



inspire
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HUPE

in the

Story

Land





**NATIONAL SHORT
STORY WRITING
COMPETITION**

HUPE
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Land

Dear readers,

we profoundly thank you for every piece of writing, or should I say a piece of art, you've sent us. We're all aware that writing is one of the most demanding skills not only in English, but in any language, and this has been visible in our classrooms for a very long time now. You and your students make creative writing seem easy and this fact only makes you outstand.

This year, the competition has been fierce since we've received loads of stories. Ten members of two Executive boards have read all your stories for a month and have chosen the seven stories to be awarded. The fact that someone must win doesn't make the rest of the stories less successful. When it comes to writing, an intriguing plot twist or just the choice of adjectives is sometimes enough for your story to stand out. As for HUPE, my dear students, you've all won since you can write down 2500 words in a blink of an eye. Be sure that there aren't many who can do so.

So, the second National Competition has ended, and we present you with a collection of stories for you to enjoy as much as we did. Take your time because once you start reading, you'll be amazed by the creativity and imagination of students coming from classrooms all around Croatia. Yes, there are gymnasiums, but you'll see that student in vocational schools write as brilliantly as the ones in gymnasiums. Zagreb, Duga Resa, Split, Moravice...you'll find a story coming from every corner of the country. Geographically, our students come from different places, but what unites them all is a passion for writing and, probably, reading.

Dear mentors, you've asked several times for us to include 5th and 6th graders and (as you're aware) HUPE never ignores your inquiries. So, next year, there will be one more category reserved for primary schools.

In the end, we thank you for the trust and leave you in the best company of all, the written word. Enjoy!

Anita Žepina, HUPE Publications Editor

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PRIMARY

SCHOOL



mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: Primary school Hugo Kon, Zagreb

Sara Dutour Sikirić

LOST

Leaves rustling, birds chirping, the sound of water flowing ever so peacefully. She sensed that she was laying on the ground, in some sort of forest, probably. Slowly, she opened her eyes and proved her theory. Above her, treetops intertwined so elaborately that it was impossible to sense where one of them started and where the other ended. Carefully, she arose to a sitting position, only to be hit by a wave of pain radiating from the back of her head. She closed her eyes and stood still, waiting for the pain to subside.

When it did, only a few seconds later, she opened her eyes and lifted her hand to inspect the source of her agony. It hurt when touched and felt sticky. When she inspected her fingers, she found them to be covered in some brown-red tacky liquid. Well, that explains it, she thought. She hadn't felt this bad since... since... well, since... she couldn't remember. Where was she? Who was she? Why couldn't she remember? Why, why, why?

She looked around once more and her gaze fell upon a notebook and a flashlight only a meter or so away. Maybe the notebook contained some answers. Careful of her wound, she slowly got up and closed the distance between herself and the objects. The notebook was black, she opened it and found nothing but sketches. A skyline, some people, a tree and finally an old village. Each of them gave a strong sense of *déjà vu*, but she couldn't remember exactly where she had encountered each of them. It agitated her, feeling so close, yet so far from those memories. Suddenly, her head started to hurt once more and, again, she waited out the pain. She realized that there was nothing she could do about her memories and that she should try to find someone who could help her.

And so, she took the notebook and flashlight, got up and went in the direction her instincts told her to. It didn't take her long to realize that she had hurt her head. The

entire forest floor was interwoven with roots and covered in mud and leaves. It was almost impossible not to trip. Somehow, she knew that those trees were maple trees. But, how in the world did she know that? She didn't remember learning it or hearing about it. Yet, somehow, she knew it. It came so naturally to her.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sound of a branch braking behind her. Quickly, she turned around and saw a small brown rabbit. She followed the furry fellow through the trees, around some moosewood shrubs and to a stream. Then, it jumped along some rocks, to the other side of the stream and got away hastily. She didn't think she could follow it any further and at the sight of water she remembered that a while passed since she had anything to drink. As she crouched down to grab a handful of water, she was met with the image of a young, black-haired, green-eyed girl. It took her a few seconds to realize the image she was met with was her own reflection. So, that was what she looked like. After staring for a few seconds... or minutes, she couldn't really tell, she grabbed some water and took a swig of it, then washed her face and finally looked at herself once more, before getting up and continuing to walk.

How long had she been walking already? The trees were starting to look the same. The forest lost its wonder as she started to get tired and hungry. She... What was even her name? Why couldn't she remember? Her hand almost instinctively drifted to the back of her head. Right. How could she forget?! That had to be it.

Once more, her train of thought was interrupted. This time it was thanks to an old road, so cracked, that it was unusable. As her gaze trailed along the road, she spotted the village it led to. The village's houses weren't holding up much better than the road. The vines and roots that dug through their walls were now the only reason they still stood, as fragilely as they did. The houses' gardens overgrown; their fences unrecognizable. She walked down the streets she believed were once brimming with life. Such a stark contrast.

That's when it hit her. The village before her and the one in the notebook were the same. Immediately, she pulled the notebook out of her pocket and opened the page with the drawing. The houses, the vines, the roots, the gardens, they all matched up. She had already been here.

Walking further down the street, she saw more of the same, old houses with old gardens with old fences. At some point, a sliver of neon orange caught her eye. As it came into focus, she recognized it to be a tent. Picking up her pace, she approached

the tent. Weighing her options, she decided to enter it. The hunger was beginning to take a toll on her and maybe there was some food inside. Carefully, she opened the zipper and, one leg after the other, entered it. Inside, she found a bed, a backpack of some sort, a phone, a water bottle and some food.

Firstly, she inspected the food stash. There was nothing special, really - some protein bars and dried fruits. After devouring a few bars, she went through the rest of the tent and found the phone she paid no attention to earlier. Gently, she turned it on. The once black screen lit up to show a photo of two women. The one on the left had straight black hair and green, green eyes. My god... it was her. This was her phone, probably her tent too. The woman on the right looked older and had features similar to hers. Her mother maybe?

Placing her finger to the screen and dragging up, it unlocked. So, so many apps. After some browsing, she found 'Phone'. That had to be usable. Her contacts were full of names with no faces attached to them. Then, she found a contact labeled mom. She called. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Just as she was about to end the call, her mother answered.

"Sweetie, I wasn't expecting you to call. Is everything okay?", the woman had such a gentle voice.

She wasn't sure what to say. "Honey, are you there? Is there a problem? Don't tell me something happened on the trip.", trip, what trip, she wanted to scream.

Now she felt that she had to respond - "Mom. At least I think you're my mom. I woke up today in some forest. I have some sort of an injury at the back of my head. I can't remember anything. Please, help me." She was met by silence; did she scare away her own mother?!

"This isn't a funny joke, honey."

"This isn't a joke."

"Oh god... Honey, stay where you are. I'll call the police and I'm coming."

"You know where I am?", was she about to finally get some answers.

"You said you had trouble with inspiration, so you went camping to the forest behind our house for a couple of days."

"Are you gonna come and get me?", she didn't even know what to say.

There was some murmur before her mother said "Yeah, I'm coming. You're in that abandoned village, right?"

How did she know? "Yes."

"Okay, I'm going to stop the call now and call the police. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

She wanted to plead her to stay, scream not to be left alone, but she didn't. "Okay."

Hadn't twenty minutes passed already? Where was her mother? Why hadn't she checked the time when the call ended?

Then, in the distance, she could hear someone shouting. "Honey, where are you?" As the words became coherent and the voice recognizable, she jumped up in excitement, fumbled for the tent's zipper, pulled it down aggressively and ran out. She was running till she reached the middle of the street, then turned around and saw a blurry figure running towards her. And the pain in the back of her head returned. Too fast, too fast. As she closed her eyes and prepared to wait the pain out, she felt two arms wrap around her, so tightly that the air in her lungs was squeezed out. She heard crying, felt her T-shirt wetted. That was it; she couldn't take it anymore. For the first time since she could remember, she broke down.

After reuniting with her mother, they walked over to her house where, only minutes later, they were met by an ambulance and taken to the hospital. The doctors told her she suffered from amnesia and that her memories could return, but not forcibly. Her mother stayed with her the entire time and later took her home. Days passed and flashes of memories gradually returned to her: drawing trees, drinking coffee with a friend, sitting in classes. She found out that she had been an artist and most of her memories did come back when drawing. She wasn't particularly sure what she wanted to do in life. Continue working as an artist or find a new passion? Everything seemed so uncertain and yet the prospect of a blank page gave her peace. After all, you can't regret anything if you can't remember anything.



mentor: Danijela Reić Šućur
institution: Primary school Manuš, Split

Marina Vučica

A STORY OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS, FROM THE DIARY OF PATRICIA JONES

It was pouring cats and dogs. Perfect time for a traffic jam.

I was sitting in my rusty car with a cat and bags full of books. „It feels like it’s never going to stop raining.“ I looked at my petrified cat, picked her up, and started rocking her in my arms.

„It’s ok, Pancake“, I whispered to her.

I glanced at the green bag and took out one of my favorite books, „The Hobbit“.

„Eh, I’ll miss you, old friend.“ You see, the thing is that I’m broke and, as I can’t afford to live a normal life, I have to sell most of my books. What about my job, you might be asking. Well, I found one and lost it. But that’s a story for another time.

I got comfortable and started reading. Shortly, the sky began to clear up.

„We can finally get going.“

On my way to the bookstore, somehow I just kept taking wrong turns and couldn’t find it.

„Great, what am I supposed to do now?“ At that moment, the cat started meowing and scratching the car window. I stopped the car.

„What, Pancake?“

As I looked through the car window, in front of me stood the strangest bookstore ever. But how? It wasn’t there moments ago. It somehow magically appeared in front of me. The bookstore seemed vast and ancient. I slowly got out of the car and started walking towards it. I pushed the antique door and got inside.

The first thing I noticed was huge, beautiful spiral-shaped stairs leading somewhere above. Books in the store were stacked on the floor, and some were even shaped like animals. And believe it or not, some books seemed to be... flying... Wait, what?! I reached for one of the books in the air and it fell on the ground with a loud thump. What a weird daydream.

„Hello, ya need some help?“

I looked up to see a strange, old man with ridiculous glasses too big for his head. He was looking at me mysteriously.

„Yes, hi! I came here to sell some books.“ I said.

„Oh, well, let me see.“

I handed him the books with a sad look.

“Please wait.” He said.

I waited, and then slowly went to the stairs I noticed before. I carefully took the first step. The stairs started squeaking and cracking.

„Ma’am. What’s your name?“

I quickly turned around. „Name’s Jones, Patricia Jones! Why?“

„Ms. Jones, where did you get these books from?“

„Oh, I don’t remember anymore. Probably at some book fair.“

„Interestingly, I’ve never heard of any of these titles.“

„What? You must be joking. You never heard of ‘The Hobbit’?“

„No, no, but, tell me, where are you from?“

„I’m from Highbridge, why?“

„Oh. Please get out and pretend as you’ve never been here. Have a good day.“ He handed me my books with shaky hands and slammed the door in front of my eyes.

I stared at the door in utter shock and slowly started walking towards the car - but got distracted by something even weirder than flying books.

„Hello!“

When I looked up to see the person that spoke, the first thing I noticed was a puddle with the reflection of something that looked like a human. With horse legs. I rubbed my eyes and looked up. In front of me was an ordinary-looking person, with another ordinary person beside.

They turned away and started whispering something to each other.

I took a long walk around the block to my car to process all the things that had just happened.

When I got to my car, the door was open. I ran towards it... The car was empty. No trace of Pancake! I started shaking. This was the last thing I needed now. I had to stay focused and calm and look for the cat. At that moment I realized that I don't know the name of this strange town or how I got here.

„When I think about this, I don't remember setting off to the road. That's horrifying.” I started walking like a headless chicken all over town. Finally, after a couple of hours that felt like days, I decided to give up. I was exhausted and out of breath.

„Looking for her is like looking for a needle in a wheat class. This town is enormous”, I said to myself. It seems that I have been doing that a lot lately.

„But now I need to find a place to stay overnight maybe I'll find her tomorrow.”

And after some time, I found myself in front of a huge, old-looking bar that looked like a castle.

The sign above it said „White Rabbit”. Oh well, now I am in the story of that Alice... But whatever. I opened the battered oak door that has seen much better days and got inside. The inside of the bar looked positively ancient. The first thing I noticed was a huge brick fireplace and a couple of tables that were already full.

But not with people. Like “human” people... These looked like some fairy folk from the stories for children. Big, small, light, dark, with pointy ears, humongous noses... Naturally, I started feeling light-headed - and accidentally kicked an umbrella stool that I grabbed for the support! Everybody turned around.

They were staring at me and whispering. One of them approached and said something in a language I didn't understand. After that, five others got up and started walking towards me. I grabbed the door handle, but someone grabbed me and pulled me back in. I closed my eyes and hoped for the best.

Then I heard grunting, hissing, and all kinds of angry noises, but after a couple of minutes, everything went silent. I slowly opened my eyes, no need to pretend I'm not here (wherever here was). In front of me stood a cat!

„Pancake!! You are ok! Oh, I was so worried. Let's go... Ahh!” With her paws, she shoved some petals in my mouth. Surprised, I swallowed them with an expression of disgust. Pancake was looking satisfied.

„What was that for?!” I yelled.

„Well, you have to talk to me somehow”, Pancake said.

„You can talk? Why doesn't that surprise me anymore...?” I followed her to one empty table.

Sitting in the bar were all sorts of mythical creatures and surprisingly, now I recognized most of them.

„Sorry about the Dwarfs. They never saw a human before.”

„Say that again - THE Dwarfs?”

„Yes, yes! But don't get too excited, we have work to do. Lilith, come, we have to tell her our plan!”

„Ok Myst, I'm coming”, the small fairy said in a high-pitched voice.

„Myst?”

„Ah right, I haven't told you that yet. That's my real name.”

„You haven't told me anything at all. You've been busy meowing and eating! Mostly eating.”

„I will explain everything, but we don't have much time. Lilith!”

„Coming.”

„We don't have time anymore. If anyone in this town wants to live, we have to act. Now.”

And then they started explaining the plan to me.

A couple of minutes later...

„Patricia, hello? Have you been listening to us?”

„Yes, yes.” Nope. I was busy admiring the creatures and bar. The only thing I heard was something about someone being half-human, half-fairy, and that person having to find a book that will save them all. They seemed to be saying that person was me, but they must have gotten it wrong.

„Why can I see all creatures now, and outside I couldn't?”

„Long story short, the spell is made so you can only see how you look like in any reflection, and the spell has been removed from “White Rabbit”.

„And what about fairies?”

„They never leave the bar.”

Sometime later...

„It's closed", I whispered to Myst. Pancake. Myst. We were standing in front of the bookstore.

„Leave that to me," Lilith said quietly and went through the keyhole. Of course. I heard a very loud klick and the door slightly opened a moment later. I pushed the door and opened them completely. I took a step into the bookstore, but Myst grabbed my hand and said: „Please be careful."

„You are not coming?"

„No, but if anything goes wrong, Lilith will call for help."

I nodded and got inside. The bookstore appeared the same as before, but darker. I began sneaking towards the stairs, while Lilith flew through the flying books.

On the top of the *very* squeaky stairs was a door. It was unlocked.

I looked at Lilith: „Do you think that this is a set-up?"

„Noo. Can't be." She twitched as the stairs squeaked.

Slowly, I opened the door. Nothing happened. Phew.

„What are you waiting for? Find the book." Lilith said.

„Right. How does it look exactly?"

„You're unbelievable. It's old and yellow", she said.

„That's it?"

„Yes, that's it. Now find it."

„Oh, and one more thing."

„What now?"

„Why am I the one that has to find this book?"

„Because you are a halfling."

„Of what?"

„Oh, dear. We'll talk about this later."

My search began. There were no artifacts in the attic, just books. However, a lot of them were yellow and dusty.

„Lilith! There are a lot of yellow, dusty books. I don't know which one is the right one. Lilith?" There was a dead silence. I felt shivers down my spine.

„You'll feel it," I heard her answer.

I carried on with the investigation and there it was. A shimmery, golden book. Warmth swam through my fingers.

„I think I found the book", I said.

„Give it to me!” Lilith suddenly yelled.

„Whoa, you’re too small for carrying this.”

„Am I?” the librarian said.

I turned around. In front of me stood the librarian, in his hand a small cage. In the cage was Lilith.

„I need that book.”

„And so does everyone else.”

„You said you’ll spare me if I bring you a halfling”, Lilith cried.

„I lied,” said the librarian. „Give me the book or you’ll be very sorry.”

„Don’t give it to him!”

„Shut up, you filthy fairy!”

I don’t think he should have said that.

„A filthy fairy!? Me!? You’ll pay for this.”

And then, she erupted. The cage blew up in hundreds of tiny bits and the librarian flew across the whole attic, demolishing all the books that were in his way.

„Patricia, run! Run for your life with that book!” So I did.

I made it to the front door where Myst waited.

„What took you so long? Did something happen?”

„Lilith and the librarian are fighting! Go help her! I have the book.”

Without a word, she turned into a giant cat with wings and horns.

Sometime later the cat and the fairy appeared with the librarian unconsciously floating in the air with a lot of bruises all over him.

„I will deliver the librarian to the local police and grab a drink after that. This is all too much for me”, Lilith said.

When Myst and I were left alone, I asked her: „So, what are you exactly? Some kind of shapeshifter?”

„You could say that, but I can only shift in what you just saw.”

„Cool. What about the book?”

„Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

„One more question. Why me?”

„Why you!? You really don't listen, do you? You are the only half-fairy, half-human left, and the book was made by your kind, so, if it was ever lost, one of your kind would be the only ones that could bring it back.”

„But why is the book so important?”

„It's the Book of Life! We can't survive without it.”

„The last question, but for real. Can you help me learn how to be a true halfling?”

She smiled and said: „Was just waiting for you to ask.”



mentor: Nina Čalić
institution: Primary school Turnić, Rijeka

Mihaela Cvijanović

MAGIC CLOSET

My great-grandmother kept a diary. I was thrilled and surprised when I found it in an old chest of drawers in her room. I opened it carefully and started to read it. I found a lot of poems and a few stories in her diary. Here is one of her unusual stories: It was the middle of the Second World War. Our villages were full of German soldiers and our houses were completely destroyed. My family and I were constantly hiding from the soldiers; luckily they never caught us. We would hide in abandoned houses, but we knew we would not be able to hide forever. My mother knew an old retired teacher, who lived in a big old house in a nearby village, and she told me that if the situation got worse, I would have to stay with him. My parents were arrested in 1943 and I had to go to the teacher's house.

One day I decided to explore the house. It was a big, beautiful house made of grey stone and wooden walls. A closet caught my eye and I opened it. It was a huge, brown closet that could hold about five people. When I entered the closet, I felt as if I was walking up the stairs. After a long walk, I saw a light at the end of the stairs.

I reached a completely different world. I entered a dark forest covered in snow. It was pretty dark and I could hardly see anything. Then I heard lions roaring and wolves howling. I was terrified so I started running helplessly until I saw a cave and decided to hide there. It was obviously a bad choice; a huge brown lion came out of the darkness. He came closer and spoke to me. He said he would not harm me and that he was happy I finally came because he was waiting for me. When I calmed down, he told me about a prophecy. A girl would visit his world and she would save the world from dark, demonic monsters. At first, I did not believe him, but when other lions appeared and when they confirmed their leader's story, I decided to trust them. Apollo was their leader; he was an experienced and wise lion. Apollo's pride consisted of his brother, Ash and his friends Blade, Morrigan, Samala and Hades.

In the morning they showed me around Melidonia, their magical country. They took me to the Litigera Lakes, the home of many water animals and also centaurs. Our next destination was Landar Mountain, the highest mountain in Melidonia which was inhabited by phoenixes. The last destination, also the most dangerous one, was the village of elves next to the castle of demonic monsters. Apollo spread the good news among the elves; the prophecy had finally been fulfilled.

That evening the monsters visited the village. The elves hid me in Luca's attic, but there was a traitor among them who was selling information to the monsters. The monsters knew exactly where I was. They found me in no time, tied my hands and took me to their castle where Azazel, their evil leader lived.

The castle was built at the foot of Cliff Beston. When we came to the castle, I was really scared, because Apollo told me how devious and cruel Azazel was. When I saw him, I stood petrified and I couldn't say a word. He was a tall and strong monster and his black and blue skin was covered with colourful tattoos. I could hardly see his eyes which were hidden by long white hair. When I came closer, I saw a patch on his right eye. His manticore sat next to his throne. He was a large black and blue lion with large white wings and red horns. Azazel held a blue and gold magic sword in his hand. It could pierce anything; stone, metal or marble. In his other hand, he held his trident, it was also magical. It would always return to its owner.

I had to bow to Azazel and then he said, "The girl who is supposed to save Melidonia has finally arrived! I am sorry, my dear, but you won't be able to fulfill the prophecy and you won't be able to change the fate of Melidonia!" Then he stood up and started shouting, "Who is your leader? Who told you about Melidonia? How did you arrive here?"

I got up and explain I discovered Melidonia by chance. Azazel looked at me suspiciously. He didn't believe a word I said. Then he called his two sons, Arius and Seraphim and told them to take me away. We went into a dark hallway and I couldn't see anything. Arius and Seraphim were very similar to their father, they were also very tall and muscular and they had white hair. Seraphim also had a big scar on his face and Arius had scars on his neck and arms. I asked them where we were going and they told me not to worry, they were taking me to a safe place and nothing bad would happen to me.

They took me to a big room and told me to stay there; they would be back in a minute. I sat by the window and watched Melidonia. Arius returned with some food and a glass of milk. He even tried to comfort me, "Don't worry, you are safe here. Azazel wants to keep you in the castle until he conquers Melidonia. He won't harm you...at

least we think so. But if he does try to hurt you, we won't let him do it. Don't worry." Soon we became friends and I decided to tell Arius and Seraphim about my world. I told them about the war. I also told them I had to hide in the teacher's house where I found a magic closet and how I came to Melidonia. Then they told me the story of their sad lives. They were orphans and nobody wanted to adopt them because of their scars. One day Azazel saw them begging for food in the street; he decided to adopt them and took them to his castle. They told me Azazel, their father, was mean and cruel, but they were not like him; they wanted to help me. We decided to wait for their father to leave the castle and they would take me to the portal where I entered Melidonia.

A few days later Azazel left the castle. Arius and Seraphim brought their manticores; we mounted them and flew to the portal. Apollo didn't want to leave, he decided to stay and fight for freedom. The citizens of Melidonia joined him because they wanted bring an end to Azazel's tyranny. Apollo promised he would somehow get in touch with me when the war was over in Melidonia and I could visit it again. Arius and Seraphim decided to leave Melidonia. They went through the portal with me. When we returned to the closet, Arius and Seraphim turned into humans, they were no longer terrible demons and their manticores turned into two big and beautiful dogs. We have never parted since then. They have become my best friends. I couldn't help Apollo to free Melidonia, but I have made friends for life. Have I ever returned to Melidonia? I haven't yet, but I'm sure I'll go back soon. I've been waiting for Apollo's letter.

mentor: Tanja Pokupić

institution: Primary school Miroslava Krleže, Čepin

Barbara Kozić

THE BLUEBELL BLUES

Stephen and James heard the bell ring at the front door.

“We have a client!” Stephen furiously jumped out of his chair. James took a deep breath. He just hoped it was something complicated and mysterious enough to satisfy Stephen’s hunger for adrenaline. You could put him under the entire pressure of this world but putting his mind at ease was a real challenge for him.

They let the man in and offered him with a cup of tea. His name was David Jones. His girlfriend, Mary Williams, was kidnapped yesterday while he was at work.

“I woke up at 5 am like I do every day. I left our apartment around 6 and travelled to work. When I came back home, she was gone, and our apartment was a huge mess! Glass and vases were broken, books were laying on the floor. Everything radiated with fear... I immediately felt like something really bad had happened” He tried to calm his trembling voice.

“Did you find any note left?” asked Stephen.

David looked at Stephen and got silent for a second. “No...”, he shook his head, “There was no note...Please Mr. Carter... I just need her back. I love her too much to lose her now.”

Stephen was just silent. James noticed the absence of Stephen’s empathy, so he added: “Do not worry. We will find your girlfriend.”

They investigated his apartment and collected all the evidence. The building they lived in didn’t have security cameras. The neighbors claim they heard glass breaking and screaming of a woman. After the investigation, Stephen again took the same position in his chair and stared at the wall that was full of pictures and notes connected with strings.

“So...any thoughts?” asked James.

“Too many...David is lying to us.”

“About what?”

“About the note. While I was asking him about it, he lied.”

“And what do you think would be written on the note?” Said James.

“Something we must not know”, he stood up and once again started scanning through the notes on the wall.

“He’s about to betray us”, he continued.

“Because he hid a note that we are not even sure it exists?” asked James.

“I’m sure there was one. And it had to do something with me or you”, Stephen looked away from the wall and looked at James, “Otherwise he wouldn’t have hidden it.” He looked so proud of the conclusion he’d just made, knowing he was very close to solving another case.

“Right... and what are we going to do about it?” asked James curiously.

“We will pretend like we have no idea. We can’t risk it and expose him; we don’t know if he’s being threatened”, said Stephen.

“You want us to drive ourselves right into their trap?”

“No, I want us to save Mary and solve this case without anyone unnecessarily dying”, Stephen said.

“And how can you guarantee that you won’t die? Stephen thought about it. A whole bunch of people may be on their side and it’s only two of us. How about we just call the police and let them handle it...”

“*Call the police*”, Stephen mocked him, “You’re ruining all the fun!”

“The fun?! Stephen, someone has been kidnapped... How can you be so... no you’re... you’re so pretentious and unbelievably ridiculous!” James was extremely worried about Stephen. Even though he has put his life on the line countless times as a part of his job, James never stopped being terrified of losing Stephen. He was his best friend, and this sounded like a suicide mission to him.

“I’m not calling the police to fight some plain rabble that thinks it can play with me.” The confidence he had with his job was truly unusual to anyone.

“*I’m the infallible Stephen Carter and I don’t need anyone’s help!*” Now James was mocking him. He lowered his tone and sighed: “How could you be so calm about this?”

“It’s a part of my job”, Stephen answered.

James laughed a little. “*I’m ruining the fun*”, he repeated in disbelief. “You’re such a machine sometimes”, he said.

Stephen licked his lips and took a short breath, like he was about to say something. But no words came out of his mouth. He remained calm and untouched by what Dr. Walker said but inside, he was hurt. Stephen was done with being perceived as cold

and emotionless, but he couldn't help it. He did care for people, much more than someone would think. And he cared for James Walker. His heart was filled with regret, it was eating him from the inside because he said things he didn't want to.

"I don't want to see you die like that, Stephen. I'm sorry."

Stephen swallowed the lump in his throat. James didn't say anything else as he grabbed his coat and left the building. Stephen was silent. It felt like James took all the words away with him.

Then his phone started ringing. Stephen answered.

"This was far easier than I thought it would be," said a female voice on the phone.

Stephen choked on his tea. He felt his heart beating faster, his throat tightening as he recognized the woman's voice. In that moment his whole being hoped that he misheard something, that it was a bad dream that he was about to wake up from.

"Dolores?"

"Did you miss me?" she said, sarcastically.

Dolores Wright was Stephen's last best friend. She was a genius when it came to solving crimes. She was also everything bad that people would assume of Stephen. At one point, solving crimes for her wasn't enough anymore so she started murdering people. When Stephen revealed her real identity 10 years ago, she swore that one day she's going to return and get revenge. Stephen didn't want to be a part of her dirty game. She never forgave him.

"I should've already known that you're behind this," he said.

"I knew you would find out there's a note."

"Dolores, let Mary go. This is between me and you."

"Poor, generous Stephen Carter. Always caring about the others, you haven't changed in the past 10 years"

"I see you didn't change either."

"I have planned on making you and your colleague fall out but you're already doing the job for me...It's so easy to play with you that it's ridiculous", she left out a little laugh.

Stephen felt like his blood started to boil.

"James would never leave me", he said.

"The books Stephen", she said and without explanation hung up.

Stephen immediately got back to his investigation. Since Dolores was almost same as him, there would always be a dash of competition in the air between them. He wanted to show her he's smart enough to play her game.

Stephen remembered David saying something about the books, so he came into his

apartment again. “Mr. Jones do you know which books exactly were laying on the floor?”

“I still didn’t put them back on the shelf, they’re on the table.”

There were two books: “*Bluebell story book*” and “*100 books every Blues fan should own*”.

There was a little, almost unnoticeable scratch under the words Bluebell and Blues.

“Bluebell...blues...” Stephen was repeating to himself, “Where have I seen that title...”

He closed his eyes and tried his best to activate his photographic memory, and then he got a flashback, a clear picture of a wooden sign with “The Bluebell Blues” engraved into it.

“The Heartwood Forest!”

“What?” David was confused.

“As children...we used to visit the Heartwood Forest sometimes during spring. Then the whole forest would be full of flowers called bluebells”. Stephen felt like all the puzzles in his brain connected.

“Who is we?”

“Me and Dolores”, Stephen answered.

Mr. Jones was unsatisfied with Stephen’s answer considering he had no idea who Dolores was. “It’s a long story, but nothing is going to happen to Mary if we find them. I’ll explain everything in the car, we have about an hour to get to Heartwood Forest!”

“Dolores Wright is my nemesis. She’s a...” Stephen tried to find the most horrible way to describe her, “a psychopath, a murderer...”

“10 years ago, I exposed her for murdering 7 people. She wanted me to join her, for us to be some serial killer duo... she wanted money and fame, solving crimes wasn’t enough for her. Perhaps the most atrocious person you’ll ever meet. She escaped from prison, and she’s been giving me secret clues, the ones that only I can find her with.”

“How is Mary related to this?” David sounded like he got sick from the description he’s just witnessed. Stephen could see his pupils dilated with fear.

“She’s not. All her victims were randomly picked. But trust me, she wants me, not Mary”, Stephen said as they entered the Heartwood Forest.

His phone rang again.

“Be aware that if I see a single cop your friend’s dear girlfriend will be on the news tonight as well as him”, Dolores threatened them.

“Noted”, Stephen’s stomach turned upside down from hearing her voice again. They

followed the main road, and they were already deep in the forest. They stopped in front of a little wooden house. No one else but Dolores could be in that house, they thought.

Stephen took a deep breath before getting outside of the car.

They opened the house door. Dolores was right there with Mary beside her.

“Hello, Stephen”, she wished she was as calm as she sounded. They met after all those years for the first time, and she planned for it to be their last encounter. What was that funny feeling that she felt when their eyes locked?

“Hello, Dolores” *Oh dear*, it’s been ages since she heard her name leave his mouth. They both perfectly ignored how terrified Mary and David were, and they just tried to focus on shutting down whatever feelings this reunion has caused them.

“Alright, you two are free. You can leave me and Stephen alone now.”

“Not so fast!” said David Jones. “You think you both get to play with our lives and just tell us to pretend nothing happened?” He pulled out a gun. Seems like Stephen and Dolores didn’t think this through - it was too late for them to search for their own weapons, one wrong move could get them killed.

“David what are you doing?!” Mary screamed out.

“Mary, stand back, I got this.”

But Mary couldn’t imagine her boyfriend being a murderer. Before he tried to shoot, she jumped on him and kicked the gun out of his hands. Stephen and Dolores quickly opened the back door and ran fastest they could into the dark forest. Stephen followed Dolores since she knew the forest better than him. When they stopped running, Dolores found a tree which had some extra weapons hidden next to it. She loaded a gun and pointed it at Stephen.

“Don’t you think for a second that I’ve changed my mind.” Stephen accepted his death and waited for her to pull the trigger. But she was just standing there. She still hasn’t fired.

“That’s funny. You’ve spent most of your life planning to kill me, and when it’s time to...”

“Shut up”, she interrupted. A tear escaped from her eye.

“Why can’t you just kill me?” Stephen was paralyzed by her next words.

“Because...I have always loved you, Stephen.”, she was still pointing the gun.

It kept echoing in his head. Before anyone tried to say anything else her face turned into terror. She fell into his arms; someone has shot her.

Stephen knelt as he carried her onto the soft bluebells. He felt like he was lit on fire, as if he was about to turn into ash. He gently kissed her on the forehead.

“Goodbye Stephen Carter”, she whispered. Her smile dropped; her eyes froze.

“Stephen! Are you okay?!” James ran towards him.

Stephen felt relief as he knew James was there.

“I knew you would never leave me.”

mentor: Nina Čalić
institution: Primary school Turnić, Rijeka

Nea Superina

THE MAGIC COOKBOOK

Everything began on my 12th birthday when my Grandma gave me her cookbook as a present. I showed it to my best friends, Emma and Luna, and we flipped through it. One of the recipes caught our attention. It was “Weather Brownies”. The three of us made a unanimous decision; we were going to bake some brownies.

As we were reading the recipe and preparing the ingredients, we realised that we didn’t have something that was called cloud-flour. At first, we thought it was regular flour, but then my Grandma entered the kitchen so we asked her about it. She smiled at us and then whispered something that we would never forget. She told us that she was a cook witch. We looked confused and surprised. Emma asked her what that meant. Grandma explained that she could do magic by cooking meals with special ingredients which could only be found in Goldland. I asked her if she could take us there. “Of course, dear,” she said.

She took us to her house, to her attic. It was dark and stuffy. At first, I could hardly see anything and then Grandma lit a candle. There were old boxes all around us and there was an old chest in the corner. Luna asked her how we were supposed to get there. Grandma didn’t say anything, she took an old key out of her pocket and unlocked the chest. She stepped into the chest and we followed her without saying a word.

In no time, we were in a beautiful meadow. We looked at my Grandma. She wasn’t wearing a black dress and a big black pointed hat as we all expected. She was wearing a lovely light-green dress with a white apron over it. She looked at us as if nothing had happened and told us that we needed to change our clothes because we were still wearing the same old clothes which didn’t fit in this world. After a long walk, we saw a small town in front of us. We entered a small clothes shop and Grandma told us to pick any dress and apron we like. Luna chose a blue dress with a purple apron, Emma fell in love with a white dress with lace on its sleeves and a pink apron. I couldn’t

choose between a red and a yellow dress; in the end I chose the yellow one with a light-grey apron. We put on our new dresses and left the shop.

As we were walking, Luna asked my Grandma about the magic ingredients for the recipe. Grandma told us that she had some in her house down in the forest next to the town. We walked for about 20 minutes through the forest, and then we saw the most beautiful cottage in the world. It had stone walls with a red wooden roof. The cottage was surrounded by colourful flowers, bushes, an old oak tree and a beautiful willow tree. Robbins were nesting in the oak tree and swallows built their nest under the roof. The cottage wasn't big. There was a bed with a small bedside table next to it and a huge bookshelf full of books in all sizes and colours. There was also a kitchen. The blue cupboards were full of jars, dried herbs and small bags full of magic spices and ingredients. There were some regular ingredients in the red cupboards. There were also some green cupboards where Grandma kept bowls, pots, cookers, cutlery and plates. There was a hand mixer on the kitchen counter.

I put the cookbook on the counter and started to read the recipe again. Emma and Luna started grabbing the ingredients and Grandma passed me the cloud-flour. Emma was mixing the ingredients while Luna and I were picking a mould. Grandma prepared the oven and warned Emma to mix well. I poured the mixture into the mould and Luna put it into the oven. While the brownies were baking, Grandma finally revealed her secret. She said that when you ate them, you could control the weather for an hour. The clock on the wall struck twelve so it was the right time to take the brownies out of the oven and put them on the kitchen counter. We left them to cool down for a few minutes. Luna cut them with a knife and gave one piece to Emma and me. I went outside and took the first bite. In a few seconds, the weather changed from sunny to rainy. Then Emma took her bite and it started to snow. Then it was Luna's turn. She took a bite and it started to blow hard. When Grandma took her bite, the wind stopped blowing and the sun started shining again.

Grandma told us we weren't allowed to tell anyone about Goldland and about the magic cookbook. The magic cookbook could become a deadly weapon if it were used by irresponsible and careless people. They could destroy all life on Earth. We promised to keep the secret. Then we did the washing up and with sad faces said goodbye to Grandma's cottage.

Grandma told us this wasn't the last time we visited Goldland and that we would come back again. When we came back to the meadow, I asked her how we would go back to our world without the chest. She gave us some chocolate chip cookies and told us to eat them. After we took a bite, we were in Grandma's attic again. Emma, Luna and I said goodbye to my Grandma and went home.

We were so excited; we couldn't wait to go back again. So we started to check out recipes for our next trip to Goldland. Each of us had a different idea so we decided to write the names of recipes on pieces of paper and pick them out of a hat. Luna picked out the right recipe! It was "Go back cookies". We were so happy and excited. The recipe was our return ticket to Goldland! That was the best birthday ever!

mentor: Danijela Lokmer
 institution: Primary school Kajzerica, Zagreb

Duga Golubić

SNOWY DREAMS

It was a snowy cold night. I was lying in my bed wrapped around by a soft blanket and surrounded by at least 10 pillows, watching *Young Royals* on Netflix, eating chocolate cookies, and having hot chocolate that was burning my tongue with every sip I took. The steam coming from the cup forming into snow-like waves and the *snowy view* through the window with a street light that would brighten up every little snowflake that was getting blown by a strong and cold wind was putting the whole scene together and it was looking magnificent. The whole scene would be perfect if I wasn't struggling to breathe through my tears, it was like a whole waterfall was flowing from my eyes. I was crying in the middle of the night. How mesmerizing! It was late, so I tried to calm down and not to wake my parents since they were already mad at me from the lunch argument. Keep calm Alex, I kept telling myself, but it didn't work. The more I thought about it, the more I cried. I was so angry at everything! The only thing that didn't irritate me was my British Shorthair cat Bobby that was lying in my lap. Thinking Bobby was trying to calm me down, made me a bit happy. "This is crazy Bobby... They are my parents, but they won't support me, or did I do the wrong thing to tell them? Am I going crazy? Maybe they will send me to some orphanage or even worse ON THE STREETS!!?"

"SHUT UP ALEX! "

Bobby jumped from my lap as the room door opened. The flashlight coming from the phone was blinding bright and I thought I was suddenly in heaven.

"Are you God? "I asked

"NO! For god sakes Alex it's 2 a.m.! "I think God responded to me.

My vision was clear now and I could finally see her, my older sister Luna. Her long brown hair was looking like a ball of hay and it looked kind of scary. She had a long grey T-shirt on and a facemask on her face. She looked like something you would see in a movie, like a ghost or some old granny from a salon.

"Oh. Hi Luna, " I said with a shaky voice

Her facial expression quickly changed from an *I'm going to kill you!* to a really concerning one when she saw my bright red and wet face with tears still rolling. I quickly wiped them up. Luna closed the door, turned off her flashlight and sat on the floor. We were sitting there in the darkness, only the light from the street was illuminating the room.

"They are our parents Alex, and to be clear, you knew they wouldn't support you." She said trying to calm me down but not succeeding. I knew she was right, of course, but I was still mad and sad. I closed my laptop and sat on the bed, my knees now pressing onto my chest as I held my legs tight.

"I don't know Luna. This is all so crazy."

"I understand Alex. I understand how you feel, well not the whole part but I understand loneliness, very well."

I felt lonely and confused and I was happy to talk to Luna. She and I haven't been on the best terms since our last fight a few days ago about her boyfriend Jake. It was stupid I know. We were sitting in silence but it wasn't that awkward, it was comforting, and I was happy that someone was sitting in my silence.

„Okay, I will go now. Don't worry and try to sleep. If anything happens, I will be by your side. Good night Alex."

I was alone again, in the darkness, only the streetlights illuminating the room and the only happy things were little snowflake shadows reflecting on my messy floor. Even Bobby left with Luna, so now I was really alone." Try to forget about it!" Those words kept repeating in my head. I was lying on my back now looking into the ceiling that became smaller with every second I looked at it. "I think I'm going mad. Great, now I'm even talking to myself." It was OK when Bobby was here, but now I'm completely alone. I turned to the side facing the wall and the window. I was looking at the falling snow. Little drops of water, frozen from the cold weather, now looked as if they were dancing. As I was looking at the snowflakes performing their dance, I noticed one snowflake falling slower than the others, it was getting pushed by the wind left and right until it landed on my window. I was looking at it until it was buried by the other snowflakes. It blended in with others almost perfectly. *Blend!* What a funny word, isn't it? Be perfect like others, be like others. That's what my parents always told me. Soon enough I felt my eyelids getting heavier with every second thought. It was dark and then bright. I thought that Luna came into my room again but no. It was very different. It was warm and calming. Nobody was screaming, nobody was talking, nobody was here. It was quiet. I was sitting on my knees surrounded by deep snow that was soft but not cold. Surrounding me was nothing but snow and a tree. The tree

was so beautiful that I couldn't take my eyes off of it. It was a big white cherry tree that was covered with layers of thick snow. It had hundreds of little white flowers that were blending in with the snow, but they were still recognizable in the white snow. The whole scene looked like I was in a white room. It was really relaxing. Watching the tree as the snowflakes fell around it was what made it so relaxing. Comforting silence and... "Who is there? ", I yelled as I heard something rustle beside me. I was watching the spot where the sound came from. The snow started to move. Oh my god!!! Someone or something was stuck under the snow! I quickly ran toward it and started to dig into the snow. It stopped moving. I got scared but then... "AGH-H!!!" "Something jumped into my face and got me off balance. I was lying in the thick snow scared. It was a fox?!!!" A white fox was happily lying on my chest, looking at me with its big blue eyes.

"Hello, little buddy! What were you doing under so much snow? ", I jokingly asked the fox. "Looking for food!" I shoved the fox from my chest and backed away a few meters. IT SPOKE!!! I was panicking.

"Calm down, he's harmless!" Something touched my shoulder. "Thanks for finding my fox, though. "

When I turned, I saw the most beautiful blue eyes I had ever seen. Dark sea-blue eyes were looking at me. A guy around my age was standing next to me. Short, blonde (pretty messy hair) dressed in the weirdest clothes I have ever seen. He had long dark blue sleeves and on top of that was a weird white flannel with an interesting blue flower pattern. His pants were short and baggy that matched his flannel and to tie it all together he wore black gloves, a black belt with accessories and black slippers. His clothes looked like Japanese-style clothing. "I'm Cloudy by the way! Nice to meet you." He smiled at me and offered me a handshake. As we shook hands I responded, "Alex." He looked intrigued and sat next to me.

"Alex! What are you doing all the way here?"

I wish I could answer the question, but I didn't even know how or why I'm here. "I just happen to be passing by!" I smiled at him, but he gave me a confused look.

"Why would you be passing by nothingness?"

"Well...", I stuttered, "I just wanted to see this beautiful tree...again." Why am I lying to this guy? He seems harmless and he could help me out here. "And what would you be doing here?", I ask so I didn't look suspicious.

"What do you mean? I am always here."

I didn't know what to say. He was looking at me with those big blue eyes, snow falling onto his hair but him not caring. The silence was so loud, it wasn't comforting anymore.

“You don’t need to lie, I didn’t ask you anything personal, did I? And if I did, I’m sorry. You don’t need

to answer if you don’t want to.” The pressure was gone, and I felt relaxed again, still with many

questions on my mind but nothing to ask. “Is that fox, yours?” I asked him with a shaky voice. “No, he is a friend, not a pet.” He chuckled and gave me a soft smile, so I smiled back. Now we were both sitting in comforting silence as he started to pet the fox. I was looking at the fox as he petted him and noticed a familiar pattern on the fox, it was the same pattern Cloudy had on his flannel. The fox was so pretty, and its fur looked softer than any of my blankets at home. “Do you want to pet him?” He asked as he stopped petting the fox. I nodded and he gave me the fox that was now lying in my lap.

“Isn’t he soft?” he asked me as he was now looking at me petting the fox. I nodded and he smiled back.

“I found him with a wounded paw long, long time ago and since then we have been friends.” “You know I have a cat that I also rescued some time ago. His name is Bobby,” I replied.

“Well, his name is Red,” he said proudly

We started talking about Bobby and Red and I didn’t even realize how much time had passed, but one thing was on my mind the whole time we were talking, the argument with my parents and the thought that this wasn’t real but I wanted it to be.

“Hey, Alex!” I looked up. “Something is bothering you!” I just looked at him not saying a word.

“You see I don’t have parents, so I don’t really know what it’s like. But I certainly do know what it’s like to be different.” It was like he was reading my mind.

“I know I sound like I’m talking nonsense, but it is *WONDERFUL* to be different. You see those cherry flowers. You can see every single one of them right. Now look at the snow, can you see snowflakes? You probably can’t. You came here to look at the tree, not the snow, right? How magnificent is that tree, in all this deep snow!!!” He looked at me and I didn’t respond so he continued, “You know if you want to be like a snowflake, be a snowflake that hasn’t yet fallen onto the ground, *be the most*, you can be.” I understood his words and at that moment a bright light came from him. I closed my eyes because it was too bright. When I opened them Cloudy was gone and now there were two foxes in front of me, and at that very moment they ran away. I looked at the tree and closed my eyes. I woke up. Again.... *the dream* My room was now surrounded by sunlight reaching into

every corner of my room and it was still snowing. I got up and I was ready to go to school. I was waiting for the school bus to come and pick me up. As I was standing in the winter cold, I noticed two deep blue eyes looking at me. It was a fox standing near the road watching me standing under the snowy clouds.

mentor: Lidija Šaravanja

institution: Primary school Vladimir Nazor, Čepin

Lana Barišić

INTERVENING

It all started in the orphanage where Semi was all alone. He had no one to be there with him. He had no friends or family who would care about him, he felt like he was going to be there forever. Every day before he went to sleep, he was praying to God that one day he will also have a family and friends that would care about him. He didn't want to stay there because the only thing that he could experience there was abuse. Constant yelling sounds of kids screaming in pain could be heard. Semi's mind was full of thoughts about the headmaster beating everything out of him. For a long time now Semi wanted to escape, but he didn't know how. Everything was full of security cameras and guards, there was no way he could escape without getting noticed. One night when everyone was asleep, he came up with a plan for escaping out of this pure hell. Semi got out through the tiny window since he was so skinny that you could even see his ribs.

He was afraid that someone would notice him and put him back in his cell where they were keeping him. He didn't even know where his legs were taking him, all he did was run. He was running as far as he could until he came to the forest. It was the middle of the night, and he didn't know where he was going. It was terrifying, he couldn't see one thing that was in front of him. Running away was only thing what was in his mind until he reached the end of the forest. He almost fell down the cliff where he was standing. He looked down and saw how deep it was, moved away and started panicking because he didn't know how to go on the other side. After a while he calmed down and started thinking about how to get to the other side of the cliff. He started exploring the forest in hope to find something he can use to get to the other side of the cliff. He was going further and further in the forest until he spotted a lake. That lake was one of the most beautiful things he ever saw. In the middle of the lake there was a little island that was full of some branches and lianas. Semi start-

ed going into the lake to go on the island, as he was going through the lake, he was admiring everything around him. He was so busy looking around that he didn't even notice how deep in water he was. When Semi arrived on the island, he found some things that could be useful for getting to the other side of the cliff he was stuck on. He took some branches and went back to the cliff. While he was going back, he noticed something moving in the bushes. Everything was dark so he couldn't get a proper look, but it looked like a human. He was hesitating at first but decided to give it a better look. Semi went to the bush where he saw that something moving and saw a girl around his age. She had short brown hair and raven eyes. Her skin was pretty pale and was shining under the moonlight. He was looking at her like she was some goddess. After analysing the girl for a few minutes, he realized that he was practically staring at her. She was looking at him like he was some weird guy but also afraid of getting hurt. Semi asked the girl for her name and found out that her name was Aiko. He also found out that she escaped from the orphanage near his and that she was also stuck on the cliff and looking for something to help her go to the other side. Since their past was similar, they decided that they are going to work together. A few days passed and kids were finally able to go on the other side of the cliff. They made a little solid bridge which helped them continue their escape. They were traveling for a couple of days trying to find some place where they could stay at for some time, because spending the night at forest, farm or things like that wasn't a good thing, but they didn't have a choice. Ever since Semi found Aiko they never left each other's side. Wherever Semi would go, Aiko would go with him. Semi was really happy that he finally escaped that place he called home, it wasn't a home, it was hell. Even though he was happy that he escaped, he felt guilty for the other kids. He had nightmares, every time the same scene, over and over again: dark room, no light, Semi on the cold hard floor and headmaster beating him. That so-called dream was an every-day thing. Sometimes, he was even afraid to fall asleep because he knew that he would experience that again, maybe not physically, but mentally. Aiko, on other hand, didn't have nightmares like Semi did, but she was worried about what was going on. They were walking until they spotted a small village, it was small but pretty. They decided to take a look because maybe that place was the right place they could stay at. They were exhausted, but they had hope. When they came into the village, they were welcomed by an old man who was at the gate. The old man was friendly and let them in with a smile on his face. When they came into the village they were shocked. Every single person that walked past them was greeting them with smiling faces, it was new to them. They were not used to being treated nicely since they grew

up in the orphanage which wasn't a nice place. They didn't even pay attention to everything around them because they were lost in their own thoughts. Their thoughts were gone when a middle-aged woman approached them. She said that she was buying groceries when she spotted two kids, Semi and Aiko. The lady was nice enough to offer them a place to sleep since she lived alone, and two kids gladly accepted since they didn't have a place to stay. On the way to the lady's house they told her that they escaped from an orphanage and that they were trying to find a place to stay for some time. The woman was hesitant but decided to ask if they wanted to stay with her for some time since she lived alone and had a few guest rooms they could use. Children agreed and after a few minutes they arrived to a pretty house decorated with a lot of plants. Inside the house it was very cosy and pretty, so kids felt comfortable even though that feeling was weird since they never knew what home felt like. They also learned that lady's name was Tsumiko and that she had a son named Koya who passed away. She made a delicious meal that kids loved because they never had something like that. Then miss Tsumiko made her way to one of the guest rooms to prepare everything for children to sleep. Their clothes were all dirty from dirt and everything so she gave them her old son's clothes so they can change, while she was going to wash their own clothes. They took a warm shower and put on some clean clothes. After Aiko finished showering lady Tsumiko bandaged up her hand. Before they came to the village Aiko had tripped and cut her palm on the sharp branch, the cut was pretty deep, so it will leave a scar when it heals. They laid in bed and fell into their deep slumber. Few days passed since they first came into that village and Semi and Aiko never even imagined that their life would turn around like this.

They had been tortured, abused and lived in pure hell but now they are in a village, with a woman that cares and thinks of them as her own children. Right now, Aiko is helping lady Tsumiko in the kitchen and Semi is buying some groceries. They have been living with lady Tsumiko for a few months now, yet again another peaceful day passed. Two kids were peacefully sleeping until their dreams were disrupted by screams that could be heard outside. They immediately woke up confused about what was going on. Semi rushed outside to see what was going on and what he saw shocked him. That same village in who he was living beautiful and peaceful life, is now burning in flames. Fire was literally everywhere. He rushed to the house to see if Aiko and lady Tsumiko were okay. He came into the house and the sight he was seeing left him in horror; Aiko and lady Tsumiko laying down on the floor motionless. Semi was about to scream for help when he felt something push him on his knees. He turned his head and was met with a young man; his uniform was covered

in blood and katana in his hand. His hair was covering his eyes so the only thing you could see was half of his face. Semi was on his knees looking at the man with horror written on his face. The only words that came out of that man's mouth was, „Thank you for taking care of my mother.” Semi couldn't believe what he was hearing until the man swung his katana towards Semi's neck. Everything was happening in slow motion and as he was about to finish Semi on his spot someone's feminine voice rang through Semi's head, „Semi, wake up, its time for breakfast”. As he opened his eyes he saw a beautiful woman. „Come on, dress up, its time for breakfast!” He was confused and he didn't know what was happening. Then he realized, he was in his bed, in his own room and the woman next to him was his mother. He slowly walked into the kitchen to see his father, who was waiting for him, and his mother, so they can start with the breakfast. Semi finished his breakfast and decided to go for a walk. As he was closing the gate he met a girl around his age. Aiko. She waved at him and he glanced at her hand, his eyes widened. It was the same scar he saw in his dream. All he could think about right now was, „Was it really just a dream?”

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: Primary school Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko,
Branch school Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Vanja Vučinić

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

The Smileys were very concerned. Their dog Crumb is gone. If you knew Crumb, you would be worried, too. She is tiny, white, and fluffy, like a small snowflake but warmer. And she is gone.

Crumb!, they called her again and again. They searched all over the town but could not find their Crumb.

The next day, Mr. Smiley heard a noise at the front door. He opened the door, and there was their little Crumb. She was very wet and trembling.

A few days later, she disappeared! Again! She disappeared in the morning and returned late in the evening. She was also wet when she came back. Mr. Smiley was curious. And a bit worried, but he didn't mention that to his wife because women tend to exaggerate (at least he thought so).

Where's Crumb going? he wondered day by day. *Why is she wet when she comes back?* Those questions bothered him a lot.

One morning he went after Crumb like a true detective. He followed Crumb while she was going to the beach. When she came there, she ran into the ocean and started swimming. Mr. Smiley jumped into his boat, which was nearby (How conveniently!), and followed his dog. But Crumb swam like a champ. She got tired after a mile, so she climbed on a small rock and rested for a while. A few minutes later, the dog jumped back into the ocean and continued swimming. She swam for three hours without stopping. Then she finally arrived at her destination. She got out of the ocean, shook off the water, and headed towards a house on that little peninsula. Her owner followed her curiously while she went towards the house. A dog was waiting in front of the house. Crumb ran up to the dog, and the two dogs began to play. Mr. Smiley later found out that the dog's name was Spot. You would never guess, but Spot

was Crumb's boyfriend. Unfortunately, he lived on the peninsula far, far away from the town.

Mr. Smiley didn't know that an undercover reporter also followed Crumb for a while. So, he wrote a heart-warming story of two dogs in love. When the story hit the newspapers, people were amazed to read that Crumb swam for several miles every day to see her darling. The newspaper article awoke people's curiosity, so they would gather on the beach to see Crumb coming to the beach and running into the ocean, driven by her desire to see Spot. Some of them would follow the dog in love in their boats. The love story of two dogs made people aware of their emotions for others, but they hid them deeply because of their constant fear of getting hurt. It seems like Crumb and Spot are much cleverer than us humans!

Seeing the love between his beloved Crumb and her Spot, the Smileys decided to move to the peninsula so the two dogs could be together and spend their days playing. And simply being in love.

mentor: Ana Vrebac

institution: Primary school Kraljevica, Kraljevica

Nina Oštarić

SEE YOU IN HEAVEN

Heaven is a fifteen-year-old British girl who moved to the USA. She's very shy and filled with kindness. She's known as a quiet girl who always wears earphones and never takes them out. She's very clever and always gets good grades. No one actually knows her. She doesn't have any friends, but everyone wanted to meet the unique, mysterious girl. Little did they know that she's been struggling with depression since her twin sister died due to cancer. She didn't have any reason to stay, so on the New Year's Eve she decided to end everything and meet with her beloved sister again. As she took the bottle of pills and turned the music on, she fell asleep immediately.

'Wakey, wakey, little sister!', she heard the familiar voice. Only one person could call her this way, but how is it possible?

'Sky! OMG! I missed you so much!', tears ran down her face as she hugged her five-minute older sister.

'I missed you, too', Sky said, smile appearing on her face.

'I'm so glad we can finally be together again', Heaven hugged her tighter.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it's not your time, yet', Sky said breaking the hug.

'Come with me', she continued while taking Heaven's hand and leading her to the little red door.

'This is the door of the past. I have to convince you to go back, because you have a lot more to go through.' The door led them to the inside of a small wooden house.

'Wait, I know this house! This is where we grew up!', Heaven said when she saw the little self and her sister baking cookies with their grandma. They were listening to their grandma's favourite song. They danced and laughed and ate some of the cookies. The twins had a lot of fun that day.

'Look how happy you were then!', Sky said happily.

'That's because we were together, so I think I should stay with you here', Heaven said

trying to convince her sister.

'I knew it won't be easy...', Sky said quietly while walking out of the house, 'Come!' They went to another door, but this time it was green.

'This is the door of the present.' The twins went inside the door and saw their mother knocking on the door to Heaven's room: 'Heaven, darling, are you awake? It's almost midnight...', she opened the door and fell on her knees crying. She saw Heaven's lifeless body and called the ambulance.

'Mom...', Heaven said sadly.

'Mom!', this time she shouted.

'Mom! I'm fine, you don't have to cry. I'm with Sky now!', tears started appearing in her eyes.

'She can't hear you, Heaven', Sky told her gently.

'She's been trying so hard to make you happy. She can't believe you could ever do this. It's breaking her heart knowing that that she failed.', Sky continued...

'I don't want her to be sad. She's a great mom.' Now Heaven's crying hardly...

'Mom, I'm okay', she's crying harder.

'Heaven, we have to go,' Sky said and touched Heaven's shoulder.

'Let me guess, to the door of the future,' Heaven said while wiping tears from her eyes.

'You're right,' Sky confirmed trying to cheer her sister up. The door of the future was extremely dark blue. As dark as the future. The twins felt it when they saw a woman. She was very skinny, drinking and smoking at the bar. It was obvious she had already drunk too much.

'Jenie, we're closing. You should go home and get some sleep, honey,' the waitress said worriedly to the woman.

'I cannot sleep at all. I lost them both, Martha. I'm a terrible mother,' the woman said taking another sip of her drink. It was the twins' mother. They couldn't believe how she changed.

'Mom,' Heaven whispered. The woman made her way home. She was barely walking. When she came home, everything in the house was broken, even some windows. It was really cold inside. No electricity, no light, no fire to heat the house. When the woman opened the fridge, there wasn't any food, only alcohol. She took the bottle of tequilla and opened it.

'After you died, she started drinking and smoking. She wasn't stable enough so she got fired. She doesn't have enough money to pay the bills and they're going to take her house,' Sky said sadly.

‘No, this isn’t true. Sky, tell me you’re joking. Please, Sky!’, Heaven couldn’t believe what she did. She didn’t want her mother to feel this way. She felt guilty.

‘Sky, I want to go back. I can’t let her go through this alone.’ Sky wasn’t answering, ‘Please, Sky, I’ll get better. I’ll help mom. I’ll be a better daughter, I promise, just let me go,’ she was crying so hard. She started felling like she was falling. She heard a loud whistling and saw a light.

‘We’ve got her. She’s with us now,’ the doctor said as Heaven was waking up. She was breathing heavily.

