

My life as a Pencil

(Original title in the Italian: Storia di una Matita)

By Michele D'Ignazio / Rizzoli

Translated by Denise Muir ©

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION

1

Lapo had been living in the tiny flat on the top floor of the apartment building for a week now. That night, like almost every other night, the phone rang.

“So, how are things?” the voice he knew so well asked.

“Well, I’ve had four interviews this week already. I didn’t get the first one but I’m hopeful about the rest. I’ve got another one tomorrow!” Lapo said. “It’s with one of the biggest firms in town. You should see how amazing it is inside, the walls are covered in paintings and posters and drawings... and the tables go on for ever. Everyone inside busy sketching, heads down looking at their drawing pads.” “What was that?”

“Mum, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you. I just didn’t get the last bit — they were all busy lecturing?”

“Well, I suppose the more experienced ones try to help out the younger ones...”

“And what’s the town like? Have you made any friends?”

“No, Mum, I’ve only been here for three weeks. It takes time you know...”

“What about girls? Have you found a girlfriend?”

“Mum! What kind of question is that? I’ve just told you I don’t know anyone. Apart from the woman across the landing. She’s nice, about your age, always says hello, stops to chat about this and that. But she has this dog that never stops barking. I can’t stand it. You can hear it in my room. And then there’s, ehm, the doorman, the guy on the newspaper stand, the cashiers at the supermarket... they all seem really nice, but it’s not that we ever speak, just a quick hello-goodbye.”

“What’s the weather like?”

“It’s freezing!”

“Okay then, I think I’ll say goodnight. And listen, don’t you be obsessing about that illustrator business, see if there are any other jobs. What I mean is, have a look around, there might be other opportunities. You could even go into teaching, apply to a school.”

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“Let’s not go over this again. I like inventing worlds, filling them with characters. With my pencil. I can’t change the way I am – I like drawing! I’ve loved it since I was a kid. See what you’ve done? We’re having the same argument again.”

Lapo coughed.

“I’ll make it one of these days.”

“Oh, off to bed with you,” Lapo’s mum said, “and cover up, I don’t want you catching cold!”

Lapo said goodbye to his mum, hung up and trundled happily off to bed. Oblivious to what awaited him the next day.

2

At the first light of dawn, Lapo opened his eyes and let out a big, long yawn. The neighbour’s dog had already started barking. He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes then snuggled back under the covers. He felt safe there. More importantly, he couldn’t hear the poodle’s skittish, insecure yapping.

“Oh, feed the daft thing and calm him down,” Lapo grumbled, still half asleep.

The cold outside was hampering the city’s movements and it was taking its time to wake up. Lapo could have stayed in bed another hour at least, if only the poodle would let him. He buried his face in his pillow but could still hear the barking. Stretching an arm out, he picked up two pencils up from his desk and stuck them in his ears, then rolled onto his back and shut his eyes. Miraculously, he managed to fall back asleep but at eight o’clock, as if to spite him, the phone rang.

One, two, three, four, five rings, then it fell silent. Two more yawns. Then it rang again. Drring-drring, four times.

“Who can it be?” Lapo muttered, yanking the two pencils out of his ears.

Curled up under the covers, his index finger made its way into his nose and started burrowing.

“Ah! If only it was pointed,” he thought, twisting his finger right and left.

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He struggled to dislodge the yuck that builds up during the night, when you're asleep and you've got a cold. And he had a cold, a stinking one.

"Jeez," he said in a thick voice, remembering what his mum had said on the phone the night before, "Cover up, don't go catching a cold!"

He didn't feel like getting up. All he wanted to do was lie there looking up at the nice ceiling. Which wasn't actually that great, just white all over with a few cracks. Drifting contentedly in and out of sleep, he would've done anything to get a few more minutes to go back to his dreams. Dreams of being a famous illustrator, the kind whose name is on the front cover of important magazines, or who illustrates the books of great novelists, who makes up comic strips, who

Drrring..drring...drring...

Lapo sprang up, bumped his knee on the corner of the bed, banged his elbow on the desk, which made it wobble and knocked all his drawings off. The pencils flew into the air, too, making the room look like a minefield. The chair rocked left and right then toppled over. *Boom!*

Drrring..drring...drring...

"Hello, who's dat?"

"Mr. Lupo?"

"The name's Lapo," Lupo replied, grabbing a tissue and blowing his nose.

ffffpprrrrththththththt

"Hello? Hello? Is there anyone there? What's happening?"

"No, it's nothing, I just blew my nose, that's all.

"Ah, okay, well, I was saying ..."

"Who is this?"

"I'm ringing from HB graphic studio."

