SILENT SCREAMS

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Barbara Gregorič Gorenc • Darinka Kozinc • Saša Šega Crnič • Mateja Gomboc • Andrej Brvar • Cvetka Bevc • Amadeja Godina • Jurij Popov • Kaja Kramar • Maja Centa • Aksinja Kermauner • Tanja Jelenko • Benjamin Žnidaršič • Cvetka Sokolov • Vinko Möderndorfer • Liljana Jarh • Slavica Remškar • Tjaša Zorc Rupnik

SILENT SCREAMS

Illustrated by Mira Uršič

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Edited by: Anej Sam

Illustrated by: Mira Uršič

Expert review by: Dan Podjed, Maksimiljana Marinšek, Janek Musek, Mojca Mihelič

Design by: Ksenija Konvalinka

Translated from Slovenian: Elizabeta Žargi

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www.onezimosvet.si; jasa@onezimosvet.si

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FOREWORD

How to Raise Grown-Ups?

If you tell an adult you saw a beautiful red-brick house with flowers in the windows and birds on the roof, they'll likely be unmoved. But if you say you saw a house worth a hundred thousand euros, they'll exclaim, "Now *that's* a beautiful house!"

Young readers know that this truth comes straight from the childlike heart of The Little Prince—a heart that stirs at birdsong and the scent of a flower, but that has no use for money.

Wise adults—those who have preserved the child within—know that money does not soften our gaze or warm our hearts. On the contrary, money brings new worries and fuels base desires. That's why wise people have always warned us: money distracts us from the beauty of life. More than two thousand years ago, the poet Virgil cried out: *Accursed thirst for gold!*

Unfortunately, most adults believe money is the highest value. And so, they behave as though everything—or nearly everything—is permissible in the pursuit of wealth. Even politicians often behave as if a nation were just a business meant to turn a profit.

The result is a world with more injustice, more hunger and suffering, more wars and heinous crimes.

Even in countries untouched by war, more and more children and adults alike live in confusion, fear, and hopelessness.

Most disturbing of all is the growing number of children and adolescents who begin to hate their peers—and themselves. Aggression, bullying, and extortion are on the rise among young people. So too are self-harm and suicidal ideation. This absence of the will to live is a terrifying new trend. We must all wake up.

How are we to make sense of this? What can we do to help young people fall in love with life?

This book (part of the EU-funded *MindnArt* project) seeks answers to these questions.

Writers who understand the emotional world of children and teens have shared powerful insights with young readers in the first section. Their words speak clearly and accessibly. Their messages are brought to life by the illustrator, who echoes them through the glint of a tear, a tense expression, or the gentle light in a child's eye.

These stories are worth our full attention. They are essential to understanding the murky forces that create fear, confusion, and emotional suffering in young people.

The inner struggles of children and teens portrayed by the writers and illustrator in Part I are further illuminated by experts from the fields of health and social care in Part II. These reflections are intended especially for parents, carers, and educators.

This is what makes the book so valuable. Read it. It will help many. It may ease someone's pain, bring clarity where there was confusion, and refine us—if only by a small but meaningful degree.

HEARING THE UNHEARD

Barbara Gregorič Gorenc

MIRA, MIRA – PACKING ON THE POUNDS

Our new science teacher is amazing! Everyone likes him – me too! He has long fair hair, and all the girls in class have a bit of a crush on him. The best part is that, besides the lesson content, he also tells us fascinating facts about animals. I could listen to those true stories all day.

Since the holidays are coming, the other day he told us about starfish. He showed us a short video online explaining that a starfish's mouth is on the underside of its body. And starfish can have different numbers of arms – at least five, sometimes even forty.

He also talked about seahorses – I never knew they could change colour like chameleons.

Then our teacher showed us some kinds of fish, and since my classmates were already in a holiday mood, they started giving themselves fish names.

"I'm an eel from today on!" shouted Uroš.

"And I'm an anchovy!" Ivan chimed in.

Bine chose sea bass, Henrik picked a catfish (and quickly drew a moustache under his nose), Broni became a sea dragon, and our joker Jack called himself a handkerchief fish.

Of course, the girls joined in too: Melani became a sprat, Sashka a sardine, Gitica a bleak, Paula a wrasse, Ida a needlefish, and Mia a catshark …

Then something TERRIBLE happened.

"Mira is an ocean sunfish!"

