

The Harper and Other Tales: English Students' Short Stories for Children and Young Adults

Edited by
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CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Notes on the Contributors	7
“Family Love“, Nina Bjelić	9
“The Magic Lighthouse”, Stevan Đelić	13
“Cul-de-sac”, Nemanja Arsić	19
“A Pirate’s Life”, Darko Stevanović	23
“The Adventure of Anne, Jack, Jill, Molly, Prim and little Arien (Or The Venture Into The Forest Before Dinner)”, Dušan Anđelković	27
“Heart of Stone“, Jovana Branović	39
“Familia Lupina Ante Omnia”, Lazar Jovanović	45
“The Magic Shop”, Miljana Adamović	55
“The Quasar underneath the Ashes”, Marijana Mančić	59
“My humble ode to you, my friend”, Tijana Petrović	67
Nursery rhymes, Marija Mladenović	69
“The Story of the Sea Star”, Jovana Jovanović	71
“The 4”, Andrea Todorović	77
“Sojourn”, Tijana Petrović	83
“The Gratitude of Doves”, Jovana Ilić	89
“The Harper”, Dušan Anđelković	99
“The Other Side“, Mila Kostić	111
“Hunting the Hunters”, Kristina Petrović	119
“The Woods of the Lost”, Magdalena Cvetanović	131
“The Five Stages of Grace”, Zoran Spasić	137
“The Dream Guardian”, Branislava Stojanović	147

FOREWORD

At the beginning of the course *Modern Anglophone Prose for Children and Young Adults*, in one of the first lectures, my students and I read a poem by the American author Maggie Smith called “Good Bones”. The poem opens with an unambiguous statement that “[l]ife is short, though I keep this from my children”. It continues:

Life is short, and I’ve shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I’ll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that’s a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.¹

Short and informal, “Good Bones” is a good introduction to the tensions and difficulties that lie at the very heart of writing for children and young adults: what to say, what not to say, how (not) to say it; how to equip the young audience with the knowledge necessary for the survival in the world of stoned birds and bagged children, yet allow for the possibility of hope and beauty in that same world – because life is not, nor should it be, about survival only. The power relations between adults and non-adults, evident in all teaching contexts, including children’s and young adult literature, are also expressed here as the balancing act between censorship (“I keep this from my children”) and the imperative of hope placed before the young (“You could make this place beautiful”). And while I do not agree with Maggie Smith that it is up to the young only to (try to) make the world beautiful, I firmly believe that hope in the possibility of beautiful i.e. liveable communities is maintained, among other things, by the texts for the young which are educational, humane, and heartfelt. As such, moreover, they inevitably work their magic on all the parties involved in the difficult and rewarding processes of reading, writing, interpreting and teaching children’s and young adult literature.

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>

* * *

The texts which comprise this collection were originally intended as an experiment, an exercise, and a didactic instrument: in 2017 and 2018, I asked my students to write short stories for children and young adults². My primary motivation was to illustrate how difficult a feat that was, how many different considerations were at play in such a seemingly easy act as writing for young(er) audience. Borrowing Maggie Smith's terminology, I wanted to teach my students that selling the world to the young was neither easy, nor straightforward. My students responded to the challenge in the best possible way, by the outpouring of creativity, imagination, sentimentality, and – quite frequently – horror, teaching me in turn that the analytical approach to both the world and literature is not always the most appropriate one. I was surprised, then humbled, and finally overjoyed by the scope of their imagination, the free play of their creativity, and, occasionally, the depth of their insights. All the short stories gathered here – and several nursery rhymes, which were wholly unexpected but more than welcome, and two poems – take children, childhood, young adults and the traditional literary forms associated with them (a fairy tale, an adventure story, a young adult dystopia) as their starting point, and a playground: the results, while uneven in execution, are almost uniformly confident of the power of love, mercy, friendship, and the imagination. Moreover, and crucially, they all offer consolation, especially when they tackle the difficult issues such as death and the loss of the loved ones. Together, these texts imagine a much better world than the one we currently inhabit: the world in which haughty kings and slave traders are punished, kind-heartedness rewarded, and love lasts forever.

The young adult fairy tale, “Family Love“ by Nina Bjelić, for instance, tempers the gory details of a king's loyal killer's fate with the belief in the immortality of souls, and the indestructible bond between the siblings. In “The Magic Lighthouse”, written by Stevan Đelić, a tantalizing glimpse of the magical other world is offered as the antidote to the loss of a grandfather, and the difficult relationship between a strict father and the bookish son. Nemanja Arsić's story, bearing the title “Cul-de-sac”, sees childhood and young adulthood both humorously and darkly, as severely regimented, with the strict boundaries between the stages monitored by the children themselves. The thirteenth birthday marks the bittersweet end of childhood, yet the author insists that the memories of childhood games will be held “dear in the twilight years that were to come”, thus passing a knowing comment on adulthood. (The same comment is to be found in the story's title, as well.) “A Pirate's Life” by Darko Stevanović, set in the early eighteenth century, is explicitly modelled on *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Treasure Island*, and equally didactic: as opposed to Daniel Defoe's and Robert Louis Stevenson's classics, however, the protagonist, the young boy called Benjamin, returns home without material rewards, but with important lessons learned. “The Adventure of Anne, Jack, Jill, Molly, Prim and little Arien (Or The Venture Into The Forest Before Dinner)” by Dušan Anđelković is the star of this collection. The rhythm and the deceptive sing-song quality echo Christina Rossetti's “The Goblin Market”, but, as opposed to Rossetti's verse fairy tale, there is no redemption here, no healing power of sisterly love: the children die one by one. What makes the poem so highly enjoyable is the richness of the language, which transforms a disturbing subject matter into a dazzling display of genuine talent

²Those students who preferred analysis to creative writing had liberty to choose and write argumentative essays instead. Some of the essays I received were brilliant: Nikola Petrović wrote about the neoliberal ideology in *The Lion King*; Dušica Ljubinković offered an inspired reading of *Peter Pan* which focused on Wendy rather than Peter, and Marija Mladenović wrote a long and well-researched paper on fairy tales bearing the title “How Timeless Stories Help Our Children“. I did not include them here because I wanted to foreground the students' creative efforts only, and, more importantly, because I believe these texts, with certain modifications, merit publication in scientific journals.

and an immense love of writing. Jovana Branović's "Heart of Stone" is, as the subtitle states, inspired by the memory of a childhood fairy tale; in it, the authoress appropriates the magic of the fairies to punish a merciless king, and to reward the kindness of his wife – the kindness that is, significantly, in the course of the story extended to all living beings, humans and non-humans alike. "Familia Lupina Ante Omnia", written by Lazar Jovanović, examines the meaning of family through the voice of another nonhuman, a young female wolf called Dawn, who learns in the end the most important lesson: "Family is not blood; family is not what you are born into. Family is what you make it, family is created by the hardships its members overcame, by the memories it created, by the amount of care and love it shows to every member". Miljana Adamović's contribution bears the title "The Magic Shop", and it represents the sentimental affirmation of friendship and imagination, delivered in an artfully naive voice of an orphaned child, a distant cousin of William Blake's chimney sweepers. Friendship, too, is celebrated in the gentle poem by Tijana Petrović, "My humble ode to you, my friend". A dystopian young adult short story, "The Quasar underneath the Ashes" by Marijana Mančić examines the familiar themes of both young adult literature and dystopias: societal pressures, uniformity, conformity, freedom and sexuality. In contrast, the nursery rhymes by Marija Mladenović are gentle, humorous and full of joy only, even when they tackle the surprising subject of neuroses. "The Story of the Sea Star" by Jovana Jovanović combines Disney iconography, Greek mythology and the Nordic god of thunder Thor in a love-affirming and utterly optimistic take on Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". "The 4" by Andrea Todorović, written in the minimalist style of traditional fairy tales, celebrates love as well, but also princesses and heroines who are very far from the damsels in distress fairy tales abound with. Another contribution by Tijana Petrović is a poetic, melancholy yet hopeful, short story called "Sojourn", about a boy, Griffith, who spends some time with his dead grandfather and siblings, and brings back home good news to his surviving family members on Christmas. "The Gratitude of Doves" by Jovana Ilić is a masterfully written short story which contains one of my favourite scenes ever: a little girl called Eve feeding an apple to the snake called Charon. (Yes, THAT Charon, from Greek mythology.) The titular tale, "The Harper" by Dušan Anđelković, is another fairy tale which imagines a happy place, and a happy ending, for the music-loving misfits who find the world of conventional living, marriage contracts and sibling rivalry unbearable. Mila Kostić's "The Other Side" hints at the horror and old family secrets underneath the surface of ordinary life of pancakes and job interviews and mint tea. Impressive "Hunting the Hunters" by Kristina Petrović reads like an excerpt from epic fantasy: detailed depiction of weapons and battles, black and white characterization (the hunted hunters are slave traders), and the protagonist who represents, at least partly, homage to Tolkien's Eowyn. "The Woods of the Lost" by Magdalena Cvetanović is a fairy tale which, much like Terry Pratchett's *Tiffany Aching* series, rehabilitates witches as doctors in the days before institutionalized medicine, and is focused on ordeals and healing. As in so many of the stories in this collection, the kindness shown to humble strangers/others, including animals, is revealed to be life-saving. Zoran Spasić's "The Five Stages of Grace" also focuses on an animal, the beloved dog called Grace that the protagonist, Ethan, has to learn to let go. The insight that Ethan has while grieving for his dog – "It was as if Grace was now giving me sadness proportional to the happiness she had given me throughout the years" – will be familiar to anybody who has ever loved and lost a pet. Yet the story refuses to indulge in grief, and it ends with two different types of reconciliation, both of which assert the significance of love and family. Love and family, family members lost and reconciliation, are the themes of the last story in this collection too, "The Dream Guardian" by Branislava Stojanović, in which a

young girl is empowered by a “vision in a dream” to pursue her music career and thus keep alive the memory of her music-loving father. Branislava Stojanović, moreover, created the illustration that is on the cover of this book.

Individually and collectively, these texts – written by very young people, in a foreign language – have given me great joy, for which I am forever grateful. Hopefully, they will do the same for the readers.

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Lazar Jovanović is a student of English language and Literature at Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. He is not a very prolific writer, in fact, this is his first publication. Lazar shows interest in subjects such as technology, psychology and sociology among others, and he appreciates art. He enjoys reading sci-fi novels and psychological dramas, as well as watching film adaptations of such works. His work reflects his upbringing and preferences and his writing can be best described with "What he lacks in stylistic elements, he makes up for with his vivid imagination". lazar.jovanovic2014@gmail.com

Tijana Petrović holds a Bachelor's degree in English language and Literature from Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš. She's very passionate about literature, reading, and writing poetry. She also spends a lot of time painting. She shows interest in fantasy works and existentialist topics, incorporating existentialism and art into her poetry. Influenced by many great writers, her greatest aspiration is to become a writer and poet herself. Exploring human emotions, mental states, and the world around us, she attempts to find the core essence of life. tijana.b.petrovic@gmail.com

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Family Love

Nina Bjelić

Once upon a time, there was a great warrior in England who served his young King most loyally. He seemed so loyal that he did not care about all the men, women and children that he had killed, passing through so many towns. He was protecting his king and his country. The king also protected him, from the people he had hurt, and also from the punishment of the deity that was lurking in the corner. But the day came when they both had to die. The king was poisoned by one of his men; suspicion fell on the brave warrior. He had to bear the consequences of his prominence in the kingdom. People worshiped him. He had been keeping them safe for such a long time. Perhaps that was the reason why he had the young king poisoned. Perhaps it had occurred to him that he deserved the throne, and not an incompetent young child who was a king formally but did not decide on anything. That was, at least, what the members of the royal family thought.

At the time, the warrior was still fighting in the battle of Medway. As always, he and his army brought England yet another victory. While he was proudly passing the cobbled streets that led to the deceased King's castle, little did he know what awaited him on the other side. As soon as he reached the gates, the archers ordered him to put down all of his military equipment and, most importantly, his sword. Only then was he allowed to pass the gates. His soldiers would have defended him heartily, but he decided to obey the archers and did what he was ordered. Slowly, he passed through the gates of the castle, so as to greet the King and to ask him what was happening.

As soon as he was at the main forum in the castle, he was made to kneel down in front of the royal family and to receive his sentence. He did not know what had happened during his absence, but while the sentence was being read to him, he soon realized that the king had been poisoned and that he was considered guilty. The punishment that he received was considered to be one of the worst sins at that time. He had to kill himself using his own precious sword. Should he refuse, his whole family would be slaughtered, including his young beautiful sister who was the deceased king's wife. As he was being instructed in his punishment, the warrior could hear the screams of his sister, taken away by two guards. She told him not to listen to them, and not to kill himself. She said that she believed him, that she knew that it was not him. That he would never do such a thing. She said that everything is going to end well. And then she said that whatever he did, they would all be killed nevertheless, because that was the plan of the true traitor. She yelled all this through the tears streaming down her cheeks...that she wanted to meet him in the other universe, to meet his soul somewhere and sometime in the future. If he killed himself, they would never have that chance. She begged him. And he was always soft and he always listened to his little sister. She was the reason, ultimately, why he did all those terrible deeds. He was supposed to protect her. While he was looking at her being taken away, an archer shot her

straight into her heart of gold. His heart broke into tiny pieces. And then he looked sideways, only to witness all of his family members being slaughtered in front of his eyes. Maddened by grief, he rushed towards the royal family to kill them, but was stopped by their many guards. They made him look into the direction where his family was lying dead. He would never forget that sight. It will hunt him forever. At that same moment, he decided his own destiny. He took the sword of one of the guards and stabbed himself through the chest.

While he was slowly dying, he remembered the words of his sister. She had always believed in nonsense. After-life, another world, the future. 'That does not exist, my dear'. 'This is the end'. 'People should not pray, because there is no-one to listen and answer their prayers.' 'It is just something that humans invented so they could endure the pain'. 'There is no deity in this world, the magical world does not exist'. Then his emotions got the best of him. 'I know I never said that to you, but I am a warrior, I did not want anyone to know that you are my weakness, because they would hurt you, since they could never hurt me'. He remembered all the happy moments they used to have'. He remembered how he would tell her that she was ugly, that she was clumsy, and that he did not love her. And he would always laugh while doing so. Because he loved to see her get mad. He loved to see her frowning face. But he loved her more than anything in this world. With these thoughts he finally went into the eternal darkness.

The warrior was not buried; his body was left to rot in the field, without any mark. The only thing that remained and was stuck into the ground was his sword, cursed by the blood of his victims. The royal family had all of his, his family members' and his sister's possessions burned. They were all a traitor's family. Only the hidden jewelry box of the young queen remained. After some time, when it was finally discovered, it too was cast into the nearby river, never to be found. But one ring, which, being the gift from her brother, had a very special meaning for the young queen, rose to the surface of the river and was found by a very old lady. This old lady was a deity, sent from another world, in order to grant the wish of the innocent slaughtered girl.

One night, while the full moon was shining over the sword stuck in a remote field, something extraordinary happened. The sword had been standing intact for many years, since people were afraid of its curse. The old lady who had found the ring stumbled upon this remote part of the field and upon muttering a few words, the sword got surrounded by red light. It twinkled, and specks of light went towards the sky. The old woman, it turned out, was there to warn the spirit of the great warrior about his next life which would be his punishment. It was already decided. Since he committed a terrible deed of taking his own life, the deities decided that in his next life he would be the grim reaper. All his memories would be erased and only upon touching the person with a soul of someone that the warrior had loved, the curse would be broken and he would finally be at piece.

Many years later, in a new century, a young woman was passing hastily along the crowded boulevard. She had always been attracted to old-fashioned jewelry. In fact, she started liking it so much that she wanted to make her own collection. Yet it was hard to find that kind of jewelry, and for a reasonable price, as she was not exactly a rich person who could afford expensive things. She turned into a solitary and dark alley. On the sidewalk, there was an old lady, who had some shiny stuff on a card-table - she was selling old jewelry! The young woman could not resist the opportunity. Perhaps she would find something for her collection. She approached the old

woman who was kind enough to offer her a ring. The young woman had never seen anything similar. And the old lady said that it was a gift, since she was the only one brave enough to approach her in the dark alley. 'Thank you so much', the young woman said. 'I was feeling a little down today, but thank God there are still people like you on this earth, who always brighten someone's day'. 'Surely, you will be here tomorrow and for some time more?' 'I would like to buy more stuff from you'. 'To repay you somehow'. The old lady smiled and promised that she would be there for some time. She had something great to witness. 'Finally' the old lady said. 'I have found you.' 'Greetings your majesty'.

Years and years passed, and the warrior gave up looking for the soul that would break the spell. It was a new century. He was sending off the spirits of the deceased people to another world, constantly wishing for that day, when he too would go to that world, and would suffer no more. Before sending off a soul, he would get a card with the name of the person who was going to die, the exact time and place where that would happen, so that he could go there and send a soul to where it was supposed to go. It was an ordinary day for him. He got a card, looked at the location and time, and got ready to fulfil his duty. He had gotten used to it. He stopped looking at the names of the people because it was all the same to him, after so much time. When he got to a place, he saw a woman who was bleeding terribly, lying on the ground. Most probably hit by a car. She was begging for help. He did not want to help her, and besides meddling into the lives of the human being was forbidden. He was not there to play God, just to do his duty, as always. Ordinary people were not able to see him, nor feel him. Yet, somehow, this woman knew that he was present. She extended her arm towards him and started crying. Upon looking at her hand, he saw the ring. The ring that looked familiar, but he could not remember why. He just knew that something strange was going on. 'I should look at the name of this woman written in the card', he thought. Hastily, he opened the card. Even the name looked familiar. But he still could not remember. That was when he felt the woman grab him by the hand. All of his memories started to come back to him. The ring. The name. It was his sister's soul. Suddenly, the world stopped. She fell onto the ground, letting go of his hand. She was dead. He could not believe that he did not save her. Again. He was her older brother, and older brothers are there to protect their little sisters always. He'd let her die again. He was crying, trying in every possible way to bring her back to life. At least, just to say goodbye. He did not notice that he had also started bleeding, from the same wound that had killed him in his previous life. The spell was finally broken. He had suffered enough. He had had to be punished for all the innocent lives that he had taken in his battles. The two souls left the face of the earth and the world continued to move at its own pace as if nothing had happened.

The Magic Lighthouse

Stevan Đelić

The early morning sky was already starting to change in color when Ben opened his eyes. Although it was only 4 in the morning, things around him were beginning to take shape under the dim light of an early summer morning. He was woken by a song that his father had played on the car radio, presumably to keep from falling asleep himself. It was a familiar song – he remembered his father talking about it on many occasions and playing it to him on his guitar, though he never really liked it much (he just told his father that he did to appease him).

“Good old Johnny Cash, eh Benny?” his father said and flashed him a grin, to which Ben nodded and mustered a half-smile, although he was still more asleep than awake. They had been driving through the night along the Canadian Pacific coast and were headed to his grandfather’s home, a small farm on the now almost completely deserted island in a forgotten part of British Columbia. The plan was to spend the summer there, because Philip, his father, wanted to spend some quality time fishing and relaxing, away from the city. Ben, of course, wasn’t too fond of this prospect, as it would mean being away from his school friends for whole two months with his father as the only companion. In fact, he almost dreaded the time when he would be alone with him, ever since his mother had passed two years earlier. From that moment, things seemed cold between the two of them, as Philip would often criticize Ben for his behavior (for no particular reason, Ben thought), and even began inflicting various punishments on him – grounding him, making him go to bed without dinner, and most damaging of all, taking away his books.

But nothing compared to the idea of spending 2 months in an old wooden house with no one even remotely his age anywhere in the vicinity to spend time with. To Ben, it was like a prison sentence. But he was well aware that if he so much as mentioned being bored, it would only get worse. So he prepared to soldier on and make the best out of a bad situation. If only he had been able to bring a book or two, he would have spread them out over the whole summer. But he knew that keeping books for that long would mean being expelled from the library, so he couldn’t even do that.

After arriving in the small town of Clover, they stopped at a small diner to have breakfast before catching a boat to the island. His father had arranged the boat ride with a local man named Brett, who’d agreed to take them across and come back exactly two months later to pick them up.

The boat ride was slow and nauseating, and Ben barely kept himself from being sick over the side of the boat; but the risk being embarrassing and infuriating his father, he managed to withstand the urge.

After they had arrived, his father shook hands with Brett, confirming the arrangement for the pickup, after which Brett turned the boat around and departed. Knowing there was nothing resembling a grocery store on the island itself, they made sure to stock up on supplies while they were in Clover, buying everything edible that could last long without spoiling. Ben picked up a rather big heap of canned food, mostly corned pork and pineapples and carried it to the house, which wasn't a long way from the dock.

From afar the house seemed rather small, but coming inside Ben realized it was a lot bigger than he had thought. After agreeing that Ben would sleep in the upstairs bedroom and his father in the one downstairs, they got to work clearing out the house and making it somewhat hospitable. By evening, the house seemed as if people actually lived in it. After all, his grandfather had kept it pretty neat before disappearing a year back. The work being done, they had a small dinner and decided to go to bed, as they were completely worn out from the trip and the work.

"There's a library upstairs next to the bedroom if you wanna read something, but I want lights out in an hour tops, you hear me?" said Philip, stressing the last part. And although this pleasant surprise came unexpectedly, Ben didn't want to overreact and risk losing the newly gained privilege. "No problem, Dad" he replied without too much excitement and proceeded to climb the rickety stairs.

He briefly checked his bedroom first by turning on the lights – a small bed, a nightstand with a reading lamp, a window overlooking the beach and not much else. But it would be enough. And now for the prize. He closed the door to his room and identified what had to be the library his father had mentioned right next to it. When he entered and turned on the light he was blown away. Because he had expected a bookshelf or two, what he saw before him completely caught him off-guard. The room was vast, maybe the largest in the whole house, and bookshelves, which went up to the ceiling, were stacked from edge to edge with books which created an almost kaleidoscopic image. He stood and looked around for what seemed a long time, feeling hypnotized. And although he had known that his grandfather was a University professor before retiring and spending his final days on the farm – after which he mysteriously disappeared a year ago - he certainly didn't expect him to own something like this. He almost wanted to go downstairs again and ask his father about it, but he thought twice about it and decided against it. Finally, he composed himself enough to start inspecting the books.

Slowly at first, he started pulling books which seemed interesting from their places on the shelves, blowing dust from the covers and briefly leafing through them. Seeing as Ben was only 11 years old, the kind of books he liked were fantastic stories with knights, castles, mythical creatures and adventures. But most of the books that he found were either in a foreign tongue (his grandfather had taught German at a University) or had titles that he couldn't understand. Nonetheless, he thoroughly enjoyed himself going through all these books. And when he finished going through all of those on the bottom shelves, he carefully climbed the ladder, so as to make as little noise as possible, and studied those books on the higher shelves too, being careful not to slip and fall while doing it. After a while he accidentally caught sight of the clock which stood on the writing desk in front of one of the shelves and noticed that he was already a whole half hour past his bed time, so he quickly started rearranging those books he had taken out, hurrying to finish this before his father discovered that he was still awake. While returning

one book to its place, he noticed that the three books next to that empty slot were a bit more protruded and were sort of sticking out a few inches compared to the rest. He hadn't noticed this before, but he found it strange as all the other books were placed perfectly in their spots. He pulled out the three books and discovered that there was something behind them – it was another book placed sideways onto the back of the shelf. It was a plain black book, with leather binding and nothing at all on the covers, which further added to the sense of mystery. Then he took the book in his hands; upon opening the first page he read “The Magic Lighthouse”. The title caught his attention, so that he leafed through the rest of the book and saw there were many illustrations inside, presumably made by hand, as well as paragraphs of text here and there in beautiful handwriting. He returned the three books which had been concealing it, and took “The Magic Lighthouse” to his room. However, it was already too late, and as he didn't want to run the risk of being discovered by his father, Ben placed the book under his bed and decided to further inspect it in the morning.

The next morning, Ben was woken up by three loud knocks on his door and a sharp “Breakfast” from his father. He swallowed the unsavory breakfast and went out with his father to fish afterwards. Through all this, he was only thinking about the mysterious book lying under his bed. He was impatient to come back and study it at peace in his room.

After a few hours on the rowing boat, having caught nothing but chunks of seaweed, to Ben's great pleasure his father decided it was time to go back. He pretended being disappointed for not catching any fish on the way back. “The lousy rod's no good, shoulda brought my own” muttered his father.

After lunch, which was very similar to breakfast – corned beef and soup out of a can – Ben finally went up to his room. He sat on his bed and put the book in front of him. The sense of excitement was almost overwhelming. He started reading. On the first page, there was a full-page drawing of an impressive lighthouse with stripes on its bare exterior and its light pointed at a boat near the shore. It was very skillfully done, with great attention to detail. Reading on, he realized that the book was actually a diary (maybe his grandfather's?) as there were dates before each entry. The first entries talked about a mysterious light appearing on the waters on certain nights with no explainable source. Ben was increasingly excited as he read on, now presented with the possibility of shedding light on his grandfather's mysterious disappearance.

What he found out in the following entries and drawings left Ben astounded. Apparently, his grandfather went out one night: having seen mysterious light dancing on the waters, he wanted to find its source. After some trudging through the dark woods, he gazed upon a large lighthouse on the shore with its light piercing the night as it moved about. And he knew for a fact that it had not been there earlier. After all, he spent a lot of time exploring almost every inch of the island after moving there and building a house. Upon entering, and climbing the stairs up the lighthouse, he found the source of the light. A huge lantern which seemed to move of its own accord. And just as he was about to leave, he found a sort of an empty slot of a somewhat peculiar shape in the wall beside the lantern. There was an illustration of that as well. Skipping a few pages of illustrations, which depicted more of the same, Ben came to a new one. It was some kind of stone or crystal which was the same shape as the slot from the lighthouse. Next to it there was a paragraph explaining that, while exploring some caves nearby, his grandfather had found

the illustrations of the crystal on cave walls – clues, basically, to its location. Following them, he managed to find it underwater in another cave on the island. The cave drawings, parts of which he had copied in the diary, also talked of a boat arriving if the crystal is inserted into the slot and taking the one who summons it to a mythical land – which his grandfather, in a manner of a university professor, named Arcadia. Finally, the text revealed that he had buried the crystal in a safe space after testing its authenticity. There were a few pages missing before the diary ended abruptly.

Ben was beside himself with excitement. It was his way out from this place, if only he could find the hidden place. But, at the same time, there were a few things he couldn't understand. If his grandfather had found the crystal and saw that indeed it did work, why didn't he use it himself? And if he hadn't used it himself, where was he? All these questions made Ben dizzy for a moment so that he had to lay the book down and try to compose himself. Then he remembered something. When he was getting the boat out with his father that morning, he noticed that a tree in the backyard had an unusual carving on its bark. He didn't make much of it at the time, but when he came to think of it now – it was the same shape as the crystal described in the diary. When he looked out the window, he could just see it. He wanted to act fast. Somehow, he felt that if he didn't, someone else would come there before him and take it from him – although he knew that was unreasonable. Nonetheless, he went downstairs to check on his father who was taking an afternoon nap in his bedroom and decided to go for it. He found an old rusty shovel in the shed and went to the tree. Indeed, the marking was there. Not being sure how to go about it, Ben started digging in front of the tree and planned to work around it on all sides if necessary. As it turned out, it wasn't. Several shovel strokes later, he hit something firm. His heart fluttered as he moved the dirt away with his bare hands and uncovered an impressive, glistening, green crystal. He took it, hid it in his pocket and tried to cover up the hole he had made the best he could. He returned to the house, his father still being asleep, and went up to his room and lay on the bed, his heart still racing. Now, he thought, it was a waiting game. From what he deduced from the diary, the lighthouse only seemed to appear mysteriously on certain nights.

And so it was. Ben waited, night after night, looking for the light on the water, staying up as late as he possibly could. His father luckily didn't notice any irregularities in the backyard, where Ben had dug the hole. Ben was growing more and more disheartened every day, wondering if it wasn't all a practical joke that was being played on him.

But then it came. Some ten days after the digging of the crystal, Ben was just preparing to give up his nocturnal stint by the window when suddenly a light flashed across the water. He couldn't believe it at first, thinking that all that anticipation had made him hallucinate. But then it appeared again, just as it was described in the diary. When Ben saw it for the third time, he wasted no more time, putting his clothes on quickly and going out through the window, descending down the rain gutter as he had planned all along. He also brought a prepared backpack, containing a flashlight, an old machete he had also found in the shed, the diary and, of course, the crystal. He raced through the night in the direction of the light. After a while the woods became almost impenetrable, so he had to deploy the machete. It was an exhausting and rather long (or so it seemed to Ben) hike. But the light was getting closer and closer and finally he emerged from the woods and gazed upon what the diary had talked about. There it was before him – an immense structure, almost like a giant wielding this blinding light and dragging it

across the water. He entered and ran up the stairs. When he arrived at the top, he looked for the slot in the wall his grandfather had drawn in the book - and sure enough it was there. He took out the crystal and took a few deep breaths to try and compose himself before putting it in. Suddenly, the lantern stopped moving and the light seemed to have become even more blinding. It marked a straight path to the shore. Ben waited to see if anything would happen; and indeed, in a matter of minutes he could discern what looked like a boat coming from the distance at a quick pace. He turned around and started running down the stairs. At the bottom he stopped, realizing he had forgotten the backpack upstairs. He thought about it for a minute, but finally decided to go back and get it. On his second way down, however, he tripped and fell down the stairs. For what seemed a few moments, he was unconscious. And slowly coming to, he realized the situation and made great effort to pick himself up and try to get to the boat. But to his horror, when he went out, he saw nothing. He must have been out longer than he had thought, for he was obviously too late. Then he turned around and looked at the lighthouse. The light was getting dimmer by the second. Soon enough it completely went out and the lighthouse vanished into thin air before his eyes. Ben fell back in the sand and looked at the sky. Tears were flowing down his cheeks: just like that, everything he had hoped for was gone. He stayed there for what seemed like an eternity.

In the aftermath of all this, Ben tried to explain himself to his father, even showing him the diary, but was of course dismissed. Philip told him that he read too many fantasy books and took away that privilege for the time being. Also, Ben was mostly confined to his room, under lock and key, except when he went downstairs for meals or out on the boat, where his father would bring him once a week. He was, at least, lucky enough to get out of the fall he had suffered with just a few scratches and bruises.

Ben lay in his bed one night, contemplating what had happened to him and trying to make sense of it. Unable to fall asleep, he got out of bed and went over to the window. He looked at the water: at that moment a light flashed across it, lighting it up beautifully. Ben looked on for a moment and went back to bed with a smile on his lips.

Cul-de-sac

Nemanja Arsić

Situated on the edge of the country rests a small town; the town which harbors organizations unlike any other. Though unofficial, these “organizations” are the pillars of proper development. One such organization lies in a cul-de-sac, its origins unknown. What is known is that it is as old as the town itself, being kept alive by the generations that come and go. At the very end of the street is a tree house that acts as a headquarters for the small people living in it. These small people are in fact children, known only by their nicknames: Number One, Two, Three, Four, and Five.

It’s afternoon, the school is over for the day and the gang gathers in the HQ, without Number 5, to discuss the details of an upcoming event, one that is not joyful in nature.

“So, how did everyone survive today?”, asked Number One.

“Wasn’t that bad, fat Johnny got bullied today”, replied Number 2 snickering halfway through the sentence.

“Serves him right,” yelled Number 4, “it’s his fault for being fat anyway!”

“Why do you always have to be mean to him 4, it’s not like he did anything to you!”, Number 3 stepped in to defend the absent party.

“Shut up 3, you’re a girl and this is man’s stuff, what do you know about it? Oh I see, you’ve got a crush on Johnny. Hey everyone, 3 is in love with Johnny, na na na!”. Number 4, instantly jumping from his seat, took the opportunity to sing the “K I S S I N G” song.

“Alright, enough!”- yelled Number One, the obvious leader of the bunch, thus interrupting Number 4’s song of mockery followed by an awkward interpretation of what he called a chicken dance.

“We have more pressing matters at hand, like Number 5’s ceremony tomorrow and exile from our little squad”, Number 1 continued.

“Woah, wait a minute, ceremony? Exile? Number 5?” Clearly awoken from his daydreaming, Number 2 found himself in total confusion.

“Have you forgotten that tomorrow is her birthday, 2?”, Number 1 shook his head. “And the 13th birthday at that, and we all know what that means.”

“Oh I’ve forgotten about the 13th rule, and the ceremony that goes with it!”, Number 2 replied precisely in an attempt to atone for his temporary absence.

“I wish it were your birthday tomorrow Number 2, so I don’t have to tolerate your nonsense every day, I am a very busy man you see”, said Number 4.

“Shut up Number 4, your 13th birthday is next!”, Number 2 defended himself, thus silencing Number 4.

“Okay so, as far as we know other streets will be present tomorrow at the ceremony, and I want us to behave, in other words no bickering or sanctions will be inflicted.” And Number One waved his index finger, signaling that this was not an empty threat.

“Aye, sir”, the bunch replied as one.

“I am gonna get her a teddy bear, Number 5 loves teddy bears!”, Number 3 added in excitement.

