

Cats and Rats

The dialogue takes place on a Skype call, between an American man and a Norwegian woman, both in their 40s.

M: Hello. I just wanted to call because, um, I really liked your profile.

W: Takk for det. (Thanks for that.)

M: It's ah, really nice. And you look fabulous. I know with the distance that it would, hmm, be difficult probably for us to really date, but you never know.

W: Det er mulig. Jeg er ikke gift. Og jeg liker eksotiske mennesker. (It is possible. I'm not married. And I like exotic people.)

M: That's nice. That's really nice. I've never dated a blond. That picture in your ad is you, isn't it?

W: Ja, selvfølgelig. (Yes of course). Should we do this in English?

M: I like the music of your voice in Norwegian.

W: Jeg kan snakke norsk eller engelsk. (I can speak Norwegian or English). It is up to you.

M: No, no please, Norwegian. I can understand some Norwegian. My grandmother used to speak it in the kitchen. I know a few phrases. Uff-da!

W: Din familie er norsk? (Your family is Norwegian?)

M: My grandmother, on my father's side. Also Danish. And my mother's line, that's a bit unclear, they came from Appalachia. Probably Irish. Maybe Scotch. Is it Scotch, or Scottish? I'm never really sure.

W: Det regner i Bergen nå. (It's raining now in Bergen.)

M: I'm not sure why my Grandmother only spoke Norwegian in the kitchen. Maybe it's because Grandpa was a Dane. I don't know. She used to make these amazing buns. She called them "Ballet." Is that the Norwegian word? Ballet?

W: Skillingsboller. (Cinammon buns).

M: These were like, the tastiest cinammon buns you have ever had. The smell was so comforting. She was amazing. She would mutter things in Norwegian the whole time she was cooking them. That's where I picked it up. The Norwegian.

W: Du er så flink til å forstå norsk. (You are so clever to understand Norwegian).

M: Do you mind if I tell you that when you speak Norwegian, your voice is incredibly sexy? You remind me of one of those Bergman heroines.

W: Nei, det er greit med meg. (No that's ok with me.)

M: This is amazing. I can't wait to video Skype with you, once we get past this first talk.

W: Det er mulig. Kanskje det er mulig. (It is possible. Maybe it is possible.)

M: Maybe I can even get over there, to the motherland. Do you call it that? The motherland?

W: Nei, egentlig ikke. (No not really.)

M: Whatever, I'd love to see your fjords. And ride in them, in a boat.

W: Det er kanskje mulig. (That may be possible).

M: They look amazing, and your profile picture too.

W: Fjordene er vakre. (The fjords are beautiful).

M: Yes, I find you beautiful, very beautiful. I suppose I should tell you about myself.

W: Du kan like godt fortelle meg. (You might as well tell me).

M: I work in a laboratory. I'm an epidemiologist. Do you know what that is?

W: Du er en lege som jobber med døde mennesker? (You are a doctor who works with dead people).

M: Dead? No, no, I'm not a pathologist.

W: Som en rettsmedisiner på CSI? Skjære du folk opp? (Like a coroner on CSI? Do you carve people up?)

M: I study diseases. I mean, of course I do some dissections. Mostly rats.

W: Jeg hater rotter. (I hate rats)

M: I don't mind rats so much. I feel sort of bad for them. I mean I give them diseases on purpose, but I'm a scientist, you know?

W: Jeg forstår. (I understand)

M: One need be somewhat detached. And careful. We deal with virulent strains in our lab, the type of thing that could wipe a city or worse. You have heard of necrotizing fasciitis, the disease that eats human flesh?

W: Er du en kannibal? (Are you a cannibal?)

M: I have done some work with that. Nasty stuff. But don't worry. I always wash my hands when I leave the lab.

W: Jeg håper det. (I would hope so.)

M: I am extremely hygienic. Do you know if your family line extends to the Vikings?

W: Det er mulig. (It is possible.)

M: I hear that when they raided cities the Vikings would carry off the most beautiful women, along with the loot. They say that is why so many Scandinavian women are so beautiful. Looking at your photo, I can believe that.

W: Ikke smigre meg. (Don't flatter me.)

M: I'm sorry sometimes I go on. Maybe I spend too much time alone with the rats. But a rat can tell you a lot about a disease.

W: Jeg er ikke sikker på min families genetiske historie. (I am not certain of my family's genetic history.)

M: Diseases have always been important, I think. I think it is important work in the grand scheme of things.

W: Noen av mine forfedre kan ha vært hekser. (Some of my ancestors may have been witches).

M: Brain surgeons and cardiologists, people understand better what they do. They drive fancy cars and save lives and so on but I think the real heroes are in the lab. It's, you know, unglamorous work but battling Swine Flu or Bird Flu or Cholera, it's really important. I might not cut out any tumors, but I may save thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives. Even if I do spend all day killing rats in a basement, counting dead rats.

W: Hvorfor er så mange sykdommer oppkalt etter dyr? (Why are so many diseases named after animals?)

M: Deer? I beg your pardon?

W: All these diseases, why are they named after animals?