I don't know who said it first, but suddenly everyone was laughing loudly and chanting:

"Mira IS an ocean sunfish! MIRA IS A MOLA MOLA!"

On the screen was a picture of the mola mola, also called the ocean sunfish. It is the UGLIEST FISH IN THE SEA! THE UGLIEST FISH IN THE WORLD! THE UGLIEST FISH IN THE UNIVERSE! Before the bell rang, I bolted from the classroom and burst into tears.

The mola mola is HUGE! It's the heaviest bony fish. Massive, flat, weighing more than two tonnes …

I am the mola mola fish.

...

I'm Mira. Named after my mother's mother, whom we call Grandma.

I'm very quiet. I can lie on the sofa and read for hours – because I really love reading. When I read, I drift off into another world where anything is possible. I nibble biscuits as I read – the ones with jam and chocolate glaze. They're the best.

I also like to sit under the chestnut tree in the garden and crochet. To crochet you need a hook and yarn, or thread. Thread is cotton or linen yarn used for doilies or summer clothes. Crocheted tops are in fashion this year – sleeveless ones. I could make one. But … I can't wear sleeveless tops. There are scratches and scabs on my arm.

I can also weave friendship bracelets. Colourful, pretty … But … I don't have friends.

...

I'm Mira – "mir" means "peace" in our language.

Maybe I should have had a different name. If I were called Zhiva, for example – like the old Slavic goddess of life – maybe I would be lively, skipping around, playing football and tennis, riding my bike, and skiing … And everyone would like me.

Yes, maybe it's all my name's fault.

"Quiet little Mira," Melani and Sashka mock me.

Or: "Mira, Mira – packing on the pounds!" Bine and Broni shout down the school staircase.

Sometimes someone does come over. To check out my new phone. I have two phones and a tablet. My dad is crazy about electronic gadgets – I can get the latest model anytime, even if I don't want it. But, as I said, I don't have friends and don't message anyone.

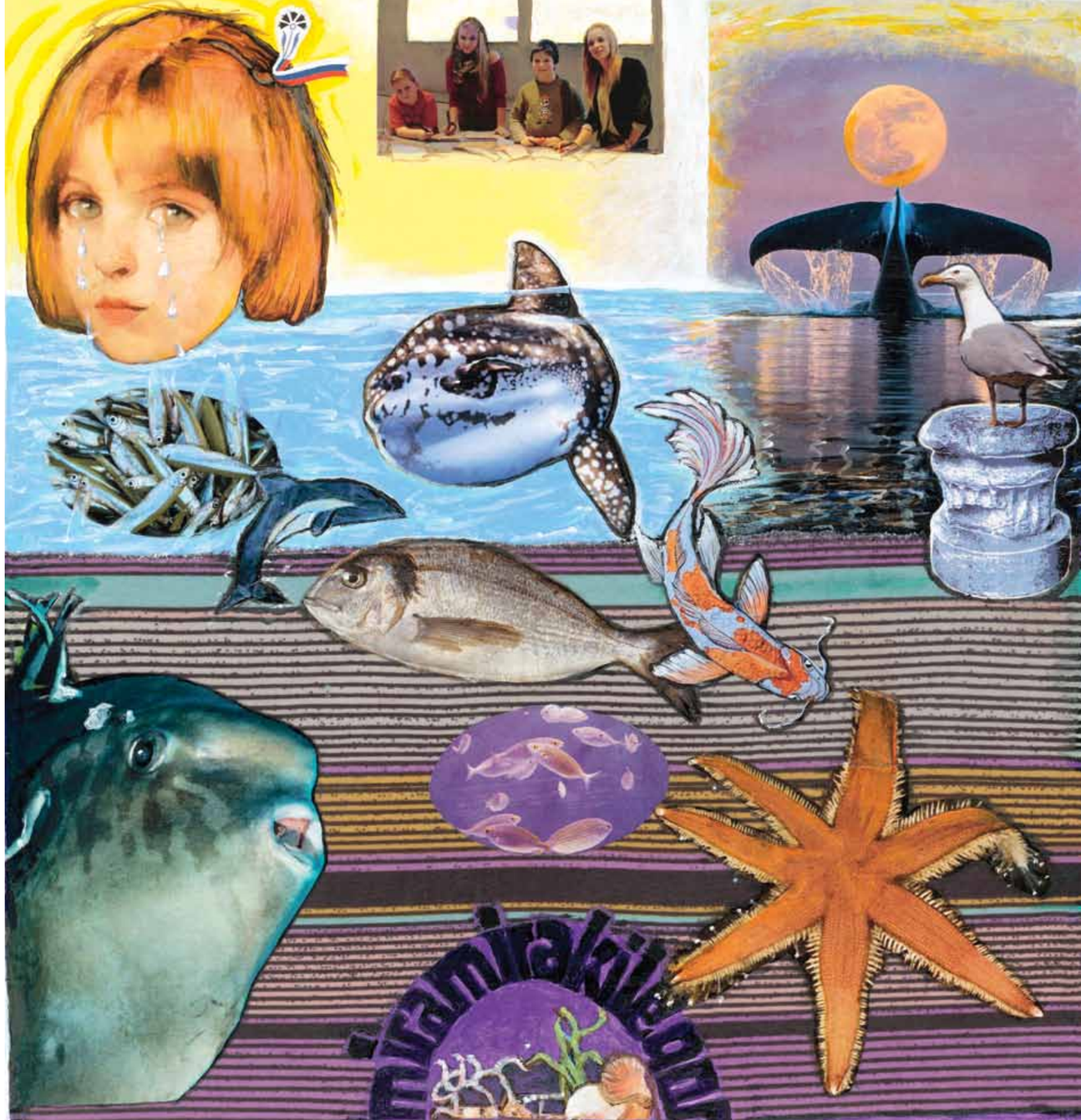
I don't have a brother or sister. Not even a dog or a cat. Not even a goldfish. Mum says we don't have space for animals. Or time for them. She really doesn't have much time – she's always dieting and trying on clothes. She even does that at work! She used to be a model …