‘Darling, you’re okay. You have overdosed, but you’re lucky your mom called us on time,’ the doctor told her.

‘Can I see my mom, please?’, Heaven asked.

‘Of course,’ the doctor smiled to her.

‘Hi, honey!’, her mom said with tears in her eyes.

‘Mom, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I did this. It will never happen again, I promise,’ she started crying.

‘It’s okay now. It doesn’t matter because you’re still with me.’

‘I love you mom!’, she barely said because of her sobing.

‘I love you, too, Heaven,’ her mom said and hugged her.

Now, ten years later, Heaven is happily married and has divine triplets, two daughters and a son. The youngest daughter’s name is Sky, named after her aunt. The other daughter’s name is Adore which means „to love“, and the son’s name is Bo which means „to live“.

mentor: Adriana Kranjac Mišković
institution: Primary school "Rikard Katalinić Jeretov" Opatija

Laura Herceg

THE ROYAL VICTIMS

Chapter I

It all began on the night of the incident. Numerous shiny stars in the sky reflecting in the prince's dark brown eyes as he practised dancing the waltz with his older sister, Samantha, on one of the many balconies of their sophisticated palace. The elegant dance was too complex for the young prince to learn, disregarding his title. His sister giggles as he messes up the steps every time. 'Will you stop snickering for once?' asked Maxwell, slightly frustrated. 'I apologize' she replies 'I just can't accept that one of the most well-known member of the royal family can't memorize such a simple dance.' 'It's because of these shoes! They're slippery on this type of flooring! Are you calling me an incapable weasel?' Max answers, hoping to quarrel with his sister, as it was one of his favourite activities with her. 'No, I'm not. I just find it unusual for your new 'Oxford' shoes to be slippery on concrete.' Maxwell, seeing there is no fun in fighting with his sister, who already has a good point, surrenders: 'Dammit Samantha! There's no point in it if you're gonna ruin the entertainment.' Samantha answers while chuckling: 'Alright, I'm sorry. We'll call it a tie this time.' Maxwell doesn't say anything; he gives a slight nod of approval and continues dancing, this time flawlessly.

Chapter II

The royal siblings danced the whole night, both losing track of time. Edward came into the room that was connected to the balcony they were dancing on and, without a choice, had to call them to go to sleep. 'I see you two spent the whole night dancing, but I'm afraid that you have to go to sleep, your Majesty.' – 'Edward what did I tell you about calling me a Majesty? We both know that I am nowhere near being as

sophisticated as kings and princes.’ Maxwell replied, giving a slight smile. Edward didn’t say anything, he just smiled back and left to leave the two alone. ‘Well, you heard him, we should be getting ready for our beauty sleep.’ Max jokingly said. Samantha being already exhausted responded: ‘Very gladly, your Majesty’ The siblings gave each other a peck on the cheek before separating into their ways to their bedrooms. Samantha throughout this whole period had an odd feeling, as if something bad would happen but didn’t think much of it. She couldn’t find where this feeling of fear was coming from. It was preventing her from getting sleep. She’s had enough of it when she decided to go see Maxwell. Once she found a dagger covered in blood in front of his room, she instantly knew something wasn’t right. Shivers went down her spine. She opened the door of his room. The high-pitched scream that came out of her mouth, followed by loud crying and whimpering echoing down every hall within the palace, will haunt everyone who witnessed it for the rest of their lives. Sam hurried to her brother, shaking him, trying to wake him: ‘Max! Maxwell! Please wake up! Stop playing games with me! Please wake up! Please...’ but unfortunately, it was too late. The family’s workers all suddenly came in, gasping at the horrific scene of the young prince, laying on one of the palace’s luxury chairs, with a stab wound on his heart. At this point, Samantha was kneeling by her dead brother’s side. The workers moved her away from the lifeless body of her little brother, trying to calm her down – but nothing worked. She couldn’t let go of his very cold and bloodless hand even if she tried. Her blue eyes swelled up with tears, which led to making a concernedly amount of tears that were dripping down her face faster than the Thames’ flow. Her shaky voice made it difficult to communicate with the people around her, so she just sat there sobbing, taking every chance possible to stay quiet. When the physician came, he closed Max’s brown eyes for the last time, looked at the watch on the wall, then uttered: ‘Time of death – 13:26.’ Samantha after his statement finally let go of her brother’s hand, now warm, by covering her face & letting a loud, muffled scream, showing her pain. The reason behind covering her face was that she didn’t want to sadden anyone even more, she didn’t want them to feel sorry for her. Edward, being amongst the big audience that has created, makes his way to Samantha, comforting her and whispering: ‘My deepest condolences Madam.’ ‘Thank you Eddie’ she answered while struggling to speak, ‘Could you please...’ – ‘Could I what Madam?’ – ‘Could you please lead all these people out of this room?’ – ‘Of course Madam.’ Edward replied, knowing she was trying to take her seriously by calling him a nickname she rarely used. He escorts every single person out of the room, leaving the siblings alone for the last time, in peace. Before he left, he looked at Maxwell and

mumbled: ‘May you rest in peace my son’ with a single tear dripping down his face. After a tedious amount of time spent in silence, Samantha whispered: ‘So this is it? I always thought I would be the first one to pass, but here we are.’ She took a deep breath and, while trying to find the right words, continued: ‘I promise you to find the person who did this to you and torture them, making their life miserable, just as they made mine.’ She then proceeds to kiss him delicately on his pale forehead and barely raises the strength to get up. While leaving the room, Samantha looks back at her late brother and mouths ‘I love you.’ while giving a gentle smile. ‘You win’

Chapter III

Samantha didn’t eat nor sleep for months after the incident. The eye bags under her eyes were almost black, due to her lack of much-needed rest from all the mourning and trauma. Her noticeable ribs, with barely any skin on them, terrified anyone who would come to visit her. Samantha developed a habit of moving forwards and backwards continuously while crouching on the floor. The only thing that was on her mind were the numbers ‘1 3 2 6’. She started talking to herself as a way to comfort herself. Many people started assuming she was developing schizophrenia, which *would* explain her hallucinations as well. ‘Poor girl’ Edward thought to himself ‘no one is considerate enough to take care of her.’ Edward was by Sam’s side for every stage of her mourning. He would bring her food, bathe her and read her some of her once favourite books every single day. Presuming it would help her remember some repressed or forgotten memories, Edward retold Samantha many memorable anecdotes of the Wilson siblings. Even if he was in pain watching her in this state, he did everything he could to try to bring her to the real world, but didn’t know how. He was looking for the light in these dark times, but got lost himself. Edward started losing hope for Samantha. One day he got an idea – doing the things Max and Sam enjoyed doing together. He tried painting with her, playing hide-and-seek in their garden, singing...then he remembered. The night of the murder, he took many glances at Samantha with Maxwell dancing the waltz, before he sent them to get some sleep. This was his last hope; he was desperate to bring her back. At 10 o’clock in the evening, he took Sam to the exact balcony she and Max danced on. Edward, with a speck of hope, started dancing with Samantha. Much to his surprise, she started calming down. Her eyes closed. She slowly laid her head down on his shoulder while quietly humming to the Franz Schubert’s ‘Andante con Moto’. ‘Oh Maxwell, when did you learn these steps?’ she says, grabbing Edward tightly while pulling his body closer to hers. Edward, with tears of joy in his eyes, exhales: ‘Samantha? Is it

really you Samantha?’ With a slight look of confusion, Samantha opens her eyes to reveal Edward in front of her. Realizing that he successfully released her from all the madness also filled Sam’s eyes with tears of happiness. ‘Edward? Am I hallucinating?’

– ‘No Madam, you’re not!’ he exclaims, comprehending what he just achieved.

– ‘Edward! Oh my dear, sweet Eddie! I can’t believe you did it!’

– ‘Neither can I Madam!’

– ‘How long has it been, a few months?’

– ‘I’m terribly sorry, but it’s been two years Madam...’

– ‘Really? Two years?’

– ‘That’s correct Madam.’

– ‘Oh Edward, in those two years you never learned to call me by my first name?’

– ‘No Ma-’ he stops and corrects himself ‘Samantha.’

They continued dancing gracefully.

Chapter IV

Samantha later that night revealed to Edward that her parents were behind it all. They would forbid letting her eat any kind of food and let her sleep. They tried to make her crazy by doing horrible things to her, her mother beating her whenever Sam would eat and her father sneaking into her bedroom at night, assaulting her sexually. They threatened her with death if she told anyone about this, especially Edward – they knew how much he meant to Sam, adding his dismissal as an additional threat. They also ordered her to lean forward and backward while whispering random sentences and the numbers ‘1 3 2 6’. Samantha, having no choice, followed her parents’ orders, but some segments of the ‘craziness’ were honest due to Samantha being the victim of trauma seeing her dead brother and sexual assault caused by her father. The Wilsons, respectively the king and queen, were always out of their minds and passionate about making anyone’s life a living hell, but not in public as to not ruin their reputation. So when they had children, they let all their rage out on them, for their entertainment. The Windsor parents liked to give very rude comments on their children’s appearance. The reason she finally let all the ‘madness’ go was because she couldn’t take it anymore and confessed it to Edward while she could, in private. Edward, with a look of shock that took over his face, was in disbelief. He couldn’t find the words with which he would cheer up Sam. He just gave her a big, tight hug which made her cry. It wasn’t clear to Edward if she was crying in joy, sadness or anger, but it didn’t matter. She was in his arms and he wasn’t letting her go. The whole time Samantha was weeping, he was planning how can he get rid of the

royal parents. Edward excused himself and secretly took a Colt Army revolver from an old cabinet that was in the room. Without any explanation, he left the room to find Samantha's father, Jonathan, in front of the door. He has overheard their whole conversation. Jonathan was holding a Flintlock pistol in hopes that Edward would be unarmed. Edward pretended to surrender, slowly raising his hands upwards, hiding the gun in the back pocket of his trousers. 'Very well Edward, nice and steady.' Jonathan said as he was pointing the gun to the butler's head. Just before he could pull the trigger, Edward took out his revolver, pointing it at the king's heart. Two loud gunshots were heard in the halls of the palace.

Chapter V

Samantha became a novelist, paraphrasing some of the important events in her life, thinking she would find the real purpose of life, since she didn't see the purpose of hers. On her own birthday, she consumed a handful of pills, thinking it will end her suffering, or at least ease the emotional pain she felt. Samantha takes a brief moment; in which she realizes what deed she did & immediately makes herself throw up on top of the kitchen counter. The final moments of her life on Earth she spent falling on the kitchen tiles on which she choked herself in her vomit.

mentor: Josipa Kardum

institution: Primary school Benkovac, Benkovac

Ivan Ivić

THE LEGEND OF THE GREAT CHILLINGCOLD

Here begins the legend of the great ChillingCold.

Somewhere in Bilerend the great ChillingCold was frozen in his throne with his sword Ikylaus in his hands.

He was frozen for hundreds of years until...

Bilerend is home to many races, dwarfs, humans, orcs, elves, and trolls. Every race has its settlement located somewhere in Bilerend. Bilerend is a magical place, there are a lot of legends and stories about it. Dwarfs live in a big mountain called Dwarfonia. Humans live close to dwarfs. The land around the mountain Dwarfonia is flat so humans inhabited that land. Orcs and trolls live in one big wooden city.

Elves are the most magical race of them all and they live on floating islands that have big towers made of magical stones.

History says humans and dwarfs formed an alliance called “The alliance of the two swords”, giving the humans and dwarves equal control. While orcs, trolls, and elves have an alliance called “the Horde” where the orcs are in control, the other two races have no control over it.

All races have different cultures and traditions but all races have one thing in common and it’s “The legend of the great ChillingCold” and his sword Ikylaus who were frozen. Legend says that Xindius the mage froze him in their battle of the Bilerend. Xindius froze him with his mage powers chanting a spell that froze ChillingCold in his throne with his sword Ikylaus. Xindius is half-elf half-human and he is a very skilled mage and one of the most powerful mages in all of Bilerend.

No one can confirm that he ever existed, but elders say that he is coming when the ice storm arrives.

One day, many moons passed, on a cold winter day the large ice storm arrived and the elders of all races knew that he is coming back.

The storm passed, as a consequence, a large earthquake happened that created craters in the earth. After the earthquake, a thunderous explosion was heard, and it came from the frozen part of Bilerend, where ChillingCold's throne was said to be.

All races arranged a meeting in the Elves' capital city. All leaders of all races knew that they have to do something until it's not too late.

Every one of the races started recruiting soldiers and reinforcing their cities for defence.

No one knew what ChillingCold was planning nor that he had a whole frozen army called Death Legion frozen under his throne. His first move was to send his army to destroy and kill all elves.

His army arrived and they started throwing magic skulls at the Elves' city which made their floating islands fall. His army then went to the ruins of the once floating city and killed all remaining elves.

Only twelve elves of thousands of them remained. They went to Dwarfonia to seek shelter, which they got. They told the race leaders that ChillingCold is unstoppable.

His next targets were orcs and trolls. His army came to their city and started bombing it with fire skulls which set their whole city on fire, but orcs and trolls still managed to charge at his army. They were stopped by the Death legion's archers in a matter of seconds following their charge.

The remaining orcs and trolls went to Dwarfonia to seek shelters as the elves did. The race leaders knew that they all need to reinforce Dwarfonia mountain and the surrounding area. They knew that ChillingCold will attack soon so they got to work. Three layers of walls, one hundred and fifty catapults, two hundred and fifty ballistae, and twenty-five Trebuchets were built. They were prepared for the attack. Three days after reinforcing Dwarfonia, ChillingCold's army arrived at flat land in a formation that was terrifying to even look at.

The races were afraid but prepared. They started bombing them with large stones and arrows from ballistae. They made some casualties but it was nothing because Death legion had so many soldiers you couldn't even tell if u killed a hundred, or ten. The Death legion started charging to the gates of Dwarfonia, the gate broke and Death legion soldiers started to enter and make their way to the main gate of Dwarfonia. After intense fighting, a lot of casualties on both sides the Death legion made it to the front of the main gate. ChillingCold showed himself and challenged the same

person who froze him for the first time, one that was called “Xindius”.

He came out and told ChillingCold that he doesn’t want to fight in front of the gates of Dwarfonia but only in front of ChillingCold’s throne. ChillingCold agreed and they both went to the location of his throne to duel.

The duel started and ChillingCold was seemingly more powerful than Xindius, but Xindius didn’t give up. He managed to push ChillingCold away from him and then he started chanting the spell that made all heroes from “The alliance of the two swords” and “Horde” assist him in the fight, Souls of Heroes gave all of their might and strength to him.

Getting more powerful, he started to fight again.

ChillingCold wasn’t scared at all and he continued to attack Xindius. Xindius all of a sudden managed to cut him on his torso and hand. This made ChillingCold drop Ikylaus.

This was his chance and Xindius took it. He chanted a spell to freeze him forever and make him face eternal pain of hunger and being awake for the time he is frozen. ChillingCold’s last words were “Thinking you can beat me is pathetic, I will be back and all will pay!”

Xindius once more froze ChillingCold his army vanished in a cloud of blue smoke.

It is now 900 years later... Strange noises can be heard coming from the Frozen part.

mentor: Lucija Pučo Lacmanović
institution: Primary school Benkovac

Magdalena Čerina

AURELIAS

The sun burned down on the exposed skin of the people crowding the streets, creating a mildly uncomfortable heat as they shopped in the market.

It was a special day, the one Silas had finally built enough confidence to speak to the girl who had been clouding his mind since he first laid eyes on her.

The yells of sellers mingled in the air as they tried to sell whatever they could, while beggars asked for any spare change, only to be met by awful words and disgusted stares.

The noise had become something familiar to Silas in the week or so since he stumbled across the village. He had become used to the organized chaos of the market and learned its schedule like the back of his hand.

That way he knew just when to make his way towards the florist, where the blonde girl would always visit and buy a single sunflower.

As the city bell rang at 4 pm, the crowd got even bigger with the added bodies of the boys who had just been dismissed from school and the girls who were running out of their homes to meet the boys.

And then he saw her.

By technical standards, she wasn't pretty. Her hair was fizzy and somewhat unkempt as if the person who had tried to style it gave up after failed attempts. She had blemishes adorning her cheeks and acne scars following her hairline. She had plenty of freckles sprinkled around her face and arms that could almost distract someone from her pale ivory skin. Her nose wasn't straight, or buttoned, but curved downwards ever so slightly. She didn't have a slim figure like girls her age had, she had a belly, only a small gap separating her thighs.

But her smile. Oh, how he adored it. It was a smile that could melt ice. Her smile could warm up even the cruelest of hearts.

And her eyes. They were nothing short of enchanting. Along with pools of ember, her eyes had tiny, almost unnoticeable tints of gold.

She wasn't the type of pretty you'd see hanging off the arm of the emperor, but the pretty you'd see in a sculpture that was set front and center of a museum.

She wasn't the type of beauty you'd see reciting lines on a stage, but the beauty said play was written about.

She wasn't a model, she was a muse. And to Silas, she was the most astounding being to grace this world.

He watched subtly as she made her way through the crowd and took a note of the bundle of books tied together by a neat blue ribbon that was tucked under her arm. These implied she was smart, at least in the sense that she was one of few women who were thought to read.

"Hello." Her soft voice greeted the florist kindly, receiving a smile in return.

"Good afternoon, dear," The older woman welcomed, "the usual?"

The woman already began making her way to the stand of sunflowers as if the girl had already told her the answer.

"Yes, please." The girl smiled, looking at her feet shyly. "Thank you."

She reached for her money pouch until Silas made his move and stepped forward.

"Allow me, beautiful women like yourself shouldn't have to pay for themselves." He grinned, laying down the amount of money asked for.

Rose glow tinted her cheeks. "Thank you for the offer, it's truly kind of you, but you don't need to waste your money on me. You should save it for more valuable items."

"Nonsense." He reassured her. "Might you add a few lilies of the valley onto that order?" The florist noted, adding lilies Silas asked for. "Thank you so much, here you go, and have a lovely day." Silas thanked, handing the money to the florist, before picking the flowers up from the wooden counter.

"And here you go." He told, towards the girl this time, placing the sunflower in her hand and tucking the lilies behind her ear. "Beautiful." He mused in a quiet tone, which apparently wasn't quite enough, as the girl's tinted cheeks got a shade darker. She mumbled an awkward 'thank you,' eyes wandering anywhere but the man in front of her.

"I'm Silas." He introduced himself, holding out his hand for the girl to shake.

"Aurelia." She replied, slipping her hand into his, a giggle falling from her mouth as he gently raised to his lips, pressing a quick kiss on the back of her palm.

"Beautiful name for a beautiful lady." He winked, the ends of his lips tugging upward at her flustered state. "May I ask," He began, his eyes set on her books. "What are those about? They're a lot larger than the boys' textbooks."

Her face lit up at the question, "Astronomy," she beamed.

Silas couldn't help but gape at her smile, it was one of the most beautiful things he had seen in the rather long time he had been alive.

"My father's an astronomer, so I learned a lot about the stars from a very young age. They're quite fascinating, really. You know, each constellation can be connected to a story." The girl rambled as she and Silas started to walk through the town alongside each other.

She took a break from her speech to look over at Silas who was looking at her intently with a soft smile. "Sorry." She breathed out. "You asked of the book, not a life story." "No, by all means, continue." He told her. "You have a lovely voice."

Her voice, although relatively hushed, was soft and sweet, like the feeling of cotton and the scent of fresh rain. But perhaps even those comparisons didn't do her voice justice. Her calm and even tone was glorious as it was soothing.

Even if she chose to change the topic of the conversation to the most draining and monotonous topics, Silas knew he would still listen.

Aurelia grinned brightly before continuing to talk of stars while the two continued walking.

Neither had any idea where they were going, but with Aurelia so wrapped up in her stories and Silas so wrapped up in Aurelia, it'd be surprising if they even registered that they were walking. But they were walking, all the same, letting fate guide them in whatever direction.

By the time night fell, the two had found themselves landing all around the village, before finally making it back to Aurelia's home.

"Will I see you again?" She questioned, turning her head around to face him as she opened the door of her home.

"I can come by the market again tomorrow if it's something you'd like. We could go for another walk." He offered, a small smile on his face as his mind prayed for her to say yes.

"I'd love that." She grinned.

"Perfect, I'll see you tomorrow, then." He winked, turning and making his way back out of the village.

"Silas, wait!" Aurelia called after him before he could make it any further, and as he spun around in her direction, he felt soft lips pressed against his cheek.

"Have a safe trip home." She told softly, "Goodnight."

“Goodnight, Aurelia.” He replied, not even attempting to hide the foolish grin that crept onto his face.

It would be safe to say, it wasn’t just Aurelia who left with blazing cheeks that night.

Silas was a man of his word, so when the clock struck 4 the following day, Aurelia found him leaning against the floral stand, a bouquet of spring flowers with a single sunflower centerpiece in hand.

They followed a similar routine to that of the day before, falling into easy conversation, letting their feet drag them anywhere and everywhere until night fell once again and Aurelia wished him a safe trip home with a kiss on the cheek and promise to meet again the following day.

That same cycle continued for two weeks, with Silas’ feelings towards the girl only getting stronger. Every moment with Aurelia felt like a revitalization of the soul, he came away from their meetings each day feeling freshened and overjoyed.

It wasn’t hard to notice the change in the man, nor how late he’d come home every night.

The first to notice was Silas’ best friend-- Estelle.

She then confronted him about it, making him tell her everything or else she’d have to find it out on her own, and was she a sneaky girl. So Silas told her everything.

But the poor girl was close to tearing her hair out at Silas’ gushes about Aurelia.

Now, don’t get her wrong, she was happy for her best friend, overjoyed even, but she just wished he would live up to his strength and ask the lovely girl he fancied officially out already.

“You always make a point to Cyrus that you’re brave, right?” She raised her eyebrow at him, “So grow up and make a move.”

He thought about it for a moment before shaking his head, “No, she wouldn’t go for me. Plus we don’t age, she’d figure out that there’s something going on eventually.”

“So tell her.” The curly-haired girl shrugged her shoulders.

At this, Silas fell into a state of shocked splutters. “You do realize that’s Damaris’ harsh no rule, it’s the thing she’s strictest on, other than not interfering with human conflicts.”

“So? I won’t tell. Plus, when did you ever listen to those rules, anyway?” Estelle asked.

“Tell Aurelia how you feel, then tell her about you.”

After a moment of thinking, Silas stood sharply from the end. “Okay! Yeah, I’m going tell her.” He said, standing still.

“Go!” She hurried him.

“Este, it’s past midnight, she’s sleeping!” Silas pointed out, gesturing to the windows of his room.

“Oh,” Estelle dragged out the ‘o’, looking out the window, “Then it must be the first thing you do when you see her tomorrow!”

“I promise.” Silas grinned, eager to stay to his vow.

The following day was the one that would be carved into Silas’ mind for eternity, playing over and over like a vilifying memorial.

When he woke that day, Silas could tell something wasn’t quite right, something was going to happen.

When he came across the first deviant in weeks while patrolling, he was rather panicked.

Oh, if he only knew.

By the time the plumes of smoke caught his eyes, Silas knew he was too late, he could only hope he wasn’t, but even with Aurelia’s joyfulness and faith, he still saw hope as insignificant.

And yet, it’s all he could think to do as he raced towards the burning village.

He ran through the smoke, over the bodies, and ignored the stench of blood and decay that he’d been exposed to over centuries.

“Aurelia!” He called out for her as loud as he could upon reaching the market.

He tore through the rubble searching for anything distinguishable, praying she wouldn’t be among the fallen ones.

But when he reached the beach, his stomach turned hollow.

There she was, sprawled on the sand, he could see three children safe in the distance, each of them clutching the blue book ribbon, and could only assume she died helping them.

Crimson liquid had seeped out of her wounds when she fell from the dune as the red decorated the sand to form a sadistic mosaic.

Silas fell to his knees beside her.

His first move was to close her eyes, he couldn’t bear to see those once bright, lively eyes blown wide and empty; lifeless.

As his tears fell onto her ashy face, Silas took her in one last time.

Her rosy lips were now dull and cracked, her hair was matted with dried blood, and tear tracks stained her round cheeks. But even in death, she was the most beautiful person he’d ever seen.

In the weeks he'd known her, Silas had been hopelessly in love with her. Then it crawled into his mind. He loved her. He was in love with her. But she never knew how he truly felt, nor did he know how she felt; if she loved him.

So it was at that exact moment of realization that Silas swore to find her in every lifetime.

And he would be better. He would be braver. He would be faster.

He would be everything she deserved and more. She deserved the world, even if the world was cruel and took her from him all too soon, he vowed to give it to her on a silver platter.

He would be there when he was needed the most.

And if somebody was to think the death of Aurelia marks the end of this story, leaving Silas to walk into the sunset with nothing but a promise and a heavy heart, then they're gravely mistaken.

This was only the beginning.

The beginning of a tale is just as heart-wrenching as it is heartwarming. As a story of love in any and every form.

Searching for forever is a long journey, but Silas was willing to do anything.

mentor: Tatjana Mioković
 institution: Primary school Retfala, Osijek

Ana Babić

BLUSHING SAKURAS

The cheerful warm rays shined through the ruddy blossoms that had just sprouted on the cherry trees. A faint gust swayed the branches, creating a shower of rosy hues in the air. The birds sang in a utopian cadence. I felt the tender dance of the viridescent grass nuzzling my bare feet.

I admired the myriad of patterns and shapes that the dim milky clouds carved in the azure sky. I shut my eyelids lightly for a few ticks, then deeply inhaled. I was delighted when I was in her presence.

The fluffy fleece blanket shifted on the ground as she plopped next to me. I swiftly opened my eyes, curiously turning my head around. Her luminous smile graced my view and I couldn't resist but to warmly grin back. Tiny crinkles formed all over her delicate complexion as a joyous giggle escaped her rubicund lips. I cherished every single part of her existence – she seemed so heavenly. So sweet.

I carefully, unhurriedly eyed her for what seemed like an eternity. Her flocculent bronze curls twirled together, caressing her shoulders as the wind blew. The aqua tones of her gape were painted with gold stripes; it reminded me of an ocean whispering its farewells to the setting sun. Speckles of stardust littered her cheeks as the wine-red tints upon them grew.

My gaze veered to her scarlet lips precisely when they grew into an aglow grin again. "Hi." The harmonies of her ethereal voice reverberated in my mind. Her eyes were deliberately searching for mine – then, our gazes met. I was staring achingly at the sparkles in her opalescent lustrous eyes.

I sluggishly raised my eyebrows, one after the other, as my eyes broadened nervously. The air around me began turning excessively humid and muggy; it was difficult to catch a breath. My blaring heartbeat muffled her voice in my head; it was insufferable.

A flurry of fluorescent twirling blossoms wafted above our heads. In a panic, I dropped on my back and took my gape off of her, yet I still couldn't picture anything but her in my mind. Ah, she was so lovely.

Abruptly, I felt the mild touch of her hot fingertips reaching out to the rims of my flushing face. My heart nearly stopped. She reverently twirled a chocolate-colored curl behind my ear, gently stroking my skin. She was smiling vaguely, her head right above mine. As she leaned in closer, I felt the warmth of her body more. A whiff of lemongrass and dandelions radiated between us – it was soothing. Her wispy ginger coils tenderly tickled my face. The sunshine rinsed her skin in gleaming aureate shades; I could observe her better than ever now that she was inches away.

“Your eyes are really...” she murmured slowly, trailing off. I trembled at the mellow tone of her voice. “Nice. They’re nice,” she settled on, eyes so soft and shimmering. She spoke simply, but I was melting on the inside. I never would’ve guessed that I could believe something like this... but the melodies of her voice rang in a tone that made it seem like she was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of affection she held for me.

I was waiting for her. She was now upon me, a vivid, ravishing goddess of a person. All I could do was wait, but the bitter impatience and suspense inside me grew huge. Her procrastination was destroying me.

Finally, she moved. It happened so fast – so gloriously, splendidly fast.

She softly clasped our lips together, closing her eyes. I sighed, dissolving in the taste of her sugar-coated strawberry lips. They were pert yet round, glowing in a lovely tint of rose. They were shiny, beautiful. I sought more.

As I loosened, I felt as if my limbs were gradually sinking into the fresh leafy grass. This saccharine feeling is what I have awaited for ever since I set my eyes on her. Inside my chest, pure contentment flowered, powerful. Her warm, slightly moist palm smoothly slid down the ledges of my face. She mildly nuzzled the nape of my neck. A rain of fond chills ran down my spine.

I felt as if I was evaporating through the silky cotton clouds that painted the sky; as if I was deliberately receding into the luminescent depths of her iridescent eyes. I could barely breathe, but as long as we remained like this it wouldn’t matter.

Instants later, she marginally tilted her head back. Her mesmerizing ocean eyes blinked at me a few times. The luscious chestnut curls brushed my cheeks again as she leaned back in. This time, she softly bumped her forehead into mine and gently placed her palms on my scarlet dyed cheeks, cupping my face. This time, she seized a moment to eye me.

Helpless, vibrant giggles escaped my chest and fluidly scurried out of my mouth. Her gleeful chuckles met mine, they echoed together, composing an unmatched, idyllic symphony. The sound of her laugh was the most alluring tune I have ever heard.

As she gradually pulled away, I scanned her elegant moves. She laid back down and curled up into the blanket. Was it selfish to think she was too far apart now? She hesitated, but regardless, I found her finely freckled hand on top of mine. Carefully lifting it, she drew me into the safe, homey warmth of the blanket. My head drifted into her fragile shoulder, cuddling closer. I was wrapped up in her affectionate arms, deeply breathing her in. Something I have never felt before caused a muffled, loving tremor in my heart. She smelled like home.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: Primary school Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko,
Branch school Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Vladimir Kljajić

LOST AND FOUND

One day a dog named Rex got lost in a big city. Rex wandered around all day, and then he met a good old fox. The old fox asked him where he was going, and Rex said he was looking for his family. The old fox promised to help him, and together they set on an adventure. The old fox took him to the old wagon, and they went to the circus next. Rex wondered why they were going to the circus, and the wise old fox said that many of his friends would gladly help them.

When they arrived at the circus, the old fox saw his old friends - Funny Bear, Max the Dog, and Sky the Giraffe. The old fox asked them if they wanted to help Rex find his family. Although they were working at the circus, they decided to help them, setting off on the grand adventure. Funny Bear made them laugh by telling hilarious jokes. Sky the Giraffe constantly hit his head on the branches, which was funny.

When they arrived in the town's vicinity, Funny Bear, Sky the Giraffe, and the wise fox were not allowed to enter. So only Rex and Max entered the city where they saw a large crowd of people. Rex spotted his owner in the middle of the group. Max told him not to go there because it was dangerous but to wait for everyone to disperse. It was then when Rex saw his owner again, and the man recognized him. They headed home together, but Rex's owner noticed Max and realized that it was his dog when he was a little boy. But he got lost many years ago. And now, thanks to Rex, he found Max, too. The two dogs lived together and remained close friends with Funny Bear, Sky the Giraffe, and the wise fox. They were lost for some time but then they were found and reunited with their owner – they were family again.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: Primary school Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko,
Branch school Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Božana Gvero

THE MESSAGE

Twenty years ago, my family and I were on a road trip. I was eleven. We were going camping close to Sagan lake. My mom Lisa, dad William, brother Michael and our dog Meko loved to spend time there, and I did too. The lake was big and full of fish, and all around, there was a forest full of squirrels, birds, bears, and foxes - full of life. We used to go fishing and swimming thereon during hot summer days.

When we arrived at the lake, we found a place for a tent and lit the fire. The plan was to make a mouth-watering barbecue. My mom and I prepared meat and mushroom my brother picked in the forest. Our dog Meko ran around us while looking at the still raw meat like he didn't eat for months. Even though he was old, he ran like a newborn puppy when he smelt food. At the same time, my brother and dad were looking for rocks and wood.

The sun was setting, it was getting colder, so I went back to the car to get a jacket and everything else I needed. But then I heard my dog bark in an unusual way because he is usually very calm and has been here many times before. He never reacts when other forest animals are close, so his bark woke certain suspicion in me. I started to run towards my dog, and then I saw it. Suddenly, I saw the unidentified flying object. Up in the trees, it looked like a mirrored pyramid. With no sound and movement, just standing there and lurking and waiting. The light from it was so bright, just like the sunrise. There were no windows on it, panels maybe. I couldn't see anything inside it. And just all of a sudden - Poof! It vanished. The dog stopped barking, and we stared at each other speechlessly. My mom was also there, but I didn't see her due to my shock. When I finally spoke, 'Wha- what now?' mom answered, 'It will be the best to go home.' Dad agreed. 'I will put out the fire.' We didn't speak much after that, just a nod.

The next day I decided to go back to the lake to see if anything was left from their visit. I knew it could be dangerous and life-threatening, but my curiosity was too intense. I was with Meko, so I felt a bit safer. I brought my notebook where I write all my thoughts and draw everything that comes to my mind, so I decided to sketch the place and craft I saw last night. While drawing and describing, Meko found something. It looked like a ball, but it was shiny too. Weirdly, no one saw it at night. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted to keep it. Maybe it's an egg?! Crystal?! Or just a rock?! When I finally returned home, I didn't tell anyone about what I had found because I was scared, they would take it from me. I examined the thing. It looked like it had some magic inside it. Maybe one day, I'll find out what was inside it. Who made it? Where does it come from? And most importantly, how to use it?

After all these years, I still have the stone I found twenty years ago.

After all those years, I still enjoyed astronomy and extraterrestrial life. And now I'm working in a small science lab where we look for extraterrestrial life on other planets. Right now, I have a clue that there is some life out there. I call them Alails. Because they live underwater, they have a particular skin type, smooth but firm and strong. It increases their strength while swimming. Their long tails with large fins eventually accelerate when hunting or running away from danger. They are a type of extraterrestrials that live on a satellite called Moon Europa, one of 79 satellites of planet Jupiter. These aliens are not located on the surface but under the crust, where about 100 km of water is found. It extends to the depth. Alails are adapted to water, and people call them mermaids or reptilians because they look like them. You may think there is too cold on Moon Europa. But that's not the case. The rotation of Europa makes the atmosphere warmer, and geothermal warming is possible. They live in a world of 3 sectors - Surfaces, Middles, and Depths.

Each part has different lifestyles, and various types of Alails live there. Also, plants and animals differ from sector to sector. Alails are knowledgeable beings. They know about the existence of humans and have been in contact with them as so-called mermaids. Some of them live on planet Earth in the depths of the ocean, far away from humans. They can transform their bodies for smoother adaptation. That's how they got to Earth. They can look human too. Aggressive? Probably not. If they see us, they will act calm if we are relaxed. If we are antagonistic to them, they will be fierce. They're more like people than you might think. They also feel empathy, anger, happiness, sadness, compassion. Their diet is primarily based on fish-like creatures. They use words and sounds to speak. In their world, they have islands with houses that

move a little bit in the village or flutter in the sea. Families always stick together in clans. If we could get to their planet, they would examine us, and they would be interested in us just like we were and still are about them. But if we attack, they will attack too. But what if someone somewhere is sending a message to us? The fact is they left so many clues behind. They were attempting to show us the signs for something. Or the signs of something? They are intelligent. They made their whole life to be underwater. There is a lot of messages they left. That stone is still with me, and all I know we need is a power of the mind to unlock it. Meditation will help us a lot to use these kinds of things.

That day, my skeptical self changed, and I knew my future. I will never forget that day. They will come back. And I will be here waiting for them.

mentor: Tatjana Mioković

institution: Primary school Retfala Osijek

Lana Dizdar

A ROADTRIP TO NOWHERE

„Ugh they’re finally leaving.“ - Zelda said as she watched her parents go to their room. „Don’t stay up too late.“ - Zelda’s mother said as she left. „ Don’t worry I won’t.“ - Zelda replied in a gentle, soft voice.

Zelda was a beautiful, tall, self-effacing lady. She had frizzy, untamable dark hair, dark solemn eyes and a flat little nose. She has always been full of stress so she sneaks out of the house every night just to drive. She’s not going anywhere specific, she just does it as a stress relief.

When she heard that her parents are sleeping, she decided to leave. She grabbed her keys and gently opened the window. The night sky was aglow with bright city lights. The pale crescent moon shone like a silvery claw in the night sky. She gently stepped on the roof, and jumped on a little tree that was close to her window. When she got down, she rushed to the car and went on for a drive.

A long rough road stretched in front of her. Everything was quiet which made her feel better. She was driving for a few hours and then started to head back. When she came back, she got out of the car and headed to her window so she could sneak back in. She tried to open it, but the window was locked. Her tired eyes widened. She couldn’t believe that someone locked her window. Risking getting caught she went to the front door and unlocked it, she went inside and headed to her room.

Half asleep, stumbling into her room she froze. Her room was different. Squinting in the dark she saw something. A big black figure that stretched from the bottom to the top of her bed. A cold feeling came over her, someone’s in her bed. Trying to stay quiet so she doesn’t wake up the intruder in her bed she rushed to her parents’ room. She started knocking, as loudly as she could on her parents’ door. They opened the door and she immediately started telling them : „ Mom dad someone’s in my room, someone’s in my bed!“ For a second they just looked at her but then they started to

yell at her: „ Who are you?! How did you get into our house?!“ Confused and scared Zelda kept saying: „ Mom dad it's me, it's Zelda!“ „Zelda? What kind of prank is this? Who are you and how did you get in our house?!“ - her dad kept yelling. „But dad it's me your daught...“ „If you don't get out of our house I'll call the police“ - Zelda's dad said, cutting her off in the middle of her speech. Scared and confused she ran out of the house and got into her car.

On the verge of tears she drove to the police station and ran in. She was running through the police station trying to find a police officer. After a few minutes she saw one. She ran up to him sobbing : „Please, please! I need help! There's an intruder in my house and I think that they're forcing my parents to act really strange...!“ Police officer stopped her and said: „ Miss miss, I need you to calm down and just tell me your name.“ „My name is Zelda Pistoia“, she said while entering his office. They sat down, the coffee he was drinking filled the room with an aroma of dark, earthy grounds. „My name is Zelda Pistoia“ she said again. But the police officer went from looking worried to annoyed. He said : „ Miss I don't know which one of your friends put you up to this, or dared you to do this, but we're not putting up with these pranks anymore..“ She stopped him and said while stammering : „what do you mean, this isn't a prank!“ He looked at her and said „ Kid, there is no such thing as Zelda Pistoia, just get out.“

She started to walk out crying and confused, she grabbed her phone and checked her social media, but everything was gone. Any trace of her life on the Internet was gone. In tears, she looked up from her phone and saw random guy leaning against her car. He had platinum blond hair and a pale, pointed sneering face. He stared at her for a second and then said: „ They didn't believe me either“ seeing her confusion he started talking again : „I woke up this morning to everyone not knowing who I am, apparently I don't exist. I heard you in there while I was walking out, they told me the same thing, but now I know that I'm not crazy. Now, are you gonna stand there and stare at me or are you gonna help me figure out why we don't exist.“

Zelda agreed with what he said. They sat in the car and she started driving. „Oh also, my name is Hunter.“ -he said. Zelda smiled at him.„Where are we going?“ she asked, while looking at him. Their eyes met, but he broke it off „Anywhere“ - he said. After a few hours of driving, they noticed that the black car behind them is getting really close to their car. At first they thought that was nothing serious, but then the car started getting closer and closer and almost crashed into them. Zelda's heartbeat was faster than ever, she felt like her heart is gonna jump out of her chest. She was really scared so she didn't want to drive anymore. They tried to switch but the car behind them was so fast, that it crashed into them.

They woke up in a strange place. It was like a big white room with nothing in it. „Many people are staring at us.“ Zelda said quietly, as soon as she said that a tall strong man with long brown hair and sparkling grey eyes said : „ Welcome to non-existence,I'm Norphius and we are „ the background““ Zelda and Hunter looked at each other confused : „The background? Background of what?“ she said. „We are the backround of existence, the background of life.“ They were still confused but Hunter then asked angrily: „Why are we not existing and why are we here?!“ „You two young children are very important here, you see, we are fighting against agents, and you two are the only ones who can save everyone from them.“ Norphius said. „Save from what?, that doesn't explain anything!“ - Hunter replied. „ Listen, kid agents are the pure evil in this universe, they are erasing people from Earth and if they're not strong enough to come or fight back, they kill them. You two are the strongest souls in the universe and that's why you two are here, we need to end this once forever.“ - he said. Hunter and Zelda we're still a little confued but they wanted to help. „So what do we need to do?“ - Zelda asked. „ The most important thing is that you need to stay alive, if you die here, its like you have never been born. The mission is that you have to steal the silver dagger and stab the Owner of the time, we're going to prepare you for everything so don't worry.“ - said Norphius, while smiling at Zelda and Hunter.

Months passed, Zelda and Hunter were almost ready to fight against the agents. „The backgrounders“ prepared them for this day since they came here. Zelda and Hunter also started to like each other a lot so they were a great team. Norphius was proud of them, but now they had to show everything that Norphius was proud of. He gave them a map and a few guns so they can protect themselves. They had black suits so they can look imperceptible. „How are we going to know where the agents are?“ - said Hunter „Life is a journey, not a destination,you'll see“- Norphius answered and Zelda smiled. Zelda and Hunter went to complete their mission.

„The backgrounders“ took them to their destination and left them to do what they hadto. Hunter took the gun out of his pocket and started to sneak around while Zel-da guarded in case agents came. Hunter was trying to find the silver dagger that was supposed to be in one of the chambers. After an hour he found the dagger but the agents came. Zelda was running and trying to distract them, but they kept following Hunter. He grabbed the dagger and called „the backgrounders“ to come and help them. Zelda tried to protect Hunter and herself as best as she could, but the agents were stronger. Hunter hid the dagger in his pocket and started to run on the top of the building where „the backgrounders were supposed to pick them up. Zelda and Hunter got on the roof of the building and „the backgrounders“ were already there.

They picked them up and went back to the „non-existence“.

Their first mission was done, now they just had to stab the Owner of the time and everything would be normal. When they came to „non-existence“ one of the backgrounders“ said: „They took Norphius“ Zelda’s eyes started to tear up „What?“- she said. Hunter looked at them and said: „Listen, we have to save him and we have to save the universe, and we’re gonna do it“ Zelda looked at him with tears in her eyes: „How?“ she said. „I have a plan“- Hunter replied.

„The backgrounders“ took Zelda and Hunter to a „Castle of glass“ that’s the place where Norphius and Owner of the time were. They decided that Zelda is going to stab the time guy and Hunter is gonna save Norphius.

They got there. They took their guns and started to walk on glass stairs quietly. Hunter looked at Zelda and said : „Go to the window upstairs, there’s Norphius, when I walk in you gonna stab the Owner of the time okay?“ Zelda looked at him and said : „But what if the agents come?“ „Don’t worry he said, I’ll be fine.“

Everything was going as planned, Hunter was now in front of the room where Norphius was. He kicked the door and pointed the gun forward in case someone else was in. Norphius looked at him and said quietly: „What are you doing here kid, they’re gonna kill you!“ „I’ve come to save you, we have a plan.“ Hunter started to untie the rope from Norphius hands, they were ready to leave, but the agents came. The Owner of the time was standing right in front of them. He waited for Zelda to break the window and come in. All the guns were pointed on Hunter and Norphius a few minutes passed and they started to shoot into them. Zelda broke the window and stabbed the Owner of the time which made every agent disappear, forever.

She thought that it was finally over, but then she turned around and saw Hunter lying on the ground. She knelt next to him. His chest was stained red with blood. She felt as if the bullet had buried itself in her own heart; there was a painful hole in her chest. Overcome with grief she screamed for help. Everyone was just standing there because they couldn’t do anything. She closed her eyes and a tear trickled down her cheek as he breathed his last breath.

„Zelda are you okay?“- Zelda’s mother said. She opened her eyes and saw that she was in hospital. „What happened?“- she asked. „You were in a car crash“- her mother said. „No, no, no this couldn’t be just a dream, I was there really and Hunter and..“- Zelda said. „Honey it’s just a dream“-mom said and left the room. Zelda couldn’t believe it, but then the nurse came in and said: „Miss, this is for you“ she got a card that said „Everything was real, were coming for you when you start to feel better lots of love- Hunter..“

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: Primary school Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko,
Branch school Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Doris Klaić

VIRTUAL FRIENDS OR VIRTUAL STRANGERS

The online world today is more significant than ever. Technology and the internet have transformed the way people live, work, communicate and enjoy themselves. Social media has changed how we communicate and relate to the world around us. There are many online tools of communication such as email, Messenger, video conferencing, which enable us to do many tasks online without leaving the house. For instance, with applications like Facebook, we can update our status, change our profile, upload photos, and videos, participate in a live chat, and much more. It is also popular to hit the Like or Dislike icon to approve or disprove friends' statuses. By collecting more likes, one starts to feel good about themselves, which can be appealing. There are opportunities to gain many followers and become famous among most young people today. It can become quite profitable, too. There is a good feeling about making virtual friends. One can easily connect by clicking the button and connecting with someone from the other side of the world within seconds, which was not available before the internet. But is it safe to make virtual friends? Also, how trustworthy are the identities of our virtual friends?

A digital world has been advancing, and at the same time, our life has been changed by it whether we like it or not. Our online connections have become more common, and we spend more and more time online. Research shows that we will use online communication even more in the future.

When looking at the benefits of online communication, virtual friendship can be a good thing because we interact with friends instantly from the comfort of our homes. For example, some teenagers can be very shy or anxious so having online friends is

stress-free as they do not have to meet them face2face. Some friendships work better when they are behind the screen as they believe that nobody will judge their looks or what they wear. Some say that it stops discrimination and being judgmental. But is it the case? Sometimes it is easier to have an online friend to talk about things you may not want to discuss with people close to you in real life. Making virtual friends from around the globe can help you learn more about their culture and lifestyle. This learning can be quick and easy as people find it more comfortable to type than talk. Also, with the current ongoing covid-19 pandemic, our life has transformed from physical to virtual. People use online communication to keep in touch with distant friends and family via applications such as Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tok-Tok, Tinder, Facetime, and many others.

Similarly, the change has happened in schools, too, as education changed from the classroom to online platforms, which I find beneficial for many reasons such are the following: it allows us to attend the class from any location, providing an internet connection but also, virtual classroom lessons can be recorded, and shared. Learning online is also cheaper than traveling to school, and it is more eco-friendly as we do not need to use as much paper.

One should be aware that there are also dangers regarding making virtual friendships and using social media in general. For example, a lack of movement can make a person overweight, as you cannot go swimming online. Moreover, someone who spends lots of time online without breaks can develop a bad posture and other physical problems due to the amount of time spent in front of the screen. Furthermore, people can become addicted to online communication. At the same time, it can make you feel isolated.

Another bad side of virtual friendship is that you do not experience physical face-2face contact. As a result, you cannot read facial expressions and body gestures, a significant part of human language. It is also impossible to tell if someone is genuine with virtual friends. The absence of body language can lead to misunderstanding as we cannot express our emotions simply by using emojis.

Although I'm still a child, I would advise you not to befriend anyone online whom you do not know personally know. A more serious disadvantage of virtual friendship is cyberbullying because online communication can intimidate and manipulate. That can cause severe mental and emotional damage if nobody spots it on time.

Social media users are also at risk of being fooled by criminals because they can present themselves with a false identity and can trick us into giving information. Also, one must be careful what they write and how they write it. It is risky to share

too much information online about oneself as the other side can misuse it and harm you. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish how much information is safe to share with a virtual friend. Where does one draw a line?

Friendship is a key to our happiness. In my opinion, true friendship is about quality rather than quantity. As humans, we are social beings, and we have a fundamental need to share activities with our friends in real life. I think it is better to have a couple of true friends with whom you socialize offline and online rather than bunch of virtual *strangers*. And remember - true friends are not just a number on your Facebook, Instagram, or Tok-Tok. Also, hundreds of so-called friends on social media are not your true friends but mostly acquaintances. As social media is becoming trendier, we are under more pressure to become and remain a part of virtual communities. I want to say that we cannot entirely escape the virtual world of friends. However, we must be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the online world because it is essential to balance our online and offline worlds. I hope you I will achieve that balance soon.

mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Zorana Nikšić

SAD BOY

A boy started going to a new school because his parents moved to a new town. On the first day at the new school, the boy was tranquil, and he spoke with no one. He only introduced himself to his new classmates and then sat at a free desk in the classroom. He was remarkably absent and did not speak to anybody. All the pupils from his class were interested in finding out more about him and wondered where he comes from and what he likes to do, but he gave no answers to those questions.

Physical education class was not his cup of tea since pupils did everything in groups, and he was more of a loner. He was very cooperative in class and showed excellent knowledge in many subjects. His friends found that very interesting because they were not interested in learning that much.

The days went by, but the boy had not made any friends. The teachers were not paying attention to that because many children were at school. When school was over, all of the children were going home by bus, but the boy got picked up by a large black car, and no one knew where he lived or when his birthday was.

One day in the classroom, a beautiful girl arrived. She had long blond hair and large blue eyes. She sat by the boy because it was the only free seat in the classroom. She reached her hand to the boy and quietly introduced herself. The boy smiled and greeted her.

The days passed, and the two of them became very close. They liked spending time together.

One day the girl forgot her books at school and missed the bus, so she got terrified and started crying because she did not know how to go home on foot. She was always taking a bus ride to her house. But the boy offered her transportation since his driver was running a bit late, and they both got in the car and went home.

The boy's house located outside the town was huge and hidden behind a large fence. When he got home, the driver escorted him to a large living room where everything was impeccable and clean but had a weird cold feeling that came from the loneliness of the place.

The boy's parents were never home. They worked non-stop and had no time to spend with their boy, who was always alone and was missing the parents' warmth, love, and affection. The girl was the only one he talked to, and they talked about all sorts of everyday things that were interesting to them.

Their story continued, so when they got older, they applied to the same high school and became sweethearts. The girl had given him love for which he longed, erased his bitter loneliness, and opened her heart for him. His heart willingly made her his most precious part.

The boy's sadness was gone. And all that was there was true love and genuine happiness. And the feeling of complete belonging. Finally, he was home.

mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Dajana Jakšić

DIFFERENT KIND OF FAMILY

It's cold. The snow is falling, and the snowflakes are fluttering. Iva goes for a walk with her dog along the beaten paths to a nearby park.

Children in winter outfits are playing noisily. Some are taking part in a snowball fight, and others are making a giant snowman. The snowball body is waiting for children to put black buttons on it. They made the snowball head and put a carrot nose, coal eyes, mouth, and a pot on his head.

A barking dog ran merrily through the snow-covered park. He pulled Iva in the opposite direction. She resisted at first but then looked in the direction of Lux's barking. Something seemed to be moving in the bush. She bent down carefully and curiously to see better what was hiding in the bush when she saw a little white kitten there. Iva was scared that the dog would attack the kitten, so she pulled the leash. Then the kitten meowed in a sweet, thin voice. It was a sad kitten and a rather sad meow. It was cold outside, and the kitten was cold and hungry. Iva took pity on the little kitten, who was left alone by his ruthless owner, not caring for it. The kitten ran to Iva and her dog fearlessly. The girl took the trembling kitten and put it in her winter jacket. It was trembling, and she clung to Iva's jumper while she took it home safely. She didn't know how Lux would accept him since he never liked cats. But that was a risk she was willing to take. They finally came home, and it seemed to Iva that she made a thousand more steps coming home than going to the park.

The kitten hid under the armchair as soon as they entered the flat. However, the dog was curiously friendly to the kitten, which looked at Lux cautiously. After convincing herself that a big hairy dog would probably not hurt her, she began to drink milk. Sip by sip. But she kept one eye on the dog. The other one on Iva. It only took a moment for the two animals to become friends. Iva was satisfied because Lux and the kitten

she named Snowy became friends. They shared a sleeping place and food and played together. They made Iva's days brighter and filled them with laughter.

A step back in the past

She went out to the town to a shelter for dogs and cats, where she volunteered three days a week. She found Lux there. She liked him right away, and she saw all his sadness reflected in his big brown eyes, asking for affection and love. She took him home and began to take care of him. It was a wonderful friendship. Lux always greeted her cheerfully when she would return home from work and saw her off the window when she came out. He would be ecstatic when she returned, and there was no end to that joy. He would jump and bark. And bark and jump and wag his tail merrily. Then he would bark a little more while Iva hugged and caressed him. Such immense was his happiness to see Iva.

The present-day

Now she could look forward to Snowy because she will wait for her impatiently as Lux.

Lux and Snowy proved to be genuine troublemakers but the sweetest kind. They made an unbreakable bond with each other and their beloved owner Iva. They became a true family whose home was filled with love, joy, and lots of cuddling. And someday, if their girl becomes a wife and a mother, their little family will grow, which means they will need a bigger flat to store all their love and joy. But which place is big enough to fit such emotion like the unbreakable and everlasting love?

mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Marko Karabatković

DOES THE FUTURE LOOK BRIGHT?

I think in the future, things will change drastically. It's expected for humans to start travelling space before 2030. Technology and the world that is today will also change a lot. Many people will lose their jobs because of the new and improved technology. Robots will take over, and millions will lose their jobs. Alongside technology and the economy, we will see a significant change in nature. Bees who play an essential role in keeping our world in balance are estimated to go extinct by 2050 alongside a ton of other animal species.

I'm hoping humans will find a way to solve that. It's not just the things around us that will change. Humans will change a lot. Children born 30 or 40 years from now will see the world a lot differently than us. The use of technology will raise them, and who knows, they might even become cyborgs. They won't have as many emotions as we have. They will be more emotionless and care less for the things we care about today. There are already brain chips connecting us to the virtual world in the making by Elon Musk. We could solve today's pollution problem by using electricity and eco fuels. Cars won't use petrol or diesel anymore, and we will switch to fully electric vehicles. Some big car companies are already saying they will switch to total electric cars. The factories will find a new way of working that won't pollute the environment. With the use of electricity, we might even stop deforestation. With less pollution, the temperatures will drop down to normal, and there won't be any more mentioning of global warming.

Another global problem is sea trash that kills millions of fish. Studies show that by 2050, the amount of dumped plastic will outnumber the number of fish. Of course, if these things don't happen, the world will be in big problems. We must do our best and try and hope for the best for our planet! Because it is the only one we have!

mentor: Nina Čalić
institution: Primary school Turnić, Rijeka

Laura Lukačević

THE RESEMBLANCE

It was a very cold evening. The sky was gloomy, and the atmosphere was heavy. The dimmed lighting of a streetlamp was the only source of light on the infamous Swamp Street. Black and wine coloured walls of old houses contrasted with yellow and orange leaves on the big oaks and elms nearby. The street was quiet, except for the faint sound of teardrops hitting the ground and windows. But there is a reason this street is infamous. Right next to the small brown house with a beige roof, behind a green, wooden bench, is an unusual building. Navy blue walls are covered with ivy, windows are made of metal, and above the massive door is a neon sign with “Police” written on it. However, this is not a normal police station. It is a crime department, known for solving the most horrific crimes in the area. Most of the time the crimes are not profoundly serious. Just some misdemeanors, like small robberies and trespassing. But every now and then, the town is a home to the most serious felonies. And this time – it’s a series of murders.

Detective Jane Wilkins was walking down the street, heading towards the station. Her fingers are running through her silky brown hair, and her vision is focused on the watch on corner of the street. It is half past five.

“Great...” Jane mutters quietly and speeds up her pace.

Finally, she sees the illuminated sign and walks up to the entrance.

“Late again, huh?” a tall middle-aged man shouts from his desk.

“The bus was late, Will,” Jane answers.

“Fourth time this month,” Will walks up to her and hands her some papers, “Here is the profile of the guy. His name is Alexander Boyle, he is accused of murdering nineteen people in a time period of seven months. He confessed to all the crimes, but you must interrogate him.”

“Alright, where is he?”

“They will bring him to room 24.”

“Great, thanks”

Wilkins left Will and walked up to room 24. She opened the door to the room and sat down. She started reading his profile. Suddenly, she hears the door opening. Guards walk in and bring Boyle to the room. The room is instantly filled with negativity. You could cut the air with a knife. Guards removed suspects’ handcuffs and sat him down on a chair. He looked very average. His dark blonde hair looked very greasy, like it wasn’t washed in weeks. He was quite tall, around six feet. He had a crooked, Roman nose and thin lips. But his most prominent features were most definitely his eyes. They were so bright and blue, like icebergs in the coldest place on Earth. There was something so charming about them, yet at the same time so unsettling. Behind that icy look, there was something disturbing, something very sinister.

“Will you handle him?” says one of the guards.

“I’m sure I will manage,” Detective answered, “That’s my job. I think you can leave now. Thank you for your help.”

“Ok, good luck,” guard tells her and leaves with other guards.

“So, now it’s just us,” Jane states and looks Alexander in the eyes.

“I guess,” He mutters while playing with the sleeve of his prison uniform.

“Well, I am Detective Jane Wilkins. I will interrogate you today. Let’s start with basic information, shall we?”

“Yeah,”

“Your name?”

“Alexander”

“Surname?”

“Boyle”

“Date of birth?”

“December 12th, 1978”

“Birthplace?”

“Bradford, West Yorkshire”

“Okay, now we can start with the real questioning,” Jane declares while writing the last information, “I have to tell you that our conversation is filmed with a camera right over there,” she points to the right top corner of the dark room.

“Good.” Alexander utters with a little, unpleasant smile.

“So, you know why you are here, right?”

Boyle nods.

“You are accused of murdering nineteen middle-aged women on the territory of Manchester, Bristol, London, Bath and Southampton. You did confess to murdering these women, is that true?”

“Yes.”

“So, you still stand by that?”

“I do, I killed them.” he answers and turns to look at the wall.

“What made you do that? How was your childhood?”

“Hell. My dad was the most disgusting human being I met. He was very abusive. Since I was little. I had three brothers. All older. All more hardworking. All smarter. All better. All of them my father loved more. I never did him justice. I was always the black sheep of my family. The one that no one cares about. The in limbo. And my mom? My mom was a coward. She saw everything, heard everything, but she never had the courage to do anything about it. Always scared. And when I once asked her why does dad do that to me, what did I do, can she somehow stop this madness, she only said “He wants the best for you son. Listen to your father.”

“Was there some kind of situation that stuck with you?”