M: Well there is a close connection between animals and diseases. Sometimes we name a disease after the symptoms the animal displays. Hoof and mouth disease, for instance. Sometimes the disease shows up first in the animals. Like the Avian influenza, or H1N1. Other times they are just carriers.

W: Som rotter.

M: Yes. Rats are the classic example. Both the black rat, *rattus rattus*, and the brown rat, also known as the Norway rat, incidentally, can carry pathogens in their blood.

W: Norsk rotte? (Norwegian rat?)

M: They are astonishingly resilient creatures. A lot of people think the Norwegian rat carried the bubonic plague.

W: Men de var engelske rotter, ikke sant? (But they were English rats, isn't that right?)

M: Right, it probably wasn't the Norwegian rat. Probably black rats. *Rattus rattus*. Actually most likely fleas. Fleas on black rats' backs.

W: Jeg har lest om pesten. Det herjet Norge. Den forlot en hel sivilisasjon i ruiner. (I have read of the plague. It devastated Norway. It left an entire civilization in ruins.)

M: I don't mean to go on about disease. I just spend so much time thinking about it. Disease is my bread and butter.

W: Jeg hadde mareritt om pesten da jeg var liten. (I had nightmares about the plague when I was little.)

M: People don't think it could happen again, but it can. To be honest with you, I think it probably will. We are due for another epidemic. We got lucky with the Swine Flu in '09.

W: I marerittet mitt, var det en båt, uten mannskap, bare døde menn, og rotter. Hundrevis og hundrevis av rotter. Tusenvis av rotter. (In my nightmare, there was a boat, with no crew, just dead men, and rats. Hundreds and hundreds of rats. Thousands of rats.)

M: Are you upset? I didn't mean to upset you. It's not the end of the world. Not yet.

W: Båten driver sakte inn i havnen, og rottene fosser ut av skipet. Svarte rotter med røde øyne og skarpe tenner. (The boat drifts slowly into the harbor, and the rats come spilling off the sides of the ship. Black rats with red eyes and sharp teeth.)

M: Don't be upset.

W: Den sultne rottene farer avsted over hele byen og de biter ungene. Sykdommen sprer seg raskt. De syke er forlatt i gatene. Byen lukter faelt, av brennende kropper. Barn forlater sine foreldre. Foreldre forlater sine barn. (The hungry rats scamper all over town, biting children. The disease spreads quickly. The sick are abandoned in the streets. The town smells foul, of burning bodies. Children abandon their parents. Parents abandon their children.)

M: Maybe we should talk about something else.

W: Halvparten, mer enn halvparten, av befolkningen lå døde, forlatt. Det er bare stønn, gråt, klage. Det er ingen håp. Og så er det stillhet i det tomme havnen. (Half, more than half, of the population lay dead, abandoned. There is only moaning, weeping, lamentation. There is no hope. And then there is silence in the empty harbor.)

M: It sounds very sad.

W: Det var mitt mareritt. Den verste delen av min barndom. (It was my nightmare. The worst part of my childhood.)

M: I meant to ask you about one tiny thing on your profile.

W: Hva er det?

M: It says you have an animal, a pet.

W: Jeg har katter.

M: You have a cat?

W: Jeg har mange katter. Ni katter. Jeg elsker katter. (I have many cats. Nine cats. I love cats.)

M: Oh no.

W: Hva? Hva er det? (What? What is it?)

M: I'm allergic to cats.

W: Er du sikker på at den ikke er psykologisk, denne allergien? (Are you sure it isn't psychological, this allergy?)

M: No it's real. It's a real allergy. I sneeze and I break out and everything.

W: Beklager. (I'm sorry.)

M: Can I ask you something, hypothetically?

W: Det kan du. (You can.)

M: Let's say you met someone, someone special, and you fell for him, really felt attracted to him, head over heels. And let's say that someone asked you to get rid of the cats. Would you? For love?

W: Drepe kattene? (Kill the cats?)

M: Not necessarily kill them, just get rid of them. I can't imagine the smell you must live with.

W: Det ville aldri falle meg inn. Tanken gjør meg syk. Hva slags menneske er du? (I would never think of it. The idea makes me sick. What kind of man are you?)

M: I'm sorry.

W: Du snakker om pesten. Pesten. Vet du hva som egentlig forårsaket pesten? Det var heksejakt som forårsaket pesten. De sa at kvinner med katter var hekser. Og de brente dem. Og de drepte katter. (You speak of the plague. The plague. Do you know

what really caused the plague? It was witch hunts that caused the plague. They said that women with cats were witches. And they burned them. And they killed the cats.)

M: You don't need to get offended.

W: Katter dreper rotter. Mine katter dreper rotter. De er bra katter. (Cats kill rats. My cats kill rats. They are good cats.)

M: I'm sorry. I like you so much, you know, and it was going so well.

W: Ikke så veldig bra. (Not so very well.)

M: I just don't want to get old and die alone, that's all, and I thought maybe there was a spark.

W: Vi dør alle alene. (We all die alone.)

M: I guess we do. Well, thanks for taking my call.

W: Ikke ring opp igjen. (Don't call back.)

M: Goodbye.