But I have time. Lots of time. More and more completely empty time …

...

I haven't told anyone that in recent weeks I can't study anymore. My grades were always the best and still are, because – well, I just know and remember a lot. I always loved studying. I was always the best. Because I wanted to be the best – it was never hard to learn and understand everything. And I can't bear losing. I compete with myself.

But tests and oral questioning really get on my nerves. My hands are always sweaty and cold. My stomach feels full of stones. My heart pounds and I can hardly concentrate.



Unbearable anxiety rises inside me. I feel like I have to do something: I drag my nails hard across my neck and again across my arm. The red marks will stay for a long time. But for a moment, just a little, it eases, and I last until the end of lessons.

Lately I can neither read nor crochet.

Now at school I just stare at the wall, and at home I just sit, lie down, and wait. I don't know what I'm waiting for. My head is completely empty.

...

I run into the school toilet. I cover my ears. I sob.

"Mira – mola mola," echoes in my head. Or maybe it's still the loud jeers of my classmates.

I lean against the cold tiles, slide to the floor, and cry.

...

"Mira, open up! Open the door! What's wrong?"

I hear my form teacher Nada's voice. Her English lessons are my favourite.

"She ran out of class … Lately she seems even quieter …" I hear the worried voice of the science teacher. "The children teased her … I didn't know that …"

"Why didn't I know anything about this?" says the school counsellor.

Their voices echo in my head. I lie on the floor and scratch my arm raw.

The headteacher tries in vain to call the caretaker who "just now" took the school tablecloths to the laundry.

"Stand aside," he says and removes the bathroom door from its hinges himself.

Miss Nada bends down to me and hugs me.

...

A new film begins to play … Mum comes to school to pick me up. We go to see my doctor. The doctor sends me to another doctor – called a child psychiatrist.

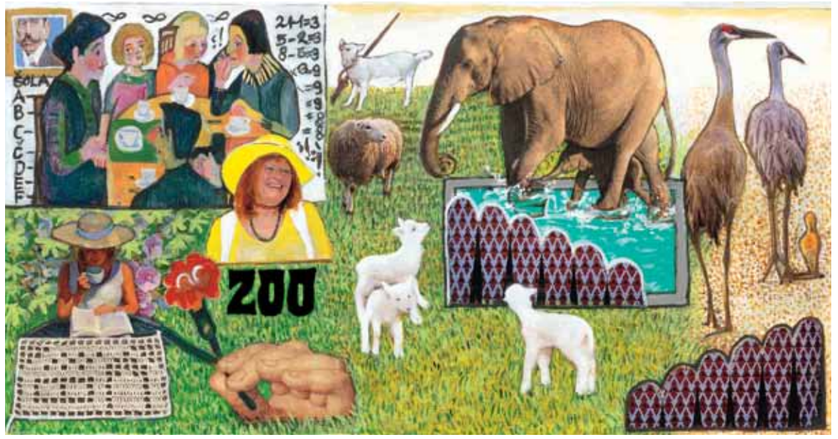
I sleep. And sleep. I sleep a lot.