“Yes. A few actually. One time I stayed at home, I felt extremely sick. I was home alone, and I accidentally broke the vase in the living room. It was very important to my dad; it was his mother’s gift for his 18th birthday. I still remember to this day how it looked. It was orange, with 24 carat gold leaves and a green handle. I felt scared, petrified even, I had no idea how dad would react. When he finally got home and he saw the vase, he brutally beat me up. Right after he finished that, he told me something that I will never forget.”

“What was it?”

“We may have the same last name, but you are not my son.”

The detective and the suspect sat in silence for a while. Jane realized that Boyle was looking at her neck.

“My mom had a similar necklace.” Alexander said, with deep sadness.

Jane just nodded. She didn’t know what to say, nor what to do.

“Uhm, alright, let’s continue.” Jane said, and got her pen, “What would you say was the moment you started thinking about murdering somebody?”

“When I finally turned 18, I wanted to get out of my hometown as quickly as possible. I moved to London, and I got a job at a grocery store. Every day, after I finished my job, I walked down this narrow street next to my house. One day, I saw a thief attacking a woman. She looked so much like my mother. He took out a pocketknife,

and said if she didn't give him the money, he would stab her. She refused to do so. And he stabbed her. I quickly got back to my house, and I started thinking about what I saw. I realized that I liked that sight. And then I got the idea. I would murder women that resemble my mother, to avenge for the fact that she never helped me."

"Why didn't you target someone who looked like your father?"

"Because I was scared of him."

After hours of talking about gruesome murders and finding new details about the case, the investigation was finally over. Detective Wilkins got her papers, called the guards and told them to take him into custody. Right when they were handcuffing Alexander, Jane asked him one last question.

"You know, whole country feared you, not even knowing who you were. Why did you confess? Why didn't you defend yourself?"

"Because I wanted my family to see me on TV. Now, they can see that I, in fact, did something. People now know my name." Alexander answered and left with the guards.

That night, Detective Jane Wilkins got home from work extremely late. She was exhausted, but, in her mind, she was thinking about Alexander and everything he said. When she went to bed, she realized something. Her necklace was missing. Jane searched the whole house, but she couldn't find it. Eventually, she decided to go to sleep and search for it more tomorrow.

Next morning, Jane woke up very late. She got up and went to grab something to eat. On her way to the kitchen, she saw something peculiar. The front door was slightly open. She immediately locked it and went to see if someone had broken into her house. When she entered the kitchen, she saw something on her table. The necklace she lost the day before and a note. Jane grabbed her necklace and opened the note. The note said:

Thank you for listening
wróć do Odebrane
odpowiedz

mentor: Dajana Vidaković
institution: Primary school “Matija Gubec”, Čeminac

Leona Križaj

SPIRIT

In a land far away, over the mountains, forests, villages, cities, and water, was a big, haunted mine. The people and animals feared that mine. It was called The Crystal Mine because it was full of crystals, but if you stepped into that mine, you would hear a growling noise and disappear slowly in the shadows of the haunted mine. If the animal steps into that mine, it will be cursed by the curse of the crystals, tons of crystals will grow inside of it, and it will die slowly inside and outside. When it dies, its body full of crystals will become powder which will return to the mine, and it will give the animal a second life, as a beautiful, shiny crystal animal. There were many shiny and beautiful crystal animals in the mine, but there were crystal spirit animals too because, when a crystal animal dies, the mine will give it a second chance to live, but this time as a crystal spirit animal. If they die as a crystal spirit, their life on the Earth will be gone forever and they will finally be free to live in a beautiful land full of planets and stars. That place is called Universe. In the Universe there were souls of dead animals, everyone was free like a bird. My name is Spirit, and I am going to tell you, my story.

In a beautiful and huge forest magical animals were living : foxes with so many tails that you can't even count them, fire leopards that could burn you to death, lynxes that were decorating the forest with their pearls, in huge lakes there were water dragons and little fishes, and in the clouds there was my family, the flying wolves. We could make the Sun shine, the night fall, make it snow or rain and we were also doing some tricks on the sky when we were bored. Everything was going well until one Spring eve. The Spring eve is a festival where all animals are thank the forest by designing and making something themselves. All the animals were preparing in the middle of the forest. I was just a little wolf, everyone was making fun of me because of my wings and the way I looked. I didn't have any one to take care of me

like a mom or a dad, unfortunately they both got killed by humans, when I was born, so I didn't even have a name. I was all alone on this Earth, nobody wanted to help me because they were thinking that I would bring them and their family bad luck. Also, they feared my appearance, because I was the only wolf who was all white like snow, and above my eyes there were black triangles. All the other wolves were blaming me for my parents' death. One day I had enough, and I was preparing to run away. When I was ready to leave, I heard the leader of the fire leopards, Star, saying that she and her army were going to attack all the animals and that she would rule the forest. I quickly ran to the animals and shouted that the fire leopards were going to attack them, but they didn't care what I was saying. Some of the fire leopards heard me and they took me to their leader. I was so scared. Their leader, Star, just laughed and said that nobody would believe me anyway, so her guards just threw me out of their palace. I started running away from them, and accidentally tripped over a rock and fell into the lake. The lake was so deep that I couldn't breathe. I finally hit the bottom of the lake, I couldn't understand what was happening, my head was hurting, and my eyes slowly started to close. A water dragon slowly started to approach me, and that was the last thing I saw. But when I opened my eyes, I couldn't believe, I was still alive, lying in a bubble. The dragon was happy that I was alive, his name was Aqua, the king of the bottom of the lake. I told him that the fire leopards were going to attack all the animals in the forest, but he didn't believe me, and he threw me out of his lake. The night was falling, so I was thinking of sleeping under the tree. I was about to sleep, but I heard someone laughing, I stood up and next to me was a fox. She was laughing at me, and she quickly disappeared. I could hear her laughing, but I didn't know where she was. Then I could see only her tails, and I realized that she could make shiny portals and go through them to the other lands. I quickly ran to that portal, and I got to a cave. The cave was full of shining rocks. The fox had nine tails and her name was Lizy. I told her that fire leopards would attack animals, but she didn't believe me either. I didn't know that you shouldn't be a fox. She made another portal, and I was stupid enough to jump through it. The portal took me to The Crystal Mine, where I fell to the ground and the fox left me alone, I could feel that something is inside of me and on my wings, I could see tiny crystals that were growing out of me. I was so scared I quickly ran out of the cave. My head was hurting so badly, and I couldn't see well, I fell on the ground full of rocks. I was bleeding, I couldn't move because my legs were full of crystals, so I just closed my eyes and the next day I was slowly turning into powder. When I finally turned into the powder the wind blew me into the cave where I turned into a crystal spirit. Some other spirit ani-

mals came to me and finally I had friends. I told them that fire leopards would attack the animals, and finally they believed me, so we came up with the plan. All crystal animals will attack fire leopards and save the animals on the Spring eve when all forest will be full of blossom petals. The time had come, it was two o'clock, all the crystal spirit animals were led by me to the forest. The forest was full of blossom petals, and the fire leopards started to attack the other animals, so the war between fire leopards and crystal spirits had begun. The other animals were so hurt and scared that they couldn't even help us. Star, the leader of the fire leopards, was so angry, that she transformed into a dragon and stared spitting flames at me and my friends, but we weren't scared, and we started to attack her even stronger. That made her even angrier, so she started burning my friends alive. I was the last one alive, but she burned me too. Star thought that she had won, but something impossible happened. Our souls started to merge into one big flying crystal spirit wolf, merging with me. Star couldn't believe her eyes, she started spitting fire at me, but that didn't do any damage to me. I was so strong! Then I jumped at her, bit her on the head and she slowly started turning into the crystal became a crystal dragon, and shattered herself into pieces. The wind blews the pieces of crystal at all the injured animals and healed them.,-the animals were very happy that we helped them, and they apologized because they didn't believe me. I forgave them.

My friends' souls couldn't stay inside of me any longer, so they got out and their souls, together with mine, were blown up in the sky, into the Universe. We were so happy to save all animals from fire leopards, but we knew that we would die after that. When we got to the gates of the Universe, a little astronaut dog named Pluto let us inside the Universe. The Universe was full of happy and free souls, stars, and planets. Pluto said I should come with him. Pluto took me to an astronaut; his name was Astro, and he was the ruler of the Universe. He thanked me for my fearlessness and bravery, and took me to my parents, I was so happy to see them, I thanked Astro, hugged my parents and told them everything. The forest animals made a big statue of me, thanking me for everything, and named me Spirit.

mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Darin Goršić

BAXTER'S STORY

The story begins in a small town in Finland with approximately 5 thousand citizens. The houses there are tiny and poor. In one of those houses lives a dog named Baxter. Baxter is a Pitbull, a fighting dog. He takes part in dog fights every Sunday. Unfortunately, his owners are abusive towards him. Because of that, Baxter does not trust anyone. One Sunday, Baxter decided to run away from his owners. Baxter agreed he would run away before the fight. His owners took him to the fighting arena a few hours later, putting him in a waiting cage. When the owners left the room with the waiting cage, Baxter took action. He bit the cell lock, opened it, and got away but did not know where to go. He remembered having a friend on the edge of the town. Her name was Bailey, and she was a Doberman. He made his way to her. He walked through a small forest, night fell, and he found a place to sleep. He woke up and started walking towards a small river near the forest. He caught a fish and ate it. He was back on the way to Bailey, where he got to her house and started barking. She heard him and went outside to see him. Her owners were also abusive towards her. He told her that he wanted her to come with him and run away from the town. She agreed, and they headed for the exit from the city. On the way to the entrance, they came across a restaurant. They went to the trash cans and found some food. When they finished eating, they went to the gate, and there, they saw the city for the last time. At the entrance of the town was a vast valley. They passed through it and went on. On the way, they talked about what they were going to do when they found a new home. Baxter told Bailey that he would have the best life and owners. Bailey told him the same thing. He asked her if they would still be friends and see each other, she replied: Yes, I hope. The night came, and they found a place to sleep near a forest. In the morning, Baxter woke up. First, he went to the river to catch a

fish. Baxter saw two fish and went back to Bailey. By the time he got back, Bailey had woken up. He greeted her and gave her the fish. They ate and talked about where they were going next. Bailey had an idea, and she told Baxter they should go to a village nearby. Baxter agreed, and they started walking towards the town. On the way, they found a place to rest. Baxter saw a dog in the distance, and he told Bailey they should meet him. She agreed, and they started running towards the dog. They got near him and greeted him; they asked the dog what her name was. She told them her name was Lucy. Lucy is a Pitbull. They went back to the village. They saw a man standing there watching them at the village's entry. The man started going towards them, he began petting them and called them to his house. He gave them some water and food. They decided to spend a night in his home. Bailey told them she was leaving in the morning, but Baxter and Lucy wanted to stay. Baxter and Lucy decided to stay with the man, Bailey left. Bailey wandered in the village for a few days and found a new owner. Baxter and Lucy lived a good life with the man. In a few weeks, they had two babies. Bailey came to see the babies, and she asked them what they would call them. Baxter said the male one would be called Max, and Lucy said the female one would be called Bailey after her friend. Bailey was so happy that they would name a baby after her. Bailey had a baby too, with a Doberman from the village. They named him Garo. Garo, Bailey, and Max always played together. From now on, their life got better, and they had a good owner that did not abuse them.

mentor: Ana Lončarić Kostrenčić

institution: Primary school Zvonka Cara, Crikvenica

Hana Malnar

BLUE LOVE

In the distant past there lived a boy named Mark. Everyone considered him ugly, many had prejudice about him, and no one truly loved him. But he never showed anyone that he was sad or hurt. His life was gray.

When he grew up, at the call of the king he went to the war. He made a friend, Philip, during the war. Philip was his first friend and he meant a lot to him, he was always there for him. At least he thought so until his enemies wounded him. Mark was lying on the floor as he called Philip for help, but he just looked at him and walked away with his horse, away.

As his legs knelt, his hands bled, tears fell down, Mark fled through the woods, fleeing the battlefield. He ran until he reached an old, collapsed tower. There was a well in front of the tower. He lay down next to it and fell asleep sobbing.

The next morning he was awoken by the golden rays of the sun. As soon as he opened his eyes, he spotted a beautiful blue flower. His gray eyes fell in love with that blue flower. He looked at it like that for a few moments, and then he realized he could take some water from the well to water it. He could barely get on his feet. As soon as he reached for the water, he saw his ruined face in the reflection. He exclaimed: "Why is everything in my life sad and ruined, just like me?!"

His life changed, he looked at the flower every day. The flower calmed him, he enjoyed its beauty. But still, he was not happy. So hours, days, months passed. Until one night a girl came. She looked like a dream. Her hair shone in the moonlight, her cheeks reddened like a rose, and her eyes as blue as the firmament. He watched her, hiding. She just stood in the moonlight and stared at the blue flower almost all night. After that night, his heart was beating at a different pace, his eyes were shining with a special glow, he was smiling with the most beautiful smile, and butterflies were flying all over his body. He felt enchanted. Mark approached the flower and knelt

beside it. He looked at it as he did every day, but he didn't just keep quiet that day. He whispered to the flower, "You don't even know how lucky you are, if only I could sleep next to you to feel her love, to see her look at me the way she looks at you." He took off his mask and, crying, washed himself in the dew that slept on the blue flower. "But she will never look at me," he said.

As soon as the day fell asleep, the girl reappeared, sitting on the silver moon and staring at the blue flower. That night she sang a song to the flower, a song about love, a song about brave love. Mark hid in the tower, enjoying her voice and looking at her every now and then. He wanted to sing too, but he couldn't. "The girl will be scared and will leave forever," he thought in his head. After the song, already at dawn, the girl left. Mark's gray eyes stared at the blue flower again, he said nothing. He smiled with sad tears in his eyes. He did not think that the girl would reappear that day, so he decided to spend the night outside the tower, next to the flower. He was wrong, the girl reappeared, he saw her then and looked closely. Then she noticed him. Mark quickly turned his back and ran towards the tower. He stopped abruptly as he heard the girl calling him, "Hey, stop, why are you running away?" She approached him slowly and touched his shoulders. He didn't say anything until she pulled away. Then, with his back turned, he knelt down and said, "I'm Mark, I live here right now. Who are you and why are you coming to see the flower?" She wondered and said, "I am Rose, I have heard that there are many flowers in this forest. I know that flowers are beautiful, but this flower has something special in it, its blue colour is special." But Mark already knew that, but he didn't know why she came to see the flower every night, so he asked her: "Why just you don't pick it up and take it away?" She approached him and explained quietly, "Every living thing has feelings, including a flower. I wouldn't want to hurt it just to take it home."

Both of them sat quietly and in peace, in the loud silence only the beating of their hearts could be heard. That's how the night went... At dawn Rose asked Mark before she left, "why are you wearing a mask on your face?" "I'm ugly," he replied. Rose then took him by the palms, hugged him gently and whispered in his ear with her lips: "There is no ugly person, there are only ugly souls. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, everything else is meaningless." After those words, she left.

As the day awoke, she disappeared into the woods, and Mark sat in love, beside the flower, watching her. "Her warmth is real, her hand chooses blue flowers," he said, looking at the flower. Rose had been in his head all day. "She's a girl who looks like this flower growing in a garden of loneliness. Her loving can mend my soul," he said.

In the evening the girl came again, and Mark was already hiding in the tower. "I know you're here, come here, I want to be with you. I've never met anyone like you

before, you're special." she called out to him, but he was still hiding. "I want to give you a flower, love, but I have to hide because I'm ugly." he said quietly. Rose was sad not to see him; she thought he had gone looking for another home. She began to sing a song to the flower to calm down. Mark just listened to her because he didn't want to sing.

She came to sing every day, and he hid with pain in his heart, he did not have the courage to approach her. The days went by and Mark fell more and more in love with her. "She is a maze with no escape. Her eyes stole my heart, her smile gave me life, and her touch left me breathless." he said to his flower. He could no longer be away from her. As soon as the girl reappeared and started singing, Mark started singing along with her. His heart felt great warmth, Rose called him to her with a song. He approached her step by step, slowly, and with each step he sang more quietly. The girl stopped singing, she just stared into his gray eyes with her shimmering blue eyes that were barely visible in his mask. When he approached her, Mark stopped singing. He fell to his knees in front of her and said, "This is my destiny, don't smile at me with that beautiful look, take revenge on me, because I don't have the courage to show you my true self. I don't have the courage to show you how much you mean to me. That's why I put on a mask to watch you, but I want you so much, I want to love you." Rose didn't know what to say to him, she just kissed him on the cheek of the mask with her gentle lips.

To him, that kiss was everything, all happiness, that kiss, that love, that was all he always wanted to have. He had always longed for love, he had never before felt that someone really loved him. But again, he was afraid to show his true self to the girl, he thought she was too beautiful for someone like him, he thought he was not worthy of her love. He didn't know that the girl really fell in love with his heart, with his soul. After kissing him, the girl looked at the blue flower and then at Mark again and said, "You are like a flower in the forest, your beauty is immeasurable but also hidden." She then went the way she always went, and Mark as always sat on the stone and watched her disappear into the woods. With her all the serenity of the night disappeared. This time he wanted to go after her, but he didn't dare. He was not so brave, he was afraid of losing her, even though his heart had long since gone after her. Every next night the girl came to sing a flower, and Mark sang softly with her, but hid again. So the nights passed, the girl sang, and he enjoyed her voice and beauty. When the girl came, the day with her voice fell asleep, and when she left, the day woke up. Mark knew nothing but the night, the stars in her eyes, the moon in her hair, and her voice echoing deep in the woods. To him she was everything, he was finally happy because

he felt the warmth, but there was no way he could get rid of the fear of showing his true self.

Everything was already getting cold, winter had come. Everything was cold except the hearts of Mark and Rose. When the snow covered everything, only the blue flower turned blue in the middle of the garden. “The flower is alive for love,” Mark thought. Everything was warm in his heart, until Rose stopped coming to sing for several days in a row. He thought she wouldn’t come if he didn’t take off his mask. So he finally removed it from his face with his hands and broke it. .Rose still wasn’t coming.

He was worried so he set out on the path she always came and went. Traces of her leading to a village could still be seen in the snow. When he arrived in the village, he saw an old lady and asked her “Do you know a girl named Rose?” The lady only replied, “I knew her. A few days ago she fell suddenly ill, all the doctors took care of her, but in the end, unfortunately, she now rests in peace.”

“If I had the courage to show myself, would everything be different now?” he asked himself, crying. As he walked through her imprinted prints, he saw his mask brought by the wind. He screamed, “While I’m looking at this broken mask, I still want you!” He barely came to the forest, he was shaking. He saw a blue flower, lay down next to it and said, “My gray eyes fell in love with the blue flower, and my gray heart fell in love with her blue eyes.” At dusk he fell asleep and heard Rose singing, his heart was gone along with her blue eyes.

mentor: Ana Vrebac
institution: Primary school Kraljevica, Kraljevica

Maja Kanjuh

READ AND REACH THE STARS

Reading is a multi-layered process in which readers use their abilities of recognizing, connecting and interpreting characters in order to understand the content or the meaning of the text. Reading is both the main component of human literacy and a fundamental skill that has been adopted since childhood through upbringing and education.

A book is not just a stacked pile of papers with something written on them. It's like a vehicle taking us to many adventures and various unknown destinations. Most books contain useful information and lessons we might find interesting in life. In any case, reading helps us open our mind to new ideas and new worldviews. Daily reading gives us a lot of benefits. It's fun. The world of literature is very imaginative, with so many different genres, from drama to criminal justice. It's simply impossible for a person not to find a book of interest and enjoy it. There are so many books on library shelves so anyone can find at least one book to be thrilled with. We read, we learn, we always come across unfamiliar words that we may never have heard or used before. Also, reading books in English, Italian, French or any other language is very useful for learning grammar or new words of the language. Many people, even when they want to concentrate they can't, so for that reason, reading is the perfect way to work on our concentration because it requires peace and devotion to just one thing at that moment, and that's the book or a text we are reading. A lot of people think too much about their problems and they often need a break. A book would help them relax, so that later on they can return to solving the problem with their clear mind. This is one the advantages of reading. You have probably noticed it before that, when you read, time passes very quickly. If you're bored driving in your car, riding in a bus or a train or even waiting for someone to come to visit you, just take a book and read. Time will pass faster, and you will bring a little fun to your boring everyday activities. Our

body needs activity, and so does our brain. It has been scientifically proven that reading has a big impact on our brain and that's why we should devote enough time to it. Let's start reading books because as we read, we discover a lot about ourselves and what we want to become one day. We learn new words, develop our creativity, imagination and concentration. The effort and time invested in reading will allow us to read better, to remember more easily, to learn faster, to reach our goals, maybe even stars.

mentor: Nina Čalić
 institution: Primary school Turnić, Rijeka

Sara Srok

CINDY LAND

It was a sweet morning in Cindy Land. It was raining candy canes. The cotton candy trees were wet, but after a few minutes they were back to normal. Unicorns were crazy about the candy cane trees. They were swallowing the branches greedily. The entire country was celebrating Cindy Land Day. Cindy Land is located on planet T2; in the north-east of its largest continent. It was named after a girl, Cindy. Cindy had pink hair and blue eyes. Her hair would turn blue when she was sad and it would glow and shine if she was in danger. Why was Cindy Land named after her? She saved it when it was in danger. Let me tell you what happened exactly.

It was a regular Monday morning. Cindy was late for school, there was no time for breakfast, so she just ran outside and grabbed a cotton candy cane that was hanging on the tree. When she arrived to school, the teacher was surprised she was late, because Cindy used to come to school early. Teachers in Cindy Land were robots. They were so smart that they could answer any question. Cindy was the best student in her class. In every test she would get an A. She would always raise her hand when the teacher examined them, and all of her answers were correct. She didn't really have friends because everyone was jealous of her.

"Well, well, Cindy overslept." commented James.

"Cindy Foster! I'm very surprised you're late! If it were somebody else, I wouldn't be that surprised." said Erica.

"Well, nobody is perfect." murmured Cindy.

After school, Cindy planned to go swimming, but she had to change her plans. Classes were dismissed earlier because of an emergency. There were clouds of black thick smoke in the distance and they were getting closer and closer. Red Dragon started burning down trees and ginger bread houses! He had woken up again! Cindy couldn't believe her eyes. She was petrified with fear. She couldn't move at first, then she started running. She was fast! She decided to run to grandma's house. When

she came there, she looked through the window, but she couldn't see anyone in the house. The door was unlocked so she went inside.

"Hello! Is anybody here? Grandma, it's me Cindy! Hello!" Cindy shouted. She was confused. She didn't know where her grandma went. What if Red Dragon had eaten her? Cindy learned about Red Dragon at school. She knew everything about him and she knew very well how dangerous he was. The teacher said that he was the last living dragon in the world! There was a legend that said that dragons could live up to 5000 years!

Cindy searched all rooms in grandma's ginger bread house, but there was no sight of her. She was exhausted and terrified and she could hardly breathe, so she laid down on the bed for a moment. She tried to concentrate and calm down.

"No! I can't give up! Everyone is in danger! The houses are on fire, the trees are burning, everything is being destroyed. I have to think fast! I still have time to fix everything!" thought Cindy.

Cindy decided to look for her grandma again. Then she noticed a piece of paper on the floor and a tiny leather bag next to it. There was something written on the bag: "Magic vanish powder". It was grandma's handwriting. Cindy read the text on the piece of paper quickly and found out everything she needed to know! Those were grandma's old notes; the instructions for defeating a dragon. Cindy grabbed the piece of paper and the bag and put them in her pocket. Suddenly she heard the door open. She didn't see who it was. She only saw a shadow. Then somebody screamed, "A burglar!"

Cindy recognized her grandma's voice. "Grandma, it's me, Cindy!", she cried.

"Oh, Cindy...what are you doing here? You should be home! Your parents are probably worried! I'm going to call them to let them know you're here!", said grandma.

Actually grandma, I have to go to the supermarket!

Supermarket? Now? Can't you see what's happening outside!?

Yes, I know. I will be back soon!

Why do you need to go to the supermarket?

Well...to buy some food! I've been eating only sweets and I'm starting to feel really sick. I think it's time for me to eat some fruit and vegetables!

But I have fruit and vegetables in my fridge!

Anyways, I must to go. Bye!

Cindy ran quickly out of the house before grandma could say anything else. She went to a hiding spot where she played with her dog, Roxy. Red Dragon was burning down almost everything he saw! Even the cotton candy trees, which could grow up

in two minutes, weren't growing anymore. Cindy was worried, but she was also brave and determined. She looked at grandma's piece of paper once again. While she was reading the instructions, a big shadow appeared in front of her and there was no sun. It was Red Dragon.

Hm... I really don't know why aren't you in your house. But I know that I am really hungry so I think you're gonna be my breakfast!

And I think I'm not! – Cindy quickly poured water into his mouth and he started choking.

Noooo! Cold! Cold! My mouth! It's so cold! Now I can't breathe fire anymore and it's all because of you!

Wow, your eyes! They're so pretty! Can I see them?

Really? I'm not stupid or naive; stop lying! I'm gonna get you!

Not before I defeat you! - Cindy quickly sprayed lemon juice in his eyes.

Ouch! My eyes! They're burning! You'll never defeat me! I'm invincible!

We'll see about that! – Cindy replied.

Then she ran to her grandma's house, but as she was running, she stepped in some sticky stuff and she couldn't move! The dragon was getting closer and closer. Erica and James were passing by when they saw Cindy. They knew they had to do something at once. They had to save her. They decided to distract Red Dragon, so they started throwing stones at him.

Erica! James! Watch out! - Cindy shouted.

Erica ran to the left and James to the right side. Red Dragon fell on the floor. Erica and James ran quickly to Cindy.

Thank you for saving me! If you hadn't arrived, he would have grabbed me!

We are so sorry for everything we've done and said. We were selfish and rude. How can we make it up to you?

It's okay guys, I forgive you. It would be really nice if you pulled me out of the sticky stuff! – Cindy smiled.

Sure! Hold our hands!

Thank you so much!

Then they looked at Red Dragon. He started spreading his wings. He wanted to fly away. Cindy grabbed the bag with the magic vanish powder and sprinkled it on the dragon. Red Dragon started melting away and soon he disappeared. They were safe and they saved their families and friends.

After Cindy defeated the dragon, they told everyone what happened. Everyone was so proud of the children and, especially Cindy, who used her magic powder just in

time. So people decided to name the city after Cindy. Even today people are talking about Cindy's adventure. They sleep peacefully thanks to her. They know that Red Dragon can't harm them anymore.

mentor: Tanja Pokupić

institution: Primary school Miroslava Krleže, Čepin

Dora Babić

THE ONE I LOVE THE MOST

Serina woke up with a terrible headache. She thought it was normal because she stayed up all night helping with Coocoa chickens. Out of nowhere she heard a terrible scream. Someone was yelling “HELP! THEY ARE ATTACKING THE VILLAGE. WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE!”. She immediately knew who it was. She grabbed her sword and put on her black tunic. She ran through monsters slashing them in half. Suddenly she realized that a house was on fire. She jumped in without hesitation. Little did she know that someone was watching her. Serina came out with a baby, but she slashed its neck “YOU MONSTER! HOW CAN YOU DO THAT TO THE POOR BABY?” But the baby turned into a shadow that Dark Bronn used in combats and just as she predicted, he was behind her, his dagger to her throat, only few inches separating their bodies “You are a brave one, aren’t you?”

It was that stupid hero’s shadow - Dark Bronn, though Serina found him interesting. He was just like that hero, but their personalities weren’t the same. Something no one knew about her is that she hated Bronn.

” I’m taking you with me” she heard out of nowhere. Dark Bronn put sleeping spell on her, and she fell asleep. He carried her to his castle in a bridal style and put her in his bed. When she woke up, she knew where she was and where he took her. Dark Bronn entered the room. With his deep and cold voice, he said: “You are from now on my new maid. Others ran away or I killed them. Don’t try anything stupid”. But little did he know that Serina was his fan girl. At that moment she run up to him and started squeaking: “I FINALLY MET YOU, YOU DON’T KNOW HOW HAPPY I AM”. Suddenly she grabbed his cheeks and started smooching them, then moved towards his mouth and force opened it to see his pointy teeth. He started blushing. Serina started squeaking even more because everyone said he was a heartless monster, but she knew he wasn’t. He pushed Serina off and yelled at her:” DON’T EVER

DO THAT AGAIN OR I WILL KILL YOU”. But Serina knew deep down he liked it. She backed off and he left room in a hurry. He was walking down the long halls - they were black and the statues were demons with red eyes. Suddenly, he was standing in front of the big black doors. He entered the room, closed the door and sat on the floor while his heart was confused by what had just happened to him. What did that girl do to him? Why did he feel something in his heartless chest? That’s how he fell asleep.

Dark Bronn woke up hearing knocking at his door. He immediately got up and opened the door. It was Serina. She giggled a little. He was half asleep and confused - why did she come so close to him? He was startled. Serina fixed his hair and he could feel her touch. She picked up his hat and put it on. “I’m very sorry for doing that, but it seemed right at the moment”. He realised what happened and he yelled: “TOUCH ME AGAIN AND I WILL FEED YOU TO WAREWOLVES! GO AND CLEAN THE CASTLE NOW. YOU ARE NOT SOMEONE WHO CAN ROAM FREELY AROUND.”

Serina got a little bit scared, but she could not really fear that elf boy. The minute she left, Dark Bronn went to the throne room. An hour passed and Serina was still cleaning until she heard a loud crashing sound. She ran to the throne room with her sword. Then her heart smashed into hundreds of pieces seeing Dark Bronn fighting with Bronn - his good side. Bronn yelled to Serina: “Don’t worry, princess! I will get you out of here”. She was startled and angry because she hated Bronn. He always ran around Sofia and she had him around her finger “What in Goddess of Triforces is he saying” she mumbled to herself. She attacked Bronn and hurt him badly because he didn’t expect that of a so called ”hostage” of Dark Bronn. Dark Bronn teleported Bronn far away from castle and then fainted of all blood loss. Serina run up to him with a red potion, but she didn’t know how to give it to him. He was unconscious so she put the red potion in her mouth and forced the red liquid in his mouth. With the help of his demons, she took him to her room and laid him on the bed while she bandaged him up. She put his hat away so it wouldn’t get in the way. He looked like a little kid while he was sleeping. Serina stood up so Dark Bronn could rest but suddenly she felt a weak touch grabbing her. It was him. He was trembling, he was showing fear for the first time in his life. He was so weak, so afraid of losing someone.” Please, just stay for a bit...” His voice was weak as if he was about to cry. Serina sat next to him holding him in her arms while playing with his hair and that’s how they both fell asleep.

Next morning Dark Bronn woke up felling something warm around him. When he saw Serina, he was confused. How did they end up like this? But then he remem-

bered how he was scared of losing Serina to Bronn and how she would go away with that hero and abandon him. Now he saw that she cared for him. Serina slowly woke up and with a tired smile asked: "Is my hero feeling better?" while she kissed Dark Bronn's forehead. He was confused. Why did she say that? He felt something warm inside, and that made him uneasy. "Why did you call me your hero?" he asked Serina. "You know that before you came into my life, I was no one. Sofia hated me. She was jealous of me. She said I was prettier, and she was afraid that I would steal Bronn from her" Serina sighed looking through the window. "You know I hate Bronn with my whole soul. He is always so cheeky". Dark smirked at Serina's word. So, he was better than that stupid elf boy.

From that day on, Serina and Dark Bronn became closer. One day Dark Bronn decided to take Serina to a hidden place. She agreed and soon they were teleported to a beautiful sight with a magical waterfall and flowers. Serina pushed him into water, he grabbed her and they had fun. It was getting dark. They watched the sun go down and then Dark teleported them back to his castle.

Suddenly the wind mage Ben appeared and warned Dark Bronn about Devils Hand's return. Dark was quite stressed. Serina could feel something was wrong but didn't know what.

Months passed and Dark Bronn was thinking about how to confess to Serina. He had a perfect idea. He will take her to Water Temple during the full moon. He left a note to her "Wear something nice. I'm taking you somewhere." Serina was very happy.

Dark Bronn was in front of her and they teleported to Water Temple. The view was breath-taking but soon Devils Hand appeared. Dark was startled „WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE TRAPPED BY TRIFORCE GODDESES!“ Devils Hand was very angry, almost yelling „SO WHILE I'M GONE, YOU DON'T EVEN TRY TO KIDNAP SOFIA? OR TAKE OVER HYRULE? AND YOU EVEN GET A GIRLFRIEND? YOU DON'T EVEN ACT SURPRISED. I KNOW YOU LIKE HER! I WAS WATCHING YOU ALL THIS TIME“ Serina was startled but she managed to say „Dark, is that true? You like me? “ Dark Bronn was sad because he knew what was going to happen but he said it anyway: "Yes, I liked you from the moment I met you, you were my comfort". Dark grabbed Serina and kissed her and then Dark's worst fear happened.

Devils Hand stabbed both of them saying angrily: "I never needed someone so pathetic and weak as you!" Dark Bronn and Serina's lives were flashing in front of their eyes but at least they were dying in each other's hands. Serina managed to say: "Dark, I love you, too ". But something unexpected happened. Triforce goddess said:

“Serina, because you managed to change Dark Bronn and awaken something good in him, I’m giving you a gift “. Serina and Dark were confused but happy at the same time. “Serina you will become the Sun and Dark Bronn you will become the Moon. “They were happy because they will now dance forever with each other managing night and day in a never-ending cycle of dancing with the one whom they love the most. For the last time they kissed and hugged each other, and they became the Sun and the Moon and that’s how their relationship will last forever.

mentor: Tatjana Mioković
 institution: Primary school Retfala, Osijek

Lucija Burić

A MYSTERIOUS WHITE CHRISTMAS

“Miss Parker!” the principal’s horrible screechy voice came from behind me.

“To my office! Now!”

“Best of luck, Klara” whispered Alex.

He’s been my best friend since I came to St Andrew’s. As I made my way to Mrs. Blackthorn’s office (Elizabeth Mary Blackthorn, the principal), I knew what to expect.

“Now Klara, I understand that you are involved in the family business, but that doesn’t mean you can sneak out of school.” I closed my eyes and nodded, pretending I’m listening to her. When I opened them, Sherlock Holmes was standing behind her. I can still imagine him talking to me like we used to do when I was a little girl.

“How long will lady Blackthorn go on about the “family business”?” said Sherlock.

“I think she will break her 27 minutes record” Sherlock wondered.

I concentrated back on the principal “putting a listening device on Mr. Brown’s desk during biology because you thought that he was stealing equipment to sell on Amazon.”

“24 minutes” I mumbled.

“Are you listening to me Klara?” I quickly looked around, she had a new fancy dress, maroon color, gold jewelry, new high heels.

“Yes. May I ask where our favorite principal is going? I wouldn’t want to be the reason to keep her late.” I smiled at how well I used my detective skills.

“Late! Um” she jumped out of her leather chair heading for the door.

“And Klara, think about what I said.” Sherlock was standing next to the door “well done” he congratulated. “Thank you”, I replied. As I walked home from school, Alex joined me and I told him everything Blackthorn talked to me about.

“So, what are you going to do?” Alex asked me looking worried.

“I have to talk to the professor about it” I said, trying to keep my voice down.

“The professor?” he gasped.

“You are going to the S.U.A.O.L!” he shouted.

“Well, I won’t go if the whole of London knows!” I accused.

That day was very dark and foggy and it didn’t seem like Christmas was just in a couple of days. I went to one of the doors of the S.U.A.O.L (Secret Underground Agents of London) headquarters to talk to the professor (Professor Emma Charlotte Gold, an old lady, in her early 60’s. I met her last spring on one of my ‘adventures’ in Evergreen Park). I hurried down the dark scary stairs into a long corridor. This part of the tunnel is under the London subway. There is even a way you can get to the subway using one of the broken train tracks. I went down deeper and deeper underneath London, suddenly I stopped. I heard men voices saying something.

“Be careful with that, we wouldn’t want to upset the boss!”, the taller man hissed.

“I am Jack, I am! What does the boss have in this? Why do we have to be here?” he grumbled.

The two men wearing black suits were holding a giant wooden box. I had to get to the big metal door on the other side, they might be agents. But why would they be in here putting a huge box in a cart? Sherlock Holmes appeared next to me “Those are crooks, Klara” he added. I looked over to the two men. They were gone, I ran to the metal door.

Click!

A guard appeared behind them, he looked down. I quickly showed him the silver key in a horse shoe and said “Agent in training K. Parker”. The guard smiled and let me in.

“Welcome Miss Parker. How is your training going?”

“Very well Tom. Is the professor in today? I need to talk to her.”

“Yes, she is. Let me guess, it’s about the “family business”?” I nodded.

As I walked down the tunnel filled with bright lights and soft carpet, big glass doors, inside rooms made from marble floor and white walls, rooms with case files, I came to a big wooden door with the name prof Gold on it. I was here. I knocked, “Come in” a voice called out.

In the room full of bookshelves, there was an old lady dressed in a navy dress with her silver hair tied in a bun.

“Klara” the prof Gold greeted. “How nice to see you. I need to tell you something.” Her kind voice spoke.

“That’s the reason I’m here, I wanted to talk to you about my school.” I told her sitting down in one of the most comfortable chairs in London.

“Is it about your school and the assignments that I gave you?” She asked.

I didn't have to tell her anything, she knew what my answer was. "All right I'll talk to Mrs. Blackthorn about that. Now for the assignment I was going to give you. There has been a smuggling incident reported last week. We think that they are after the Queen's diamond jewelry which is worth about 2 million pounds. We need you to help us find them before they go out of the country loaded with cash."

"Any evidence or clues that might help?" I asked.

"Yes, they wear black suits and might use our tunnels. They are the best way to get around London without anyone seeing you" she proclaimed.

I came home shattered. The smell of compost and soil was everywhere, dad works as a groundskeeper in Evergreen Park for the last decades. We live in the groundskeeper's cottage. I went upstairs to my room. I put on my pyjama and started scribbling some notes of my day, thinking about the man in the tunnel and my new case. My room isn't big or filled with stuff that normal teenage girls may have, a vanity table, posters of their favorite movie stars and actors. Instead, it's filled with crime books. On one wall I have the map of London, big skylight and my bed.

On my way home from school I stumbled across a piece of paper, it had some code written on it. A clue to my case? I looked at the paper which said: "teme ta het lod dofo phos 9:30". I ran home as fast as lightning; I know I saw this code before. "Aha! There it is!" I quickly start decoding it "meet at the old food shop 9:30". I grabbed my phone and texted Alex our secret code 'chocolate covered strawberries' at my house and bring you know who.

Next thing I knew, Alex, the professor and me were all found over the little piece of paper that I found with the message it had decoded. "What will we do?" asked Alex "You'll go there. I'll give you some spy things. That way I'll be with you and tell you what to do. Gather as much clues and information you can. Then tomorrow, if all goes well, come to my office and we will think of a way to catch them." The professor declared.

I put on my black long sleeve shirt and my navy pants. I fixed my blond hair into a bun and got ready for my adventurous night. Alex and I got there, hid behind a bin and waited for the meeting to start. "Silence, she is coming!" a man yelled out. I rec-

ognized him; he was one of the men I saw in the tunnel.

“Do we know anything about the police seeing that the jewelry is gone?” a tall woman interrupted the talking. She had a glorious wine-colored dress with beautiful white pearl earrings and necklace.

“No Stella” confessed Jack.

“Well, did you put them where I told you to and I told you to call me boss or um...”

“Yes, we put the jewelry in the cart underneath the subway” replied Bob, the other man I saw that day.

“Super” she laughed.

“Will meet there tomorrow at midnight and take the Queens jewelry with us away from this city. We will be rich.” she vowed.

The next day Alex and me went and told the professor everything we heard last night about the boss, a lady called Stela and the way she got mad at them, calling her by her name and the escape they will do today at midnight. The professor looked very pale, her beautiful face went in a frown, she looked as if she has seen a ghost.

“What will we do? Professor, do you know her?” Both of us panicked.

“We’ll catch them today; I knew a girl once with that name. It was a long time ago I trained young agents; Stella Parks was one of them. I have never seen a girl more talented; she was the best agent in this place.”

“What happened to her?” I wondered.

“She betrayed us and became a criminal. What a waste of talent.” The professor sighed.

At 11.30 I started to go down to the S.U.A.O.L, since the smugglers were going to be in one of their tunnels. We all decided to split up, Alex and me were going to cover the tunnels underneath the subway and London Museum. Emily and Rob, two older agents were going to cover the ones near the Queen’s palace and the Big Ben, while the rest of the agents will look out in the other tunnels and on the river incase if they see them. There is going to be agents near every door for back up. The professor will be in her office passing information to us. I hid in one of the old carts laying in the tunnel. The men were in. Suddenly, I heard voices “Here we are boys, a step towards freedom with 2 million pounds in our pocket.”

A female voice sang, “what was that thing the man on the moon said?” wondered

Bob scratching his black hair.

“One small step for a man and a giant leap for mankind.” replied Jack patting his friend.

“More like a small step for smugglers and a giant leap for freedom” giggled another man.

“That’s it, let’s get out of here before we get caught. Boys, where did you put the cart with the Queen’s diamonds?” insisted Stella.

I saw the man pull out the big wooden box, I must stop them somehow! Sherlock Holmes was standing next to me, “Miss needs help? I suggest to call for back up and face them.” he signaled.

I quickly said “Parker going in. They are here. Need back up” jumping out of my hiding spot.

“Klara don’t, we’ll be there now. All agents tunnel 17, back up needed,” shouted the professor.

I jumped up. “Stop right there! Where do you think to go with those diamonds?” I yelled.

“GET HER!! Don’t let her escape” Stella shouted.

Then, I felt a man arm around me. The lights started to go out.

I woke up to a gentle hand pushing me “Klara, wake up! Are you ok?” Alex sobbed “I’m fine. Where are the criminals? Did they get away?”

I groaned in pain “O thank God you are alright. The smugglers, they will be spending their Christmas behind bars. All thanks to you.” The professor spoke in her kind voice.

“Christmas!” I gasped

“Merry Christmas!” everyone said with joy.

As we walked out of the tunnel, I felt sudden cold on my face. I heard a crunch under my shoes. Could it be? I looked under; it was white, crystal snow. It looked like a fairytale with the snow sparkling in the sun, trees covered in frost, children enjoying making snowman and having

snowball fights. It was a Christmas miracle. I ran home to go to bed.

“Merry Christmas, love,” said dad.

“Merry Christmas!” I exclaimed.

The house looked beautiful with the Christmas tree shining in its full glory, stockings on the fire place, smell of the turkey and the pudding, with presents under the tree and with the snow outside. This really is a mysterious white Christmas.

mentor: Adriana Kranjac Mišković

institution: Primary school “Rikard Katalinić Jeretov” Opatija

Mila Car

THOUGHTS

Life is strange. I was sitting on my bed after a long day of school and I was just ... thinking. I couldn't help myself. I haven't done this in a while even though it's one of my favorite pass time activities. Thinking. It's really interesting you know? What your head can do to you and what goes on in there. If you don't pay mind to it, you won't notice it. The influence it has on us it's... it's astonishing, almost frightening. A great deal of people find that out minds and imaginations are unimportant. I feel like creativity is not as encouraged as it should be. The importance of coming to terms with the way we perceive the world is greater than many think. You might say it's weird, but it is true. I often feel like I am not normal. I don't value the same things others do. I don't notice them. I can't even though sometimes I would really like to. When people do talk about the mind and what its power are, I've never heard them talk about this. Perceiving things. Looking at the world. The people around us. You can feel trapped in your head. You usually notice that you see something differently when you talk to other people. The thoughts you've normalized in your head... might not be so normal after all. That doesn't mean that just because you see something differently that it's wrong or not normal. We all do. No two people see the world the same way, and yet... some views you can't even remotely compare to any other person on the planet. Those stories and thoughts are irreplaceable, there will never be any other person even remotely like that again and some are so bland and boring that there are thousands of similar souls already out there. It seems rude to say, but it really is true. You know, I pity them a bit. Life must be quite boring. I am only assuming this of course, I can't know that nor I ever will... but still. The looks I get sometimes surprise me. While my mind is troubled with many deep problems and issues I will never be able to solve, others are empty and filled with, at least to me stupid things. Most girls my age just think about boys. Boys... I just don't get it.

I don't get how you can be so in love with a random boy you have seen like twice in your life. I mean I'm sure it's nice. The media presents it to be this magical thing, and if it really is that way that's great and I would love to experience it the same way as everyone else, but I don't. I have given up on trying to talk about it with my friends. I don't understand them and they don't understand me. Adults are quite useless as well. The answers I get are not often but always so disappointing. They refuse to look pass the fact that I am a child. And I understand their refusal. I am after all just a teenager to them. You know, they say they were just like me, and that both love and many other things will come later. But they weren't like me. And I know that the reader, whoever it may be, thinks the same way... but I know these things won't change. And I can't wait to grow up to prove that I was right. But that also frightens me. The fact that I will stay this way. I have many, many friends that I love dearly but I still feel lonely a lot of the time. Usually, people like me find some way to express themselves through many different things. I chose art. Drawing to be more exact. It is the way I can talk to someone about the way I feel. To myself. I talk to my self through art. It is really, really cheesy and I hate it but it really does help. And I hate when other people look at my art and judge it. Judge it wrongly. I know they can't see my thoughts because... um well I haven't told them but I can't stand the fact that they cannot see the story I told myself while making it. The story I see every time I look at that drawing. But it's ok I guess. I just have to deal with it. They aren't doing anything wrong... And as I was sitting on my bed thinking my cat came up to me. Naranča. It is quite a silly name for a cat. She was hungry. Another view of the world. The view through an animals eyes. I wonder what they see. Especially the difference between prey animals and the ones that hunt them. Omnivores and carnivores. Oh well I guess I will never know that, no one will. I went to feed her. Looking at the time I realized I spent several hours thinking. It was fun but I still needed to get ready for school. While packing my bag I couldn't help but feel exited. Another day has passed, another day of working towards my goals, another step closer to achieving them. And tomorrow is a new day filled with so many possibilities.

mentor: Ante Žderić

institution: Primary school Cvjetno naselje, Zagreb

Viktor Jakušić

RED SNOW

Have you ever wondered what it is like to be a detective? Firstly, being a detective really takes a lot of courage. Secondly, being a detective requires special skills and dedication. Most importantly, being a detective means that, with so much crime in this world, your work is never done. The villains often strive to become notorious and the desire to experience fifteen minutes of fame lures them strongly into doing evil. The most ordinary folks around us, like our smiling neighbors or old friends, can easily take the dark path.

It was a quiet night full of blinking lights. The heavy snow was covering the city of Doom. It didn't come as a surprise for it was the middle of winter. Detective Mislav Kennedy was walking slowly down the main street and thinking about dinner when suddenly a gunshot was heard in the distance. Mislav couldn't believe his eyes when he quickly approached the street from which the shot came. He found a dead man lying down on the street. The man's blood was covering the snow around him. The redness of the pure snow all of a sudden seemed shocking although he had seen such scene before. Mislav spotted what seemed to be man's footprints next to the body. He decided that it would be smart to follow the footprints, but after some time they just disappeared. He was puzzled and the dinner was waiting.

The next day the detective started an investigation. As he was thinking about the possible murderer, he got interrupted by officer Martin. "Hey, chief, I know the name of the dead man." "His name was Ivan Rogers, and he had a wife named Masha Rogers!" said Martin. "Good job Martin but is that all you've got?" asked Mislav. "Don't worry sir, I have one more thing about Ivan and that is that he owned a company that transported gas throughout the city, but shared the company with his friend Sven Johnson." "OK, I will question the wife and you will his partner."

It was long time ago when Mislav took his first case. Although he is still quite young, he feels as if he has been investigating the people from the dark side for ages. Still, one never forgets their first arrest. That case was his early success. It was a young woman, maybe not very different from Masha Rogers.

Mislav went to the address that Martin gave him. “Ms. Rogers, I am a detective from the police department of the city of Doom and I would like to ask you some questions,” he said nicely. The doors of the apartment opened. Soon before the eyes of the detective appeared Ivan’s wife. Her eyes were full of tears. “What do you want?” asked Masha. “I only want to ask few questions, that’s all,” he humbly replied. Masha allowed him to enter the apartment. “By your tears I judge that you heard of your husband’s passing,” said the detective slightly nervously. “Yes, I did, I heard it in the news.” “Miss, I know that this is a lot to take in, but I have to ask you these questions.” “It’s ok,” said Masha. He suddenly remembered the beautiful lady from his first detective assignment thinking about how similar they are. This case rings a bell for sure.

While Mislav was questioning Masha, Martin was doing the same with Sven. “So, sir where were you yesterday, around midnight?” asked Martin, “I was in my apartment, alone.” answered Sven. “Alone, so there are no witnesses at all to confirm that,” said Martin suspiciously. “I’m sorry officer but I have to go, I have some business to attend to,” said Sven. Martin wanted to stop him, but his phone rang. “O, hi Jimmy, I’m in the middle of an investigation,” said Martin, “Wait, what do you mean by there is no chocolate ice-cream, you know what we will talk about this later.”

Martin closed his phone, but when he turned around Sven was nowhere to be seen. Both detectives returned to the station to discuss the information they gathered. “So Martin, what did you learn about Sven?” asked Mislav. “Well, I know that there are no chocolate ice-creams in the city.” “You let him get away, didn’t you?” “Sir, what did you learn about Masha?” asked Martin. “Well, unlike you, I actually got some information. The Keneddys are broke so Ivan was planning on selling the company so he could get all the money.” “So, Ivan wasn’t planning on giving any money to Sven,” said Martin, “that sounds like a motif to me.”

“Hey boss, I remember one thing from my little chat with Sven.” “Well, spill it out,” said Mislav nervously. “Sven said that he had some business to attend to at the company” said Martin. “Good, now could you please give me the address of the company!” Martin gave the address to Mislav and he rushed to the company’s location while Martin was gathering a team of police officers for backup.

Mislav ran as fast as he could until he got to the company building. When he entered the main hall of the building, he asked a random woman: “Have you seen this man?”

“Yes, I have. He went to the head office.” Then Mislav ran to the head office where he saw Sven taking all the money and documents that he could find. “It’s all mine at last, ha, ha, ha ” laughed Sven manically.

“Hello, Sven,” said Mislav. “Oh, detective, how nice of you to drop by”, said Sven. “Mr. Johnson, I know that you killed Ivan Rogers?” “Why, of course I did, that bastard was trying to sell the whole company without giving me a penny.” “In that case, I will have to arrest you.” “You bastards,” said Sven madly, “I came too far to be stopped now.” “Please, Sven just come peacefully with me; it’s going be easier that way,” said Mislav. “Leaving so soon; but I have a surprise for you”.

At that moment Sven pressed the button on his office desk and suddenly gas started leaking in the room. Mislav tried to escape but somebody locked the door and there was no other way out. “You wanna see my little science project?” said Sven while putting on a gas mask. Mislav thought that he was a goner, but Martin with a couple of other officers busted in through the door and punched the gas mask of Sven’s face. “You, you bastards!”, he just muttered.

One hour later Sven was taken to prison and Mislav and Martin were talking in their favorite bar. “Good thing that me and the boys came in to rescue you, huh!” said Martin proudly. While they were talking, Mislav remembered that someone had locked him in with Sven. It was the proof that Sven hadn’t been working alone. Being a detective means that your work for the justice is never done as long as there is evil in this world. And as long as the snow turns red.

mentor: Ana Kodrić Ivelić
institution: Primary school Pujanki, Split

Bruno Đipalo

TWO BIG, SMALL MEN

A man named Josh was a scientist who discovered a special Size Potion. That potion could change the size of any living thing, but it was still unstable although he performed thousands of experiments on living beings. The potion could increase a man's size up to ten times, reduce a man's size up to ten times and return him to normal. But if a man drank the formula to increase and then to reduce himself, it would happen based on his emotions.

Two best friends Ben and Adam were very curious and read the story of the so-called Augmentation Drink. They decided to find the formula, sell it to the government and become millionaires. They searched and searched all over the world: in Paris, in Japan, in Rome, in Moscow. But they failed to find the scientist and so gave up travelling the world and decided to research the formula on all mighty Internet. They managed to discover that the scientist lived in present-day Germany on KirchholzstraBe. They travelled to Germany and bought an old cottage at a location near KirchholzstraBe.

The hut was small and smelled of all sorts of chemicals, but inside they could sleep. When they managed to settle in and meet the neighbours they started searching and asked people if they knew anything about a scientist named Josh, but were unlucky. The search lasted for 2 months, so they decided to renovate the cottage to get back the money they spent on it. When they were changing the floorboards, they discovered a dark tunnel leading into a small underground room that smelled of wine and alcohol. First, they tried some wine which they found in the refrigerator and then the one that was in a bottle on the table. They were both tasteless and rotten, they thought, but they suddenly turned green and started shrinking! They panicked! There were many bugs crawling around and they were the same size as them! They

ran across the room, but as their heart rates started increasing, the formula in their bodies changed and they started growing taller, and taller, and taller until the roof of the hut shattered and burst into air in all directions, hitting the neighbours' houses! They were amazed and horrified at the same time! The police came immediately and started shooting at them so Ben screamed: "Cease fire, we surrender!"

They were enormous and still there existed the possibility for them to constantly change size if they got scared or irritated. So, the police took them into custody and placed them in a special room with thermal cameras which monitored their heart rate. They investigated what kind of formula they found and drank. The two friends told them the whole story and how they intended to get rich from the potion but accidentally drank it. The police found the remaining formula and decided that they have no choice but to destroy all that was left of the potion. But did this mean that they had to get rid of both Ben and Adam? And would anyone ever find the mysterious scientist Josh?

Nobody knows. Some believe they are still alive in some secret facility and are being examined. Some say that Josh sold the potion to some rich countries. Others hope all traces of the formula were destroyed as the officials told the public. But still... We wonder...

mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Dina Marković

RYLEE ISLAND

When I was 15 years old, my cousin and I went to Rylee island. We decided to go camping there. While we were hiking, we heard some strange noise, and we peeked. Suddenly, a vast area full of water appeared in front of us, and curious as we both were, we wanted to see what was in its depths. We saw huge wells and steaming pools. The warmth of the collections attracted us, so we decided to go in that steaming water and relax a bit. Soon water became bubblier and bubblier. The moon was full and entirely white, but nothing happened. It seemed strange, but we didn't notice it, so we went to our tents where we were fast asleep.

Our parents decided to take a walk on a beach the next day, but my cousin and I didn't want to go. We'd rather swim in the sea. I jumped into the sea, and there were the bubbles again! I didn't want to tell my cousin anything, but at that very moment, I noticed I had got a mermaid tail. But my cousin saw it. She had one, too! What a shock! Nothing made any sense. A mermaid tail?! Come on! I told her that we had to keep this a secret because my parents would be terrified. My parents came back from a walk, and the first thing I asked my mom was when we were going home.

You must wonder why I asked that question. Well, I was scared and in a state of shock after finding out that I'm a half Mermaid, and I thought that maybe the pool had something to do with that.

The days passed, and finally, we headed back home. We arrived. I dashed to my room and started browsing the internet to find out if there was anything to be found about Rylee island. As I was doing my online research, the phone melted in my hands. At first, I a silly thought came to my mind – maybe it melted due to the amount of time I spent on it. Stupid, don't you think so?

Later, in the middle of the night, under the moonlight, my cousin and I went to the beach again as we decided to take a dive and find out what would happen this time. While we were in the sea, we saw some lights in the distance. Of course, we followed them, and we swam so fast because tails appeared again. Swimming as fast as real mermaids, we soon reached the shore of Rylee island. The lights were telling us where we had to go. On the hill above the beach, a woman was meeting with other people like us – mermaid people. She explained to us that people who enter the area of Rylee island and take a swim under the moonlight gain extraordinary power by becoming mermaids. We weren't scared anymore. At least, not so much as before. We found out that we have enemies called the Power-welding collars who appear quarterly. Finding out about special powers we possess, our fear lessened. My cousin was fortunate because she gained the ice power which only ten percent of the mermaids have. In contrast, I gained a soluble powder familiar to almost every mermaid and the star-swirling power that unities all the existing ones known to mermaids. From that night on, we swam every night, learning more about being mermaids and adjusting to our new powers, and becoming familiar with a mermaid life. Maybe one day you'll become a mermaid, too, if you take a swim in the waters of Rylee island under the moonlight. Do you dare?

mentor: Davorka Nekić
 institution: Primary school I. G. Kovačića Vrbovsko,
 PŠ Nikole Tesle, Moravice

Aleksandra Ninković

LIFE TURN COLOURED INDIGO BLUE

Olivia, a 30-year-old girl from New York, has always been very naive and gullible. Many abandoned her throughout her life, but she always thought that would change. She worked as a waitress in a small café with few guests, and the salary was meager. She loved to travel, but she couldn't afford it because she hadn't enough money. As a child, she lived with her parents in the very centre of New York and travelled the world with them. When she was just 12, her parents died in a car accident, and she ended up in an orphanage. Emily has been her best friend since she remembers. She is a well-educated high-class woman who runs her own company. She is 33 years old and has a 36-year-old husband, Jacob, with whom she has been married for ten years. Jacob works with Emily, and they both have a big salary and a mansion in downtown New York. Their children Mia and Noah are playful twins who love to play with Olivia the most while Emily and Jacob are on a business trip.

Olivia spends most of her free time babysitting Mia and Noah and doesn't have too much time for herself. One day Emily told Olivia that she and Jacob were going to Washington and would be there for five days. Her friend asked her to take care of Mia and Noah because there was no one to care for them. She, of course, agreed. Although they are playful, Mia and Noah are six years old and aren't troublemakers. They liked to hang out with Olivia. The days passed quickly, and they spent time playing board games, walking, and cooking together. The children did not complain about Olivia's small apartment at all.

The night before their parents arrived, Mia and Noah went to bed. Olivia was browsing the Internet and came across a travel page she had never seen before. By the way, her favourite site was the one with pictures of places worldwide. The new website she came across that evening was very similar to the ones she liked the most. Travel prices were not so high, but it didn't seem strange. She found a 3-day trip to Australia. It

cost as much as she could give, which meant it was very cheap. She had never been to Australia, although she had travelled worldwide with her late parents. Her life-long desire was to visit the country Down Under, so she booked the flight two days later. She decided to embark on that trip right after Emily and Jacob returned from their business trip. When Emily and Jacob returned from Washington, they came to Olivia to pick up the children. She told them about her trip. It was very strange to them that it was so cheap and that it was so suddenly published, but they could not persuade Olivia to give up her long-time desire. A day later, Emily and Jacob drove Olivia to the airport.