“As you wish 3,” Number 1 said, looking out for her best interest “but I have a feeling that that’s about to change starting tomorrow.” He continued: “We all know that things change once you turn thirteen, the person you once knew is no longer the same person, all of a sudden they like different things and...they are no longer the same...There is nothing we can do about it, it’s how things are...”

Gloom filled the room just as Number One was finishing his sentence, and everyone looked down at the ground, utterly consumed by sadness, and the atmosphere in the HQ took a shift from playful to miserable. Each member knew that the bond created over the years of comradeship and endless adventures such as the operation “Apple harvest” and “That-annoying-old-man-that-keeps-puncturing-our-ball” will be severed once the candles are blown.

“...And we will have to get used to the fact that we won’t be seeing Number 5 anymore. Now with that this meeting is adjourned, take a break and I will see you tomorrow at the birthday, be sure to bring your A game.” And with the slam of his gavel the meeting ended; the gang dispersed as swiftly as they gathered.

The next day the gang regrouped at Number 5’s house for the birthday party, and, as predicted, the members of other groups were present as well.

“Yo, there’s Number 75 from Joe King street,” said Number 4 excitedly. “Hey, 75 how’s it going man?!”

“Hey 4, looking sharp man, heard the Old Man’s house got egged a week ago, you wouldn’t have to know anything about that, eh?”, Number 75 replied while doing the secret handshake with Number 4.

“Let’s just say the Old Man will be too busy for puncturing our footballs with all the eggs we threw on his house haha!”, replied Number 4, eager to take the credit for the operation he came up with.

“Hey, here comes Number 5, don’t act awkward!”

“Hi guys, are you enjoying the party?”, the girl asked.

“Uhm, yeah, sure... nice party 5, yeah...”, the gang replied awkwardly.

“Oh come on, you don’t have to be weird about it, just enjoy yourselves and what will be will be.”

“Yeah, sure 5, happy to be here”, Number One stepped up. “Have a good one.”

Finishing the conversation Number 5 moved on to speak to other guests, and a bunch caught the gang’s attention.

“Who are those guys, and why do they speak funny? What does ‘lit’ and ‘fam’ mean?” confused Number Two wanted to know.

“Aren’t those the teenagers?”, Number 3 asked in reply.

“Oh yes, the infamous “It’s lit” group, they disgust me. They are probably here to recruit Number 5 after the birthday. I’m tired of losing people to these guys”, replied Number 1, clenching his fists.

“Hey, the ceremony is about to begin!”, a voice shouted from the distance.

“Let’s go.”

After the birthday has ended, the gang, along with Number 5 and the other brotherly groups, gathered in front of the tree house.

“You who are known as Number Five, please step forward...”, Number 1 “by the right which is bestowed upon me I now banish you from the sacred order of the “Cul-de-sac” on the grounds that, by turning thirteen, you have reached the end of your membership. You are now entering the next stage of your life. If you have anything else to say, now would be the time to say it.” “I am just thankful that I was a part of this little gang, and thank you for all the memories that you have given me, the memories which I will cherish and look up to as a beacon of light in my darkest times. I am proud of you, and what you achieved here. Thank you”, Number 5 recited.

Tears began to stream on Number 3’s face. Number 4 was doing everything in his power not to shed a tear on this dreadful occasion, so as not to seem weak, while Number 2 was drifting in his daydreams, only catching a fragment of the conversation, yet even those fragments were enough to devastate him.

“Very well, you may now blow the candles. I wish you all the best...Happy Birthday Ann”, said Number 1.

“Happy birthday Ann!”, the crowd repeated.

The day concluded after the candles were blown, the gang, one member short, retreated to their headquarters to look at recruitment plans to replace Number 5, and to plan the big winter operation, codename “Frog’s Hill”.

The very next day, Ann woke up and got ready for school. New responsibilities awaited her now that she was thirteen and no longer a child. On her way to school she took a shortcut that lead her to the cul-de-sack, she stood there for a minute and looked at the tree house, the former headquarters of hers. She felt nothing, she had overgrown the feeling that had consumed her before. She was now a teenager, and the past held no grasp on her now. She was ready to take on the world, but she would keep true to her promise in her “last words” delivered the day before. She would cherish the memories and hold them dear in the twilight years that were to come.

A Pirate's Life

Darko Stevanović

It was, if my memory serves me well, August 1711 when I decided to abandon my “dull” life and my family so that I could lead a more interesting, exciting and glamorous life of a pirate. Ever since I read a book about pirates (a gift from my uncle), I was fascinated with their way of life. All my heroes were great and famous pirates. We lived in a small town called Chorley, not far from the Western coast of England. Although Liverpool, where I heard many pirates lived and stopped by to sell their loot, was quite near our town, I had never actually encountered a pirate in person. The stories my uncle told me, and the book he gave me, were enough for me to create an idealized picture. My uncle liked pirates as well, but for a different reason. He was a merchant in Liverpool and often bought their stolen goods and merchandise, which eventually made him moderately rich.

I was fourteen years old at the time, and my uncle offered my parents to take me with him to Liverpool to work for him during the summer. My parents, always in financial troubles, accepted his offer gladly. I, although happy to spend time with my uncle and see Liverpool for the first time, was not thrilled about the job at first since I knew it would be hard, but it was not really my choice. On our way to Liverpool, my uncle helped me find another silver lining, and that was that I might have a chance of meeting a pirate, and, he joked, of becoming one. A thought that I would actually want that to happen, that is, to become a pirate, crossed my mind there and then for the first time.

A few weeks had passed since my arrival in Liverpool when my uncle told me that I had to do the night shift at the warehouse again. My tasks were usually to clean up the mess in the warehouse and grant the wishes of the other workers. I was the youngest there so the workers took advantage of that. They pushed me around and used me to bring them things they needed, and they often made fun of me. I hated my time there. I did not like my life in Chorley but this was even worse. I just had to get away from it all. During that night shift, after a few long and hard hours of cleaning up I was allowed a short break which I spent avoiding the other workers. I got out of the warehouse and walked to the nearby docks. There were only four or five ships anchored and the docks looked desolate. I noticed that one of them had a Jolly Roger raised. It was decided. I was going to join a pirate crew at once. But then a group of pirates appeared around the corner.

“Where do you think you’re going, boy?”, the one with a peg leg said.

“I... I want to join your crew,” I stuttered.

“Oh, really? And why do you think we would want a child like you?”, the pirate continued.

“I can be of great help to you. I am ready for any challenges and any tasks that you may have for me. I assure you that I will fulfill my duties.”

The pirates laughed at my answer, and then a pirate with an eye patch asked me: “What’s your name, boy?”

“Benjamin”, came my swift reply.

“Look here, Benny boy, being a pirate is not easy. We have no use for you here now. Come back in a few years and then we will talk. You are not ready for this.” the pirate said and then addressed the other pirates, “Let’s get going. We’ve got to buy that rum. We set sail in the morning.”

The group of pirates left and I remained there, in front of that beautiful man-of-war, contemplating my options. Yes, I was hurt by what the pirate had said, but I couldn’t give up just because of that. I could have guessed his answer and I couldn’t let the first impediment be the one to ruin my long time wish. I decided to sneak onboard and hide until we left the port in the morning. My plan was obviously not elaborate and meticulous enough since I had not thought about what I would do the after the ship left.

Sneaking onboard was easy, since a lot of pirates were in town and the rest were drunk and asleep on the deck. I tiptoed to the room where food was kept and I found a half-empty barrel with a few apples left in it which I concluded was a decent hiding place. After a minor struggle, I managed to climb into the barrel and put the lid on top of it. I then had a nutritious meal of two whole apples and fell asleep.

In the morning, I was woken up by the creak of wood and I heard the waves splashing on the hull. It meant that we had left the port. Soon after, two men came into the room and I looked through the peephole to see who they were. It was the pirate with a peg leg I had run into the night before, and the other one, whom I did not know.

“Where are we headed?”, the other pirate asked.

“I’ve heard we are searching for ships to plunder around Port Royal, and then Nassau”, the peg-legged pirate replied.

“What is Blackbeard’s plan if we fail this time? He’d better bring us some loot, John. I’m starting to doubt his abilities as a captain.”

I shuddered upon hearing the name. It couldn’t be, I thought. I embarked on the ship run by Blackbeard! The one. The most notorious, cruel and vicious pirate of all time. Edward Teach was his real name. I heard and read a lot of terrifying stories about him. I started thinking that this was all a bad idea, and that my pirate’s life wouldn’t be as easy as I had thought.

“I have doubted his abilities all along. We have to go. Get the apples”, Peg Leg John said.

Upon these words, I froze with fear. I knew there was no way to get out of that situation. The lid was removed and I could see the pirate’s surprised face.

“Hey, John, there is a boy in here”, he said.

“What? Oh, for god’s sake. Aren’t you a stupid boy?”, Peg Leg John grunted.

They took me out on the deck. Every pirate came to see me, and they formed a circle around me. Suddenly, a tall burly man with long, dark beard came out of the crowd and approached me. It was him. He had a smirk on his face which scared me even more.

“Well, what do we have here?” Blackbeard asked. “What’s your name, boy?” he continued.

“Benjamin,” I replied trying to act calm.

“I see. So, what are you doing here Benjamin?” he asked.

“I want to become a pirate.”

“My crew told me they ran into you last night. And after they told you you were not welcome here, you had the nerve to sneak aboard.” He paused briefly, and then continued: “So you want to be a buccaneer, eh? I should make you walk the plank.” The pirates started cheering excitedly in the background. “But I am not going to that.” The crowd settled down. “I’m in a good mood today. Tie him up here. We will use him to clean the deck or something. Get back to your business.” Then he walked away. I was immensely relieved that I survived, but I knew now that becoming a pirate or being one was not how I had imagined it.

The next few days were hard. I cleaned the deck and helped the cook. The other times I was tied up on the deck. I was rarely given food, and was once again a laughing stock. I realized that instead of becoming a pirate, I became a pirates’ slave. At least I realized that I didn’t want to be a pirate anymore. Pirates were far from how I had imagined them. It was not all sailing and searching for gold, enjoying life and being respected by people, it was completely the opposite. I deeply regretted the choices I had made. Unfortunately, nothing short of a miracle could save me this time.

About two weeks since my embarking on Queen Anne's Revenge (the name of Blackbeard’s ship), I was helping out the cook and he sent me to bring the bag of potatoes from the storage room. There, hidden behind the crates, I managed to overhear a conversation between Peg Leg John and the pirate with an eye patch.

“What’s the news?” Peg Leg John asked.

“It is bad, John. It is really bad,” the pirate with an eye patch replied.

“What is it? Spit it out already!”

“The word is that the Spanish Armada is after us. Three ships. All fully equipped men-of-war. And they are not far behind us. They aren’t letting us go this time.”

“Blackbeard has been in war with them for years. I guess they are finally getting their revenge for what he did to them. I doubt we’re getting out of this, too” Peg Leg John replied.

I waited for them to leave and then took the potato bag and got out of the storage room. I was scared of what was going to happen. The Spanish Armada was going to crush us. I knew my chances of surviving were slim, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it. However, I knew it was my only ticket out of this ship as well.

The next morning we were caught up by the three Spanish ships. The pirates tied me up near the helm. It was happening already. I heard a pirate yell “Incoming starboard!” and then another one yell “Incoming port!” and the third one yell “Incoming stern!” That meant that the ships surrounded us from all sides. The fight soon broke out, but didn’t last long. The first cannonball fired hit our main mast which instantly spelled doom for Queen Anne's Revenge and its crew. I could see the Jolly Roger slowly sinking with the main mast into the depths of the ocean. After the first cannon was shot, rapid fire erupted. Blackbeard tried to fight back, but it was in vain. Our ship started sinking and the pirates were jumping overboard. I saw Blackbeard coming towards me. He cut me free and said “You’re free, boy. Good luck,” and then went to help the gunners. I got up, and without much thinking, jumped into the water.

I woke up on a beach. It turned out that I had lost my consciousness upon my fall. There was a lot of debris around me, but there was no one else. I was marooned on an island. I was glad I was alive but I was now faced with another challenge: to try and get back home safely.

After coming to my senses and processing everything that had happened, I went to search for signs of human life. I went into the forest, and after a couple of hours of searching I ran into an indigenous tribe. Hesitant at first, eventually they gave me food and water and a place to rest. The next day I managed to communicate with them to some extent, and from what I understood there were some other people at the other part of the island. The indigenous people helped me get near there, but from one point I had to go alone since they were scared – justifiably so – to make contact with the whites. I thanked them for their hospitality and moved on. After reaching the end of the forest, I saw the camp. It was a British camp. How lucky I was!

It took a while to tell my story, which I had distorted a bit because I was embarrassed of my own stupidity, but the sailors believed me. They told me their ship would be leaving for Liverpool in two days, and that I would be home in Chorley in about ten days. I was thrilled to be going home finally, and couldn’t wait to be reunited with my family again and tell them about my adventures, or rather misadventures. But mainly I was excited to get my life back, the life I used to think was dull.

The Adventure of Anne, Jack, Jill, Molly, Prim and little Arien
(Or The Venture Into The Forest Before Dinner)

Dušan Anđelković

Anne, Jack and Jill,
And Molly and Prim,
(Leading by the hand little Arien)
On an adventure departed,
To a forest dark, slimy and wet,
(Or at least so they saw it)
To fight dragons and bad men,
To find treasure and gold,
To play and admire the fog,
Yet they were stunned to see,
Beauty, grace and refined gold veneer,
Of nature's leafy crown,
(For it was autumn, you see,
And then the world's the prettiest,
All in red dressed)
But their enthusiasm was no less!
So onward they went, along crunchy paths,

Burnished in copper and iron,
(To guard against the fay, no doubt,
For they like to snatch little children,
And then in their meadows dance about)
And they felt quite brave,
And dazzlingly prepared,
For anything the forest could show,
Even if it were a doe!
(They saw them from time to time,
And it was quite a dreadful fright
When one would suddenly jump out of a thicket)
When, Flower! Flower!
Cried Arien from the prow
Of their little ship,
And raced into the trees,
Too thick and leafy still,
To see too far at all.
And his brother shouted,
Panicked, and derailed
The train from its well-trodden rails,
And all the friends after him went,
To the accompanying lament,
Of a little boy's laughter,

Who had gone ahead.
But look! What a sight awaited,
When they had waded,
Through the weeds and clasping fingers of thorns.
A meadow!
And in the middle
Standing Arien, in a gleeful giggle,
Was surrounded by flowers,
(And oh, how many flowers!)
Of every hue and scent,
Shape and size!
Roses, Tulips, Orchids,
Cypress Red, Fragrant Lilly,
Jasmine, Morning's Glory,
Violets and Laurels,
Begonia and Hydrangea,
And Freesia white and pink,
And many a more,
Without name or ever before known
(They thought so,
For if they didn't know them,
Then certainly no one else would know)
And in their wonder they wandered

Into this elven garden,
(Though Jill did stop them,
And, quite carefully, looked round them,
Checking for the little mischievous fey)
To play and to ogle,
And gather flowers for their little friend,
Who had sat down and started to fashion a crown
Out of all the blossoms.
But soon they tired,
(For the game was much too tame
For the tamers of dragons and warlocks,
The saviours of fair dames)
And clamoured to depart
Much to the terror
Of one little devil.
No! No! Arien did cry,
And purse his lips,
And with tears did threaten his peers,
To no avail!
So on and on it went,
Till the little angel's tears were spent,
And he fairly collapsed,
Into the pile of flowers they had plucked

So he could make his dazzling crowns.
Confused (and a little frightened),
The friends convened,
And, much reluctant, decided
They could bare not break his slumber.
So Arien won!
And he stayed with his flowers,
And though they proclaimed themselves
Sad and befouled,
(Befuddled, really, but let's allow them their jest,
For they had so much to do ahead!
And losing their little squire
Would no doubt lead to quite a mire.)
They cried 'he has found his napping place'
And left him to be one
With the flowers he so loved.
But adventure waited for none,
And onwards they sailed,
Now five instead of six,
But not less robust and hale.
Now without a trail,
They wondered over yonder,
Picking their way through

A most enchanting forest floor,
Though occasionally they came across
What they could swear was a bone.
When Jack suddenly cried
Get into formation! Grab your arms!
(Sticks were ready by their sides)
For he had something seen,
A glimpse of light,
A play of mind?
But no! Something did emerge,
Like a river, quick and lithe,
And the little soldiers
Breathed in relief and dropped their shoulders.
(It wasn't a dragon, after all,
And what other beast deserved their fear?)
Wolves they were,
Pretty and swift,
And their coats of grey,
Scattered sun's rays,
Like miniature suns,
So warm and inviting,
Cuddly and befuddling,
For company starved,

They called and jeered,
Promised candy and veal,
Begging the girls,
To add their voices,
To their choir of rejoice,
And Anne went to them!
(She thought them enchanting,
And really, she was so tired
Of walking with no true clue
To where their enemy would ambush the group,
And she would only play a while!)
So, happily they played,
Bounding, hopping,
Panting and lopping,
Swiftly and with ease,
(What could possibly stand in the way
Of their dizzying play)
And pranced about,
In circles, round and round,
Nipping on her little fingers,
As she giggled, oh so chapply,
And never even noticed,
They had snatched her little flower,

The brooch her mother dear,
Had so desperately appealed,
She was not to lose.
Yet when she wanted to stop,
She found, and not without a considerable,
Uncomfortable flop in her little chest,
They had wondered away,
And her friends she could not see,
Anywhere far or near.
And she chastised the wolves,
And they looked away,
Properly ashamed.
But when she tried to leave,
They clamoured, whined and did plead,
That the forest was a dangerous place,
And they snatched at her dress
(And, oh! By mistake,
Drew a little blood, but do not fuss
Or make mistake, it did not hurt at all,
Or so they claimed.)
And argued, quite rightly,
She ought not trek alone,
Through such a galore

Of things dark and dreary.
But no worries! They would guide her out
(They were friends, after all!
So she would see
Her other friends quite soon, indeed,
As soon as they left the forest too.
And as Anne nodded in assent,
Her knight company so dear,
Was in quite a pickle all seated on their rears,
In a council most severe,
For they had lost their friend
And had no lead (nor the required men)
To comb the woods in search of her.
Till, at last, after much deliberation and debate
(Ten minutes, at least!)
The decision was made,
To forge onward,
Since, indeed, 'tis could be none other than a warlock
Who could fight off Anne's guards,
(The wolves, of course)
And snatch her from their jaws.
And so on they went,
To save their friend,

Till Jill and Jack,
Broke away from the pack.
For a secret they had found,
And were eager to expound,
To each other the virtues of their discovery.
Go on, go on,
They chirped and grinned,
For they would not lonely for long be,
Working hard and long,
At making new friends in their abode,
Which they would build
Our of branches and twigs,
And leaves as gold
As sunlight woven into song.
And so they giggled and cuddled,
Hidden from sight and ear,
Of all who would peer
On their private bliss.
The band, now down to two,
Little progress made,
But as the day passed,
And made its slow descent,
A silver cloud of glittering stars

Began to cover the forested expanse.
And what a sight it was!
The twirling flakes,
Their dance of delight!
Like little fairies they caught Molly's hair,
Tugging on it,
Adorning it in jewels,
Till she resembled a princess of ice
Embossed in white,
Straight out of a tale.
And as Prim watched
She wondered left, then right,
In a happy daze, in mute delight,
And her heart soared with a fervent wish:
To find her friends,
And share her silent bliss.
(For surely bliss it must have been,
Look at the far-away look in her eyes!)
And guilt gnawed at her,
For enjoying in solitude,
The view laid before her,
Without her friends by her side,
Whom she was powerless to keep

From wondering off after their own interests and fanciful deceits.

(And such a majestic view

Can only be enhanced when shared

And her mood sought company

Since company it adored.)

And so Prim was left,

Since he could not stand

To tear Molly away from her dreamy,

Icy embrace of

(Again, it could only be)

Happiness.

In shadows which were long and crept

Up on him when he wasn't looking,

And he paused, wide-eyed, searching

For a sign of his friends.

But none were to be found,

And adventures in front of him still abound,

So he exclaimed,

Oh joy, oh joy!

What adventures and wonders,

What bewildering conundrum,

This world of ours,

So pretty and not at all foul,

Has to offer to us, children of Dawn!

The Heart of Stone

(inspired by the half-forgotten memory of a fairy tale heard in childhood)

Jovana Branović

A long time ago, a king and a queen lived in a land far away. Being afraid that someone might come and take his throne, the previous king had had his castle built on the very edge of the woods. Even though they had everything one would ask for - gold, food, expensive clothes, servants - the queen felt miserable. The castle had belonged to her father, whom the current king had killed and overthrown, forcing her into marrying him. She had not been happy ever since, but rather felt like a prisoner, with her family turned into servants in the place she could no longer call her home. She felt helpless and could only lament over her destiny. Every night, she would look at the moon and admire the way she managed to stand out and shine majestically even when the sky was swallowed by the darkness. Her husband's cruelty frightened the queen, and she could only imagine what terrible deeds he could commit next in pursuit of wealth and power.

Little did the queen know that she was not alone. The tree fairies inhabited the thick tops of the tallest trees, deep in the woods; they would sleep in the little homes they had made in the branches among the clouds, feast on the trees' fruits and drink the dew from the leaves every morning. They were thousand years old, yet possessed the beauty and the vitality of girls of fifteen. The fairy queen had been carefully observing the poor queen's every tear and every prayer, and decided to give the king the last chance to change his ways. She used her magical powers to turn herself into a poor, old woman, dressed in rags, with a hump on her back and a cane in her hand. It was winter now, and the scrawny old woman knocked on the door of the castle, begging the king to let her stay during the night, since it was freezing outside and she was starving. The cruel king just laughed at her words, threatening to kill her if she came back.

Feeling sorry for the old lady, the queen told her husband, 'My king, I could take care of her and make sure you don't even notice her.' But the ruthless king did not want to listen. He warned his wife not to question his decision, or he would have her killed too.

The next day, a young man in a rich attire entered the castle.

‘Your highness, I lost myself in the woods, would you please give me food and shelter just for the night? I will pay you well!’ he said, throwing a small bag full of coins on the table, which the greedy king took hurriedly. Since the stranger was wealthy, the king agreed to help him, promising him the most delicious meals and the most comfortable rooms. No sooner did the king give these orders than the man turned into the Fairy Mother with a beautiful female body: long golden hair with curls which smelled of poplar trees and early spring irises, large and (now) furious eyes, and a pair of brightly-colored wings flapping in the air graciously. Aware of his sins, the king was now trembling with fear at the sight of the Fairy’s angry hazel eyes.

‘So, this is how you rule!’ the Fairy shouted. ‘You help only those who are useful to you. First, you threatened to kill me and pushed me away, and now you’re helping me because I offered you money! You have to be punished!’

The king fell onto his knees: ‘Please good Fairy Mother, give me one more chance and I promise I will be a kind and noble king!’

The fairy said: ‘I will let you live, but in one month precisely, you and your queen will come to my kingdom up there in the trees where I will be waiting for you. Remember well: if either one of you brings a single stone or anything made of stone into my kingdom, you will be punished. And if you arrive on time, I will find you myself and you will not escape my punishment!’

‘But how will we find you?’ the king asked, but it was too late; the fairy had already vanished into the air. The king was worried but still pleased that he got away so easily.

Twenty-nine days passed, and the king and the queen made all the necessary preparations and set out on their journey. As soon as they entered the realm of the fairies, they met a big boar dying of thirst.

The animal said desperately: ‘Dear king, would you please give me some of your water? The nearby spring froze a few days ago and I haven’t drunk anything since. Help me and I promise I will return the favor in the moment of need.’

The king just laughed: ‘How could an animal like you possibly help us!’

But the queen felt sorry for the poor animal and gave it some water from her bottle. Her husband laughed at her, too, and called her a fool.

A few hours later they came across a snake. She pleaded with the king: ‘Your highness, would you please give me something to eat? I am dying, I am too old and weak to hunt, and it’s winter. Help me now and I will help you when needed.’ But the king didn’t want to waste his food on

the animal which will die anyway, and wanted to move on. However, the good-hearted queen could not just leave this poor snake to die, so she tore off a piece of her bread and gave it to the hungry animal. ‘Thank you, my queen! I will never forget your kindness!’ the snake promised gratefully.

The king and the queen moved on, and found a gigantic white owl trying to fly but falling back on a piece of trunk.

The owl begged the king: ‘My dear king, a sharp piece of wood is stuck somewhere in my wing and now I cannot fly to my nest – my children will die without me. Please help me and I will prove grateful to you when you need me the most!’ Thinking that everyone is as deceitful as he is, the king did not trust the wounded bird.

‘We only have a few hours left and have no time to waste. Moreover, you are bigger than us and you could easily eat us the moment we help you!’ he said, and proudly went on.

Even though she was scared, the queen could not stand thinking that baby owls were left to the mercy of wilderness. She approached the owl, found the piece of wood among the feathers in her left wing, took it out and freed the bird from pain.

‘My queen, you have a heart of gold! I promise that your kindness will be rewarded sooner or later!’ the owl cried.

‘Just go and take care of your children! That will be my biggest reward!’ the queen shouted, watching the owl rising into the sky powerfully.

A few days later, the two of them found themselves lost in the woods. There were no longer any paths to follow, the trees were suddenly so tall and their tops so thick that they could no longer see the sky. The two of them felt helpless and did not know which way to go. At this moment, the boar appeared from behind a pine tree. ‘I see that you have lost your way in the Fairyland, and I grew up in this kingdom. Follow me and I will keep my promise and show you the way.’ Not having much choice, the king and the queen followed the animal through the caves, swamps, over the streams and hills, all the way to the Great Gate. ‘This is where you will find the key to the Gate’ said the boar while pointing at the garden on their left. I kept my promise and now I have to go’, he added and left, leaving the king and the queen in despair.

They felt helpless once again as the garden turned out to be a labyrinth covered in thorns and roses. The king pulled out his sword and tried to cut the huge stalks but to no avail – the garden was protected by some magic spell so that once he cut them, the stalks would return to their

former shape once again. They had to find another way. It was at this moment that the snake appeared.

She said: ‘Thanks to the queen, I’m still alive. You are in trouble and I will help you, as I promised. The key is hidden in the petals of the most beautiful rose in the world, right there at the center of the garden. The rose is protected by the big thorns so that no human hand can ever reach it. But I will find a hole in the ground and slide under the ground towards the center of the garden, take the key and bring it to you.’

Having opened the Gate, the couple finally entered the Fairyland. They were overwhelmed by the most beautiful scenery they have ever seen. Everything around them was rich in color and full of precious life: blooming, growing, blossoming, flourishing. The queen closed her eyes and enjoyed the sweet smell of irises, chrysanthemums and lilacs. A blissful smile on her sun-kissed face revealed joy and peace which she felt after a long time. Birds, insects, small and big animals were all living in peace in this magical place untouched by the human hand.

The king and the queen moved on until they reached the tallest tree in the whole kingdom, whose top they could not even see. It seemed to have no branches and its bark was so smooth that they could not climb it. This is when they caught sight of the great white owl approaching from the sky. ‘Jump on my back and I will carry you to the top where the Fairy Mother lives. You see, I haven’t forgotten your kindness,’ she told the queen. ‘And remember,’ she added, ‘we rise by lifting others.’ Saved once again, the humans jumped on the wise owl’s back and found themselves among the clouds.

Before facing the Fairy Mother, the king had made sure that neither he nor his wife had any stones with them.

‘So, you made it in time,’ the Fairy Queen said. ‘Tell me, do you have something made of stone?’

‘No, your Fairyness,’ the king answered, with determination.

‘Are you sure? You do not have a single thing made of stone?’ she persisted.

‘No! You can see for yourself if you want’ replied the king, filled with certainty.

‘You are lying! You do not understand my question! Your heart is made of stone! You did not change; you did not learn your lesson! You refused to help those you considered useless or less worthy. You are still selfish, and obsessed with gold and power! Therefore, I will punish you!’

As she said this, she turned the king into a statue made of stone. The statue was then put in his castle as a reminder of what happened to those who are greedy and selfish. As for the queen... As reward for her kindness, the Fairy Mother gave her a pair of wings and let her stay in the Fairyland where she would use magic power to spread love and kindness all over the world.

Familia Lupina Ante Omnia

Lazar Jovanović

When you live in the forest like I do, staying with the pack is the way to survive: only those who left the pack or have been abandoned live alone. This usually happens to our mothers who are too old to stay with the pack and provide it with new pups. But it was my father who disappeared when I was one summer old. No one wanted to tell me where he had gone. He probably left the pack too. Anyway, after that, it was only my mother and me, alone in the pack, and I think they like us, the elders agreed to teach me even though I'm a girl, they say my father's blood will make me as good a hunter as he was.

“Dawn!” My mother howled, calling me, “Get back here this instant!”. I already knew I was late for bed but I didn't care.

“Where were you? Do not stay out this late again, I don't want to go around the forest looking for you”. I couldn't tell her that I had picked up my father's scent again because she always gets angry with me and sends me to my corner in the den.

“I am sorry Mom, I had so much fun playing outside, I forgot how late it was”, I lied.

“Next time a bear might attack you, or you could get caught in those jaws that humans set. I don't like you staying outside in the dark, I don't want to lose you too.”

I couldn't help but notice the sorrow in her eyes when she told me that, we both knew what she was thinking about.

“Anyway Dawn, let us go to sleep, tomorrow Aldwulf wants to start teaching you and the other pups how to hunt larger prey.”

“I wish dad was here to teach me instead of him!” I snarled at her knowing full well what I did. It's just... I couldn't forget his scent from moments ago. I remembered the scent of the fur on that tree and it brought tears of anger to my eyes since no one wants to tell me what happened to him. She put her nose to the ground and had her eyes fill with tears, only to bark back at me:

“Well he is gone, he is no longer a part of the pack, and you have to learn to be a hunter without him!”

Her words hurt me, I know she wanted me to forget about him and move on, but also I know we both want him back. I know that that fur on the tree wasn't even his.

She sent me to the back of the den and told me never to snarl at her again as the sadness in her eyes took a shape of condescending anger mixed with the strictness, which she obtained the day my father left us. I went to sleep remembering the color of his fur, thinking how we were once a happy family along with the rest of the pack. The same recurring dream where my father and I play-fight together while my mother watches us from the back of the den telling me to go easy on my father started once more. I woke up at sunrise, just moments before my mother, when I noticed her paws intertwined with one another. She probably fell asleep wishing they were dad's.

Aldwulf howled for all of us pups to come to the big rock in the middle of the forest, so we all did. He was a large, gray wolf whose fangs have not seen hunt in a while, but his wisdom came from the many years he had spent in this forest being the best hunter of the pack before my dad came of age. “All right younglings, today we will learn how to hunt deer, moose, elks, and just in case, bison.”

“There aren't any bison near us”, my friend Bardolf said under his breath.

“Why do you always have to be such an arrogant know-it-all, Bardolf?”, I asked him.

“It's true!” he said loud enough for Aldwulf to look at both of us reproachfully. This was enough for us to quiet down.

“As I was saying, it is very important to face larger prey with extreme caution and as a group. They have horns which can break your bones or tear your skin if you aren't careful enough, and we do not want to lose numbers trying to play heroes and singlehandedly bring food for the entire pack. That's step number one. I mean two. I mean those are steps one and two. Or is it all just one step?” he continued arguing with his old self which made us pups laugh.

“I picked up his scent last night”, I whispered.

“Oh, you did? When did he leave the pack exactly?”, Bardolf asked me.

“I don't remember and it doesn't matter. It was his scent, I know it.” I replied.

“Ah, you are right, it is.” He smiled. “Did you follow it?”

“Of course, I did! Bardolf, who do you think I am? I can't be our pack's best hunter if I don't follow my nose”, I replied.

“Hey, I know you did, I was just pulling your leg. What did you find?”

“It was some fur on a log, it seemed to be his, I couldn’t see that well in the dark.”

“The best hunter can’t make excuses Dawn, if you want to be one you have to follow more than just your nose.”

Aldwulf cleared his throat, which was a sign for us to stop bickering and start paying attention to him.

“Step 8, when you have it surrounded, try to push it into an obstacle so it can’t run from you anymore, and then swiftly grab it by its neck with your fangs to finish step 9. Step 10 is easy, just wait for it to stop fighting and there you go, we have meals for our pack.”

That was the end of his lesson; he dismissed us and told Bardolf to stay behind for a minute. After I saw him nodding away at Aldwulf’s questions, Bardolf headed my way sprinting.

“What was that about?” I asked Bardolf once he returned to me.

“Oh, nothing, he was just checking if my father still bites me if I don’t do what he says.”

“Well, does he?” I asked.

“I just do what he says now, so it rarely happens these days.”

“Well at least you have your dad.”

“It’s not as great as you think it is.”

“Hey, stop saying that, you don’t know how badly I wish my father was here again.”

“You should really focus on the pack and on what you have; being such a little pup won’t bring him back.”

I knew he meant nothing by it, he just wanted to change the topic. This was not the first time we talked about this, and he was the only one in the pack who wouldn’t beat around the bush with me. I went back to my den and my mother asked me if I had learned something today, and I said I had. She brought out some rabbit for lunch which I quickly ate just so I could go out and play in the forest again. Today, dark came quicker than usual, maybe because the clouds covered the sun or something, I’m not so sure. As all the others pups started heading back to their dens, I walked past Aldwulf thinking I should probably ask him about the shortened length of the day, but decided I don’t want to. I spent the entire walk home thinking about it, so I tried cheering up before entering the den.