Everyone talks a lot. Mum and Dad whisper too. Sometimes they argue about who's to blame. For me being so "strange." Grandma comes to visit. Everyone is endlessly kind.

I go back to the doctor and the psychiatrist.

"Excess weight, self-harm …"

The words buzz around me. Everyone wants to talk. But I really don't know what to say. What should I talk about? I'm still so tired.



But I also hear words: "Maybe we could try …" Mum explains that I never wanted to DIET. That she suggested it A THOUSAND TIMES …

"We're not talking about dieting, madam," the doctor says firmly. "But about a healthy lifestyle. IF Mira is interested in the camp, of course …"

Some time passes. It's the holidays, but we all stay at home. Grandma buys us all annual passes to the zoo. I like the animals you can pet best – little goats, lambs, and piglets.

At first Mum refuses to touch them. She's even scared of them. She eyes the ostrich suspiciously and checks whether it can jump over the fence. Dad laughs and brings her coffee from the vending machine. He's most excited about the elephant, who's got a new pool to splash around in happily.

Grandma and I also watch the animals that come to the zoo as guests – crows, herons, and little woodland birds helping themselves to the food.

Together we go to a nearby stream on the edge of town and to swim in the lake. Well, only I swim, because Mum won't get her hair wet and Dad – I can't even imagine him in shorts. He sweats in jeans instead. But he photographs us all the time.

This holiday is better than the trips we used to take.

I feel a tiny bit better. Maybe two tiny bits …

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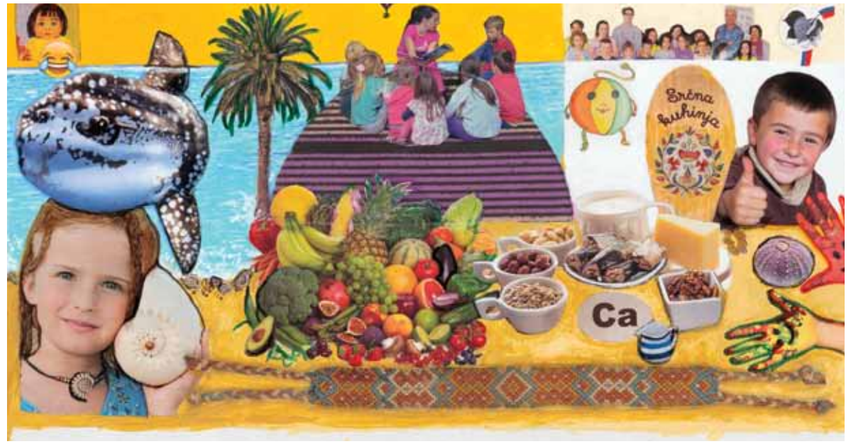


Grandma gives me her straw hat with a faded blue ribbon. Mum thinks it's ugly and would immediately buy me ten new ones, but I've always liked Grandma's. In my rucksack I also have two books, colourful yarns, and a crochet hook.

"There won't be time for your hobbies," Dad sighs as he stuffs the rucksack into the car.

Several parents with children of different ages gather in the courtyard of an old manor house.

"Welcome to the camp THE GOAL IS – THE JOURNEY! We'll spend two weeks together!" the camp team greets us. They introduce the doctor, nutritionist, psychologist, physiotherapist, kinesiologist, and our group leaders.

"Our programme is intended for children and teenagers who struggle with excess body weight and want to change their lifestyle. The focus is on physical activity and healthy balanced nutrition. The programme also supports strengthening mental well-being and reducing depression."

I don't listen. I look around.

"Parents, don't forget – next weekend you'll join the programme too!"

I'm a little scared. Not because my parents are leaving. But because there's so much new.

A girl my age smiles at me.

"I'm Zhiva."

"My name's Mira," I reply and smile back.

...

Camp is good. It's interesting. Something is always happening.

Sometimes anxiety returns, but we even talk about that in workshops. I learn a breathing exercise that calms me. I breathe into my belly: inhale through the nose and slowly exhale through the mouth, like gently blowing out birthday candles. Repeat a few times.

