities – I throw myself into her arms.

‘Lisbeth, we have to get to the hospital! I’m having hallucinations!’ I splutter, pointing to the reaper girl, who has slipped back into her robe.

‘I can’t see anything,’ says Lisbeth.

‘Exactly, I’m hallucinating! Something’s wrong. We have to hurry!’ I insist, rushing to my wardrobe to fetch my protection suit.

‘We’re not going anywhere. You’re absolutely fine!’ a voice rumbles across the room. Rudi is standing in the doorway.

I shoot him a furious look. ‘How would you know?’

Rudi doesn’t respond. Instead, he looks at Lisbeth. ‘You know what Mrs Lind said. We shouldn’t encourage him.’

I can see Lisbeth struggling. She turns to me. ‘Go to bed, darling. Get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow the world will look different.’

‘But it looks different already!’ Aren’t they listening? I try to put my suit on, but Rudi hangs it back in the wardrobe. Before I can object, Lisbeth presses my pyjamas into my hand.

‘Come on now,’ she says with a loving smile. What kind of love is this?

‘If I wake up dead in the morning, it’ll be your fault!’ I hurl the accusation at them, and accompany it with the fiercest look I can muster. Behind them, the small figure swings its scythe. Goosebumps creep the length of my body as a tear rolls down Lisbeth’s cheek. I feel guilty about that, but neither of them appears to appreciate the gravity of the situation.

Rudi takes Lisbeth’s arm and leads her out of my room. I’ve never seen such a look of disappointment on his face. He closes the door and I’m alone again. Alone with the reaper girl.

‘Hello, me again!’ chirps the girl, throwing off her robe. She’s changed, and is now wearing pyjamas – in neon yellow. She points to my pyjamas, which are still in my hands.

‘Mine are prettier than yours.’

I look at my pyjamas. Grey with blue stripes. I toss them into the nearest corner. I don’t care!

The girl grins and takes a step towards me. ‘At last! Now we’ve got time to get to know one another in peace.’

I stumble back; I don’t want to get to know her at all, thank you very much. I want her to disappear. I rush over to my bookcase, where I keep my medical dictionary. Murmuring ‘you’re not real, you’re not real,’ in an attempt to nudge my brain back on track, I open the book.

‘I’m just as real as you,’ says the girl, snapping her scythe closed and stowing it in her robe.

I shake my head and think *impossible!* I flip the pages feverishly. Where is the chapter on brain disorders?

‘It must be a tumour, or at least an aneurysm,’ I think out loud.

‘What’s an an-your-is-um?’ the girl wants to know.

I ignore her.

BANG! She slams my book shut. ‘See? I’m real,’ she grins.

I shake my head again, *No! No! No!* and reopen the book.

‘I’m Death, Junior, but you can call me Frida,’ she continues.

I stop leafing through pages. What did she just say? Frida? Death Junior? It feels like I have an entire glacier pouring down my back, I’m so cold. Death Junior ... Death Junior ... Suddenly a thought takes hold: Death Junior ... like Death Senior? THE Death? From my dream?

‘Talking’s not your strong point, is it?’ asks Frida.

I open my mouth, but no words come out. I can’t get my head round it. It was all just a dream! A dream!

Frida sighs. ‘Death Senior said this can happen. Some people scream, others are just left dumbstruck. No probs! Maybe it’s better you listen first.’ She rummages in her robe and pulls out a notebook. ‘Death Senior said I have to do this by the book, so I wrote it down.’ She leafs through the book until she finds the right page. ‘Are you paying attention?’ A stern gaze pins me.

Right now, I’m busy wondering whether I bumped my head in the scuffle with Rudi today. A head injury would explain everything. I run my fingertips gently over my head, but I can’t

find any bump. Nothing. An epileptic fit would be a possibility ... I might not remember it if I’m suffering from amnesia too ...

‘I’m Death Junior,’ Frida reads from her notebook.

OK, she said that already. At least my short-term memory is still functioning.

‘And I’m here so that you can show me life. I want to be Death Senior one day, so I have to know. When I’m wearing my robe, you’re the only person who can see me. Only when I appear as a human can anyone else see me.’ Frida snaps her book shut. ‘Got it?’

She gives me an enquiring look. What am I supposed to do? Nod? Definitely not! I don’t want to ‘get it’, not one little bit.

‘Would you like me to go over it again?’ she asks.

Anything but that! ‘I’d rather you left!’ I splutter.

‘Nope, no can do. I’ve been assigned to you,’ says Frida.

Pardon? Assigned? What? ‘By whom?’

‘By Death Senior,’ she replies, and suddenly I can see a dark shadow against the wall. A shadow that looks just like Frida, with a robe and a scythe, only much, much taller. I’ve seen that shadow before, in my dream – which perhaps wasn’t a dream?

OK, OK, don’t panic! The most important thing to remember in a crisis is to remain calm. Only then can logic prevail. I begin breathing deeply. In and out. In! And out! Frida watches my breathing exercises and copies them, puffing each out breath into my face. Eeeuurgh! I turn around and close my eyes. Once my brain is functioning clearly, there will be no Frida in the room, I’m quite certain. She’s nothing but a figment of my imagination, pure fantasy. Frank’s death has clearly left me traumatised.

I continue with my deep breathing; I can already feel my pounding heart beginning to calm down. I open my eyes and turn around. Frida is grinning right in my face. Ignore her! Maintain concentration! Continue the breathing exercises! In! Out! In! Out! I focus all my concentration on my breathing, until my heartbeat returns to normal. I turn around. As I thought: no more Frida to be seen.

No! She’s just moved to a different spot. Now she’s sitting on my bed cuddling my teddy. To be more precise: she’s power-cuddling. She’s rubbing my teddy all over her face.

‘It’s so soft!’ she sighs. Then she does something totally revolting – she licks the teddy.

‘Stop that!’ I shout, but she carries on regardless.

‘I want to know what it tastes like.’

‘Why? Nobody eats cuddly toys!’ Does she really need this explained to her?

Frida puts the teddy down, and scrapes the fluff from her tongue. ‘I’m not surprised! It doesn’t taste very nice,’ she says, pulling out her notebook and scribbling in it while I pinch the teddy between finger and thumb and carry it to the laundry basket. He’s now in urgent need of a 90-degree wash.

I can’t let Frida out of my sight for a second. Now she’s got my lip salve in her hand, and she’s taking a good sniff at it.

‘Hands off!’

Frida shakes her head and bites into it.

‘Why are you doing this?!’

She spits the salve out. ‘So that I learn what it’s like to be human.’

Mission

I have no idea why I need to know, but Death Senior insists it’s part of my training. Fine. It’s quite interesting to have a human body: to breathe, to touch, to smell, to taste, to jump up and down...There’s so much to do when you’re human!

Actually, I could skip the whole being human bit – I’d rather move straight on to taking my exam. I’m looking forward to that so much!!! If I could, I’d make short work of Samuel – shove him out of the window, for example. Bish bash bosh, job done! But I’m not allowed. We only do the collecting, not the killing, Death Senior said. So I have to wait until Samuel’s time comes. I thought it had already come, that last time, but it turned out not. Pity.

Samuel’s escaped Death Senior several times before now. That won’t happen to me! I’m going to collect him, and that’ll prove I can be Death Senior one day...