"Ah!" Lapo gave a start and crossed his fingers.

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“It’s about your interview the other day. We’ve had a good look at your drawings. They’re good, but unfortunately we don’t need any more illustrators at the moment. I’m sorry, we’ll keep your name, number and drawings on file so if we ever need anything, we’ll be back in touch.”

Lapo replaced the phone and crumpled down until he was sitting on the floor among the pencils and sheets of paper with his sketches, spread across the wooden floor.

His nose was blocked and it was difficult to breath.

Drrring..drring...drring...

He pulled himself back up, walked over his pencils, jaggng his feet in the process and snapping some of the leads.

“Hello!”

“Mr. Lapis?”

“The name’s Lapo.”

“Hello, I’m calling from the Matisse Graphic Studio. We’d like to thank you for getting in touch, but...”

Lapo stopped listening. He knew the spiel so he hung up and sat back down on his drawings, cross-legged like an indigenous American, gazing at the heap of pencils below him.

He thought back to all the jobs he’d had. There hadn’t been that many, to be honest. He’d worked for a firm that sold gates and a few months after that, as a shop assistant in a stationery shop, selling office equipment.

He thought about his dreams, the ones he’d just sat on. His pencils were supporting him but they were jaggng him a little, too.

Even though he was feeling a bit frazzled, he still dreamt of making his mark; it was the thing he cared about the most.

The phone rang again.

Drrring..drring...drring...

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This time Lapo quickly blew his nose, cleared his throat and answered, breezily, “Good morning, Lapo design studio...”

“Helloooooo?”

“Mum! Is that you?”

“Yes, of course it is, don’t you recognize me? What’s this about a design studio? Are you still playing at games even at thirty?”

“Why did you phone?” Lapo asked in a faint voice.

“I wanted to remind you that your identity card runs out today, so don’t forget to renew it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mum, I understand,” he replied, spirits sinking as he put the phone down.

In his pyjamas and slippers, he began to pick up the pencils, one by one, then played his usual round of Shanghai which, with great patience and skill, he won, before he put all the pencils back in a giant mug.

His left pinkie finger wiggled its way into his right nostril this time. Little fingers were better suited to this kind of work. He turned it this way and that, poked and prodded, then suddenly got a whiff of something—the smell of his pencils.

“Oh, wow!” he exclaimed.

His face lit up with a flicker of satisfaction. He loved the smell of wood and graphite together. Not only that, he’d managed to smell it now, too. The incredible digging finger had burrowed through to his respiratory tract and Lapo, on the other side, could smell things again.

He felt happy, for now.

But he wasn’t finished yet so kept twisting his pinkie finger in his nose.

Drrring..drring...drring...

“What’s the deal this morning?!”

He’d had enough of phone calls for now, so let it ring and kept digging.

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The smell of pencil was back again. It made him happy. It always did. He extracted his pinkie finger, stood up and went off to make a cup of coffee.

The aroma that hit him when the coffee started bubbling through was intense. He poured it while it was still hot.

It was only when he brought the cup to his lips that he noticed something strange—and gaped.

There was no need to look again. He'd seen all he had to. The nicely-sharpened tip, the yellow coating, the hexagonal shape. It was a beautiful pencil. The only problem was, it was where his pinkie finger should've been.

"I must be losing it!"

He dashed into the bathroom to get the thermometer to take his temperature. It measured a healthy 36.8°C.

"I'm not feverish, then. It must be the cold cures, because I really am hallucinating. No, come to think of it, I haven't actually taken anything. So, what's going on?"

His head started to spin at that point and he crumpled to the bathroom floor.

3

He lay still as a pet dog for several minutes.

When he came around, he jumped to his feet and bumped his head.

He rinsed his face and looked in the mirror.

His face was pasty, his eyes were sunken, his nose and ears were red and his hair ruffled.

He brought his hands up to his eyes.

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“This can’t be right...” he thought, peering at them.

“Right, just stay calm, ring the doctor, but no, what will I say? Call an ambulance instead. No, it’s not that serious. And even if it’s really happening, where’s the problem? I won’t have to trim my nails anymore, just sharpen them instead. That’s what my life will be like - sharp. After all, you sharpen a pencil so you can draw with it, so sharpening your life is just the same. Oh, what am I waffling on about?”

Grappling for the thermometer, he stuck it under his arm, waited a few minutes then looked at the mercury.

“37.5. That’s it, I’ve got a fever!”

Relief flooded through him. He felt almost happy.

“It all makes sense now. I’m hallucinating, I’m seeing things that don’t exist. The fever’s doing it. It’s making me talk nonsense, utter nonsense. All because of the fever!”