Sometimes I retreat to my room and pick up my crochet hook and yarn.

Sometimes I talk to the psychologist.

But mostly I'm outside with the group. I like swimming and volleyball best. We also tried archery! And went on a boat trip! They even have an outdoor gym!

But honestly, I find the nutrition workshops the most interesting. We prepare some meals ourselves – once we even baked pizza, but instead of dough the base was crushed cauliflower florets. I almost wouldn't have guessed the ingredients were different. Our salads are colourful, sometimes with walnuts and buckwheat.

One rainy afternoon we sit in a circle. Each of us can share something interesting – what impressed us, what we liked.

But I don't listen. I watch the raindrops and think how nice it is here. And I know it will be good at home too. I won't change miraculously. But I know I can find help.

Suddenly I hear Rok:

"Did you know that even in our sea they've already found a mola mola? It's also called an ocean sunfish, a moonfish, or a headfish. These fish can dive 600 metres deep, but sometimes they sunbathe on the surface to warm up after long dives.

And one more thing – divers can see the wonderful bioluminescence that lights up the mola mola at night. The bioluminescence is made by parasites living on its skin that emit light. One day I'll go diving where the sunfish lives and watch it. The mola mola is definitely the most beautiful and fascinating fish in the world!"

...

On the last evening we have a party with dancing and gifts we made ourselves. I draw a string with a little beach pebble with a hole in it. I see Rok wink at me. I wave back and put the necklace on.

And Zhiva gets my gift! A colourful friendship bracelet. We've already connected on social media. We also found out we don't live far from each other.

We promise to meet again tomorrow.

Darinka Kozinc

NIKO, THE SPOILED BRAT

I'm sitting on the floor of my room, sulking. Mum has just slammed the door. I don't like that she's angry with me. But she also refuses to understand that I hate tidying up. In fact, I loathe it. I don't even notice the mess around me, and it doesn't bother me at all. In this, my mum and I are as far apart as Mars and Earth.

Just before she closed the door, I caught what she said to Dad:

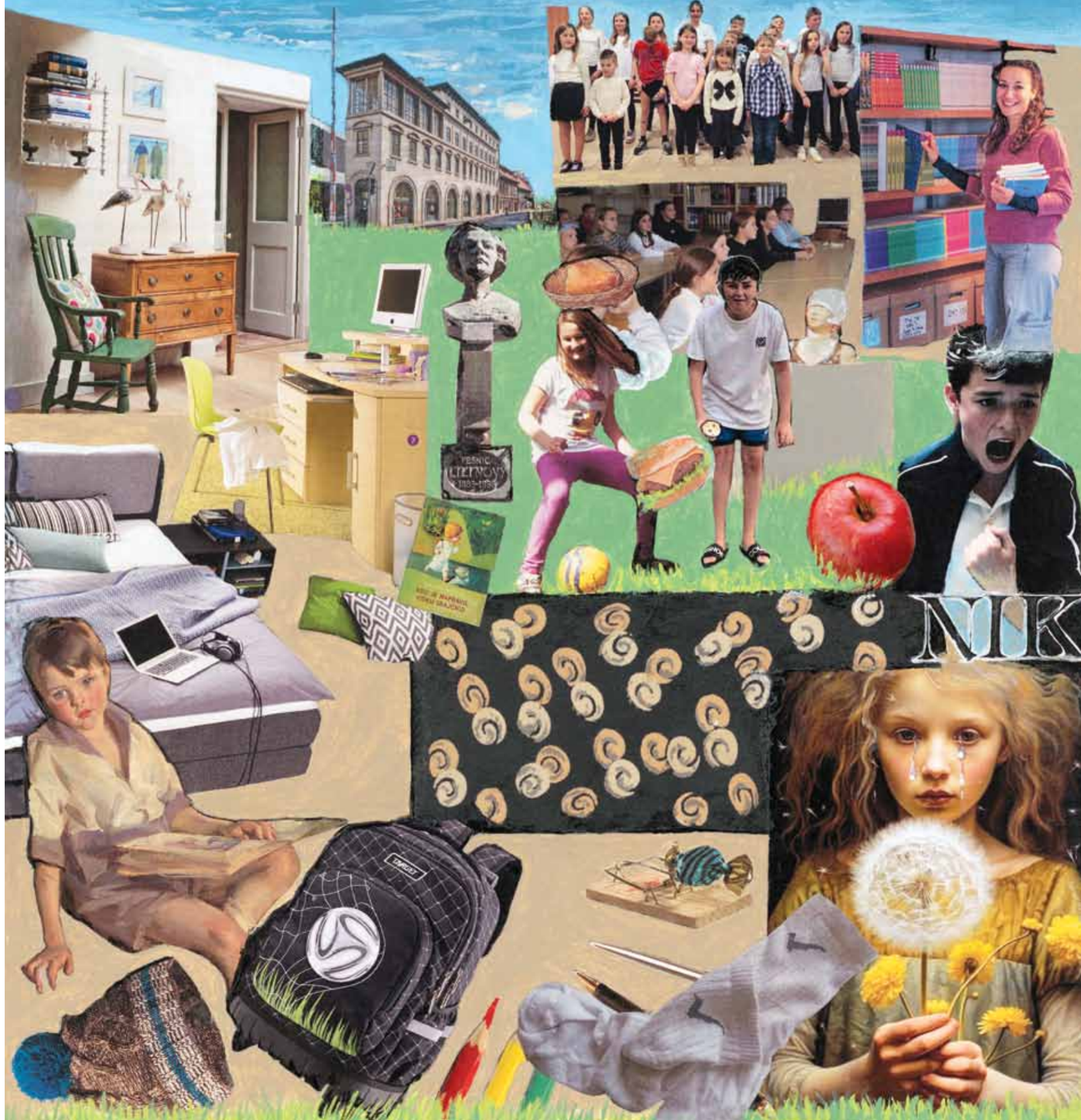
"That kid is just like you! With the way you leave your socks everywhere, you're setting him a bad example."