The plane that would take Olivia to her destination was completely blue. Indigo blue, more precisely. Everyone was suspicious except Olivia, who got on the plane first. When the others entered, the plane took off immediately. After a few hours, everyone noticed that the aircraft was not flying towards Australia but in a completely different direction. A group of hijackers abducted 400 people on a plane with shady intention. The passengers started panicking and screaming. The pilot lost control over the indigo blue machine, which began falling into the Southern Ocean. The plane crashed on a deserted island, and all the passengers died except Olivia, who was unconscious for some time.

When she woke up, she didn't know where she was. She couldn't get up for a few minutes because a part of the plane wreck covered her. She managed to free herself but was quite severely wounded. She toured the island somewhat disoriented due to the crash, but she wanted to see if anyone was alive. She found no one. Since her cell phone got damaged in the accident, she found a functional cell phone that belonged to another passenger. Still, there was no signal, and she could not call anyone for help. She was desperate and came to terms with the fact that she would stay on that island forever. And probably die. Three days passed; she didn't eat or drink anything. She was so exhausted that she just lay helpless. Lifeless. Hopeless. On the third day, another plane suddenly flew over the island where the accident took place. It spotted Olivia, landed, and saved her. Since the trip was supposed to last three days, Olivia did not call Emily and Jacob and let them know what had happened.

The plane crash was a real wake-up call for Olivia, making her change her life completely. Since her friends lived in a mansion, there was a place for her. She moved in with the two of them, got a new job as a host in a celebrity restaurant where her salary was much higher than ever before. Her life seemed much better than before, and she thought she was on the right track to make a genuine change, a complete turn of her used-to-be life. To find out how her life changed, you have to wait for Part 2 of the story. Or you can make your ending.

mentor: Marina Hadžiomerović
 institution: Primary school Medvedgrad, Zagreb

Dora Babić

I WAS CHATTING WITH TUPAC SHAKUR

One day I was looking through my father's old stuff out of boredom. There were a few small cardboard boxes, so there wasn't as much for me to explore. I stumbled upon a medium-sized photobook of the rapper "2pac". I decided to observe it in view of the fact that it was pretty appealing. All of a sudden, I heard a knock on my window. That was extremely unusual since we lived on the 4th floor. I walked up to the window and no one was there. I brushed it off, but as I turned around I saw something, or rather someone incredible...

2PAC: "Hello, Dora," said the amicable, charismatic man.

ME (DORA): "Tupac Shakur, is that really you?" I responded in absolute delight.

2PAC: "The one and only."

ME (DORA): "It's a pleasure to meet you. This is truly astounding! How are you even here, didn't you die?"

2PAC: "You have an interesting choice of words, young lady. The pleasure is mine." he chuckled, "I died, yes, but I have the ability to visit the Earth on occasion. Feel free to ask anything, there's no need to be shy!"

ME (DORA): "I have a variety of questions."

2PAC: "Go on!" he responded in enthusiasm.

ME (DORA): "What were the things you did the most when you were alive?"

2PAC: "I travelled, listened to lots of music and hung out with friends. Those were the things that made me exceedingly euphoric."

ME (DORA): "Who were you named after?"

2PAC: "I was named after the revolutionary Peruvian Tupac Amaru II from the 18th century."

ME (DORA): “Was rapping the only thing you did throughout your life?”

2PAC: “No, I used to be an actor, too. The first time I performed was in the 1980s, I was in a play called “*A Raisin in the Sun*”. I starred in movies like “*Above the Rim*”, “*Juice*” and “*Poetic Justice*”.”

ME (DORA): “How did you die?”

2PAC: “I was shot four times in the chest by a gunman at a stoplight in Las Vegas. I died six days after the incident. The bizarre thing is that I was revived seven times before my death. I was 25 years old. People believed the gunman who assassinated me was Orlando Anderson, but he was never arrested. He got beat up, though. There were many theories about my killer.”

ME (DORA): “Did you live a wealthy lifestyle as a child?”

2PAC: “Not at all. I grew up in poverty. A fun fact, despite the fact I later on became a successful rapper, is that my net worth was only \$200 thousand. I was in debt, owing an estimated \$4.9 million.”

ME (DORA): “What was an unusual thing about you?”

2PAC: “I used to be a Shakespeare enthusiast. When I studied at the Baltimore School of Performing Arts, I was enchanted by his literature, which also had a big influence on my work.”

ME (DORA): “Thank you for your time, this was phenomenal!”

2PAC: “Don’t mention it. Goodbye!”

ME (DORA). “Farewell, legend.”

mentor: Marina Hadžiomerović
institution: Primary school Medvedgrad, Zagreb

Dora Babić

THE AGONY OF A BUTTON

My name is Beatrix Cassia. Most people who barely know me would say I'm a pretty normal girl. It's better off that way since no one shall know my secret. You might be wondering what I'm hiding from everyone, but don't worry - there is plenty of time for me to explain. It was a regular day in Sante Anniu, a town with a population of around six hundred people. I was walking out of school, Noroi High, with my best friend Amrynn. We're both in grade eleven and soon to be seventeen year olds. I decided that it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to take a walk through the forest. She was very tired, so she politely declined. We said goodbye to each other and went our own ways. I was walking through the deep forest while humming a peaceful melody. It was a bright day, but the forest made it seem like it was night time. It would take me around ten minutes to arrive home through the forest, so I wasn't in a hurry. The only things that I could see were the beautiful Pinus Cembras and many gloomy looking flowers. Ravishing and dark energies surrounded the forest, but I liked that. I was stunned by the gorgeous feeling of walking through the most peaceful place ever until I stepped on something hard. It was a small red button. I chose to take it home with me. I didn't think much of it since it was just a regular button. Well, at least I thought so. The button constantly followed me around. I'd often leave it on the kitchen counter, but as soon as I left the house, it would suddenly appear in my pocket. It happened so many times that I started getting a very eerie feeling about it. Whenever I left it somewhere, it would always come right back to me. I couldn't stand it anymore. It creeped me out and I wanted to throw it away, so I did. That didn't work out, although I tried getting rid of it dozens of times. I even threw it to into river near the forest once, but it came back after a day.

The same situation kept happening until I got an idea. I decided to give the button to Amrynn, and I was positive that I'd finally get rid of it. I gave it to her one day after

school and she gleefully took the button home with her. Since it was finally Friday, I could relax. I called Amrynn to check up on her. The phone rang for a while, but she didn't pick up. Many hours had passed and I started to worry. Even though I was a bit concerned, I didn't want to think much of it since Amrynn was probably just busy. Another day passed. It was Saturday and no one had heard from Amrynn. She was officially pronounced as missing. I immediately knew it was the button's fault. Or was it my fault?

Many Saturdays had passed. I was dejected and felt like somebody had ripped apart a huge part of me. I started to lose hope. I was lost and frightened, and I believe Amrynn was, too. I was strolling out of school as usual. My head was completely empty. No thoughts were circling around my brain. All of a sudden, I realized I was in the same forest where I had found that red button. Frozen in shock, unable to move, I stood there looking at absolutely nothing. Uncontrollable dreariness ran across my skin. I fell down to my knees, covering my face with my cold hands. I burst into tears. After a while, I hopelessly lifted up my head. I saw something unexpected once again, but it was different this time. A tall redheaded woman was looking directly into my eyes. She had gorgeous full lips, a freckled face and glassy hazel eyes. I was so stunned by her beauty that I forgot about every single problem I had ever had. I just felt comfort and tenderness. The goddess walked up to me and told me how she knew where Amrynn was. I was petrified, but listened. She swung her ravishing red locks and created fog with them. When the fog slowly started to vanish, a blurry figure appeared. It was tangled in the woman's hair and I could barely see it since the fog wasn't completely gone. The hair untangled from the figure and I realized the same misty physique was Amrynn. So many unusual things had happened and I was more than astonished. I ran up to my best friend, hugging her more tightly than ever. Amrynn and the delightful woman explained the truth behind the button. There are in fact many buttons all around the globe. Those buttons are lost souls who can't move on. A lost soul finds its own special person and brings that human to its in-between world. Once the human helps it, the soul moves on and lets that person go. Amrynn had chosen to help the redheaded woman, so it took her quite some time to come back. The woman's name was Serpentine. Amrynn and I will surely always remember her. I hugged Amrynn once again and as soon as I let go, the redheaded woman wasn't there anymore.

mentor: Anita Žepina
institution: Primary school Benkovac, Benkovac

Sara Aurora Kvartuč

WAR FLOWERS

We all die in the end.

7th August 1914. WWI, USA

Her POV:

He got recruited. Right as we started to plan us spending the rest of our lives together, the war struck like a lightning struck by Zeus. And there I was, lying in my bed looking out of the window, because even if we aren't together right now, at least we are under the same sky, looking at the same moon and the same stars. I was his sun, he was my moon. And while the moon and the stars were fading to let the sun take over the sky, I quietly whispered "I love you".

13th August 1914. WWI, Germany

His POV:

I got recruited because of the shortage of men in the war. I left her right as we started to plan us growing old together. I was worried sick and feeling guilty for leaving her, my sun. And while we were getting directions when to attack, I was looking at the sky, sweat falling of my skin because of the rays of sun striking my face. I could barely see because it was so blinding, but I felt calm, because the sun reminded me of her and the rays of sunshine like our blinding love. Oh how I miss her. She's my sun and I'm her moon. And while the sun was starting to set down, I quietly whispered "I love you".

21st August 1914. WWI, Germany

His POV:

A week has passed. It was raining today. I like rain because no one can tell that I'm crying. It's ruthless out there. I have no idea how long it'll last and to be completely honest, I'm filled with dread because of a gut feeling that this won't end well at all. But for now my only worry is how my darling was holding up.

21st August 1914. WWI, USA

Her POV:

It's been a week without him. I never thought that I would have to live in these conditions. Dreading if my soulmate is alive in the storm of the war that is raging outside. I'm very shaken up and worrying how he is because that's the only thing that matters to me right now.

5th November 1918. WWI, USA

Her POV:

It's been four years. Not a single letter arrived from him. I spent the last four years looking at the sky and praying he is okay. But today is a very special day! My brother-in-law has informed me that the Allied Nations might sign the Treaty of Versailles soon and end the war. I was preparing to go see my soulmate on the battlefield and surprise him after all these years. I can't wait to go see him. Hopefully by the time I arrive to Germany, it will all be solved.

5th November 1918. WWI, Germany

His POV:

Every day I think about her. About her beautiful smile that lights the room like a ray of sunshine on a warm summer day, her full lips like juicy cherries hanging on from a tree in the middle of summer while the warm summer ray rolls off of them and the striking ray of sun makes them stand out, her mesmerizing amber eyes that are the exact windows of her warm and vibrant soul with that look full of love, her skin frail like porcelain and smooth as a cloud in the sky and the rosiness of her cheeks is

like a sunset with all of the colors crashing together in a mesmerizing flow. And her dark brown messy hair that could never be tamed. ” Oy soldier! Are you listening to me? Go out with the rest of your people right now!”. My general messed up my daydreaming thoughts. “Yes sir, on it”. I just want this lousy war to end so I can be with my darling, my other half. Am I asking for too much?

11th November 1918. WWI, Germany

Her POV:

I finally arrived in Germany. It was a bumpy and vigorous trip to here, but finally I am here. Now I just must get to the battlefield where he is. As I heard the Treaty of Versailles will be getting signed by the Allied Nations today. Oh I can't wait to see him. His eyes blue as the richest sapphires drowning in the bluest waters of the Indian ocean, the sharp structure of his face that could slice you like a knife, the dimples that he gets when he smiles and he charms people with it, his beautiful tan skin like he was bathed in sunlight.

Her POV:

I came to the battlefield. Maybe I was wrong? They aren't signing it today. It seemed like everyone was very much still battling.

His POV:

Everything is smokey and loud from the tanks, guns and airplanes swooshing through the cloudy sky. A storm was ahead. I heard a loud sound. I thought it was thunder, but as I looked down and saw blood coming out of my torso, I quickly realized it wasn't thunder.

Her POV:

Right after I heard a loud gunshot, there was an announcement. “The Allied Nations have signed the Treaty of Versailles. The war is officially declared over! Soldiers get back!”. And people started to cheer and hug each other while I walked over to them. I tripped on something and as I looked down I saw him. Lying down on the sandy ground, dirt all over him, blood gushing from his abdomen and tears forming in his eyes.

Their conversation

Her: "Are you okay? Can you hear me?!"

Him: "I'll never stop loving you."

Her: "Even though it killed you?"

Him: "I'd rather die thousand times than live without knowing your love. Everything has an end."

Her: "Even love?"

Him: "Especially love. I'm sorry, I loved you more than I was supposed to."

Her: "and how much were you supposed to love me?"

Him: "I wasn't. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't be heartbroken now. Don't think we weren't made to be. Maybe we just weren't made to last. And it had to end somehow, I'm glad it's in your arms." It would always end this way, her tears on his face and his blood on her hands.

Her: "B-but I dreamed of our future together" she said sobbing.

Him: "Dreams are what we wish we had. Eventually we must stop dreaming. Eventually we must settle for what is. In this case, death."

In that case she realized that the saying "till death do us apart" wasn't a promise, it was a curse.

Her: "I'll never forget you. I will mourn your death until I die"

Him: "You won't. Do something with that fire that you have inside of you."

Her: "It may be true that we all have a fire inside of us, but pain is like water, and no matter how strong the fire is, water will always win."

Him: “You know how we said we will be together forever? And that is why forever isn’t real... forever is something we say because we are scared of what tomorrow will be.”

Her: “Hey? I learned something” she said, while tears still streamed her face like waterfalls.

Him: “Yeah? What’s that?” He asked with short breaths barely being able to keep his eyes open.

Her: “Love isn’t something you get to keep, it’s something that you cherish while it lasts. Oh, great it’s raining even more now”

Him: “You know I always loved rain. Cause we were to be broken and numb to cry, so the sky did for us. And no matter the pain it caused me; I’d fall in love with you all over again. For every flower that blooms one must die. I wonder who will bloom after me. Finish what I couldn’t, live darling.”

Her: “while our time together was only a dent in the universe’s timeline...it will always be my big infinity. It was us against the world, but the world somehow won. And maybe one day we will connect again, but for now this is goodbye. “

Him: “Goodbye darling.” He said as he took his last final breath and a single tear rolled of his face.

End of conversation

Fast forward into the future

13th August 1934.

Her POV: I broke my promise. I met someone else. Was it truly love again or was it something to take my mind of him? Honestly, I don’t know. But I learned to not hold on to the past for too long because it will break you. “I love you” I whispered to my new husband. My husband smiled at me with hurt in his eyes while stroking my hair with his hands and said, “You always say such beautiful lies.”. That kind of

startled me. I will admit I wouldn't know if you could call my feelings towards my husband love, but I certainly did grow fond of him. "I'm going to bed." I informed my husband before giving him a peck on the cheek and throwing myself onto the bed. I couldn't sleep. I just looked at the dark night sky. I wanted to talk to my old love for a second." you always said you loved the stars, in fact, I grew to love them too. it's funny how they seem to shine a little brighter now that you've joined them." I realize that no matter how much history we shared, there will never be a future and that broke me. Then I spotted a little notebook on the bedside commode. I know it's bad, but my curiosity pulled the worst out of me and I read it. It was my husband's. I saw a sentence that said "Because sometimes cupid runs out of arrows, and shoots one person, not two. And there I was left loving someone who loved him". I closed the notebook immediately. I felt bad. I realized I will always look for him, my moon, in everyone else.

His POV:

Even though I died, I never left her side. I was there watching the love of my life say "yes" to another man. And then finally my heart accepted what my brain already knew, she was going to fall for someone else. I watched my other half become whole again. It was then i realized she had found a new moon. i was just one of her stars, watching from across the world.

And that's the story of how I died twice. Some people say right person wrong time but for me it was right person wrong lifetime. She started a new book in her life, I was stuck on the last page of mine, and as I reread our story again & again, hoping for another chapter, I realized it wasn't going to change. Maybe forever was a word meant for memories, not for people. We were a perfect match, but matches are bound to burn. And then she smiled, maybe not at me, but after all this time she still smiled, so I smiled too. "He would have loved you" she whispered to her new husband. My beautiful girl, of course I would have. Didn't you know I sent him just for you? She had that look in her eyes, the same look that she looked at me with those amber eyes, only this time I wasn't in the reflection. She was the Sun; I was the Moon. Destined always to long for each other, but always to be kept apart.

I warned you.

mentor: Anita Žepina

institution: Primary school Benkovac, Benkovac

Rozmari Antunović

WINE

The air felt heavy as the investigators walked into the shabby, abandoned building. They held their breath while looking at the door, both being young and careless, and usually assigned to the most boring cases.

The older of the two, Trick, was a serious chap known for his persistency in solving any mystery encountered. He was, for many years, the most glorified investigator in his station, but after a rough period, he was overshadowed by a colleague of his who accidentally solved one of his cases.

Trick found this investigation an opportunity to rise from ashes to the top again since it seemed like a perfect, almost unsolvable mystery. He usually worked alone, but this time, a young investigator followed him every step of the way. The young detective was the just an ordinary guy you would see at a barbecue. If he didn't wear a suit you couldn't have guessed that he was an investigator. His silly personality matched an even sillier name, Kelp. But the name suited him, he was tall and lanky almost like actual kelp. The guy looked up to the wise and serious investigator Trick, seeing him as an idol and wishing to be like him once he was a teenager.

Now back to where they stood. The building, which, a long time ago, was one of the town's most prized possessions was now left to rot in the forest, the town moving away from it. The rumours about the place kept anyone far from it. The wind blew inside, letting in fresh air after so many years. The horrible smell of crumbling furniture was felt in the air when the investigators opened the main entrance door, and then, they then finally took a few steps inside. It was no wonder the town was so proud of the building back in the day. The building's walls were painted in the richest colour of soft green leaves, and after so many years the wood looked shiny. Long dark curtains gave the rigid square windows an elegant shape, even if the curtains were ripped and dirty. Inside, it looked like one of those rich mansions you would see in

the movies, the houses you wished to have lived in. Even the softest step would make the floor squeak and the hallway in front of the investigators revealed a giant staircase that led upstairs. The stairs were covered by a filthy carpet, the wall full of dusty paintings of people whose eyes stared at the two investigators as if judging them for entering the building.

After many years, the house was finally put up for sale, chances of it being brought back to life were low. It will most likely be emptied and the vintage, expensive items will be sold for high prices. But the sale was not the reason the two investigators were called. Usually, this was not the job they would do, but the owners, the townspeople, felt as if the house was more than it was supposed to be.

Earlier, the building served many purposes, first standing as a courthouse, then being separated into a pub downstairs and a restaurant upstairs. After that, it was sold to a family who transformed the vast fields surrounding the house into a vineyard. The yard is now overgrown with tall grass and not the safest place to walk during warm seasons.

The investigators were determined to see only one room, not having will or reason to look around. The only place of concern was the basement where the pub was. Even if the restaurant stopped being a restaurant the pub was never shut down. The family took the pub upstairs and all the winemaking was moved downstairs, into the basement. But even though the winery brought in many people, there was always something wrong with the wine and the family. No one knew who the family was, they came from another town. When they were asked the town's name they giggled mysteriously. The family consisted of a beautiful, tall woman who had many names but, because of the appearance, she was nicknamed Beauty. Her husband was also tall but looked shorter next to her once she wore a pair of heels. His nickname was Paul, nickname because people weren't sure if that was his real name. The husband was a thin, yet older man with grey hair that he would pull out from time to time. He was the only person in the family that talked, aside from his oldest child, a bright young boy who spoke German to his father, Dutch to his mother and Latin to his grandmother. He wrote numbers on the floor when he played outside and always kept a grin on his face. The grandmother was a nice old lady. She spoke quietly and only to her grandchildren, especially to the youngest child, a girl who could destroy anything with one touch. Unlike her brother who knew everything and anything, she only knew what she was told. Their father had a strict rule of only the men speaking and the women being quiet, a rule his mother was allowed to break. It was a deal-breaker for anyone who visited, everyone wanting the mother and daughter

to also join in the conversations and be able to write like the brother and father, yet no one said anything to the man being afraid of him. The family's portraits were set high up on the walls, never having dust or any flaws on them. The paintings usually had many other people on them, but the townspeople never knew who those people were. While the whole house was lively and the people were allowed to walk into any room, the basement was always off-limits but that was just something anyone brushed off saying how the basement must be dirty from the winemaking inside of it. The first two people to enter the basement aside from the family were the two investigators. They were told where the basement door was, right behind the stairs, a room that had a circling stairway that would bring you down to the basement. The room's door was in the kitchen which was on the left as soon as you walked in. Trick was the first one to make a move into the kitchen, he took the steps carefully but quickly wanting to solve the case as soon as he could. Kelp followed along, putting his feet right on the place where Trick walked. He stared at the older man who looked serious. It wasn't long until they found the door. The door was tucked in between the cabinets that were filled with glass cups and glasses. They were dirty and dried wine left very light red marks on the glasses. Trick opened the door swiftly and looked at a switch on the wall which was supposed to turn on the lightbulb that was hanging above them. The switch, though, didn't work and created a buzzing sound when pressed. Trick turned on the flashlight he always had with him and started to walk downstairs. Kelp followed along but took his time admiring the very beautiful room they were entering. The room was lightened only by a few windows that were on top of the walls. Yet, the light coming from the windows was enough to show everything. The barrels of wine laid untouched. Aside from the barrels the room was left empty. This was the reason why the case became a mystery, with no evidence or a solution. Trick had his eyes set on the floor searching for anything left on it. While the serious man walked around, Kelp ran to the barrels amazingly reading the numbers which showed the years in which the wine was made. He brushed off the barrels using the tablecloth he brought, trying not to damage the treasure. He looked up at the last barrel to read the year it was made, he presumed that that was the freshest of them all. The numbers gave him no year, the numbers looked as if they were randomly put on the barrel which made Kelp confused. His confusion was interrupted by Trick, sighing in annoyance.

"There's no use in this investigation, we don't know what we're trying to uncover. The townspeople must be either crazy to make up a story up or we are crazy for believing them and coming over here. Waste of time."

He tripped in anger as he walked over to Kelp, the old investigator's wrinkles showed as his expression changed into a frustrated one. He turned his back to the barrels, closing his eyes and feeling Kelp's eyes staring at him in surprise. Never has he seen the investigator so frustrated with a case. Kelp looked back to the barrel with the funny numbers and wrote them down in his notebook, finding them interesting. The investigators walked back up, Trick stomping his feet as he walked. Kelp followed along again, rereading the numbers. He slowly started to read the numbers out loud which made Trick halt in his tracks, he turned back and looked at the young investigator.

"What are you repeating?"

He asked, almost poking out holes in Kelp's hands that held the notebook. The young investigator tried to laugh it off, he found the numbers silly and didn't want to bother the wise man with something stupid and unimportant he has found. Trick took the notebook and tore the paper out, putting it in his pocket.

"This case is over Kelp. Come, I'll drop you off at the bus stop."

The investigator sighed and pinched his forehead. This was how Kelp found himself at the bus stop, waving to the wise investigator, guilt building in him for not saying anything about the numbers. But, he followed the older investigator's words and forgot about it. On the other hand, the wise investigator Trick stopped the car as soon as he was far enough so Kelp couldn't see it. He reached into his pocket and took out the paper, along with the small tag that had the numbers carved into it. He smirked as he read the numbers.

"19°56'56.96"S 69°38'1.83"W"

Trick put the papers on the front seat and drove back home. The hour journey felt short, yet lasted long. He passed through the town, leaving the buildings behind, looking at the old-style houses that after so many years people still lived in. The old investigator chuckled at the townspeople. They were so naive to him. They sure couldn't solve the mystery, but he could. He knew the solution and kept it hidden from them.

The numbers were coordinates to a very special house. In this house lived a man who knew the secret of enchanted wine, the wine that can provide you with eternal youth. The man who had to make everybody who got close to the family's secret disappear without loose ends. Can you guess who that man was?

Trick was slowly moving away from the town. All you could see were the shadows of tall buildings and the smoke that was coming from a burning, exploded bus on the outskirts of the town.

mentor: Lucija Pučo Lacmanović

institution: Primary school Benkovac, Benkovac

Sofija Vrcelj

THE WAR

1. The one with the kingdoms

Somewhere in a time long before this one there were three kingdoms: Leine, Erus and Salas. They were all named by the last names of their royal families and to officially be the king or the queen you had to wield the sword of the kingdom. The legend behind the three swords was that hundreds of years ago three best friends stumbled upon a huge abandoned land where they found a cave that was full of blue and red crystals. The first friend had an idea to make a sword out of it so he did, he melted the blue crystals and made a blue sword. The second friend thought that was a great idea so he did the same, he melted the red crystals and made a red sword. The third friend didn't want to because he thought it symbolized evil and war. Throughout the years the three friends all made a village for themselves and made a deal to never go to the cave again. They started compering everything they had, the houses in their villages, the food, even the people. The third friend decided to make a sword despite everything he believed in, he broke the deal and went to the cave to take the crystals, he melted both crystals together and made a purple sword. He made the sword because he had a feeling that the compering would soon become fighting, and he was right. One day they agreed to meet each other in the cave to talk about what they were going to do with the rest of the crystals. The first one wanted to make jewelry out of it, the second one wanted to make weapons but the third one didn't even say anything. The first one realized that some of the crystals were missing so he started yelling and pushing others around. He pushed the other into a wall of rocks, he was fine but the rocks started moving, the cave collapsed on their heads and killed them. All three of them hid the swords but people in their villages found them and hundreds of years later they became the symbols of the kingdoms. There was a war going on between the two kingdoms Leine and Erus for ten years now. The war was

mostly about land but most of the people thought it was personal for the kings because the former queen of Leine killed the former king of Erus. The Leine kingdom offered peace 2 years ago but Erus declined. The reason why Leine offered peace was because one of the king's daughters almost died in the battlefield. The king hated that she was the part of the war but she was 17 and you can fight in the war willingly from the age of 15 and you are sent to war when you are 18 no matter if you are a girl or a boy. Her sister Em was totally different, she was older so she was going to be the queen when her father Eric II. and her mother Anne die. The third kingdom was never a part of the war and no one really knew much about what was going on behind the walls. One of the little things everybody knew was that the king's name was Bruno and that he had an 18 year old son Eliot, he also had an older daughter but she died about 7 years ago and nobody knows how or why. There was a rumor going around that the king is dead and he left everything to his son, but again just a rumor, nobody knew for sure. Queen Ella of Erus and her husband Michael had just one child, a 17 year old William who also fought in the war because of his father. He often thought about if he was the king 2 years ago he would have accepted the peace offering.

2. The one with the families dying

One day May (Eric's younger daughter) woke up because she heard screaming from her parent's room. She got up but when she opened the door to get out of her room, there it was, her father's body, it fell on her and covered her in blood. She could still hear her mother screaming, but she couldn't move, she was in shock and when she got out of it, it was too late, her mother was already dead on the floor. When her mother's body fell on the floor in front of her bedroom's door five soldiers came out of her room and saw May. She immediately started running because she recognized the uniforms the soldiers were wearing. It wasn't Erus like she assumed, it was Salas and that made her very confused because they haven't done anything like this in ten years, but she was too busy to think about that. She got out through the little window on the roof in her room and the soldiers couldn't follow so she bought some time with that. She ran to the farm but on her way there she saw her sister and at least 20 soldiers, so she couldn't do anything but at least she knew she was alive. May always thought the quiet people are the ones you should be afraid of the most, so for someone who gets afraid pretty rarely she was so afraid she was shaking. She went to the farm because the only other way out of the kingdom except the main exit was through the farm. She saw there were a couple of soldiers surrounding the back exit

as well, but she figured that was her best shot, so she took it. She got on her horse and rushed through the doors, they saw her and started following her, but she was way in front of them. She was going straight which led to the Erus kingdom and was planning on turning right but after couple a of seconds she saw horses going towards her from the Erus kingdom. She thought maybe they were after her too but as they were getting closer she saw they were following someone as well. She was still going to turn right but then she felt a spear that one of the soldiers threw in her right arm so she couldn't, and the soldiers were getting closer and closer from both sides. When they were close enough she recognized the person the other soldiers were cashing, it was William, the person who almost killed her 2 years ago and also the prince of Erus. She jumped off the horse but she fell on the ground and as she looked up she saw a sword about to cut her head in half so she closed her eyes. She had her eyes closed for a couple of seconds and when she opened them she saw the soldier who was about to kill her dead in front of her. She looked to her left where she saw William fighting them, she thought about killing him even after he saved her life but she decided not to.

-You want to help? - he said while slicing one of soldier's throats.

She though about it and decided to help him because at the end of the day he isn't the one who killed his parents and tried to kill her a hundred times today. They fought but they just kept coming, she didn't know what to do but just then he said "I know a place, just follow me". He started running, she just followed him as did the soldiers. They were running straight for a couple of minutes and then he grabbed her arm and turned left and then left again. He opened a door in the ground and jumped in, she followed and he closed the door, she wanted to ask what the hell that place was but he shushed her because there were soldiers right above them. They were quiet for a couple of minutes until they couldn't hear them anymore.

-What the hell was that? - she asked when she couldn't hear the soldiers anymore.

I don't know, the Salas really went crazy. - he said

Yea, but why, they have been so quiet for 10 years, why now?

My guess, the rumors about the king dying are true and now the 18 year old thinks he can have the whole world for himself just by killing the royal families like a coward. - he said while laughing.

They killed your family as well? - she was confused because no one whose family was just killed would be laughing the way he was.

Yes, and I assume they were looking for the swords.

Yea, I think that's why he didn't kill my sister.

Is your arm ok? - he asked.

I'm fine, but what do we do now?

I know a guy who can help us both. - he said pretty confidently.

How?

He can get us straight to Eliot, you get your sister, I kill the bastard, ok?

Straight to Eliot? No one outside the walls knows anything about him, who is this guy of yours?

Look I know we don't really like each other but just trust me on this one, ok?

Like? You put a sword through my gut and broke both of my legs.

That's war May, and right now both of our kingdoms are being terrorized while he is looking for those swords, so the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

She didn't say anything she just broke the part of the spear that wasn't in her arm, opened the little door above her and said "Lead the way".

3. The one with the plan

They were walking for half an hour when she asked "No really who is this guy of yours", he told her that he was an old friend of his father's who owed him. She still wanted to know how he would be able to help them, and they had about an hour left to walk so he told her. His name was Sal and he grew up in the Salas Kingdom when King Henry, the father of the current king Bruno, ruled the kingdom. Sal worked as a guard in the castle since he was a teenager, but about 12 years ago when his wife was pregnant a chaos started in the kingdom because someone killed the king in the public while he was making a speech. He was a pretty bad king but he wasn't the only one that was killed, in the next year people just started dying, they were poisoned just like the king. Sal was afraid for his pregnant wife so he sent her to one of the only people he knew outside of the kingdom, Williams's dad. They met when they were kids because their mothers were best friends, Sal's mother always talked about Michaels's and the other way around. Michael took Sal's wife in, and she gave birth in his castle and Sal was very thankful for it. Sal wanted to bring them back when the panic stopped, but as he was smuggling her and their daughter she starved to death because she gave all her food to her daughter. She was only 2 when she saw her mother die in front of her, and that was about the same time the war between the other two kingdoms started, and when Sal saw the war he thought Salas was going to be a part of it as well, so he asked Michael for a one las favor. He asked him for a house far away from the kingdoms, which he built so Sal could raise his little girl peacefully. The house was very hard to find but Williams's dad told him exactly

how to find it and if he ever needed help to go t William asked for Sal which made t here. When they got there he knocked and the door was opened by a girl who looked very confused. She said “Hi, can I help you”, William asked for Sal which made the girl even more confused. “How do you know my dad” she asked but before he got to answer she yelled “Are you William?”, she looked even more excited when he said yes. She called her dad who immediately came and looked even happier than she did. They let them in, Sal hugged William and asked if he remembers him, he said not really but his dad told him a lot about him. They gave them food and water and asked what happened. When William told them everything that happened and Tina, Sal’s daughter, stitched May’s arm, which was pretty impressive for a 12 year old, Sal drew them a blueprint of the castle and told them how to get inside the walls. The last time he was there was about 10 years ago and by then Bruno had fixed a lot of things his father messed up, but he told them that a lot had probably changed since then. The plan was that they get into the walls through a passage that was created by King Henry for emergencies. Sal knew about it because he heard Henry and one of the builders talk about it when he was a guard about a year before the king was killed. Henry told the builder not to tell anyone about it, not even Bruno, his own son who was 30 at the time. The passage led to the prison, so May hoped maybe her sister was there. From the prison there was a staircase that led straight to the main hallway, but Sal thought that it wasn’t there anymore because Henry was always paranoid like the end of the world was coming but Bruno wasn’t, that’s why he thought Bruno removed them. The plan was pretty bad but if they got lucky they could get to Eliot without a lot of people seeing them.

4. The one with Ella

When they got to the walls they found the passage, but before they got in, he wanted to discuss the plan again and make a deal, just for tonight they were partners not enemies, she shook his hand and went in. It was like a tunnel, very dark and very long. They were walking for at least 10 minutes and didn’t hear or see anybody. When they saw a light at the end of the tunnel they started running but May fell over something and when she got up to see what it was she saw a body of a 10 year old. It wasn’t the first time either of them saw something like that, so they didn’t say anything, just kept going, which is really sad if you think about it. The light they saw wasn’t from the prison, it was a little room that led to prison which Sal didn’t tell them about which means that it was built after Henry died which means Bruno knows about it and could walk into the room any second. William was about to open the door but

she stopped him because she heard two guards talking. It didn't seem like they were going to leave any time soon so William and May made a plan, they were gonna kill them and steal their clothes. They surprised them and before she put the clothes on May went to see if her sister was in prison. The moment the prisoners saw her they started yelling for her to open the doors, of course she didn't. She didn't see her sister so she yelled her name and someone answered but it wasn't her sister. It was a guy her age who had a sell of his own, and he said "Why, are you May?". That got her attention because not only did he know her sister he knew her name as well. She asked him what his name was and when William heard he said his name was Eliot he wanted to kill him right there but she stopped him. They were both confused but she wanted to know why he's in there so she gave him a chance to talk. When they asked about it all the prisoners started laughing and one of them asked "Where are you guys from? Haven't you heard?" May was confused but she wanted to talk to Eliot alone so she took the key from one of the dead guard's uniforms, let him out and the three of them went to talk in the other room. He thanked them and asked why they look so mad at him, they told him why but he had no idea what they were talking about.

Why are you in prison, aren't you the prince? - she asked.

Because of my sister and yes, I am.

Your sister? Isn't she dead?

No, unfortunately she is not.

They didn't understand anything at first but as he told them the whole story they understood. When King Henry, Eliot's grandfather was killed he was 6 and his sister Ella was 12. Bruno tried finding out who killed all those people because everybody that was killed went to the same bar that was owned by Bruno himself, so he was worried it was someone who worked there. One day he went to the bar early in the morning because he figured that the killer probably put the poison in the drinks in the morning and since no one can know it's related to his bar he just wanted to end this. When he went to the storage where they kept the drinks he saw his own daughter putting poison in all the bottles. He asked her what she was doing but she wouldn't answer, so he just took her to the castle before anyone saw them. She said she poisoned Henry because she thought he was a weak leader and the others she killed just because it was fun to watch people struggle for their life. He never told anyone else about it just his son and since no one made the connection with his bar the whole thing just kind of went away, Bruno locked Ella in the castle and told everyone she was dead. One day Eliot took a trip with his friends and since Bruno's wife died 2 years ago he

was lonely and missed his daughter. He got so drunk he went to see her and passed out in front of her right before she killed him with his own knife. She knew exactly where the sword was but that wasn't enough and when she found out about the war she immediately sent her soldiers to the other two kingdoms and told them to kill the royal families but to bring the kids alive because if she can't find the swords she is gonna need to torture someone to find out where they are, or at least that's what everyone thought. When Eliot got back she put him in prison and said "Now you're gonna see what it was like for me for 10 years." William didn't believe him and still wanted to kill him but May didn't let him.

Thanks for letting me out but you can go home now.

Excuse me? - May was already frustrated before he even said that.

I can take care of this, she is my sister.

You obviously can't take care of this considering we just found you in jail. - Whilliam said while laughing.

You never told me how you knew my sister.

When Ella and I were talking which was right before she put me in here they brought some girl she called Em and asked her where May was.

Was she ok? - she asked

I think so. - he said.

They decided to help each other, May gets her sister, Eliot, who didn't really care about his, gets his kingdom back and William gets to kill Ella.

5. The one with the explosions

They asked about the staircase that Sal told them about, he said it was still there, but it didn't lead to the hallway anymore, it led straight to the Henry's room. He said it belonged to his grandfather and when he died Bruno didn't turn it into something else, he just said no one is allowed in and made the staircase lead to it. May and William were dressed as guards so they could easily walk out of the room, but everyone knew what Eliot looked like and his whole face was bleeding. They showed him the map of the castle that Sal drew them, he said lot has changed since then and that who knows what Ella has done to it. William opened the door first, then May and when they saw no one was there Eliot followed them. It was all going well but then three guards saw them and asked them who Eliot was and when they saw his face they asked if he had escaped and are they bringing him back to jail. They said yes but before the guards could say anything else Eliot stabbed one of them in the eye with a knife he took from May's boot. "What the hell was that?" May was angry because

they would've believed them and left them alone. Since she had no choice but to fight, they killed all three of them, took one of their uniforms and hid the bodies. Eliot led them to her room, she wasn't there but someone else was, well not someone more of a something. It was her father's body, Eliot's father's body. He knew where she was at least he said so, William didn't believe him but May did because when she saw Eliot next to his father's body he reminded her of herself. They passed a lot of people not just guards but cooks, prisoners just ordinary people, that made May wonder what Ella was planning but all she could think about was her sister. When they got to the room he was talking about, the doors were unlocked which was odd but they still went in. The room used to belong to Eliot's and Ella's mother with whom Ella used to be very close with. When they stepped in, Ella did seem a little surprised but to May she looked relieved which was quite scary.

How nice, you won't miss the show. - she said while laughing.

William wanted to kill her right there but he knew May needed to ask her about Em. Where is my sister? - May asked.

Your sister? She is right here. - she said while holding Em's head in her hand.

May shed a tear out and looked at William and told him to do what he came to do.

Why would kill her, she was the only way you could find the Leine sword? - Eliot said before William could get to her.

The sword? I don't care about the swords, I killed the royal families so I could have the castles.

Why the hell would you need the castles? - William asked.

You'll see. - she said and turned around again on her balcony.

William walked to her and was about to stab her, but she started fighting and she was pretty good at it too. Eliot and May tried to help him but she would just knock them out and as May was about to get up she saw Ella throwing William off the balcony. She held his hand and told them to back off as they did, but as they were getting up they heard something blow up. They looked through the balcony and saw that the Erus Kingdom exploded, Ella started laughing and said to May "Your home is next". William was holding her hand but when she wasn't looking he tried to climb up but when she saw him she pushed him, but he pulled her with him so they both fell. It was at least 200m tall so there was no way they would survive that. The second after they fell, May and Eliot saw another explosion that was coming from the Leine Kingdom and before they could process that, they heard another one but this time they felt it as well. They released that Ella didn't want to rule the kingdoms, she didn't want the swords, she wanted to see people suffer and die, that's why she was looking

through the balcony, so she could see the kingdoms get destroyed. They started running because they knew what was gonna happen, they went the same way May and William got in. They ran as fast as they could but so did the rest of the people but Ella closed all exits so no one could get out, including her. When they were outside of the walls they could still hear people screaming and crying but they couldn't stop running because they knew they couldn't do anything to help those people. After a couple of minutes the whole kingdom was gone just like the people in it and just like the other two kingdoms. They looked at each other, May's eyes were full of tears, so he hugged her, a person he had known for just a couple of hours and the only person he had left in this world. They both lost everything, but they were still alive, which didn't seem like much at the time but at least they had that. They went to Sal's house and lived there as happy as a person that went through what they did could.



SECONDARY

SCHOOL



mentor: Tihana Pavičić
institution: II. gimnazija, Osijek

Helena Lucija Vuković

GODS OF ROCK AND ROLL (SLEEP WHEN THEY'RE DEAD)

The tour bus is packed with bodies of nameless people and cigarette smoke is clouding my vision as the alcohol was last night. I roll over and there she is. Another nameless woman - no - a *girl*, a nobody to me, to us, but someone's daughter, sister, friend passed out and tangled in my sheets.

I couldn't care less.

I lost my soul somewhere inbetween Berlin and Las Vegas, and I couldn't care less.

"Good morning, Lou," My morning voice croaks out as I greet our bus driver. He has four kids and a loving wife who makes the most godawful apple pie, and he still eats it with a smile on his face. She gifted it to me once after our album went gold on the charts, and I gifted it to my dog. The apple pie rotted away, untouched. Can lying be considered love? Every self-proclaimed hopeless romantic would argue '*God, of course not, how could it be?*' in their faux outrage at unconventional romance. Lou tells me, '*Happy wife, happy life - if she isn't, you'll get knifed.*' A bit too aggressive, but maybe he's got this life thing all figured out. Some of us don't.

He smiles at me and what baffles me is the honesty - a smile from the soul that reaches the eyes. The crinkles around them tell joyful stories of a lifetime well spent. At least I'll look handsome when I'm old. "Good morning, Michael!"

When he uses my full name, I'm sadistically glad he's condemned to apple pies 'til death does him part.

"The girl in my room, uh..." Always, my fingers click when I pretend to remember names.

"Judy." And always, he remembers. The poster-middle-aged-man for white picket fence America. Someone should get him a Nobel Peace Prize.

“Yeah, her.” I don’t feel bad, why should I? She’s the one who willingly came to be forgotten. “Could you take care of it?”

Lou chuckles, but it doesn’t glisten in his eyes - and sometimes, he stares at me like I’m a charity case. Like *I* need to be pitied. I’m on top of the world. “The usual, huh? One of these days, you’re going to find yourself a woman--

“When hell freezes over, man.” I utter my all too familiar phrase, pop a cigarette in my mouth and I’m on my way. As I inhale the first breath filled with smoke, I hear my lungs cry and all is right in the world.

The brisk morning air is far too unkind to my face, and the sun is too stubborn to respect the consequences of my late night adventures. Of course, the moment I start to make my way down 42nd Street, my drained eyes meet hopeful, beaming ones. I curse inwardly.

“Oh my *God!*” Even *he* can’t help you, woman. Screeching into strangers’ ears at eight in the morning. Far up on the list of things that make me wish Alctraz was still up and running. “You’re Mikey Harrison from *Sunday Blind!*”

Taking a long drag from my cigarette, there is nothing I take more pleasure in than saying, “No, no, I think you got the wrong guy, sweetheart. Many people do.”

She lowers the picture of my band from the summer photoshoot (does she carry it everywhere, the absolute lunatic?), and her disappointment almost spills into tears. Perhaps I am a sadist, because the sight almost makes me smirk.

“Bu--but, no, you’re him, I know it! I’ve been a f--

“I despise the guy. Too pretentious, too mediocre. I would apologize, but I can’t bring myself to feel sorry I’m not him.” She looks as though she’s been sucker-punched in the gut. That’s what she gets for screaming at innocent passers-by at the crack of dawn. Maybe if she had been a few octaves quieter and asked nicely, I would’ve taken the time to sign the damn picture.

I probably wouldn’t, though.

“You’re just-- just a jealous nobody! He’s twice the man, no a million times...”

...I’ll ever be? If she knew she had just talked to her idol, she would rip my pictures off the wall and burn my records. At least I’ve never said we were bigger than Jesus. I’m just trying to be left alone, not with a bullet in my head. She should be thankful I’m walking away, thankful I helped her keep her pitiful delusions when I could’ve shattered her skewed perception of me in seconds. I’m the humanitarian here.

I’d say that New York has always been my home, but walking these cold streets with harsh outlines and the worst people - I would liken it to an orphanage. A makeshift home that is forced upon you when there is nowhere else to go. I always say New

York takes care of me like an alcoholic mother takes care of her children... Barely, yet just enough; and it truly is enough, because I am no one's son. I feel that it loves me because I am too, a worst kind of person, and it can tell I belong here.

After what seemed like a thousand eternities of ducking past strangers, the soles of my shoes brush against a familiar 'welcome' mat. I flick the cigarette butt on the pavement before I look up to see a neon-pink sign screaming *Kimberly's Kitchen* at me.

The only kind of screaming I'm willing to endure on early New York mornings.

"Oh, my dear boy!" A firm, but gentle cadence travels to my ears, and all of a sudden, for a split-second, New York is a happy family and I am, for the first time, someone's son.

Kimberly squeezes me tightly and rests her full head of grey hair (with tints of pink) on my chest. She mumbles a string of sentences, from *'thought I would never see you again'*, *'I'm so sorry'* and eventually to dozens of *'are you okay?'s*.

If it were anyone else, I would have already evaporated into thin air.

"Kimberly," I smile genuinely, and every time I do, I am reminded that my true happiness lies in the aged lines of a waitress' face and her fifty-year-old diner in Manhattan, New York. "How are you?"

The old woman pierces through me with her all-knowing fiery gaze, and I squirm uncomfortably. Her gaze spills over into my soul with a warmth I haven't felt since the last time I sat in her booth, a year ago. It wraps itself around my heart and too quickly invades my brain. She knows it all, the wise woman. She knows which eggshells to tiptoe on when she talks to me, and she's seen what rips me apart. I don't like it, yet I do.

Without another word, her wrinkly hand takes mine and leads me to my usual booth, far in the back, far from anyone who isn't her.

I study our entwined hands, and it looks almost poetic. Hers aged by time, mine by poor life choices. Which is better?

"So," she straightens her white apron with pink hearts and sits in the booth, pointing at the seat across from her, "stop evading the question like I'm someone you keep secrets from. Tell me how you're holding up, my boy."

The dark circles under my eyes would disappear if only I could fall asleep wedged between the notes of her soothing voice.

I sit and study the salt and pepper shakers as if they're the most fascinating works of art.

“I don’t even... I have no idea, Kim. Truth is, I’m not even aware of myself until the first coffee in the mornings. And then we play a sold-out show, and then I’m gone again.”

Nobody knows me like Kimberly Anne Scott does. Nobody should. Sometimes I just want to leave her a note attached to the loose doorknob on the back entrance, telling her how sorry I am and that I shouldn’t burden her anymore. Sometimes. Most of the times, like right now, I’m selfish and I sit in her booth while she plays therapist.

“Don’t get me wrong when I say this; I *am* happy to see you, always, but seeing you tear yourself apart like this...” She trails off, sniffing - an indication of sadness threatening to materialize into tears. I always make her cry. She always cares too much.

I take my eyes off the salt and pepper, and finally set on her gaze. “It’s okay, Kim. You shouldn’t take my stupidity this much to heart, it will give out on you.”

“You’re not stupid, darling.” She sighs. “Just broken.”

“One and the same. Broken people do stupid things.”

“True, but... Only because they feel that there is no other choice, not because they themselves are stupid. And what they need to do, is strive to find a path that isn’t destructive to them, because there... There are people that care. So much, darling.”

I’m starting to get a sneaking suspicion that she’s talking about me in third person plural.

I chuckle. “I’m not going to off myself anytime soon, Kim. You aren’t getting rid of me that easily.”

“Michael!” She slaps my arm across the table and I recoil, feigning hurt. “You stop talking like that, right this instant! Don’t even joke like that!”

“God, Kim,” she sometimes doesn’t understand my dry humour, and I don’t get angry at her. Because she’s not everyone else. “Alright. I won’t. In other news, why did my check get returned?”

Kim waves her well-manicured hands. “I don’t want to be a--

“If you say ‘burden,’ I’m leaving--

“--you’re young, you should go out there and have your fun, responsibly, and I’m just a little old woman in an old diner whom you’re not even related to. I shouldn’t be your financial responsibility, boy.” The crinkles around her eyes intensify and act like rays of sunshine around the two green suns that swirl next to them.

If I believed in God, she would be what they call my ‘guardian angel’.

How do I say this in the least stuck up, narcissistic way? “I’m swimming in money, Kimberly. I have so much of it I can wipe my--

“Alright, alright!” She points her finger at me. “No swearing in this diner, have you forgotten already!?”

“Point is, you *have to* give money to family. I *want* to help you out, Kim. There’s a difference between those two. You’ll never be a burden to me.”

I will never get enough of her gentle eyes. The way they shine in the bright diner lights, the way they might as well be their own person - with arms that extend outward just to embrace you and the mouth to only speak to you in easy, tender volumes. They remind me of much simpler times, when I was no one to everyone and everything to myself, and not the other way around. My lungs were filled with life opposed to smoke, and the songs I wrote dripped honey, not twelve-year-old whiskey. Sometimes, I’m disgusted with what I’ve let myself become. Though only in these moments when her gentle eyes pose as my own personal keepsake of times well spent, and far gone. This booth and Kimberly Anne Scott will be carried and locked away to a tiny corner of my mind when I leave through the front door. I keep sacred things there that I’m not sure are able to stand the test of the storms that happen often in my mind. Every now and then, Kimberly manages to convince me that she could stand grounded and unfazed through those hurricanes.

I *am* selfish, but not enough to do that to her. She gets the filtered version, and even that makes her cry.

“We haven’t seen each other since--

“No. I... I can’t, no, I won’t talk about that.”

“Come on, Michael, I worry so much... You haven’t been the same, and-- and it *is* such a terrible tragedy, you can’t--

“Kim.”

--just not talk about it... It will eat you alive, and that alone--

“Kim.”

--absolutely destroys me, Michael, it-- I can’t-- you are going to drug or drink yourself to death--

I shout from the absolute top of my lungs. “Kim!”

I make her flinch. Guilt makes my chest cave in as she looks at me with fear in her eyes. I just scared at my guardian angel. If there’s a God, there’s a special place in hell waiting for me. What have I done?

“I’m sorry.” I bury my head in my hands. “I’m so sorry, Kim. I just... I can’t, alright? Some things are just off-limits. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

A warm body slides in the booth next to mine, and suddenly arms designed for motherly comfort wrap themselves around my neck. She pulls my head into the crook of her neck. I’m not quite sure at what point my apologies turned into strangled sobs.

“It’s okay, darling, it’s okay.” Her whispers tangle into my hair. “Whenever you’re ready. Just please, talk instead of destroying yourself.”

And only when I step out and the October rain drenches me entirely do I realize what a grave mistake I've made - visiting Kimberly without fixing myself. She deserves better than that, but do I deserve to be mended?

I'm walking down the avenue, and already at least a dozen people are offering me their umbrellas. It seems as though when one person notices you're famous, other people latch onto it not because they've seen or been impressed by your art, but only because of your status. What a sad life they must lead, these vultures that are willing to soak themselves and risk falling ill just to offer a stranger protection.

What a sad life indeed, I think as I take one.

As soon as I enter the bus, I send Lou an intentional glance - routinely.

"This one was a fighter, but she did leave eventually." I nod automatically and move to my room, before he continues. "The rest of the band are at the bar across the street, told me to let you know. Something about changing the setlist."

I guess I'll sleep when I'm dead. Or when it isn't eleven in the morning, and I'm not the lead singer of a world-famous band.

Grumbling under my breath, I pat Lou on the shoulder and make my way out of the bus once again.

"You're actually going?" He laughs in a rich baritone and I roll my eyes.

"Someone has to balance out all the incompetence."

He narrows his eyes at me, and there it is again. That holier-than-thou, unjust tone of voice and language of the prejudiced body. "If I told them how you talk about them every day, they would leave you."

What an interesting choice of words. An incorrect one, at that. *They* would leave *me*. Sure, three musicians that are far too mediocre on their own to succeed without me would abandon millions of dollars flowing into their bank accounts. Lou should try a career in stand-up comedy. I could sit here and drone on about my useless band for hours, say the most unsavory things, he could compose all of it into a tell-all testimony about how terrible I am, and give it to them to read - they would all still bow down to me. Human morals, opposing views and even mutual disdain never trump money. At least not in the real world. But it seems, that secret has not yet been divulged to the picture-perfect man in front of me. With his blue button-up and his cuffed jeans and the complete inability to realize how flawed people outside of his blissful bubble are. If I let him roam inside my head for at least thirty seconds, he would probably drive our bus off a cliff.

So, I will take the moral high ground for now and spare him the life inside my shoes. Let him play pretend, it's what half the planet does.

“Ah, if you *do* decide to tell them, please do it soon enough,” I make a mock praying gesture with my hands, “I’m getting real tired of them.”

My legs carry me across the street, and each step ricochets inside my skull. This is what I get for living the life of a rockstar.

As soon as I enter the bar, my manager, Nancy Stevens, click-click-clicks towards me in her too-high red heels. And yes, I have a female manager, it’s the seventies. Not at all because my former manager was arrested at one of my concerts for laundering money, and Nancy Stevens had been sending in constant letters of recommendation from herself, for herself. It’s the seventies - we are progressive. If women can fold laundry and organize... whatever the hell they do around the house, they can organize our lives.

“Harrison, you’re late.” Does her hair get bigger when she’s mad at me, or am I slowly going insane? Probably the latter, but the former is more fun. “Where have you been?”

“None of your business,” I wave her off and sit next to my drummer, John.

A scotch on the rocks is already waiting for me at my spot. Turns out my band can be competent when they want to. Color me impressed.

Nancy pinches the bridge of her nose. She does that a lot when I’m around. “You’re lucky today is practically a day off until the show at ten. I would skin you alive if there was a photoshoot scheduled or something.”

John smirks and takes a swig of his beer. “Take a chill pill, Nance, you only live once, man! Mikey’s here, everything is fine, just like, reach your inner *zen*, you know what I’m sayin’?”

Sometimes (all the time, except when he’s playing drums and more importantly, shutting up) I think John’s entire life’s purpose boils down to just overloading his vocabulary with slang phrases and one-liners that he overuses until someone beats him up for it. He always justifies it by saying he’s *‘just trying to fit in with the trends’*, making him sound fifty years old.

A clean, sharp sound of a slap at the back of John’s head bounces off the wall.

I clink glasses with the culprit, our guitarist, Tommy. He’s the only one I can somewhat tolerate. If I were twelve years old, I’d call him my best friend. But we’re not, and I’m not about to braid his hair and make friendship bracelets.

“Man just shut up, John.” Tommy laughs out the words, though I’m sure out of pure pain.

As I knock the burning scotch down my throat, one man sticks out like a sore thumb. Patrick. Or Patty, as we began calling him when we decided to be a band. Usually, he’s

the one to talk about the upcoming show and the ways we can, as he says, *spice things up*. Not that I can really bring myself to care all that much about him on a personal level, but his silence and disinterest in the show can grow to be our downfall. And I am only just getting on an upward track. So, if I have to show a little bit of fake compassion towards a gloomy, stupid 22-year-old bassist just so he doesn't flush my success down the toilet, then so be it.

"Patty, what's up? You're quiet today." I question him.

John immediately brings a pointer finger to his lips and shushes me, and Tommy begins gesturing an explanation. "Patty's girlfriend broke up with him today."

Oh.

Cry me a river.

I already notice Tommy giving me a 'don't-you-dare' look, warning me that I let the kid off the hook, because he knows.

In an extremely rare instance, I bite my tongue. "Well. That sucks. What did you do?"

John interjects. "*He* didn't do anything, man. He was a groovy boyfriend--"

"That's not how you use that word, John--"

"--I don't care, man. Let me live in peace. So, as I was saying--"

Nancy's shrill voice interrupts John and Tommy. "Let Patrick speak, you self-centered *men!*"

She uses the word 'men' like it's a curse word. Even when her boss is in the room. Admirable.

All eyes rest on Patrick now. "It's not really a big deal. I just thought I was going to-- we were going to... Nevermind. I don't really want to, uh, talk about it."

He's absolutely right; it's *not* a big deal and it's almost the most trivial thing in the world.

A young man in one of the most famous bands of the world, at the start of his career, featuring some brainless, young girl who will ride the coattails of his fame until they become frayed. The only thing that a very few select people will think of when they hear her name is '*oh, she was with that famous bassist from Sunday Blind*'. They won't even have to hear his name, because they've heard it enough everywhere all the time - and read it etched on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He should be celebrating.

As I shrug, get up and walk to the bar, I notice Tommy following me.

"Don't look at me like that." I tell him, never sparing him a glance.

"You could've been more empathetic towards the kid, Mikey. He's only twenty-two."

I don't like when Tommy speaks to me as if he's at all smarter. He's not.

"And we're *only* twenty-five, Nancy's *only* thirty-one, and your dad is *only* fifty-five. What exactly is your point here?"

He rolls his eyes and I can only assume he doesn't like when I pretend not to understand what he's saying.

"You know damn well what my point is. He's young, it's his first heartbreak. We should help him get through it, you know, as a band." He runs his hand through his greased jet-black hair, and looks at me like he can solve the problems of every person in the world. He should only be able to look at me like that when he gains that ability. I'll be the first to stand in line.

"He's young, it's his first heartbreak." I echo Tommy's words. "He'll get through it." Tommy raises his voice slightly at me, his impatience glaringly obvious. "Just because you've had your life turned upside down - and it's awful, what happened to you - but it doesn't mean you can't be sympathetic towards people just because it's not at the level of intensity of what happened to you."

Maybe this is the first time I'm speechless. Not out of shock, but because I simply have nothing to say.

"Get your life together, Mikey. It's been a year."

"Well, if it's so damn easy, do it for me then. Try, I dare you." I decide to burn through his eyes as a means of illustrating my point better.

"Why should I do that when *you* haven't even tried?"

Fascinating, how Tommy's words can feel like like a slap to the face so much that I can almost feel a physical palmprint scorching my cheek. He thinks too highly of himself.

I turn back to my scotch and watch the melting ice cubes dancing around. It reminds me of her. Everything does.

"See you at soundcheck, nine o'clock sharp. You better be there." He points an accusative finger at me. "Sober."

I'm ripping at the seams you stitched together, Jackie.

It's never good when I allow myself to talk to her. It's almost noon, and the effects of last night are starting to subside. It's almost noon, and it's almost the time I start losing myself in different versions of reality again. Maybe I'll be sober tonight, for her. That's what I tell myself every night, in hopes that she'll stand there, front row, with a beer in her hand and one of her colorful outfits, screaming my words back at me. Maybe I have more in common with Patrick than I thought. But the one thing we don't, I wouldn't wish on anyone.