“Oh, so today you came home on time, that’s unusual”, my mother said.

“Yeah, there was nothing interesting in the forest today.”

“Is everything all right, daughter?”, she asked.

“Yeah...” I stalled, and hesitantly asked her “Why did the night come quicker today?”

“Well, my daughter, I’m not so sure, but your father once told me days get shorter before wintertime.”

“Oh, all right.”

“You can always ask Aldwulf, us girls were never called to learn stuff with the elders like you are. All they teach us is how to take care of you pups... just to be left behind later, when we aren’t of any use to the pack anymore.”

“I don’t like him; he tries so hard to teach me things which I am sure father knows better. Besides, he will be the first one to leave you behind when you get old, I don’t want to let him do that.”

“This is how the law of the pack works my little girl, though I’m sure your father, as the best hunter, would protect us from that.” It was moments like these, when she talked about him without any sadness in her eyes, that I loved. And I was always happy to hear more stories about him.

“After all, he is the wolf who managed to convince the pack to let our girl-pups learn about hunting and be a bigger part of the pack.” She finished. “Off to bed now young lady, you need to rest for tomorrow”, her face fighting not to let any melancholy come out. I again had the same dream like I always do.

The next morning, Aldwulf howled for us pups and we went sit by the rock again. I sat next to Bardolf like I always do, but I noticed he wasn’t entirely his chatty self. His tail was between his legs and he was hiding his hind legs. We spent Aldwulf’s lesson entirely in silence, I waited for him to turn to talk to me but this time he was just looking at the ground, probably not even paying attention to anything else.

“Hey, what’s wrong, you haven’t had any snappy comments for Aldwulf’s teaching today?”

“I wasn’t in the mood for it; I have other things on my mind.”

“Oh really, like what, what could be more important than becoming the best hunter in the pack?”

“I don’t want to talk about it”, he snarled at me.

It was then when I was certain something was not right with him. Despite his anger directed at me, I approached him slowly looking him directly in his eyes, seeing sadness masked underneath it.

“Did he bite you again?”, I asked in a soothing voice.

“Why do you care?”, he yelled, on the brink of tears and from the top of his lungs.

“We are a pack Bardolf, you and me, I care.”

“My father is my pack and he still bites me, what does that matter.”

It was at that moment that I noticed his paws trembling from both anger and weakness. I took a step closer towards him as he backed up a bit.

“I know, he is a bad person, even though he is your family”, I offered.

“What do you know about family, your father left you and your mother all alone.”

“I know families care for each other, I know all the bad and good sides of the pack, my mother never kept secrets from me and I know the pack will abandon her too once she isn’t able to care about pups anymore”, I told him in the same direct manner he had been using on me. Bardolf was stumped by my words and I could notice his frowned lips trembling in confusion.

“Is that it? Are you, a person who doesn’t even share my blood, the only one to care about me?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “this is all you get.” He smiled as tears started falling down his face: “Well then, that’s fine by me”, he said as he started crying in earnest.

I realized he didn’t want to go back home when I got close to him and looked at the wounds his father had inflicted on him last night. Bardolf probably stayed out longer, or didn’t clean his den or it was an accident, I didn’t want to know and it didn’t matter. I told him he could come to my den; my mother surely won’t have a problem with it. When we got back to my den, I told my mother about Bardolf and the wounds on his neck, ears and legs which he managed to hide from Aldwulf earlier. My mother helped him by licking his wounds, I brought him some food, and it was already dark. He was so tired that he fell asleep with lunch still in his mouth. My mother and I soon went to sleep after him when she told me that from now on she’ll take care of the both of us. As we were sleeping, Bardolf snapped, waking himself and the two of us up by yelling: “Oh the bones! I didn’t clean the bones after eating!”

He curled his tail squealing, opened his eyes wide waiting for my mother to bite him. She told him it was just bones and that she did it for him, and that he could go back to sleep. At first, he didn’t expect her to say that but he was relieved that he wasn’t going to get punished for it, and it took us some time to get back to sleep. The next day, after dawn, Bardolf and I were getting ready to go to Aldwulf’s lessons under the rock when my mother said she would walk us to it. We weren’t quite sure why she would do that since she never walked me to the rock since I was a young pup, but we agreed anyway. She knew how the pack worked, she knew what kind of wolf his father was, and she knew he was going to try to take him back home against his will. It did not take much for him to show up in front of the rock talking to Aldwulf. The three of us approached them when he snarled: “There you are you little runt! Where were you?”

My mother stopped us in our tracks and jumped in front of us snarling back:

“He was staying at his friend’s; I’m sure a good parent like you knows what their child is up to.”

Aldwulf looked at him knowing how he was treating Bardolf just to direct his eyes to the ground the moment Bardolf’s father looked him in the eyes. My mother looked into his eyes and started snarling and showing her teeth, expecting Aldwulf to try and stop him, but she saw he was afraid. He was no match for the much younger wolf. She turned to us and told us to run towards the sun, which we were hesitant to do. Bardolf and I looked at each other and started running when we noticed his father had shown his teeth to my mother. Everybody else fled, the entire pack abandoned her much earlier than they were supposed to, so the two of us decided to go back and help her. As real hunters, we remembered Aldwulf’s lessons and surrounded him with my mother on his front, his back to the rock and Bardolf and me on his sides. He knew we could bite him right there so he tried to calm us down and asked: “Why did you run away from me son? What did I do to you?” “I’ve had enough of you, dad. If I can call you so! You hurt me every day, you don’t see the things I’ve achieved and you punish me for every little thing I do.”

“It’s because I love you, son.”

“Lies, that’s all lies! You are a bully, and I don’t want to have anything to do with you”, Bardolf replied with tears in his eyes.

“Do not come after us, these pups are my pack now, if we see you next time, they will do whatever it takes to defend themselves,” my mother said.

The rest of the pack was still hiding behind the trees and bushes, watching this. It was at that moment the three of us knew they had abandoned us and that we were now on our own. My mother told us to keep heading towards the sun; she was right behind us checking if anyone was following us. We kept walking all day, stopping only to have a few licks of water from a stream in order to stay away from the pack as far as we could. At the end of the day, when the night started setting, we tried to find some shelter from the coming cold. “It’s cold, isn’t it?”, I asked.

“Sure is”, Bardolf replied.

“Come children, curl up together so that we can get some warmth”, my mother instructed us.

We lay down next to each other not sure what was colder, the night or the feeling that the pack had abandoned us. My mother barely had any sleep that night, trying to see if anyone had followed us, but despite all that cold she was the one that managed to keep us warm. Before falling asleep that night I thought about what happened earlier and how the pack had betrayed us and left us alone, thinking that this was probably what they had done to my father too. When we got back to bed, my recurring dream was different now, though: I could see Bardolf sitting next to my mother licking his wounds while telling him: “You can join them soon.”

When we woke up, the snow had started covering the ground. Our backs were clean, but my mother’s back had snow all over it. She probably hadn’t slept the entire night cleaning us and

keeping us warm.
“We have to get back on foot” she said. “Dawn, Bardolf, hurry now.”

She got up shakily and we tried to help her when she said she was fine. We went in front of her; she kept lagging behind so we kept waiting for her.

“Let’s find a sheltered dry place so she can rest, she didn’t sleep last night”, Bardolf suggested.

I immediately nodded to him and started looking for such a spot. There was a cave, a nook where there was no snow at all, and some weird tracks led to it. The tracks looked as if two animals were dragging their tails across the ground with what seemed to be a large elk between them, I had never seen anything like it. “Humans” my mother said, “and they left a while ago”.

We noticed some black rocks surrounded by other rocks and it was surprisingly warm as if alive, but it didn’t move, so Bardolf and I decided to bring my mother to it. We went out to play in the snow and tried to stay close to her so that we can hear her if she needs us. The two of us started running and playing hide and seek, howling at her from time to time to check if she was well. After a while we got hungry so we decided to tell her to just howl at us if she needed us. Our hunt began, and we tried picking up scents and looking for tracks, but we couldn’t find anything, it seemed as if all the animals had already gone for their winter sleep. As Bardolf and I were trying to sniff or spot anything which would help us hunt, I stopped for a moment and couldn’t help but notice the nature around us. The cold air, the snowflakes, and even the trees covered by snow were all chilly, the only thing I could hear was the snow crunching under my paws and Bardolf’s howls to my mother became somewhat muffled. I realized how hard it was to live in the forest during winter-time, but I felt safe for I knew my pack was here for me. As I watched a snowflake drop and hit the ground, in the distance I saw a huge dark shadow and immediately recollected myself. I prowled my way towards Bardolf who was facing away from the big shadow that I noticed and told him in a low voice: “I see something over there, look”. Bardolf turned his head slowly, his body barely moving when he said: “It looks like a rock” “It’s not a rock, follow me” “Dawn, it’s huge”, he whispered in fear. “Let’s at least check it out”.

As I said this, the two of us started sneaking over in its direction just as we were taught, we split up to try and corner it. When we got to it, I realized it was an elk, not as big as I thought, and that it would be perfect for the three of us to regain our strength. I looked for Bardolf, and when I found him he kept nodding down to the elk’s feet. When I looked down to his legs, I saw a wounded wolf that didn’t seem to be from our previous pack. I immediately tried to find any other wolves who were trying to ambush the elk but I couldn’t find any, so it must mean that the wolf tried to hunt it alone when he was wounded by the elk. I used my head to signal to Bardolf that we are going to try and hunt the elk, and that he should follow me. Bardolf nodded in agreement and we started sneaking to the elk. When we got close enough, I growled from the top of my lungs and told Bardolf to avoid its antlers, when the elk noticed us and started running. Just before we started chasing it, I looked at the hurt wolf hoping it was my father, but it wasn’t.

So Bardolf and I kept chasing our prey. When we finally caught up to it, thanks to our paws that wouldn't let us fall into the snow like the elk, the two of us managed to corner it. The elk started flailing its antlers. "Look out!" I yelled at Bardolf.

"Let us wear it out, look what it did to that other wolf back there", he replied. We struggled not to get hit by its antlers, in this entire effort the only thing that went through my mind was that if we don't get it, the three of us won't have food to survive this winter. The hunt had already started wearing the two of us down, we were both hungry and the elk was not slowing down yet. Suddenly, Bardolf's movement was broken by a hit from the elk's antlers and he backed off, and when the elk saw that, it came straight at me. Just before it was to hit me, I saw a quick shadow coming from my side grab the elk by its throat, finishing it in one blow. It was the wounded wolf I've seen lying on the ground earlier, and she collapsed onto the ground just as she saved me. When the wolf fell to the ground together with the elk, she didn't have the strength to lift her body again, and Bardolf and I approached her. When I took a closer look, I noticed she was not much older than my mother. I immediately approached her. "What happened?", I asked.

"I... was hungry... and it... was the only... prey... I could... find..." she said faintly.

"You shouldn't have tried hunting it yourself, I am glad we came just in time to help you", I said. At this point she was struggling to stay awake so I managed to thank her quickly before I told Bardolf to start bringing food back to the shelter while I bring her to my mother. It took him some time to bring all the food back in, while I took care of the two of them, feeding them bits of meat so they could recover. As the night set in, the two of us took turns guarding and caring for them until sunrise came.

"Dawn..." my mother exhaled as she woke up, "Who is this?"

"It's the wolf we met while hunting, she helped us take the prey down". Just as I said that, she woke up too. "Thank you... Who are you, you never told me your name..."

"I am Dawn, this is my mother and my friend, we left our pack so we are one family now", I replied proudly. "Who are you, we found you wounded and alone, remember?", I followed.

"My name is Fang, and I was abandoned by my pack," she replied. "How did the three of you get abandoned?"

I told her everything that had happened to us until that point. We shared the food equally between us, talked about our fates and came to the conclusion that we were all betrayed by our packs who followed strict laws and did not care about the individuals enough. Fang thanked us for saving her, and asked if she could stay with us until she completely recovered. Soon the days started getting shorter and shorter, but the four of us were happy as we could be. Bardolf and I played every day, bringing any food we could find to share. Days went by, and the nights did too, and every night I would dream the dream with my father in it, but this time he would be

sitting away from us, watching Bardolf, Fang, my mother and me play and live together happily. The only difference now was that the only part in my dream that was not true was my father sitting and watching over us, being there with us. As time went on, Fang recovered completely and there were no wounds left on her body to heal come springtime. When the cold snow melted and the sky became home to the yellow glow of the sun once again, she told us that she was leaving and thanked us:

“Where are you going Fang?”, I asked her.

“I don’t know Dawn, away, I guess.”

“What kind of an answer is that?”, I said jokingly.

“What do you mean? I don’t have a pack, you ran away from yours, I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“I thought we were a pack now”, I said shyly, not sure if she thought the same.

“I sure feel like we are. Would you mind if I stayed, then?”, she asked joyously. We went on to live as a pack, the four of us together in everything; we were a true pack which adapted to the needs of its individuals. A younger Dawn would probably wish that her father was still alive, but now, I don’t mind it, I have my pack to keep me happy.

Family is not blood; family is not what you are born into. Family is what you make it, family is created by the hardships its members overcame, by the memories it created, by the amount of care and love it shows to every member. A pack must value its future and the future of its individuals equally if it wants to be a family; it must protect what it stands for and those in it; it is the only place which must be able to take you in with open arms no matter what happens, even if you want to run away from it. I think that is what we are, and though perhaps no one would say we are a proper pack, we are what a proper pack should be.

The Magic Shop

Miljana Adamović

There was once a boy who seemed to have nothing, yet he was the happiest boy you could ever meet. And how do I know that? Well... because I am him! I have to admit, I wasn't always this happy, oh no. If you could see me a few months ago, I was very, very sad, lonely, and boring. That's what everyone told me. But ever since Mia showed me the Magic Shop, not a day passes that I am not happy! This Magic Shop, it's the most beautiful place in the world, and when you go there... oh, but wait... I should really start my story from the beginning.

Ever since I knew about myself, I had had many brothers and sisters. I would sometimes have more brothers than sisters, and sometimes the other way around. Whatever it was, I didn't mind as long as there were a lot of us. And I had three moms, or at least that's what I thought until I learned that I was living in an orphanage, and that "orphanage" is a name for a place where children with no real parents live. You see, those moms were not my real moms, because you can only have one mom, but I still loved them as I would love any mom in the world. As for my brothers and sisters, we all loved each other the same way we loved our moms, and that means a lot! We called the orphanage "home", because we learned that this is what you call a place in which you live with your family, and that is exactly what we were, a family. We loved to play in our home with our toys. And we also had a backyard where we would spend a lot of time playing, even during winter, even when it rained!

Then one day, one of our moms suggested that we should go to a park nearby, which wasn't there before, but now it was. It was new. People from our city built it for us, the children. So, we went there one day. It was beautiful! Amazing! We saw there some things we had not seen before – two slides, one for small children, and the other for big children; teeters, some short and some long; there were swings, and benches and trees. There was also sand. We loved it. We wanted to go there every day. There were other children there: they were not my brothers and sisters, so they became my friends. It was all great, I was so happy. When I met those new friends, I also met their toys. Trucks, teddy bears, dolls, cars, even shovels and buckets that can help you build a sand castle in the sand. I could play with all of them while I played with my friends.

One day, something very bad happened. When I asked for a shovel, my friend told me how I was being rude and selfish, and that I should bring my own toys and stop using theirs. The rest of them agreed and they were mad and they said how I was greedy because I used their toys and kept mine for myself. But I explained that I didn't have any toys like they do. I told them that I actually didn't have my own toys, and then they called me a liar. But I explained that I shared

my toys with my family because there weren't many toys in the orphanage. And that's when it all changed. They all started laughing and then they were mad and called me a liar because I told them I had a family, which was a lie, I didn't have one. That's what they said. They called me an orphan and then they left. I was hurt. Those words hurt me so much. How could they tell me I didn't have a family...? Why would they hurt me...? I was so sad and angry and I never wanted to go to the park again, I hated it. I was sad for days. My moms knew what happened, but I never told my brothers and sisters. I only told them I didn't have friends anymore and that I never wanted to go to the park again. My moms explained to me that I shouldn't say that, and that I shouldn't be mad at the park. The park didn't do anything wrong. They also told me how I can't stay at home all the time, and that I should go to the park. And if I met those friends, I should just not play with them, and I should just stop paying attention to them. That is what I did, and it was all good. But now I had a new problem... I started paying attention to their toys. I was jealous because I didn't have those toys they had. They were really, really good. And you could play with them over and over again and they would never become boring. I was sad again. I tried to enjoy the park the same way as before, I really did, but there was no use. It became boring without those toys.

I was sitting by the big slide one day, and I was secretly watching my friends, who were not my friends anymore, when somebody yelled:

“Put your hands in the air or I will tell my tiger to bite you! And don't turn around!”

Tiger??? I had to do what I was told.

“Now, get up the slide and yell ‘I surrender’ and go down.”

I was so scared! I didn't know why I had to surrender, but I was afraid of the tiger and I had to do it. I went up, yelled, and as I was going down the slide I heard a girl laughing. And there she was, right in front of me, laughing, with no tiger. Where is it? What happened? She reached her hand towards me and said:

“Let's go. They'll be looking for us.”

She grabbed my hand and led me towards a bench. We sat on it and then she said:

“There, now we're safe. Hi, I'm Mia.”

All I could see then was her big brown eyes. Then she smiled and I couldn't help but smile back. Then she told me how she came to the park everyday and saw that I was sad for days, so she wanted to make me feel better. She apologized for scaring me, but she said that it was so fun when she thought about it that she had to do it. You know the tiger and all that. And, to be honest, I didn't mind. She really did make me feel better. My whole day was way better than those before that one.

When I went to the park the next day, I saw her standing on top of the slide yelling:

“You’ll never catch me in the water!”

She went down the slide, stood up, and ran towards the wooden table and sat on it. I went to her and asked what was happening. She explained some pirates tried to catch her.

“Because I’m a mermaid you know. But they are so silly. They let me get into water, and how did they think they could catch a mermaid in the water, we are such fast swimmers.”

I didn’t understand.

“Pirates? Mermaids?” – I asked.

“Well, yes. Just like that tiger yesterday. I have it all in my Magic Shop.”

What? A Magic Shop?

She nodded.

“But what is a Magic Shop? Can you show it to me?”

Her smile disappeared.

“I’m sorry but you can’t go into my Magic Shop.”

“But why, Mia?”

“Because the Magic Shop is a place inside you. You can’t go into my Magic Shop, but that’s okay because you have your own. We all do. But I don’t think everybody knows that. Whenever I come here, or when I play at home, I go to my Magic Shop and there I can find whatever I want. Today I wanted to become a mermaid, and I did. There are many different worlds in the Magic Shop. Why don’t you go into your own and maybe we can find the same worlds in which we can play?”

“Are you sure that I also have a Magic Shop? You know, I come from an orphanage, and...”

I looked down as I said that. I was so stupid. I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t have told her my home is the orphanage. I didn’t want her to know. I closed my eyes and I almost started crying. I opened my eyes and there she was with her big eyes, smiling.

“I know. You are that boy who has a big family. I live just a few houses away from your home. Don’t worry. You have it. All the children in the world have it, but not all know about it. You just have to use your imagination and everything you ever wanted will be there, in your own Magic Shop. Let’s try it!”

And she was right! I did have a Magic Shop! It was all there. That's how the park would one day become a chocolate factory, and on another day it would become a huge mountain, and the top of the slide would be the peak. It was magical!

And that is how I became a happy boy again, all thanks to Mia. I shared this story about the Magic Shop with my brothers and sisters, and we had a great time. I was so happy I even forgot all about those old friends and their toys. I had something much better – Mia and the Magic Shop.

The Quasar underneath the Ashes

Marijana Mančić

In the center of the city lay massive piles of trash. Groups of people, determined to clean up the litter of the aftermath behind them, were flinging it onto the piles, and returning for more. It wasn't long ago that the tables were turned. Florence turned to view the world around her and stopped at the face that was familiar, Erica's, whose eyes gleamed brightly amidst the chaotic ruins. "We can finally have peace," she whispered as she watched the ash drift to the ground.

1

"You're only young once," Florence's mother's voice rang in her mind.

Youthful beauty was something every girl her age wanted. It was the best way to "snag" a good husband. Florence was never the type to go chasing after much of anything, but her parents had a strict plan. As soon as she was to turn eighteen, there would be a ceremony and all of the eligible females would be presented to the eligible males. From there, the courting would begin and soon Florence would find herself in a respectable marriage. Just as her family had planned.

Florence turned her thoughts to preparing herself for bed and splashed cold water from the golden faucet on her face. The white soap foam trickled down her chin and into the basin. She opened her eyes to find herself staring back at her reflection in the mirror. Her black long hair was bright against the white of her long cotton nightgown. She stood there in the light of her bathroom, looking more like a porcelain doll than an adolescent. Although she knew this day would come, she wasn't sure how she felt about the ceremony. She wanted to please her family, but she was nervous.

"Are you still awake?" her mother cooed from the threshold of her bedroom. "You should be getting your beauty rest," she scolded. Florence didn't respond and instead walked to the edge of her bed. She lifted the duvet and climbed in.

"Mum?", Florence whispered, "Do you and dad love each other?"

“What kind of a question is that, Florence? Of course we love each other,” her mother said as she crossed the floor to her daughter’s side and perched herself on the edge of the bed. “We met just as many others did. I had turned eighteen. It was my ceremony and your father chose me. We fell in love instantly.”

Florence rose with the morning sun. It was a beautiful day and everyone was already buzzing about. She opened the doors to her balcony and looked down as the city prepared to receive hundreds of adolescent boys and girls for the event. Streamers hung from one building to the next with twinkle lights and balloons on every corner. Food vendors were setting up their stands and a large stage with a massive curtain stood in the center of the town’s square. Thousands of people would gather there before the curtain to watch as each child was presented to society and then asked to begin the process of choosing their lifelong mate. Florence swallowed hard as she looked at the red velvet curtain, knowing it wouldn’t be long before her name was called.

Just then, her mother called out. “Florence, you clearly are not ready yet. What are you waiting for? Your father needs us out of here in no more than twenty minutes.” Florence dressed quickly and threw her hair into a messy bun. As she snagged her ballet flats and a croissant on her way out, her father stopped her in her tracks. “Darling. I am so proud of you.” He looked into her eyes and kissed both of her cheeks. “We have raised you for marriage, and your mother and I couldn’t be prouder.”

“First we must stop and collect your dress and shoes, and then it is all hair and make-up,” her mother barked.

“Does it have to be a dress? I can dance better in pants,” Florence asked with her mouth full of croissant. “I don’t want you wearing pants for tonight’s ceremony. It’s not traditional. Last year the Cleary family allowed their daughter to wear slacks instead of a dress, said it was fashion-forward, and she ended up being thought of as a *lesbian*! Do you understand the turmoil they have been through? No, we can’t have that for you. It wouldn’t do. A dress it is.”

The two of them entered a dress shop where a beautiful red dress had been laid out specifically for her. Having put it on, Florence looked at herself in the mirror and felt like an elegant woman. Almost nearing the ranks of the ones she was raised to emulate. With the make-up done, she felt beautiful on the outside, but with every inch of the hand movements on the clock, she became more and more nervous.

The square began to fill with people and Florence was instructed to go behind the stage. There she found a hoard of other young men and women awaiting instructions. Another young woman in a bright blue mini dress stood next to Florence. Her bright red hair caught Florence's attention at first, but then it was her sparkling green eyes and a dazzling smile. Florence smiled back. Once more, she felt that fluttery feeling in her stomach, but took in a deep breath and pushed it down as far as she could.

The ceremony leader stepped out from behind the front curtain and began to address all of the young potentials before him. "Hello. Welcome. My name is Mr. Harford, and I will be your Master of Ceremonies this wonderful evening. Each of your names will be called and you will then cross the stage from left to right. Once you have made your grand entrances, and everyone has been introduced, you will all reconvene in the court of the square. The music will begin to play and each of you will take a partner. Feel free to change partners as often as you like. At the end of the night, you may introduce who you choose and begin the courting process. While some of you may find your soulmate at tonight's event, some of you may not. This is perfectly acceptable as well and just know that there is no shame in not finding your perfect match right away. All the best to each of you."

Florence did not look forward to any of this. She just wanted the ceremony to end. Her face must have shown her discomfort that since suddenly she heard "Are you going to be alright?" uttered in a sweet voice from behind. She turned and saw the red-haired girl from earlier. Her green eyes seemed to pierce into her whole being, and once again, Florence's heart thudded loudly and out of rhythm beneath her breast. "Oh, yes. Thank you. I'm just not much for crowds."

"Good. I'm Erica, by the way," the girl said as she reached for Florence's hand. Their hands met and, as their skin touched, Florence felt a spark. Like lightning. Only seconds later she heard her name called. The music swallowed her thoughts, the lights became bright and she swayed slightly as she walked.

She became dizzy. Her vision was becoming hazier until she stepped off to the exit. Then everything went black. Moments later, Florence's eyes fluttered open. She was lying in the arms of Erica. "Don't worry. I caught you," she chuckled. Everyone around them who had seemed worried went back to their own affairs and ignored them. "Are you alright?" Erica asked.

"Oh, yes. Thank you. I'm so sorry. I've hardly had anything to eat today. I guess I'm just a little dizzy." Florence explained as she sat upright. "Here. Take this." Erica opened her purse and found a peanut butter and jelly tea sandwich wrapped in a napkin. In fact, she had quite a few.

Florence reached in and took one. “Thank you so much. Do you always carry food in your purse?” she chuckled.

“I figured I would today since we wouldn’t get much breathing room. Otherwise, no.”

Name after name was called and the two talked for what seemed like hours. They learned all of the basics about the other, as well as the peculiarities. For example, Florence learned what “quasar” is, and how fascinated Erica was with it and with astronomy in general.

“So. Any idea of what you are looking for here tonight?” “I am not really sure,” Florence said, as she looked Erica up and down. “I was told that you’ll know when you meet the person. That it will hit you like lightning. You’ll just know.” At that moment, everyone who had been waiting began to stand closer to the stage, waiting to exit back out to the dance floor.

Erica stood up, the crowd moving past the two, and reached down to help up her new acquaintance. Their hands met and as Florence rose to her feet and met Erica’s gaze, she *knew*. They leaned into one another and shared a passionate kiss.

As the evening wore down, they danced the night away, keeping a distance from one another, and yet feeling a draw to be closer.

2

Florence woke up early the next morning.

Her head was beginning to throb. *Did that really happen last night?*

After the initial drowsy state of disbelief, she went over the course of events from the last night.

She and Erica kissed. It was the best kiss she had ever had. Sure, she had kissed boys before, but this... *This just felt right*. She had never believed in overused Hollywood phrases like “it feels

right,” “I love you, I need you,” and her favorite, “butterflies in the stomach,” but now she was so overwhelmed with emotions that they were the first ones that came to mind.

But there was a problem. She knew that her parents could never accept that sort of outcome.

After the long night without dreams and full of daydreaming of her and Erica being together, and equally long hours of crying because those dreams were wrong and beyond the bounds of reality, Florence gathered the strength to go to the living room and get some toast.

Her parents were watching the news.

“Reckless teen driver caused multi-vehicle crash... Summer annual car show set for... XY football player set to join LA Galaxy... This year’s gay parade will begin at 3 p.m. on September 20... Heat advisory issued...”

The penultimate piece of news caused a rapid heartbeat; she hoped her parents wouldn’t say anything. “So, September the 20th, we will not go out. I don’t want to see those people,” remarked her father. “I don’t want to see them either. We should go somewhere or shut the doors and windows,” said her mother. “What’s the big deal about the parade though?”, Florence protested shyly, afraid of the answer. “It is unnatural. Why do you even want to know? You’re too young to ask stuff about *them*.” “Let her, honey. She doesn’t ask us things often anyway. We should explain it, this is a modern topic, and we’re a modern family!” “You’re right. We can talk openly about anything, Florence. Your mother and I are open-minded people, and you can always ask us anything you want to learn.” “Exactly. Homosexuality does not need further explanation, though. It’s unnatural and God’s Word Forbids It. The people who choose to be gay have been brainwashed by the propaganda and the media.”

Florence got back to her room, pushing her head in the pillow, and sobbed. So right it felt being with Erica, even for a few brief moments, even only holding her hand, that she felt like she was herself for the first time ever. Like she admitted it to the whole world.

But she had to face the facts: *What they did was wrong.*

A boy from the ceremony that liked Florence contacted her, and so she decided she should try and date him because that was the right way. He was kind and handsome, tall with dark black hair to match hers, and piercing green eyes. Every time Florence looked into his eyes, she imagined Erica. His name was Thomas, and other than not being Florence's interest, he was lovely.

During the weeks of dating Thomas, Florence couldn't shake the thought off of Erica, and her heart sank deeper and deeper. If love was meant to be felt deeply and wholly, she knew she was missing the best part of herself.

3

September 20, 4 p.m.

A riot broke out in the middle of the square below. Banners flew and papers were thrown. The square was filled with people chanting, "Equal rights. Love, don't fight." Florence looked down and, among so many young people, she saw Erica, chanting with the rest of the group. They stood up on the edge of the fountain and were quickly met with the police force.

Screams and shouts and the sounds of people being beaten rose from below. Florence's father closed the windows. "Pay them no mind. They will get what is coming to them," he said. Florence ran to the window and looked down and watched as the police beat Erica and anyone within the vicinity.

"Serves them right. Going against the natural order of things," Florence's mother added coldly.

"What do you mean?" asked Florence, her eyes filling with tears.

"Well those people down there, my dear, they are homosexuals. Serves them right, I say." Florence turned and looked at her parents sitting there quietly as the sounds from below only grew louder. *How could they sit there while people were being beaten?* She couldn't just stand by and watch Erica be injured. She rushed to the front door. Her mother's voice rang out as she placed her hand on the handle. "And where do you think you are going?" "I have to help a friend," she said and, without another word, she rushed out of the door into the square. She dodged past people with batons hitting men and women who carried banners, many of them already beaten and bloody.

Suddenly, she felt a strong kick on her head which knocked her down.

4

Florence woke up laid out on the cobblestones, bruised and badly injured.

After she caught a glimpse of the surroundings, she realized that something was different.

Straight couples were holding hands and shouting: "Equal rights to straight people!"

Around them, there were cops who prevented homosexuals from attacking them.

There was a banner that said: "Adam and Steve, not Adam and Eve!"

She limped off to side alleyway in agony and asked a girl who sat there trying to recover what was happening. The girl answered: "We are protesting for equal rights. I am straight. Society oppresses us so we fight back."

The chants of hatred spread towards everyone who was different than them. While gay people were not the minority now, the words were still hurtful. No one listened to the other, and in the end, all that was left were the charred banners and streamers, and the black stains of the fires which had been set from stubbornness and pride.

That was when Florence realized: She could no longer be part of a side. She could only be a part of herself. Some people who are in the majority are always going to harbor hate.

In the end, only the **quasar** and the lightning she felt a few nights ago mattered; what people thought and society dictated didn't.

My humble ode to you, my friend

Tijana Petrović

From the start, you had your own way.

A wish that guided you to this day.

A will that no one could ever sway.

A spark in your eyes that lit the way,

Which only a few could follow.

You never gave in to sorrow.

Even when you couldn't stand the thought—

Of tomorrow

When all that you could see was hollow,

You stood your ground.

And without a sound

You gave it your all,

Even when you frowned—

I knew it was a smile upside down,

Waiting to be found.

Your friendship gave me stronghold and will.

Your strength and grit—guide me still

To your side.

And with a smile, I have in sight—

My dearest friend.

My happiness has no end.

With great delight,

I am overjoyed I had the chance,

To witness your flight.

Nursery Rhymes

Marija Mladenović

Goofy Ball

Go to sleep you goofy ball,
Mom will keep an eye on all.
When you look inside your dreams,
Mom will tell you what it means.
Even if you see a wolf,
Howl at him, woof woof.

Love and Laugh

Brother and sister make a strong team,
They will defeat the monster grim.
The power of love shall make him laugh,
The joke's wrath he'll taste, and cough.
So when in danger, just crack one,
Love and laugh and he is gone.

Neuroses

Dreams are strange, dreams are creepy,
They run away, if you are witty.
Sometimes wild, they may return,
To scorn you with a witch's burn.
Even though they aren't real,
It surely is the thing you feel.
But who are we to judge the fact,
When we all sleep under night's path.

Imaginary Friend

He is a friend that child needs,
In pain or pleasure to share the deeds.
He is invisible, yet there he is,
On children chairs and stools he sits.
Even when he breaks a vase,
He isn't bad, it's just a phase.
A phase that is a good sign,
A sign of a colorful mind.

The Story of the Sea Star

Jovana Jovanović

Once upon a time, there was a powerful god named Poseydon, the god of the sea. Poseydon ruled the waters and its creatures, and was respected by all of them, but had never felt any other feeling except for respect and fear from any other being. One day, while he was patrolling, he saw her – a beautiful young mermaid playing around with the flounder fish and laughing in great joy. She had long blonde-gold hair, and big blue eyes. Her complexion was very pale, so he could notice those brilliant blue eyes easily even from a distance. Her lips were as red as blood, matching her long red tail. The moment she noticed him, she froze in fear. She told her fish friend to run. She remained in silence, waiting for his powerful voice to rise and announce her punishment for being in the forbidden zone. Instead, he gave her a smile, or at least what a smile should be, because he had never done anything like smiling. The mermaid was confused, but she stood firmly and proudly, despite her fear. He came closer and took a bow. His eyes glowed with admiration. He was even more confused with the things that were happening inside him. He told her that she was free to go home, he only wanted to know her name. “Mera”, she whispered. Her voice was so soft, and a beautiful melody to his heart. “I hope to see you again, Mera”, he said and continued with his patrol. Mera stayed for a couple more minutes in that same place, confused with what had just happened there, but also enchanted with Poseydon’s figure and strength. She was hoping to see him again too, but of course she did not say that aloud.