I sigh deeply. I look around. In the corner on the floor lies a towel, bunched up like a ball of rags. When I came back from swimming, I just dropped it on the floor with my wet trunks still inside. My school backpack is lying next to the desk. A cap is sticking out of the unzipped pocket. Lego bricks for the plane I'm building are scattered around the open instruction sheet. My socks are still under the chair. The bed is unmade. My pyjama bottoms are on the pillow, the top is under the bed. My eyes wander over my desk: notebooks are piled one on top of the other, my science textbook lies open, waiting for me to study, and my pencil case looks like a ripped fish belly, coloured pencils sticking out.

For a moment I admit to myself that maybe Mum is right. But only for a second. Then another thought hits me: Why doesn't Mum tidy up? She's always cleaned up after me, and now she's suddenly decided I'm big enough to do it myself.

I'm still sitting on the floor, turning rebellious thoughts over in my head. Then … with a sigh I get up, grab the wet towel and trunks, and carry them to the bathroom, leaving a damp patch on the floor. I glance through the half-open door; Mum has her back to me, busy at the kitchen sink. I snort through my nose, loud enough that she has to hear me. She doesn't turn. I go back to my room.

Later she comes in. She looks around the tidied room and says: "You're not that spoiled after all!" I don't reply. I don't see myself as a spoiled child. Especially when I compare myself



to my classmates. Well, some might be even less spoiled than me – like Anisa, for instance. She and her mum live alone without a dad. Or Nejc, who lives on a farm. They're winemakers, and Nejc can't escape chores at home even though he's only in Year Four. He probably doesn't have much time to play, if any at all. I also think of Tina, who lives with her grandparents because her mum can't take care of her and her dad disappeared somewhere abroad.

But I never imagined I'd come face to face with real, hard-core spoiling so soon. It was the first day of school after the winter holidays. Our teacher walked into class with a boy our age.

"This is Niko, and from today he's your new classmate," she said.

Before the holidays the teacher had mentioned we might get a new pupil. She'd said it in passing, so we hadn't taken it seriously.

Our class has a reputation for being good – no trouble. At teachers' meetings we never need any special discussion. Other teachers envy ours and tell her she's lucky. At least until we got Niko. With him, everything changed. Even on that first day, standing by the teacher with everyone staring at him, some of us felt he was looking down on us. Almost contemptuously! As if we were worth less.

"His father owns a chain of shops," Nejc told us at break.

"They've had problems with him everywhere," Kati whispered to us. "He's really spoiled and everything has to go his way."

That same day Niko went after Anisa.

"Did you get those worn-out slippers at the Red Cross or Caritas? Or at a flea market?" he sneered, lifting his right foot in new, probably super-expensive trainers.