When will I stop seeing your face everywhere, Jackie?

When will being sober be enough to get over you?

When does life begin again after you?

Only the alcohol and I have a secret that will never be shared with anyone; the answer to all those questions is *never*. Especially today.

The next few hours float and contort together in a swirl of colors and scenes that I seem to have witnessed from a third person point of view. The usual, then. I stumble into sound-check, and the crew stopped even looking my way, because it has become the norm. They would be shocked if I *didn't* come in followed by a clattering of equipment and Tommy shouting creative profanities at me.

I'm sweating everywhere, and I think Nancy isn't too happy with me. Though I can't tell, because the only way I can tell that is Nancy Stevens is by her red heels. The rest is an enigma to my eyes.

"I've checked, and I... I know what day it is, Mikey." A voice that sounds too apologetic to uplift even my ego rings through my ears. "Sorry for earlier. I didn't know." Even if I can't see clearly, the shift in the atmosphere is palpable. It's always clear to me when people start pitying me - I've had a year's worth of unwanted experience in that field.

"Do you want us to cancel the show, Mikey?" Nancy's usually high-pitched tone is the quietest it has probably been in a year, and it's a bad thing when she doesn't call me by my last name.

Cancel the show? God forbid. I would never do that. It is a sign of weakness, and gods of rock'n'roll never show it - especially not to their worshippers. I'm going to stay right here and sing the entirety of the setlist, and I'm going to become one with the crowd and they're going to chant my name in high spirits because I'm their purpose. My songs, my stage, my crowd, my band. And then, onto a different city with seas of different people to get lost in. My type of life.

Cancel the show? *Never*. I am here to do my job and to appease the audience, to return even just a sliver of their worship back to them. I could never sleep without being doused in sweat and exhaustion. I'm not the kind of musician to underperform or not perform at all. I'm conquering this stage and claiming my throne -- and in all my inner (it could have easily been outer) monologue, I have only just realised that my feet have brought me outside of **Kimberly's Kitchen** yet again, far from my soundcheck.

Before I could register, I push the door open and collapse on the ground.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, boy! Jesus, what have you done!?"

Don't call for him, Kim, I think he hates me lately. I'm not sure if I said that or if I just thought it, because Kimberly just continues frantically touching my forehead and removing the hair stuck to it.

“Water! Bring me some water!” She spills cold water on me, pours it into my mouth. If anyone is going to be it, Kimberly is my salvation, I’m sure.

The next scene before my eyes is the view out of the passenger seat of a car. God, I should really get sober - this change of scenery never stops being jarring.

“We’re almost there, God, the things I do for you, Michael,” I hear Kimberly’s faint rant about me, and it’s teetering on the edge of anger and unmasked concern. “Nancy is probably looking everywhere for you, and here I am, driving you there. It’s time you start helping yourself...”

And if Kimberly continued to speak to me for hours in that car swallowed by the dark and unforgiving rain, it wouldn’t have prepared me for the sight that consumed me when I opened my eyes for the next time.

I swear the rain stops falling, and Kimberly fades into the obscurity of darkness. It’s just me, my heavy breathing and the rough, icy marble underneath my fingertips. The sight is almost sobering enough, but if it isn’t that, it’s her voice dominating my entire sense of self. She’s talking to me, and I nearly feel her warm fingers in place of the cutting marble stone. They aren’t words, but the softest, most divine melodies catered only to my ears, and every time, they make me regret ever questioning how immense her love for me had been. I dare myself to look up.

Jackie Grace Fletcher

1953 - 1974

Far above the world, planet Earth is blue, and there’s nothing I can do.

Tears don’t spill from my eyes, entire rivers do. I’d say seas, even. I can feel my heart thudding painfully against my ribcage, as if it wants to break free and lay itself down next to her. Is it better to feel numb, or to feel everything all at once? I really wouldn’t know, because impossibly, I am both. I’m adrift somewhere where the spirit meets the bones, and if a higher power is listening, I politely ask to be secured here forever. Is anybody paying heed to my prayers?

I would eat the most gruesome apple pies in this world, and paint picket fences the most blinding white just for you. That’s how our song will go, Jackie. I’ll stop being selfish and you’re going to shake hands with the rest of the world.

I found it, God, I found it - and I seem to call his name too often for a person who refuses his existence.

I found my soul - it’s here, tucked between the wilted white flowers on her grave; I hear her begging, willing me to take it. It would seem a happy ending, and it’s one for the books, but I’d much rather join her.

So finally, I sleep.



mentor: Dunja Karem

institution: Srednja škola Duga Resa

Vlade Škugor

STUCK IN 2015

Every waking moment of my life has been filled with emotions such as emptiness, loneliness, sadness, and misery until I met her. The first time I saw her was on the 20th of July, 2015 on a beach, near my hometown. I found her while she was gazing into the sea while standing next to rocks that were piled up on the right side of the beach. She had beautiful blond hair, blue eyes, and a thin figure, which usually wasn't the type of look that caught my eye.

The sun was beaming, with clouds being few and far between. The nice sound of the waves pushing up against the beach made me feel at ease. Her gaze turned over to me, as I was the only one beside her on the beach at the moment. We stared at each other for a few moments, but then she returned her look at the sea. I didn't know what to make of the staredown we had. It was like we had known each other ever since we were young.

Being twenty-five at that time, having just finished college and having gotten my first job I appreciated a day off and I decided to spend it at the beach. Especially because I knew that the beach didn't attract many people at the time of day. Besides, I was bored and being home with my parents didn't bring much joy. Not that anything brought me joy, though. Spending my time alone was the closest to what I'd considered joy. I didn't go outside much. Just like most of my introverted peers I was stuck in my room all day watching whatever shows I could find. I had almost no friends at that point because I cut ties with most of them. I figured - cut them off first because otherwise they will cut me off first. I wanted to be the one in control. Now that I think about it, the time I spent with them I will always remember fondly. I even feel sorry for doing that, but I guess this is a point of no return.

Anyway, I wanted to make a friend, so I decided to approach her.
 'Hey' I said rather quietly.

At first, she didn't even reply. She just stood there, frozen like a statue without a single word coming out of her mouth.

'Hello, what do you want?' she asked me quite annoyed by my presence.

I stepped back a little, not knowing if I crossed the line. Maybe I was creeping without realizing it? A second ago she felt approachable, but with her replying like that, I didn't know if I should even talk to her anymore.

'Nothing. I just wanted to introduce myself.' I said as I was staring her down, still not knowing what to do.

'You come up to everyone like that? That's kinda weird.'

Instantly regretting this lame attempt of befriending her, I turned away and started walking to the opposite side of the beach where I'd parked my car. I felt stupid for intruding on her peace. To my surprise, she probably realized I meant no harm because she ran towards me. Extending her hand towards me, she introduced herself.

'My name is Alice, nice to meet you. I didn't mean to come off as a rude person, it was a genuine question. What is your name?'

'My name is David, pleasure to meet you as well. You just seemed approachable so I wanted to talk.' I awkwardly said as we shook hands.

'Oh, okay. So you wanted to talk about something in particular?' she asked me in a more friendly manner.

'Nothing, in particular, I guess I just wanted to talk to someone.' I said while looking out at the sea.

We sat down on the rocks nearby, talking like we were long-time friends. I told her the exact reason why I approached her and it didn't take too long until she started telling me something personal.

'You know, I'm glad you approached me. Usually, I'd call you a creep and I'd tell you to get away from me, but I get the reason you approached me. You see, I have something I'm dealing with, could you hear me out?' she told me while fidgeting her phone, which made her look stressed.

'Sure thing, what's bothering you?'

'Well, I don't know how to even start talking about this.' she said with a really nervous and seemingly forced chuckle.

'Take your time. I have time to listen.' I said as I returned a smile.

'I need to have an operation which I'm really scared about. I have liver cancer and they will have to replace my liver.' she said while holding her stomach. 'I'm from Georgetown, but I came here to Madison to get that operation done. The doctors said that they don't know if I'm going to even survive this operation.'

‘Wow. I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.’ I was speechless.

‘You don’t need to be, it’s not your fault. I’m glad that I told someone about this. This is the first time I told someone without crying about it.’

All of a sudden we heard a car honk its horn. I turned around, noticing a car with its engine still working right next to my parked car. She stood up and she started slowly walking towards the car. She just threw a quick wave at me. She got into the car and the car quickly left, leaving me all alone at the beach. I just stood there stunned, not knowing what to think about the situation. I quickly started to overthink my way of interacting with her. I stayed on the same spot for at least another half hour, not noticing that other people are now present on the same beach I was at. When I noticed, I quickly went back to my car to drive back home.

When I arrived home, as always, I went straight to my room. Thankfully, nobody noticed I arrived. Or they just didn’t bother. I didn’t bother either. With so much on my mind, all I want was to be closed in my room. My room is the smallest in our house, but that fact doesn’t bother me either. I have a small closet, bed, night table, a chair and a desk with my laptop on it. It has no pictures, plants, books, or decorations. It is bare and I like it that way.

I hopped into my unmade bed. It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep, which confused me when I woke up, because I hadn’t been doing anything that could drain me. When I woke up, it was early morning, around 2 am. I just got up, went to our kitchen, and made myself some noodles and a sandwich to go with it, being careful not to wake up anyone inside my house. I went back to my room as quietly as I could. I started up my laptop, putting food on the side of the table. I found a short show that seemed pretty decent so I started watching it. I ate the food while watching a show.

Time passed by quickly, as I almost finished the entire show when the sun came up. I got up to leave the dishes in the sink. Passing the living room, I saw my mom drinking coffee and watching the TV. I entered the kitchen, leaving the dishes in the sink. As I turned around to head back into my room, my mom was in front of me.

‘You can’t even say good morning, but you live here rent-free?!’ she asked me loudly, almost as she intended to wake up everyone in the house.

‘I’m sorry momma, good morning.’

‘Good morning Davie, why are you up so early? Were you watching shows all night again? That’s not healthy, you know? Are you alright?’ she bombarded me with questions in a more calm manner.

‘I just woke up early, it shouldn’t be a problem. I wasn’t watching any shows momma. I stopped doing that and I’m fine I-’

‘You don’t look so well honey, I’m concerned about you. You should look out for yourself more! How was work yesterday?’ she cut me off in the middle of my sentence.

‘I was in my room, went out to have breakfast at Sam’s Diner and went on a walk near the Blakesberry beach. Then I just came back home and fell asleep. I had a day off yesterday, I forgot to tell you.’

‘Want am I going to do with you dummy?’ she asked me with a slight disappointment in her voice.’

‘I don’t know momma.’ I said that as I passed her.

‘Go clean yourself up for your job honey! You don’t want to be late!’ she yelled while I was walking to my room

‘Sure thing mom.’ I said after giving her a long sigh.

I headed back to my room, not hearing another word from her. I sat down on my bed, looking through a window in my room. It was finally daytime. I got up, checked if I had time to take a shower before going to work. I did have enough time, so I did. I even combed my hair, and dressed up. I don’t usually do this before work, but I forced myself into doing it. On my way to the car, I saw my dad doing the laundry, so I waved at him. He threw a small thumbs-up while carrying clothes to the dryer. I hopped into my car and drove to my work. At that time in my life, I worked at Dubber, a company that was producing all kinds of software. I worked in customer service, which was a nice job. All I had to do was answer calls and answer simple questions regarding issues in our programs. If there was an issue I didn’t know how to solve, I’d just let a superior solve the problems. We didn’t get a lot of calls, so working there was a nice experience. I didn’t interact with my co-workers, always staying in my cubical. That day was boring, with me having around 30 calls that lasted around ten minutes. I was mostly just snacking at my job, looking through Snapper, one of our programs I’d been told by my supervisor to get used to.

I got off work as usual, but this time I didn’t go home instantly. I headed to Blakesberry beach hoping to see Alice again. When I arrived there, there were a few people, but no Alice in sight. I got out of the car, walking to the spot where we met yesterday. I got my phone out, just to check if my mom called for whatever reason. I had one missed call from my grandpa. I was confused why he even called my phone, so I rang him back. It took him a few calls to respond, but eventually, he picked up.

‘Hello?’ he said in a quiet tone like he just woke up.

‘Hello grandpa, how are you? Why did you call me? I’m sorry I couldn’t answer your call earlier, I was at work.’

‘Oh, sorry for bothering you! I thought you had a day off today. I called to see how my big man was doing, how his life is going and that stuff, you know. Want to come over for some tea at my place? We haven’t seen each other in a while?’

‘You never bother me, grandpa, don’t worry about it. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to come over, I’m working tomorrow. If you are going to be awake around the time I finish work, I could come over.’

‘I will be awake, don’t worry about that. So we have a deal?’ grandpa said with excitement in his voice.

‘Sure thing grandpa, I’ll call you tomorrow when I end my shift.’

‘Sure thing son, talk to you later.’ he said just before hanging up on me.

At that time grandpa was still alive and my favorite person to be around. He always treated me as his equal, gave really good bits of advice, and was generally an overall good person. Everyone in my family looked up to grandpa, because he got rich in his younger days, so he retired early and spent a lot of his time dedicating his energy to grandma and the family.

Four years ago when grandma died of a heart attack everyone in our family was hit badly by the news. The biggest issue was that her death was sudden and we couldn’t predict that happening. At that time, I was spending most of the time at my grandpa’s place. His place was the perfect place because it was always quiet and nobody bothered me while studying. When I was not studying we would talk about life. He would share his stories with me and I would tell him about my day-to-day life. After I finished college we didn’t see each other much. I had to find a job because my parents urged me to, so I couldn’t spend much time at his place.

After a few minutes spent thinking about my grandpa, I put my phone down, looking at the sun that was right on top of me. Clouds were piling up and them being as gray as mice made me realize that soon enough it is going to rain. I continued to watch the sun and the sea while overthinking about my life and my choices. My thoughts were intercepted by someone’s tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Alice.

‘Hey David, what are you doing here again.?’ she asked me while still gently holding my shoulder.

‘Oh hi. I just came here to relax, don’t worry about it.’

‘You already work? I guess that’s kinda cool.’ she said as the rain started to slowly pour in.

‘Yea, I do. This rain is going to drench us if we don’t hide away somewhere. You want to join me in my car?’

‘Hmm... You are technically a stranger, but you seem harmless.’ she said as she winked at me.

We went to the car as fast as possible and the rain started to pour heavily as soon as we were inside. For a moment we were just staring at the people running towards their cars after the rain finally came down on them. We sat inside, with rain being the only thing that separated us from deathly silence.

‘So, do you want me to drop you off at the hospital?’ I said, trying to break the silence. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘Actually, I want to go out on a date.’

‘What?!’ I said in a state of confusion.

‘What don’t you understand, I want to go out on a date with you. If you don’t want to, whatever. You can drop me off at the hospital’ she said clearly annoyed at my response.

‘I mean we could go out...’ I took a brief pause. ‘Don’t you have someone that would wait for you here?’

‘No, only the nurse who takes care of me, but I’ll contact her and tell her I’m off for today.’

I started driving to the only place in town I would go out to and that’s Sam’s Diner. On our way there we had small talk. She mentioned that she’d just finished high school and she couldn’t wait to enroll in college. She told me that she was hoping to make it through the surgery, so she could finally pick out what college she wanted to go to. I casually asked her how old she was. She told me she’d just turned eighteen last month. She asked me how old I was and after a bit of hesitation on my part, I replied. She was shocked at first, telling me that I look younger. We arrived in front of the diner not long after. As soon as we entered the waitress greeted me, not noticing that behind me was Alice. We sat down at the usual place I sit. The waitress came to us slowly.

‘Hi David, the usual?’

‘Yes, Anna.’

‘And for you young lady?’

‘I’ll have the same he is having.’

‘Great... Two Sam’s Classic Menu coming!’

We sat mostly in silence until the food arrived. She was constantly scrolling through her phone and any time I tried to spark up a conversation she would just answer with ‘Hey, give me a second, I’m doing something.’ Since she wasn’t talking to me I was just admiring the view of the street. The rain stopped at that point, just before the steak arrival at our table. She put down her phone and started to eat along with me. We both finished up our meals pretty quickly.

‘Hey, I have something I want to show you.’ she told me. ‘I don’t know if you’ve ever

been there, but it's the hill nearby,' she said all of a sudden.

'Claymore Hill, or? I mean sure, we can go there if you want to.'

'Okay, let's go then.'

I quickly left the money on the counter and we went out to the car. I started driving to Claymore Hill, not knowing why we were going there. I started asking myself why I even agreed on this. This date was so unnecessary, it didn't need to happen.

'I'm sorry I was on my phone the whole time in the diner. I was talking to my mom and nurse about where I am. I hope you understand.'

'It's okay, don't worry about it at all. May I know why we are going to Claymore Hill?'

'There's a surprise waiting for you there. I'm glad you have some understanding.'

The sun has already begun to set, as we were approaching the hill we were going to. I parked my car in the parking lot next to a path that is leading towards the top of the hill. We got out of the car, going to the hilltop. While we were climbing up the hill she asked me about my social life and college experience. I tried to be as honest as I could be, saying that the most fun part of my life was being in college. She listened carefully, being intrigued by all the stories I had to tell about college. She shared some of her high school adventures and by those stories, she seemed to be a perfectly normal girl. Now, why was a perfectly normal girl hanging out with me was the question I couldn't answer myself. What brought her to that point that out of all people she could spend her precious time with, she chose to spend it with me? She politely asked me to carry her on my back to the top since she wasn't feeling well, so I did. I thought about it for a second first. But I carried her.

We arrived at the top and with the sun being completely gone at that point we saw beautiful stars outside. We sat down at the first bench in the row of benches that were on the hilltop. As we sat down on the bench, watching the beautiful stars in silence for a while.

'So... What's the surprise?' I said to break the silence while I was stargazing.

She kissed me on the cheek. I was stunned for a second. I turned my look towards her. She was turned towards me and then our lips locked. After the kiss, we hugged for a good amount of time. It felt like we were stuck on the hill forever. I think that's the moment where my life changed for the better. I finally had a moment of pure happiness and I couldn't believe it. All these years of misery had led to something meaningful. We headed back to the car in silence, holding hands. I drove her back to the hospital. People were waiting in front of the hospital. She got out, walked slowly to them and they nurtured her back inside. She was gone just like that.

I returned home and trying to be as sneaky as I could, I entered the house quietly,

trying not to make any noise so I don't alert anyone in the house. I started going to my room when I noticed my mom and dad watching a film on the couch. Something in me told me to greet them, so I did. They looked at me as they greeted me. I got up to my room, I sat at my bed and I got an idea that I should make my bed and clean a little bit before I go to sleep and so I did. I went down to our kitchen, taking some leftovers from today's lunch. I quickly ate them in the kitchen, so that I could take a quick shower and go to sleep since that day was tiring. I cleaned up, went to take a shower, and as soon as my head touched the pillow I fell asleep.

My mom woke me up with a big smile on her face. She told me to get ready and head downstairs. I got dressed swiftly, heading downstairs to see what's up. My mom waved at me from the kitchen, giving me a lunch box.

'Ahh... Thanks, mom?' I said to her as I was holding the lunchbox. 'Why did you give me this?'

'I gave you something you can eat at work so you don't have to go to Sam's Diner every day of the week honey,' she said with a big grin on her face.

She seemed satisfied that I took the lunchbox so I just went along with it. I got in my car and went to work. I arrived earlier than usual. I sat down at my cubical, putting my lunchbox next to me. I started my shift early so I could get off more work done. After I got about 10 calls I took a little break. I checked the lunch box and inside I found a sandwich, a little box full of fruit. On top of those was a piece of paper that read 'I love you, good luck at work.' with a smiley at the end. That note made me feel a little happier. I took my time eating the snacks she prepared for me. After that, I got back to work.

That day the work wasn't exhausting, so after work, I decided to call my grandpa and as soon as I did he answered. I asked him if I should come over that day and he said that I should. His place is a little further away than my parents' house so it took me about 20 minutes to get to his apartment. The drive to his apartment building was filled with me thinking about what I would say to my grandpa. I parked my car next to his apartment building and went inside. When I got to his apartment, I knocked on his door. It took him a few moments to come to the door. He opened the door, hugging me as soon as he saw me.

'Son, I haven't seen you in a while. Come on, enter son,' he said as he was still hugging me tightly.

I entered his apartment, noticing that everything is cleaner than usual. I sat down on his couch. His living room had a big TV, a few shelves full of books, pictures on the walls, and a big coffee table. He brought two cups of tea with him to the living room.

He sat down next to me and we began talking about life, as we used to do before. We haven't seen each other in person for a long time, so seeing him made my day. In our conversation I mentioned Alice and he was interested to hear about her. I told him everything that happened in these past two days and how I finally felt happiness for the first time in a long time.

'I'm happy you had that experience, but do you know anything about her except her name?' he cut me off.

'No... I don't.'

'Well, why don't you find out?'

'I don't have any contact with her.'

'But you know where the hospital she is at right?' he asked me with a confused expression on his face. 'You also told me that two days in a row you met her on the Blakesberry beach?'

'I did, yes. You think I should wait out there for her?'

'It's obvious. You said she made you feel happy right? So you should at least try. You don't want to go back, right?'

'You are right.'

He hugged me, making me feel better about the situation. We talked a little bit, I drank the tea and went back home. When I arrived home, I went straight to the kitchen, grabbed something to eat, and went to my room. I ate the chips I took and after browsing for a while I laid down on my bed. All kinds of thoughts were going through my head until I eventually fell asleep. When I woke up, I got ready and did all the mundane stuff I usually do. I said my goodbyes for the day to my mom and dad and went to work. I grabbed something to eat at Sam's Diner and then I went to work. The work that day was lackluster since there weren't many calls and Snapper was down for maintenance so I just waited for calls to come in. There weren't many calls, so I was mostly thinking about Alice. That whole day was so dull until I got off work.

When my work was done, I packed up swiftly and went back to the beach. When I parked my car, there was nobody on the beachfront. I got out of the car and walked to the rocks. I sat down there, just looking at the sea. I felt peace. Usually, if a situation like this had happened, I'd have been devastated, but something changed. Somehow, that little relationship we had changed me. Is this love? I asked myself a question that I couldn't answer. I just knew that the feelings that I used to feel were not present anymore.

All of a sudden I heard strange footsteps approaching me. I turned to face the way

where the footsteps were coming from and I saw an old woman in front of me.

‘Young man, is your name David?’ she asked with a nice smile on her face.

‘That would be me.’ I said with a nervous chuckle, not knowing what the woman wanted.

‘I’m Alice’s grandma, I’ve come to give you this letter she wrote to you?’

‘Oh, why’s that?’

‘She said you are quite important! You are the only friend she wrote a letter to, every other letter was for the family.’

I didn’t say anything after that, I just stood in silence until she offered me to take the letter. I took it, nodded and she walked away. I opened up the letter slowly reading through it.

‘Dear David,

I know this is an awkward letter for me and probably for you as well, but I felt like it needed to be done. I’m sorry that we didn’t have much time to spend together, since the little time I’ve spent with you felt like the best time I’ve had with someone in a long time. I feel like you were yourself and you weren’t trying to impress me in any shape or form, which makes me happy. Most of my high school crushes and boyfriends I had were always trying to prove something, while you, for those 2 days, were just trying to spend time with someone, no matter in what way it was. I felt lonely when you approached me since almost every friend I had stopped talking to me and none of them would visit me. The beach where I met you was the only place that wasn’t the hospital where I was allowed to be without supervision and the only reason why I could’ve gone with you on a date was that you were the supervision. I told my mom I know you from school and that you were a close friend. I’m glad that we spent that time together. Because of you, I didn’t cry myself to sleep yesterday. Because of you, I feel a bit more optimistic about the operation. Because of you, I feel happy. Thank you. Call me: +1 502 210 5909.

Alice :)’

...

It’s been two years since that letter. And Alice and I are still in contact. Her operation was successful and we continued to talk. When my grandpa died a year ago she was there to comfort me and, during that time, we got even closer. Thanks to her, I feel better and I communicate with people more. I made more friends on and off work. I’m not stuck in my shell anymore. Since 2015 I feel happy and in love. I changed my life in 2015 and it’s been good since then. I’m stuck in 2015.



mentor: Ivana Opačak

institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola, Slavonski Brod

Éma Tomašić

GET OUT

The question that I got asked the most was: “What is the last thing you remember before waking up in the hospital?”

Honestly, I was not sure... Sometimes I got really confused. I had no idea what was going on and I would simply zone out. I would start staring at the light or neon signs on tall buildings that attracted me like I was a moth, hypnotised me and forced me to detach from reality. Maybe it was because I didn't know the answer or maybe I just didn't want to know.

Apparently, I woke up after being in the hospital for three days. I had second-degree burns on my left hand and a bunch of bruises on my right. Some couple had found me unconscious on the river promenade. I wondered what they had been thinking about at that moment.

Two weeks after they had released me from the hospital, I was meeting my psychologist for the first time. David Ferguson was a tall man with a Scottish accent, dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. At first his office seemed cosy and, thanks to a huge window, very bright. So why was I feeling so cold in there?

“Samantha, tell me, how are you feeling?” he asked me looking through some papers. I assumed these were the hospital's report. That was the most basic question, but I guessed we had to start somewhere.

“Sam... and I... are not sure,” I replied while playing with my hands. He set the papers down on the table and looked at me. It seemed like he could see right through my soul.

“What do you mean?” he asked, slightly raising his right eyebrow.

“I used to feel like I knew myself, but, for a while now, I don't think I have been properly in my body. It has become a haunted house, only I am the ghost that's stuck in it.” Just saying that one thought made my whole body shiver.

“Well, that is understandable. You had a traumatic experience. Now, tell me, how do you like your new apartment?” he continued the conversation as if what I had said did not matter at all. It, kind of, made me angry.

“It was a nice, fresh start, plus I didn’t want my roommate to be forced to listen to my screams at night,” I answered, wondering if I had said a bit too much.

“What do you dream about?” he asked me, writing something in his notebook, something I really wanted to read.

“It’s all in bits and pieces. At one moment I’m back in the bar where Kehlani, my roommate, is celebrating her birthday and next I’m in something very small, maybe a trunk or even a box and then...” David interrupted me and said:

“Your brain is playing tricks on you. I will prescribe you some sleeping pills and I do believe our time is over. See you next week.” He handed me the paper and almost forced me out of his office. I stood in front of his door shocked for a few more seconds before I gave up and decided to go home. On my way I threw the paper in the trash.

When I came home, I noticed that I had two missed messages on my telephone-answering machine. One was from Kehlani, saying that she had tried to call me on my cell phone and, given the fact that I hadn’t answered, she assumed I was with my psychologist, so I should call her back as soon as I could. The other was from the local police department; they wanted to schedule another interview since the first one had not gone so well.

Detective Harmon was the one who gave me David’s number. I agreed to meet Kehlani in the diner where I worked as a waitress and after that I went to the police for an interview. 30 minutes passed by and we still didn’t make any progress. I really wanted to remember, I did, but it was all so blurry. Apparently, I had been gone for three days and Kehlani was the one who had reported me missing. After that the police had been contacted by someone at the ER.

“Was Mr. Ferguson of any help?” one of the detectives asked me. I believed detective Naomi Malik was working with detective Harmon on my case, but I had never seen the other one. He had never even introduced himself.

“No, actually he wasn’t and I probably won’t be going back there,” I said angrily.

“Why is that?” she asked. She seemed like she genuinely cared.

“Just when I thought I would remember something, he interrupted me and started acting all weird.” As I said that, the other detective abruptly got up and left the room.

“Just like that,” I added. Naomi smiled, looked through her notes and said:

“I am so sorry to hear that, maybe you will have more luck on your own. In the

meantime, if there is anything that you need, just give me or detective Harmon a call.“

“Well, thank you for your time,“ I said as I was putting my coat on.

“And... I am not sure if I am supposed to tell you this, but another girl was found few days ago in similar condition as you and Harmon is with her right now. There is more hope to get to the end of this madness, for her and for you.“ As she said that, I felt like I lost the ground underneath my feet.

“Can I talk to her? It could help me remember and, if not, what is there to lose?!“ I asked. Naomi gave me a short glance and said that it would not be a good idea, at least not for the moment. I nodded and left.

When I exited the building, I decided to go to the hospital anyway, only there was one problem. Naomi had never told me the girl’s name. It would take me around 20 minutes on foot to get to the hospital, Harmon would have already left and I wouldn’t be able to see whom he had been talking to, so I decided to get a taxi. When I finally arrived, I sat in the waiting room and looked carefully for any sign of detectives. 15 minutes passed by and there was still nothing. What if I had missed him? Was it possible that he had already left by the time I got here?

I became jumpy and nervous. Just as I started thinking about leaving, I saw a young officer walking out of the room at the end of the hallway and behind him there was detective Harmon. I sat down and took one of the magazines that were on the table to cover my face. Harmon stopped to talk about something with the nurse that was behind the counter and then left. I waited for a few more minutes in case he would come back and then went to the room he had come out of. There she was... or at least I hoped it was her.

“Can I help you with something?“ the girl asked. She was probably about 19 years old, had long blond hair and bruises all over her hands and neck, but no burns.

“Actually, I think you can,“ I said, closing the door, and continued, „This is going to sound really weird, but we could help each other.“

“Wait, I know you. You are the girl that was found before me,“ she said, staring at me.

“How do you know me? Can you remember anything?“ I sat on the chair that was next to her bed.

“Yeah, I can. You were also there. I had come few days before you, but you were the lucky one.“ She smiled.

“What do you mean?“ I thought I was even more confused than I had been before.

“You really don’t know anything, huh? We are the survivors of human trafficking. The only reason we escaped was because of the fire that was in the part of the house

where they were holding you and two other girls, I believe. The smoke must have messed with your head." She smiled again and offered me cookies that were on her bedside table. Maybe she was the one that had got messed up by the smoke because she was weirdly cheerful.

"What about you?" I could have asked so many questions, but this one first came to mind.

"Oh, you know... I got out because of the mess the fire created. I don't know what happened to the other girls." Her voice started to sound a bit melancholic as she said the last part of the sentence.

"How many of us were there?" I asked, trying to get her focus back.

"Four girls, two young boys and I do believe there was about to be more." As she said that, someone opened the door. I turned around and saw detectives Harmon, Malik and that weirdly jumpy one.

"I sensed that you would be here even though I specifically told you not to talk to her," Naomi Malik said.

"Don't I deserve to know the truth?" I asked defensively.

"If it means you are going to interfere an ongoing investigation, than no," Malik replied.

"Naomi, I'll handle it," Harmon said, moving his head as a sign to follow him. As we got out of the room, he said that he had seen a nice cafe just a few minutes away from there and that it would be better if we talked there. I just followed him and, as we finally arrived, he ordered two cups of coffee for us and sat down. I just kept staring at him, not saying anything.

"That girl that you have met, Sarah, she was working as a waitress, just like you. One day she started talking to a man; she said that he was all tattooed up and made her feel rebellious, whatever that was supposed to mean. They continued chatting over Snapshot, Snapchat or whatever, but he would get really angry if she saved any of his texts." He stopped talking when the waiter showed up.

"But I didn't talk to any guys that I didn't know," I said once the waiter had left.

"I know, you were lured in by a woman. There are more of them and they control a large amount of people in this town. That is why we need to put a stop to this."

That was when it hit me: "A girl offered me a taxi ride with her after Kehlani's birthday party because it was raining and I said yes. I even thanked her!!!"

Harmon and I talked for about an hour. He told me all about Sarah and that for the time they had two sketches of the people she had seen in the house, she had also recognised some of the people from the *Missing persons* list. She had done a great job

and I should have been happy about that, but all I could think of was how useless I was. The only thing I could offer was to help making that woman's sketch, but guess what... Sarah had already taken care of that too.

Harmon also apologised for referring me to David, saying that he had thought he would properly help me. I didn't know why, but I told him about my nightmares and he asked for a detailed description; everything I could remember could actually be beneficial to the case. I couldn't see how my bad dreams could be of any help, but I agreed to do it. I closed my eyes and started talking.

"As I said to David, it is all in pieces, but I will start talking and hopefully you will be able to connect the dots. In the dream I open my eyes, but I can't see anything, I can only hear screams and what seems to be two people arguing about something. I think I am in a car trunk, which makes sense now that I know it's the *Taxi Lady's* fault."

I opened my eyes and looked at Harmon who was observing me. I thought he had even smiled at the *Taxi Lady's* part.

"Do not interrupt the flow!" he said, so I closed my eyes again.

"In the dream I am somewhere in the countryside; a tall figure gets me out of the truck and tells me not to look around, only to keep walking straight to the house. Once I open the door, I see a bunch of horror-looking figures screaming and weeping. The fire is everywhere and I can't escape, so I start burning as well and than..."

I suddenly opened my eyes and felt like I couldn't breathe.

"It's okay, calm down. This is actually helpful. I have to go now, but we will keep in touch," he said and rushed out of the cafe.

"What do you mean?" I yelled at him, but he was already too far away to hear me, or he just chose to ignore me.

After that, I didn't hear from him or Naomi for what seemed like ten years. I tried to move on and continue with my day-to-day life, jumping at every phone call I got. You may think you have run away from something when, in reality, you've been carrying it with you the whole time.

My dreams kept getting worse every time I would close my eyes. I tried talking to a few therapists about them, but none of them were helpful. I kept following the news, reading articles about human traffickers, eyewitness stories, anything that would seem familiar. The whole situation drove me crazy.

I wondered if Sarah had been able to go on with her life. She probably had, being too cheerful not to. I kept fighting my thoughts that my daily nightmares would turn into one of those cold cases, a stack of paper just sitting in a box in some dusty old basement.

“Not yet, Samantha, not yet!”

Just when I noticed that people at table ten had called me, I saw Naomi Malik walking into the diner.

“Can you cover table ten for me?” I asked my coworker and turned to Naomi, who was just about to sit down, still talking on her phone. I didn’t think she would be alone for too long, so I had to take the opportunity to talk to her.

“Oh, didn’t know you worked here,” she said once she had hung up. With those words all my rage built up in one spot and was ready to explode. After few minutes of staring at each other, she finally continued:

“I’m joking. I’ve come to talk to you.”

“Why hasn’t anyone called me in so long?” I asked, sitting down with her.

“We are not in a movie, it is not that easy to solve the case, especially with this many cold spots. Can I get a cup of coffee?” Naomi took a short glance of the diner and looked back at me. After I hadn’t moved, she started talking again.

“The reason I came here is because we have a few suspects in custody. We have already contacted Sarah and she is on her way to the station, but Harmon thought it would be better if I talked to you first.”

“And why is that?” I wondered if Harmon had given everyone as many details of the case as he had to me; however, I still felt like that had not nearly been enough.

“He matched some parts of your dream to one of the locations we think could be the place where they kept you and the others. Still have no idea how he did it. He also wants me to drive you there, so you can, hopefully, confirm.” She gave me a look as she thought I would get up and run away just like that detective had.

“Absolutely, lets go!” I yelled. Naomi took her car keys from her bag and we were outside in just a few seconds. First she needed to take me to the station.

She left me in a small dark room to wait for a few minutes. When she came back, the lights in the other room turned on and, through what I assumed was one of those mirrors that you could see on cop shows, I was able to look at five people while they were walking inside the room and taking their places. After I had looked closely in every one of their faces, the only one that looked semi-familiar was the one of a man that looked like he was in his thirties, had his hair tied in a ponytail so I could clearly see a scar on his left cheek. After I pointed my finger at him, Naomi asked me if any of the other men looked familiar.

“Besides him, no one,” I replied, not being able to look away from him.

She left me alone for few more minutes and than it was time to go. We didn’t say anything the whole car ride, and it took approximately forty minutes to get there. As

we were reaching what seemed to be an abandoned house with a gazebo nearby, I got more and more convinced that I was not useless after all.

Naomi parked just below the yellow tape that was around the premises. That was when I saw it – a part of the house that was totally burnt. Harmon and Naomi gave me the house tour. They were talking about something, maybe even talking to me, but in my head it sounded like indistinct chatter. I lightly nodded and Naomi took my hand and dragged me out of the house. We sat in the gazebo and waited for Harmon to join us.

“Thanks to you we now have solid evidence to confirm our guesses and this will all be over soon. After you had recognised that man, Nick Bundy, he couldn’t hold it under questioning and he told us everything we wanted to know. We are still looking for the woman that abducted you. Nonetheless, we do know her name – Natasha Romanova – and we will find her, in that I can assure you. Sarah also recognised her abductor, Victor Dashkov. We are still looking for some girls and one boy, but for you, my dear, it is finally over.”

As he said those words, I felt like huge weight had been lifted off my chest.

One can get stuck in a place and not even realize it. If not careful, one can get stuck in there forever.

If it hadn’t been for the fire, I wouldn’t have made it out alive. It turned out that someone had accidentally left the gas pipe on. One honest mistake had saved so many lives. The detectives never told me how I ended up on the promenade, but that did not matter, at least not at the time.

One of the officers drove me home. I took a long, warm bath and got myself ready for bed. I hoped I would finally be able to sleep that night. At one moment I thought I saw someone at the window, but, given the fact that I lived on the fifth floor, it would be impossible. I kept telling myself that was just my mind playing tricks on me. Suddenly, the feeling that I was being watched became stronger. No matter how crazy that sounded, I felt like something was going to happen. That was when I realized I would always be in that house. I would always be in that room. I could never get out.

mentor: Sandra Prpić

institution: Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb

Karla Batinović

LOVESTRUCK EULOGY

Children don't know what to do with a dead body. They merely form a circle of flesh doused in fear, cheeks salted from rivers of tears and snot that took away their breaths. The room wasn't silent, not with confused and scared wails crawling from their throats, leaving them parched and raw, and burrowing in the ears of those with lips shut tight like writhing worms.

It was an almost otherworldly experience. The Administrator, perceived as a strong, stern figure in their lives, acting as the main pillar of the orphanage's foundations, crumpled. Eyes that saw through everything the delinquents were attempting to hide, blue glaciers always in subzero, enough to trigger a freeze response with just enough of disapproval, sealed shut until the eyelids rotted away.

The miasma that clung around her like an angry vulture demanding either respect or maggots off your corpse wasn't present on the off-white tiles kissing her skin. The green robes that decided which temple she belonged to meant nothing now that she was in the clutches of Lady Death, and so they were being slowly conquered by dust, filth, and red. Red, that seeped into the cloth, turning it a charred black of forests burnt away in the hot summer heat.

Ezra had never seen her with upturned lips or the crow's feet carved around her sockets without sharp talons up until now. He couldn't weep when the woman looked much more content with a chest finally still and a fountain running sanguine down her neck, no heartbeat to force her awake. She bore much more resemblance to his mother now: dirtied blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin wrapped too closely around the bone and lungs without air.

There's shuffling outside the building, a thud of heavy double-doors, almost like thunder, shatters the despondency of the dining room with the might of heavy war horns. Ezra recognizes the garments weaved from black dahlias and melancholy, veils hiding their visage from mourners and murderers. Their footsteps plant the seeds of reality, roots promptly growing and curling around his head: Administrator does not belong to the world of living anymore.

Ezra watches as their gentle whispers and gloved hands coax the crying children away from the sight, eating up the circle until there's only him. He doesn't move when a heavy weight is settled on his shoulder like a perching crow, a shadow looming over his entire being; keeping away the faint light tenderly spilling from the small windows.

His heart accelerates, but his blood is made of stone that sits in his limbs, under his skin, like grey phlegm that coagulates in his veins and leaves him petrified. He isn't sure how he's supposed to act. These men and women have an aura of sorrow and hurt wherever they go, deterring any citizen from merely thinking of being nearby; a perfect contrast to flames moths adore with such intensity and passion they char. Like shadows, they dance around the buildings hidden in plain sight, merely a phantom in the town's peripheral vision. And now, he can feel the way the fabric of his shirt turns warm from the hand of one of them. It's a wonder their touch isn't as gelid as a corpse.

"Administrator... Administrator seems happier now," Ezra croaks before he knows what he is doing, voice a brittle breeze fighting against trees of mahogany and oak with bark too thick and inert to swing with the motion like a breath.

"Sister Amarta has cut her ties with our gods as soon as she plunged that knife in her own throat," the priest scolds, pointing to the blade flourishing from the woman's long neck like red spider lilies with crimson roots. Blasphemy in bloom. "Lady Death does not condone running from Lord Life. She will not waltz with those who have never learned to dance."

Ezra doesn't know how to respond. His ears are full of murmurs of the priests, forming tornados and storms under the thin skull bone. The hand on his shoulder only grips tighter as the body of the sinner is covered in worn brown fabric, before being

placed on a stretcher. All that's left of her is a stain, a hindrance to those who are left to clean.

He sees a priest in the green robes of Lord Life conversing with the servants of Lady Death, a weed amongst black dahlias. They make eye contact, warm brown in the man's irises a pleasant antithesis to the pale skin. His forehead creases as a smile carves his face in a poor attempt at comfort. The new Administrator, another nameless figure.

He's being beckoned towards the priest with a gentle push, almost casting an illusion of choice. The fingers stuck to his frame rip it away before his brain can pull it together, and he's left drowning without knowledge of what the heralds of Death are planning to do. There's water clogging his throat and stealing away the words from his tongue, and he can only wonder why he is the only child here.

The new Administrator gives him a small wave, before crouching to Ezra's eye level with a surprising lack of tempo, as if the boy was a shivering fawn ready to bolt at any given opportunity. "I'm sorry you had to witness such a vile act, from a role model nonetheless. I assure you, nothing of this magnitude will happen as you still bud ever again," he affirms, extending his hand to gently cup the boy's cheek. Ezra finds himself grabbing onto the man's large wrist, a steady branch just above the river that should mean salvation from the aquatic demise, but the pressure on his shoulder isn't leaving.

"The temple needs more servants," the man behind him declares, and Ezra turns to look into the veil. He prays to Lord Life the man will not utter what the boy thinks he will. The temporary silence of the men manifests like a preparation of soil and tools to bury him with.

The Administrator stands up, dusting off his robes. "Are you certain recruiting a child just after he'd witnessed someone go against the gods in the most brutal of ways is a benevolent deed?"

"This child has already been touched by hands of Death numerous times without physical changes," the man in black counters, his voice betraying an elated crescent of lips behind the black curtain. "Children learn quicker than adults. He is quiet and cold. The Council has agreed on adoption a sunset ago. This is the perfect candidate."

The Administrator glances at Ezra, and the boy can only pour so much begging in a single blink before it starts spilling in waves that turn his face an ugly red from the blood rushing to his cheeks.

“Surely you don’t want to dispute the Council? That could very well be a voyage to the streets.” Ezra hates the finality in those words, dripping with honey because honey is deadlier than vinegar.

And he knows his fate is sealed as soon as he hears a sigh of resignation, sees the way the Administrator’s muscles twitch before sagging. There’s an apology somewhere in the furrow of his brows and the breath he takes before speaking, but Ezra can’t begin the process of accepting it when incredulity clogs his ears and turns his teeth too heavy to allow his lips to part.

Ezra doesn’t hear their words. He doesn’t lament when he wakes up surrounded by walls of stone framed with inordinate pillars instead of crumbling and dusty wood, with a smell of incense clotting his lungs instead of dust and rancid broth and muttering of manifestations in lieu of children’s cries.

He forgets about hunger pains and pranks, but somewhere along the line corpses become more familiar than humans. The sound of human heads hitting the ground after the swing of an axe instead of wood soon enough isn’t as appalling, and weeping men and women begging for a release aren’t plaguing his dreams. He skips from shadow to shadow, following his mentors like a lost duckling powerless to do anything about the stinging daggers that were the stares of the civilians.

Each time he passes by the stained glass picturing a plump woman with skin flaking from her skeleton his hands shake, a morbid curiosity prompting him to see what’s behind her veil. But the reaction withers and he ages among other children whose lips don’t speak of anything other than how to properly conduct a ritual or execute a sinner, and now he finds himself with stubble and shoulder-length hair and a snake hissing in his stomach, begging for perfection and years and years spent just so he could finally hear himself say that pledge.

“I am a servant of Lady Death. I witness Her deeds to keep the community safe. I stain my hands with blood and soil to keep the community safe. I keep Her away to keep the community safe. I do not pray, for it calls upon Her. I do not scream, for it

calls upon Her. My duty isn't to praise. My duty isn't to cherish. My duty is to respect and aid. I am a servant of Lady Death."

"Very well, Ezra. You truly are worth the reputation of the best in the youngest generation." It's a title he'd grown used to having shoved down his ears, carried by half-smiles and crinkling eyes.

"Thank you, Reverend," he dips his head in respect, taking care to sound just quiet enough. But it's too loud, and the priestess says nothing.

The snake that prowls in Ezra's stomach hisses in anger, jumbling the way he perceives his vowels and consonants so they never sound how they're supposed to. His breaths are just a little too wrong, the dip of his head too low. His heart beats too quickly for someone bathing in the miasma of rotted and gone.

The priests of death never settle for something touching the boundaries of mediocre. He can only hope they aren't willfully turning a blind eye at something he cannot stop staring at. He hopes it's fake.

"This is your first Calling ceremony. Be proud of how far you've come," the higher priestess says, but there is nothing in her voice that speaks of fondness or satisfaction. It's a horizon without hills or chasms, a desert without dunes. "Your veil and robes were earned and deserved, for Lady Death's wrath would have already burnt your soul for encroaching her abode."

"I will make you proud, Reverend. I swear on everything and nothing that I am," Ezra declares, lifting his head to stare into a curtain made of the most grandiose see-through darkness and prettiest black lace. It stares back at him, his own veil too plain to ever hope to shield him away from its sharpness.

The woman doesn't respond, instead opening the large gates they stood in front of. Ezra can't help but wince at the loud creak that the wood releases, and it echoes around them with persistent screeching.

"Remember, Ezra. If you let Death see your heart, She won't let it beat," the priestess warns with a gravelly tone.

The gates close and all that's left are taunting shadows infesting the hallways of the morgue, cackling with rats and roaches hidden behind the walls. His boots resonate loudly against the stone floorings riddled with dust and smells of questionable origins. Robes hugging his body feel heavy, tight sleeves practically one with the skin of his arms. He feels an envy towards priests of Lord Life, with long flowy cuffs that don't scratch with every tug.

He turns a corner, and finally, a small wooden door barely clinging to its hinges comes into view. It's a miserable thing, smelling of rot and old age just like most of the catacombs of the morgue.

"This is it," Ezra mumbles to himself, breathing in as much oxygen as his lungs are willing to take, ignoring the vitriol of walls and stuffiness of air that burns his nostrils. He exhales as the door is opened by his gentle hands, posture straightening and face steeling as soon as he crosses the threshold.

He doesn't soften at the sight of a woman with poppies braided in her hair singing at the table, a sound so silent it could be blown away by the mellowest breeze and overtaken by the most bashful of birds' melodies. She was stroking the corpse's hair, motions so loving and warm he finds himself coveting that same sensation of affection that prompts shivers to run down his spine. He's descried many like her before; mothers begging the executioners not to swing down the axe because their young surely couldn't have killed, widows praying Lady Death to take them in tow with their husbands.

"Who are you?" he inquires coldly. "I wasn't aware of anyone being invited to witness the Calling."

He was told William was much like him, an orphan without siblings, isolated from his peers due to a curse Lord Life bestowed upon him stealing his tongue. Alas, nobody's soul was close enough to his to witness something as sacred as the embrace of Lady Death.

Unless what the orphanage Administrator provided about him was fabricated for whatever ungodly reason.

The woman looks up, and Ezra feels something in the chambers shift, a switch that turns off the sun and hitches his heart. There's a gust of wind in the room that shouldn't be there, forcing the claws of something too cold underneath his skin and an unmistakable primal instinct awakens, bellowing beware to every drop of blood that coursed through his veins.

Her eye colour reminded him of what he sees when his eyelids are closed, a strange brown bordering black.

"Please, do pardon me," she answers, and all Ezra can think about is the beauty of the mellow melody pouring from her throat. "I wasn't made aware of the time of the ritual. I will be on my leave."

He stares at her retreating form, muddled with contradictions and nonsense. Her clothes were ragged and so filthy he couldn't discern their original colouration, but her skin was the colour of the most expensive ivory and too pale for someone who is kissed by the scorching sun all day long in the fields.

Grabbing her bicep, he suppresses a gasp at the sheer coldness of her skin, almost like a corpse, "Stop! How did you get in? The mortuary is off-limits without the presence of a member of the clergy!"

She giggles, the sound a sharp knife slicing through his cold facade and leaving him confused, "I wanted to see him." Her arm slips out of his softening hold, an unfamiliar shine in her eyes speaking of something more than what she appears to be, "He looks so serene. Who wouldn't want a destiny such as that? You fear it with so much might, and yet this boy who was starved and beaten sleeps so soundly."

Despite himself and what he knows, Ezra looks at the cadaver, eyeing the cracks and chasms blemishing the boy's skin. He'd expect him to have some sort of agony stuck on his face, a sign of struggle against the hands that took away his breath, but all he saw was acceptance and a shell of a smile.

"Do not let Her lure you in. She promises something sweet and easy, but it will lead to sin and an afterlife in the jaws of who we don't speak of," he repeats the words branded into him by the priests, but when he turns the woman wasn't there. All he

sees is a rotted poppy, innocently placed on the ground as if it had been there for weeks.

Something in him tells him he wouldn't find her no matter how many hallways he'd cross, so he completes the reason he came here in the first place.

He feels William's eyes boring into him from the other side of his eyelids, and all he could think about was the calm expression on William's face even with bones peeking from under his dermis and bruises producing storms around his collarbone cheeks.

Ezra leaves the mortuary and meets the high priestess with his chin held high and a sour frown hidden between his interlocked hands. They sing of pious men and women who stood before him and their diligent prayer that impressed the gods themselves enough to warrant miracles, calling upon their blessings from the Other Side for the newest among their ranks.

He buries the flower with William, and despite letting the fragile thing suffocate under layers and layers of dirt, sometimes he can still feel phantom petals moving against the pads of his fingertips. He doesn't know why he risks everything he had to plant a lily on William's grave, the words ringing in his head more a passing thought than what he focuses on.

"Glorious gardens call upon Her, and while She enjoys the sight famine and pestilence fester around Her."

His slumber pictures gardens of lilies as white as snow-covered glaciers bathing in the moonlight, in the middle standing the Administrator, with glazed-over irises and a blade struck through her gullet. She collapses and the flowers around her turn to a charred black, and when he reaches her and turns her over, in her place stood his own eyes and face.

It ends with the pale visage of a woman with poppies in her hair and bedsheets slicked with sweat.

When he visits the grave, the lily was barely standing on a rotten stem and shrivelled petals.

It wasn't his last.

Something ate away at him with fangs too sharp, hungrier than a viper and with venom just as infectious. The closed stares of corpses don't leave from under his skull bone, brewing and budding with each prayer that leaves his lips. Hands move on their own without the full consent of his mind, and it's three of his graves later that instead of feeble dandelions there grow gardens of carnations, lilies and roses.

Nobody finds out. The flowers all corrode in the night before they can.

Until a hand roughly grabbed his shoulder as he was planting a carnation, fingers stained with mud and soil. He spins around to face the familiar veil with black lace in floral patterns of dahlias, the high priestess all tense and rigid.

She sputters a few coughs, dry heaving in anger and clutching onto his shoulders as Ezra tries to stand to support her, careful to not dirty her garments with his hands. "What," she manages with a broken voice, "have you done?"

"Reverend, I swear, it's, uh, it's not what it looks like," he attempts to placate, words tangling together from adrenaline. She wasn't meant to find out, and now he has surely carved a coffin he'll have to lay in.

"Not what it looks like?!" she almost yells, breaking into coughs and suddenly there's crimson painting the white carnations, "You've cursed us! And yourself! You're to blame for children, women, and men collapsing on the streets like flies!"

"What—?"

He doesn't have time to properly process her words as a crow screams in the distance and the woman collapses onto her palms, crushing the flowers with sharp and sudden convulsions. There's blood seeping from the veil, and Ezra can only stare as vitality evaporates from her like water to vapour. He tries to ease her coughs with careful pats on her back, but something flashes past him and it takes the veil with it.

"Hey," he calls after it, almost tripping the priestess in the process. Cackles and flapping of a dozen birds surround him, and he's swarmed by them in a matter of seconds. Their beaks pull on his robes, and all he hears is the priestess weakly screaming out his name before it all turns silent and the birds disperse.

The temple of Lady Death he doesn't remember running to stands before him, the stairs riddled with feathers and faint crimson drops, not a sight of the priestess. He watches as the birds settle on the roof, pointing inside with simple head movements.

There's too much intelligence in those beady eyes.

"Has She sent you?" he inquires with a thick voice, and it comes out weaker than he'd initially hoped.

The birds caw in response, and it's all Ezra needs.

Stepping over the Death's temple threshold always awoke a feeling of taboo, as if the chambers dedicated to the arcane concept turned volatile as soon as the meaning spilt over the walls together with the paint. The extravagant ceilings made of marble produced deep and long echoes that often didn't sound quite right, bleeding into whispers and warnings of the dead. Smoke from candles and burnt spices slowly swirled in the darkness, dimming what little light managed to seep from the tiny circular windows behind the altar.

It was a perfect concoction of beauty that Death Herself was and fear so many harboured of Her.

The numbing tiles easily pierce through his robes as he kneels, gelid needles harrowing his bones to the marrow. The sensation is irrelevant when all he can focus on is who this was built for, the cadavers with slightly upturned crescents on their faces humming nuanced melodies so quiet they're overridden with each of his breaths.

"O, Maiden Death, I hear You, I see You. I beg of You to come forth," his whispers are like hammers decimating the gilded cage built from injunctions of holy words and slaughtering the coiling snake in his stomach, fragments of the soul sieving into each vibration of the vocal cords.

"I yearn for Your gifts, the final ending to our destiny and eternal ataraxy," he imagines rapture waltzing in the glazed irises of dead bodies, the loose muscles and organs, blood sitting heavy under his skin and turning it pale, lungs that do not strain for oxygen, and everything that he could be if She graced him with a miracle. For suicide is too vile, a desecration of something as divine as Her touch.

Loud cawing emits from the once again stirred up crows, only now there were many more, and Ezra immediately turns to see a cyclon produced from feathers of ink and night. They move in intricate and even patterns, too complex to be named as something of terrestrial origin, with rigid edges and circular insides. He loses sight of the beginnings and ends the formation was supposed to have, his head turning dizzy from the way it all bled into one.

There were people outside, cowering in his peripheral vision and blurring with unimportance. Something twitched inside the flock of crows, swimming just beneath the surface of the ink. Limbs move on their own, thoughts tunnel visioning to the core of the phenomenon, and before he knows it, the space between them is barely a few steps in length. The beating of his heart accelerates in exhilaration, the sight invoking some alien sense of euphoria he couldn't put completely into words.

The screams of humans don't register to Ezra completely, and he forgets them as soon as he perceives them. The patterns break in front of him, and suddenly all Ezra can do is bring his hands to shield his face when the calamity opens up in front of him like a gaping maw of eldritch horror, gulping him up and submerging him in black. Winds from the might of feathery wings swirl around him, and he lowers his hands to meet what somehow feels like everything he's ever wanted.

There, in the middle, proudly stands a figure at least two heads taller than him, dressed in the same colours as the birds. The visage sculpted from ivory and moonlight lights up memories even in the absence of poppy stems woven with strands of midnight in her hair, and all he can think about is how She was there all along and maybe he was always meant to cease like this.

"You are Her," he says dumbly when the woman approached him, her movements that of a dark crane dancing away in the night. "You don't have the veil."

"And you are him," she chortled, a pure and unsullied sound gilded with honey, but not the kind made for big traps or turning your brain too fuzzy with stars to think properly. It was the kind that seeped inside your stomach and left you wonderfully full, made by only the vigilant hands of nature. "I always hated how it hid my eyes."

Hands covered in black gloves made from a material with a texture he couldn't recognize cup his cheeks, gentler than anything he's ever felt, and Ezra finds his blue

irises melting inside an elysian black with light grey freckles. Two large pools of a starry night sky, made of black velvet sown with the purest silk so soft it caught dreams in its threads; spattered with puffs of condensed last breaths leaving the lungs of soldiers bathing in spilling flesh on battlefields, of sickly old men without a single functioning foundation left in their bodies whose hands were held by their weeping partners, and of children that never tasted anything other than stale and mouldy bread that cracked their teeth and tasted of stone.

But then there were content sighs on deathbeds of heroes carrying a legacy of slain tyrants and murderers, rulers that brought their nation nothing but prosperity and full bellies, priests whose hands plucked pestilence from lepers like nothing more than angry weeds infesting gardens of vitality, inventors that created unimaginable machines pumping steam like a living thing capable of something more than they were.

He saw amalgamations of misery and glee, stars shining brightly in the content of every single action taken and their antithesis, things that could barely be compared to a celestial body with the shame sucking up away any semblance of light.

Ezra finds himself grabbing onto her wrists, thumbs gently caressing circles into the fabric, "Please."

And the way her forehead creases shows she knows exactly what those words mean, exactly what emotions his crystalline eyes are pouring with.

It takes many decades later, and a starving traveller to find a decimated town and traverse through debris, for the bones of a young male adult covered in feathers to be found. On the other side of the world, an old woman with one foot inside a grave whispers to her children with her last breath of Mister Death.

mentor: Dijana Ravlić Keresturi

institution: French International School of Zagreb

Flora Mamić

SOPHIA'S STORY

Hi my name is Sofia, and this is my story.