As time went by, they started seeing each other more and more often. Eventually, they fell in love. Both a little scared, neither prepared for the powerful magic of love. One day Mera came and said that she had two beautiful gifts for him. First, she gave him a sparkling red sea star. Poseydon was confused: why would that be such a special gift, when he saw sea stars every day? Mera then she told him a beautiful story. A long time ago, or better to say, before any time at all, the mighty Sun and the beautiful young Moon had fallen in love, but were doomed to not be able to consume their love ever, for their meetings were only for a few seconds, when the day becomes the night, and vice versa. Mighty Zeus, the god of the sky and thunder, was convinced that, being in love, the two of them were not able to do their duties right. So he cast a magic spell, or rather a curse, that they were never to meet again, and he took away their abilities of speech and sight. He gave them one last time to see each other and say goodbye. That very night, the young Moon gave birth to thousands of little stars. She cast them all into the sea, to protect them from the cruelty of Zeus. That is how the sea stars came to be, and they were said to be the protectors of eternal love, for they were born of the eternal love of the Sun and the Moon. Mera gave that star to her beloved Poseydon, and her eternal love and loyalty. No matter what happened, the beautiful little sea star would always remind him of her and of all of the beautiful feelings she had awoken in him. Mighty Poseydon kissed the sea star and whispered silently, “Forever”. The other gift she had prepared was even more beautiful - Mera was with child.

Time passed by very quickly, and the day for Mera to give birth had come. The childbirth was very difficult, for the baby had divine energy and the strength which she had inherited from the father. It was a girl. A girl with big blue eyes, and golden hair. Poseydon let a tear escape from his eye for the first time in his entire life. He felt unmeasurable happiness. Sadly, this happiness was shattered when he noticed Mera lying motionlessly, her tail slowly losing its sparkle. He came closer and took her hand. She was so cold. She opened her eyes for the last time and collected the last atoms of her strength to say in a very silent voice, “Estella”.

Years and years passed, but Poseydon could not reconcile with the fact that his Mera was gone forever. He neglected his daughter completely, for he could not bear the burden of his sadness. He waited at the rock for Mera to show up, and he waited for years. One day the flounder fish came to him. The very same fish that he saw Mera with that first time. “Stop mourning, mighty Poseydon”, the fish dared to say aloud. “Your Mera is not gone, your grief has blinded you so much that you do not see the truth”. The god was confused by those words, for he himself had been a witness of Mera’s death. Flounder fish then put something into his hands. He still did not see it but he could feel its red sparkle, its warmth. “She lives in you, do not forget it”, and the fish swam away. He closed his eyes and held the sea star in his hand, hoping that maybe it had the power to bring her back. But then, not very far away from the rock, in the forbidden zone, he heard a soft female voice singing a very sad melody. He swam there quickly, prepared to return to his old glory and remarkable pride. He stopped for a moment, not being able to believe what was in front of his eyes. A red tail, big blue eyes, and long golden hair. She was the living image of her mother. In that moment he realised that he had neglected the greatest gift his Mera gave him. His daughter Estella.

From that day on, they were together all the time. He taught Estella everything that his duty as the ruler and the protector of the sea and its creatures required. Estella was half a god and half a mermaid. She had the power to walk among humans, to fly among gods, and to swim among the sea creatures. She loved everything that surrounded her, and she respected all of nature and its beings. Poseydon was afraid that her kindness and the beauty of her innocent and naive heart may cost her dearly. He was overprotective with Estella, for she was the only thing he had left from Mera. He had turned his sea star into a beautiful necklace and gave it to Estella, so that she could always feel her mother close to her heart, protecting her. He told her the same story that Mera had told him, the story of the sea star, so she could understand why it was so special to him, and, from that moment on, it was special to her as well. What he had forgotten is that the little protector of the eternal love could one day lead young Estella to her love.

Aquaria was a country on a beautiful island Aqualand, that had never felt war, bloodshed, or any kind of disaster, due to the fact that it was unreachable to any human for it was surrounded by the wild Atlantic waters, ruled by Poseydon. Poseydon loved that island, for there his only friend, king Thor, lived. Every night, around midnight, Poseydon would come out of the sea and meet his friend Thor on the deck. He told him his and Mera’s story and he spoke of their happy times. Poseydon enjoyed talking about his incredible moments with Mera, for he was reexperiencing those moments all over again. The young king spoke of his sad childhood and his parents’ accident. He had lost his family when he was fourteen, and had to take over the kingdom at a very young age. Thor never experienced any other feeling other than the feeling of respect, just like Poseydon a long time ago. For he had no family, or friends other than Poseydon, due to the

fact that he had neglected everyone in order to perform his duty as a king and to maintain order in his kingdom. Poseydon really loved and respected that man, for he reminded him of his young-self. And so everything was going just fine, until one day Estella, in one of her exploring adventures, accidentally found Aquaria.

She came out of the water and walked the shores of Aquaria for hours, for she was amazed with its tranquility and the beauty of nature on the island. Suddenly she felt that her sea star was burning her skin, and she tried to remove it, which resulted in it burning her hand. She did not understand what was happening and in a moment of fear she took the necklace off, threw it away and got back into the sea. When her father asked her about the necklace she told him that she had lost it somewhere. He was furious, for he adored that little red thing. In the middle of the night, Estella was awoken by a female voice. The voice was calling her to follow it. Not thinking at that moment, she let the voice guide her. In a blink of an eye, she found herself on the very same beach of Aquaria where she had thrown her necklace away. She had no idea how she got there for everything had happened very quickly. Suddenly, she saw a male silhouette holding her necklace. The necklace was shining more than ever. Its red light spread across the entire beach and suddenly Estella heard the whisper of the same female voice that had guided her there - "The Eternal Love".

On his way to meet his friend Thor, Poseydon saw Estella coming out of the water, under some kind of a spell. He decided to remain hidden and observe what would happen. Estella approached the young man and asked him what his intentions were regarding the necklace. The moment he lifted his head he knew that she was the most beautiful being he had ever seen. She looked so delicate with that pale complexion, and big blue eyes, but her voice revealed the strength of her being. The young man, enchanted with her beauty, could not utter a single sentence. She sat by his side and continued to observe him. He was very tall and muscular, with short brown hair and black eyes. He took her hand and put the necklace in it. They both remained silent for a few minutes. Meanwhile, Poseydon was still observing, knowing exactly what was about to happen. Estella asked the young man if he would like to hear the story of the sea star and her necklace. The man just nodded with a smile on his face. Carefully listening to every word she was saying, he was astonished with the passion in her voice while she was retelling the story. Realising that their feelings were mutual, she stood up and did the same thing her mother did. She gave the sea star to the young man. The attraction between them could be felt in the air. It was like the whole world had stopped and there were just the two of them and the little sea star. Estella put the necklace around the young man's neck and told him that her mother had believed in that sea star, and that she would love it if he kept it safe. Finally, the young man stepped out of the shadow, and Poseydon, still watching, felt his heart drop. The mysterious shadow man was none other than his beloved friend Thor. Giving Thor the necklace, Estella jumped into the water and swam away. He stood there for a couple of moments, hoping she would come out again, and mumbled "You will be my eternal love". He grasped the star and smiled. Then, he sat down and continued to wait impatiently for his friend Poseydon to tell him what had just happened, not knowing that his happiness would forever ruin the friendship. Poseydon was filled with anger. He knew that they were going to fall in love and that if that happened he would lose his daughter, his only living memory of Mera. He went back into the water and swam in search of Estella. Thor saw his friend running back in the water and in that moment he understood why the story of the sea star sounded so familiar to him. She was Poseydon's daughter.

Out of fear that he would lose his daughter, Poseydon locked Estella in a cave deep in the sea, far away from Aquaria, and he forbade her to have contact with any sea creature, under pain of death. She cried for days and nights. She did not understand the cruelty of her father, for she knew that her only sin was falling in love with that young man.

Poseydon stopped visiting his friend, for he was afraid that his rage might overpower him, leading him to do something horrible. He respected the friendship they had had for many years, and would hate himself if he ever did something to hurt him. Young Thor kept coming to the deck every night waiting for his friend or Estella to show up, but neither did. He dreamt of her every night. He would sit by the sea and talk to the sea star about how wonderful it would be to see her at least one more time.

One night, Poseydon hid among the rocks and observed Thor. He was caressing the sea star. Poseydon came closer to hear what his friend was whispering to the star. Thor was about to throw the sea star into the sea. He told it: "If you really are the protector of eternal love, then please find her and bring her back to me, for I promise you to love her forever". Poseydon's eyes filled with tears, he understood that he had hurt his friend and his daughter too, that maybe there was the chance for them to really experience the eternal love that he and his beloved Mera could not have, but he was too proud to acknowledge his mistake. He turned around and he heard the sound of the sea swallowing the sea star. He walked to the water and just before entering he turned back and could not believe his eyes. Out of nowhere, on the deck, Mera's tail was throwing the red light all around. She was watching the water and the little red dot shining at the bottom of the sea. Hesitantly, not knowing if his brain was playing tricks on him, he approached Mera, and lied next to her. Tears started rolling down his face, for he felt that he had disappointed her. She took his hand and grasped it strongly. With her eyes locked on the dot on the bottom of the sea, she kissed Poseydon's hand and softly said "Eternal love, remember". Poseydon closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them again she was not there anymore. Mera was gone. The experience made him realise that his daughter deserves to love and be loved. When he returned to reality, he quickly jumped into the sea, took the sea star from the bottom of the sea and rushed to free Estella. He hugged his little girl and put back the necklace around her neck. Baffled, Estella could not believe her eyes, "Is this really my father?", she mumbled to herself, happy tears rolling down her cheeks. After apologizing to his daughter for all the horrible things he did to her, Poseydon ordered her to go and find her one and true love, Thor. Estella felt very proud of her father, for she knew how hard that must have been for him. As she was leaving, she turned around one more time, smiled at him and said "She lives in you, father".

Estella went to Aquaria that very night and waited for Thor to show up. Thor came the next night at the same time as always and saw his beautiful goddess waiting for him. The wind was caressing her golden hair, the Moon was admiring the beauty and clarity of her blue eyes. And Thor, Thor could not wait to kiss those red lips of hers. She jumped into his arms and hugged him whispering in his ear "I will never let you go again, I promise". They sat on the deck and spoke for hours about everything that had happened. She took off her necklace and put it between them. They both laid down their hands onto the star and swore that their love would be eternal just like the sea star. They threw it back in the sea, for the sea had always been its home, so that one day someone else would find it, and find eternal love.

Estella and Thor continued coming to the deck every night. They enjoyed their love and watched the sea. The waves were always sparkling, sparkling red. They both knew Poseydon was there, protecting them from a distance. And for generations, the story of the miraculous sea star was told, so that everyone should learn a most important lesson:

True love conquers all obstacles, defies all storms and deepens its colors with the passage of time.

The 4 Andrea Todorović

The inspiration for the story is found in the fairy tales my grandmothers used to tell me before bedtime.

Once upon a time, in the city of Exalos there lived a great queen who was known for her kindness and generosity. Thus, the queen made the entire country of Exalos famous because of her virtues and because of the prosperity the denizens of the South enjoyed. The Queen had a daughter. She was not only profoundly intelligent, but also fleet-footed. Archery and rock-climbing were fields in which she was undefeatable.

On a frosty winter day, Princess Allea, clad in a bear skin coat, was standing on a bridge near the highest lookout with her three friends. They were looking into the distance while discussing their wishes and longings. The wind grew stronger when the princess said to her friends: “Oh my dearest friends! I need to be honest with you about how I feel. In my mind and heart I have this sweet, terrible yearning...” One of her friends was a daughter of a healer, the other was a daughter of a merchant, and the third did not know who her parents were, but somehow always considered Allea’s Castle her home. So, they began imploring: “Tell us, our sweetest, what troubles your mind? Tell us, quick!” The princess sighed, and told them: “I want to travel far, to the most distant lands and kingdoms. I want to experience a different kind of life and learn more about human kind.” The girls listened carefully and decided: “Yes, and we are going on a journey with you. Till sunrise, then! Till sunrise!” They went home to say goodbye to their families, and to promise that they would be home by the same time next year.

As soon as the glowing medallion spread its honeycomb-yellow veil across the country, all four of them, the princess Allea, the healer’s daughter Lexa, the merchant’s daughter Darei and Xena, mounted their horses and turned towards the Dewrun. The land was famous for the notorious vulture who devoured everything that came in his way – men, women, children, dogs and even panthers. Also, he had a monstrous morning habit – clearing his throat by spitting fire three times and burning everything around. Houses and farms were burning as far as his flame could reach, and the land grew emptier day by day. The king of that land was tormented by the thought of losing his nation and decided to give a reward to whoever was brave enough to kill the vulture. To make things worse, the bird had the king’s first-born son trapped in a cave. It was raining when the four girls arrived, so they took shelter in one of the inns, where a widow approached them:

“We are in great misery here, you shouldn’t have come...we might not survive the morning.” The girls asked what was going on and so the widow told them, forgetting to mention the prince in the cave. Having listened to the story, the four girls asked to be taken to the vulture’s den. The widow hesitated and said:

“Be careful, he has already burned alive many heroes and heroines with his fire breath.”

“Never mind, show us the way, and we will deal with his flames.” Seeing their willingness, the widow agreed to take them. Just before the dawn they woke up, got ready, and followed the widow, watching the beautiful sunrise painting the sky. After a while the woman stopped and said: “There, you see, lies our enemy.”

“Let me fight him first, if he is too strong come and help me”, Xena said. Her friends listened, and then watched Xena putting the sword above his beak. “I have come to see how strong you are!”

“Good morrow to you skinny girl, I’m glad that I’ll see your strength too!”, the vulture replied slyly.

“I want to see your strength, all of it! I want to see what the secret of your flame is! However, I don’t think you actually have the strength, your food is the fear that people feel, isn’t it? You are just a selfish bird”, Xena said. When the vulture heard those words, the fire blazed from his beak three times, burning the ground, but the girl just jumped around like she was skipping the rope and not the flames.

“Ha! Where is your strength now?”, the girl demanded to know, and then jumped behind him striking his wings, and legs. The vulture fell on the ground still feeling glorious even if he was defeated. The girls ran forward, and just as they were about to strike the final blow the vulture muttered: “My strength lies within a prince, so strike as much as you want, I will draw strength from him, and heal. Vesheda will tell you if you don’t believe me.”

“What are we going to do with him?”, asked some countrymen. “Take him to the King, and put him in a cage, but tell the king he must not kill him, otherwise his son will die too”, said Xena. “And who is Vesheda, does anyone know?”

There came a little girl and told a legend about the woman who had to choose between the death of her daughter and the captivity of the stolen baby boy. She chose the latter, which she thought less harmful, thus becoming the Queen in the Stone of the Snow Lands. She was a warrior queen before and had fought against the vultures but once she became a mother, the vultures saw her daughter as her soft spot and attacked when she was at her most vulnerable, and unable to fight back. In order for her nation not to be slaughtered she was forced to make the choice.

The four heroines knew they had to go and search for the Snow Lands. Having ridden for several days, however, they needed rest, so they stopped in the lands of Kind Rhoan where they heard miserable stories about people being sacrificed every day. This was happening because the King had made an agreement with the Cannibal, who provided some medicine for his two sons and kept them alive. The girls went straight to the King’s Castle and found him sitting next to the two princes’ beds, and they were just lying like plants and falling apart. Lexa ran quickly to see what kind of medicine they were receiving. It was Enath in small doses, a poisonous plant, which made their lips curl in a smile, thus fooling the King to think they were getting better.

“This has to stop, I know how to help them, we need to get this ‘cure’ out of their bodies immediately”, Lexa said.

“But the King’s agreement...”

“I don’t care, if we don’t stop this they will die, and so will many others from his land, besides, he has been fooled to think this is helping, we need to tell him!”

They tried to speak to the king but he didn’t want to listen, and tried to argue with them, so they locked him up in his chambers, without being seen by the guards, and Lexa and Darei began treating the consequences of the poison. The princess and Xena sneaked out of the castle finding their way to the village where they heard the Cannibal lived.

“Today I’ve got two meals, I see, the King has been generous, I might give him more of that plant”, the giant Cannibal exclaimed.

“I will not be your victim, you shall fall today”, Xena replied, when Allea’s arrow shot him in the shoulder, and then the next in the foot. However, the Cannibal wasn’t giving up easily, and they fought for hours. Finally, Xena took out her knife and used it for the final blow. Drenched in sweat and blood, they took the Cannibal’s head and brought it to the king. The king, having been released from his imprisonment, was happy to see that no one had to be sacrificed for his sons anymore, and that his sons were getting better.

“Thank heavens, you have saved my people, and my sons are well again! The greatest reward I can offer is for the two of you to become queens by marrying my sons.”

Xena and Allea saw that their two friends had already fallen in love with the princes, so they decided to leave them the honours and, after the wedding ceremony go and search for the Snow Lands.

After several days of riding in sleds across the Snow Lands, they were stopped by a grey-clad young man near the castle gate. He had a hood over his face and his voice was deep and mysterious.

“I cannot let you pass, if you do, you will die. Many have tried, but the legend says that only the long-lost baby of the queen can pass these gates and stay alive”, the man said.

“I have nothing to lose, I have no parents, no kingdom, but the life of the future king depends on finding Vesheda. So, I will go”, Xena decided.

“I can’t let you go alone X, you are like a sister to me!”, Allea replied.

The man took off his necklace and untied the knot leaving a small piece to fall into his hand.

“This is the ring the Queen once wore. My grandmother gave it to me when I was a little boy, and said that I must never take it off because it protects me from the evil spirits. You need it more than I do if you want to pass unseen in the Ice Castle.”

As soon as he gave her the ring, his hood fell backwards and they were faced with the most beautiful man they had ever seen. His locks and beard were golden, matched perfectly with the hazel eyes. The sight of the moonlight was not as handsome as his warm smile was. He was gleaming. Xena was already running towards the door of the castle, but Allea was still staring.

“Yes, that’s why I must be protected. ‘Spirits envy your beauty’ my grandma used to say. But that’s not the only thing that I am. I mean, I’m very good with needles, and I know a bunch of lyrics my grandma used to sing to me when she thought I was sleeping...”

She was still staring at him. “I am not making this any better, we need to hurry, because the ice elves will be here soon, and my head is the target because of my hair and beard, they believe it has some healing effect”, he said. So, they covered themselves with some scarfs and ran towards his hut. When they were inside, he sang the incantation, closed his eyes and meditated while comfortably seated in a winged back chair. Allea was still in a disbelief, but the greater shock was the hut, that was actually a castle once you were in. She realised he was most certainly a wizard but she said nothing.

Freezing to the bone, Xena reached the throne room and saw the statue next to the throne, came closer only to see that the queen’s statue was shedding ice tears. Then she heard the voice “Xena, you made it, the queen’s friend has kept her promise and kept you safe all these years. Now you need to find the way to bring the statue back to life.” She recognized the voice of the handsome man she and Allea had met in front of the castle. “Who are you, and how can you be inside my head?” But the voice was silent, and then it echoed in her head what she disregarded at first “queen’s friend, kept you safe, you.” How was that possible? Was this her mother? “Mother” she said, and the ice tears stated melting slowly. She hugged the statue for a few seconds and then realised that it was a real person she was hugging and not the stone.

“I am so glad to finally see you Xena!”, she exclaimed. “But you need to kill the vulture if we all want to live. Rey will take us there.” She took her arm and closed her eyes. The four of them, the queen, Xena, Rey and Allea found themselves flying to the Dewrun on an amorphous white cloud. Once they got to the castle dungeons, they saw that the vulture had completely healed and grown in size.

“He is drawing strength from the prince!” said the Snow Queen.

“But how do we find the prince? The vulture said it was inside some cave”, inquired Allea.

“The cave is the vulture’s heart, that’s why we mustn’t kill the bird if we want the prince to live. The only way we can get him out of there is if his true love hugs the bird and presses her heart to the bird’s heart and sings:

‘Come out, come out your bride is here, come out, come out no need to fear’

Therefore, a girl needs to fight the vulture, but be careful not to kill him, or else”, the queen explained.

“I’ll fight him, I’m the quickest”, princess Allea offered, “but you must hug the bird Xena, because Rey’s beauty has already charmed me and it is he I choose to marry.”

And so it was done, once Xena embraced the half-dead bird, his chest opened and a tall handsome man was revealed, lying almost dead as the bird. Xena kissed him on the brow and his eyes opened:

“I knew somehow you were coming to rescue my people and me” the prince said, and kissed her back.

Sojourn

Tijana Petrović

It would often happen that he opened his eyes and found himself in the room where he had gone to sleep the night before but with an odd feeling. He always had the same dream, he thought. He would wake up in a place where he felt safe and called it his home and where he would talk to various people whom he felt were dear to him. He would talk to his other brother and sister whose names he quickly forgot. But this was odd, he thought. This place *is* his home. This is where his brother and sister are along with his grandfather, in this beautiful green land. What was the name of this town again? Never mind, who'd even want to remember such frivolous information. Besides, it always seemed to him that a different name was written on the sign at the town's entrance when he went for long walks in the hills. He never was that good with names, so he took this as a sign of his forgetfulness and lack of attention. This was his daily routine: walking, talking to the birds, street cats and trees. He would often talk to the trees, they were his friends. You'd think him mad at first but the trees really did talk to him, and the town's folk knew that, for they would talk to nature too. Nature was alive, however, very dangerous and threatening. He heard it only in the stories of travelers and from some creatures distinct for the particular parts of the forests in the area. There was a sound he would sometimes hear during the day, like a horn or a trumpet, only much more sinister. And the earthquake would appear, a terrible breaking and tearing noise, and after a while all would be still again. This, said the town's folk, were signs of nature being alive. There was another thing that was interesting about these people. They all used nature's energy for daily activities: cooking, cleaning, washing — the people tried to teach him, though he was still new to this deeper connection with the world around him. The folk's hands would glow, like they had a vivid green aura around them, and nature would come to their aid. From their hands they would produce water, air, even move things around without touching them, for these things used in houses were all made of natural materials, clay, wood, reed. But for some reason he couldn't do it and because of this he himself felt a sort of an outsider. He found a map of other villages that existed without their names written on it, and was eager to travel to them. However, his grandfather told him that unless he learned the ways of the town's folk he would not be welcomed in any of the villages, since, as he explained, he would be seen as an intruder and nature would rise up again in the multitudes of earthquakes. In order to travel, he had to learn what the villagers called *bethu áithius*. He had to clear his mind and find a clear connection between himself and nature. To say that he tried would be an understatement; he practiced daily with an unwavering resolution to succeed. The trees and animals would sometimes try to help him but he never really managed. The moment he felt an uprush of energy surging through him he would find that he had not cleared his mind completely. An image of the dream he always had would appear in front of him and break the link. While his little brother and sister could do it without any difficulty, it was at times when they wanted to teach him that he felt most incompetent. He was their big brother after all. But their grandfather would only smile, and look at them and then at the beautiful light velvet sky on which his eyes would rest for a while. He looked lost in thought at those times, and when the children asked him what the matter was he would smile and say, "aren't the stars beautiful tonight?" Indeed, the stars

looked different every night; some were dead, but so close that you could see their surface. It was like the night sky was a curtain and every time it was raised a new play began. It looked as if the stars had a mind of their own. Who knows? The only person who looked as if he had unraveled their secrets was grandpa. And he would never tell. He was a great storyteller. He said that the stars told him stories, that he only retold them in a more beautiful way which was closer to humankind. Still the kids didn't believe him. They sat and they listened. But it was not only they who were listening. It seemed like the whole nature listened. Some animals would even come especially at this time to sit next to him lending an ear. Those animals were unfathomable mysterious creatures that only the minds of the most imaginative people could comprehend. The people who could see beyond the visible boundaries of everything ordinary. They would sit and listen patiently. He seemed the kind of man who knew much but revealed little. Sometimes he would even disappear for a couple of days, saying he would visit a friend from another village. He would never tell them who this friend was nor his name, but they could see, based on his demeanor, that this meeting was very important to him. So, every time he left, they would bid him farewell and take care of the house while he was away. It was on a day like this, when the boy tucked his two siblings for an afternoon nap and was lying in the field behind the house, that he met Fingal. He thought that they didn't get many visitors, and that he was not always allowed to see the ones they did get, let alone talk to them. This man was a bit stout, but very happy. He had a longish white beard and a mysterious light in his eyes. He had a little harp with him and a horn dangling on a string around his neck. He was clad in purple, yellow, red, and green of the most fascinating hue. He asked the boy if he had seen an old man who was living in this house.

“Oh, you mean my grandpa?” the boy asked.

“I see, so this is what he was hiding.”

The boy looked at him puzzled by this remark and at the moment he opened his mouth to say something Fingal began to sing:

“I am the bard who walks this earth and I tell the stories I have heard. Whatever plane I've walked was never in vain and neither of them was the same.”

This man, the boy thought, was obviously amused and happy. But he had no idea what this man was talking about. At first he thought him mad, but he was now sitting upright enchanted by this sight.

“Planes? What are planes?” he asked.

“Well of course you do not know - if you did you wouldn't be here!” He said, letting out a lively laugh. “You see, your plane is known only to people like me. Tell me dear boy, what is the year of your lord?”

He suddenly felt longing, and an odd feeling of forgetfulness again, and he answered half-absently— “1786, sir.”

“Ah. So, you are from king George’s time, I presume? I know my memory tends to mix eras sometimes but it often serves me correctly... I think.”

He let out a joyous laugh again, the most carefree laugh the boy had heard in his life, except the laugh of children, of course. Then he felt slightly alarmed. He asked the bard what he had done to him, because he did not know that he had a memory of any year at all in his mind, and the bard smiled.

“If you knew you wouldn't be here, haven't I told you that already? But I'll help you remember Griffith, don't worry.”

“What did you call me?” the boy asked.

“Your name, of course.”

It was at this time that he remembered that he actually had a name. He asked how Fingal had known that and Fingal said—

“Well it was probably me who took you through the plane, otherwise the nature here would have eaten you at the entrance.” He said this with a smile. “It's just that I sometimes forget all the people I take with me for walks.”

“Take with you?” the boy asked.

“Well, yes. When I sense deep sadness and longing in people I take them here, and in a short period of time they leave. It's been a responsibility of mine for quite some time. Only you keep coming back, so I've come to find you and show you the right way.”

“The right way to where?” the boy asked.

Fingal said that he'd help him remember and he sat for them to have a little talk. He explained what planes were. He described them as little roads leading from one world to another, with each person having a plane of their own. He said that he had travelled many times to Griffith's world but sometimes it looked different.

“Once,” Fingal said, “I met a man in your world who said that despair says little and is patient. The man was kind of famous for something; I can't quite remember his name right now. This was not in your time of course. By that time your world will have light without candles and fast things on wheels that will transport you without horses.”

Griffith looked at him in awe, unable to even imagine such a world.

“How exciting that sounds!” he said.

“It is,” Fingal agreed, “but you know, the sky is really not the same and the people are different, one bard is no longer enough to help all the sorrowed people travel to this world.”

Griffith felt sad for the old man. But Fingal was cheerful and said,

“Well, that is why we have more people like myself in other villages.”

He looked up at the sky while the boy was smiling, eager to ask another question. Then Fingal saw a magpie fly over his head and started singing.

“One for sorrow, two for joy”

Then Griffith began “three for a girl, four for a boy.”

“I see you do know this song, don’t you?”

And Griffith said that he thought he did. And then a familiar voice came from the side of the house.

“Yes, you do know this song, Griffith.”

“Grandpa! You're back.”

Fingal looked at him critically.

“Well, what did you expect?” the old man said, “I know my duty as a bard, but he is my grandson after all.”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble this has caused us, Joseph?” said Fingal.

“Yes, I know. Why do you think I’ve been going to other villages this often? But you have to understand.”

“I do,” said Fingal, “but it is time to set things right.”

“Yes, yes, it is”, Joseph said, and sat with them on the grass.

Joseph made his harp appear out of thin air and Griffith gasped. Joseph smiled and said,

“It is time my grandson, do you remember this song?”

“Yes” Griffith said.

The animals came out of the forest, all of the strangest kinds and sat around them, as if they were saying goodbye to one of their own. And the two little children, Griffith’s brother and sister, were at the window of the house smiling and waving. The stars were brighter than ever before even though the biggest star had only begun to set behind the tallest hill, and Fingal began:

“One for sorrow, two for joy.”

Griffith looked at his brother and sister who he saw were saying with him — “three for a girl, four for a boy.”

“Five for silver, six for gold,” Fingal continued.

“Seven for a secret, never to be told,” said Joseph with a stiff expression on his face.

“Eight for a wish, nine for a kiss,” Griffith added.

“Ten for a bird, you must not miss,” all the three voices uttered at once.

Griffith had caught a last glimpse of the two old men before he fell through a portal underground. They were happy and his grandpa had tears in his eyes. He heard his grandfather tell him to say hi to his children for him and his grandchildren and tell them that he and the kids were happy. He heard Fingal's horn sound as the portal closed and Griffith finally found himself falling through the universe. Countless planets he passed; countless stars and galaxies until he reached our own. And he was still falling. He passed Neptune, Uranus, Saturn; He saw Jupiter's rings as he was approaching Earth. He saw England, as small as the puddle of water on top of his hand, but it suddenly became bigger and bigger, and he fell further towards and through the atmosphere. His hometown was now in sight. He saw the roof of his house, and then he caught a glimpse of himself sleeping right before he fell back into his body, and he opened his eyes. He was in his bed. The sun had just begun to rise and the birds were singing, the church bells clanging and his mother was calling her children for breakfast.

“England, 1786,” he said with a smile.

He jumped out of bed and ran toward the door of the other room and shouted,

“Mom! Dad! Uncle! Charlie! Suzy! They're okay, they're fine and happy, grandpa and Jordie and Liz, they said hi!”

It was Christmas morning and they all looked shocked at this proclamation.

“But Griffith darling, for a long time now they've been -” his mother tried to tell him gently, in a voice broken by sorrow, but he did not let her finish.

“Yes! I know! Isn't that wonderful mother! They're safe, Jordie and Liz. They're so happy! Grandpa told me to tell you not to worry, they're safe.”

His mother let out a cry of relief, and with a smile ran towards him and embraced him in her arms. His father followed. Their other two children, his siblings, joined in with a smile and uncle Bernard sat and watched them joyfully grinning and clapped.

“Now, that's what I call a happy family!” Uncle Bernard said.

Dinner was cooking, the family was present, and Christmas holidays had only just begun.

The Gratitude of Doves

Jovana Ilić

I

Eve did what all children, at some point or other, wanted to do but couldn't. Or wanted to do, but changed their minds as soon as they opened the door and saw how dark it was outside. It was, perhaps, a parent's worst nightmare – to wake up in the middle of the night, go into the room of your daughter, or son, and not see them there, in their bed, where they are supposed to be. Or to not hear them respond once you call them down for breakfast. Eve ran away from home.

She didn't plan on it, though: exactly a month ago, the thought of running away first occurred to tiny Eve. At first, she didn't think much of it – the thought would easily disappear just as it appeared when she heard her friends in school talking about it, without any weight, any substance – but then, one evening when she was getting ready for bed, she heard someone whisper her name. “Shhhhhhh, Eve!” The voice was unfamiliar yet clear, light and pleasant.

“Who's that?” Eve squeaked, obviously startled. She glanced at Miss Seraphina, wondering if the voice belonged to her.

“Over here!”

“Where? Who is that?” Eve insisted. “I don't know where here is for you.”

“Here,” a thin hand appeared just outside the window, “Here is here.”

Curious, Eve started walking towards her window: “Who are you?” she asked. She grew impatient as her eyes grew wide in the dark, looking for a speck of light to clutch onto so she could see something. “Agh, one moment, Hand, please,” Eve said, polite even when in distress, “I need to find my glasses.”

“On the desk, you left them on the desk.” The voice instructed.

Eve's fingers roamed over the desk in the blurry darkness; she had no memory of leaving her glasses precisely there. She was getting ready for bed, and she always left her glasses on her nightstand, so she could reach them when she woke up. But the voice was right, the glasses were on the desk. “There, thank you.” She turned to the window, but the hand was no longer there. “Hello? Are you there?” Eve asked. There was no answer from the silvery voice that called her name. “Hand? I saw your hand, I know you were there.”

“I'm here, I told you.” The hand appeared again, at the same place. “Come!”

Eager and impatient once again, Eve walked to the window. She felt a strange rush of curiosity as her impatience swelled inside of her lungs, making it hard for her to breathe evenly, and once she finally curved her head outside and looked down, she let out a shrill sound only to quickly

cover her mouth with both hands, as if to stop herself from letting out such a shriek again. A raven-haired girl jumped up, and seated herself on the window sill, evidently agitated, “Are you mad?! Do you want the grown-ups to hear you?”