He tried to calm down and look sensibly at his hands — but all he could see were ten sharpened pencils, one for each finger.

Thinking he should probably check, he kicked off his slippers and took off his socks.

“I don’t feel very well ...” he mumbled before passing out and falling down on the bathroom floor again.

There were twenty pencils now.

By the end of the day, the transformation was complete.

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Lapo was a big pointed HB pencil, with two smaller pencils as arms. He no longer had legs and had to jump to get anywhere. Where his face used to be, he now had a big lead tip that looked like a plume.

It was all quite bizarre. Twiddling his three tips as he looked at himself in the mirror, he said, "How can I see if I don't have eyes anymore? And how can I smell if I don't have a nose?"

He had no answers to these questions and no friends to ask for advice. He couldn't call his mum, she'd only worry. The hospital wasn't an option because he'd always been afraid of hospitals.

For several minutes, he stood, bolt-upright in front of the mirror, thinking hard and trying to stay calm.

There was no way he could leave the house, not looking like this. He had to do something.

He thought about sharpening the end of the pencil, where his feet had recently been. That would make it easier to move around, he could slide, like a pencil across paper.

He needed a pencil sharpener. A big one. He switched on the computer with his right tip and, a bit awkwardly, typed in "giant pencil sharpener."

"Found it," he cried, and stopped worrying about how he could speak if he didn't have a mouth.

"So, diameter 20cm, blade 28cm. That should work. Great, I'm ordering it!"

There's nothing you can't find on the internet.

A few hours later, the postie left the parcel with the enormous pencil sharpener outside on the landing. A quick sharpening later, and Lapo had a fourth tip instead of feet and could slither across the floor. In so doing, he realized he was leaving marks everywhere he went and on everything he touched. The computer keyboard was full of scribble marks and the floor covered in squiggles. But he had other things on his mind and would have to clean up later. Although he had no idea how. Never mind, he'd find a way.

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He could see, hear and smell. It was a miracle. His cold had gone so maybe there was something good about being a pencil, after all.

“That’s it! Maybe pencils don’t get sick and can’t get colds.”

But that didn’t change that his head was still a giant lead tip. He couldn’t let his neighbour see him like this. He needed a face with two eyes, two ears, a mouth, two cheeks and two eyebrows, too.

On one of the enormous sheets of paper he used for his sketches, he drew a face with a bit of a scowl.

5

Just a day after he turned into a pencil, Lapo ventured out of the building and through the streets of the town. So, he wouldn’t attract too much attention, before he left the house he pulled on a big, baggy t-shirt.

Out in the street, the first thing he encountered was the newspaper stand. Feigning indifference, Lapo greeted the newsagent who smiled politely at first but, on looking a bit closer, said, “You’re a bit pale this morning. Are you feeling under the weather?”

Lapo slithered off without replying.

He bumped into his neighbour at the corner.

“Good morning! How are you! Is that a new hairstyle?” she enquired.

Lapo swivelled around and, in seconds, had managed to shake off the woman and the poodle, who immediately started barking as Lapo fled.

He had to get home, his first outing had been pretty much a disaster.

As he scooted past the florist, she looked at him and smiled as she arranged tulips in a vase full of water.

For a second, Lapo felt an overwhelming sense of relief and joy.

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But that's as long as it lasted, a second. Right away, Lapo realized he had a problem. A big one—he couldn't smile back.

What's more, at that precise moment, his tip got stuck in a drain cover and snapped.

"Ouch!" he yelled, although his expression never changed. The pain was so bad he felt like crying, but no tears spilled forth from the wood.

He skipped home and sharpened his lower tip then, when done, took some A4 sheets of paper out of his desk drawer and started to draw faces.

He needed more faces, one for when he was happy, one for when he was sad, one for when he was bored, one for when he cried, one for when he was having fun, one for when he was in love. Not to mention a face like thunder because sometimes you need that, too. He drew innumerable faces, more than a hundred, but still felt that they weren't enough.

6

Man or pencil, Lapo still needed to look for a job. And hopefully find one, too.

Turning into a pencil meant he had missed the interview with the important graphic studio. Slightly embarrassed, he rang to request a new appointment and, luckily, they gave him a second chance.

"Tomorrow morning at 10am. But don't be late!" a female voice said.

"Oh, of course, I just had a minor... ehm, hiccup, but not to worry, I'll be there tomorrow."

Without hanging around, he started to get ready. First, he sharpened his pencil fingers, which was becoming as customary as brushing his teeth; next, he sharpened the tip on his head with the same ease as when he ran a comb through his hair.