I come from one of the poorest cities in South America, Aurora which is located in Suriname. Along with being really poor, my family had other problems. We fought a lot, my parents both consumed drugs and were severely addicted. My mother got herself to stop somehow, but my father died of overdose when I was fifteen. My brother was sick and had a deadly disease; it is called cerebrovascular disease. This is one of the deadliest diseases in the world, it refers to a group of conditions that affects the blood vessels in the brain as well as the blood flow in the entire body. The doctor told him that he had maximum seven years to live, but I refused to believe that. My brother was my whole world, my best friend, he is the reason why I am still alive today. My goal was to help him, even though I knew that the chance of him surviving were low, I didn't want to give up, I wanted to do my best to keep him alive. I never really had a connection with my parents, especially with my father; I hated him, it feels wrong even calling him that word. He was awful, he would come home drunk and break our bed. We had to sleep on the floor because we couldn't afford a new one. I feel kind of bad for saying this, but I was happy when he died, I was not scared to be in my own home anymore. On the other hand, my mother fell into depression post his death, even though he sexually assaulted her, hit her and insulted her. "He was a bad and aggressive man, he hit you and your children" is what I kept telling her, but she refused to listen, she quit her job, all she did was lay around and cry all day long. My brother couldn't work therefore I had to. As I already said, I was fifteen at the time so my job choice was very limited, especially in Aurora. I washed other people's clothes, cleaned their houses, kept their flocks of sheep and cows, babysat their children and still got barely enough for two loafs of bread a week. At one point, I even thought about going into prostitution or drug dealing, but I realized that I did

not want to end up like my parents or without self-respect. I decided to start saving in order to get my brother to a clinic in Belgium. By the time I was nineteen and a half, I had enough money for the plane tickets, a two-star motel and an appointment with the best doctor in the clinic. The doctor realized that the disease was spreading out much faster than planned, he said that my brother had maximum four days to live. I was devastated, I burst into tears in front of him and my brother. He died two days later. The last thing he told me was that he is proud of me, that I can't give up because of him as well as "I love you baby sis". I moved in with the doctor, Luca and his daughter Monique who was almost two years younger than me. Luca realized that I was alone, poor and sad, so he opened his house and heart to me. Since then, we became inseparable, and they became my father and sister. He paid for the best tutors and after a year of intense tutoring, I applied to Harvard Medical School and got accepted, so did my sister Monique. After four years, I decided to get a master's degree at Yale. When I got it, I started developing a cure for cerebrovascular disease with Monique and my father. We had a lot of sleepless nights, failed attempts hence we finally developed a drug that can cure or at least slow this disease down. The problem was selling it, not because of the money, frankly my father had too much of it already, but getting it to the world. No one believed us, the companies did not want to buy and sell the drug because they only thought about profit. Furthermore, they came to a conclusion that only a few people in the world have this disease and that it makes no sense to buy it. On the other hand, the people didn't know that we invented this, or didn't trust us with their life. I met the CEO of GFP, the biggest pharmaceutical company in the USA and the world, George Florence. We talked about him wanting to buy the drug and about other things. His brother also died from cerebrovascular disease and he also loved to play volleyball and eat cherries. We had an instant connection and got married. Two months later, I sold him the drug. Little did I know that he would sell it as a "leg rejuvenation" product that helps older women get rid of veiny legs. I was shocked, I didn't know what to do. He then filed for divorce and told me that he was faking everything, that he never even had a brother, that he hated cherries and that he absolutely despised volleyball. He also explained to me that as I already signed the paper, there is nothing I can do to stop him from selling the drug as "the new leg rejuvenation". I filed for court. I waited for two years, and really came prepared alongside the best lawyers. I didn't know how, but he won. I was so disappointed and wanted to give up, the only thing that stopped me from doing exactly that was remembering my dear brother. I then decided to ask for a re-trial but the jury denied it because my grounds were not strong enough. I then

proceeded to do some research, I found out that Darla Smith was actually his sister, but she got married to John Smith thus changed her name from Florence to Smith. The jury then granted my request and the re-trial date was set. That day arrived very soon, I won and took back what belonged to me. I borrowed my father's money and opened a new company. The company's name was Santiago, in honor of my brother. In just five years it has made three billion dollars! Here we are today, celebrating Santiago's fifth anniversary. I hope this story has inspired you to follow your dreams and not to give up. I thank you for your support, and I am happy that the Santiago drug is helping many people today. I think that is a great way to honor my brother because he loved helping everyone and he would have loved what I achieved just by believing in myself and having a bit of faith. I would specially like to thank Monique and Luca because they really helped me and all of you for taking the time to read my story.

mentor: Nika Marijanović

institution: Salezijanska klasična gimnazija, s pravom javnosti u Rijeci

Nora Ljubetić

NOT ANOTHER LOVE STORY

Love; it used to be something I read about in books or dreamt about while watching romantic movies on TV. I'm sure most of you have watched Disney movies like Cinderella or Snow White. All of these stories have a similar, if not the same storyline. For example, the girl is always very beautiful and also in most cases a damsel in distress. On the other side, the boy or man is a strong hero, most likely a prince whose whole purpose is to save the girl. I never comprehended the concept of love. For example, the fact that somewhere in the entire world there is a person, only one person who is perfect for me. That person is my soulmate. And what if I never meet that person, what am I just supposed to be by myself just because my person fell in love with someone else. I don't want to sound pessimistic or doubtful but I just didn't believe in it. You can see that I wrote „didn't“ in the past tense because as much as I didn't think it was possible, I fell in love and I fell hard. So you might think that this story is just going to be about how I realized love is perfect. Quite on the contrary falling in love is one of the easiest things in the world but you will eventually and most likely get hurt which is hard. So as you probably assumed by the title, this is not another love story.

So I think introductions would be in order. Hi, I'm Elana Singer and I'm going to take you with me on this lovely journey to my teenage years. For you to understand the present and the future you need to know the past. Unfortunately, my dad passed away when I was three so I don't remember him much. So since then, it's been just me and my mom Vanessa. Everyone who has ever met my mom always mentions how we look so much alike. We have the same light green eyes and the wavy light brown hair that is so hard to tame. The only thing that we have different is our attitude, after losing my dad she's become very protective towards me. With my somewhat complicated but small family being mentioned we can dive right into my senior

year. It's my last day in Wisconsin since my mom got a job offer in Boston. Our flight is at 8 AM so as expected my mom woke me up way too early. „Elana, come on we're going to miss our flight!“ My mom yelled from the kitchen. I open and close my eyes a couple of times to adjust to the light that is shining thru my window. Suddenly I'm getting pushed back on my back and I instantly yell. „Luna, get off of me I need to start getting ready!“ She jumps off and I just hear her stumbling down the stairs so I Groan and turn around to look at the alarm clock. „5.13 AM “ it read on the clock. Knowing that I will never fall asleep again I get dressed in my gray sweatpants and a black hoodie since I'm not going to school today. „Morning mum.“ I said as I kissed her on the cheek and sat at the table. I take a look at the pancakes on the table and suddenly I'm fully awake. The sleepy look on my face is replaced by a smile when I see my favorite juice as I open the fridge. I go to take the glass for the juice so I ask my mom: „Mom, you want some cherry juice with your pancakes?“ She hums and nods her head so I pour us some juice and sit back down to eat my pancakes. „Elana you don't want to eat too much, you don't want to get sick on the plane.“ My mom says as she eyes my plate that's full of pancakes and the syrup in my hand. I just smile up at her and say: „I will be fine, it's not even that many bags.“ She looks at me one more time and runs to check if we packed everything we need. „Elana come help me with the bags!“ My mom yelled from the hallway. I sighed and went to put my plate and glass in the sink. After I cleaned the table I went to help my mom and just as I got there, a suitcase fell from her hands. I caught it just in time before it hit the floor. „Mom you should be more careful, all of my stuff is in this bag.“ I said, my voice sounding full of concern. She looked at me with guilt in her eyes and said: „Sorry sweetie, but in my defense, I did say I need help to carry your heavy bags.“ I smiled at her and took two of my bags out the front door and to the car. I carefully put them on the ground only to open up the trunk and put them inside nice and neat so everything could fit. Just as I was about to move away from the car and close the trunk my mom came outside and handed me the remaining two suitcases and one travel bag. She headed back into the house to check if we forgot anything; again. I lifted the rest of our bags into the trunk and grabbed my backpack off the sidewalk. I sat in the car and turned the music up because my favorite song was on the radio. As I listened to the music I thought about leaving my little town behind. My thinking was interrupted by my mom opening the car door and asking: „Elena, are we ready to go?“ I take one last look at our house and say: „I honestly don't think I will ever be ready; but if you meant if we have everything we need, yes mom, yes we do.“ She sighs and starts the car. The clock is on and it reads 6 AM, we need about forty-five minutes to get to

the airport so if there is a little bit of traffic we should get there by 7 AM. So we will still have an hour before our plane takes off. As I'm watching the outside the window I feel my eyes start closing and the slow music on the radio isn't helping my case. I let my eyelids close as I drift off to sleep. Suddenly I am being shaken as I hear someone saying: „Elana, sweetie wake up. I unloaded our bags and our plane takes off in about fifteen minutes so come on, hurry up.“ I open my eyes to figure out it's my mom. Half asleep I get up and take my backpack with me. Next thing I know we are in our seats on the plane. I'm just waiting for the plane to take off so that I can go back to sleep. I didn't sleep at all last night, I don't know if I was excited or if I was dreading this moment. Probably a little bit of both. „Dear passengers, we have a flight lasting a short hour and a half, so please put your seatbelts on and enjoy the flight. This was your pilot.“ A lady walked out and showed us how to put the seatbelt on as most people just laughed at her. I secured my seatbelt and again, fell asleep. I woke up just as we were about to land and my mom looked at me and said: „Oh great you're awake, so I'm going to call an uber and grab two of our bags and you get the rest so I can see when the uber get's here. Okay?“ Still looking outside the window I answered: „Yeah sure mom, just wait for me and answer your phone if I call you.“ She nodded her head as we hear the airplane door open, we rushed out and were one of the first people to exit the plane. My mom glanced at me as I nodded in her direction showing her that I'll wait for our bags to arrive. Half an hour just passed and I just grabbed all of our bags and headed outside. My mom waved me over to the big black car that I assumed was our uber. A nice guy exited the car on the driver's side and introduced himself as Michael. He helped me get our bags into his car and asked for our destination. My mom answered like she has waited her entire life for someone to ask her that question: „It is number 23B Blossom Street on the West end of Boston.“ I just smiled at him as he said it wouldn't take us a long time. He was right, twenty minutes later we were standing in front of our new home. Just my mom and I; and our seven travel bags. Just as I was about to carry our bags up the stairs a little girl came up to me and said: „Hi, I'm Lili, you must be the new neighbors, Do you need help? How old are you, not that I think you're old I just. I'm five. You are very pretty.“ I looked at her puzzled as I realized I have to answer. „Hi Lili, my name is Elana, and thank you so much for the compliment. Also, I don't need help but if you can insist you can carry this very heavy bag because you look like a very strong girl. Oh and by the way, I am 18.“ I pointed to my small backpack as she happily grabbed it and followed me up the stairs. Right as we were about to say goodbye we heard someone yelling Lili's name so she told the person she is on the second floor. A handsome guy

was running up the stairs. He had black hair that fell on his face and a neck covered in tattoos. He started apologizing for his sister but then he saw me and paused, took a look at me, and continued with a smile on his face: „Well hello there pretty lady, you need any help with your suitcases or anything else?“ He asks eyeing me down. „ Well, I don't need help but thank you for asking. Your sister here already helped me with my stuff.“ I answered with a smile. It seemed like he didn't expect that type of answer so he smiled sarcastically and said: „You have no idea how many girls would die for me to talk to them. And also I will save you the trouble of asking, my name is Noah. So what's your name love?“ I almost laughed in his face but I kept my composure as I spoke: „ I didn't ask but fine. My name is Elana so if you could use it instead of using those nicknames, it would be much appreciated.“ He smiled almost as he was intrigued and goodbye while his sister ran after him: „Bye darlin', I'll see you at school. I hope.“ He winked in my direction as I felt myself grow more annoyed. „I hope not“ I yelled after him. I entered the apartment and saw my mom in the company of another lady laughing. My mom noticed me at the door and introduced us: „ El, this is Laura. She is our neighbor and she has two children, one of them is a boy your age.“ I smiled as I look closer at her face and recognized that she looks the same as Noah just with long hair and she is a fair bit shorter. Laura smiled: „ By the look on your face dear I'm going to assume you met my children. But it's good you know each other since you will most likely be going to class together.“ I just stood there in shock, why me? Why Noah? I keep telling myself that I'm doing this to keep my mom happy. So I just smile at her and say: „Oh yeah, they helped me bring our suitcases up the stairs.“ I smiled and went to unpack in my room. I sat at my new table from where I was looking out the window. Just as I was about to stand up I saw Noah looking at me from across the street, I'm guessing also from his room. He winked at me and I just closed the curtains. By the time we unpacked all of our stuff it was late in the evening so I decided to go to my room to sleep. I put on my nightgown and sat in bed thinking, just thinking. I slowly fell asleep. I open my eyes and look at my alarm clock afraid that I've slept in. Thankfully it was 6.20 AM and the bus is supposed to be here at 7.30 AM. I open my curtains and my eyes immediately fall to Noah who is sitting at his desk with a book in his hands while Lili is in his bed sleeping. „Cute.“ I think to myself but then I remember I need to get ready. I go to my closet and put on black jeans, a black crop-top, and a red jacket. I straightened my hair and put some mascara on. I walked to the kitchen and grabbed some milk and cereal to eat for breakfast. I was eating my breakfast when my mom woke up. We said good morning to each other and I went back to eating. I finished my breakfast when

I heard a knock at the door. Surprised I check the clock which read 7.10 AM. I go to open the door and see Noah standing in front of me with his cocky smile. He opens his mouth to speak but I just put my hand up and said: „Don't. It's way too early for this“ He just said goodbye to my mom before I could and turned to me and said: „The bus is usually early so come on or we're going to be late.“ I smiled and kissed my mom goodbye. We slowly start walking down the stairs in silence, so peaceful, so nice... „Hey what do you have the first period, maybe I could show you around love“ I blushed at his nickname for me and at the same time I slapped myself mentally for it. After collecting myself I said: „Um sure, but I honestly have no idea what I have in the first period. I need to go to the principal's office to get my schedule. But thank you.“ His cocky smile returned as he opened the door for me and spoke: „Well we're finally getting along, hey maybe you will even like me someday.“ „Don't push it.“ I said walking out the door. He ran up to me as we saw the bus approaching. We both entered the bus, me first. I went to take a seat somewhere in the front but he grabbed my hand and said: „You're going to sit with me and my friends in the back. They are good guys. Come on don't you trust me?“ I looked at him skeptically: „No, no I really don't“ I saw the group of guys sitting and looking at me, most with smiles on their faces. They started introducing themselves. So far I've met Caleb, Ivan, and Logan. I opened my mouth to speak but Noah was ahead of me: „El, sit down.“ A couple of his friends laughed as I looked at him with pure anger: „Okay mom. So anyway I'm Elana but you can call me El“ I went to sit down as Logan said: „Hey come over here El, we can squeeze a bit, come on.“ I was about to protest but they all started to beg me to stay so I looked at Noah, he just smiled and nodded for me to sit down. I talked to the boys from the house to school. When we got to school Noah told me: „Hey I'm going home on my bike after school. Do you want a ride?“ I genuinely smiled: „I mean if you are offering, sure.“ He winked and I blew him a kiss as we went our separate ways. The principal was waiting for me in front of the school with my schedule in his hand. „Hi Elana my name is Mr. Gabe and this is your school guide, Marlee, and your schedule. Well, enjoy.“ I looked at the girl with red hair and an adorable face. She seemed shy so I asked her: „Hey sorry to bother you Marlee but would you like to get ice cream with me after school.“ When she heard that her eyes lit up: „Yeah, I would love to. Since it's the first day we only have one period in which I will be showing you around the school.“ I smiled and continued listening to her explaining everything about the school. The period passed so fast I didn't even notice. Marlee and I were walking out as I spotted Noah with a few girls around him and his bike. I pulled Marlee with me to tell Noah I'll be going to the ice cream shop. I ap-

proached them and all of the girls gave me dirty looks as I spoke: „Hi darlin’ I will, unfortunately, be going home on foot because I’m going to the ice cream shop before going home. Just let my mom know, my phone died. Thank you“ I yelled the last part because I was going away from him. I heard some yelling after me but I ignored him. We were talking in the shop and Marlee mentioned something about a school dance and I stop her: „What dance, why is it always me that’s left out?“ She laughed at me: „It’s a boring dance just like every other year. It’s just that this is our last as it’s our senior year.“ She looked somewhat sad so I decided not to push it too much but I still had to ask: „Well who would you like to go with?“ She giggled like a little girl and blurted out Caleb’s name. I sat there shook and then said: „You do know, I’ve met him. Not as cool as you describe him.“ Marlee laughed and then she realized she needed to head home and apologized. I just laughed at her nervousness: „Give me your phone so I can put my number in it and you can call me whenever you want to talk about Caleb.“ She ran out after saying goodbye. I grabbed my bag and headed outside when I crashed into someone, Noah. „I guess fate just want’s us to fall in love, don’t you think love?“ I smiled cockily and said. „No I don’t, but since you are here how about you save me the walk home?“ He looked at me and walked into the shop so I decided to wait for him on his bike. I decided to look inside but when I did I saw him kissing a girl with the most beautiful body. I don’t know why but my heart felt like someone was punching it. Do I like him? No, surely I don’t. He is arrogant, bossy, tall, has pretty tattoos, fluffy hair. No, Elana stop. After fighting with myself in my head I decided to leave him alone and walk home. When I got home I’m met with my worried mother and Laura who looked at me like she saw right through me. My mom yelled. „Go to your room, now!“ I just obeyed and went into my room and sat at my table. I sat a sign on Noah’s window, it read: „Where did you disappear, I was going to give you a ride you know.“ So I decided to write back: „Yeah sorry, just had to clear my head. Also, I thought you would have driven someone else home.“

„What, who would I be driving home, I came alone“

„The girl you were with inside the shop, I didn’t want to bother you. Maybe fate want’s for you to be with her“

„Meet me in the treehouse in your backyard at 11 PM and I’ll explain“

„You don’t have to explain anything“

„Fine, I’ll bring pancakes. Come for the food“

„See ya then“

„<3“

It was 10.55 so I carefully sneaked out and climbed the treehouse where I saw light.

Noah invited me in with a smile so I said: „First of all this is in my backyard so you can't invite me in and second of all how do you know about this place.“ He smiled at my curiosity and said: „My sister and I used to come here when Caleb lived here, but his parents moved downtown so he did too so we were waiting for the new neighbors. Thankfully the girl that lives here, you won't believe it, she is so pretty and smart and the best thing is I think she likes me.“ He was smiling the entire time he was saying that. If I didn't know he was talking about me I would've believed him. Since I know it's me I said: „She probably doesn't like you that much but she appreciates the compliments.“ I laughed after I said that so that he knew I was kidding. He opened his bag and gave me a pancake with Nutella and I opened my bag and gave him some of my favorite cherry juice. We enjoyed the food and each other's company in silence for a while until he said: „I know I don't need to tell you this. But the girl you saw. Her name is Maddison and I promise you I didn't kiss her. I don't like her. I pushed her off but by the time I did you had already left.“ I sat in silence and after a while asked: „Why did you tell me this if you still stand by the statement that you like me.“ He smiled and moved closer to me while whispering in my ear: „Maybe my statement has changed.“ A few seconds after he said that we just looked at each other. He gave me a bracelet and said: „Here you go, this means a lot to me so I would be very honored if you would wear it.“ I thanked him and put it on. I closed my eyes for a second and immediately felt his lips on mine. I was in shock at first but then I kissed him back until he pulled away: „I'll see you at school.“ He sort of whispered while getting up and collecting his stuff. I sat there alone in the treehouse with a smile on my face with my right hand on my lips. I just couldn't believe it. He kissed me. Noah Hughes kissed me. My alarm clock made itself known and my mood completely changed as I remembered the events of last night. I repeated them in my head for the entire morning while getting ready. The bell rang and my mind immediately went to him. I jumped to the door so imagine my surprise when I saw Caleb saying: „I'm guessing he didn't tell you he has a game today, so he sent me to get you. Come on we're going to be late.“ I just said at him grabbing my bag and jacket. „Did he tell you anything I mean you are his best friend?“ „No he didn't tell me anything, we don't talk every damn minute.“ He said sounding angry. I looked at him and whispered under my breath: „Damn you are nothing like Marlee told me.“ I heard him laugh but I think he didn't hear me, I hope. We entered the bus I went to sit at the front but Caleb kept pushing me until I sat in the middle of Logan and Ivan. I looked at Caleb and he said: „Look Noah said to keep you closet someone will hurt you. So you stay close.“ I gave him the angry stare back and said: „Look I'm

not any happier with this than you so don't give me that attitude. And another thing if I'm suffering from you three so is my friend Marlee. You're going to be nice to her, understand?" They all looked at him like they were holding back laughter. I stared them down and asked them again: „Do you understand?“ They mumbled a yes. They just continued following me and Marlee around the school while she squealed every time she saw Caleb, which was a lot. It was lunch and the guys went to sit at their table when we heard some loud laughter. I looked towards it and saw Maddison on Noah's lap, she was looking at him while he was looking at me as if trying to catch my reaction. It was my last period so I just gave him a sarcastic smile, grabbed my stuff, and Marlee and I walked out of school. I waited with her until her dad got there. They asked if I needed a ride but I politely declined. We parted our ways just as it started raining. I was drenched and I haven't passed half of the way home. Suddenly a bike stopped next to me but I refused to stop knowing it was Noah. My suspicion was proved when he spoke. „Love, get on, I'll take you home, or are you too jealous to talk to me.“ I turned around so angry and stomped towards him. He saw me and backed away when I said: „No I don't need a ride. As for Maddy, You told me you don't like her so trust me it will hurt her more when she finds out you don't only like her.“ I just continued walking not waiting for his answer.“ Fine, you're right now would you please get on the bike. You are going to freeze plus I won't leave until you do.“ „Fine, fine only to get rid of you.“ We drove to my house. I got off and told him to wait: „Here you go, I don't want it. Maybe Maddy will, I hope you're happy with your decision.“ He looked hurt by my actions but I convinced myself that he was pretending. I ran up to my room and closed the door. For the next few days, Noah and I completely ignored each other while Marlee and Caleb grew closer. She told me he sometimes asks how I'm doing, I mean I do the same but I tell her not to say that I asked. Well the moment has come it's 5 PM and it's the dance night. Marlee and I are getting ready for the dance at my house while Laura is doing my hair and my mom is doing Marlee's hair. Laura asked me about Noah because she says he hasn't been coming out of his room at all. I liked to think I was the reason, maybe he finally realized what he had lost. Once we got ready I just went to my room to grab my purse but I stopped in front of the mirror in my room. I was wearing a red dress that was short in the front and long in the back. I turned to look at my table and I saw him. He was already looking at me smiling. I just closed my curtains before I started crying again. Caleb was knocking so my mom went to open the door and froze. I went to look and saw Noah laughing with Caleb. I asked my mom to close the door to collect my composure. We exited and Caleb complimented Marlee's dress so I asked Caleb

if we could talk but before I could say anything he said: „He told me everything, I mean we are besties as you say.“ I laughed at his comment then asked: „Well if he told you why is he here. It’s uncomfortable for both of us.“ „Like I said he told me everything he feels so I need to help my boy get his girl.“ He smiled and grabbed Marlee’s hand as they entered a separate limbo. Noah opened the door and I thanked him. We entered and quietly he said: „You look very beautiful. I like the color, it suits you.“ I blushed and thanked him. The ride to the school was peaceful but just as we got to the school he told the driver some random address and the driver kept driving. „Noah, where are we going?“ I asked him, my blood already boiling. Relaxed he said: „Realxe love, I just wanted...“

„No, no I do not care and you lost your right to call me love.“

„Look we weren’t exclusive so why are you mad.“

„I’m not going to talk about this again, not today.“

„You didn’t even say anything last time you just gave me my bracelet back. Wich hurt by the way.“

„So you think you didn’t hurt me?“

„No I did but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.“

„Well then stop, stop caring!“

„I can’t.“

„Why the hell not?!“

„Because I love you!“

I stopped in my tracks and looked at him to see if he was telling the truth. He was. He loves me. I sat next to him and grabbed his face in my hands and asked: „Do you mean it?“ He just nodded. I whispered: „I do too, I love you too.“ I kissed him. He kissed me back. And well our lives progressed nicely after that, I mean we loved each other what more could we ask for.

I hope my story, our story inspires you to take the risk, fall in love. Always thinking love was something that only existed in movies and books has made us all scared that if we don’t experience the perfect love story we won’t experience love at all. But just like books, all deserve to be read because they are written. Because the writer took a risk you were scared to. Even if you do get hurt just remember the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

„Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.“

So be brave, courageous and fall in love to write your own story.

mentor: Željka Getoš

institution: Elektrotehnička i prometna škola Osijek

Ivan Ivanović

TOGETHER FOREVER

CLANG!!

CRASH!!

We currently see two figures clashing in distance. One figure is wielding what appears to be a regular iron sword. He is a young man in his early twenties. One of his most striking and unique features is his hair, middle length with spikes going in all directions. His eyes are azure as the ocean and face is lean, with sharp jaw. He has body many men would be envious of, built for speed while also having the necessary strength for it not to become a liability. He was dressed in what appeared to be knights' armor. It was not a standard silver color; it was as blue as the night sky. The second figure appeared far more intimidating since he was quite literally a skeleton. But this was not just any skeleton. He was dressed in, what appeared to be a high priest robe and despite having no eyes, his eye sockets were glowing giving the appearance of eyes. He is wielding sword of his own. This is Hades, The God of the Dead. He is one of the Trinity Gods of Olympus. The other figure is far more friendlier and normal looking. He is Arthur Fox. He is a regular human. Kind of. You see, since he was little, he had always been naturally good at anything. If he gave something new a try, in little to no time he would be proficient, as if he had been doing it for years.

But not all stories have nice, happy backgrounds. You see, the day that Arthur was born is the same day that his home village was destroyed, because it was caught in the crossfire caused by the war. But it wasn't just any war, but a war between Angels, Fallen Angels and Devils. Both of his parents died that day by protecting him from a certain death. His home had been completely wiped off the map that day. So, one would ask, 'How does a newborn survive on its own?'. Well, it usually wouldn't. But if certain conditions were met, then there is a possibility. Well, it just so happened that

Arthur's parents hid him close to a den where a little family of two foxes and their kits lived. They heard the baby's wails and cries, so being curious and concerned about their kits, both foxes went to inspect where the sound was coming from. They had found baby Arthur hidden under the roots of a loose tree. The foxes, seeing and hearing cries coming from a newborn, came closer and sniffed at the youngling. They deduced that it wasn't any danger to their kits, and baby's cries reminded them of the wines the kits would make, they decided to take him with them. Now, I just want to point out that at that time the animals were a lot different. Especially foxes since Inari, Japanese Shinto Goddess of foxes, fertility, rice, tea and sake, had blessed them with an ability to grow stronger, and as an indicator of one's strength it would show by one's size and number of tails. So, the female fox stepped forward and licked the baby on the face to calm its cries. When the baby calmed down, by a presence only a mother could produce, she picked him up with her tails and wrapped his body to keep warm and comfortable. She secured him on her back and nodded towards the male fox and started to walk back to the den. From that day and onward, Arthur was raised with foxes up to the age of nine. From that age and up he was raised by an old man that lived just on the edge of the forest he was raised in. There was an accident, he had been out hunting for food that day, but when he came back all the foxes were dead, killed by a group of devils. In his rage Arthur had taken out his iron sword and charged them. Long story short, he killed them all. They never stood a chance. Later that day Arthur buried his family in the den that he was raised in. After that he was alone for a couple of months, living in the forest he was raised in. It wasn't bad, apart from being lonely. That was until one day an old man stumbled upon him. After that day, the old man started to visit him more often to check up on him. Then one day he offered to adopt him. And so, from that day on Arthur was raised by the old man. Another key point that happened in his life being, when he had been out hunting, he was stopped by the sound of whimpering. Or to be more specific, a kit whimpering. So, without a second thought, he ran to where the sound originated from and found an injured kit. And so, from the day that he found and saved the kit, he would later name him Scarlet. From that day and forever, they would be inseparable.

So, let's go back to where we left off. One would ask 'Why is he fighting a God of the Dead?'. Well, let's go and find out, shall we?

The now named Hades and Arthur are seen clashing together, the weapons of their choice creating sparks from contact. Arthur pulled away and jumped back, Hades mimicking his actions. Both were panting dirty and sheerly exhausted from the day's lengthy battle they were still fighting. But it was bound to end soon. Just as Hades

was about to fire his magic at Arthur, the said young man quickly got into his stance and readied himself for another attack. Hades launched his magic attack, intending to end their battle now, Arthur jumped and ran right at the God of the Dead and cut him across the chest with his sword. There was a moment of silence that overcame the battlefield the two created, before Hades collapsed on his back. With his hands supporting him, Hades looked up to young man that had defeated him. After a moment or two, the young man reached for his helmet and took it off showing his face to the God. He huffed a few times to regain his breath and spoke in a calm voice:

“There... I’ve defeated you like you said, if I defeat you than you shall grant me anything I wish.” his voice, while calm, was shaky from all the adrenalin running through him now. He then stood to his full height and spoke in a demanding kind of voice. “My wish is that you revive and bring back to my side my partner and lifelong friend, the fox that goes by the name of Scarlet. He was a soul that your subordinates (the grim reapers) took, even though he had no connection to the war between the angels, fallen and devils.” Hades had a look of outrage that could make even other God’s quiver in fear. He, the God of the dead was defeated by a mere human! And on top of that all he asked for was to bring back a stupid fox!! He shook with anger, then spoke up. “Fine, take the damned fox and leave my presence!”. Hades moved his hands in a weird way with a look of concentration. Second later there was a scarlet red colored sphere floating between the two that started glowing once it settled in place. Once the light died down, the two warriors heard a yip. Arthur opened his eyes, extended his arms and smiled a true happy smile. Not even a moment later a red blur crashed into him and started licking his cheeks. Scarlet was happy to see his master again, he was wagging his nine tails in excitement. He laughed softly as he hugged and petted Scarlet. He missed his partner. While the two were having a moment, Hades could be seen getting up and muttering something under his breath. Although unknown to the pair Hades was chanting something. Hades finally stood up to his full height and spoke, his voice concealing his rage towards the boy.

“Arthur Fox, you have humiliated me, a God. For that humiliation I, Hades the God of the dead, curse you. For all of eternity you will never find rest in the afterlife. You will die and be born again, and it shall be so until this curse is lifted by anyone with the same strength or stronger than me. Your fox shall be cursed with immortality. When you die it will stay at your grave until you are reborn. Now be gone and leave my sight.” As Hades said that Arthur sheathed his sword, picked Scarlet up and walked back home. He was tired and wanted to rest. Right now, he didn’t care about anything. He was just happy to have his lifelong partner with him. The positive side

of the curse was that they would always be together. So, it was bittersweet for him and his partner.

To be continued... maybe?

mentor: Elvira Dolenc

institution: Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec

Ema Bilaver

NOTTURNO

The road ahead is lit as can be, and yet I feel uneasy.

The streetlights framing it seem barely more tired than usual, but every single street light outside of it seems to have been mercilessly smothered. The side streets only exist because I know of them. There is only one lamp belonging to this road that has been almost entirely choked out, and it's the one lighting up the entrance to my house.

Although I grew up here, the only thing familiar to me is my cat's fluffy raccoon tail leading the way. He's making his way confidently down the eerie road, while I grapple with not being able to see the stars above from the haunting golden aureoles lighting the sidewalk.

And so, we walk. To the untrained mind, this street should've already ended. Finally, after I already stopped counting the time, he turns into a street to our left and disappears in the darkness, not even giving me a glance. The uneasiness had evaporated before, but now it was back stronger than ever before.

As I stepped into that street, I just felt *wrong*.

With every step the only comfort I had was that he knew where he was going. That there was something at the end of this road that would justify this. But I kept walking, and comfort kept evading me.

The blackness was deafening after only a couple dozen steps. I turned around to try and go back, fulfill my cat's wishes another time, but what I saw I would not soon forget.

The main road was kilometers away.

I thought about running. My cat's scolding meow shook me from the panic.

Enough to realize I *should* start running.

The blackness itself could've been tripping me up as my cat sounded more and more

desperate the closer I got to what I thought was salvation. I wanted to go back and get him, persuade him to come with me, I wanted to stop and cry and beg for forgiveness for leaving him alone in the darkness he didn't know.

But he did know it. And I knew that if his heart wrenching cries made me turn around, I would not see those streetlights again.

For the life of me, the next morning I could not shake the feeling my cat was watching me.

There was nothing weird about him. I woke up with him curled up at my feet, loving as ever, blinking at me slowly as he always does. And yet I had to move my feet away. I could not bear to touch him.

It was sad to watch, really. The first time I did it, he seemed confused, but reasoned with it and moved closer still. I tried to keep my feet there, but the anxiety was welling up. I got out of bed and left him there, feeling like complete trash. He didn't follow me downstairs like usual. Somehow that made me even more paranoid.

When I gave him his food after he finally came down to the kitchen, he sniffed it and walked away. Didn't even attempt to rub against my leg and ask for treats instead of kibble. It could've been normal cat behavior. He could be feeling betrayed by earlier. But whatever reason I came up with in my head, none seemed more reasonable than the fact he noticed I knew something about him.

I tried to leave it. Tried to pretend everything was fine, separate that dream from reality. But I couldn't make myself scratch him behind the ears. When he was in the kitchen, asking for food, I only had the will to get up and give it to him because his cries sounded just human enough that I wanted to beg him to stop.

In the next few weeks, things started touching me.

I didn't even notice at first. It would be a breeze against my hand or bumping into a door frame only to realize it was a meter away. But something was touching me, and my cat seemed to always stare at me with disapproval whenever it happened. I know cats are supposed to have front facing eyes, but has there ever been one with round pupils? Visible sclera?

After that, it was the dreams. For a moment, the touching became real. One night, dreading the chance that my cat would join me and curl up beneath my feet, I thought I felt him making biscuits at the foot of my bed.

In that moment, slowly, a hand wrapped around my foot. I could've sworn there was no more than four fingers.

Nothing jerked me awake faster. I practically jumped out of my bed, only to see that my cat had really been there and was looking at me with disdain and wishful thinking. What I, for a second, thought was a hand resting behind him, really just was his oddly striped tail.

In that moment, I wanted to apologize. He had never been less than comfort for me, nothing short of a lifesaver, and here I was, treating him like it was all his fault.

I knew I needed him, so despite my paranoia, I turned all the lights on and approached slowly to cup his face in my hands.

It worked for a while. I didn't dare to hug him, but just feeling his soft fur was enough to calm me.

The more I looked at him, the more it looked like he was smiling. Soon it stopped being endearing.

Cats don't show their teeth while smiling. And they sure don't have that many.

It continued.

With every new night, it was worse. I would dream of my nails falling out, or there would be music playing from inside my head all night. In those times I never knew if it was a dream I had to wait out, or insomnia playing tricks on me. Some nights would be normal, but in the morning I would find notes placed around my house with my handwriting. I hoped I was just forgetful. The notes mentioned things I didn't know.

Yesterday morning, I heard it calling my name.

Not my cat, no. my cat stopped following me around. Now he was standing in the corner of the living room, all day, every day. I wanted to care, to fix it, but everything else was just taking up space in my brain, making my head feel like a plastic bag about to burst.

No, it wasn't the cat. The voice came from upstairs. I didn't bother to check, but if I didn't know any better, I would've said it was the bathroom. It sounded like it was... practicing.

And it was getting better.

The first time it called my name, I didn't even recognize it. It was so mispronounced, so garbled, for a moment I managed to think the most normal thing and assume it was the neighbor's drill. The second time, it was the correct pronunciation, but the voice was cracked, skipping.

The more it did it, the closer it got to my own voice. I didn't know how long I could hear it, but I know that when it was over, I found myself on the kitchen floor trying to squeeze out what was left of my head. Level with the cat, I couldn't help but feel like the silence was worse. Whatever it was trying to do, it looks like it worked.

I kept waking up. Sometimes, when something like this would happen, I would wake up again, realizing I never woke up to experience it in the first place. At the same time, it felt like all of it quieted down as soon as I decided to get some sleep. Whenever I would give up on trying to figure out the waking world, peace would come for me, and falling asleep came to be easier than waking up.

Upon finding my face cut out of the family portrait after a particularly restless night, I knew what I had to do.

Whatever this thing was doing to me, it wanted me to sleep. It wanted me to blur the line between dream and reality, it wanted to lull me into unconsciousness so it could grow while I lost myself and kept losing.

I packed my bags. Whatever I didn't take, I reasoned I would buy, one way or another. This house was home no more.

Yet for whatever reason, I didn't leave the whole day. I kept walking around the house, looking at all the normal rooms where I'd spent my normal life. It would've been cathartic if it wasn't completely disheartening.

Evening was when I finally managed to collect myself and get my shaky hands to fit the key in that door. Inadvertently, I checked whether the street lights were on.

Sigh of relief.

I threw the key in the tall grass. If something wanted me to come back to the house, the chances of that are gone now.

The difference in brightness went unmentioned. I turned around and paid no mind to which road was the only one lit.

I managed to completely eradicate sleep, but for some reason, I found myself back at the house.

I didn't need the key. I broke the door down. Damn all doubts and tests of sanity, I am not going down that road. I slammed all the light switches on. Panic made me miss all the ones that didn't listen.

Probably the only sane decision I made in a while, I went to the garage and got the axe I forgot I had. I didn't know what I would use it for. I didn't want to connect that thought with my cat.

When I got upstairs, I found him pawing at the door that lead to the bathroom. I didn't remember locking the door when I left. Now when I shook the handle, it answered back stronger, wilder, but never opened. The axe let me in.

In the poorly lit bathroom, where the mirror showed me exactly what a man would look like had he been through what I had, in the corner of the half covered bath, facing the wall, was the long golden hair my mother had given me. Outside, a single spark, and the little angel of light over my entryway gave out.

And I did follow that cat.

Its hard to believe how easy it was to walk after him through that pitch black street. And although the nervous welled up in me, and I knew I was going nowhere safe, I never did turn around.

I knew this time I would not come back.

mentor: Dijana Ravlić Keresturi

institution: French International School of Zagreb

Sarah Jukić

“4 CHILDREN FOR SALE”

Chicago, 1948.

I remember a time when I was playing with my siblings in the backyard. Mother was doing the laundry and Dad was working. It was all perfect as long as we were together. Being the second eldest of four children, after Lana, Mother depended a lot on us: whether it was setting the table, vacuuming the floors or washing the dishes. She didn't usually assign Milton and Sue Ellen tasks as she considered them puny and clumsy.

I knew that my parents were constantly in debt. Bills kept piling up every day. Mother was always stressed going back and forth and left to right. Dad was working, or rather, he was absent all day long and the earliest he would make it home was after nine o'clock. What exactly was he doing during the day remained a mystery for my siblings and me.

My Mother, however, was not like others. She was quite strict and careless at the same time. Affection, warmth, love...was a waste of time in my Mother's eyes. As she was always too busy trying to make ends meet, such emotions were a luxury. For example, after breakfast, she would always hurry us out of the house without a warm word to encourage us for the day.

When I was around 5, I received the most horrific news in my life. However, at that time, the situation was so new and confusing to me just as it was for my siblings, too, that we did not bother about it much. The time had come. It was time for us to leave for we were too much of a burden for our parents. Mother needed of us no more. On

the 4th of August 1948, she made a big sign in front of our yard with the words: “4 Children for Sale. Inquire within.”

Two years had passed and Mother still had not managed to sell one of us. Until, on the 27th of August 1950, Milton and I were sold to the Zoeteman family. Our names were soon changed to Beverly and Kenneth.

The Zoetemans were horrible people. I remember how they would chain us up in a barn and would force us to work long hours in the field. Those were the longest and most dreadful hours one can imagine. Mr. Zoeteman talked to us in profane language and I recall a time where he even called Milton a slave; it was a label he accepted at the time because he did not know what it meant. The Zoetemans never legally adopted us unlike David (my brother) who was legally adopted by Harry and Luella McDaniel who only lived a few miles away. David would ride on his bike just to see us and unchain us before going back home.

Years passed laggardly but Milton grew old enough to react to the beatings, starvation, and other abuses with violent rages. Because of this he was persecuted and a judge deemed him a menace to society; he spent a number of years in a mental hospital after being forced to choose between that and a reformatory.

At the age of 17, I left home shortly after undergoing a brutally traumatic situation. I was kidnapped and abused resulting in a pregnancy. Thus, I was sent to a home for pregnant girls and gave birth to the most beautiful boy. I named him Leonardo. He had big, blue ocean eyes and the most wholesome smile.

After giving birth, I was sent back home and was told that I could not keep him. I begged and cried for days but my parents kept refusing. I was left with no choice and no one by my side. I sent him for adoption and from this day I still regret it. How could I have done the same mistake my mother did? I shall never forgive myself.

Only years later was I able to reconnect with my siblings thanks to the internet. Lana had died in 1998 of cancer, but Sue Ellen was still alive. She was raised not far from our original home, growing up in Chicago’s East Side neighborhood. “She needs to be in hell burning”, was how she described our biological mother.

Our mother had remarried after selling us and had four more daughters. When we eventually came to see her, she completely lacked love for any of us, or having any regret for letting us go.

I will never forgive my mother for what she did to us. May God judge her by her actions as there is nothing left that I can do. And I find it fascinating how one act can change someone's life.

mentor: Anita Ivanković

institution: Medicinska škola Osijek

Claudia Pamer

HER

She is so beautiful. The kind of girl you hear about in songs. I love her, I really do, but she doesn't know it. There is nothing wrong with that, right? A lot of guys are in love with women they could never have, and those women will never love them back. Some of them aren't even aware of the love that guys like me could give them. But I watch her every day. The way she moves, talks with her friends, flirts with other guys. She is different than most of them, has her way with people, makes it all look easy. Maybe that's why she won me over. Not that I ever talked to her, but I bet it would be nice. You may ask yourself why I would do that to myself. I just can't help it. I love watching over her even if she isn't mine. It's all good because she could never be anyone else's. She is too independent for that. There is one side of her that no one else knows. Just like every cold-hearted person, there is always a story behind their coldness, a father who didn't love her, a mother who never had time, or maybe some primary school friends who called her mean for having an opinion. Maybe it was that boy she met at the time she was at her lowest, the one that felt like home but was the one that crashed it all down when he left her. And the part that hurt her the most was that he had no reason to do that except for the fact he never cared. That could never be me. I would never do that to her. I will be the one to open her heart and make her feel again. As I was saying, she is not always like that, you should see her playing with cats, she adores them, or when she is singing her favourite songs, the way her eyes glow singing those songs from her heart. She likes to feel the music, she feels like music. She just wants to be loved, you can see that. You just have to look at her long enough. And I did it every day. I learned her virtues. Even if there aren't many, it was enough to ignore her flaws. Our story is really funny you know. Who knew you could find out all those things just by sitting in a corner of her closet? Funny, right?

mentor: Elvira Dolenc

institution: Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec

Tena Horvat

AGNES AND THE BUTTERFLY

Once upon a time by the lake lived a young girl named Agnes Anderson with her father Oscar Anderson. They lived in a small hut all by themselves. Agnes' father worked as a blacksmith in a nearby village that was a mile from their hut, so he woke up early and returned home late at night.

At the time, Agnes spent all her time on a small wooden pier by the lake. She had always hated the silence that would come when her father went to work in Kingsville. So every night she would tell her father how terribly quiet it was and how she no longer knew what to do.

Oscar took pity on his daughter, but he himself had no idea how to help her. So, on her fourteenth birthday, he decided to get her an instrument. But due to lack of money, he had to improvise. It was his only daughter after all! And so, as every other day, he headed through the woods to get to the Kingsville smithy earlier. But as he didn't pay attention to where he was walking, he stumbled upon something—

“Oof--” Oscar groaned, rising from the ground. He squinted at the floor, hoping to find the object he'd tripped on. After a few seconds, something silver and white caught his eye. Instead of continuing to walk, he approached that mysterious item. When he arrived, he saw something resembling a decorated stick.

“It must be some children's toys or something.” growled the brown-haired man as he rolled his eyes. Despite being late for work, Oscar picked up the twig and looked at it. “Well, would you look at that! It's a flute!” he exclaimed in surprise and ran his fingers over the unique design on the flute. It was made of pure willow, it looked like it had been carved for a long time considering the look and details. The carvings on it were silver in color and looked like lines wrapped around a flute.

‘I hope the person who lost this won't mind if I give this to Agnes...’ Oscar thought and quickly put the beautiful flute in his leather bag. He laughed and continued walking

through the woods with a slight whistle. After a hard day at work he finally returned home. As usual, he was greeted by his dear daughter Agnes.

“Dad! Dad! You’re finally home!” she exclaimed and ran towards him as far as her little legs could carry her.

“Agnes, dear! I missed you!” Oscar exclaimed and knelt on the ground and spread his arms so he could hug his daughter. Agnes rushed to her father and threw herself into his arms.

“It was very boring without you...”. Oscar laughed and dropped it from his hands but held it in place.

“I know, I know. But I have something for you...” he whispered in her ear and took the flute out of the bag.

“What is it?” she asked her father, who was holding a small flute.

“It’s a flute, an instrument played by city musicians every day in the village. I was hoping it would brighten your hours when I’m not here.” Oscar said with a smile.

“Thank you so much dad!” Agnes thanked him and hugged him again. They hugged for a few more moments, until Oscar broke away from the embrace and gave her a gentle kiss on the head.

“By the way, happy fourteenth birthday Agnes...” Oscar muttered and both went to the cottage to rest.

<< two years later >>

Agnes had now become a young girl. She still did not go any further than the lake and the hut in which she lived. But it didn’t seem to bother her much. One day, her father took her to Kingsville to tour the town where he worked. On the way to the smithy, they were stopped by a couple of city musicians. One spotted the flute Agnes was holding and offered to teach her to play. Oscar, knowing the musician, allowed him to teach Agnes a few notes, but warned him to bring her to the smithy after they were done.

And so Agnes spent the whole day with the city musicians trying to learn the charms of her flute. After a few hours, she even managed to play a piece of a song that musicians would play on the street. She thanked the musicians and ran in the direction of her father’s smithy, which was down the street.

Oscar, proud of his daughter, decided to honor her with whatever she wanted from the market. As they were walking, Agnes overheard two saleswomen talking in whispers. They were talking about the missing prince and the royal family?

Agnes sneaked up to the stand and pretended to look at fruits and vegetables. Now that she heard them better, she learned the whole story. They talked about the missing Prince Greysen who had disappeared two years before and left the whole kingdom to mourn his disappearance.

As the two saleswomen approached the end of the story, her father appeared beside her and the saleswomen immediately turned to him and offered everything they had at the booth. Agnes quickly scanned the shelves stacked up with fruits and vegetables and picked up a shiny red apple.

Oscar smiled and paid the two saleswoman some silver coins. Agnes pulled at his sleeve and they began to walk towards their home. When they arrived, Agnes remained sitting on the wooden pier while her father went to sleep. She took the flute in her hands and began to play a tune taught to her by the city musicians.

She played a little longer, until the silver notches began to glow. In shock, she removed the flute from her lips and managed to see the glow from the lines slowly fade. The blonde girl scratched her head out of sheer madness and wonder.

‘I should probably go to bed before I start seeing even weirder things around me...’ she thought to herself. But as she rose from the ground, a blue-and-white butterfly gently landed on her nose. Agnes froze and tried to capture every detail of this truly unusual butterfly.

It shone like a little night star, and its wings were glassy transparent. It looked too beautiful to be real. The butterfly suddenly soared into the air and began to fly across the lake into the deep forest.

Agnes ran after it but soon stopped when she realized she had reached the end of the pier. The only choice she had was if she started swimming across the lake. She had to hurry or the butterfly would fly away! She took a deep breath and jumped into the crystal lake as she held the flute firmly in her right hand.

She swam out and started swimming across the lake, hoping to catch the butterfly. She finally made it to the other side of the lake and started running after the glowing butterfly. After a while she ended up deep in the woods. And before her eyes, the butterfly flew into the air and shattered into pieces of glittering dust.

Agnes couldn’t believe her eyes at what she saw but, her attention quickly turned to the more strange sight. There were all-white roses, the most stunning ones she had ever seen. As she approached the roses she saw someone lying in the middle of the lush roses.

The girl approached the roses cautiously and caught a better view of the person lying in the center. Well that was a boy! He looked her age. He had long brown hair, but she

couldn't see the color of his eyes because they were closed. He wore very expensive clothes, but nothing that a slightly more respectable citizen could not afford.

As bizarre as all this was, she decided to help the poor boy. She immediately grabbed the stem of one rose, but when she prepared for the pain, There was none. The blue-eyed girl looked under the larger flower and saw that the rose had no thorns? Was there anything else strange that could happen?!

She shook her head and began to untangle the lush roses from each other. When she had made enough space, she entered the center of the bush of roses and now she could see the boy more clearly. The moon shone on his face with its fragile light, so she saw the occasional freckle on his face. A few moments passed and Agnes decided to shake the boy. It was not clear to her how no one had noticed this so far! I mean? ... a boy overgrown with white roses is not something you would see every day?

But neither jerk nor shift from the young man. He reminded her of that fairy tale her father loved to tell her when she was a little girl; Sleeping Beauty. Only in this case, she was that brave prince who saved an unknown young man from white roses and unfamiliar magic. Agnes thought for a few seconds and decided to take the young man home and try to ask for her father's help.

She took him by the shoulders and began to drag him across the ground. After some time she finally came to the hut and laid the brown-haired young man on her bed, which was in the upper part of the hut. She covered him with a blanket and decided to go to the other bed that was on the other side of the room. In the morning, Agnes was awakened by her father shaking her shoulders in a great panic because he saw an unknown young man in her room! And not only that but he was lying on her bed! Oscar was blabbering all sorts of nuisance.

"O-Oh, dear... What did you do Agnes!?" he asked his daughter with horrified expression. 22

Oscar was stunned to hear everything Agnes had done. He held his head in his hands and sighed deeply. They decided to inquire about the lost young man in Kingsville. And so the days passed, and the sleeping young man did not wake up from his deep sleep. Agnes and her father began to worry more and more about the brown-haired young man and his life.

One evening, Agnes sat down on her bed, which was now free, and looked at the young man lying on the other bed at the other end of her cramped room. She no longer knew what to do and took the flute and started playing the same tune she had played the day she found the sleeping teenager.

Today was the day when storms and thunderstorms took over the otherwise sunny and blue skies. When she pressed the flute to her lips a loud thunder struck very close to her hut. She dropped the flute from her hands and began walking backwards towards the door of the room, to keep an eye on the brown-haired young man in case anything happened. Until she suddenly ran into something other than her door. She turned quickly and saw something resembling a forest fairy.

She wore a long white dress that looked like it was made of fairy dust. Her hair was red with a wreath of flowers on top of her head. She had piercing, silver eyes that reminded her of the moon. The fairy did not laugh or make any kind of expression. Agnes asked who she was and the fairy just laughed and replied that she was the guardian of the forest and how she was here to pick up the flute. The fairy stretched out her slender arm and motioned Agnes to hand her the flute that rolled to the bed where the mysterious young man was laying.

The blonde girl picked up the flute, but before handing it over, she asked the fairy if she would help and wake up the boy. The fairy frowned and snatched the flute from her hand

“This is his punishment because he picked the Moon roses from the ground and just left. The only thing left for me was to get even.”

Agnes stared at her in disbelief

“But what does the flute matter?” The fairy rolled her eyes,

“Oh, how I could forget! Not only did he take the roses, but he carved this out of the tree of Life!” the red-haired fairy squinted at Agnes, who still couldn’t believe what she heard.

“Is there a way to wake him up?” Agnes asked the fairy, who looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, why would anyone wake him from a lifelong dream that he deserved?” The fairy said, confused.

“Maybe he didn’t know what he was doing? I think you could have thought of a slightly lighter punishment.” Agnes murmured and the fairy giggled.

“Perhaps what he did doesn’t seem like much to you. But once you hurt nature, let alone the life in it, then there is no lighter punishment.” Agnes glanced at the boy out of the corner of her eye and looked down immediately.

“What if you wake him up and tell him what he did wrong?” the blue-eyed girl looked at the fairy in her silver eyes full of anger. But when she heard what the young girl said her eyes softened and she dropped to her level so she could look her in the eye.

“Child... why are you so stubborn to wake him up? Do you know him at all?” the fairy asked the young girl who just shook her head

“No, I don’t know him but I know he might need a second chance.” the fairy opened and closed her mouth in wonder... possibly she was wrong once. The fairy sighed and walked over to the sleeping boy.

“Ah, maybe I exaggerated a little... But whether he were a prince or not, you’re probably right.” the fairy whispered completely inaudible but Agnes heard her quite clearly. But where exactly did she hear the words *‘lost prince’*?

Well yes! The story of two shopkeepers from the market! Agnes took a closer look at the young man, *‘So how come I didn’t think of this before !?’*. The fairy placed the flute on his chest and crossed his arms over the flute.

“Please, can you just step back a little?” the fairy asked Agnes, who did as she was asked. The fairy created her wand and waved it lightly in the air and as fast as she created it, it vanished in thin air. The fairy stepped back and looked at Agnes “This will be quick...”. And at the same moment, the same butterfly that brought her to the prince flew out of the room! A small butterfly flew up to the brown-haired prince and at the same moment as he was above him, it shattered into glittering pieces of dust that fell lightly on the sleeping prince. The fairy laughed and nodded, “He should wake up now.”. And so a few seconds passed and Agnes looked at the prince impatiently. Slowly, he opened his arms slightly and squinted a little. Agnes opened her mouth but said nothing, she just watched the prince wake up from a long sleep.

“Where... Where am I?” the prince murmured softly as he slowly sat up on the bed. The prince looked around and noticed that he was no longer in the woods but in a small room... with a fairy and a girl !?

“Excuse me? Who are you and what have you done to me !?” he exclaimed, baffled with the whole situation.

“After two long years of your slumber, someone has finally decided to save you. I believe you remember well why you were asleep in the first place.” The fairy spoke in a stern voice and the prince just looked at the floor and nodded.

“I’m terribly sorry... I didn’t know what damage I did and I promise it will never happen again...” the prince promised and the fairy just nodded.

“I hope you learned your lesson, prince... Well, goodbye, you two. My work here is over...” and with that the fairy vanished into the light, leaving the prince and Agnes completely alone in her room.

"I'm Agnes Anderson, and you?" the blonde girl asked with a small smile and sat down on the bed where the prince was lying. She looked into his eyes, and those were beautiful dark green eyes that looked like an evergreen forest.

"I am Prince Greysen, nice to meet you, Agnes." Agnes laughed, and held out her hand which he took in his and shook hands gently.

"Greysen... Why did you go picking roses in the woods?" Agnes asked but soon regretted saying it out loud. Greysen's green eyes widened and his cheeks flushed.

"Well... Two years ago... before I fell under this curse, I was out for a walk in the woods. And since I didn't have much to do I decided to carve something. But as you can see, it didn't turn out the way I had planned..." Greysen said in shame and Agnes just patted him on the shoulder and laughed. Greysen looked into her eyes with his cheeks even redder

"I can't believe you're the same girl I wanted to give those roses to..." Greysen says with shame. Agnes wondered,

"Oh, how did you even know about me?"

"I saw you across the lake that same day. And I don't know why, but I just had to meet you." Agnes laughed and covered her face with her hands

"Greysen, you could've easily approached me. Perhaps you would have escaped those two years of sleep." They both laughed at her joke. When they stopped there was silence again. Greysen looked at Agnes and Agnes looked at him.

"So, are we going to start over?" Greysen said softly as he gently took her hand into his. Agnes approached him and leaned on his shoulder

"Of course Greysen"

"You know, I thought I'd keep this flute, but I believe you'd prefer it." said the green-eyed prince to Agnes, who was holding a flute.

"You can take that as a thank you for saving me..." he whispered in her ear and hugged her to him.

"Thank you, Greysen, too," the blonde girl said as she looked out the window. At that moment, that beautiful glittering butterfly flew by. Agnes closed her eyes and leaned against Greysen.

And so, they lived happily ever after ...

mentor: Renata Gal

institution: Medicinska škola Osijek

Emma Živković

IS IT FORTUNE OR WOE

Let us indulge into a story. Is it a tragedy, is it a blessing... is it a fortune or is it a woe? Was their meeting enough to mend the girl's ill-luck?

The girl comes from a middle-class family. Lingered in a singular space, she couldn't move back or forth. The only thing brightening the girl's life was her own mind, grounded in fantasy and fiction. By cementing herself she would feel something other than grief. She displayed a fierce personality to cover her shortcomings and shield herself. Her physique backed up the personality she manifested in front of people. She wasn't frail nor weak on the outside. As normal as it is to be unsatisfied with your body, she felt as though no one could understand. At only sixteen stretch marks covered her legs and stomach, hairy arms and masculine back. But despite a bit of extra weight and an athlete's frame due to being active in sports since childhood, you could clearly see the feminine proportions residing. Her eyes reflect light as vividly as the atmosphere, once blue turned silver in winter, green in summer. Her hair is glistening light brown, waves enveloping a rounded structure of her face, always wearing it down to cover the shape of it and her slightly larger ears.

Adored as a baby, coddled as a toddler, praised as a child...even called a genius since birth which probably caused an early burnout. "The chapters are running astray..." she would often say. Chapters are a funny thing you see. A chapter in life, a chapter in a book... there's meaning in her words. By referring to her life as a book, she felt satisfaction, a reassurance that it would all come to pass. There could be countless chapters in a book, though. Every time a chapter changes, the plot drastically shifts tide - you could be elated in one and somber in the next. One chapter's sweet spot is 3500 words, but a beggar cannot choose how many chapters their life will have. Despite the 3500 sweet rule, a story of mere 500 words could be sweeter than a 24-chapter novel. There's no telling where the chapters will lead or how many there would

be unless a book is finished, but a continuing story is a thrill in itself. It stimulates the mind of an analyst and over-thinker like her. An analyst must often analyse their own feelings to figure out what they are, because emotions are a luxury. Thoughts can grow into feelings in a heartbeat, clap your hands and love turns into sudden hatred. One may wonder how that is possible; it is for them, it is for us, and especially for that tender girl. Discovery is one of the reasons for a sudden change like that, it mostly leads to success but in her case, it was a downfall.

As a child she dreamed of growing up. As she grew up, she wished to stay a child. Why, you wonder? Have I caught your attention about how she came to be this way? Then, shall we begin...

“Newly made acquaintances are strangely disturbing, you know nothing of what is in their mind. One could kill you while the other may be in love with you. Don’t you think so, mom?” she gasped for air with every sentence while carrying groceries, mumbled almost as a prophecy with a tint of sarcasm.