“Who are you?” Eve responded, mimicking the girl’s agitation.

“Don’t you remember the dream?” the girl asked, her voice calming to quieter tones, again silvery and peaceful. Eve brought herself to breathe normally once again. “I’m Columbina, and you’re Eve. We know each other.”

“I don’t know you!” Eve retorted, looking at the girl.

“You just don’t remember me, but that does not mean you don’t know me.” Columbina explained, clasping her ankles together, one over the other. “Remember the promise you made? You said you were going to climb the misty moor, and bring the black-feathered dove up. Remember?”

“No, not at all. You must have me confused with another Eve.”

“You also promised not to be so stubborn. I told you nicely, what if you don’t remember what you promised, then you said that you will remember, you never forget, not even when your mom asks you to do something, and...”

“That’s true, I never forget to do anything.”

“Do you want to remember, then?” Columbina asked.

“Yes.”

-

There is a silhouette against the night sky, stars wrapping about its shadows. This silhouette belonged to a tree without an end. Or seemingly, a beginning. The bark, etched and decorated, its patterns delicate and elaborate, a living proof of its old age. The slight incline of the branches upwards and the grace with which the tree carried itself left Eve breathless; she never saw a tree like this. Overwhelmed by the enormity that stood as if it was nothing in front of her, she almost failed to see a bird on the ground. It appeared windswept and very much alive under the elevated ancient roots; the entirety of Eve’s attention shifted from the immense tree to a tiny bird. Eve was reluctant to pick the bird up at first, she couldn’t perceive what was wrong with it – or if anything was wrong with it, at all. Maybe this bird didn’t like the vastness of the sky, or perhaps, the altitude made it sick. Silly bird, wouldn’t it be? She knelt with such care next to where the bird was, careful so as not to somehow transmit her fear, feeling it to be contagious, and of course, careful not to upset the little creature.

“Can I touch you?” Eve asked.

“My wing hurts. Please, be careful.” The bird answered, and Eve mustered all the tenderness she had inside her to gently pick the bird up in her hands. She tried to envelop it entirely in order to lift it off the ground, and she did so, slowly and painlessly.

“How did you hurt yourself?” She leaned back and sat down with the bird in her hands. “I’m going to put you down on my lap. My hands are starting to tremble.”

The bird awaited the transition from the warmth of the girl’s hands into her lap; it did so with courage, with determination, as if it swore an oath not to grumble in the face of pain.

“I didn’t listen to my mother. Flew without permission.” The bird replied dolefully, nesting in Eve’s lap.

“I think I can help you with your wing. You could fly back to your mother.” Eve said, observing the bird’s hurt wing.

“My mom can help me with my wing. Can you help me to my mom?” The bird asked.

-

“Eve! Eve!” Constant poking woke her up. “I made you remember. Do you remember now?” Columbina kept poking Eve even after the latter regained consciousness. “Will you help me now?”

“I will. But wait until the morning, please. I still have to ask my mom.”

“Alright. Ask her. But listen…” Columbine leaned over, and whispered to Eve: “You need to find the marsh and the statue, and then the tree. And you need to do it fast.” And so the pact was formed; Columbina nodded, marching towards the window without any words. Eve fell asleep. Morning came. Eve was silent and already on her second pancake, a fact that did not escape her mother. Such a talker Eve was, especially in the morning.

“Did you get enough sleep, Evie?” She intended to rouse Eve out of her deep thoughts gently.

“I did, mom. Did you?” Eve replied, still so obviously wrestling whatever problem that managed to spring up in her mind overnight.

“I slept alright. Did you have a bad dream? A good dream?”

“A dream.” Eve mulled, more to herself. Her mother understood that pressuring Eve into conversation wouldn’t uncover anything interesting about her daughter’s unusual mood, so she decided to let her be. After a moment of silence, Eve said:

“Mom,” she began, ceremoniously, with something large on her mind, “If someone asked you to do something important for them, would you?”

“Yes, of course. Why?”

“And if that meant that you had to... not do the things you are supposed to do right away, would you, Mom?” Eve chased the last piece of her breakfast around the plate with a fork.

“Well... If it meant a lot to the other person, I would. This doesn't have anything to do with the dentist appointment you have in the afternoon?”

“Well, it means a lot to my friend Columbine. I really need to help her. I might not make it home for dinner, but I will...”

Her mom already decided. Eve was trying to squirm her way out of the appointment, and she decided to forget how to listen for that short while. She brushed the entire conversation with a smile and the usual “I'm sorry, honey. You have other things to do”, but Eve's mind was made up, too. She went upstairs, packed all of her necessities in her backpack and when she was about to leave the room, she noticed a reddish gleam in the corner, scornfully observing her actions.

“Oh! Miss Seraphina! I swear, I was not planning to leave without you.”

II

The marsh, the statue, the tree. Columbine said, they come one after the other. Columbine also said that she couldn't help until the night falls, but that she was sure of Eve finding at least the marsh on her own. After hours upon hours of walking, Eve found herself aimless, as the marsh was nowhere near. She was thirsty and anxious, wondering whether Columbine was going to keep her promise too - to help when help was needed. “She probably doesn't think I need help yet,” Eve mused out loud, much to Miss Seraphina's dismay, “I know you don't like that we're here, but Mom would understand. She said so herself.” Eve was too busy convincing Miss Seraphina that her Mom was alright with a little bit of running away that she failed to notice when the city road ceased to exist. It escaped her attention that she was walking along something that resembled a forest path; that the air was getting thicker and warmer, and light was lacking. “Miss Seraphina... Where are we?” Eve asked, a hint of trepidation decorating her question. The forest had its own language that was a mystery to Eve's ears – the wind rustled the leaves on the ground, whispering of a guest; the leaves chattered underneath Eve's feet, and so did the squirrels that roamed the trees. The forest seemed accepting of tiny Eve, and did not question her entrance at all – it even seemed to nestle closely around her, to lock the space left for wandering, as if to try and squeeze her out where she needed to be – to the marsh.

Eve's wide eyes tried to envelop the entire environment, her curiosity tamed by her shyness as she did not want to obstruct anyone or anything here, but rather wanted to leave it as she found

it. She admired every branch that her eyes met, every knot and curl of every tree, and on her way she was as silent as Miss Seraphina herself, until she stepped into shallow water. The earthy smell that permeated the humid air was barely breathable, the water, albeit shallow and tranquil,

seemed to enjoy rotting logs and branches as its food. “The marsh,” Eve looked around, stomping lightly around a few times, “I’ve found the marsh!”

Her excitement withered soon. She found the marsh, but now what? There wasn’t a statue in sight, much less a museum, where she knew statues would and could be. The water in front, however uninviting, seemed to be the only way forward for Eve. Unlike the humid air, the water was cool but just as unpleasant. She remembered what Columbine told her: the marsh, the statue, the tree, they come one after the other. So, she must be on the right path – she found the marsh, and she was on her way to find the statue, in order to find the tree. Both her socks and shoes were filled with marsh water, but she saw no other way to proceed forward.

“Psssssssssssssssssst……” Eve looked around. There was no one, and nothing around her capable of producing such a sound. “Columbine?” She called. “Pssssssssssssst…” A slender serpent swam near her feet, its keeled scales shimmering in the low light of the marsh.

“Tiny girl,” the snake hissed, “Are you lost?”

Eve stopped trudging through the shallow water, suddenly all of her movements infused with stiffness – she swallowed air, and looked down at the talking snake.

“It’s terribly rude, tiny girl,” the snake continued, “to keep your interlocutor without an answer.”

In her awkward stiffness, Eve found the courage to overcome her fear, “I think –,” she began, a stutter followed her voice which was significantly quieter than before, “I think that I am on the right path, but I may be a little lost.” The snake took a moment to process her answer.

“Do you need help on your right path? I know every nook and cranny of the marsh, tiny girl.” Knowledgeable as it seemed, Eve had her doubts about the snake.

“Are you going to eat me?” Eve asked.

“No, I don’t eat tiny girls.” The snake replied, slithering next to and around Eve’s legs, its head up to her knees.

“And what do you eat?”

“Insects, fish, whatever I come across…” The snake replied.

“But not tiny girls?”

“I wouldn’t compromise my digestion like that.”

Eve wasn’t satisfied with this answer, but she realized that the snake would be of significant help. “Alright, if you say so… I am looking for the three of those: the marsh, the statue, the tree. I found the marsh, but I don’t see a museum nearby…”

“Not a museum, tiny girl. I know where the statue is, alright. And from there, we’ll find the tree easily. On one condition, though.”

“What is it?” Eve’s eyebrows knitted together, forming a puzzled facial expression.

“You’ll need to feed me once I take you there.” Insects, fish, and whatever it comes across, Eve thought. “Alright. I’ll feed you.”

“What’s your name?” Eve inquired, her curiosity unconstrained by fear once again.

“Charon, tiny girl.” The snake said, and the unlikely pair continued to cross the marsh, toward the statue.

III

It took some time to cross the marsh, but Eve couldn’t really tell how long they walked. Charon talked, for and to himself, and rarely to and with Eve. She didn’t mind his company; Eve found the glistening serpent interesting amidst occasional thoughts that colored her mind with fear. Her shoes and feet were wet from the marsh water. Although she didn’t want to admit it, Eve was tired. “Is the statue near?” She asked the snake, wondering how to best conceal her upcoming irritability. “It’s near, tiny girl.” The snake hissed out an answer. “There it is.”

And there it truly was, the charred statue. A girl with her legs deep in the ground, she looked as if she was once a planted seed which sprouted in such a way. One of her legs seemed wounded. Her hands were clasped behind her back, giving the impression that she was just there, stretching in the blazing sun when she turned into marble. Eve couldn’t see her face – she wasn’t tall enough – but she felt that she was beautiful. “What now?” She asked the snake.

“Now, we rest.” The snake said, curling around a discarded branch.

Eve was a tiny girl, considering her age, which was why many people often made the mistake of thinking she was younger. The most prominent feature on her freckled face were her restless eyes, huge and brown, which were neatly framed by red glasses. From time to time, the weight of the glasses made her nose itch; they made a red indentation which sometimes hurt, but Eve knew how important it was for her to wear them. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to see,” the gentle voice of her mother sprang up from nowhere, right into her head. “It’s only been a day or two,” she began to explain what happened to her companion. “Mom said that I couldn’t go, and I wanted to go, but I didn’t want to go unless I could bring Miss Seraphina, you see? There she is.”

Miss Seraphina, a red-haired doll clad in a turquoise dress, Eve’s personal favorite, sat without words where Eve placed her – how rude, thought Eve to herself, she wouldn’t even say hi. “I know that Miss Seraphina would have been mad at me if I didn’t bring her along, but she is equally mad at me now. She said I should have listened to Mom. What do you think?” The

serpent gave no answer. Silence ensued. “Are you mad at me as well?” Eve asked, sighing as she sat down, resting her back against the legs of the girl that she was talking to. Her legs were solid and cold. Eve didn’t mind it. “I know what I was supposed to do. I know...” Another heavy sigh.

“If you were my mom,” Eve began, looking up at the girl’s face, white and spotless, “Would you forgive me?” No answer came, neither the serpent nor the statue cared enough to wake up from their silence. Eve made herself as comfortable as possible, and joined them in dozing off quietly, following the serpent’s advice: “Now we rest.”

“Eve. Eve! Eve!” Poking again; tethered between being asleep and being awake, Eve’s arm was subjected to five small daggers that were Columbine’s thin fingers, poking at her arm, poking her awake. “Stop. Stop, Columbine!” Eve was brought back to consciousness, annoyed and tired but relieved to see the raven-haired girl. She leaned back, expecting to support herself against the coldness of the statue’s legs but her back met something entirely different. “Where is she? The statue-girl? I swear I found it, Columbine!” The rising beat of panic, her palms flushed with sweat prompted Eve back on her feet again.

“I know you found it, Eve.” Columbine said calmly, “You found me. The marsh, the statue, the tree. You found me in a statue, and I will take you to the tree.”

“You were in that statue?” Eve suspiciously darted at Columbine. “I am the statue. For some time, at least. I am other things too. You remember, Eve.” Columbine replied. She stretched, and clasped her hands behind her back like the statue girl before. “I see you made a friend.” She continued, glancing over at the dozing serpent. “That’s Charon, he helped me across the marsh, to the statue.”

“I know. Did you make a promise to him, too?” Columbine asked.

“I did.”

“You sure make a lot of promises, Eve.” Eve thought nothing of this remark; she went over to Charon; afraid to nudge him, she remembered how he caught her attention: “Psssst, Charon. We have to go.” The serpent was awake in seconds. “The serpent knows the way to the tree. You will see me there, Eve. I have to go now.” Columbine said and dissolved into the thick, humid air in a heartbeat – Eve didn’t even have the chance to protest. All that she could see was that the raven-haired girl limped away into nothingness.

“You’re content not knowing everything.” After a time of passing through the forest in silence, Charon decided to speak to and with Eve. “I like to help.” Eve replied; she was worried. Worried about her mother, worried about Columbine, worried about going back home. She worried about the hungry serpent, too, for it became her friend on this journey. “The charred statue girl,” the snake embarked on an inquiry once again, “Is she your friend?” to this question Eve only had a nod to offer as an answer. “Very well,” the snake closed the one-sided dialogue, and returned to its own cluster of thoughts. Eve walked, carrying her worries along. Her glasses would occasionally slip down to the tip of her nose and she would automatically push them back, all the while wondering whether she would get to see her mother again. The air was lighter than inside

the marsh, it wasn't as thick and humid. Rather, it was breathable with a distinct scent of pines that surrounded Eve. She was about to fall into a knot of her thoughts, when her wide eyes were captivated by the sight in front of them – she remembered a silhouette against the night sky, an enormity unburdened. Its bark was as beautiful as her dream predicted it to be – unlikely shapes adorned the ancient tree's coating, with numberless etchings and patterns radiating aimlessly, serving only as testimony of the tree's old age. She remembered seeing a windswept dove underneath one of the many roots that spread under then over the ground, resembling wooden waves. Awe-stricken, Eve could only approach the enormous tree and lay her hand on it, as if to promise that she would do no harm. "The tree, the statue, the marsh, tiny girl," she heard Charon's inviting hiss, "And then, food. I didn't forget, tiny girl."

"Yes, of course." She was about to reach for her backpack when she noticed the snake curling itself around the black-feathered dove. "No! No, Charon, I have food!" Eve dropped her backpack to the ground, determined to control her all-of-a-sudden shaky hands, "Please, I came for her," she spoke, her voice interrupted by her unsustainably fast heartbeats, "Please, Charon."

"What does the tiny girl have for me other than this dove?" the serpent inquired, wrapping itself around its victim. "I don't have insects, or fish, but I do have something else. You said something else. You said "whatever I come across" and – here, here, have this instead." She begged earnestly, without any reservations, her eyes settled on the hurt dove that seemed as if it willingly nestled there. Eve clutched her fingers around an apple and extended it towards the serpent. An odd trembling rhythm dictated her movements, and Eve, saddled by fear, begged the serpent to let go of the dove. She couldn't decide whether there was any interest for the apple on the serpent's side – it seemed unfaltering, severely disinterested in anything but the dove it was clutching with its own body – but an utterly strange thing happened. The serpent began to slowly release its pressure, and the dove quivered, as scared as Eve was. The stern serpent slithered towards the apple, its attention thoroughly encapsulated by this strange, round and rosy occurrence. "Insects, fish, and anything I come across..." The serpent hissed. "Thank you, tiny girl."

Eve hobbled over to the dove, her hands still shaking; out of fear, she hesitated to touch the wounded dove, her hands made an unsteady resting place for it. "Are you all right?" Eve asked, careful not to agitate her. "I'm alright, Eve. Will you help me up the tree, to my mother?" Eve nodded, her fear settling but not dissolving completely. She looked over her shoulder, but the serpent was gone, along with the apple. "Hold on a second, dove." The charred dove was patient and gentle in her pain, and she watched Eve closely as the girl pulled Miss Seraphina out of her backpack. "She will keep you safe," Eve smiled, "Are you ready for me to pick you up?" She opened her palms out to the dove, ready to pick her up and nest her in Miss Seraphina's little bag. "I will put you there, and Miss Seraphina will hold onto you while I climb. Is that okay?"

Eve asked once again, the dove approved. Eve's hands were dirty and shaky, but also warm; she gathered all her tenderness into safely placing the charred dove inside of Miss Seraphina's bag.

"Is that alright? I will put you two in my backpack, and then I'll start climbing."

"Alright." The dove said. She was tired.

There was one thing to know about Eve – she was careful. Careful not to disturb, destroy or disrupt the tree that she was climbing. The rigidity of the tree made her feel secure, each branch resembled a hand guarding her from a possible fall. The more she climbed, the less she thought of the ground that expected her beneath; from such a height she couldn't even see it anymore – there were only branches, thousands of them, and a nest that was up which expected the charred dove. “We're almost there,” Eve said, wanting to reassure the wounded bird in Miss Seraphina's bag. “I'm sure your mother is worried, like my mother is. All mothers are worried for their children. All the time.” She figured the dove was asleep, or that she couldn't hear inside the backpack. It was already night when they reached the nest; it was quiet, and Eve seemed to have reached the top of the ancient tree. She was tired, her hands were hurt and shaking, but she figured that if she would stop to rest that she wouldn't be able to move from there. So she went on, to the top of the tree, to the nest where the dove was supposed to be, with her mother. There wasn't a door to knock on, there wasn't a window, just a huge nest.

Eve cleared her throat and said: “Excuse me? Is anybody there?”

Seven heads sprouted curiously, each head adorned with raven-hair, much like Columbine's, to look down on Eve. “I need to bring a wounded dove home to her mother. Do you happen to know where she is?” The oldest among them extended her thin, pale arms towards Eve and plucked her up, out of the branch with ease. “Welcome. Where is the dove you speak of?” The woman asked; her skin was almost translucent in the pale moonlight, her deep black eyes shimmered. “Here she is,” Eve gently took off her backpack as the remaining six of them nested around her. All of them observed, their attention shifting between their Mother and the backpack. Eve took the charred dove out of Miss Seraphina's bag gently, and placed her into the translucent palms of the Mother. “It is her,” the Mother spoke, and Eve recognized the similarity of clear silvery tones that the Mother's voice bore, “She needs rest.” The Mother placed the charred dove in her lap and began to caress her wounded wing gently, while the rest watched closely as the dove turned into a raven-haired scrawny girl with a wounded arm. “Columbine!” Eve whispered in wonder, recognizing her friend. The Mother smiled. “Thank you for bringing her back to us.”

“I didn't know it was her... How...” Eve watched them in awe, peaceful at once for knowing that she brought the charred dove – Columbine – back to safety of her Mother's nest.

“What are you?” Eve asked, daring to reach her hand out to touch Columbine.

“Eve,” the Mother said, “I can only grant you one wish as a token of gratitude. I can tell you the secret of our being, or I can do any other thing that you wish. What will it be?”

Eve remembered the words of the serpent: you're content not knowing everything. And how she felt now was just that – content and peaceful. “I want to go back to my Mom.”

“Alright, then. Back to your Mom.” The mother said and leaned over to kiss Eve's forehead.

Eve opened her eyes. The marsh, the statue, the tree and then, the nest in the pale moonlight weren't there. It was dark, and she was lying on the grass, wondering how she ended up there.

“Where...” she muttered, her limbs and muscles sore from the walking and the climbing. She was tired and in front of her house. “Oh,” she said, eager to finally go inside, “Oh.” She opened the door to find her mother sleepless in the armchair.

“Eve?! Is that you!? I was so, so worried... Where were you? Are you alright? Why did you leave without saying anything? You know I looked everywhere for you?” Questions piled upon other questions, between sobs and laughter.

“I told you. I had to help my friend.” Eve clung onto her mother’s neck, hugging her tightly. “Do you forgive me, Mom?”

“You’re so silly... I was worried sick about you. Of course I do. I do, I do. “

The Harper

Dušan Anđelković

To Lisa

Have you heard the Elven Harper? The sweet melody of his strings? Been captivated by the sound that touches your soul? In the little village called White Hill they still say that if you dared venture into the dark, dense forests that surrounded the dreamy landscapes and small houses you would hear it: first the soft laughter of the fey, the sound you'll pass off as nothing but the whispers of the wind, and then, softly at first, you would hear his call. The sound no mortal could evoke from the strings of the harp. The gentle flowing of the melody, overwhelming, frightening in its beauty, yet so soft and gentle. And if on one such occasion you dared venture further, you will be able to meet him. The Elven Harper with the eyes of frost. So run, mortals. Run and don't turn back, for if you see his eyes but once, you will never be the same.

In the little village of White Hill once lived a family, but not any family, for its head was the duke of the land. He was a man of great wit and fortune, loved by all for his good heart and the nature that could not leave anyone unfed or without a home. His wife, the duchess, was once the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, and in her day many suitors had come to seek her hand. She chose the one she loved, and the two lived happily in the manor not far from the village itself, admired by all and praised for their ways.

The couple's love was eventually crowned with the children they loved dearly. The three girls that were the proof of their parents' love quickly became the centre of the village's affection, and they would often venture there on their own, laughing and smiling together in the blissful daze of childhood.

However, it is only after the cold and bitter winter that had killed many throughout the kingdom that our story actually begins. All had welcomed the warmth of the spring with smiles on their faces. Life was slowly creeping back into the land that had been left barren by the bite of frost and snow, and you could see a couple of flowers here and there among the splotches of the snow that still refused to disappear. There was a single person that had not ventured outside to greet the beauty of the sun, though. The Duke's eldest daughter named Jane, the girl that had just greeted her twenty fourth spring.

She was in her room, perched on the window seat, lost in thought as she gazed at the forests surrounding the beautiful home their parents had built in their youth. The house always seemed to be filled with warmth and love, but to Jane it didn't seem that way at all. No, it seemed

oppressing, caging and cold to the poor girl. And when the faces of her sisters appeared under the window she quickly drew back, almost falling from her seat.

Jane's sisters, Elizabeth and Emma, were both dazzling. Elizabeth was a tall girl, her beautiful golden hair shimmering in the sunlight, outshone only by her bright blue eyes that always seemed to sparkle with that unyielding spirit hiding behind them. Emma was almost as beautiful as her sister, her blue, sea-like eyes were always lit up by a smile, and her hair fell in gentle waves to the small of her back, bearing the colour of the starless night. Poor Jane, however, seemed dull compared to her sisters. Her muddy brown eyes and the chestnut-coloured hair made her seem boring, and her eyes were always glazed over, lost in daydreams the girl was prone to. Little if any knew, and even less cared to know, that the plain girl had something her sisters did not. Her voice. It was the most beautiful sound any man could hear, just like the soft chiming of bells, or the call of the nightingale at dawn. Its beauty could hold one captive, or give courage to those of faint will. This was, however, lost on her shy nature. And even though she had such a gift she never even dared speak in front of others.

This was the reason behind the girl's unhappiness. For although she was of age, not one suitor had come to seek her hand in marriage, not one soul wanted to spend days by her side. Her sisters, however, were already making plans for their glorious weddings, showered by the suitors from all parts of the world who would sometimes come just to admire their beauty. Alas, the girls' father, the Duke, was a man of tradition. And following the law his firstborn had to be wed first before the other two could even dream of becoming someone's bride!

The girls did not mind much at first, but, as time passed, they started growing bitter. Their loved ones were getting impatient, and their older sister was still spending her days alone in the shadows of the forest, or venturing into the fields to pick wildflowers. This only caused their bitterness to grow, and slowly it turned to anger. They turned on their sister. Day by day Jane's life grew darker and lonelier, until she had to hide from the wrath of her sisters.

The girl had a single escape from the reality that had wronged her so much. The woods she had grown to love with all her heart and the only place she could be herself. On the day our story begins, poor Jane, pressed by loneliness and fear, had fled to the place her dreams almost seemed reachable.

It was only a short walk that separated her from the trees, and she was already used to the dreadful fear caused by the slim chance she could run into her sisters on her way there. Soon enough, she was smiling, hidden by the shadows the forest offered. Leaves crunched under her feet as she laughed, running deeper into the woods, the echo of her happiness answering her in the still silence broken only by the song of the birds.

She was almost desperate to reach her favourite spot in that dreamy landscape. Deep in the forest there was a small hill crowned by an oak that seemed like it had witnessed countless years. To Jane, the tree seemed magical, like her own little corner of the world. She could climb its branches and let the wind ruin her perfectly made hair her mother had spent hours on, or simply drift off to peaceful slumber. Or she could do what she did then: taking a deep breath and

calming her racing heart, she let her voice drift over the land that was still awakening, calling out for the spring to hurry and shatter the last remains of the winter.

The world seemed to still, the very heavens listening to her song intently. She could almost feel someone's eyes on her just like every other time she was there, singing. But she was already used to the feeling, unlike the first time she sung and stopped suddenly when the sensation arose. Now, it gave her even more courage, as if her spectator was a dear friend she had always wanted.

However, this time it was different. For as she sang suddenly a different melody joined hers. The soft whispers of a harp, beautiful enough to be considered the melody of the devil himself. The girl stilled, stunned by the unexpected. She was never good at facing anything new or strange, but in that moment it seemed to her as if she had known those notes her entire life. Drawn in by the gentle sound, she started singing once again.

This time, her song was different. Excited, free, her feelings seemed to flood her as she poured her heart out for all willing to hear. And when the last words died down, she wished she could have sung forever. Excitement that still had her heart beating strong and fast carried her forward as she rushed in the direction of her mysterious Harper.

She told herself she could almost see something among the trees. She could almost see a silhouette of a man with long hair and a harp, but no matter how many trees she passed or how long she called after him he never answered, and she could never catch up.

It was when the numbness of fatigue took over her body that she stopped her search, the silhouette already gone. She decided to sit down, disappointment making it hard for her to focus on anything else but the mysterious melody. Her thoughts were filled with the stories and legends about the fey that hid from the human eye in the very forest she was in. But they were all nonsense, she forced herself to believe, and the melody she had heard was very real. That is why the one who had played it must be real as well! She repeated to herself those words over and over like a chant, and her eyes kept swiping over the forest expectantly, believing she would see the musician any moment as long as she kept looking.

However, a single stray thought took her to her home for but a moment, and suddenly her previous excitement was gone to make way to fright as she jumped to her feet. She broke into a run immediately, for the words of her smiling mother invaded her mind, repeated over and over again.

“Do not go off into the woods today! Important guests are coming!” The words haunted her as she ran. Every time her mother told her that it meant visitors were coming, and more often than not one or more of them were young men eligible for marriage. Jane could not even imagine the anger of her sisters if she missed the opportunity, no matter how insignificantly small it was, to steal a man's attention.

But as she broke through the trees, stepping into the clearing separating her house from the forest, she could not help herself but stop in her tracks, casting a longing glance to the trees. She

had not found her mysterious Harper yet, and that filled her with the sadness she could not yet understand.

“I promise I will be back to find you.” She whispered with sadness and longing. “I promise I will be there tomorrow.”

With that, the girl turned around and ran again, but she could not shake off the feeling that, just as she had uttered those words, a pair of ice blue eyes stared back at her from the veil of the forest. And those eyes haunted her even when she ran into the house, greeted by the scowl of her younger sisters and the disapproving frown of her, at times, strict mother.

She was quickly ushered to her room and forced into a dress of her mother’s choosing. This, of course, was followed by her mother’s endless comments about her ruined hair or her not taking care of herself. The girl was used to this, so she simply nodded her head shyly in acknowledgment of her mother’s words, knowing any form of objection would cause much unwanted bickering.

It was over quickly, and even though the duchess kept repeating how sorry she was she did not have the time to fix her daughter’s hair better Jane was deemed fit to appear in front of the guests that were supposed to arrive at any minute.

Some of the excitement of her family finally seemed to pass to the girl as she found she could not sit still. Of course, those eyes still haunted her, but it was almost easy to push back the memory at the moment, faced with the slight possibility she could finally make her sisters happy. She knew she did not care what kind of man she would be with, as long as she was finally out of her family’s way. She had convinced herself it would be better that way a long time ago, and she was ready to go through with her decision. As soon as someone asked for her hand, she would accept.

The stinging sadness that the thought of leaving her home brought seemed insignificant to the pain of knowing her sisters hated her. But, for a moment, just for a brief moment, she thought of her promise to the Harper and felt deep sorrow at the possibility she might not be able to keep it.

What shattered those dark thought was the sound of commotion from downstairs that forced the girl to snap out of her daze and jump up from her bed, the beautiful dark green dress she was wearing falling to the floor in waves. The sleeves of the dress were short, revealing her beautiful elegant arms. Her hair was carefully brushed and decorated with pearl-web that glittered in the light, and for the first time Jane could actually see herself as pretty.

With a smile on her face she skipped ahead and spun in front of the double mirror that stood not far from her bed, giggling as blood rushed to her cheeks, giving them a soft pink colour. Her mother burst into the room, disrupting the girl’s glee. The duchess was wearing a huge smile, her good mood obviously at its peak.

“Come! Come! You must not leave the guests waiting!” She chirped excitedly, almost dragging Jane out of the room in her daze.

It became apparent to Jane quickly enough why her mother was so gleeful. In the hall of their house stood not one, but two young men and their parents. It was obvious their families were well standing, and even passive Jane couldn't help her eyes from wondering over their graceful forms.

Jane's sisters followed after them as they descended the stairs to the lower floor, and the eyes of men were immediately drawn to them. Jane's heart fluttered in hope when their eyes landed on her for a brief moment, but then, just like always, she was quickly forgotten and their faces lit up at the sight of her sisters.

Jane felt a sharp pang of pain seeing the way the suitors looked at them, and for a second she froze on the stairs, almost running back up to her room. However, her mother's steel grip on her hand forced her to continue. As soon as they had descended, the guests crowded around her sisters, and even though her mother struggled to steal their attention for but a moment in order to introduce her eldest daughter it was all in vain.

The visit passed in a blur for Jane. She was too swept up in her own thoughts and despair to even notice the glamour of the men, or the graceful dancing when the music started and they immediately snatched her sisters aside. Was she so ugly? She wondered, struggling to hold back the tears that threatened to spill free. Was she so detestable she had to bring misery to her sisters as well?

As soon as the guests disappeared so did Jane. She didn't even wait for her parents' idle chitchat about the visitors, or for them to dismiss the girls. No, she ran. And as soon as she was in the seclusion of her room, the tears she was holding back tore free.

It was no longer only her sisters that hated her. She began to detest herself. She hated her hair, her plain face and the personality that made her drift in dreams more so than in reality. She desperately wished she could just disappear, but no matter how many times she repeated that over and over in her mind nothing happened. She was still there, and she was still lonely.

In her dark thoughts, a single thing still held some value: the promise she had made that day. And now, she knew she had to do anything to keep it, for what else did she have left but that?

That evening, she did not even undress when she went to sleep. Her mind drifted away easily, she was too weak to fight off the drowsiness and she lost to the darkness in the very position she was crying in. The following morning, she woke up with light headache, feeling even more disheartened than the day before.

It was still early in the morning, the light had only begun to reach out for Earth, chasing away the shadows of the night as sun showed its beautiful form.

She changed quickly into more comfortable clothes, discarding the dress carelessly. Then, as carefully as she could, Jane treaded down the stairs, skipping to the kitchen and raiding any food she could find, putting it into a small basket she would always take when she wanted to eat outside.

With that, before anyone else could wake and discover her little escape plan for the day, she disappeared through the doors and ran, excitedly, into the woods. Then more than ever it seemed to her the cover of the trees was a blessing. In truth, she was afraid to face her sisters, but she gave herself the excuse of looking for that mysterious Harper to escape from reality.

However, even when she found her way to her tree, and even when she had sung her heart out, the music of the harp never answered her call, and as the hours stretched past her poor Jane got more and more disheartened. Maybe he did not want to come? Maybe he saw her as plain, just like everyone else? Maybe she chased him away with her careless approach?

When she was finally ready to give up, her song turning desperate and remorseful, the gentle melody of her elusive companion answered her. Immediately, Jane stopped singing, blissful excitement and relief taking over her as soon as he had once again played for her. The music, too, stopped once her singing did, but Jane could almost feel his presence, the warmth and courage it gave her.

With a smile she had thought impossible just a while ago, she began to sing again, and the melody joined her instantly. For her, it was the happiest moment of her life. Maybe because she finally had someone that she thought understood her. Or maybe because he didn't disappear after all. It didn't matter anyway, as long as she could hear that heart lifting call of his harp.

She sang until not a sound would leave her lips, and then she finally collapsed to the ground, her cheeks flushed, her chest heaving, and her breathing laboured. Her eyes, however, held a shine they had never known before.

In that moment, plain Jane did not seem plain at all. The excitement and the fervour of the moment transformed her into a beautiful being. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks were red and her entire being was so alive that she seemed more like a nymph than the human girl no one liked or cared about.

And among the trees, unseen to her, two ice blue eyes watched her intently, with fascination they had not known before. Neither of them would leave the place unchanged on that fateful day, nor would they be allowed to forget the daze of blissful innocence.

When she finally returned home, even to her uncaring siblings Jane seemed different. Her mother whispered she must have finally found love, and her father looked at her with concern written on his face. Everyone noticed the change, but no one dared explore the reason behind it, fearful if they pushed, she would draw away from them even more.

It happened anyway though, Jane seemed to drift away from her family and the world around her with every new visit to the woods. Every time she heard the soft sound of the harp, she wished she could remain among the trees forever.

What little beauty her home and the world she lived in held, seemed to grow paler by the day. And the livelier she got the quieter she became when with her family. Her mother's glee quickly turned to fear, and her father's concern only grew.

Slowly, the balls and the parties of nobility she had always dutifully attended were completely forgotten in her mind, and so was the rage of her sisters. For what did it matter compared to the beauty she had found? The companionship she had yearned for was finally hers, and she was swept up in it like a flower in the cruel winds of a storm.

Her sisters, however, grew angrier by the day. It seemed to them that their older sister mocked them. Their lovers were angered by waiting, and all Jane ever did was dash into the cover of the trees with a mysterious smile on her lips.

It was not long before she began to ignore the words of her parents completely. And little by little even the authority they held seemed to wane. But everything came crashing down on her like a tidal storm when she finally caught the eye of a man.

Namely, a young merchant with his family was passing through the village one day. By chance, it was the very time that Jane's mother finally managed to capture her daughter's attention, and immediately took her for a long walk through the beautiful streets filled with laughter and happiness, trying to squeeze the truth of what was happening out of her daughter. The moment the merchant's eyes fell on Jane he could look at no one else, and that very instant he made it his goal to make her his wife.

Of course, Jane knew little of this, as instead of approaching the girl the merchant went straight to her father, declaring his love and his intentions. Needless to say, everyone was surprised, but the excitement that gripped the entire family was almost overwhelming. Without giving a thought to poor Jane, they immediately began organising the engagement party for her and her future husband, assuring him she would say yes when the time came.

It was on the most beautiful day of the fall, when the bronze leaves had already begun to descend upon the ground and everything seemed like the scenery from a fairy tale, that all of the preparations were completed. Invitations for the family members were given out, and the two enormous families were to gather in Jane's family's mansion.

Jane, lost in her world for months barely even spared a thought to the odd behaviour of her family. Completely lost on her were the glances and the bright smiles of the villagers and her sisters, as she spent every day only wishing the time would fly by and she would be free to run to the woods.

It was no surprise that when her mother informed her, in a voice of greatest seriousness, that she was to attend a party that day, and that she was required to wear her best clothes and jewellery, Jane brushed it all aside as another of their insignificant events she did not remotely wish to attend. And as soon as she noticed the carriages arriving, carrying guests from all over the kingdom, she slipped through the house like a cat, escaping to her little piece of heaven.

Imagine the horror of her parents when they discovered her room empty! Their daughter was nowhere to be found and the suitor knocking on their front doors with his family, brimming with enthusiasm and happiness of finally achieving his long-held goal.

It was a mess. The hosts locked themselves up in the abandoned room of their daughter, shaking and raging as they struggled to find the solution. They knew they could not find her in the woods, for she knew them better than anyone, and at the same time, neither of them was ready to walk out and announce the engagement was off!

By the time Jane was home, the house had been completely deserted. To her utmost shock, she discovered her mother crying in the hands of her father, and her sisters raging through the house, shouting and crying they were no longer going to wait for their horrid sister to be wed!

In the end, the couple had no choice but to tell the truth, and just like every time when the reality does not suit them, it was in the human nature of guests to throw a tantrum. The poor merchant almost died of shame, having his loved one run away on the day he was supposed to seize his happiness. However, this shame quickly turned to anger that was poised on her family, and the poor duke and duchess did not know how to mend their destroyed reputation.

But the one to suffer the most was Jane.

Suddenly, she was yanked away from her peaceful world of dreams and magic, and thrown into the cold, bitter reality she had left behind. Faced with the hateful glares of her sisters and the judgment of her parents she ran, and as soon as she was locked inside of her room that dam that protected her so well from pain in those past months broke, and everything flooded her at once.

How could she have allowed herself to be so caught up in fantasies? How could she forget the happiness of her sisters so focused on her own? She saw the face of a monster each time her eyes wondered to the mirror in her room, and from the bright girl she turned into a miserable creature that avoided the light of day!

Days dragged by painfully slowly for everyone. The suitor did not contact them at all, and no one expected him to. And, just as expected, there was no one else coming to seek Jane's hand in marriage. Obnoxious rumours quickly began to spread through the village. Everyone said the duke's eldest daughter turned down every suitor that approached her, and slowly they began to twist her into a creature with the heart of stone that none dared approach.

Her sisters suffered as well. Their lovers had finally run out of patience, and now they had to watch them with the new girls by their side! Both of them fell into endless pits of sorrow and pain, and each day they would beg their father to reconsider, certain that their lovers would return if only they had the permission to become their brides.

Granted, their unhappiness only fuelled the hatred for their sister that was already past anything that could remotely be humane. Each day their hate would grow, and each day they secretly wished their sister would die, so they could finally gain their freedom.

Their parents were not far behind the girls in their misery. The duke had already begun to despair, and the duchess constantly complained of headaches and the lack of sleep. Slowly, the two of them seemed to wither, their grace and beauty destroyed by the constant worry and neglect.

It was Jane, however, that suffered the most. She could no longer live with her guilt, and she left her room less and less, even to eat or bathe. The cold eyes of everyone, the looks on their faces that screamed they wished she did not exist haunted her even in her sleep. The nightmares she often had kept waking her in the middle of the night. It was but one thing that kept her sane, the soft memories of the songs unhindered by reality, and the ardour of something akin to love that would grip her every time she heard that mysterious music.

Winter crept up on them, and as soon as the first dash of wind and the gusts of snow descended upon the land it was obvious that the cold bite of frost would be even more vicious than the previous year. Villagers, huddled around the fires of their homes slowly forgot all about the duke's daughter, and no one cared about the gossips.

With the passing of that winter, the girl was already forgotten in their stories. But then something most miraculous happened, something that makes up the very heart of this tale.

It is only when we are forced to keep company to ourselves, that we discover our darkest thoughts and wishes our heart has buried to spare us from the evils of the world. And for a long time, Jane's sisters struggled to avoid solitude. However, gripped by the cold clutches of the winter, they had no choice but to indulge in those thoughts, and it became apparent quickly something had to change soon, or everyone would suffer forever.

In their eyes, it was the presence of their sister that had caused this unhappiness, and as soon as the two sisters finally revealed their thoughts to one another, their rage finally reached its limit and spilt forth, destroying everything in its path.

They stormed forth to their sister's room, ripping open the doors and running in. Jane's confused face greeted them, pale for the lack of sunlight and the time she spent hiding: she looked even more boring and ordinary than before. She was just finished with her bath, and water still dripped from her hair, wetting her night-gown. Her sisters did not hesitate as they pounced like rabid animals, cornered into striking. Jane was pushed to the floor roughly, and they loomed over her before they uttered the words that finally broke Jane's frail heart.

"We wish you were dead!"

"Be gone you odious wench!"

"Even parents hate you by now!"

Stricken by their cruelty, and in despair, Jane rushed through the open doors of her room as quickly as her feet would carry her. She wanted to die. In her eyes there was nothing else left, but she could never raise her hand on herself.

And so, she ran.

She ran to the only place she could ever connect with happiness, under the tree she loved and where she finally knew the meaning of that single word that overtook her so quickly. However,

she had but a night-gown on, and the cruel winds kept whipping her face, her eyes blinded by snow as the cold of death seeped into her bones.

She could barely walk by the time she reached the woods, and as soon as she stepped forth she found her body would not move. It was only her will that guided her forward, her despair to reach the place she loved.

Minutes dragged by as she struggled, fighting off the alluring sleep that clouded her already numbed senses. When she was just a few meters away from the spot, poor Jane finally crumbled to her feet and her eyes locked on the magnificent oak that seemed to reach out to her, pressed by the wind.

Her vision wavered, and she found she could not go on. Slowly, her very essence seemed to fade as she stared at that tree with a small smile on her lips that would bring a man to tears. It was the smile of a person that had greeted death, welcoming it like a friend, the final relief.

Just when her eyes closed, something warm seemed to descend over her, and for a moment, just a moment, she could almost hear the sound of the harp, drowned out by the winds. Two circles of startling blue. That was the last image that flashed through her mind before consciousness escaped her.

In the forest far away,

Lying in happiness forgotten,

I found a smile that led me astray.

Kindness of love misbegotten

Escape I could not,

You had what I sought.

Outlasted this pain will be,

Unwavering hope will live for all eternity.

The love you've planted inside me,

I will never uproot and deny

The sky is where I'll engrave our love, for all eternity with the stars it will fly.

The most beautiful voice she had ever heard in her life softly called out to Jane, the song begging her to open her eyes just for a moment so she could see the face of the person singing. However, it was only after her numb mind had finally recognised the soft sound of the strings of a harp that her eyes shot open and she jolted upright.

The music stopped immediately, and as a gentle hand touched her shoulder she was pushed back into the soft covers of a bed. Looking up, Jane's very soul was almost sucked out when her eyes fell on the most startling pair of ice blue orbs she had ever seen in her life. Not even the glance she had stolen before could match up to the beauty of the eyes of her mysterious Harper up close.

"Lie down." He whispered gently. "You need to rest."

However, as soon as he drew back and her eyes fell onto the sharp, beautiful lines of his face and the pointy ears that stubbornly peeked from his hair it was as if her breath was stolen away, and doubt and fear showed their ugly heads.

An Elf! Her Harper was an elf! And what, pray tell, was she doing in his presence?

It was then that the memories of what had happened rushed back to her, and she almost doubled over in pain, clutching her stomach.

"Are you hurt?" His worried voice reached her immediately, and she looked up in wonder to face his scared, wide, innocent eyes that enchanted her again.

"No... I..."

"Hush." He whispered immediately, as if he knew exactly what she was about to say. "Everything is going to be all right now, I promise." He whispered as his long fingers stroked the line of her jaw, gently spreading over her cheek.

And then, he kissed her.

For Jane, it was something she had never experienced before. The full power of love and lust seemed to flood her innocent heart, and she did not know how to respond. However, she found she didn't want to know, surrendering instead to the lips of her saviour, for she had no doubt it was him that had risen to her aid before.

Once he finally pulled back, leaving both of them breathless, the Elf stared into her eyes with more love than she could comprehend, and to her utter surprise she found she answered with matching intensity.

"Do you like the song I've written for you?" The elf whispered. Jane, stunned, could only nod weakly and he laughed, the sound like the thousands of little crystals breaking or the chiming of bells. "I know we have just met, but I've been keeping you company for many seasons." He murmured, and his cheeks slightly blushed. "Will you... will you stay with me, Love? Become my bride and we can be together in these woods forever." Finally, leaning forward so his lips

were almost touching her ear he whispered. "I want my music to always follow your song, forever and ever, my dearest."

Feeling as if she was in a dream, slowly, Jane raised her hand and her fingers gently brushed away a strand of the elf's long hair. Looking into his eyes again she could not find anything but sincere love and purest adoration in them. It scared her, in a way, and she felt sudden fear he would see her for what she was, plain, and leave as quickly as he came into her life, like a summer storm.

"B-but... I-I am just..."

"You are beautiful." He stopped her, suddenly snatching away her hand to kiss her fingers. "The only one for me."

Tears escaped her the moment she heard those words. She felt strange, even though she had only just met him she felt she had known him her whole life, and as she uttered that single word she knew she would never grow to regret it.

"Yes."

In the small village of White Hill, the only trace of the existence of the girl called Jane is a single story, the story of a girl lost in snow, and the Elven Harper that found her. It is said that at the very place he lifted her into his arms now stands an oak, taller and wider than any other tree, and that every year, no matter how cold the winter is, or how cruel the snow, around that oak you can always see wildflowers, blooming as if they are eternally lost in the spring they were planted in, by the hands of the Harper elf and his Bride. People still say that if you venture close to that Oak, you can hear them. The beautiful call of the harp and the voice that will make your heart stand still. And the villagers say, with their voices hushed and the eyes sparkling in excitement, as if revealing something holy and secret: "Forever and ever, he will be by her side, just like their promise said".

The Other Side

Mila Kostić

"Want some pancakes ?", I asked. "Yeah, Lana, like that is going to fix everything. Why do you always talk about food?", asked Hannah, with a desperate look on her face. "Well, it worked last time... Didn't it?" – as soon as I said it, I knew we were better off without it being mentioned and I knew what was coming. "You can't be serious. It was a cat, just a cat. And it had been looking funny at us since... Well, since forever. Ever since Mason moved in next door. And why on earth are we even talking about it. I thought we agreed on that one". "Okay, okay, be quiet – she is coming down the stairs. Oh, good morning sunshine. Slept well?" There she was. The little one, as we called her, barely even able to look at us and still not sure where she was. "Morning, guys. I had a weird dream, or dreams, I'm not sure – I saw grandma in it, it was something about a cat, I think, and the basement. I got a feeling it was all in this house, but I am not sure. I can't really remember if the house even has a basement. I kept waking up and going back to the same dream. Weird, right?", Ava went on talking and talking while Hannah and I stood frozen, there in the kitchen, in mid-April, hoping she wouldn't get suspicious and start asking more questions about 'the dream'. That wasn't her first time dreaming about that, but it was her first time dreaming about it in this house, and grandma warned us about that happening – although she said she had taken care of it years ago. I always wondered about that, but never dared to ask, because I was scared for these two little fools - I am the one who should keep them safe. In an attempt to distract her and change the topic, I offered her breakfast – "Sounds tiring, but that's probably because you slept in a new bed, don't worry. Are you hungry, darling? We got pancakes and strawberries, I tried to make this old place a bit homier for you today. I have to say, it's like grandma left years ago. Anyway, do you girls have any plans for today?" Ava went for the food and she didn't seem interested in talking much. Fortunately, Hannah was peculiarly excited to answer: "Actually, I have a job interview in two hours, it's that law firm McKenzie & Clyde from downtown. I am really optimistic about this one!" Bless her, she was optimistic with every single job interview so far, but nothing had worked out in other cities.

"I overheard you two talking about a cat before as I was coming down. I don't remember grandma having a cat when we were little. Is there a cat here? You KNOW they don't like me and I just got here last night". Hannah was about to burst into a fake laugh, trying to make it seem impossible that we would own a cat, so I convinced little Ava (not so little anymore, she was twenty-three – unbelievable!) saying: "You were always dramatic without a reason, honey. We mentioned a silly thing about a neighbor's cat, but he moved away a long time ago so you don't have to worry about that. Do you remember when all

three of us begged mom and dad for a week to let us have a cat? Ah, it's a good thing they did not let us – can you imagine that when you two had to move away from home, that would've been awful to...".

And then something crashed, we did not know what it was, but it was loud. I mean, 'something-heavy-crashed' loud. Ava was, of course, 'scared out of her wits', as she was at least once a week. "What happened? Was that the door? Lana, was that the basement door?", Hannah asked grudgingly and stormed off of her chair towards the basement. I had to follow her, I knew, but I honestly hoped it was nothing serious and that we would just find that old bookshelf on the floor again. Ava came along, although I tried to stop her. "Lana, get the key. It came from downstairs. Open the door", Hannah latched onto the door knob and would not let go for the life of her, "Open it, please, someone might've gotten into the house". I knew no one could, the basement windows were secure, but I unlocked the door anyway – maybe 'the moment' was this moment. The three of us entered the basement – it was gloomy, dark, stuffy, musty. "We shouldn't even be here. Remember?", but they paid no attention to what I was saying, they started rummaging through the old boxes and trunks – our old Jenn was a bit of a hoarder and we knew she held onto her memories; Hannah and Ava had their hands full with all of those, and, of course, Ava wanted to know where everything was from, why grandma had that particular dress or that dusty red book (she was always the most curious sister, which wasn't always good). The two of us were not quite sure what we should tell her, because Ava did not remember much, though Hannah and I did; if we say something new now, she might get suspicious, and if we say nothing, she might get suspicious ... Hannah's phone started ringing so she went to get it just when Ava said: "Oh wow, this is fancy for our dear Jenny, she was never a fan of heavy bulky furniture, but this is quite a piece. And it's not even scratched that much. This would look much better upstairs in the hallway, what do you think?" She went towards the old mirror and wanted to take down the curtain that was barely covering it. "Oh, no, no, you don't have to bother with that old thing, it has served its purpose, Hannah and I just mentioned it a couple of days ago. Let's leave it there and have some coffee in the living room". She just ignored me and stared at the mirror, seeming bewildered, which worried me. Then, Hannah came back down, and she also looked worried but she didn't say anything. Ava took down the mirror cover. I couldn't believe my eyes.

There we were. The 3 of us. And the 3 of 'us' but not us, in the mirror, staring back at us – the living images of Ava, Hannah, and ME. We all just stood there. "I knew it, I knew. I told you we SHOULDN'T, Hannah, we did not have to come in here. She doesn't have to know. Ava, honey, I understand if you ... ", I just started shouting at them, as I couldn't face the possibility that all of it might come out there and then, something we carefully but

barely managed to keep a secret for over 20 odd years. How are Han and I supposed to explain that to Ava? Who are the girls in the mirror – we don't know? They are us? Are they? I don't know. What is going on?

“WHAT IS GOING ON? I can't ... Who are ...? Lana?? Hannah??”, screamed Ava, her eyes fixed in the direction of the two of us, she looked so scared and scary at the same time, and with a good reason. I tried to get closer to her, but she pulled away. Hannah managed to get her to sit and calm down a bit, hoping we would come up with a meaningful, logical, realistic, any kind of explanation. We couldn't.

No one could, it was what it was. Grandma had warned us years in advance, I can still remember her quivering voice that always managed to console her little girls: “I am telling you, Lans, you can't escape your past, my past, OUR past. It will all become clear to you three, to Ava too, even though she wouldn't want to be a part of it. I don't even want her to, or Han and you, but you must accept it. Be bright as you are!”

‘Be bright’, what does it even mean? I never got to that part, I would always get interrupted before I could read about it. She always insisted on the light - opening the windows, opening the blinds, turning the lights in the house as soon as it got dark outside, candles burning in every room, a flash light or a lighter in every drawer and handbag. Grandma loved the light, she craved it, cherished it. The dark did not scare her, though, but she somehow seemed to be fighting it off. The basement, on the other hand, was not such a ‘bright’ place, it gave off a strange dreary feeling, too creepy for us kids to even go there on our own. This time might even be the first time the three of us together came in here; luckily, it was daylight outside and the basement was not completely in the dark. I was never sure why grandma never brought some ‘brightness’ into this room like she had done with the others. Perhaps the mirror had something to do with that, but I kept that thought to myself.

Ava seemed disoriented so the three of us returned to the kitchen. The pancakes had gotten cold by now; I decided to make some mint tea, as it might help break the tension - no one was in the mood for it but I put it on the table anyway. “Do you remember when you hit your head on the counter here when you were 5, Ava? You woke up scared and did not know what happened, dear, and mom told you it was nothing to worry about. You were clumsy when you were younger, but you did not really fall and hit your head. We were not exactly sure how to explain it to you then, we are not sure of that even now but ... Lana? A little help? ”, Hannah startled and looked at me desperately. I felt desperate myself - mom told us never to talk about it, grandma told us it couldn't be avoided. ‘I love you, mom, but she is old enough to make her own decisions’ (I knew mom would hear me so I said it very quietly). “See, that was for your own good, we all had to go through the same thing; only, Hannah and I remember everything unfortunately, it worked only with you so you can't remember anything”.

“What worked with me? Why? What??”, Ava requested to know so Hannah openly told her: ‘Grandma’s spell’.

Ava burst into laughter - it was a mixture of disbelief and shock; that disoriented expression resurfaced on her face and she said nothing. For the next hour, she said absolutely nothing and just stared blankly at the wall.

Suddenly, Hannah grabbed her hand, told me to come along and rushed down the stairs. ‘I can’t, we have to clear the air now. Sit here’, she told Ava, approaching the mirror, ‘and ask every question you have. You are a part of this family and you have as much right to know as we do. Lana, call her, it’s okay’. I came closer and quietly said: ‘Mom? Can we talk, please?’.

It’d been two years. We had had a fight. A big one, as we never argued over trivial things. But today, two years later, she finally spoke to me and Hannah. She was able to hear us at all times but she never spoke back when we talked to her. At least, we knew she was always there, down there, behind it. But for Ava, it’d been much longer and now, she was even more shocked. Just like she always knew how, our mom was direct and succinct so she told Ava about the house, grandma, the mirror and her ‘incident’ in the kitchen. ‘You were too young, it was the only thing to do, your grandma was a wise woman, and she knew the spell would have to work at some point. We sort of tried with your sisters too, but for many reasons, it didn’t function as well as we hoped it would. First, we wanted to protect Lana, but her memory was lost only for a couple of months. With Hannah, it lasted for two whole years. On her 8th birthday, she got it all back, and it was rough, almost like with you now, my love. That’s when grandma and I realized we needed something more in order for it to work properly with you. All you need to know is in there’, she added while pointing at the red book on the floor. ‘Take it, read it, it’s okay, I am sure you will understand, your sisters did’, and she left.

“Why is she in there and why don’t I know any of this and what is this book and why do those girls look like us?? I can’t understand anything now and you think I am ready? Ready for what?? This can’t be my life; my life was normal, peaceful, yesterday I was in MY bed in MY house, and where am I now? A book? And all will be clear?? Sure, let me just go grab mint tea and relax while I read everything about my WEIRD family from a dusty book. You always treated me like a little brat, you never took me seriously!”, Ava yelled and ran upstairs.

‘She could talk to one of us,’ a soft voice joined us from the mirror, ‘or to herself. We are family too’. ‘Stop it, Lena, you can’t fix everything just by talking’, I cried. ‘I told you time after time, don’t call me that! My name is LANA, and you know that. And it can’t hurt to try and help. We were able to help you with that guy Mason. And they are doing

great, thank you for asking. WE are doing great, don't worry, especially not about mom ...", the voice stopped suddenly and she went away. I was not about to try again to bring that girl to her senses so I hurried to the kitchen. Hannah stayed in the basement.

"Seems like it's down to us two, huh? How are things there, Hailey? Is mom really okay? Ava had a dream about Mason's cat last night. I guess this day was coming. I was supposed to have a job interview today, but they called to reschedule at the last moment. You guys had nothing to do with that I suppose, right? What a day, huh?" Hannah was ready to say anything just to talk for a bit longer with Hailey. They were the only ones who were close, in a way, unlike the rest of us. And Hailey never insisted on us calling her 'Hannah', unlike the rest of them.

Hailey was in a good mood today and she was in fact glad to see Hannah, so they kept on talking for about half an hour. "I bet Ava is pretty upset. Remember Ada with us? Rough doesn't begin to describe it. But no one can help them unless they help themselves, let your little one breathe and focus on what's important. She will come around, she's bright, that one. Oh, and grandma says hi, she couldn't make it in time today. Looks like I have to go too, it's time. Say hi to Lana from me and give a big hug to Ava, she needs it!", Hailey waved and left so Hannah joined us in the kitchen. Sometimes she leaves the basement door open, probably because it is so dark down there. That is how I can stay in the loop about them; Hannah often comes up sad and doesn't feel like talking. It's very important for us here to know that they are fine down there and that whenever they need us, they can knock, or rather more, bang on the mirror. It works for all us, and it has for many years.

"I wish we could talk more often. Not on days like today, but you know, more like family does. About our days, the weather, that boring job, the cute guy from the coffee shop, anything. And not have to constantly worry about whether all of us are alive and well. Except mom, of course, she is somewhere in between that. Hailey reminds me of me so much, but Lena is totally different from you. I wonder how Ava and Ada will click. So far, they resemble each other. I am sort of trying to keep a smile on, but I am not sure what to do with that girl, especially today. Oh, by the way, my interview was postponed. I mean, this day is already strange enough as it is, but I didn't know they were able to control other people's actions and their time. That's interesting, isn't it? It might come in handy ... Of course, I am kidding, we could NEVER ... Or could we?", Hannah giggled but I could see she was worried. "Grandma said hi to us, but I didn't see her. I guess next time we will have more luck, what do you think?"

“Yeah, next time. When was the last time? It’s weird without her. A whole year in here and I still don’t feel like it’s my house, to me it is still hers. Only hers. It’s as if we are here just for the weekend. That’s how I feel here”, I answered. “ We should probably check up on Ava, I think she’s got herself together by now. I wonder what she learned from the book. I never got to finish it, which reminds me – you know how grandma used to tell us ‘Be bright, girls. Be bright!’? I was never sure about what she meant by that”.

“Hailey just told me the same thing about Ava. I don’t know, but we will find out, just like she found about this mess today. What a mess. It didn’t have to be so messy, so dramatic. Is it impossible to bring something up and not get all upset and angry about it? I thought we could get on well, actually, one big, happy, unconventional, divided family. I guess I just hoped for something, when Ava finally finds out. I imagined it differently. Mom could have come up, it might have been helpful”, Hannah said it with a huge smile on her face, like that was something great. “You know she wouldn’t come up. You know what happened last time. Since dad’s gone, she refuses to come here and we can’t make her. She doesn’t have to risk another life again, that would kill her. Don’t bring that up again, please, it was bad enough last time. Please, Han, for Ava”, I replied.

We went to check up on Ava in her room. Before we opened the door, we’d agreed we would be patient and keep it honest with her, no matter how weird or illogical something seemed, we had to acknowledge the fact that she, as our third sister, had as much right to decide about her life as we had. “Good, so we are going to ‘talk’ to her, we won’t fight or argue about the things because they are as they are. Mom is there, dad is gone. Those three are our sisters, in a way, and grandma wanted, and still does want us to all get along and respect each other. She and mom can hear us here. Okay, here we go”, Hannah convinced me.

Ava was on the bed, she couldn’t hear us because she was fast asleep. "Poor little one, she must have been exhausted with everything today", said Hannah and covered her with a blanket. The old red book was beside her on the bed, and we noticed she had read through grandma’s part about brightness, but what confused us was that the last dozen of pages were blank. “I don’t remember it having any blank pages, do you? This is the same book as before, right?”, Hannah looked at me surprised. “Yeah, it’s the same one, look at the covers, those are grandma’s and mom’s initials. But I don’t remember it having so many pages, now that I come to think about it. And this line under mom’s initial - that wasn’t there. Should we add our own maybe? After all, it is our book, and now that Ava has read it, we might be able to put our initials on it too”.

And so we did. We added 'L', 'H' and 'A' below grandma’s 'J' and mom’s 'N'. It seemed right.

As we didn't want to wake Ava up - we thought she could use some rest - we came back downstairs. "And when is your interview scheduled for next? You could take my shirt, the one you like so much. You already believe it's a lucky shirt so it might come in handy for the interview. You seemed excited this morning, but now ... You look distant, what's wrong?", I asked Hannah. "Well, nothing in particular. I just feel weird about mom and grandma spells to reschedule a job interview. Like, what could go wrong, right? If they had done that today, it might not have been their first time. Or they might do it again and again. We don't know. We wouldn't know. They surely wouldn't announce it to us. And I definitely don't need my mom setting me up with a job. I want to get it on my own, it would be a great opportunity and I could stay here with you. I hope it goes well. It's tomorrow and I am right about that shirt, you'll see. A bit of luck won't hurt".

"I am sure it will be fine, Han. Just be an optimist. Now, you too should have some rest. Go to sleep, you must be tired. I will finish up with the dishes here and I will go too. Good night!"

The next morning, Hannah and I got up before Ava.

"Oh hey, morning. Would you like some pancakes? Coffee? Mint tea?", I asked Hannah. "You always think and talk about food, Lana. You can't fix everything with food, can you?", she answered. "It helped us last time, remember?", I added and immediately regretted mentioning it. "Oh, Lana, that cat had always been looking at us in a weird way. Forget about it already". I heard a noise from upstairs: "Right, fine, okay, just stay quiet - she is coming down". Ava joined us in the kitchen.

"Good morning, guys. I had such a weird dream or dreams, I'm not sure - grandma was in it, and there was something about a cat, I think, and the basement. I got the feeling it was all in this house, but I wouldn't say for sure. I can't remember if this house even has a basement. I kept tossing and turning, waking up and going back to the same dream. Isn't that weird?", Ava went on talking ...

Hunting the Hunters

Kristina Petrović

The sun shone in her eyes as she playfully sighed and, kicking up her feet, jumped off the vegetable cart. The fresh morning air was filled with shouts as the market slowly started attracting more and more villagers. She skipped her way around the chaotically arranged carts with a wide smile playing on her lips. Gods, it was such a wonderful day, one of those that seemed to be made for swimming in the lake and just lying around. Amidst the happy barking of dogs and the cheerful bartering of shoppers and stall holders alike, she heard a shrill cry. The sound sent chills down her spine, such as she had never felt before. It started crawling up her limbs as she started to turn around in the hopes of locating the cry. 'I... It's all my fault... IT'S ALL MY FAULT!' a strange boy she had never seen before yelled out. She opened her mouth to say something but the boy burst into howling rage while tears ran down his cheeks. Reluctantly, she made a small step towards the boy; something inside her screamed that she should be angry, that she should be mad. But then, the sky turned black. In the blink of an eye, all life was snuffed out of the market, silence and long purple shadows falling on the small hamlet. She stood face to face with the crying boy, her small hands balled into fists when she heard a shuffling sound behind her.

'Alex. Alex, my dear girl...' Horror struck her as she faced the hollow and disfigured face of her mother. 'Alex, my precious child, don't go into the night... it's not safe.' The creature, her mother, opened her mouth and an unearthly scream came out of it, forcing her to her knees.

'No, this isn't happening! NO!' she exclaimed.

With a loud grunt she leapt from her makeshift bed and bent over, hands pressed hard against her knees as she tried to compose herself. 'Just a dream, 'twas but a dream,' she whispered, slowly forcing herself straight.

The last light of the day was piercing through the ruins that served as their temporary shelter, illuminating the small area that might have once been a reception room. She rolled her shoulders and slowly massaged her temples while her eyes were slowly getting used to the gloom. With a sigh she turned about, passing a glance over the wrapped figure lying in the furthest corner from her. Disgust marked her expression as she moved one hand to where her dagger used to be. 'That bloody dolt! I should take his life here and now,' the idea crossed her mind as she was slowly stepping over some rubble and making her way towards the figure. Lieutenant Wizford was still bundled up in a foetal position, only slightly shivering.

Stopping herself, Alexandra turned away and went back to her corner, slowly crouching as she contemplated. 'We've been chasing these raiders for two weeks now, catching up with their operation after a few outlying hamlets were raided and the settlers snatched.' She bit down on a piece of salted meat while slowly oiling the mechanisms of her crossbow. 'It was a pretty

straightforward operation; five squads were sent out; their goal was to cut the slavers off the safety of the woods on the other side of the border. Five squads led by five sergeants; as by-the-book operation as one could be.'

She pulled a brown satchel towards herself and slowly started inspecting the alchemical explosive devices inside, her fingers running across the smooth surface of the glass and clay spheres. 'Military intelligence suggested that the slavers were under the burden of two score villagers and there were at least that many raiders as well. So even though there might have been more of them, the numbers were more or less the same against their group of fifty battle-hardened stormers.' After putting the satchel away, she drew her short sword and slowly started cleaning its blade, her rough hands working on it ever so assiduously.

'With the advantage of speed and better equipment, the only problem in this operation would have been to keep the villagers out of harm's way. But with a good plan and enough time at our disposal we would have figured out how to keep the number of casualties low. But now... it all fell through.'

Alex caught herself staring at the snivelling lieutenant with contempt. She averted her gaze and went about preparing the rest of her kit, checking her crossbow bolts, tightening the belts and straps and letting her mind drift into the state of readiness and calm.

But then, the events that had led to all this started flowing back rapidly.

'I will lead this attack,' were the words that brought her where she is; words from a pompous young fool, the fourth son of some minor House that just couldn't reach his inheritance. Nobles in the army were bad enough, but men such as this one were worse, far more dangerous for the life and wellbeing of a soldier. For, the fourth sons were those who had bought their title, and bought titles never brought anything good.

There they were, fifty stormtroopers, the Empire's finest, led by five sergeants, including her. Men and women she knew by their names, their hopes and dreams, their skills and capabilities; every single thing down to their snoring patterns. And... Him. Snot-nosed, wet behind the ears, green brat that grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth.

'This is a big operation and I will lead us into victory,' the noble boasted. Going back to it now, they should have killed him there and then, reported that he had fallen off his horse or something. But they were silent. Sadly, they honestly thought that their experience would balance the boy's nonsense; it was such a simple operation after all...

It was on the fifth day that they found the tracks of the raiders. Two loaded carts, a dozen horses, and a lot of boot prints. Less than two days old. They were still travelling through the Crumbling Mountains, and were soon to arrive at the ruins of Drum city. Two days to the ruins and another two days to reach the endless forests of the clan lands. They had just enough time to skirt the city and prepare the ambush on the other side.

‘That sounds like a plan befitting your rank, sergeant Vukova. But that just won’t do.’ The lieutenant clasped his hands behind his back, striding around the fire, the ember flames reflecting off his gilded buttons and cuffs. ‘A simple ambush just won’t do. What if they chose to hide in the city and just escape in some other direction...NO! No, I won’t allow that. We will be doing a slightly revised plan.’ A smirk played across his face, the one she had to pull enough restraint not to break into a thousand tiny pieces. ‘Ah yes. So, while Varik and Dmitar lead their squads to circle the city and fall into the ambush positions, your and the Ironhand’s squad, led by me of course, will charge at them from the back. Gregor will keep our backs safe from a distance and pick up and straggle...’