“Of course, it’s true. However, the possibility of one killing you is much slimmer than one befriending you, perhaps even falling in love. What you say is true, there is no easy way of knowing who is for or against you. That is why you should be careful.” mom answered rather seriously, having experienced some of the horrors of the world.

“I’ll remember that mother, you don’t need to worry about me. If someone were to kidnap or hurt me, they would return me at once. Nobody can cope with me like you do and nobody can love me more than you. What use of me is there anyway, haha.” the girl replied to her mom quite jokingly to relieve some of her stress. “Anyway, do you want to stop by Ricky’s for a drink since we shopped so much, I don’t know about you but I’m famished. I can only hope our little beaver is happy with what we prepare tomorrow, it was exhausting, shopping so much at once.”

“Sure honey, we can grab a bite of their worldwide famous pizza, haha! I’m getting shivers just thinking about how cheap it is, no one buys it because they think it doesn’t taste good but it keeps the stomach full. And I also wish for the same thing, since she’s our only little devil we need to do our best.” While they affectionately referred to the girl’s little sister, they decided to go to the cheap local restaurant.

“Well, it is quite exhilarating, if I may say so myself.” the girl kept joking, “How can anyone replicate such a masterpiece like Ricky’s pizza, it’s a once in a lifetime product.” A cheeky smirk inhabited her stern face. The girl and her mother sarcastically used old expressions and cheesy lines as communication to spark a flame in their everyday life. “It keeps the fun going.” as they say.

Sometime in the afternoon on the same day, the girl found herself in a bit of a pinch. A new chapter of a manhwa she was following came out, but she had a PE assignment due in an hour. Since PE is one of her least favourite subjects, she hadn't been paying attention to it. Due to the good grades because of her polite behaviour unlike her classmates, there wasn't a reason to worry anyway. With a heavy heart she decided to leave the new chapter for another time and put on her shoes. The assignment was to find a couple of local plants while going on a walk around the neighbourhood and make a little memoir, then bring it to school the next day. However, because of her slacking she didn't turn it in on time so the professor extended her due date. The assignment was nothing drastic but enough to make a slacker sigh. The truth is, even with all the sports she did growing up, the best she can do now is run for 30 seconds. Willpower is not something she wished to use often since it is draining. She poked the floor with her right foot to check for stability of the shoe and grabbed the backpack off of the chair near the bathroom which is right next to her room down the hallway. As she got out, she noticed the rug she made herself outside of the apartment missing. Her mind automatically thought of a stalker. Or at least wished for it since a horror addict and a brain maniac like her always seeks good stories despite the consequences. This was an opportunity for a good story. In spite of her instincts, logic was saying that the only way a stalker would steal a rug from her household was because he must have accidentally missed the target. First of all, there was no way a shut-in like her would have a stalker. She doesn't go out except for school and sometimes a drink with a couple of only friends she had after class. Secondly, regardless of the animal shelters around the town she lived in, there were still quite a bit of strays out and about. There were numerous reasons for this unusual occurrence, it's nothing her unlucky character hasn't experienced. Just a few days ago she lost the container of her stick deodorant, a pencil that she often chewed on from anxiety and a tiny sketchbook she sketched on during boring classes. Another example of her twisted luck is a talent in getting hit by a volleyball quite often during PE and fumbling over her own feet.

"Mom! Did you move the rug somewhere, maybe for washing or something?" the girl asked after pondering for a bit.

"Huh? It's not washing day yet, why do you ask?" mom replied in wonder.

"Yeah I thought so, but just so you know it's missing and not even a dog would go near that stinky thing. There is no way for the animals to even enter the building, if I go missing just remember that it was a dirty rug thief that kidnapped me! Bye, love you!" exclaimed the girl in a hurry.

“Don’t joke about that or I’ll be the one to kidnap you, young lady! Be careful, hon!” The odd thing about all this was that the apartment complex she lived in had a security code and the only way to enter it is through the locked entryway and through the key protected basement. Furthermore, since her family was struggling financially, they lived in a complex mostly populated by the elderly.

Walking around the now well-known area collecting plants reminded her of the days she spent hanging out with the other children at the first house she lived in, until the day she moved away together with the sound of shattering dreams. The happy memories were short-lived. As she came back to reality, by the side of the road she noticed pieces of rug that was missing. She knew it was their rug because she made it after all. There were some broken tree branches and plants near it, which indicated that something or someone heavy had stepped on it. To make matters worse, it was the plants she was planning to collect! And at the same time the route she would often take. It also seemed like she caught a glimpse of a person right around the street corner. She has watched too many horror films and series to shake this off like an accident, even though nothing made sense, who even steals rugs in a locked complex?

“Sixteen years I have spent watching this stuff with mom is a warning not to ignore even the smallest red flags. I have enough of the plants anyway: some weeds, chamomile and poppies. Let’s not be too greedy. *Sayonara* outside, let’s not see each other until it’s necessary.” she mumbled as she went back. Be it an animal or a human, it wasn’t wise to bump into someone who had stolen it.

“Oh mother~ Guess who came back unharmed~ Are you sad to see me alive?” she provoked her mom purposely to forget about what had happened, even if for just a moment.

“You came back earlier than expected ‘M’lady’. Your dinner is served in the oven, shall I fetch it for you? We can’t have your precious hands getting dirty.” mom caught on the weird mood her daughter was in and mockingly retorted.

“Oh my, well of course. I am going to receive your grace in my humble chambers.” eloquently spoke the girl through a breath of relief. In the next forty-five minutes, she made the memoir and through an e-mail sent it on time.

The next morning was Saturday, the 11th birthday party of her little sister, who was staying with their cousin for the past two days, so the surprise can be executed flawlessly. Excitement was visible on everyone’s face from miles away. In spite of such a celebratory day, the girl couldn’t help herself but feel nostalgia. On such a joyous day every person deserves to be happy, it is the day to celebrate a life after all, especially if it’s the life of someone you hold dear. Nonetheless, this feeling was uncontrollable.

The girl's birthday is in the middle of summer so at times it felt lonely not being able to celebrate it with friends, even her parents weren't able to attend it every year since summer was the time they spent working on the coast where tourism blooms and money is better. Just like emotions, pleasant memories were also a luxury to her. Her childhood was painted in different colours, either good or bad. Financial struggles deemed her life as that of a traveller, unable to settle because of fear of leaving. Her parents were always on the move. Perhaps that is why she didn't have many friends. A total of seven accommodations were in her memory, all temporary. Therefore seven different chapters, as she said. Some of them were good, some poorer than usual, some colourful and some darker than night. Her life could even be considered as that of different people combined. Being coddled than thrown away by ambience, idolized than torn apart again. It wasn't easy being her.

Shall we dig deeper into her past?

At the age of ten she moved to a neighbouring country with a different language. The reason was of course money and hope for a better future. There she experienced bullying and abuse along with discrimination. Persuaded and convinced by supposed role models and school that she was no genius, a dumb child. The genius stopped breathing at once. It caused the child great depression. But what could a child her age know? The language she encountered was not anything she was familiar with. Even Mathematics she excelled at wasn't comprehensible, she couldn't understand anything. She was forced to grow up. A little girl of ten years old was forced to grow up. It broke her. It wasn't easy... being her. The cycle went on and on. Then after years of torture she moved back home, it took time but she got better, although it always stuck with her in the back of her mind. Her grades weren't as good and she gave up on most things she found interesting, including sport. The sole reason she didn't go mad was because she had fiction, a world to sculpt all to herself. She indulged herself in novels, manga, anime...anything fictional to drown her sorrow. And it helped, very much.

Those days are all a part of her past. Currently, she's residing in her hometown with her mom and sister. As one would know, not many couples stay married these days, including her parents. She called her dad by his name. A recovering alcoholic with a sad past. Although separated, there was no lack of love, her mother loved both her and her sister more than life itself.

"Hey honey, could you go across the street to buy some bread?" asked mom, holding a pot containing soup.

"Got it. Is that all?" countered the girl while putting on shoes.

"Yes, the guests and your sister's friends will soon be here, so hurry up. Also your

aunt is late, so if you see them show them in.”

As the girl got out, yet again she spotted an abnormality outside their apartment door. It was not another act of thievery, nor a dog sniffing around. It was an unusual combination of gardenia flowers and a mix of pink and red carnations. The flowers were of course splendid, but they must have a meaning, it was not common to receive a bouquet containing such flowers. She was taken aback. The thought that they were for her didn't even cross her mind.

“Surely they are for my mom. Oh..there's a note.” she let out a shaky voice as she read the note, “Gardenias bear a definition, they mean ‘Secret Love, You're Lovely’, pink carnations bear the meaning of ‘I'll Never Forget You’ and finally red carnations ‘Admiration, My Heart Aches For You’”... Her face showed no expression. Then her eyes went blank. She started to breathe forcefully. What could that note mean? She stared at the note for quite some time. Her heartbeat started to fasten, palms broke out in a cold sweat and finally she started to shake as though an earthquake hit only her. A drop fell on the note. Two, then three drops. They weren't tears. It was sweat. It wasn't so exciting experiencing this again as she thought it would be. Her body was in state of shock and as she tried to get out of it using her mind she heard the doorbell outside of the building. Inside of the apartment she heard her mom pick up the phone connected to the outside. Then the entrance to the complex opened. She froze. Through the door entered her sister, aunt, uncle and cousin. Immediately they noticed the girl standing and said their greetings. Almost as if heaven itself opened up to her, the girl snapped out of trance and greeted them back as she snuggled her sister wishing her a happy birthday.

“I have to go to the store across the street, but go on in. Mom is waiting for you.” the girl sprinted out and settled on the stairs in front of the apartment complex. “...” she sat there stoically.

Before she moved, between the ages of seven and nine, the girl had many friends. She won many sport and art competitions. She thrived in academics. She was the embodiment of a perfect child. She enjoyed the attention and liked being around people, especially helping them. She never failed those who needed her. Apart from excelling at everyday activities so early in life, her parents were struggling financially. She had everything she needed but a child of her caliber needed more. More books, more parental love and time, more attention and care. Lack of those things proved to be essential later in time. One day, a new student arrived. His parents had died in a car crash not too long ago, so the legal guardians were his aunt and uncle. He had clean clothes and new shoes.

“Hello class, this is our new student. He is very shy so be nice to him, okay? Do you

want to say something darling?” the teacher announced.

The boy shook his head and sat on an empty chair behind the girl. Everyone was excited by this, but the boy was too scared to speak. Instead he gave out candy to everyone that tried to talk to him. The girl was the only one who paid no attention, however the boy still gave her a candy. The girl was jealous of his wealth and for that reason alone she thanked him nonchalantly. A couple of weeks later the boy finally talked and the first words he uttered were “Do you not like me?”. It was the girl he was speaking to.

“Why would I not like you? You’re good at school and friendly with everyone! But I am a bit jealous of your expensive clothes and bag. I really like the candy you give me, I smile every time I get them so I’m really grateful!” young heroine happily responded to the talking boy.

“Then...you can have my clothes and my bag. I will bring you tomorrow even more sweets!” As the boy exclaimed gently, he held the girls hand.

The girl chuckled and said “Silly, I don’t need your clothes. I’m a girl anyway. But I’ll take those sweets you mentioned.”

“Then I will become a girl!” the young boy shouted.

“You’re really smart during class but sometimes you say the silliest things!” The conversation faded and reminiscing abruptly stopped.

“How is this happening...?” The girl murmured some words as she got up from the stairs.

After the birthday party, the girl went to bed. That night she couldn’t sleep, no matter how much she tossed and turned. Only near the morning did she finally close her eyes. Instead of concerts and parties like any other teenager, a set of memories came rushing into her dreams. Glimpses and flashbacks of that time a boy turned on her. The girl was young when it happened, so it felt that much more bloodcurdling. The boy didn’t get to touch her beyond compensation. The reason? The young girl managed to speak up before it became a physical assault, along with that transfer student she managed to get away.

When the girl was younger, she had many friends. A dozen of them. Some of the friends she had were two years older than her at most, and some were a little younger. There were some classmates who had older siblings, so they visited her class often, and of course they would bring their classmates with them. A clever girl like her was known throughout the school. It wasn’t a big school but enough to contain at least seventeen students per class, there were three classes for each year. They came to befriend such a talented little girl. Who wouldn’t like her charismatic and kind-hearted nature? She accepted all the friendship that came her way. Even the ones she

had negative feelings about at first became her friends in the end. There was a boy who didn't come close to her but watched her from afar. You could say he admired or loved her, but in the end it falls nothing short of an obsession. This boy was an upperclassman, one of the few who were two years older. He came everyday searching for the girl for a year but he never uttered a word to her. There were instances when she noticed him but there was no harm in what he was doing. He wasn't directly hurting her, nonetheless he stole the girl's belongings such as chewed pencils and poked rubber. Sometimes he left a flower before class at the girl's desk. Compared to things happening later on, those acts were quite cute. Children's play. Once he realised there was no way of approaching her, he began to sneak in during her PE class and stole shirts, then water bottles. It affected the girl greatly as her parents didn't have enough money to replace those belongings so often. It couldn't be considered an accident anymore. At once, the time of the transfer student's arrival came. After that these acts of theft stopped.

One time the girl clearly saw him arguing with another boy much taller than him. It was a face similar to the upperclassman who was following her. She contemplated on stepping in but decided not to for the reason being "It looked too heated to be a simple fight." She never saw the transferred boy being so angry before, he was always shy and friendly to everyone. From that point on everything stopped. Then half a year later, while the girl was on a walk home from school, she detected a presence behind her. If she walked faster, so would he. The presence disappeared for a moment. She sighed in relief. Relief was brief. Imagine a small nine-year-old girl's fright when a boy bigger than her appeared out of thin air. The possibility of running away wasn't obtainable.

"Wh-who are you?" her voice trembled at the sight.

"You know me..I've always been with you, how could you not know me?" a calm voice turned into distress.

"But you never talked to me... Why are you here?" she spoke gently as the sun went down.

"I did! I always sent you flowers! I gave you space! If only wasn't for that boy I could still love you!" he didn't sound like a little boy anymore. It was a sound the girl hadn't heard before. His words sounded menacing.

"What? What boy?" She managed to muffle out before remembering the time a fight between the boy and this upperclassman occurred. "Wait! Why are you here now, what do you want?!"

"You can't even figure that out, you are smart and lovely. I want you to stop talking to that boy and be only with me..." he cried out.

"I...can't do that. I don't like you like that. Please, look for another girl, I'm not a toy you can own." The little girl's bravery had no equal.

"No!" As the boy reached out to grab her hand in spur of a moment, the sound of running shoes resonated through the street. A thump was heard. It was the upper-classman falling as the young boy threw himself at him. The transfer student took the girl's hand and they ran towards the school leaving their backpacks behind. They informed the teachers of everything that had taken place for the past year before the boy transferred and after. Shocked faces of the teachers caused the girl to even let out a chuckle. As traumatic as these events should've been, she didn't feel scared because the boy had saved her. Almost as if fate smiled upon only her. She was very strong. From that day on there was no sign of that particular upperclassman anywhere. She didn't know what happened to him but she wasn't so nice as to care about someone that tried to hurt her. When her parents found out about what events transpired and what the reason for the disappearance of her belongings was, they always assigned someone to accompany her anywhere she went. Usually, the transferred boy was the one to escort her. A few months later, she moved and cried seas for that boy that saved her. He was her first love.

The next morning of the girl's current timeline, she frowned upon last night's dream. It was lucky that the transfer student saved her, but if the upperclassman returned there was no one to help her now.

"Good morning mom. How did you sleep?" the girl questioned.

"Morning. Quite well, you honey?" Mom took a sip of coffee.

"I had a dream... Do you remember that event before we moved away? With that older boy?" she spoke visibly unnerved.

"Yes... I almost went to search for his entire bloodline to curse them. You weren't that upset and told me to leave it be, so I did, but I still wish I hadn't. Who would dare to do something like that, especially to you..." her mom became anxious.

"Yes well, the rug that disappeared... I think he's back. And when I think about it, my belongings also started to disappear again. I didn't tell you, but I received a bouquet yesterday with a note, but I threw it away." the girl spoke calmly.

"If that's true, we have to report it. I'm not letting you experience something like that ever again." mom gently hugged the girl with a fierce expression.

"Let me think about it for another day, okay? I'll ask my friends to meet me and I'll confide in them. And one more thing... thank you." the girl smiled.

She got ready to go out. The meeting spot was fifteen minutes away, so she slowly made her way there not anticipating anything to happen on a short walk. She wasn't cautious like she would usually be, nor sharp like other days. Perhaps the exhaustion

was too much to handle. In front of her there was a hooded guy, dressed in black. A normal person wouldn't suspect anything, but her life wasn't normal. She should've noticed it. But she didn't. His walking became slowly paced and soon she caught up with him. Then as she was about to go past him, he grabbed her hand and said:

"You know me... I've always been with you." he glared down. The exact words he said to her last time they met. The girl tried to control her heartbeat, but it was getting louder. She tried not to show any signs of shock but it was impossible. "What. Do. You. Want?"

"You. How did you like the flowers? Did you have a nice sleep with those poppies you picked?" he smirked.

"How do you- never mind. Let me go or I will scream." she argued.

"No one will hear you, I'll put you to sleep if you do." he responded.

The girl managed to call the police with her free hand behind her back and they heard the conversation. They immediately dispatched two vehicles and soon arrived. But she had to buy some time. "Why are you doing this to me? What is so special about me?"

"You never judged anyone, it was nice watching you from afar. I liked your eyes and hair. You were smart, perfect for me. You were my dream." he whispered sweet nonsense.

"There were others like me, it didn't have to be me. Why couldn't you normally come up to me? I was a child." she tried to reason.

"Maybe, but not for me. I liked you. I admired you, I loved you. Why couldn't you choose me, huh? Please, love me. I'll give you another chance if you apologize now." there was nothing he could say that would make him any less of a stalker.

At that moment the police arrived, would you like to guess who was the first to the scene? It was the transfer student from eight years ago. His uncle worked as the chief police officer in that same town so he went there often to train under his wing. Once he turned eighteen, he was planning on becoming a police officer. Being only sixteen he wasn't allowed to enter the scene but this was an exception. He begged to go and his uncle let him. He wasn't a little boy anymore. The girl's eyes widened at the sight of him. She recognized him immediately. Again, her heartbeat thumped, but for another reason.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt? Give me your hand." was the first thing he said to her.

"I'm okay. Have we met before?" the girl's facetious words echoed over his tormented expression.

"Yes, I think we have." his mouth twinkled.

Her face lit up as she turned to the stalker and said "I'm not a child anymore."

mentor: Anita Ivanković

institution: Medicinska škola Osijek

Ivan Nemet

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Darkness. Pure, unadulterated darkness. It's so humble.

So comforting. So warm. To almost every single one of her peers, darkness is something to be feared. To be avoided.

To them, it is a horrible monster waiting to strike.

Lilly knows better than that, however. For as long as she has needed shelter, darkness was always there to keep her safe and to be her friend.

That's what inspired her to first start visiting it four years ago. These sewers may be old, wet and absolutely disgusting, but they're her trusted friend's habitat. She feels at home here far more than at the surface.

Everything is so sickeningly bright up there. This isn't to say that Lilly hates the light. She doesn't. She actually likes it. Color too. To her misfortune, that is not what is on the surface. The colors and lights up there are not real. They're vile imitations that Lilly cannot stand to experience. Deciding to escape that evil place for good was the best thing she's ever done.

Now, she can celebrate her 13th birthday properly. Without a worry in the world, she sweetly sleeps on a relatively dry bit of "sewer floor" (her words). Her long, blonde hair might get a bit dirty, but she doesn't care. Her puffy, black jacket is all she cares about right now, as it keeps her from being cold. Her brown boots, though oversized, protect her feet from the same threat. She's on her back, limbs spread out and with her hood fully over her head, using her violet backpack as a sort of makeshift pillow. It may not be much, but it's good enough. She's gotten as much as 7 full hours of sleep today. A good night's sleep is rare in this environment. Usually, Lilly's bedtime gets interrupted by a very specific sound.

„LILLY!!! LILLY!!!! STAY RIGHT THERE! LILLY!”

That sound.

With her heart transitioning into a fast paced rhythm of pounding and her entire being rising up immediately, Lilly grabs her backpack and sprints with the force of a thousand black holes to the opposite direction of that all-too-familiar shriek.

„I'M NOT GOING BACK, JACKIE!” Lilly retorts as she runs, „YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!”

„ESCAPE IS IMPOSSIBLE. IT'S NOT WORTH IT, SIS. I-”

„DON'T CALL ME THAT. I HATE YOU.”

„Lilly, please!” Jackie pleads as he pursues her, this time lowering his voice to his usual soft-spoken tone, making Lilly increase her speed even more. She trusts him even less when he starts with that.

Lilly wisely doesn't respond this time in order to make as less noise as possible. Jackie doesn't stand a chance here. This is Lilly's territory. He may be bigger than her, stronger than her and in possession of night-vision goggles to maneuver in this black void, but he doesn't have what's most important. He doesn't have Lilly's speed, nor her perfect mental map of this sewer system. She's been here so many times, she knows exactly where to go and when.

Jackie is fully aware of this, hence his desperation to get her to stop. His efforts are futile, Lilly has stopped listening to him a long time ago. Now she only runs away from him and she does so quite efficiently. He hasn't even been chasing her for a full minute and she's already far ahead of him. All it took was a couple of sharp turns.

„Oh, come on! HOW?” Jackie mutters to himself as he stops his pursuit. When Lilly creates that big of a distance between them, it's too late. She just disappears without a trace.

“Father is gonna crucify me.” Accepting yet another defeat, Jackie decides to turn back and get out of the sewers. Unbeknownst to him, Lilly is actually a lot closer than it might seem.

These sewers aren't just a perfect hiding spot because of their pitch-black nature. They also hold secrets. Secret areas and compartments made by those like Lilly. They may be long gone, but their contributions still stand. To Lilly's disappointment, they

all are either very tight and uncomfortable or decorated with a whiff that not even she can stand. They suffice in moments like these, though. Jackie doesn't know about them and they can be closed, so safety is guaranteed.

"Can't go anywhere without running into that jerk and his dumb buzzcut. How does he even know that I'm trying to escape? Someone must've snitched! Can't trust anyone these days. Right, buddy?" Lilly silently muses to her blank companion while awkwardly nesting herself in a horribly stiff hiding spot crafted out of a weak part of the brick wall stretching itself through the entirety of this gross maze. It's almost exactly her size, leaving very little room for movement. These things have been used by many brave children who dared to break free.

"Is this the 'Tunnel' one?" Lilly questions her memory as she pulls out a very tiny flashlight from the left pocket of her jacket. She recently stole it from one of the boys on the surface. It's not a regular flashlight, it's actually one used for invisible ink. The two unknown individuals who made these hiding places have also written ideas and instructions in almost all of them on how to try and escape this horrible place. It was in their great fortune that one of the toys given to the "good boys" was an invisible ink pen and a matching, tiny flashlight to go with it. Surprisingly, the ink seems to be permanent.

"The only way to reach the tunnel to freedom is by getting into Mother and Father's house. It's connected to the chimney (super obvious when you look at it from far away). The main door can only be unlocked by them, but there is actually a small, human-sized door engraved in it. That one is reserved for whoever their current errand boy is. Steal the key from him. Good luck, C+V."

Every single one of these messages is signed by this anonymous duo. Lilly has read all of them by now, she knows how to get out of here. That's why she brought her backpack. It contains some food and water for about a day and a half. Her original plan was to say a final goodbye to her friend before she leaves forever. Jackie has ruined that now. This one special day has been tainted by that meddlesome young man.

"I'm really sorry. I am." Lilly laments to the lifeless blackness out of which she had fabricated a friend. Her eyes start to water.

"I was going to tell you after waking up. I'm leaving. Forever. I hope you understand.

I don't want to upset you. I promise I'll never forget you. I'll tell mom that you took care of me. She'll be so grateful."

Naturally, she gets no response, but she imagines receiving one anyway. Her sobbing becomes slightly louder.

On the exact opposite end of Lilly's location, Jackie is slowly inching closer through the filthy water towards the exit of the sewers, a giant hole with a broken gate. The fake light grows stronger, forcing his eyes to start adjusting themselves to it. His grey jumpsuit, reminiscent of one that might belong to an engineer, reeks of the conduit he just ventured in. His brand-new brown blucher shoes are also in a state of ruin. He doesn't have time to think about that, though. The pale young man is currently too busy concocting an excuse for his failure to retrieve Lilly. Usually, he gets off easy because Lilly eventually comes back. Seeing as that isn't happening today, he needs to be creative.

His train of thought is cut short, however, by a humongous entity suddenly slinking down right in front of the gate to prevent him from getting out.

He only sees the bottom part of this figure, but it's not like their identity is a mystery. That fleshy, fat tail tells all. The monstrosity before him is a disproportionately massive earthworm. One that keeps its upper body straightened up at all times. Unless it is necessary to conduct business on the ground, like right now. The tail backtracks a fair amount to allow the "person" part to descend. Unlike regular earthworms, this particular creature has the torso and a head of a human. Clad in a plain white, long-sleeved collar shirt with an accompanying brown coat and a green, checkered tie, Father is an intimidating man. Although his top half resembles a regular human body, his skin is still worm-like. The horrible, slimy smoothness of his face swimmingly compliments his disturbingly perfect white teeth, silver eyes and light brown hair. Due to his size, Father positions his enormous face right at the gate in order to communicate.

"Son! Any luck with your sister?" He delivers this through his teeth with a sickeningly wide smile. His plain, yet powerful voice rumbles through the air.

Jackie tries his best to hide the pure fear currently inhabiting his body by giving a short and straightforward answer.

“No, Father. I don’t. She outran me again.”

Despite him fully expecting this answer, Father’s smile quickly transforms into a saddened frown.

“Oh, dear. You disappoint me, son. You’re getting worse at this. What will Mother think?”

“I got closer this time, Father! Besides, if she wants to escape, she’s going to need to get out of here eventually. I’ll catch her then!” Jackie politely responds, secretly trying to convince him to let him leave the sewers.

“Jack,” Father starts, slowly becoming frustrated, “I got you those fancy glasses with the hope that you would put them to good use. You’re old enough to be a man, not a frail little boy.”

“Father, I-”

“Don’t bother, Jack. It hurts me to say this, but you’re completely unreliable. I don’t know what to do with you.”

The panic in Jackie’s eyes visibly becomes more intense. Father mistakes this to be a sign of hurt feelings.

“Oh, come on, Son. It’ll be alright. Maybe it’s better you focus on your other chores for the day. The boys’ game is about to start soon. Maybe focus on that for now? I’ll catch Lilly for you.”

Jackie, being familiar with the way Father handles “rebels”, quickly tries to persuade him to give him another chance.

“Father, she’s just a kid. I can handle her. This is just a phase she’s going thr-”

“I WISH IT WAS A PHASE!” Father’s shiny smile returns after belting this out. “But I know better. I’m not making the same mistake I did with Victor and Charles. It’s time I whip that girl into shape.”

Father then easily removes the entire gate with only his index finger and thumb and scoots to the right so as to allow Jackie to get out. When enough distance between them is made, Father crawls head first into the sewers, his body fitting surprisingly better than it should due to the slime it secretes.

“Alright, here goes. One one-thousand, two one-thousand...”

Lilly begins as she uses all of her limited strength to push the hatch leading to the “outside” open. She’s not all too sure what the “one-one thousand” thing is supposed to be, but she’s heard a lady in an old movie say it before she did something similar so she might as well try it too. It doesn’t make things much easier. Lifting that thing is hard enough without the fact that she has to do it while her legs are lodged onto an old sewer ladder.

“...and.....THREE ONE THOUS-AAAHHH!” Her cry of victory is cut short by the immediate shining of the light. She forces her sensitive blue eyes to adjust by blinking in rapid succession. As she comes to, she takes her first steps back on the hellhole she is being forced to call “home”.

Lilly doesn’t actually know what “Luceville” is. It’s definitely not an actual place, though. The entire thing looks like a giant set of some sort of children’s TV show, except it takes the shape of an enormous dome stretching to a length far beyond her comprehension. All of its illumination, whether it be “day” or “night”, comes from spotlights attached to the very top of the structure. The walls are all painted light blue with a few crudely drawn clouds here and there. To put it plainly, it looks disgusting. Lilly doesn’t understand how none of the hundreds of other kids don’t see what she does. Perhaps they do, but aren’t willing to admit it. The ground is overrun with what might be the most fake-feeling grass imaginable. It doesn’t help that there’s almost nothing **on** that grass. The only thing one can see in this entire space is a dozen or so mid-sized camp cabins scattered around without much organization, a football field in the dome’s very center and a house. A house big enough to fit two worm-like monsters. Father and Mother’s house. Although it probably belongs to Mother more, seeing as Father doesn’t ever seem to let her leave it. The only confirmation she’s still in there is the daily prayer she delivers through the speakers connected to the house itself. Her voice sounds a bit different these days. It retains that sickly, high-pitched sweetness it always had, but it’s a lot weaker now. More toned down.

Before Lilly can make any more observations, her thoughts are interrupted by a violent rumble from beneath. It seems that Father has grown impatient in his investigation of the underground. Lilly closes the hatch just to be safe. Father may not be aware about any of its secrets, but that doesn't mean he can't find out.

Lilly sits down on the fake grass and unzips her jacket, allowing the ugly, pink tent dress she is forced to wear to become visible. Every girl in Luceville is forced to wear one. It's not fair. The boys get more options. They get more options when it comes to everything. They get to play sports, get into fights, and eat more food. Not that the disgusting mass they serve as "food" is actually any good. Still, it's the principle that matters.

"Ugh, just forget it. There's no time to think about that now." Lilly tells herself. She only talks to herself when there's no darkness around to communicate with. That's her rule.

She takes out a piece of paper out of her backpack. It's a written summary of all the messages C and V have left in the sewers. Well, "written summary" sounds really sophisticated for what it actually is. Lilly tends to be lazy when writing, choosing to write short notes instead of full sentences.

A good example of what that means would probably be this:

"ERRAND BOY -> KEY -> HOUSE -> CHIMNEY -> YES"

A little too simplistic, perhaps, but it serves its purpose.

"What if I'm wrong? What if he isn't their errand boy? They might just be sending him after me because I'm his sister." Lilly pondered.

As angry as she is at her brother, the thought of him betraying her to that extent saddens her deeply. She still has hope in her heart that he has a reason why he brought them here in the first place.

"Oh, who am I kidding? He's been awfully snug with them for a long time now. I have to steal that key from him."

Lilly wisely chose the day of her escape. Today is the boys' monthly football game. It's Jackie's duty, being the oldest, to look after them. It's sort of the perfect diversion. The boys will be too busy playing the game. The girls, who aren't allowed to play, can

only sit and watch on the benches. It is strictly forbidden for them to speak during this under any conditions. They're bound to do that even if they see Lilly, since they don't know any better.

"Right." Lilly jumps up with determination. "It's time I go to him. I'm coming, mom."

"How was I supposed to catch her? He makes it seem like it's easy!" Jackie complains to his walkie-talkie, another piece of technology unusual of the aesthetic present in Luceville, just like his goggles.

"I understand perfectly, dearie. He can be a handful sometimes. He means well." The person he's talking to, Mother, softly answers. Mother is the only person Jackie confides to. Father doesn't know about it.

"Does he, though? When he first made contact with me, he promised me and Lilly a better life. Did we get that? Lilly is miserable, she wasn't like that with mom."

"Of course your life is better now, dear! You have an actual family! Your mother was selfish, trying to keep you all for herself like she did."

"Yeah....YEAH. You're right! I mean, she just left dad like that because he was "toxic" or whatever that adjective she made up was and had the gall to say we'd be better off with her. That really is selfish, isn't it?"

"Indeed. That's the modern world for you, dear."

"God, I can't believe I forgot about that already. Thank you so much, Mother. I'm glad you're here for me."

"Of course, darling. I'll always be here, for every one of you kids." Mother assures rather sincerely. "Speaking of which, how is the game going?"

"Huh? Oh." Realizing he hasn't monitored the game in a while, Jackie quickly scans the entire field, the scoring board, and the girls to gain context of the current situation.

"Red team is winning."

“Are they playing fairly?”

“Sure they are.” Jackie confidently answers, despite not paying attention or caring for what’s happening on the field.

“These are good kids, y’know? They wouldn’t-OW!” Before Jackie can fib any more, something small yet strong hits him in the back of the head.

“Oh, my! Is everything alright, dear?”

“Ugh....um.....I’ll call you back later.” Jackie hangs up, puts the device in his left pocket and looks down to see what hit him. It’s a blue glass marble. The only toy the girls are allowed to have. Thankfully, it didn’t break. He then angrily approaches the bench right behind him, on which six little girls are seated.

“Alright, who threw that?”

Silence. No answer.

“You can talk when you need to answer a question like that, you know. Please, tell me.”

They remain unconvinced.

“Fine, keep quiet. Just try to be like the other girls, OK? Be good.”

Jackie’s order is seemingly disobeyed almost instantly as two other marbles swat him in the exact same spot as the first one. The third marble breaks.

“WHAT THE HELL!” Jackie turns around again. “SERIOUSLY? I DON’T NEED THIS RIGHT NOW! WHO THREW THAT? AT LEAST POINT AT WHO DID IT. YOU CAN DO THAT, CAN’T YOU?”

Upon hearing this, all six of the girls unanimously point behind them. Behind the girl in the middle, specifically.

In the flash of a second, Father crawls toward the cabin Lilly hid in and scoops it up. Now that it's firmly placed on his palm, Father raises the cabin so that it's in his direct eyesight.

"LILLY. COME OUT THIS INSTANT OR I'LL FORCE YOU OUT!"

"NO!" Lilly shouts out from the inside.

"WHY DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE, LILLY? WE LOVE YOU. WE WANT TO RAISE YOU PROPERLY. THE OUTSIDE WORLD WILL CORRUPT YOU. DO YOU REALLY WANT TO MINGLE WITH THE FILTHY KIDS THERE? DO YOU REALLY WANT THE COLORED ONES TO TOUCH YOU?"

Shockingly, tears begin to fall from Father's eyes. He really believes the garbage he's spewing.

"Or are you like Victor and Charles? Those two lost souls, who rejected all girls and wanted to take each other instead. Are you unnatural like them? They may have slipped past me, but you won't!"

"I'm not coming out! You'll have to force me out!" Lilly informs him, intentionally tempting him.

"SO BE IT!" Father pokes the door of the cabin out. He then grabs the small wooden house with his fingers and turns it sideways to expel the girl out of it. To his dismay, while a whole assortment of things falls out, Lilly does not. The clever girl is using both arms and legs to keep herself stuck in the south-eastern corner of the cabin. The key is still firmly clenched in her left hand.

"WHAT? Where the hell-" It is then that Father positions the cabin above his right eye, hoping to see where the troublesome girl is hiding.

Lilly seizes the opportunity and makes her way to the door and jumps out. Holding the key with both hands as if it's a blade of evil's bane, Lilly lands directly on Father's eye and plunges the small key right into it. Despite its size, the key easily penetrates the eye, causing a fountain of colorless blood to rain out of it.

Father's pained screams echo throughout Luceville as he stumbles around with his tail.

Before he can grab Lilly, he trips on one of the cabins. Due to his already disoriented state, he easily ends up crashing down, landing directly on his own house.

Lilly's eyes flutter open. She finds herself on the floor in the living room of the massive house she had tried to get into for so long. She is surrounded by wooden debris. To her great luck, not only did nothing land on her, but she had a pretty safe landing too. Her clothes are really dirty, though. They're draped in a mixture of blood, dirt and dust. After getting up and looking around, Lilly finds out that Father was not as lucky as she. He's still clearly breathing, but not much else. Lilly is unable to see the state of his eye as it is currently being tended to with a gauze by a very distressed Mother. She's weeping with worry and fear.

"Whoa....you look terrible." Lilly bluntly proclaims. She's right. Mother seems to be all shriveled up. She's as thin as a rake. Her clothes, consisting of a plain white blouse and a long, pink skirt, don't look like they fit her at all. They're far too big for her. What's even more surprising is her lack of hair. Lilly remembers her having a nice, black set of hair that suited her nicely.

Mother doesn't seem to notice Lilly, giving her ample time to locate the fireplace.

"Oh, thank goodness you didn't light a fire." Lilly gleefully points out as she scampers over to the large fireplace. When she enters it, she sees a simple ladder that leads straight to the top. This is it.

"Lilly, wait!"

She turns around to see Jackie on the opposite end of the house. Mother probably let him in.

"I'm going, Jackie. You can come with me if you want. I want you to."

"Where are you planning to go, Lilly? Back to mom?"

"Of course I'm going back to mom. I don't care where she is. I'm going to find her and tell her everything."

“You don’t even remember how she looks like.”

“I do remember! I remember everything about her and everything we ever did together. Every night, my dreams take me back to my old room. I don’t see anything, but I know I’m there because I hear her. I hear the lullaby she sings to me in the darkness. Sometimes I even feel her warm hug. It’s wonderful. I want to feel that again.”

“She can’t take care of you in the state she’s in.”

“What state IS she in, Jackie? How would you even know that?”

“Father has camera systems set up in the outside, including one for our district. I take a peek at what she’s up to every once in a while.”

Hearing this, a single question pops up in her mind. The answer to it may make or break her will to continue.

“Is she still looking for us?”

“Yes, she is.” Jackie answers honestly.

Lilly is unable to control her emotions. A storm of tears, both of sadness and joy, erupts from her very being.

“But she’s not going to raise you properly. Not like Father and Mother would have.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s with another woman now, Lilly. She met her two years after we left. That’s not what you need. You need a mother AND a father.”

“Is she happy with her?”

“I mean.....yeah.....she seems to be.” Another honest answer.

“That’s all I needed to hear. I’m going Jackie. I’ll find them. I don’t care what you have to say. I love you, big brother, but I will leave alone if I have to. You had no right to

drag me into your petty problems.”

Jackie is visibly hurt by this. Even so, his face gives off the impression that he agrees with his sister’s last statement. After a minute of silence, he gives in.

“Fine. Go. Go and never come back.”

Lilly wastes no time. She turns back to the ladder and begins climbing it. The speed with which she does this both disturbs and impresses her brother. When she is far out of his sight, Jackie sheds a tear and mutters something to himself.

“I love you, too. Happy birthday, little sister.”

Despite how tall the chimney is, Lilly reaches the end of it without even breaking a sweat. She’s in. This is the tunnel out.

To her left, she notices a splatter on the wall, indicating invisible ink was used there. She takes out her flashlight again and lights it up, revealing one final message from V and C.

“We knew you could do it! See you on the other side. V+C.”

This time, the “V+C” is enveloped in a lovely heart.

Filled with a giddiness befitting a child celebrating its birthday, Lilly happily skips over to the metal door at the far end of the dark tunnel. With a simple twist of the knob, the door opens and Lilly is showered with something beautiful.

It’s light. True light. Soft, warm, tender and, most importantly, real.

Taking as much time as she needs, a very euphoric Lilly steps out of the door into the light.

“See you soon, mom.”

mentor: Jasna Polanović
institution: Srednja škola Zlatar

Lana Brčić

ST. GUNTHER'S INSTITUTE FOR DEAD POETS

It was Arcturus' job to figure out what had gone wrong in the underworld of poets. He got the call at 7am on a Saturday; to say he was angry was an understatement. Percy does not usually disturb him on the weekends, unless it is a serious matter, which, of course, it was. St. Gunther's was an institute that welcomed all the poets who had been met with an unfortunate faith called death. Their latest arrival was Maya Angelou, who was quite honest when it came to her thoughts, not leaving much to the imagination. Arcturus took it upon himself to interview each of the poets and give them a chance to express themselves through different thoughts, to share something they hadn't through their work.

Henry David Thoreau – May 6, 1862

"It has come to my attention that you mostly write about living life to the fullest," Arcturus pointed out.

"One must play all the cards he has been dealt with. That is the only way to truly live," Thoreau spoke with such confidence.

"Your most famous work by far is *Walden*. Would you care to share some, perhaps unknown, information about the book?"

"There is nothing more left to say. I have let people hear my thoughts. Life is not to be wasted, for something so precious does not grow on the branches of even the tallest trees."

Emily Dickinson – May 15, 1886

"So, Miss Dickinson, what would you say is your biggest regret in life?" Arcturus asked as he crossed his legs and set the notebook in his lap.

"Why would you care. It makes no difference now that I'm dead," she replied, not showing even a sliver of interest.

"Please, Emily, don't make this more difficult. It is not unpleasant if you don't treat it as if it is."

The poet merely offered a slow blink and kept staring at her elegantly placed hands. Arcturus never considered the job to be easy, but he found it all worth it when faced with poets who were willing to share more than an uncomfortable silence with him.

Oscar Wilde – November 30, 1900

“I have done nothing wrong for loving a man,” Wilde spoke calmly, “but they judged me for something I could not have changed, and would not have wanted to.”

“Do you think it would have made a difference?”

“Would it have made a difference if I loved a woman instead? Of course, it would. Who you loved made all the difference when it should not have. A human being should not be defined by the lover he chooses to bed.”

William Butler Yeats – January 28, 1939

“Mr. Yeats, you are known for your understanding of love. Tell me, what about it would you wish to share with the world?” Arcturus asked Yeats, ready to scribble down the poet’s answer.

“It is a profound thing, love. There is no definition that describes its vast greatness. It simply...” he seemed as though he was in very deep thought, “stretches into oblivion.”

“And what would you say oblivion means to you?”

“Madness.”

Dylan Thomas – November 9, 1953

“And what am I today if I am not thinking about the contents of tomorrow? Is it worth it to live through today if my thoughts have not yet contemplated on what is to come? What does it take for me to exist in the present? To make the world seem real? To make it seem as if though a human mind is strong enough to endure all of its cliffs and rivers and forests and lakes? I comfort myself with the thought; I am the ocean, and I am the waves, and I am the seagull watching them crash against the shore.”

“Beautifully said, Mr. Thomas,” Arcturus offered as a response.

Edgar Allan Poe – June 24, 1956

Arcturus was most excited to talk to Edgar Allan Poe, but the poet did not seem as eager. Even though he arrived way back in October 1849, he was not willing to speak until more than a century passed.

“Forgive me for asking, but why have you kept to yourself for such a long time?” Arcturus was curious. It was uncommon for the arriving poets to refuse to speak to him, even if it was just a mere shrug.

“I found no intelligence in speaking before I had a thing to say. It is words that affect people most strongly, and to speak with only empty ones would be a heinous crime directed towards humanity,” Poe spoke.

Poe's wish to collaborate had come so suddenly that Arcturus found his mind empty of questions. He chose to ask the most obvious one.

"What would you say is your most successful work?"

"All work is successful if it has been read, no matter the love or hate with which people thought of it. If it has been read, it has served its purpose to its fullest extent," Poe did not waver.

"Truly. I must agree with you, but haven't you ever been additionally proud with a published piece of work?" Arcturus tried.

"Pride is only a construct. A limit to one's greatness."

And with that, Arcturus closed his notebook, thanked Poe for his time, and dismissed himself. He expected more from the great Edgar Allan Poe himself, but perhaps it was because he had such high expectations that he was let down so severely.

Present-day – 2014

It fascinated Arcturus to see all of those held on a pedestal because of their words. Especially when such things as this one occurred at St. Gunther's. He had arrived as early as 7:30am, his old model of a Toyota Corolla parked sideways over three parking spots. Arcturus had been called upon to, once again, talk off poor old Shakespeare from returning to the world of the living.

"They are interpreting my work wrong! All wrong! Wrong! I mustn't stay here while they turn Macbeth into a mockery!"

"Calm down, you old sod. It is not like you are the only one whose work has been ruined by modern humanity," said Jane Austen.

"You shan't speak of this. You have no right to. You got such talented little people, while I was left to deal with peasants!"

It didn't happen often, these outbursts. Mostly because not everyone was interested in knowing what people of the 21st century were doing with the poet's works, but William was always different.

"Settle down, Will," Arcturus tried, "you can not interfere, and for what must be the twentieth time, you can not leave."

"Dickens did!" The poet contradicted. Charles Dickens merely raised his head as his name got called, but did not feel the need to do much else, especially when it was a conversation in which Shakespeare so greatly participated.

"That was a mistake, and you know it. Charles did not mean to haunt that poor boy, right Charles?" Arcturus looked over to where the poet sat.

"Well, of course, if it will make this dreadful man stop talking," Dickens said.

It would, perhaps, surprise people if they knew how much the old poets actually

knew of today's world. St. Gunther's was equipped with everything one might need to inform himself, that being the souls of the dead that could be sent into the world of the living to wander around. There were only a couple of writers here who chose to have monthly excursions outside the institution; one of them being Shakespeare. "That is enough," the voice of Louisa May Alcott spread through the room, "I have had it with you, William. You shall sit down immediately, or I will make you read another one of Whitman's poems."

"Oh, how dreadful. That man is nothing but a settler," Shakespeare finally calmed down.

Now that the crisis was averted, Arcturus could finally spend his Saturday, as he usually does, with the living.

Louisa May Alcott – March 6, 1888

"Why do you think Jo and Laurie never ended up together?" Arcturus wondered.

"Love is a complicated thing, my dear. Perhaps I decided to ponder my own experiences through these young people, for not all of us experience a great love story; if even a little one."

"Do you think everyone is capable of love?"

"I would not wish to speak on the behalf of others and their experiences, but I shall tell you mine if you ask me to," Louisa smiled gently.

"Please do," Arcturus opened his notebook once more and returned the smile.

She proceeded to get up from the chair facing Arcturus, and she sat down in front of a typewriter with the initials L.M.A. engraved into the rusted metal. Then she began writing.

In these wretched, woods people get lost in, I am the road that takes them to salvation. People say that God created each human being and that to be human is to love and be loved. Through difficult ways, I have found myself incapable of one of the two greats. Does that make me only half-human? And what would you call the other half of me? The half that is not capable of being loved. Perhaps it was written in my star that I would be the one to love so deeply, but never be loved in return. Perhaps life has dealt me this hand in hopes of observing how much a human being can give of themselves only to have that part absorbed by another selfish soul, leaving a hole in one's chest. Hole by hole, I begin to deteriorate, but I never seem to run out of love to wrap in pretty wrapping paper with a bow on top and a little stamp in the right corner. To those who receive it, I hope they feel warm. I hope they feel that a piece of my very heart has been chipped away and is now laying spread across their palms, still, and forever beating. Even when love fades away and the gift given to them has been tucked in an attic, cov-

ered in dust and spiders, it never finds its way back to the place where it was ripped out of, my chest. Why was I destined to feel so much? Have I whispered in my maker's ear how much I long for all to experience the generosity of love? Have I doomed myself by wishing good to all? How could I ever ask my maker to give it all back? How can I ever be fixed? By now, I have accepted my faith. It is simply as it is. There is something about me that does not deserve to be loved. Perhaps that is for the better, for if a heart would decide to love mine, I do not know if I would have any love left to give back.

Robert Browning – December 12, 1889

“Were you ever scared of death?” Arcturus asked.

“Death is a concept that a mind creates. Are you afraid of the dark, Mr. Ocean?”

Arcturus was certainly surprised by Robert’s question. He was usually the one to ask the poets, not the other way around.

“Well, perhaps as a child,” he answered.

“Tell me, are you not afraid of what might lurk in the dark? You do not see what awaits you. You do not see into the unknown. Are you not afraid of the unknown?”

Arcturus ended the interview before he would have liked to.

Walt Whitman – March 26, 1892

“I shall read you something that I wished I had shared with the people before I took to the great darkness,” Whitman spoke.

I have lost so much of myself that I have learned to recognize the lines of my face for what they were, sculptures of ash. Witnesses to everything my charred heart has had to endure. I have not climbed my mountain yet. My fingernails are bleeding under the ruthless touch of unpolished rocks. I missed a step and fell to my doom. I have melted the gold off each of the grandfather clocks. This is not another story of a man putting himself back together. After all, the age of innocence has been blown away, light as a feather. Take me, then, to the bed of poisonous thorns, on which lie gentle roses. Let me bask in their soft smell. I shall never recover from my own circle of hell. I have never learned the basic rules of being all too well.

Allen Ginsberg – April 5, 1997

“You spoke of madness,” Arcturus began.

“That I did.”

“What does it take to consider a man mad?”

“Oh, very little indeed. Truly very little. We are all mad in some way if you think about it, my dear friend. Do you not feel a little mad each time you cannot answer your own mind’s question? For I certainly do. It is okay, though. To be mad is to consider the moments of sanity entrance into divinity.”

Present-day – 2014

You see, it would have all been fine if, on his exit, Arcturus wasn't met with a hysterical John Keats.

"Mr. O-Ocean, something has gone t-terribly wrong!" He stuttered.

Arcturus grabbed him by the shoulders in an attempt to calm the poet down, "Speak, John, speak."

"I-I did not m-mean to... The man just, he j-just..."

This time, Arcturus tightened his grip and shook Keats, "Speak, John! I cannot fix it if I do not even know what went wrong."

"I was doing my monthly visit, y-you know..." Keats paled.

"And?"

"And there was this old man. He, it, i-it felt as if he was reaching out to me. As if he knew I was there. And I thought to my self *well that's impossible*, so I reached out my hand and... And he, h-he..."

"And he WHAT, for God's sake?!"

"We connected. I entered his body. I felt the warmth of being alive after so many years."

"Even though it is strictly against the rules, which will, of course, be taken into consideration, it seems to me that it is no longer a problem, if you are standing here, in front of me."

"Well, you see... As soon as it happened, I knew I should not have done that, so I left his body immediately, but... I'm afraid it was too late," John let his eyes drop to his feet.

"What do you mean by too late, John? Is he...? Did you...?"

"I do not know what happened, sir. One moment he was standing there, confused. And the next he was on the floor. People around him started shouting. Calling for an ambulance. I did not know what to do."

The poet looked as if he was on the verge of tears.

Arcturus was left speechless. Never before had he dealt with such a situation. Yes, there have been cases of poets entering a human body, but never has it gone so very wrong.

"You," he finally spoke, "stay here and don't tell the others what happened. I shall go and find Percy. He will know what to do."

Alfred Tennyson – October 6, 1892

"What say you, Mr. Ocean, is the best fruit?"

Arcturus was taken aback by this unrelated question, yet he felt a kind of appreci-

ation for the poet; and his interest in such mundane things about his interviewer.

“I am a simple man. I like myself an apple.”

“An apple,” he began, “is the reason behind humanity. It is as red as a human being is selfish.”

Arcturus cleared his throat.

“And what about the green apples, Mr. Tennyson?”

“They are the outcasts of society. The unwanted. The rotten.”

Arcturus found that eating the green apple he brought along with that day’s lunch was unnecessary. He would pick up some strawberries on the way home.

E. E. Cummings – September 3, 1962

“If I withhold correct information, sir, you have been married thrice?” Arcturus did not know if he was pushing the boundaries, yet if you never step out of your comfort zone, how much can you learn?

“That is correct. I have tried my luck in love thrice.” Cummings replied.

“Would you care to share what each of those marriages taught you?”

“I do not wish to dwell now on what has happened while I lived, but I could share with you one of my newer works.”

“Of course, of course,” Arcturus nodded eagerly and took the parchment out of the poet’s hand.

I watched her feet touch the humid grass, gentle,

As a mother cradling her newborn child.

She was like a gust of wind, light,

The further she flew, the more I was beguiled.

Her hands were always reaching out, touching,

I was bewitched by her eyes and the way she smiled.

She held my heart in her hands, beating,

But our love soon grew to be reviled.

Sylvia Plath – February 11, 1963

“Why do you think your writing made such an impact on people?”

“I cannot possibly answer that question. Only those who have read my work could know why they thought of it as adequate.”

“Do you not think that people might have resonated with it?”

“Sure. It is quite possible. I suppose people do read books for many reasons, and one of them would be finding yourself inside someone else’s words, knowing that you are not a loner in a deranged world.”

“Would you say it is okay to be alone?”

“Most definitely. It is how one becomes himself. I like to think of people as reflections of their loneliness.”

“Is that not an interesting train of thought?” Arcturus was intrigued. He often thought of what it would be like to have a mind capable of poetry.

Sylvia’s lips stretched into a smile.

“Many of the poets decide to share their unseen work with me. Have you anything to say?”

As if waiting for this moment to come, she began reciting a poem.

If the morning arrives without me,

Know that I have been carried off like the autumn leaves,

In browns, reds and yellows.

The cold wind caressed my cheek as it elevated me off the ground.

If the morning arrives without me,

Know that I’ve gone away peacefully.

I had given it my all but felt it was my time to go.

Do not wonder why I went so young,

Even the newest of objects are bound to have manufacturing errors.

If the morning arrives without me,

I have decided to sleep through the cold fog that gathers around street corners.

I have let a heavy blanket envelop me in the tightest of hugs.

I have left the world to view it as a movie.

If the morning arrives without me,

Take it easy on me.

Do not blame me for leaving.

Do not feel as if your words could have made me stay in the first place.

If the morning arrives without me,

Do not wonder what went wrong.

Oh honey, nothing ever went right,

But the morning will arrive,

And I will be there,

Because I am more frightened of watching blame rise up your throat like bile,

Than not meeting tomorrow by letting death finish its beguile.

Jack Kerouac – October 21, 1969

Sometimes, they did not speak at all. Jack did speak, but solely through his poems.

There was one called *Poor Little Joni* who everyone knew by heart, so when Arcturus sat opposite Jack to interview him, everyone started reciting it.

*Poor little Joni,
 She watched her dog ponder out the door and into the street.
 She watched the headlights of the car come near,
 And heard it honk, but she just stood there, shaking in fear.
 Poor little Joni,
 She watched the woman exit the vehicle and scream bloody murder.
 She watched her carry the dead dog and place him in the passenger seat.
 And heard the door shut, but didn't hear her own heartbeat.
 Poor little Joni,
 She watched as the lady approached with tears in her eyes.
 She watched her hand shake as she kept saying, "I'm sorry!",
 And heard the woman ask for a phone,
 And heard herself saying, "Just a minute. It's okay, don't worry."
 Poor little Joni,
 Was always so observant.
 She knew of her father's secrets.
 She knew of his infidelity, but more importantly,
 She knew where he kept his gun.
 So Joni grabbed it, strolled outside,
 And did not give the woman a chance to run.*

Present-day – 2014

Percy Wedlington strutted towards the entrance to St. Gunther's in his immaculate Paul Smith navy blue suit and polished six hundred dollars Testoni shoes. The man himself never actually drove out to Hartford to visit the institution. He had his assistant, Jocelyn Jarvis, do everything for him. As soon as he entered, everyone knew a serious matter was in question. His orders were loud and clear. Jocelyn was to maintain order, while himself and Arcturus went to Saint Francis Hospital to check on the state of the haunted man.

It was an awkward silence that lingered in Percy's Mercedes. Arcturus attempted to switch from AUX to radio, but miserably failed. Instead, he decided to count the red cars they passed while driving towards the hospital. He missed most of them thanks to Percy, who drove the car as if it wasn't his own.

The hospital's walls were almost blinding. The whiteness made the space monotone. Arcturus has seen morgues whose walls were more interesting than Saint Francis Hospital. Not many people knew that about him, but Arcturus despised hospitals. As a fourteen-year-old, he spent a whole summer in one, waiting for his grandmother to pass.

Now, he walked through the halls with a kind of unease crawling up his neck. Percy was walking in front of him, as a way of presenting his leadership, even in a building such as this one. They walked up to the information table and asked for Mr. Ted Hackley. A background check prior to coming here showed that the man had three daughters and a son. Pretending to be Mr. Hackley's sons-in-law, Arcturus and Percy managed to find out that the old man was alive and kicking and nowhere near a critical condition. As a matter of fact, he was apparently more cheerful than he'd ever been. He claimed that he had not felt this inspired since he'd been a young man. They had to keep him an extra day, though, because of protocol.

After making sure that everything was alright, and Ted wasn't harmed, Arcturus and Percy headed back to St. Gunther's Institute for Dead Poets. With one thing off the list, they still needed to reprimand John Keats.

William Wordsworth – April 23, 1850

"May I read you a poem, Mr. Tonks?"

"Please, Mr. Wordsworth. That is what I am here for."

Oh, the old elm tree in my backyard,

Oh, how high it rose,

It touched the sky itself,

When it swayed in the wind, time froze.

Oh, the stream behind my rusted old barn,

Oh, how fresh was the water that flowed,

I cupped my hands and watched them fill,

The water fed the elm tree, old.

Oh, the dirt whose brown was deeper than mold,

Oh, how the smell of it took me whole,

My little black boots plunged into dirt's depths,

Those which you swallowed and stole.

Oh, the old elm tree in my backyard,

Oh, how I watched you burn.

Rudyard Kipling – January 18, 1936

"About that dog that you sent to The Lord..."

"Ah, yes. Dear old Vincetti. He was a good boy," Kipling looked as though he was thinking back on a dear memory.

"So, he was a real dog?" Arcturus followed up.

"Sometimes, to make poetry more meaningful, more emotional, you put into it what you care for the most."

“Would you say poetry is honest?”

“It is as honest as the reader who allows himself to get lost in it.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning – June 29, 1861

“Does it all truly matter? We rise at dawn to be met with another day, and then another, and another. We watch over the actions of others as hawks, ready to purge themselves of their predatory tendencies. Every day, a piece of us leaves and drifts into another reality. The reality we have set aside, thus creating room for the opinions of others, which form us into divergent people. Most people claim us poets to be melancholic people. I do not think we are melancholic. I think we are realistic through our creativity. Let me, then, be realistic with you. Too many young people carry the burden of sadness, and too many old ones are left to die in their loneliness. All of them have one thing in common, fear. Since I have been here, in this institute of the dead, I have had plenty of time to dive into modern literature, and there is one line that left me pondering its meaning. *Fear is a phoenix*. I have read it and found it to be true. Each time it turned into ash, became nothing more than sweepable dust, it returned vigorously. It returned and bit off more of us than it could chew. I have spoken of many things, but those I fear. My phoenix is a phoenix. Here I am, though, using big words and speaking in a complicated manner, thus convincing the one who listens that what I said has meaning. Perhaps it did, perhaps not. To prevent further confusion, I will say one more thing, and I will make it clear. A phoenix might sit on your shoulder, but do not forget that you are its feathers. Each time it burns, a feather touches the ground. It has burned many times, leaving more than enough feathers behind. They stacked and built and knitted themselves between your very bones. Fear might seem unbeatable, but you are its only contender. You might have lost a battle, but you could still win the war.