‘Lieutenant, with all due respect, splitting our forces like that would be dangerous in this environment. They will surely notice us on their backs as soon as we close in. Heck, they might have even spotted us already. And if by chance our units ge...’ She was cut off by his shrill NO.

‘Don’t forget your place, sergeant Vukova. I am in command here. I am of noble blood and I was placed in this position by an army Blade! You will follow my orders, all of you. Don’t make me call for disciplinary actions...’

She started towards him but Ironhand’s arm was faster. ‘We’ll handle him later. Don’t lose your cool...’ she heard him mutter.

‘Why don’t we end it here Iron? Why are we following his folly?’ she thought to herself while lowering her fists, still curled into balls, and fixing a gaze on the lieutenant.

‘Anything to add, Vukova? No? ... Didn’t think so.’

And that was the end of the discussion. With first light, Varik and Dmitar’s squads left for their tasks, while Alexandra and her men slowly crawled forwards, trailing the obvious tracks the raiders had left behind. Gregor’s men followed them at half a day’s distance. The next day... Well it is not one she could easily forget.

They were woken up by a scream. Without a second of contemplation, they jumped to their feet, padded armour equipped, belts tightened and crossbows cranked; just in time, for they were under attack. Armed slavers charged out of the ruins. Alexandra’s men filled a few of them with bolts, but they were outnumbered. Thus the soldiers went down, one by one. Peter with the boar tusk around his neck and the battle axe of a northern clan. Young Ira, with her cat-like eyes and daggers as sharp as her wit. Denald with his face disfigured into a constant smile caused by an old battleaxe wound. All gone... And there was Ironhand, a man with whom she got in blows more often than she could count. A friend. A rival.

Three of the raiders had already fallen to her swordsmanship. She quickly danced around the pillar, avoiding a well-placed spear thrust. She couldn’t afford sticking around; she had to warn the rear-guard of this ambush. Steeling herself, Alex quickly sidestepped another thrust and with one quick slash opened the neck of her foe, scarlet blood spraying across her face. Moments later, she was already picking her way through the ruins, her heart racing as shouts grew ever closer.

Up to that moment, there had still been hope to turn the situation around, to get the rear-guard's support and, together with the ambushing parties, still convey a successful assault. But all of that withered away when she heard the sound of battle ahead.

Realisation, followed by horror, struck her as she was just in time to witness the last moments. Her face went pale as she watched the raiders rob and mangle the bodies of her fallen comrades, while tying and forcing a few of the surviving ones in the direction of the slaver camp. As the slavers passed by, she said nothing, she did nothing; her presence among the ruins remained unnoticed. It must have been a few hours before she dared herself to stand up; the sun was at its peak when she started checking out the site of battle, kneeling before the corpses of the only friends and family she had ever had, and giving them their last rites in a short and orderly fashion. A few more hours passed when she finally completed her task and she was ready to leave the site. But to her surprise, she heard a low whimpering sound from one of the ruins nearby. And that's where she found him. Lieutenant Wizford was half lying against a pillar, the grey cloak blending in with the surroundings. His armour was scratched and covered in dents, but there was no blood.

The moment she laid her eyes on him she quickly marched forward and with all her might planted a mailed fist in his face, jerking his head back as it slammed against the pillar. 'You bastard!! You worthless piece of filth!!'

And that... that is how she ended up being in such situation. Now here she was; her blades ready, her bolts accounted for, and all the alchemical devices in a more or less acceptable condition. There was no other way, this had to be done. The raiders were still close by, making their way for the border. The remaining squads were probably already there lying in wait, men and women ready to spring their trap while expecting support from the rear. The support that would never come.

She was left without options, with no time to alert the ambushers of the situation. There was only one thing she could do. She had to assault them on her own before the trap sprung...

Alex picked up the brown bag and tightened it over her shoulder, letting it rest against her hip at arm's reach. Without looking back at the mess she left in the shelter, she started picking her way through the ruins. The path she followed was illuminated by moonlight and star-filled sky. 'This is it, all or nothing,' she tried to give herself courage to move forward, 'You can do this, Alex. You've trained for this and by the Fire you will see this through and watch that bastard hang for his crime...'

Tirelessly she marched onward, blending into the ruins, slithering forward, her eyes wide open for any sort of trickery. This was not the time for fears, doubts, or tears. This was a time for action, this was her calling. With her comrades dead, she was but an arrow, the manifestation of their vengeance. An arrow notched and loosed by the Empire as a whole. And she would not miss...

* * *

Her first victim was a bearded man in light leather armour and a mean knife on his belt. She caught him taking a leak on one of the ruined statues of the ancient town. The crossbow against her shoulder made a clicking sound and within seconds the bolt punctured his skull, jerking his head forward and dropping him on the ground. Before he even hit the ground, she had already dropped the crossbow and made a sprint across the open ground. His watchmate, preoccupied with some awfully interesting crack in a wall, only noticed her after she had crossed more than half the distance between them. He tugged at his sword belt, but before he got the sword loose, a dagger dug deep into his shoulder, forcing a sound of pain out of him. Not a moment had passed and she was already upon him, her eyes cold and keen, her face a mask of serenity. With a single swing of her sword, she slashed his throat and forced him down in a bloody heap.

‘I’m getting closer; would be unlikely to have such inattentive scouts too far from the main group,’ she noted while pulling the dagger, cleaning it against the dead scout’s clothes, and sheathing it.

The sun was shining high in the sky, dominating the wide blue expanse without a cloud in sight. With ease she moved through the ruins, silent as a shadow, geckos and spiders skittering before her, watching her from rafters, dark corners, and rooftops as she disturbed their usual daily routines with her passage. Her senses were filled with the crumbling of stone, the smell of century-old dust and the occasional cry of the local bird population. After getting her lips wet with a few swigs of water and filling the void in her stomach with a piece of hard bread and salted meat, she was on the move again. It was the second hour since she left the two scouts for dead. As she was getting closer, she slowed her approach. By her estimate, they should be walking into the pre-planned ambush the next morning. And if she were to strike, it would have to be just before the trap was sprung, to leave them wide open for her comrades to attack, even at the cost of her own well-being. A sad sigh escaped her as the thought crossed her mind. ‘First in, last out,’ was always the saying they adhered to.

It wasn’t long before the sounds of the slaver’s convoy found their way to her. The shouting of men, the neighing of horses, and the cranking of loaded wooden wagons. She was quick to spot the armed vanguard of the convoy, tough-looking men sporting hard leather armour and simple crossbows. They kept their eyes peeled forward, confident that their companions were on alert for everything happening behind their backs, and at the thought of that, her lips curled into a vicious smile. They dropped their guard after their victory, confident that even if another strike force might be sent after them, they would be long lost in the northern wilds by then.

Most of that day she spent trailing them carefully, making her way through the ruins at a steady pace while the convoy advanced. She shadowed them at a decent distance, keeping tabs on the vanguard while also having her eyes on any unfortunate soldier stumbling into her hiding places. The day was hot and dry without a single cloud in the sky; she had already gone through one flask of water, sipping from it only when necessary. A cold flame was resting deep inside her. Without pause or second thought she kept tailing the group, her desire for vengeance embers ready to be lit up once more at the moment of strike. She did not think, she did not feel. For that... she would have time later.

The sun went down and with that the convoy came to a stop. The slavers started turning their convoy into a camp, preparing for the night. With ease, she moved through the gloom, scouting out the position of their guards, moving through the dark ruins like a black cat. A perimeter was set, but there were no patrols between the solitary men with torches. After her initial passing, she quickly located the most careless of the four guards left to protect this side of the camp. The man, average both in height and size, was holding the torch too close to his head, as if the proximity of the flames were soothing his fears. He was still in his post, the only movement coming from him the awkward shifting of weight from one foot to another. His shift had just started, and he was already nervous and tired, things that played well into her hands as she quietly slipped by him, hidden by the long darkness and the blinding fire that obscured his vision.

With the guard behind her, she moved to a seemingly unoccupied building, avoiding the lights coming from the bonfire that were piercing through the ruined window panes. She edged towards one of those windows, her back now hard against the cold stone wall. Few moments had passed before she started making out the voice voices from the general noise coming from the outside.

‘We runnin’ out of food. Nothin’ to catch in these ‘ere ruins. We oughta go further out to get some huntin’ going.’

Another voice joined the first in conversation while she carefully moved closer to the broken window, trying to catch more.

‘Are you crazy, this is a ghost town, you’re signing your own death if you go too far alone. Damn the boss for forcing us to sleep here! Should’ve travelled through the night, this place is sending shivers down my spine...’

As the conversation slowly moved out of her range, she took another look at the building she was in. The corners were covered in cobwebs, broken stone was littering the ground floor, and there was a large hole in the ceiling. There was a shattered set of stone stairs leading to the first floor, with wooden boards left to rot for a century. She slowly crept up the stairs, trying not to press her weight too much over the rotten wood. Once up there, the first thing she saw was a large hole in the floor. She slowly made her way around and inspected the spacious room. There were five windows, two looking at the bonfire from before, and the other three facing another direction. The rest of the room was unremarkable as the one bellow, with broken stones and rotten wood littering the floor. She moved towards something that may have been a hall leading to another part of the floor, but her way was blocked by rubble. Not wanting to disturb the debris and cause a commotion, she slowly moved back, making her way to the windows overlooking the bonfire. As before, she crept up to the window and took a peek outside, her eyes picking up figures around a number of fires.

The slaver’s camp was rather simple. There were a number of tents arranged in some sort of a circle around a larger tent, with small cooking fires littering the paths between them. Two chariots flanked the large tent which must have been where the band leader and his officers resided; a few other wagons were positioned around the smaller tents, supposedly to act as a kind of a barricade against a cavalry charge. Closer to the building she was in, there was another set of

wagons, but these had thick iron bars on their sides, with armed thugs walking between them, steel-tipped batons in hand. Beside the bonfire, there were two more tents, most likely for the men that were supposed to be guarding the slaves at all times. Her eyes moved quickly between the figures illuminated by the orange, dancing flames. Eight in total, and another two who were patrolling between the wagons; this wasn't supposed to be easy in any case. She then made her way towards the other set of windows, her eyes now gazing upon the rooftops of the ruined city, and the occasional flicker of the perimeter guard's torches.

Her eyes were quick to adapt to the gloom as she slowly counted the solitary lights, separated by darkness. Counting the ones she couldn't see but guessed were there, the camp had about a dozen guards spread around its perimeter. Her gaze moved back to the base of her hideout. It was settled closer to the prisoner wagons and only a short distance from the leader's tent. She quickly moved back to the windows facing the slaver's camp, her eyes wandering further north, past the guard's lights, far into the darkness; there her comrades lay in wait, certain that once their trap was sprung, help would arrive from the south, crushing the slavers between a hammer and an anvil. She bit down on her lip, anger rising in her heart. 'Oh, there will be a hammer, and none shall escape when it falls,' she promised herself.

Moving away from the windows, she slowly made her way back to the staircase leading to the ground floor. Carefully she took a pair of flamers, thin clay pots that released a fireball once broken, and made her way downstairs. Once there, she carefully placed one of the clay pots behind a pillar, tying it tightly with a thin silk wire and slowly moved towards the other end of the room, where she repeated the process by tying the other clay pot to the remnants of another pillar and slowly made her way back upstairs. If someone was to try and go for the stairs, they'd be quite surprised when the flames took them.

With her hideout secure for the time being, she went back to the blocked hallway and laid out her kit. The daggers were as sharp as ever, the crossbow needed some oiling done since dust hadn't been kind to it these past few days, but the rest of her equipment was ready. She sat herself down and started working the crossbow, each mechanism familiar to her as tools would be to a mason. Then she crossed her legs and leaned against one of the walls, willing herself to sleep with a loaded crossbow nested in her lap.

* * *

Her eyes opened up to darkness, and moments passed before she got used to it and could slowly put the crossbow away. No dreams had haunted her short rest this time around; she pushed herself up and stretched back her arms. Looking outside the window, she saw the night losing its battle against the encroaching sun. For a few long moments her gaze lingered on the horizon and the shifting of colours before she quickly marched back to her kit, slowly equipping herself, fastening the belts, reading the knives.

She was ready, and by the Flame she would be the victor on this day.

As dawn was approaching, she quickly made her way downstairs and undid the tripwire she had placed just a few hours ago. With that done, she rolled her shoulders and positioned the crossbow to rest against her stomach in its leather hold. With the two clay pots in her gloved hands, she walked out, into the dawn of a new day. Serenity welcomed her as she slowly strode towards the twin tents which held the guards watching the slaves. Without second thought she lobbed the two pots at the tents. Time froze around her for a few moments as she watched the pots fly high into the sky, reaching their peak and then slowly descending in perfect arcs towards the tents.

It was a magical sight to look at, and equally magical were the two pillars of flame that sent the darkness away once the pots made contact with the tents. A wall of heat crashed against her as both tents instantaneously burst into flames. Shrill cries mixed with the roar of the flames as the tents' occupants woke in horror. Alex heard shouts behind her and was quick to turn about, spotting one of the perimeter guards rushing towards her, still oblivious of the situation. She cocked her crossbow and placed a well-aimed bolt in his throat, forcing him down in a gurgle of blood. Her attention moved back to the burning tents just in time as the first burning figure was trying to escape the hell of smoke and flames he awoke to. She let the crossbow rest against her once again while marching towards him; it took her only a few quick strides to already be by his side and slash his throat with her long knife, leaving him for dead.

Placing another bolt into place, she quickly moved towards the barred wagons, the sound of shouts getting closer and louder while fire and smoke continued to fill out the sky. As she reached the first wagon, she quickly turned around and sent another bolt flying, this one lodging in the gut of an attacker too careless to have put any armour on, the blood turning his white linen shirt into a red mess.

'I'm here to save you, stay calm!' she shouted while working the hard knots with her blade.

She was unable to discern the faces in the wagon as the smoke and fire had left her vision a bit hazy. The knot gave in and the doors were flung open, but no sooner had she opened the doors, than a trio of thugs rushed at her, swords and cudgels in hand. Another well-placed bolt slammed against a man's left flank, sending him to his knees and out of the fight for the time being. Biting her lips and drawing her sword and long knife, Alex quickly shortened the distance between herself and the thugs. 'Free the others, and then get out of here! FLEE!!' she managed to shout through the roaring flames.

Keeping the burning tents to her right, she managed to keep the assailants from flanking her. A stubby bearded youth tried to stab her with his sword, but she deflected his assault with her long knife with ease, using it as a parrying dagger. With one, precise thrust, she slid her blade into the youth, blood pouring down his chin as he fell on the ground. The club-wielding one attempted to cave her head in, but in the nick of time she turned to evade it. She gave ground as the thug kept swinging his club like a magician, before bursting into action; she feinted a thrusting attack with her sword and as the thug lifted his cudgel to defend against it, slipped into his guard and stuck her long knife into his eye. She withdrew the knife, letting the slaver scream out in pain and clutch his face with both hands before she slid it across his throat, cutting the screams short.

Sweat was running down her brow, her combat fatigue boosted by the unbearable heat. 'Into the ruins!' she shouted out once again, while slowly moving towards the third thug who was still clutching the crossbow wound she had left him with.

Despite the heat, however, he was ghastly pale, eyes wide open and turned towards her as she approached him. 'Please m'am, I haven't done anythin' wrong, don't kill me m'am, I haven't killed anybody.' In silence she kept marching towards him, hands tight around the hilts of her blades. He pleaded with tears running down his face, but to Alex, it meant nothing. Right until the end, before her sword went through his heart, he had pleaded for mercy; but he wouldn't find in her, it, none of them would.

The sound of the footsteps close by forced a reaction out of her. She felt dismayed at the thought that she left such a huge opening for the thugs to sneak up on her. With haste she turned, throwing dagger ready in her hand when she was greeted by two familiar faces.

'Whoa, easy there Alex!' called out Dana, 'It's just me and Oleg!' The blonde woman with cropped hair and a distinguishable mole on her left cheek nearly jumped, both hands held up, though one still clutching the shaft of a short-spear. Her companion, who sported a lion's mane of red hair, was holding the sword of one of the dead thugs pointed to the ground. Something close to joy surged through Alex as her eyes kept staring at the two, as if it was just a mirage caused by the heat.

'Dana, Oleg, you've no idea how glad I am to hear you, to see you!' she struggled to contain herself from leaping forward and embracing them both.

'By the Flame, Alex... we thought we were goners, us and the rest of the boys up ahead. When we thought about today and the coming ambush, we did...'

'And we're thankful, I'm sorry Alex,' Dana cut in as she moved to stand on her left, the spear now trained in the direction from which the thugs came. 'We can have our reunion once we've dealt with these bastards.'

A whisk of a smile passed Alex's lips before she turned towards the same direction, blades poised to strike once more. To her right she noticed the large frame of Oleg, his own sword still trained on the ground. Raising her blade, she pointed forward 'We make for command tent, by now the whole camp is up and ready for us, but I want to cause a bit more mayhem before Varik and Dmitar's squads make their assault.'

She took off the satchel filled with the alchemical devices and handed it over to Oleg. 'Oh ho ho, well isn't this a fine arsenal you've got there. You want me to lob them on those tents over there?' Oleg inquired. Giving him a sharp nod Alex drew her blades once again, the leather-bound hilts held tight in her hands. 'We must make haste.' And with that they were off, half sprinting past the burning tents.

It didn't take the trio long before they finally reached the centre of the camp, but fortune was not on their side, for the slavers were all up and ready now, a force of two-dozen men staring them

down. A few dozen metres separated the raiders and the soldiers, a few dozen metres of hard and cold cobbled stone road, a few dozen metres of reddish morning sky. The whistling of gentle wind could be heard, passing through the ruins of a long abandoned city.

‘You burn my camp, you kill my men AND you free my slaves! That’s not a great way to make friends, is it, boys?’ a dark-haired slaver shouted out while strutting before the rest of the band. ‘Do you have ANY idea how hard it was to catch those slaves ... Honestly, not that much, they barely gave any resistance, harh!’ a howling laughter boomed from the gathering of scum as their apparent leader kept walking back and forth, an ugly-looking sabre resting in his hand. ‘Why you know, I ought to catch all three of you alive, for all the trouble you’ve caused me. It won’t do me any good to – just – kill you. Oh no, what I’ll do to you, well... Death will be more merc...’

To his dismay, the splash of a flamer against a couple of his men cut the monologue short, flames engulfing them with vicious speed, their pained screams filling the air. The ‘Get them, GET THEM!’ commands that followed were a bit redundant, since the next couple of flamers missed their marks as the raiders spread out far to avoid the fiery death.

As the gaggle of thugs charged them, the trio let out a heartfelt battle cry, ‘For the Empire!’ and they too pressed on.

First ones in...

All her adult life, Alexandra had known battle; she knew that superior tactics, numbers, morals, all played vital part in the theatre of war. But on that day something different happened.

The distance between them felt like nothing as the trio charged across the broken stone road. A pair of flamers exploded in front of them, right before they clashed with the slavers, twin fireballs forcing some of their force to back off. This left Alex and her comrades with a perfect opening as they clashed with the first few raiders, a couple of lightly armed thugs wielding spears and blades. Between Alex’s dualist’s finesse, Dana’s stinging spear and Oleg’s more brutish swordsmanship, the raiders had no chance and were cut down like wheat stalks. But as the flames subsided, so they renewed their assault. For Alex, the details of this battle will forever be left foggy, for there was no place for sly tactics, for underhanded tricks or plays of outmanoeuvring the enemy. There was only the soldier and the blade in hand.

Her instincts took over as she danced in the midst of the foe, as if she was back in her practice yard. Forward, forward, lunge, back, parry, riposte, again... again. Men fell before her in screams, their defences mattered little to her, their attacks meant nothing. All the cuts, the stabs, the blood she had lost, nothing. For she was a storm, and no blade could possibly stop the storm. To her left, lightning, striking fierce and true through hapless assailants, her laughs not unlike roaring thunder. To her right, fire and brimstone, slashing through, burning all those that dared stay in its path. And so they fought on, for seconds, for hours, for years; or so it seemed to them. But the cuts grew larger, they grew deeper, and the forces of nature were slowly driven back.

Now she was left alone, the light before her growing ever weaker, darkness spreading all around, enveloping that little sphere of light that remained.

And that is when the earth shook. Fiery explosions covered the horizon forcing the darkness away. Shouts. Shouts she had heard somewhere before rang through the air, followed by the clicking sound of wood and metal. A new-born strength surged in her heart as she pushed onward, barely feeling the blades in her hands. Slavers fell before her, unable to escape, left in a state of disarray. And so it was over, for they had nowhere left to flee, caught between a hammer and an anvil, they were finally stamped out.

She stood in the middle of the blood-and-corpse-littered road; the corpse of a black haired man with an ugly-looking sabre lying at her feet. She stood strong, her back straight and head held high, her fingers still wrapped around the worn out, leather-bound hilts of her blades. Two men approached her and stood in silence. One was tall and wiry, with curly black moustache, the other one bald and stocky, with a nasty scar splitting his lips. She looked to her left and saw Dana resting on the ground, her spear shattered, her body covered in cuts and bruises. She looked right and saw Oleg lying on his back, a spear jutting out of his left shoulder, but still breathing. She then looked before herself and said, 'You did an exceptional job, sergeants. However, there is a straggler few days' south, hiding in a ruined house, if you could take it from here...' And with that, she let her blades fall against the ground and sunk to her knees, finally giving in to her exhaustion. A kind of serene smile crawled up her lips as darkness overtook her.

....last ones out.

* * *

'... Wizford, you are sentenced to hang by neck until dead,' ruled the Imperial judge with a voice that boomed throughout the courtroom, silencing any dissenting voices. The scrawny, drained man, draped in the brown robes of a prisoner didn't put up much of a struggle as he was escorted away by a couple of soldiers. In the very back of the courtroom, the procession was followed by a group of fifteen men and women, wearing the usual stormal uniforms. As the prisoner was being taken, he turned his gaze away, as if afraid he might meet one of theirs, while the prisoner's father stared at a black-haired woman among them. Standing up, she met his stare, keeping her eyes on him until the large hand of a red-haired man with a long beard rested on her shoulder. 'Come on, Alex, we've seen enough... let's go find ourselves a tavern.'

And with that, the soldiers left the courthouse, losing themselves in the wide streets of Natilgrad.

The Woods of the Lost

Magdalena Cvetanović

In a kingdom far, far away, where magic was a concept still foreign to men, a legend was being passed on from generation to generation.

Deep within the forest, where the trees were so thick that no light could find its way to pierce the darkness, where nature was wild and monstrosly alive, where the beasts roamed freely destroying much in their wake, lived a witch of many wonders. It was said that she held the key to every disease. Some said it was because she was the one to unleash the plague onto people, others said that she was a sage, banished for her gifts. Some doubted she even existed. Despite all that, many had set out on a journey to locate the witch in hope of finding a cure for their loved ones. Very few returned from the quest, for they had been unable to foresee what was waiting for them deep in the forest. There were rumors that only the worthy were able to pass through the forest unscathed. Those not worthy had gone missing, and had not been heard from since. Because many people had disappeared upon accepting the quest, the forest was deemed cursed and named 'The Woods of the Lost'. Nowadays, people were afraid of even passing near the outskirts of the woods, in fear that something would sweep in and take them away, deep into the forest. It was considered pure madness trying to go on a journey to find the witch, and everyone had given up on the hope she was real.

At the time the royal announcement was made, no one had stepped into the forest for years. But the king's only son fell ill, and no medic could identify the disease. The king was desperate and thus he rallied the kingdom, looking for the brave souls who would venture into the woods in search of the healer. If anyone proved to be successful, the king promised he would give that person anything they wished for. Many people answered the call, all blinded by the promised rewards, not thinking about the dangers that awaited them in the forest. Before the troops set for the forest, the king had made sure to provide the brave warriors with the information which previously had not been released to the public, but which was crucial for the quest. Namely, the journey involved 3 trials; the trial of benevolence; the trial of truth; and the trial of courage. The king did not disclose a lot of information about the trials themselves, only that the trials were different for each person. However, he gave a final warning to everyone who still had second thoughts, saying that if they were unable to pass the trials, they would be lost forever, doomed to wander the forest as punishment for years, until they became one with it. The king gave them all two days to decide if they would still take on the challenge of finding the cure. Upon hearing the warning, the troop was split in half. Once they understood the danger they were facing, many men decided that it was too dangerous to attempt the quest. On the day of the journey, only three courageous souls remained. The first one was an arrogant prince from a neighboring country, who saw this as a great opportunity to expand his kingdom. The second one was one of the king's finest warriors; he came from a long line of warriors who had been serving the royal family for generations. Both the prince and the warrior had an exemplary physique in comparison to the third volunteer. Not much could be said about him, to others it seemed that he

had a childlike figure, and he seemed very fragile. He was wearing a cape which covered most of his body, and the only visible part were the eyes, which showed a determination not often seen. The king provided them each with a steed and the necessary equipment, and wished them luck on their journey.

The forest was only a day away from the kingdom. The ride to the forest was a quiet one; no words were exchanged. Once they arrived to the forest, they were mesmerized by the nature that surrounded them. They were welcomed by it, and it seemed as though the forest was rejoicing, happy for its visitors. The forest was rich with many trees of different colored leaves, and flowers with the sweetest fragrance: that put them at ease. The birds were chirping in unity, the animals were coming into the open as if to greet them; all seemed so joyful, and clearly not the place of dread. However, the dreamlike place was quickly shattered as they entered the deep part of the forest. The further they went the darker it got, less noisy, until they arrived at a place where silence reigned and they could barely make out the shapes of the trees. It took them awhile to notice that they could no longer see their fellow adventurers. Each seemed completely alone. However, the heroes were not startled by this, for each was trying to succeed. Having stumbled deep into the forest, each was put through the trial which would decide whether they were successful or lost forever.

The prince was the first to undergo the trial. The eerie silence which he was surrounded by was cut through by a sharp voice that said: 'An act of kindness goes a long way; only if it's honest will you not stray!' At that moment, it was as if the prince was transported to a different realm, for the place he was now at was no longer the woods. He was back in his own kingdom, in his own bed chamber. A servant rushed in to notify him of the dreadful news: his brother had fallen ill, poisoned by an intruder. No one could figure out the source of the poison, thus they needed the prince's help. Being the second child, he had a rather ordinary childhood, as not much was expected of him. The king focused all of his attention to his firstborn, molding him into the perfect successor, and neglecting his younger brother. In order to gain the favor and praise of his father, the second son studied the arts of toxins. It was a rare sort of specialty that people would try to master, since there was very little knowledge about it. But that did not prevent the boy from pursuing it; on the contrary, mastering it would prove his skillfulness and maybe earn some of the king's love. At the age of 15 he became the youngest expert in toxins, he had no equal. And now, finally, he could show his skills to his father by creating an antidote which would save his brother. But just as he'd finished thinking that, he had a different idea. All these years his brother was standing in his way of gaining his father's affection. He was the only one standing in his way of succeeding the throne. Since he was the only one who could figure out which poison was used and create an antidote, he could maybe tweak it a bit in his favor. The antidote would cure him, but after a few days, the after effect would kill his brother in a matter of seconds, leaving no trace of the crime. The scenario unfolded just as the young prince had planned, and after his brother's death he was pronounced the new heir. In that moment darkness enveloped him and the voice he had heard in the beginning spoke again: 'Your blood, your brother you would betray, now pay the consequence and forever stray.'

The warrior was the second to undergo the trial. The silence which he was surrounded by was cut through by a sharp voice that said: 'An act of kindness goes a long way; only if it's honest will you not stray!' Hearing those words, the warrior was transported to a different realm. He was

back at the kingdom, on one of his daily patrols. While finishing his round at the outskirts of the town he came across a wolf attacking two young men. Wolves were considered sacred creatures, protectors; it made no sense that they would attack humans without a reason. Having seen the warrior, the young men started aggravating the beast, thinking the warrior would jump in and save them. Just as they picked up a pole and attempted to throw it at the wolf, the warrior jumped in and prevented them from doing more harm. He scolded the young men, warning them that if they continued bullying of the animal, he would have no choice but to apprehend them. Baffled by the response, they quickly fled the scene. The wolf growled as the warrior tried to come close. He extended his hand to show he meant no harm and got closer and closer. The wolf cried out in pain, as he could no longer put on a strong front and collapsed. The warrior rushed to the wolf, and searched for the wound. He took the animal in for a few days, until it healed and set it free once its strength returned. As the wolf left for the forest, it took one last look at the warrior and uttered the words the warrior now heard again: 'You pass!'

Confused, the warrior took a moment to rest before attempting the next trial. 'Everything that's hidden comes to light, will your truth be dark or will it be white?' As the words were spoken, once more the warrior was transported to a new realm. The place he was now in was as dark as night. There was nothing in sight, apart from a shape that started to form in front of him. It was the warrior himself, or the part of him which he despised. Coming from a long line of warriors, he had never had a choice of choosing a different path. He did not like the violence, the death that came with the calling, but he needed to adjust, and so he created a new him; the one who could carry out tasks without fail, and without remorse. Along the way his new personality developed a taste for violence. He could not control his desire for chaos, and as a result many fell victim to his sword. He tried hard to suppress this new nature of his, but he was afraid, afraid of who he had become, afraid that he in truth enjoyed causing pain to others. The shadow took a step forward and took control of the warrior. The last speck of light was diminished as the warrior let out a crazed cry.

The last one to undertake the trial was the third hero, who was also a girl. As with the previous two, the silence was cut by a voice that uttered the familiar words - 'An act of kindness goes a long way; only if it's honest will you not stray!' - and the trial began. She, too, was transported back to the kingdom, to her home. From a very young age she had lived alone, ever since she lost her mother to a disease. But even though misfortune had followed her throughout her life, she had never lost hope, and she had never forgotten what her mother had taught her: kindness beget kindness. In this memory, she had left her home to go to the forest, as she usually did, to gather herbs and mushrooms. During her search, she stumbled upon an old woman who had collapsed. The woman seemed to belong to the richer quarters of the kingdom, as her clothes would suggest. The silken scarf she was wearing was worth a lot by itself, it would have kept the girl fed for months to come. The old woman was unconscious; no one would ever know who had taken it. However, such a thought never crossed the girl's mind. Instead she put down her basket and lifted the woman's hand over her shoulder and started dragging her towards the city. A few people recognized the old woman and ran to the girl's aid. She explained the situation and instructed them to take the woman to see a doctor, and left without giving any information about herself. She returned to the place where she had left her basket, and in it was a letter that said: 'You pass!'

The second trial began immediately. ‘Everything that’s hidden comes to light, will your truth be dark or will it be white?’ the girl heard the voice once more, and again was transported to a new place. Just like the warrior, she was now in a dark place with nothing in sight. The only thing she could see was a random shape that was forming in front of her eyes; the shape that had her appearance. It was anger and grief, something she had always carried with her, but never let go of. The anger was directed at the people who had refused to help her mother, and the grief was for the fact that she had lost her mother because they could not afford a proper treatment – the medicine did come, but it was too late. The shadow was crying and yelling at the girl, asking, ‘How can you still smile despite what you’ve been put through?’ It wanted revenge, it wanted others to feel the helplessness that she had felt. The girl was reminded of the time that she felt that way and it saddened her that there was still a part of her that had those feelings. She took a step forward and took the shadow’s hands. She explained that while she did miss her mother, and while the grief would always be there, it was something she had to live with, she was not angry about how things went down. In the end, her mother had had a fighting chance. The prince, who was now in need of cure, tried to help her, and provided the medicine she needed. From a very young age he was kind enough to take care of his people, and did his best to help those in need. As the girl hugged the shadow, she added, ‘Now we have to help him, and I can only do that if you allow me.’ The shadow smiled. As it disappeared it illuminated the darkness just enough so that the girl could see what was in front of her.

She was now in the thickest, tunnel-like part of the forest; the trees that surrounded her were so closely packed that their crowns had formed a roof. There was not a speck of natural light anywhere. The light she could see, thus, was not that of the sun, but something even more magical. As she reached the end of the tunnel, the mystical voice once more broke the silence: ‘In a world full of harshness of great diversity, you need to show courage in the face of adversity.’ Outside the tunnel was a garden, full of wild beasts guarding the witch’s cottage. The only thing stopping the girl from acquiring the cure for the prince was a pack of wild animals. As she approached the gate, the hound guarding the gate, the one who seemed to be in charge, pack spoke: ‘Halt! Who goes there?’ Frightened by the sight of a speaking beast, the girl froze. She managed to get hold of herself and replied: ‘I’ve travelled a long way in search of the witch that can cure any disease known to man.’ The hound eyed the girl thoroughly. To his eyes, she appeared harmless, but he was still very suspicious of her. He said: ‘Many have come here saying the same thing, and few have spoken the truth. If you wish to see my master, you need to pass through the garden of the judgment. But beware, apart from my fellow protectors, the garden itself is alive, if even for a second a malevolent thought crosses your mind, or your determination grows weak, you will be attacked.’ The warning the hound had given her would have made anyone run for the hills, and the girl was terrified of the possibility that she could have such a tragic end if her faith faltered even for a second. Despite all that, she took the step forward. She had nothing to lose; she had already made up her mind to save the prince no matter the cost, and she crossed the garden in a matter of seconds. As she opened the door, the beasts returned to their vigil.

At the cottage she was welcomed by the witch. The witch congratulated the girl for making it thus far, and introduced herself. She said her name was Panacea, and that she was the witch of healing. The girl greeted her back, and asked the witch for help. Panacea took out a small bottle and handed it to the girl. She explained that it was the potion to heal all illnesses. The girl’s face

lit up as she accepted the elixir, and she thanked Panacea profusely and wholeheartedly. Before leaving, the girl had some questions about why running the gauntlet was needed in order to get to her, and what happened to the people who had not passed the trials. Panacea explained that her elixirs denied natural laws, and if anyone could get them, the world would turn chaotic and unstable. There would be wars for such a thing, thus she had created the trials, which only the pure-hearted could pass by conquering their fears and showing great courage. The forest was designed to protect her, and ward off those with ill will. It did not hurt people, it gave them a chance at redemption, but ultimately if they did not redeem themselves, they would be forever stuck in the limbo of their own making. The stories the girl had heard turned out to be true in the end. Even though she wasn't satisfied with the answer, there was nothing she could do, apart from praying that the lost souls find their way back. She bid farewell to Panacea and went on her way. The moment she stepped out of the cabin, she was back at the outskirts of the forest, with her steed there, waiting for her. The cabin was no longer behind her. She mounted her steed and made her way back to the kingdom.

The king, not having heard from anyone who had set out on the quest, was starting to lose hope. Then a messenger informed him that one had returned. He quickly left his chambers and went to meet the hero. To his surprise, a mere girl stood before him, having accomplished the task many men had failed at. The girl approached the king, knelt in front of him, and offered him the elixir that would heal his son. Astonished, he ordered the girl to stand, and with tears in his eyes, thanked her from the bottom of his heart for retrieving the cure for his beloved son. With no time to waste, the king went to his son chamber in order to administer the elixir and save his life. Within moments, the prince was healed.

The king told the girl that whatever she desired she would be rewarded with. The girl responded that she was only returning the favor and wished for nothing in return. The prince was her savior who had helped her out when she needed help the most, and she found it only appropriate that she did the same. Bewildered for the second time by the same girl, the king thought to himself that he had not met a kinder soul since his late wife. Not many people would go to such lengths and not ask anything as compensation. He knew that he couldn't let her go just like that. She was the embodiment of all that there is pure. Thus, he proclaimed her to be his son's fiancée, the princess, and the future queen of the kingdom she had saved by taking on the quest not many returned from.

The story of her success was the encouragement people needed in order to undertake the quest themselves. Some who were thought to be missing were able to leave the woods and return home even though they had not passed the trials. The knowledge that the trials existed did not make the journey easier, for no one knew what their trial was going to be. The only certain thing was that only the kindest, sincerest and most courageous souls were able to meet Panacea, and those who did not possess those attributes still wander the forest, looking for a way to redeem themselves – looking for a way out of the Woods of the Lost.

The Five Stages of Grace

Zoran Spasić

Every day for the last seven years I had spent in the company of my infinitely beloved dog, Grace. Ever since I first laid eyes on her white fur and half-closed eyes, I'd felt happiness, the kind I had never experienced before. And when I first touched her paws, that was the moment when I established some kind of a mystical bond with her; it was like our souls had merged into one. I remember more happy moments with that dog than I do with, well, pretty much everyone else in my life. I promise you, if twenty human beings gathered and tried their best, they wouldn't even come close to making me as happy as Grace could just with a single swing of her tail.

I guess that's why it's so hard to look at her grave, now. As I waved my last goodbye, I tried to maintain a smile, yet my soul remained confused as to why a huge part of it was missing. I didn't have any more tears to shed; I just stood there in the backyard for a few minutes, looking lost. A few minutes, yes - but it felt like years were passing me by.

I went inside the house and into my bed. I stared at the ceiling and listened to the deafening sound of silence, emptied of the tapping of her paws. My father knocked on the door, but I refused to answer.

“Hey, Ethan? May I...”

“Go away, dad.” I whispered.

“Just so you know, I'm here for you. If you need me, I'll be...”

“Go away!” I screamed, as I threw a pillow at the door.

A moment of silence.

“I love you, son.” He said, and I heard him walk away.

I'd never felt anything like this before. I'd never even believed it was possible to feel such a thing. It was as if Grace was now giving me sadness proportional to the happiness she had given me throughout the years. One may not understand such suffering if one has not gone through it - it's as simple as that.

After a few hours of reminiscing and consequent weeping, and trying not to dissolve into a big puddle of tears, I fell asleep knowing that things would never be the same again.

I saw darkness all around me. An infinite black void was engulfing all my senses. And then, there was an ocean... It was peaceful, with waves which could barely be noticed. The sky

suddenly became cloudy. Very cloudy! The clouds were a few meters above me now! And the winds began to blow with such intensity that I could barely stand on my feet! All was turning into chaos.

“Hello?” a female voice was barely audible amidst all the chaotic sounds. “Can you hear me?”

I looked around me, but there was nobody to be seen.

“Run away from the shore, child! Go!” the voice exclaimed.

I started running as fast as I could. It seemed like I was just running in place. So I tried harder. I tried running with all the strength that I had, until, eventually, I began moving further and further away from the shore. I fought my way through the trees and bushes, jumping over holes, dodging falling debris...

I was now in the middle of a forest, having a hard time catching my breath. But it was rather quiet. The only thing which could barely be heard was the chaos in the distance. I sat down on a rock and rested for a moment.

“I’ve never seen you before.” A young woman appeared.

I turned my head towards her.

“You are new, right?” She said, serenely.

I jumped up, took a nearby branch and pointed it straight at her.

“Come one step closer and you’ll wish you hadn’t!”

“As you desire.”

She was beautiful. Actually, she was the most beautiful woman I had seen in my whole life. Dressed up in a white gown, with long hair, darker than anything I’ve seen before, and eyes which pierced right through my heart. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her even if I wanted to.

“Y- Yes. Stand there.” I demanded again.

“Well, I *am* standing there, aren’t I?” She smiled.

I felt lost and scared.

“Who are you?”

“Me? I am but a mere fraction of your mind. A teeny-weeny part of your thought. An itsy-bitsy-”

“Cut it out!” I shouted.

“But I thought you wanted to know?”

“Just... Just tell me what is going on.”

“I don’t know. Can *you* tell *me* what is going on? After all, this is *your* mind that we are trapped in.”

“What?” I was confused.

“Is there something you don’t understand?” she asked.

“Why ... Why did you ask me if I was new here, then? I mean, if this is all just in my mind, and you are only a part of my imagination, shouldn’t you know who I am?”

“I should.” She replied. “It’s just that every time you came here before, you were the happiest boy I’ve seen, and this place looked like a paradise. Now, look at it! Look at yourself! I’m not sure if that’s the boy I’m used to seeing around here. I’m not sure if I recognize you.”

When she said that, I put the branch down. In all this senseless mess which was around me, some things began to clear up, and I knew she could be trusted.

“I- I’m sorry. It’s just... I lost my dog today.” I sighed.

“I lost Grace.” A tear slid down my face.

She came close to me and put her hand on my cheek.

“I know what you are going through, child. It hurts me no less to lose a happy boy to sadness of this kind, too. I want to see you smile again. You are the only friend I have here, and this place is my only home. I don’t want to lose that.”

I looked her in the eyes, barely holding back my tears.

“What can I do? I’ll do anything! Just please, make me feel whole again.”

She smiled.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you there.”

The next thing I remember is that all faded to black for a brief moment. Then, I felt myself pressed against a warm, sandy surface. As I opened my eyes, it was all just a big yellow blur, but after a few seconds I could make out a yellow landscape stretching into infinity. I stood up, and looked around me.

“It’s a... Are we in the desert?” I asked.

“Yes.” She replied.

“Oh, okay. That’s nice. Hundreds of miles of nothing! How convenient!”

“I’m glad your sense of humor is back, Ethan.”

“Well, I’m not sure it’s here to stay, considering the circumstances.”

“Don’t worry. We can be here only briefly if you do what you’re supposed to.”

“And how do I know what I am supposed to do in an abundance of sand and then again some more sand?! This makes no sense!”

“You’re smart, Ethan. You’ll figure it out.”

I felt madness making its way to my bones, knowing that I was just wasting my time here. Even if this all was just a dream, I was still not doing anything of importance. Just walking around aimlessly, kicking sand out of anger, running without purpose. I’d spent more than twenty minutes doing that, and just as I was about to give up, I stumbled upon something.

“Is that a...”

“Yes. A cactus.” She replied.

“But, why is it buried in the sand?”

“Keep looking.”

I went on and on, searching around in the desert. A few moments later, I came across a big rock. Then, a turtle. After that, a camel. Then I saw an airplane. A house was in sight, and after that, I saw a person...

As I kept looking, I saw bigger and better things, until eventually, I discovered an entire city, crowded with people and cars and buildings and statues and trees!

“Wow...” I stood there, motionless.

“Didn’t you say there was nothing but ‘an abundance of sand’?”

“I might have said that, yes.”

“You couldn’t have been more wrong, child.” And she put her hand on my shoulder.

I looked at her, rather confused.

“What now?” I asked.

“Hold on.” She replied, grinning.

Everything turned black again.

It was not clear to me why she was doing what she was doing, but I was grateful that she was willing to help, and knowing that I was her only friend made me feel special.

I woke up lying face-down on the ground again, with dirt all over me and with my hands grasping some blades of grass. My head hurt tremendously and I felt a bit dizzy. As I slowly got up on my feet, I realized that I was in my backyard. I looked at Grace’s grave for a brief moment.

“Ugh, did I sleepwalk again?” I said to myself, as I placed my hand on my forehead.

“Not quite”, the woman replied, as she walked towards me.

I approached Grace’s grave and sat down next to it.

“You’re still there, old friend. One more day with you would be more than enough.”

As I said that, I heard an engine roaring somewhere in the distance, and it was getting louder by the second. I got up, ran to the wooden fence of my backyard and peeked above it. That’s when I saw a huge bulldozer approaching with high speed, with no intention of slowing down. Quickly, I rushed towards Grace’s grave and sat down next to it, again. The bulldozer stormed through the fence, destroying everything in its path with ease. It abruptly stopped just centimeters away from me.

“Oh boy, here we go again.” The person in the passenger seat was clearly annoyed by the fact that I didn’t go out of the way.

He then went out, slammed the door, threw his cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out. As he approached me, I came closer to Grace’s gravestone and hugged it.

He didn’t even look at me – it’s like he was so used to such things happening; like it was just another day at work for him.

“Listen, kid. You either move, or join your pet. Your call.”

“Not moving. Not in a million years.”

“Alright.” He said, as he turned around and put his finger up, signalling to the driver to start up the engine.

“Hey!” I shouted. “You can’t do that!”

“And what makes you think we can’t?”

I didn’t know what to say. I was paralyzed with fear and anger at the injustice of it. Finally:

“You are trespassing! You can’t just come inside my backyard like that!”

“Are you not paying attention, kid? We just did, and who is going to stop us? You?”

“I am calling the police!” I said, furiously.

“Oh, no!” he said to the driver “Tony! He’s calling the police!”

“Tell them I said ‘Hi’, will ya?” The driver replied.

Then they both burst out laughing.

“Alright, enough of this – get her going!”

“Alright, boss.” The driver replied, as he pressed on the pedal.

I looked at the woman in white, but all she did was sit on a swing and watch.

“Are you just going to let them do that!?” I shouted.

“What am I to do?” she replied calmly. “It’s not *my* dog that’s buried there.”

“Seriously!?” I felt perplexed and infuriated.

It really was a fight or flight situation for me, but fighting with a giant bulldozer would mean dying on the spot, so I just moved out of the way and looked helplessly as they dug a huge hole in the place where Grace’s grave was, and in just a matter of seconds, she was gone. As they were taking her away, I fell down on my knees and started shouting at the top of my lungs.

“YOU COWARDS! I WILL MAKE YOU PAY FOR THIS! I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER!”

The bulldozer disappeared before I even knew it. I put my hands on the ground and, exasperated, began crying. The clouds began turning black and it started to rain. Lightnings struck all over the place. The strong wind kept bending the trees as the leaves were flying all around.

“Good. Let it all out.” The woman said as she put her hand on my shoulder.

“Go away, you traitor! I don’t want to see you ever again!”

“Excellent.” She said, clearly satisfied.

Everything turned black, yet again.

There was little room for any kind of thinking, and all that I did think about was making all of this come to an end. I did not want to be here. As bad as reality was, it was still better than this.

The first thing I felt when I woke up this time was emptiness. I did not feel angry; I did not feel sad - just plain indifference. Everything around me was still black even after I woke up. The only thing which stood out in the black surroundings was the woman in white, standing next to me and looking into the distance.

“Can I ask you something?” She said.

“Yes.” I replied.

“How did Grace die?”

I looked at her, and she looked back at me. We did not say anything for a moment. Then, a few meters away from us, I saw an illusion of myself, walking Grace on a leash.

“I... I was on my way to school.” I said, as we were looking at the situation unfolding before our eyes.

“It was unusual for me to bring Grace with me to school, but I had to do it then, since I couldn’t leave her home alone.”

“Why?” She was curious.

“Well, let’s just say she was fond of doing things my father didn’t quite like.”

“She peed on the sofa?”

“Among other things - yes.” I smiled.

She smiled back.

“Anyway.” I continued. “I was just a bit late for school that day, so I had to pick up the pace a little. And... Well, that meant crossing the street on the red light.”

Before me and her, the illusions of Grace and me were crossing the street while the traffic light was still red. That’s when it happened. I managed to cross the street in time, but Grace couldn’t keep up. When I turned around, it was too late. That red Toyota’s tires were screeching as Grace was lying down lifelessly next to the sidewalk.

“Graaaaaace!” The illusion of me screamed.

As I looked at the scene unfold before my eyes again, I felt just as disappointed in myself as I did when it first happened.

“Ethan...” The woman whispered.

“It was my fault entirely. A moment of carelessness; it’s all it takes, you know? A life is changed in a split second. A life is snuffed out.”

Just as I took Grace in my arms, the illusion stopped. I came closer and put my hands on her.

“I wish this was all just a bad dream; but I know you’re gone, forever. There’s nothing I could do about that, is there, old friend?” I said, with a bitter half-smile on my face.

“It’s not fair, blaming yourself for this. You are the last person on Earth who would want this to happen.”

“I know, but it doesn’t change the fact that I *did* let it happen, after all.” I replied. “I would have done it all differently if I could go back in time. I would have been more careful. And now... Now it’s too late for that.”

The woman put one hand on my cheek and went through my hair with the other. I put both my hands around her and we remained embraced for a few seconds before it all turned to black.

I woke up and did not care what was going to happen or where I was. All I could think about was the fact that my happiness had not only been taken away from me, but taken away from me forever. I found myself in a dark tunnel with what seemed a small light source at the opposite end. As I made my way towards the light, I heard voices telling me it was futile. They told me to go back, to give up... I did not see the woman anywhere. I tried calling for her but she didn’t answer. I was on my own. Every step seemed heavier than the last, and the voices did not cease for one second.

“Ethan. Ethan!” the voices screamed.

“Give in. Give up!” they echoed.

“Shut up.” I said under my breath.

“You know, Ethan, not only do *you* hate yourself for what you have done, but also, everyone else hates you for it. Your father is disappointed. Your mother, wherever she might be, is looking down on you with utter disgust. Even Grace...”

“I... am... not... listening!” I screamed.

“You don’t need to listen. You already know that. You are aware of everything. Why fight it? Give up.”

I struggled, but I made progress. The light seemed closer now. As I was just a few meters away from it, arms started emerging from the tunnel’s surface everywhere, trying to pull me in. I tried as hard as I could to avoid them.

“Take our hands, Ethan!” the voices yelled. “We will give your life meaning!”

The light was just a few steps away. I didn’t want to give up now, whatever the cost. With my last-ditch effort, I took those few steps and reached the end, and just as I stepped out of the tunnel, I closed my eyes and felt myself falling. I was free-falling with my eyes shut and a smile on my face. A tear or two made their way through my eyelids, but I finally felt at peace.

“You’ve made it, Ethan.” The woman’s voice echoed all around me.

“I have.” I said, smiling still.

“But there’s still one more thing I want you to do.”

As I expected everything to turn black, I welcomed this final step.

But, it didn’t. Everything around me was still white and empty, and I just steadily slowed down my fall, until I landed safely on the white ground. About a few meters away from me, I saw the woman standing with her back towards me. I slowly approached her, being happy that she is still with me. I stopped just behind her, but she still didn’t turn towards me.

“Ethan.” She was calm.

“Yes?”

“I am very proud of you.”

“I know. I am proud of myself, too.”

“Are you ready for the last task?”

I took a few steps more and stood next to her. She was looking at Grace’s grave which was right in front of us now.

“I... I think I am.”

“Alright”, she said as she turned towards me. “Look me in the eyes.”

I looked, and saw her eyes filled with tears.

“I...” she continued. “I want you to let me go.”

I was confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“I want you to accept reality. Accept the fact that I am gone.” She replied.

“Gra—Grace?” I put my hand on my mouth.

“Listen, Ethan. I know this is too much for you right now, but I need you to know one thing. No matter how much you hate yourself for this, and no matter how badly you regret my demise, I will never blame you for it, and I will always and forever love you. You made my soul happy, permanently. And that is something that I will never forget.”

I took a few steps back and turned away from her.

“Now,” she continued “all I want you to do is go.”

“But... I don’t want you to go.”

“I will be here, still. I will be here forever - in your thoughts, in your heart.”

As I turned towards her again, I saw tears streaming down her face. I rushed into her embrace which I never wanted to get out of. But I knew I had to, and she knew that as well.

“I will visit as often as I can”, I smiled.

“I will be looking forward to that.” She smiled back.

And then, I did it. I turned around and started slowly walking towards the white vastness. My legs felt heavy, but my will was strong. After walking in a straight line for a few minutes, I turned around.

She was gone. Nevertheless, I felt her presence all around me.

Finally, I let her go.

I woke up in my bedroom. It was morning. I got out of my bed and headed downstairs to the kitchen. My dad was there, reading the newspaper.

“Hey, kiddo! Ugh, about last night...” he sighed.

“It’s okay, dad. I am fine now. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

He smiled and I hugged him. Then I went to the backyard and sat down next to Grace’s grave. I looked at it with a bittersweet feeling, but I knew that she was still out there somewhere; and she was happy. I knew that she loved me still, just as much as I loved her.

“Good morning, Grace.” I smiled, as I put my hand on the gravestone.

The Dream Guardian

Branislava Stojanović

I'm running. Running as fast as I can, my knees trembling, making my legs feel like jelly as I try to catch my breath. The wet leaves and the sticky mud under my feet keep gluing me to the ground and making me feel like I have concrete blocks on both of my ankles, or even worse, like I'm tied to a chain gang.

"Clara!" the voice echoes in the distance.

"I'm coming dad! Dad, please...wait for me!" I yell back, my voice breaking as I start to cry.

"Clara, hurry up!"

"Dad please, wait for me! Please!"

He shouts my name again, but I can't see him anymore. I try to wipe away my tears, thinking that maybe, just maybe, I'll see him again, but it doesn't work. His voice starts sounding softer and softer and suddenly, I feel someone's arm on my shoulder.

"Clara! Wake up, you'll be late for school!" I realize that it was all just a stupid dream again, seeing mom's face as I open my eyes, still unaware of what exactly happened. She tosses me my clothes hurriedly, telling me to be up and downstairs in five minutes or I'll have to hitch a lift from someone else. Unwillingly, I obey.

It hasn't been the same since dad died. Mom hasn't had a proper laugh in two years, and neither have I. Hell, I can't even smile like I used to. She says that I remind her of him a lot, the way I act, talk, the way I look even. I've never really been able to see it, but mom always says how we have that same look in our eyes, that same sparkle, but we sort of avoid talking more about it. It makes both of us sad. He may be gone but one part of him is always here with me - his record player and all of his LPs which he was passionately collecting for years. Whenever I turn it on and listen to music, I feel like he is here with me, telling me a story about how and why he bought that specific record, how he would blast it in his room late at night, annoying his parents and the whole neighbourhood.

"One time, this neighbour's kid threw a brick at my window when I played Zeppelin. I guess he wanted to hear it better!" he would say, and laugh.

His records are the only thing I have left. They are my treasure and my favorite memory of him, and I listen to them whenever I can.

Tonight wasn't any different. I switched from one record to another, letting the sound fill my ears as I imagined myself singing and playing those songs on stage, living easy, living free.

"Clara, why are you still here?" Mom said, entering the room. "Weren't you supposed to be at a party tonight? Jessica invited you and you said you-"

"I didn't feel like it", I replied, without even letting her finish because I already knew where this was going.

"You can't stay here all day and not socialize at all. Clara, you have friends and they care about you. Can't you just go to this one party? You don't have to stay all night, just spend some time with your friends, I can pick you up in a couple of hours and..."

"Mom please, we've been through this before. I don't feel like going."

"It won't bring him back!", she shouted at me suddenly.

"What?"

"Staying here all day and listening to his music won't bring him back! You have to move on, you have to realize that he's gone, Clara, and he's not going to come back!" she said, making my heart ache more with each uttered word.

"Get out!" I yelled back at her. "Just get out and leave me alone!" I was trying hard to hold back my tears because I hated crying in front of others, even my own mother. I slammed the door and started sobbing the moment she got out of my sight. She, of all people, should know how much it hurts. I wanted to change, I wanted to move on, but I was not ready. I always felt like it was too soon, that dad would be mad and say how we forgot all about him. I buried my head in the pillow and kept crying my heart out. Wouldn't it be great to just sleep and sleep and sleep until you forget all the pain and then wake up one day and start over? Oh, how wonderful it must be to be happy again! How wonderful...wait. What is happening? I'm falling. Oh no, I'm probably having one of those dreams where I feel like I'm falling and I'll wake up in a second, shaking. Why am I still falling? I can't see anything. I can't wake up! Come on, Clara, wake up! Where am I even going - ouch! I suddenly feel sharp pain, and figure I have landed on the ground. My eyes are still closed but I can feel the grass underneath my fingers as I try to lift myself up.

"Hey there, are you ok?" a voice says, amused, chuckling.

I try to open my eyes but I'm still feeling a bit dizzy. A hand reaches over to help me get up and I see a boy, not much taller than me, giggling as he's trying to maintain my balance. A mop of brown curls is falling over his forehead, almost covering the bright eyes.

"Wait...what happened? Who are you?", I ask, puzzled and looking around to see where I am. Everything seems so strange and unfamiliar.

"I'm Angus, your dream guardian!", he announces cheerfully.

"My what?" I barely utter, almost falling over again.

"Your dream guardian! Come on, let's go."

"Oh no, I'm not going anywhere with you!"

"Well I'm afraid you will have to", he says.

"What? No way! Wait...oh my god. I died, didn't I? I've read about this, it's just dawning on me! It can happen if you have one of those astral projection dreams. Oh man, mom is going to kill me when she finds out I'm dead!" I blurt out.

"Woah, slow down there silly! You didn't die. You came into this place where we keep your dreams safe, and I am your dream guardian. You don't have to be afraid; I am a part of you", Angus explains, not realizing how crazy this whole thing sounds.

"What in the world are you talking about?!"

"I know it may be hard to believe, but it's the truth. Every person has their own dream guardian. We are born the moment you are born and we die when you die."

"So...my dad's guardian..."

"He died when your dad died. But he had collected all of your dad's dreams. You see, when a person dies, all of their dreams are released into our own special galaxy, and when you look up, you can see them shining, just like stars. Come on, let me show you!" he says, grabbing my hand, making me follow him into this gigantic round building surrounded by the woods. In that moment, I finally realize that we are in the middle of a huge field covered in azure-colored grass and a purple sky above us, with neither clouds nor sunshine.

We step into this giant place, sort of like a round hallway, but there is no one in there. Everything looked blank, like this enormous white nothingness. My eyes were still adjusting to the place when I noticed that the walls were made out of doors, thousands and thousands of little white doors.

Angus explained: "This is the Guardian palace. See those little doors ? They are the portal to your dreams and each guardian has his own portal. But, you see, we can't actually go into your dream, we are not allowed to. We just guard them and when the dream is finished, we collect them and put them in your dream collection."

"Let me show you our dream galaxy", he continued, taking me away into another smaller hallway with only one door. He carefully turned what seemed to be a crystal knob, and I'm suddenly in an infinite space surrounded by millions of stars. "Why are all of these stars in different colors? I've never seen green or pink stars..." I ask, amazed by the sight.

"Each color represents a different feeling in a dream. Look up there!", he points to a big red star. "This one was a happy dream, the person was probably dreaming about love. Look at this black one, oh that one was bad. A nightmare", Angus says with a little pout, almost trembling, like he had just remembered that dream and was trying to shake it off.

"I wish I knew what color my dad's dreams were..." I whisper, looking up as if I'm trying to recognize which ones were his.

"I bet they were all red, as a matter of fact, I'm positive!" Angus smiles and there are dimples appearing on both of his cheeks. I feel a bit better.

"Would you like to see what sort of dreams you're having tonight, Clara?"

"Lead the way Ang", I reply, excited and scared at the same time.

I carefully follow as he leads us to one of those white doors and we enter a room with three more entrances in there.

"Looks like you are having three dreams tonight!" he says.

I step in front of the first door, taking a deep breath before I gather the courage to open them. I glance at Angus for a moment, wishing he could come with me, but I know I am on my own now. I've been having all sorts of dreams lately and, quite frankly, I'm not looking forward to what tonight brings. But I'm tired of being scared and sad all the time. I take a deep breath once again and turn the first knob.

Everything turns quiet all of a sudden and I can't see anything. It's too dark and my brain starts bringing all of those ghastly childhood scenarios back, where I'm in my room, unable to sleep because the wind outside and the shadows on the blinds remind me of a mysterious night prowler waiting patiently in the dark so he could come out when I close my eyes and take me away to his horrid kingdom of doom. I hear my heart racing, breaking the eerie sound of silence, and I finally step forward. As I do so, the sound of a flickering lightbulb fills the air for a second and I see that I'm in my high school. But it's so...empty, and inky. I make a few more steps and see a little note stuck on one of our classroom doors. Approaching it carefully, I take it from the door, squinting my eyes in order to see better and notice that the handwriting is actually...my own ? The note says "Take the key", but which key? "Which key?" I keep repeating out loud but there is no answer and how could there be one if I'm the only one here? Or at least I think I am. A sudden noise interrupts my incessant repetition, and I see that the key had fallen right next to my

feet. I carefully pick it up from the floor and see the number 28 engraved in it. Wait a minute, that's the key to our school theatre. But why the school theatre? Still frightened, I decide to proceed and run down the hall. Unlocking the door, I immediately find myself on stage and the spotlights go on followed by a loud applause. Thousands of people are right in front of me, a sea of clapping hands cheering and shouting "Sing! Sing!". But I can't sing! Not in front of all these people, it's terrifying!

"Sing Clara! Sing!" they keep shouting.

"No!" I yell back.

"Sing!"

"No! I can't sing!" I keep yelling, tears rolling down my cheeks because I'm absolutely petrified. A mass of people starts approaching the stage but I am unable to move. My feet feel like concrete again and I feel a sudden rush of blood to my head.

"Stay away from me!" I shout. "Stay away! Angus I wish you were here! Help me, please!" My feet suddenly start moving by themselves and I quickly open the door and get out.

I'm back. I am barely breathing, but I'm back, and there's Angus running up to me and catching me as I almost collapse to the ground. I am mad at him for leaving me alone in there, but I am assured he was the one who saved me at the same time.

"Are you ready for your second dream?", he is already pointing to the other door.

"No. But I have to go, don't I?" I ask, hoping that he would say that we can end it all now or that he would at least come with me.

"You are brave enough. I believe in you Clara." I turn around to open the second door.

I enter a small but very bright room, with only a mirror and a clock on the wall. I step in front of the mirror and see my reflection, but something doesn't seem right. I look different, more mature, braver even. I have this concentrated, vigorous look in my eyes, like I am capable of doing anything I set my mind to.

"Do you like me, Clara?", the reflection asks. I step back, almost stumbling.

"W-what? How...how can you...what?" I stutter, my eyes glued to the mirror. But my reflection doesn't move.

"Do you like this version of yourself?", she asks again.

"I...I think so. Wait, who are you? You are not me! You cannot be me!" I keep shouting but the reflection keeps still. She's smiling. She's happy.

"I am you, Clara. I am who you want to be, who you can be. But you have to stop being afraid, you have to stop running from everything. Do you want to live a life you will regret?"

"No. I want to...I want to be you. But it's hard! Without Dad and..."

"Your dad is always with you. He would want you to move on and stop hiding from everything and everybody. Are you ready to do that, Clara?"

"I believe I am."

"Do you see that clock on the wall? Take a closer look."

I go over to the clock and start examining it only to see that it shows two different times.

"What does this mean?"

"The first one shows the exact time you were born. 9:45, right?"

"That's right. What about the other one?"

"You have to wind it first", the reflection replies.

"And what would that represent?" I still do not understand the point.

"The time of your second birth. The time you become me. Now wind it, Clara."

"Hurry up, wind it!" she repeats, and I do so swiftly. All of a sudden, the mirror disappears along with the clock, and I find myself back in the room with Angus.

"Was it scary this time?" he asks, eager to know the answer.

"It seemed so at first, and it was a bit...strange. But I survived, didn't I?" I say, smirking, seeing him smile back at me and looking pleased that I was finally gathering my courage.

"You have only one dream left. I'll be right here waiting for you. Now go." And I turn the last knob.

The smell of the rain and wet grass fills my lungs and I realize that I'm in a forest. But...I know this forest, I've been here before. The same forest where I was trying to catch up with my dad but he kept running away and I lost him, once again. Maybe I'll see him again and manage to catch up with him this time! My heart starts beating faster and faster as I expect to see his silhouette in the distance. Wait, there is somebody out there!

"Dad!", I shout.

"Dad, it's me, Clara! Wait!" I start running towards him, my feet feeling heavy again as I run in slow motion, the wet grass making me stumble but I somehow manage to get up again.

Approaching the silhouette, I realize that it is not my dad, but me! And suddenly, she starts running, incredibly fast, making it almost impossible for me to even come near her.

"Come on Clara, hurry up!", she shouts back at me, giggling.

"Wait, what does this all mean, tell me, please tell me!", I beg but she keeps moving faster.

"Is this what you want, Clara?" she yells back the answer.

"Want what?!" I ask, gasping for air.

"Is this who you want to be? Carefree, brave? Then catch me!" I start running faster, I almost feel like flying, the world is spinning but I'm not stopping, not this time. I'm almost there, I will catch you Clara! I will -

And I'm back. In a split second, everything stops and I am back in the room with Angus, who grabs my arm and prevents me from bumping into a wall.

"But...but, Ang! I was so close! I nearly caught her, why did the dream end?!" I shout, furious and miserable, until I notice that he is collecting the door knobs. Only, they don't look like door knobs anymore. They are...stars. The little purple glowing stars. I go up to him and observe as he is putting them into his bag.

"Why are they purple?"

"Purple represents desire", Angus replies.

"But...those were nightmares, weren't they? Why aren't the stars black?"

"Don't you get it?", he asks me, disappointed because I cannot comprehend the meaning.

"It's what you want the most Clara. The singing, the performing, the unstoppable attitude, the 'I can conquer the world and you cannot stop me', the courage...all of your desires, and who you want to be. Think about all of those talent shows you've missed because you were too afraid of being judged, thinking that you are not good enough. All those opportunities you've had in the past two years but were too afraid to take. Clara...they won't be there forever. Take a chance while you've still got choice." Angus explained and my heart broke. It broke because every single thing he said was true. And I hated how right he was, but I loved him so much for saying

it, because someone had to.

"I think I'm ready. I'm ready to take those chances. Angus ... I'm ready to go home now."

"Are you sure?", he asked. "I'll miss you, but I know you can do it Clara. I believe in you. I always have."

"I will always be here with you Ang, you won't lose me...I promise, you won't lose me, you won't lose me..."

"Who won't lose what?" I hear a familiar voice and I jump up, seeing my mom's face as she is sitting down right beside me.

"Mom! Oh mom, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry for acting the way I did. I know it's hard for both of us but I promise I'll do better!"

She looked puzzled; I could see the mixed emotions on her face but I could tell one of them was happiness. She smiled, after such a long time, she finally smiled.

"You won't lose me, Mom."

"And you won't lose me either, I promise you that", she said, tearing up.

"Now come on, time to go to school! Oh, someone came over this morning. One of your classmates I believe. He handed me this note and told me to give it to you, I'm not sure what it is, probably a homework assignment..." Mom said handing me a piece of paper. I opened it and dropped it the very same moment, gasping in disbelief. "Take a chance while you've still got choice", written in purple letters.

"Clara, are you ok? What happened?"

"Mom...this boy...did he say anything, anything at all?"

"Not really, he just handed me the note and that was it", she said leaving the room only to come back in after a few seconds.

"Oh, I think he mentioned his name was Angus."

*Name significance: *Angus* has Celtic origins, derived from the element aon (one, choice, preminent, one strenght). It is based on the name of a Celtic God, Angus, that used to help people with their intelligence and wisdom.

**The Harper and Other Tales:
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