Robert Frost – January 29, 1963

“Why would you say, people, recognized the quality of your work?”

“I have walked through streets brimming with people, and not one soul looked my way. I traveled through the same dirt road the next day, dressed in the same coat, same hat, same shoes. And somehow, everyone was looking my way,” the poet seemed surprised by his own words.

“Humans are curious if nothing else. We are born with a thirst for knowledge. A man can, one day, be perfectly healthy and die the next. It gives them the advantage of unpredictability, an element of surprise. You never know with society, day by day, you live and pray they accept your faults. And that I did with my poetry, waited for it to be accepted.”

Charles Bukowski – March 9, 1994

“What is your biggest regret, Mr. Bukowski?” asked Arcturus.

“I do not believe in regret. Of course, we as humans make mistakes, and, naturally, we regret them, but that mistake becomes a part of your life that you cannot erase. Why then dwell on it and let it eat you up? Is it not enough that you acknowledged it as a mistake? Is it not enough that you committed the act in the first place? We say things we do not mean, and we regret them. What is regret worth if you do not try to correct your mistakes? Regret only helps society deal with its failures. And that causes the mistake to become forgotten by the person who made it, leaving it uncorrected. Because if you carry enough guilt, that equals immediate forgiveness, right? It is all blurry, especially the line that should not be crossed.”

Present-day – 2014

Keats was an easy poet to deal with. He was obedient and respected the people who worked at the institute. Arcturus was sure John was even happy to receive his punishment, which prevented him from visiting the living for the next few years. It was a fascinating place, St. Gunther’s, and Arcturus could never quite finish admiring it. Imagine, a place that looks so very alive from the outside. Tall, bulky, with its reliefs and domes. It looked like an ancient Greek temple; Achilles was still running around holding Patroclus’ hand. Perhaps it wasn’t what it seemed to be on the outside, but it did wield great power within. The power of the dead souls who, for once, weren’t lost. A graveyard for those who always knew there was more to life than death. A habitat for the word sorcerer’s, the expression witches, and locution warlocks. It was an ideal place for the poets, their very own sanctuary.

What I saw through the looking glass was nothing out of the ordinary,

Shoes, a ladder, and a mountain top.

A man stood nearby and began pulling on the shoes.

He shook pieces of paper out of his pockets to reveal the following clues.

The man opened the latter and leaned it against the mountain’s base.

Slipping in his shoes, climbing, it seemed like a race.

Once he reached the top and stood on high ground,

He could no longer move; he was bound.

For once you reach your true destination,

You have done your part in this generation.

Later on, news of the passing of a man named Ted Hackley spread around St. Gunther’s. A man who was enlightened after his brief stay at the hospital. He claimed to

feel a poet's soul reside inside him, so he became one. He became the greatest poet of his decade, thanks to non-other but John Keats.

Maya Angelou – May 28, 2014

„What do you think, Miss Angelou, modern poetry offers us?“

„I had been lucky enough to be alive during the era of many great poets. Seeing poetry evolve has been nothing less than riveting. I must say, though, it has most certainly changed.“ Maya explained.

„Changed? In what way exactly?“

„Well, you see, I think poetry has gone from roaming the depths of an ocean; to only scraping its very surface. I think fear is what holds them back. Anxiety and fear. It is hard to think of yourself as great when society is trying to prove you otherwise. It takes courage to be a poet. Courage and honesty. Everyone is capable. That is what they keep forgetting and therefore not exploring viable possibilities.“

“Thank you, Miss Angelou.”

“‘Twas a pleasure, Mr. Ocean.”

*Little bird, little bird,
Where art thou?
Have you touched the highest branches?
Did your arms wrap around the thickest bough?
Little bird, Little bird,
Sing me a song.
Wake me in the dawn,
Make me feel as though nothing in this world is wrong.
Little bird, little bird,
Oh, so bright and pure.
The feathers of your wings have caressed my face,
My wounds, your tears cure.*

mentor: Sandra Prpić
institution: Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb

Tara Baričevac

BURNING FLAME

There she was again. Like the day before, and the day before that one. Just how she will be there tomorrow, and the day after that one, and the day after that one too. The girl by the name Luna. Such a simple name one would think, but our Luna is not simple in any shape or form.

There she was, lying on the queen- sized bed located in the middle of the room, surrounded by a heap of freshly washed comforters, blankets and pillows. If we are to learn one thing about our girl, it is that she must always have clean sheets. Otherwise, she is not able to fall sleep. Every day, around the same time, in a time window from 1 PM to 3 PM, we are able to find our girl lying on here back, squinting at the rays of sunshine seeping through her window. It makes her feel things. It makes her feel alive. The sun would kindly brush against her skin leaving a trail of warmth. It is almost like the sun is painting, and she is the art. She would close her eyes and let the sun create shapes behind her eyelids. She would focus all of her attention on those shapes until they would eventually disappear. Those few hours of peace meant a lot to her. As did other things which we will mention shortly.

Luna was turning seventeen in July. But the only problem was, she vowed that she will not live long enough to celebrate it. She was born and raised in Parma, a small town in Italy. We do know much about her father, but her mother was her saviour. Angolla raised her the best she could, always making sure her daughter was surrounded by books, music, art, and laughter. She did the best she could, but was that enough?

Our girl did well in school when she cared. But lately she does not care, at all. Why waste the day memorizing a bunch of stuff that will evaporate anyway, when you can just simply live? As much as she appreciated the warm visits of the sun, at night she was comforted by the presence of the stars. Every night, when things would get really

quiet and people would go to sleep, she would sneak out on the roof and make patterns with her finger on the night sky. On the days where she had nothing to do, she would spend her afternoons in the meadow behind her house. She would lie there, in a starfish position, trying to memorize the touch of the grass on her legs, or the smell of daisies by her nose, or the motion in which the wind would dance with her dress. As much as she adored the sun and the nice weather, she was not beaten down when the sky would cry. On those days she would sit by the fire in the kitchen with a book in here hand. Then when her eyes would get tired, she would play music and dance with the maids around the living room. She tried to fill her life with as much joy as she could. It's not that she didn't like living, she loved it very much. But she refused to turn seventeen.

It is Sunday, and Luna is on her way to the garden. Such a peaceful place to be. The garden was as large as half of Central Park, with high walls surrounding it. Our girl would often just come here to sit against the lemon tree and be in the presence of little creatures who are proud to call the mentioned garden their home. She would come here and just breathe, and listen, and think. She would think about her father, signore Celio. Her father was her best friend since she was a baby. He was the one who taught her how to enjoy life. He was the one who sunbathed with her, drew amongst the stars, danced with her, and sat against the lemon tree. Since Luna's 6th birthday, Celio was planning her 17th birthday party. The day his only daughter would become a woman and go into the world by herself. Unfortunately, as life goes, signore Celio is not able to be present at the said birthday. He was killed by a drunk driver shortly after Luna turned 13. Our girl, then and there, vowed, with a heavy heart, that she would still celebrate the birthday with her beloved father.

She missed her father very much, finding him in everything she would do. Every day she would climb up the rusty attic stairs searching for her father's belongings. Today is no different. After her little session in the garden, she set of to the dusty little room at the top of the house. On her arrival there, she was pleased to meet the trunk, that holds all of the memories, untouched. She carefully opened it and started rummaging through the pile of clothes, books, and journals. Each time she would visit, she would borrow something from the pile and then change it for something else the following day. That way, she always had a piece of him with her. Today she optioned for a long white shirt, she swore still smelled like his cologne. Just as she was about to close the trunk and go downstairs, she felt a sudden pain in her upper arm. A feeling of stinging and hotness overwhelmed her. Just as she was about to

look down at her apparently injured limb, she felt the sticky feeling of blood gushing. Looking to her left instead, she saw the weapon that had injured her only moments prior. A long, rusty nail stood erect behind the wooden board of the trunk. Luna got up, careful not to stain her father's shirt, and went downstairs to inform her mother of the incident.

Angolla, a well-known hypochondriac when it comes to her daughter, immediately took Luna to the hospital, afraid she might have gotten exposed to tetanus. So that's how we got into this situation. Luna is sitting at the windowsill at St. Mary's hospital, waiting for her blood work results. The day is beautiful. A rainbow light is dancing on the hospital floor while the warm spring wind is waltzing with the cherry tree branches across the street. Being so occupied with the beauty surrounding her, Luna failed to notice a certain someone greeting her from across the room. 'Ciao' A tall, olive skinned, green eyed boy greeted her. 'Sono Elio, e tu?' Luna stared at the boy standing in front of her, barely managing to let out a reply. 'Luna, sono Luna Bianchi' 'What a beautiful name' said Elio sitting next to her at the windowsill. 'Are you from here? I have never seen you before.' questioned Luna. 'My family and I have moved here two weeks ago. Now do tell me what has happened to your arm, looks like someone made an attempt to butcher you.' cried Elio making his way closer to our girl. 'Niente, solo un taglio' Nothing, just a cut, answered she. 'What about you, what brings you into the hospital, if I may ask?' 'Brain tumor' answered Elio like he was merely describing the color of the sky. 'Oh, I'm so terribly sorry!' cried Luna feeling horrible for even asking the question. 'You have nothing to be sorry for, you didn't give me the tumor, or did you?' answered Elio with a smirk dancing on his face. 'Don't fret cara mia, I'm only joking.' Luna only managed to let out a smile, completely taken aback by the nickname this silly boy gave her. 'My darling.'

Who is this overly confident boy anyway?

Elio Moretti. A sixteen-year-old boy with a big heart, and even bigger wish for life. Born and raised in Ravenna in a familia of 8. Elio ha tre fratelli e due sorelle. Three brothers and two sisters. What a big happy family one would think, but this family has been through a lot of pain and sadness since Elio's 15th birthday. Elio has meningioma, a primary central nervous system CNS tumor. He and his family have moved to Parma after hearing about a treatment that can possibly ease his pain and give him a bit more time. So here he is now, at St Mary's hospital, sitting with a girl he just met. Sitting with our girl.

As it turns out, Elio and his family live just down the street from Luna and Angolla Bianchi. So, it is not strange that their acquaintance soon turned into friendship.

Considering that Elio's treatment has been successful, his mother had no problems with letting him go to Luna's house almost every day. The two practically became inseparable. Their day would start at the attic, collecting the item of the day. Then they would transfer to the meadow where they would usually make daisy crowns. 'Porca miseria! I did it! I finally did it!' Elio screamed out when he finally got his first crown done. Later in the day they would race to the lemon tree where they would read until it got dark. Their current read is 'In nome della rosa', a novel by Umberto Eco. Elio's favorite time of the day is when the moon rises, and he gets to climb on the roof with Luna. Just how she was mesmerized by the sun, he was fascinated by the moon. But the reason he loved spending his nights there weren't the stars, and it wasn't the moon. It was the girl. Even if they sat and didn't speak, the silence was still comfortable for the both of them.

Lying there now, on the roof, noses facing the Space, Elio was the first one who broke the silence.

'Luna?'

'Hm?' answered she.

'Can I ask you something?'

'You just did.'

'Don't be insufferable, you know what I mean,' he practically barked. 'Anyway, the thing I wanted to ask you, propose if you will...'

'Just spit it out Moretti!' she laughed

'Will you make a dying men's wish come true?' he said while simultaneously trying to sit up. 'Don't ask stupid questions Moretti.'

'So, you will then! Excellent!'

'I will what exactly?' she questioned, afraid to even find out what she has just consented to.

'You will help me make my wish come true.'

'I need you to be a little bit more specific.'

'I want to live Luna. And I do not mean survive, I mean live like these are my last days on Earth, cause quite frankly, they are. It has been really nice here with you, but I wish to get outside of this town. Do something wild, something adventures!'

'So, how do you exactly plan we spend our last days alive?' and just with a simple sentence, Elio knew she was with him till his very end.

Sitting in a café, in the center of Parma, Elio and Luna sat with their drinks. It is a little bit gloomy outside, but still warm enough for white summer dresses, and

breathable shirts. Luna was slowly sipping her macchiato, while Elio sat with his espresso. He did not enjoy the bitter taste the liquid would leave on his tongue, but he did like the feeling of being perceived as an adult. In front of them was a piece of blank parchment and a pen. ‘So, who will write?’ asked Luna, coffee dripping from the side of her mouth. ‘You write, girls have prettier handwritings.’ acknowledged Elio while still fighting the silent battle with his taste buds. After approximately twenty minutes the list was finished. The both of them leaned back into their chairs, a feeling of success and excitement fulfilling them.

‘When do we start?’ asked Luna after a minute of silence.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Sleep well tonight cara amia, for tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our life’s.’ whispered Elio to Luna after walking her to her front doorstep. ‘And remember, only bring the essentials.’ exclaimed he while heading back to his own house. And so, she lay in her room, with nothing but the sound of crickets, and rustling of tree branches to occupy her otherwise rather noisy mind. What they were about to do is dangerous, and stupid, and cruel to their loved ones. But how could have she said no to such a proposition. How could have she said no to a once in a lifetime opportunity, how could have she said no to Elio. She felt asleep rather quickly, satisfied with the knowledge that she is doing this for him. At dawn, before you could even hear the crowing of a local rooster, Elio and Luna are meeting at the end of their street. ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph! I thought I told you to only bring the essentials.’ exclaimed Elio. ‘These are the essentials.’ fought back Luna holding up a backpack the size of an abnormally large potato sack.

‘Whatever you say, just know, I’m not carrying it for you.’ Elio eyed her.

‘Never asked you to.’

And so, they set off on their life’s journey, leaving everything and everyone they knew behind. Setting off with only the little money a teenager’s allowance is, clothes for about a week, and two bicycles. ‘What is the first thing on the list remind me again?’ asked Elio. ‘The library.’ proclaimed Luna after taking a quick glance at the piece of parchment that now has ten adventures written on it. Driving their bikes, on their way to the library, while the sun is still waking up, they both knew that they were not making a mistake. A stupid decision, yes maybe, but not a mistake. Upon entering the library they’ve tried to look as less suspicious as possible. They both made their way around the building, carefully picking out the books that will mark the beginning and the end of the journey. After they’ve checked out of the library, they sat against the wall of a nearby supermarket and discussed the titles of the se-

lected books. ‘Okay, but first let’s put a check mark on the list.’ reminded Elio. ‘Oh yes!’ said Luna while putting a big red check mark next to the sentence: each borrow five books from the library. The plan was to read a book a day. Elio chose *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare and *Franny and Zooey* by J.D. Salinger. Whilst Luna chose *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Agnes Grey* by Anne Bronte. With their bags 10 pounds heavier they continued their journey, riding away into the sunrise. With that, we can also check off another adventure of the list: Have a ‘coming of age’ movie experience.

An hour passed, and Luna and Elio still had 26 minutes until their next destination. An hour and a half long bicycle ride may seemed a bit much to some, but to these two the concept of time doesn’t exist. They were singing and joking around, scaring the passing drivers every once in a while. In a blink of an eye, they were in Reggio Emilia. A small city in Emilia- Romagna region. They stopped at the local supermercato. Luna got in and bought some food for their trip, while Elio stayed outside. While at the checkout, tingles went down her neck. Even though she knew what they were about to do was wrong in so many ways, she still couldn’t wait for it to happen. As she was walking out of the supermercato, a bright red 1989 Alfa Romeo Spider drove right in front of her. ‘Get in! Hurry!’ yelled Elio from the drivers seat. She quickly got in and tossed the previously mentioned groceries at the back seat, along with the rest of their belongings before Elio drove them from the crime scene at the speed of light. Not a single soul could erase the smiles on their faces. The wind was stroking their hair whilst the smell of fruit and freshly mowed grass is blessing their nostrils, and the music from the radio slightly hurting their ears. They did not care anymore about the fact that they had ran away, nor the fact that they had stolen someone’s car. They even forgot all about the bicycles that were waiting for them, hidden in the forest. They were simply enjoying the moment.

They had been driving for an hour and were finally entering Mantua. Here, they were planning on crossing out another adventure from the list. It took them a good half an hour before they found the perfect location. A nice, quiet, and empty spot by the lake. They parked the car close to the water, for easy access, and they did not wait a minute more before they ran into the icy water. Luna dunked her hair into the lake, letting the water climb up to her scalp. She closed her eyes and only focused on the new sensation she was experiencing. The sentimental moment didn’t last long, given

the fact that she was there with Elio. Before she was even aware of what might happen, Elio jumped on her, completely sinking her into the lake. You best believe that when she finally came to the surface, she gave him the splashing of his life. And so, the splashing and the sinking game lasted until they saw a new item of their interest. A swinging rope. They've played in the water until the sun itself got tired. Only then have they decided that it is time to leave. They found a small, cheap hostel to spend the night in. Just before Elio turned off the lights, Luna remembered to cross off the adventure of the day: A lake trip.

The next morning, they woke up bright and early, trying to use up their day wisely. While driving to Verona, Elio was reading his second book, *Jane Eyre*, while Luna was on the driving duty. The trip to Verona wasn't a long one, only a mere 45-minute drive. Once they got there, the world was their oyster. First, they paid a visit to Juliet's house.

'Luna come here!' called Elio

'What is it Moretti?'

'Become eternal with me.' he looked at her with a hopeful look in his green orbs. 'Always, Moretti' she smiled and pulled out a marker from her potato sack sized backpack that was now being carried by the boy. The girl and the boy wrote their names on the wall in front of the famous Juliet's house, which was already filled with other eternals, like themselves.

'*Luna e Elio, sempre e per sempre*'

'*Luna and Elio, forever and for always*'

The rest of the warm, sunny day was spent running around the Giusti Garden, and eating gelato at Piazza delle Erbe, or so-called Market Square, and chasing down the pigeons in front of the Basilica di San Zeno. The evening was once again spent at the local hostel but was not ended before the next adventure was crossed off the list: have gelato in Verona.

The following day started the same way the day prior was, at dawn. This time Elio was back behind the wheel, while Luna was starting her third book *To the Lighthouse*. After another 45-minute drive, they found themselves having breakfast, in front of Teatro Olimpico, consisting of pastries from a local bakery, and frutta fresca from the market nearby. They visited the Palladiana Basilica and Palazzo Leoni Montanari where the boy chased the girl in a long, white, pretty dress down the halls. At one moment, he just stood there, admiring the way sun caressed her face, the way the wind made her dress into ocean waves, the way her smile lit up the

entire room, the way her bare feet made quiet impact with the cold marble floor.

‘Come on Moretti do not let me win!’ laughed she while running further down the palace halls. They ended their Vicenza trip in Parco Querini, where they both started reading their designated fourth books. While driving out of the town, they noticed the perfect spot to make their next adventure come to life. They parked in the middle of a flower field. The field stretched out as far as the eye can see. The thousand colors of multiple flower species became mixed into one. As they were looking in awe at the beautiful world that laid in front of them, a song came on the radio. *Marco Armani-La Vita* was heard from the small device and both, the girl and the boy knew, that was their song, and their song only. They danced like they’ve know each other their whole lives. They danced like they were each other’s whole lives. That night they didn’t sleep at the hostel, they slept on the roof of the old Alfa Romeo and with that crossed off not one, not two, but three adventures from the list: run barefoot on a cold floor, dance like there is no tomorrow and sleep under the stars.

The fourth day started with a drive to Padua where they fed the local ducks and drank coffee at Prato della Valle. After a short walk around Padua, they decided to continue their journey, and drove to Venice. They snuck into Saint Mark’s Basilica and had dinner at St. Mark’s square after a Gondola ride. Their main reason for coming to Venice was to cross of the eight adventure from the list: message in a bottle. The night prior, the boy and the girl wrote on pieces of parchment, messages for their future selves. Ironic given the fact neither of them planned to have a future. Ignoring that, they put their messages into the bottles, and during their Gondola ride, threw them into the canal. They finished their fourth books in a hostel.

The fifth and the final day of their little adventure started with a drive to Ravenna, Elio’s birthplace. They sang as loud as they could, changed between driving and reading, and let the wind knot their hairs into untangled messes. After a few hours, they found the perfect place for the ninth adventure: jump from a cliff. This one was the least possible one to come true. Not only did they have to find a perfect cliff which is stable enough, the water had to be deep enough as well. But it looked like someone was really rooting for them, because they found exactly what they were looking for. ‘Are you sure you are okay with this one? We can always find something else to replace it?’ asked Elio concerned for Luna.

‘What do we have to lose anyway?’ she told him reassuring him that there is no place she would rather be at then right here with him.

Holding hands, he looked at her one more time and asked.

‘Ready?’

‘Ready’ she answered. Those next ten seconds became a blur for both of them. The only feeling they will remember was the feeling of flying. The feeling of flouting through air like you weight no more than a grain of rice. The feeling of freedom. They will remember the way they both got air punched out of their lungs during the impact with the harsh water surface. And the feeling of euphoria when their heads dived out of the water.

As they arrived at Ravenna, the sun was getting ready for its daily rest. The boy and the girl had one more adventure on the list. They parked the stolen car behind an abandoned building. ‘Where are we going now?’ questioned she.

‘To get us a more suitable ride.’ smiled he.

‘No, no Moretti. We are not stealing another car!’ she said after stopping in the middle of the street.

‘Oh relax santa Luna. We are not steeling anything, it is mine. And besides, it is not even a car.’ They entered the courtyard of a large house with a green color façade.

‘Elio? Is that you?’ a person called from behind the door.

‘Luca! Mio caro amico!’ yelled Elio and ran to greet his old friend.

‘Luna come here! This is Luca my dear old friend!’ said the boy.

‘Ciao, piacere di conoscerti.’ greeted the girl.

‘Nice to meet you too!’ said Luca while shaking the girl’s hand.

‘Listen Luca, do you still have it?’ asked the boy.

‘Of course I have it, dear friend! Your precious baby has been waiting for you.’ smiled Luca.

Before Luna even realized what they were talking about, she found herself seated on Elio’s blue Vespa, holding on to him, trying to open up her eyes which were violently getting shut by the wind. ‘What do you think?’ asked Elio. ‘It’s, amazing’ yelled she. And so they spent their final day driving around Ravenna. They visited all of Elio’s favorite places before they’ settled down on the beach. With the final adventure: ‘go home’; their life’s journey came to an end.

‘Thank you, Luna.’

‘Any time Moretti.’

The night was spent driving back to Reggio Emilia. Luna was the one driving while Elio was sleeping in the back seat. They left the car at the same supermercato, along with a big ‘Grazie’ note.

Putting her bicycle away, Luna got up to the front doorstep of her house. ‘Luna! Caro Dio! Sei al sicuro!’ cried out Angolla throwing herself at her daughter. ‘Where have you two been? What were you thinking? No note, no goodbye, no

warning...’ Luna didn’t hear a word that came from her mother’s lips. Her head was empty. Her heart happy.

And just like a flame, he vanished from existence

It has been two weeks since the boy and the girl were last seen together. Elio died in the comfort of his own home, not long after they returned back to Parma. The girl was back in the meadow. Sitting on the flower bed in her pretty, black dress. Holding up a message in a bottle. Holding up a message in the bottle that was given to her by Elio’s mother after the funeral, earlier that day.

My dearest moonlight,

And so I leave you like we both knew I would. You have made me the happiest ‘man’ alive in all the right ways. I know I am by now long gone, so I just wanted to share my piece of mind, for one last time.

I never could wrap my mind around the concept of love. How someone could love someone so completely. How one could love another, flaws and all. And if that is what love is, then I sure as hell convinced myself I am not worthy of such things. And yet here I stand, so completely and utterly in love with you. Every aspect of your very existence is everything I have ever wanted, and truly needed. I could also guarantee that you do not think you are worthy of affection. And yet, here you are, making me complete. It may be cruel of me to speak now that I am no longer with you. I sure am sorry for not expressing these feeling sooner, but what difference would have it made. I was already doomed. My own soul was often windswept, tangled between my fingers and thumbs, contorting a way that is twistedly inept. But your soul, your soul cara mia is so light and free. I know you do not owe me anything, on the contrary, I owe you everything. But still I have the audacity to request you help me make his one last wish come true. Blow out your candles on your 17th birthday darling. Blow them out on the 18th, and the 19th, and 20th. Blow them out until your time truly comes. And when it does, I will be waiting for you, right here, ready for our next adventure. You only have one life amore, go spend it doing things that really make you feel alive.

Forever and for always,

Moretti

And so she did. She made his last wish come true. She blew on the candles every year. She lived everyday to its fullest. She lived for herself, and she lived for him.

mentor: Anita Ivanković
 institution: Medicinska škola Osijek

Marina Dukarić

NOAH'S STORY

There was a seventeen-year-old boy, his name was Noah. He was tall and skinny but nicely built, pale skin with gorgeous emerald green eyes. His hair was short with bouncy curlers, brown with blond highlights. He was a good and respectful student who had some problems in his life.

He lived with his mother Jean in the capital of Canada. He loved his mother, they had a bond...a bond only a mother and a son can have. It was like a good cup of hot chocolate in cold weather.

Noah's mother was a fine-looking woman taller than most females. She had sky blue eyes that hold up to millions of secrets and beautiful curly blond hair. She was kind and loving mother.

Jean divorced her husband long time ago. Noah was just finishing second year in high school. It was probably one of the better decisions in her life. They didn't have much, but they had each other and that is what she would always say to her son.

It was start of the new school year. Summer break was over. Who knows what this coming year holds for him?

"NOAH!", said Jean as she came into his room.

"Okay woman, I'm up, I'm up...", responded Noah tiredly.

"I have been waking you up for 20 minutes, are you ever planning to get yourself out of that bed anytime soon? It's already seven, you have school."

"Jeez woman, give me a breeze!" Noah mumbled so his mother wouldn't hear. Clearly, she heard....

"Did you say something?" She gave him the mom look everyone is scared of.

"No ma'am!", said Noah not wanting to get his mother angry.

"Better. Now go get ready, we are leaving in 10 minutes." She walked out of his room shutting the door.

Noah sat on his bed looking dead, not wanting to anything. He knew school tired him out. He didn't even feel like he got enough energy for next school year.

"Jesus, I'm so not ready for this school year." Noah sighed and went to dress himself. It was cold where he lived. There was not really *warm* weather, except you think fifteen degrees is warm for end of the summer.

It was a rare occasion for him to be driven to school by his mum. It must be his lucky day.

"Goodbye Noah. I will be working a bit late so you will be staying at Nick's house. If he bothers you, call me. Okay?" Said his mother as she smiled.

"Yeah, sure, I don't really care..." Said Noah rolling his eyes. He never liked going there.

Nick...good for nothing. It's not like you should speak like that about your own father but he knew he hated him and not like Nick liked him back.

Nick was the father of Noah and they have never had the best relationship. He was a businessman and rather straightforward. Nick and Noah would usually fight, but Jean was the one who would shut them both.

"YOOOOOO, NOAH COME HERE!" It was the guys Noah hanged out with. Noah started to hang around with them this summer.

"Sup." He put his bag down and sat next to the boy.

He was like a leader of the group. His name was Leo. Every girl knew he was a hardcore player, yet he had all the girls. I felt bad for all the girls he hurt. He was tall and well-built with black charcoal eyes and medium length dark brown hair.

"How have you been doing? Anything specials? Any girls?" Noah never liked being in a relationship and he has never really had feelings for any girls.

"Dude, it's the first day let me live." Noah said looking at him like someone hit by the train.

"Okay, okay I was joking." He said that laughing as he pushed him a bit.

"Hello Leo!". It was Avery! Jesus! the last thing he needed. That girl was something. She was sixteen but she probably has been with almost every guy in the whole school. She was not pretty but her daddy was rich and because of that the amount of plastic she had would cause world pollution.

"Avery, my sweet love!" Leo just grabbed her and kissed her.

"Leo, what did I tell you about kissing someone in my classroom?" It was Mr.Kaeya .

"Whatever! I wasn't even listening to you, grandpa." He just rolled his eyes as Avery laughed.

"I will not be dealing with you. Either you pay attention in class or you will be going to the principal." Teacher put his books on the table.

“That was meant for you too, Miss Avery.”

She just smiled at the teacher.

“Good, let’s begin.” Mr.Kaeya smiled.

I was finally at my dad’s. I was getting my school stuff out of the bag when I realised there were so many things to do for homework.

“Noah, where are you child?” Nick came into the room.

Ah great, the last thing I needed today.

“What?” I asked firmly.

“Don’t give me that tone young man.” Nick sighed as he looked angry.

“Okay? What do you want? I have some homework” I told him already angry.

“I got a call I didn’t expect so I have some business to do. I will be home in two or three hours. Don’t do anything stupid and I better find you working.” The last sentence was said in more demanding tone.

“Okay, I will be here.” Now I can go out to grab a smoke with boys at least.

I pulled out my phone. I already got a text from Leo to meet him in twenty minutes at our usual spot.

I put on some jeans and grabbed a hoodie. My jacket was in the hallway. I saw that my dad left his wallet on the desk. I didn’t really have money, so I took my dad’s wallet to buy some cigarettes.

It was cold outside. If I didn’t want to smoke, I doubt I would go out. I was coming closer to the spot. Our spot was not something special. It was an abandoned little house but as I was coming closer, I saw a girl near the window. I never really saw her hanging around Leo or Avery.

She seemed familiar but I couldn’t put my mind up to who she was. But then it dawned on me. It was that smart girl from our class. What was she doing here? I wondered.

Her name was Lin. She was not the girl who would usually be here, but I was guessing Leo told her to come. She was really pretty and probably the only nice girl in our class. I knew they used to bully her, but one day they just stopped. She used to have beautiful long straight blonde hair but she cut and dyed it, so now it is short and dark red.

“Took you long enough.” Leo just said as he poured me a glass of whiskey.

I was just staring at her as I sat down.

“So, what is she doing here?” I asked as I pulled out my cigarettes. It was silent for a good few seconds before Leo spoke.

"I invited her. I hope you have nothing against." I could see the grin on his face as he passed by.

"Hello I'm She told it in such angelic tone as she waved with a soft smile.

"I know who you are. You sit two seats away from me. Do you think I'm blind?"

"Well, sorry, I guess." She looked at me a bit disappointed and with attitude.

I looked at Leo who was staring into God knows what.

I sighed. As I went to say something I was stopped by Leo.

"Why don't you and Lin talk a bit? Me and Avery will be going." Leo said as he started to walk away, Avery following him.

"Leo?" I heard Lin say quietly. She probably didn't know Leo would pull this on her, although I kind of suspected it.

"Sure, we can go and have a quick walk." I said as I went to grab my glass of whiskey to drink it.

Did I want to? Not specially. I just wanted to see what kind of person she is and why Leo invited her because he didn't really like new people in his group.

I drank my drink and then I looked at her. She looked at me and started to walk towards me.

Without saying a word, we headed to the nearby park. It's been some time and she didn't say anything. It was getting quite awkward in the silence, so I decided to say something.

"So where are you from?", I asked her.

She looked at me a bit in shock.

"How did you know I was not from here? Is it that obvious?" She asked as she looked down at the ground.

"It's not that obvious. I had a friend long time ago who had the same accent. Sadly, they moved back to the country." I told her as we sat on a bench.

"So, what city in Scotland do you come from?", I asked her, kind of interested.

"Oh, I'm from Edinburgh." She told me in a happy voice.

"You speak English pretty nicely for someone who has Scottish accent."

"Yeah, I lived in Scotland for ten years but then I moved here. I had problems with my English but I never really cared." She looked at the ground a bit sad.

"Did you get bullied for you accent?" Her sadness made me blabber this out. I wanted to disappear from the face of the earth. Why did I ask that?

She was silent for a few seconds. I felt bad thinking I said something wrong not wanting to make her sad.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way. Sorry. If..." I was cut off.

“It’s totally okay. It was not your fault, but yes I went to many English classes and lessons to get my English the best I can.” She smiled and laughed a bit.

I could feel my cheeks getting a bit red and my heart skipped a bit. It was a strange feeling and I couldn’t say I didn’t like it.

I got up from the bench.

“I will have to get going. I have a lot of work.” I said getting another cigarette.

“Oh, okay I hope we can hang out another day?” She told as she got up and started to walk back to Leo and Avery.

I waved as a sign of goodbye.

I lit up my cigarette and started walking. Path home was not the shortest. I had good twenty minutes to get home.

I just hoped dad wasn’t home. I didn’t want to argue with him. I was smoking as I saw a familiar person. It was Lucas. Jesus, I didn’t need this now.

He was a talkative person. When he starts talking, he doesn’t stop. I didn’t want him to see me, so I pulled my hood over my head. I was no use, he saw me. I stopped and looked towards him as he yelled my name.

“NOAH!” He yelled as he got closer to me.

“How have you been? I haven’t seen you in ages!” He told as he smiled and hugged me.

“Sup dude, there’s nothing special here, you?” I smiled back.

“Eh, I’m good, nothing to do around here anymore. Where are you coming from? I didn’t expect to see you around these parts?”

“Yeah, I’m on my way home. I was hanging out with Leo and Avery.” I told him as I finished my cigarette.

“I haven’t seen Leo in a long time too.” He scratched his head.

I looked at him confused. Was he? Never mind? I threw my cigarette on the ground.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked wanting to change the topic.

“I was with the guys just walking but then I saw you.” He smiled.

“Oh, cool, but I have to get going. I have to study, and I’m not really supposed to be out right now. My dad will go nuts again.” I said as I laughed a bit hoping he will let me go.

“Oh okay. I hope we will see each other again.” He waved as he hurried to get back to his friends.

I had no words for that guy. I hurried home because the weather was not the best. After walking for a few more minutes, it started to rain.

“Great” I groaned.

This is not what I needed now I'm going to be all wet from the rain. I started running as fast as I could. Thank God my home was close.

As I was running, I tripped and fell. I got up. It hurt like hell to walk. I saw some blood coming through the ripped jeans. Great! That was just the thing I needed.

When I reached my home, I realized my dad had returned. This really was a cherry on top of a milkshake.

I got inside and prepared myself.

"NOAH JAMES SIMON! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!" my dad shouted from another room. He had steam coming out of his ears.

I got my shoes and jacket off which were both wet. I took a deep breath already not wanting to deal with this and went into the living room. I expected my dad to be there and he was. He reeked of alcohol. It was disgusting.

"I was out with a friend. He helped me with the homework. Is that bad that I asked for help?" I asked not wanting to get him even angrier.

"You asked for help? How useless can you be?" he got out of his armchair and walked towards me.

I backed up.

When I was younger, he would often come home this drunk. I feared him. I never wanted to stay home alone with him.

Once, when I was five, my mom was on a trip and I stayed at home with him. He went to "work", but I was smart enough. When he came back, he wasn't even able to walk properly. He called out my name. I was so scared. I came from my room. The moment he saw me, he just hit me. It was always like that. I was so scared and he told me he will do worse if I do worst, so I never told my mom.

"Get away from me." I told him still backing away, step by step. But he was still coming closer to me.

I hit the wall and closed my eyes I wasn't scared of anything like this. If my enemy came and did this, I would punch him right in the gut, but this was different. I felt like I couldn't fight back. I didn't have the strength. It was trauma that was laid upon me from young age. I got used not to fight back, which affected me greatly.

And in that moment he just slapped me.

"Get out of my face before I do my worst and don't you dare to say a thing to your mother. You are already stupid enough! You can't even walk! Look at your knee! Go and clean that up. If I see one drop of blood, I will slap you again" He told and went away.

I looked at the ground blinking, processing what has happened. I sighed and went to the bathroom. I took off my pants as I looked at the wound. I decided to take a show-

er. When I got into the shower my wound hurt so bad. I cursed everything I knew, of course doing it in my head not wanting father to hear.

When I got out, I put some disinfectant onto the wound.

I went to my room and I saw my books just lying on the desk. I knew, I wouldn't do my work. I wanted to do something, and I knew that it had to be done, but I still didn't have the strength to do it, so I didn't.

I grabbed my phone. There was a notification from Lin on the Instagram. She was asking if I wanted to go out with her again. She had had fun, so why not to know each other better?

I was sceptical, but I agreed. We were going out next weekend. I was kind of excited.

Next day in school I saw Leo with another chick. She was just leaving and I must say she was not that ugly.

I went up to Leo.

"Cheating or you broke up with Avery?" I wanted to tease him even though this behaviour was usual for him.

"Oh yeah, me and Avery are not together anymore. She was annoying anyway. This new girl, the one who just left, was a hot shot." He said as he made a disgusting grin.

"Yeah, I saw her, but I must say the relationship with Avery was the longest one you have ever had. What is the "hot shot's" name?" I asked kind of laughing.

"Yeah, you are right, but it's the past now. Oh, and the girl is a new student. She has just transferred here. She is a Latino, you know, the right one in every spot. Has a bad temper though. Her name is Camilla." He said showing everything with his hands.

I looked at him concerned.

"Well then, lot info I didn't want to know. I wanted to say, I'm going out with Lin again." I scratched back of my head.

"Damn dude, not bad yourself. She is nice. That is why I told her to come that day. I guess I'm the perfect matchmaker." He said that proud of himself.

The guy who changes girls like his socks, isn't the best, but I will give him a pass. What can I do? He's is my friend. I guess I have to be the nice one.

It was Saturday. I got ready and headed to the same park me and Lin last saw each other.

I had a pretty long way there, so I listened to some music from my headphones.

When I got to the park Lin was already there. I got to say she was beautiful. Her short hair matched the dress she was wearing.

I approached her.

“Hey Lin, you look beautiful.” I said smiling.

“Thank you, Noah, you’re not bad yourself.” She told as she pushed me a bit smiling.

“Wow, should I take this as a compliment, or?” I asked with a confused smile on my face.

“Everything is fine by me.” She shrugged her shoulders and started walking.

“Where are you going to?” I asked approaching her.

“There is a coffee shop down the street. We could get a coffee and something to eat.”

She told me starting to be excited.

“I see you like coffee, don’t you?”

“Maybe?” She stuck her tongue out.

I laughed “Don’t stick your tongue at me!”

“I can do whatever I want, thank you.” She told me.

The day was pretty good. We got some coffee and shared a sandwich. We had a lot of fun.

We mostly walked. From time to time we would sit on the bench. It was a beautiful evening with a full moon.

“It’s a beautiful night.” She told looking at the moon.

Her eyes were shining in the moonlight. Her hair was dancing with the wind.

I realised she was shaking a bit. I took off my hoodie and gave it to her.

She looked confused.

“You look cold, so take it.” I was holding the hoodie not looking at her.

“Thank you.” She took the hoodie and put it on her. It looked like she was cosy.

I laughed. I noticed it was getting late.

“I have to go. It’s getting late.” I told getting up from the bench.

“Oh, okay I...”

“I will walk you home.” I told her as a sighed a bit.

“Oh no need to, I’m okay.”

“I don’t mind. It’s too late for you to walk alone at night.”

“Oh, so it’s because I’m a woman...I’m only joking?” She smirked and laughed.

“No comment on this.” I told as I started walking.

As we were walking across the road, I noticed that Lin didn’t see the truck coming down the road.

“LIN!” I yelled as I pushed her out of the way.

Everything was black after that.

I was somewhere I didn’t know where. Everything was black. It was like I was in a dream but then I heard something. I thought I heard my mom.

I wanted to say hello, but I couldn’t. It was like something wouldn’t let me say anything.

Then I heard her say.

“Oh, my boy what have you done?” I heard her say it through soft cries.

I just wanted to say I was okay. I wanted to hug her. I didn’t know what to do. I remember saving Lin. I was in pain and I felt dizzy.

This was so confusing. Then someone opened the door. It was a male as what I recognised from the voice.

He said he was a doctor. Was I in a hospital? His name was Dr. Albert.

“Hello, doctor.” I heard my mom talking.

“Hello, Mrs. Simon. I’m here to examine your son. His name is Noah Simon?”

“Yes, doctor. Please tell me my son will be okay?”

“Please sit, Mrs. Simon, take a seat.”

“Okay, so your son got hit by the truck right in the head as he tried to protect Mrs. Lin. The hit caused some brain damage.”

“What are you saying doctor?”

“Your son is in a coma Mrs. There is nothing we can do. I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t see them, but I could hear them. It was all so confusing. But I read about this type of situation. I was in a coma!

I just wanted to hug my mom and comfort her, but the only thing I could do was listen to my mom crying.

She sounded broken. Her cries were loud.

“Mrs, I think you should go home and stay calm. This situation is hard for you, but there is nothing you can do for your son right now.”

I was happy the doctor comforted my mom. The last thing I heard was doctor asking if my mom was okay as they left and the door shut.

I didn't want this I wanted them to know I could hear them. THIS WAS SO STUPID! WHAT WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?

I just couldn't do anything. It was like walking through a long black hallway that had no end and you just got more and more exhausted without reaching its end.

It has been a while. I don't know how much since I can't really see whether there is a day or a night.

I usually listen what doctors or nurses are commenting, and they say my condition is getting better which made me a bit relieved.

Once I heard the door and felt someone coming close.

“You mistake, look what you did! Maybe if you die it would be easier for me.”

What... Who was...? And then it clicked It was my dad. I WAS SO ANGRY! WHY WAS HE HERE AND HOW CAN HE TALK LIKE THAT?

Honestly, if I were awake, I would slap him. It would get me in a lot of trouble, but he deserved it.

The door opened again.

“What are you doing here?” A soft voice asked.

“I was just leaving. Don't you dare and say a word” I heard my dad say in a harsh tone. Then I heard the door slammed behind him.

Someone came close and grabbed my hand.

What? Who?

“I'm so sorry you are here because of me. I didn't want this to happen. I was careless.”

I heard soft cries as the grip on my hand became harder.

Wait, LIN!

I wanted to hug her! I was happy she was alive! She was the only reason I threw myself in front of that truck.

I wanted her to know I was alive but what was I supposed to do.

I tried moving my finger in her hand. Nothing. I will not give up.

As I heard her cry, my heart shattered. She let go of my hand. I was so mad, not at her but myself. How was I going to show everyone I could hear them? Then I heard someone say something.

“Hello Lin! How are you, child?” It was my mom. Her voice sounded so sad and that gave me the strength to try my best to show everyone I’m with them.

“Hello, Mrs. Simon.”

“Oh darling, just call me Jean. You are a nice girl.”

Someone laughed. I assumed it was Lin.

“Thank you, but I will have to get going.”

“Of course, see you another day.”

I heard Lin leave as my mom sat next to me.

“Oh, my child!” I heard my mom stop as she realized what I did. I DID IT! I MOVED MY FINGER.

“SON, CAN YOU HEAR ME?” She jumped up from the chair.

“Noah, if you can hear me, do anything.”

I know my mom wanted me to just move my finger, but I just wanted to wake up and hug her. I saw a big white light and I ran to it.

“Noah...?” Mom sounded like she gave up, but I didn’t. I ran faster and then I opened my eyes.

“NOAH?!” My mom hugged me so hard as I hugged her back as hard as I could. I was so happy.

“Mom, I’m sorry I just...” It was a long pause as my mom laughed a bit. “You saved someone’s life. It’s okay. I’m just glad you are okay.”

Wait. ”LIN?!”

My mom laughed again. What is with her? Why is she laughing?

“I know where to find her.”

Lin came in wearing my hoodie.

“LIN!” I was overjoyed.

“Noah?” She looked at me in amazement. We hugged.

She cried and apologised many times. I took her chin because I wanted her to look me in the eyes.

“It’s okay! I’m happy you are okay and that is what is the most important to me.”

There was silence for a moment as our lips touched for a second.

We looked at each other falling even more in love.

It has been a few years. I'm in my last year of college. Me and Lin are engaged. We plan to start living together as soon as we get stable jobs.

I told my mom what I heard my dad had said. I also told her about his behaviour towards me. We finally cut all communication with him.

Leo and Camilla stayed together. We are all good friends. As for Lucas, he moved and went to a good collage in Europe.

And that is my story. I've met someone I care about and I have amazing friends.

My mom was next to me in every situation and I love her more than anything.

I hope, in the near future, I would be able tell my story to my own children. For now, I like the present and I hope nothing will change.

mentor: Ivana Opačak

institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola, Slavonski Brod

Josip Lucić

YUSUF'S STORY

(In search of apostrophes)

Our story begins in Iraq, a small country in the Middle East where our protagonist, a 16-year-old boy named Yusuf, has been living since he was born. He lives in an apartment with his father and a sister. His mother is very sick and has been in the hospital for five months now. His sister is a very ambitious, but religious person. He also has a grandmother who often visits Yusuf to help him cook and clean up around the house. His father is an honest and hardworking man who tries to earn enough money to pay for both his *wifes'* medical treatment and rent.

Every day Yusuf gets up at 6 a.m. to wake his father up for work, after which he makes himself breakfast and does chores. Around 9 a.m. his grandma comes to help him prepare lunch for the whole family. When he is done with making lunch, Yusuf goes into his room to find clothes he will be wearing at school. He washes them, dries and irons them. *Its* already 11 a.m. At that time Yusuf takes his backpack and starts preparing for school. When he is done, he eats with his sister and grandma and rests until 12:30, when he has to get on his bicycle and go to school. Yusuf doesn't like school because he hates being told what to do or where to sit. Despite that, he has a lot of respect for all the good teachers and cleaning ladies.

One particular week he was up late every night helping his father even though he knew that there was a huge oral exam coming on Wednesday. He did not want his father to work alone all night, so Yusuf decided to help and get the work done faster. That was going on for almost the whole week before the exam. The teacher that was giving an exam was called Ms Germ. Time went by and Wednesday rolled around the corner. Yusuf knew he wasn't well prepared so he was trying to come up with a plan how not to get a bad grade because he *didnt* want to disappoint his father.

He was not popular at school, but was a good friend to pretty much everybody. After some time the most brilliant idea hit him. He knew that Ms Germ would, as always, use a “random” option on her laptop to choose a student to be orally tested if nobody volunteered. So the idea was: since the app that teachers used to open students up and give them marks was dependent on the *schools* Internet, Yusuf was going to disable the Internet connection on the *schools* laptop and enable it again after the class ended. After telling his classmates his idea, everybody agreed that it should be done, since most of them had not prepared for the exam.

They held a vote to agree on the proposition: “If there is only one person who thinks we should not be doing this, they can say it now and nothing happens. On the other hand, if we agree to do it, we will just blame it on the *schools* bad Internet connection.” Everyone agreed on doing as proposed and it was on Yusuf to do the trick because it was his idea after all.

The second recess break came along and they assembled the dream team of misbehaviour. It took less than a minute to assemble and give out roles. It was time for the devious act to be done. Yusuf gave out roles, organised everything and got to work while four other classmates were watching his back. One was on top of a classroom desk watching through “windows” for the teachers coming; since they had 20-centimetre-tall glass connecting the wall and the ceiling, it was easily achievable by simply standing on the desk. Two classmates were in front of the classroom so they could, in case Ms Germ showed up, block her entrance by doing small things such as chatting with her or playing dumb by tying shoe laces in front of the door. Finally, they had a friend that was their base, their strong link. He was the “middle guy” who was going to tell Yusuf if one of the other classmates saw Ms Germ; since the door and the *teachers* desk were far from one another, they needed the middle guy to deliver the information quietly and quickly because if the “window guy” were to yell, Ms Germ was going to hear him.

Everything went according to the plan and after few seconds, few classmates started recording the mischief. Yusuf was not bothered by that since he knew they were going to send the video to the absent classmates in order for them to back the “dream team” up in case Ms Germ complained to the principal or any other teacher about the lost Internet connection. Finally, everything was done without any improvisation. They had everything perfectly planned – at the end of the lesson, as soon as Ms Germ would leave, they would get the Internet back in the same way they had put it down. Everyone sat down and had a good laugh. After some time, the bell rang and everybody went to their desks waiting for Ms Germ to show up.

To their surprise, when Ms Germ showed up, she had something in her backpack, something that threw everyone off guard – she had brought her own laptop. The silence was so sudden, even Ms Germ got creeped out a little. Instead of their usual wild and childish behaviour, the class was filled with silence and terror. Many students got bad grades. Yusuf got a C, a grade which most students would be happy to have, but also the one that was not going to make *Yusufs'* father happy, because he believed that Yusuf could do much better and everything that was lower than a B was not acceptable.

Yusuf was a smart but incredibly lazy student. He would learn what he liked and skip over what he didn't. When Ms *Germs* class ended, the squad got back together to get the Internet on the old laptop up and going. That was when they ran into another problem. To reset the *schools* Internet one needed to have the *principals* ID and password. *Thats* where everything started going downhill for Yusuf. He knew how to hack into the system, but he needed more than five minutes of time. Yusuf knew he had to do something but didn't know what.

The next class came and it was led by a teacher that was loved and respected by everyone, Mr Miriko. Yusuf wasn't sad that Mr Miriko had problems with the Internet because he was confident that he could, with the help of his friends, hack into the server and retrieve the last known password that had been used to reset the Internet. When Mr Miriko asked why the Internet *wasnt* working, the class just said it *hadnt* beed working the whole day and Mr Miriko bought that. However, when the lesson ended, Mr Miriko stuck around the class for some reason and the class *wasnt* aware of that; everyone started moving around the desk where the laptop was located. Mr Miriko, of course, noticed it, but didn't have any evidence that the students had done anything because nobody had touched the laptop until he left. However, when he did leave, Yusuf did not have enough time to undo what had been done, so the class agreed to do that tomorrow after the fourth lesson; that was when the class would have a longer (15-minute) recess break.

Yusuf went straight home after school to think of the "attack plan" for tomorrow. When he came home, his dad immediately gave him a list of tasks he wanted him to do. When he finished all the tasks, it was already late and Yusuf went straight to bed. After doing his morning chores, Yusuf ate and went to school. Everything went by undetected until the fourth class started. *Yusufs'* class had Physical Education. Yusuf had a leg injury, so he wasn't playing. He had the time, and could use an excuse to leave the P.E. room, but he *couldnt* fix the Internet then because he could easily be detected.

When P.E. finished, Yusuf was among the first students who came back to class. When he entered the class, two students were throwing around another *students'* slippers. The slippers' owner was a student who didn't get along with anybody else because he was very quarrelsome and loud in general, the guy called Latrick. Rightfully so, Latrick didn't like when others touched his stuff without his permission. He knew that some students were going to play with his stuff because another student had told him. Yusuf took few steps inside the classroom and, suddenly, someone threw a slipper at him, which he caught and laughed with other students. As Yusuf was walking to his desk, carrying the slipper in his hand, Latrick walked into the classroom and saw him. Yusuf, not wanting to do anything with the boys who were throwing *someones* stuff around, gave the slipper to the student that had thrown the slipper at him.

When Yusuf sat down, still tired from *yesterdays* work, Latrick came running to him and started asking what he was doing and why he had been throwing his stuff around. After Yusuf said he wasn't doing anything, Latrick became more aggressive. He started yelling and screaming. Every time Yusuf tried to say something, Latrick would start yelling even more. Yusuf was taller and stronger than Latrick, but was very gentle with everything and everyone and *didn't* like to argue much. Latrick knew that very well, yet he decided to abuse that a little. After few other students that had been watching the scene unfold told Latrick that Yusuf in fact *hadnt* done anything, Latrick started cursing at Yusuf. After a bit more minutes of *Latricks* yelling, the bell rang.

Yusuf *didn't* mind *Latricks* behaviour because he knew Latrick was a hothead and expected him to calm down so they could talk normally. However, Latrick decided to push his luck a little further. He took *Yusufs* bag and threw it across the classroom, after which he started laughing and saying: "Look, your bag is across the room on the floor, better go pick it up!"

By that time the whole class had already dropped what they had been doing just to see what was going to happen next. Yusuf stood up. The whole class thought that Latrick had just signed a one way ticket to his grave, but Yusuf just quietly walked towards his bag, walking next to *Latricks* desk, where he was still laughing. Yusuf returned to his desk, collecting everything that had dropped out of his bag. Latrick started cursing at him again. Students that were sitting around him told him that that *wasnt* a nice thing to do and that he should stop.

Latrick told them: "Oh, *dont* worry, Yusuf *isnt* going to do anything to me since there is a video in our WhatsApp group of him turning off the Wi-Fi on the *schools* laptop!

Watch this!”

Then he turned to Yusuf and made a comment about his *moms* wellbeing. Everyone went silent. Yusuf stopped collecting the stuff around his desk and just stood there. He turned to Latrick and started walking towards him.

Latrick started laughing even harder than the last time.

Yusuf asked: “Do you think that was funny?”

Latrick responded: “What are you going to do? I have a video of you turning the Internet off, you *cant* do anything to me!”

Yusuf pushed away the table that Latrick was sitting at with his right hand and pushed Latrick with his left hand. “I would like you to apologise.”

Latrick started laughing again. Yusuf, remembering that Latrick had cramps from today's P.E., put Latrick in an arm lock. Latrick screamed in pain.

“We can talk like grown men after the class, that is if you quit with that childish behaviour of yours”, said Yusuf angrily.

Latrick yelled: “Ok, ok, we will talk, just let me go!” and so Yusuf did.

Five minutes later, a teacher came in and the class went on normally. Everybody thought that would be the end of that, until one of the students yelled: “Latrick sent the video to the teacher!”

The whole class erupted in anger. Insults and curse words were raining down at Latrick, but he was proud of what he had done. The teacher, Mr White, *couldnt* believe what he was hearing. He asked what was going on, so the class explained everything to him. Somehow he managed to calm everyone down and continue lecturing like nothing had happened.

Everybody was mad at Latrick, especially because he had been the first one to promise not to say anything. Yusuf was mad. What he decided to do shocked almost everyone. He said he was going to beat Latrick up. Not many students were surprised that Latrick was going to take a beating, many were happy as well, but no one expected Yusuf to do that.

That day, when the last lesson was coming to an end, Yusuf decided to leave earlier. It was a tactical move before anything. He knew that after the bell ring, Latrick was going to run like the wind; also, Latrick had a bike on the parking lot. Since Yusuf had already memorised *Latricks* route, he decided to leave the school five minutes earlier and walk outside the *schools* grounds, so no teacher or student could prevent his attack. Yusuf went to a 90-degree turn, was around 200 meters away from the school; the path was narrow, meaning Latrick had to drive slowly, which was the perfect opportunity to get kicked off his bike.

Yusuf waited and waited, until he saw the cars going away from the school. This was another part of his plan. Yusuf was aware of the fact that almost every teacher drove a car, meaning that all the teachers whose shift had ended would be long gone before Latrick showed up. He knew Latrick was about to come. He stood up and waited near a tree, so Latrick *couldnt* see Yusuf waiting, therefore he *wouldnt* turn and drive off. It was yet another near perfect plan.

Latrick eventually came riding his bike with a fellow classmate named Ivan. Latrick thought Ivan would guard him in case Yusuf showed up, but he was mistaken. Ivan was there just to see Latrick get beaten up. Of course, Latrick *didnt* know that. The two of them were just about to turn when Yusuf jumped from behind the tree, making them slow down. Latrick was very confident that Ivan and him could defeat Yusuf in a fight. *Latricks* pride was his downfall. When they stopped, Ivan moved to the sidewalk and Latrick was alone, with no friends by his side, and so he realized. He tried to talk his way out of the situation by talking about how it *wasnt* really his fault, the fault being mainly *Yusufs*, but Yusuf *wasnt* buying in. Maybe if he had tried to apologize, the situation could have been different.

As Yusuf was about to hit Latrick, Mr White came around the corner. He called both of them over. When the boys got there, the teacher told Latrick to get lost, so he could talk to Yusuf. Mr White said that if he were to beat Latrick, he *couldnt* get anything out of that, he could only get into more trouble. Yusuf made a decision to take Mr *Whites* advice to try and make truce with Latrick.

The next day *Yusufs* main teacher Ms Benignus confronted Yusuf about the video Latrick had sent her. Yusuf was sad and ashamed because he knew how much trust she had had in him. She also confronted him about his intentions to hurt another student. The wise lady got the information – only God knows where and how...

Yusuf tried to get out of the situation by saying: “None of this would have happened if Latrick had not sent the video!” to which she responded: “None of this would have happened if you all had studied for your German exam!”

Yusuf knew that she was right and *didnt* say anything after that. Just then, Yusuf realized what he had done. He was fully aware that he had done a bad thing and all he wanted was to apologise, but it was too late. In the end, two near perfect plans *werent* good enough. Both of them had a fatal flaw, which was bad intent. In both scenarios, if plans were to succeed, someone would get hurt in the end. Something Yusuf realized far too late.

Saturday came along. It was late in the evening when Yusuf was thinking of how to make everything right, but without causing any further damage. Suddenly his phone

rang. It was Latrick, calling to apologise. Yusuf, knowing that was a great way to start, accepted his apology. He decided, since Latrick was a drama queen, not to give him much attention. “*Its* better to have a friend than an enemy“, Yusuf thought. After they had chatted a bit, Yusuf went to sleep.

The following week, *Yusufs* father was called by the school to have a talk about *Yusufs* recent behaviour. His father *wasnt* happy to hear about *Yusufs* mischeaf, but, instead of punishing him, he decided to let the main teacher, Ms Benignus do that. Ms Benignus decided to make Yusuf write a story in which he would be summarising all the events that had happened in the previous week; he had until the end of the current week to finish the story and send it to her, after which she would send it to a story-writing competition. If Yusuf would do so, he would only be getting verbal reprimand, but if he failed to do so, he would get a strict rebuke. Yusuf gladly accepted the “punishment“, not only because he would only be getting a verbal reprimand, but because he knew he could learn something out of it.

It is Sunday. Yusuf is finishing his story. He thinks that his English speaking skills are great, but his writing skills, not so much. He is struggling with grammar and, oh, spelling, mostly with apostrophes. He *doesnt* know when to put them nor where to put them. After some time he has decided to stop including them in his story. He knows Ms Benignus *wont* be happy about it for the reason she has been warning him about his (lost) apostrophes, but, in his 9 years of learning English, Yusuf has never learnt to use them properly. (Another challenge for Ms Benignus?)

With the end of his story, Yusuf only needs to add a title to it. People do consider Yusuf to be quite creative, since he is prone to making stuns no one has ever heard of and giving ideas that are practical and well thought out. When it comes to naming stuff, Yusuf has a hard time thinking of an appropriate name. Most of the time Yusuf just asks someone for help and when they suggest a name, Yusuf goes with it. This time *its* different. He *cant* ask anybody, so he decides to stick with the first thought that has come to his mind, no matter how boring or uncreative it is...

And so, *Yusufs* story was born.