Anisa just lowered her head and said nothing.

The next day Niko jumped with both feet on the backpack Anej had put down for a moment. It cracked. He broke his pencil case. Tears welled up in Anej's eyes. He'd had to beg his mum for that motorbike-themed case because she thought it was too expensive.

"Big deal," Niko laughed. "I could buy ten of those!"

After that we never knew who would be his next victim. Niko strutted around the class as if he were the boss. He tripped Tina during PE. He took my notebook out of my bag and hid it in Barje's backpack. We're not a tattletale class and at first we held back, but then Nejc told at home how Niko had knocked his snack out of his hands, and Tina got brave

enough to speak up, then Barbara … Accusations started pouring in, but our teacher calmed us, telling us to be patient with him a bit longer.

"You see," she said, "Niko has everything and more, but not what he really needs. He only knows the image of himself that his parents have fed him. Because he doesn't know himself, he doesn't like himself and isn't capable of true kindness to others. In fact, He depends on your attention – and deep down he knows it."

We were amazed by her explanation. But Niko became even ruder and more aggressive with us. He kept proving what his family could afford and called us nobodies. The atmosphere in class got tense. One day it exploded.

Niko was playing with his mobile under the desk.

"That's enough! Mobile phones aren't allowed, full stop! Especially not in Year Four!" the teacher snapped and yanked the phone from his hands.

Niko jumped up and lunged at her. He struck at her with both hands: "Give it back! It's mine!"

We don't even know how she managed to get him out of the classroom and to the headteacher.

We were left alone. We were quiet for a while until Anej, in a voice imitating our teacher, said: "Be patient, just be patient, children! He still doesn't know why he's in the world; he doesn't know how to give things up, he has to have everything he wants."

He kept a straight face, and we burst out laughing. But it wasn't funny. Not at all!

After that incident Niko never came back to our class. Because of him the adults held endless meetings … In short, accusations flew back and forth. Then, together with all the child-rearing experts, they decided Niko would be schooled at home.

"You see where excessive spoiling leads," we often heard from other teachers.

When Niko was no longer in our class, we all breathed easier; the usual peace returned. Only now we were richer for the experience. And if anyone loudly called someone spoiled, we froze.

My mum rolled her eyes again when she came into my room. Without much resistance I immediately started tidying up, even though I really don't like it. For me it's torture. But I was determined to stop her saying: "Don't be as spoiled as Niko!"

Saša Šega Crnič

THE YELLOW BLANKET WITH FRINGES

Nezha was walking home from school. She walked slowly, because there was so much along the way that caught her eye. She wanted to notice everything in detail: how the birds gathered twigs for their nests, how two colourful butterflies played tag across the meadow, how the first blossoms shyly opened to the bees. She wandered through the field in wonder at all the life around her.

At home, she opened the door and stepped straight into the kitchen. "Where have you been so long? You're an hour late!" her father thundered, waving towards the large wall clock.

Klara sat at the kitchen table and glanced anxiously at her little sister. "I was just watching…" Nezha began, but her words trailed off as she met her father's flashing eyes.

He didn't say he'd been worried that something might have happened to her. No, he went on roaring: "I don't care what you were watching! You know very well what time you're supposed to be home! As punishment, go kneel!"

He pointed to the corner of the kitchen. "And don't get up until I come back!"

He grabbed his jacket, yanked the door open, and slammed it hard behind him.

For a moment, Nezha stared helplessly at the closed door. Then she turned to her older sister in despair.

"You heard him," Klara whispered. She tilted her head toward the corner — they both knew there was no other choice.

Nezha knelt in the corner of the kitchen. Dutifully she straightened her back; she mustn't sit back on her heels, that always made Father furious. She knelt for an hour, two, three. The hard tiles pressed painfully against her knees. At school they would mock her again for her "battered knees." She was cold and hungry. She began to cry, her tears mixing with the snot on her face.

"What time is it? When will Mama be home?" she sobbed, wiping her nose with her sleeve.

"Six o'clock. Mama works till eight," Klara answered. "How are you? Should I bring you something?"

“My knees hurt… and I’m freezing,” Nezha whimpered, her voice almost gone. She didn’t mention how loudly her stomach was growling.

Klara dashed up to the attic room, where they shared a couch for a bed. She grabbed the soft yellow blanket with fringes. “Here, I know it’s your favourite.”

“Thanks,” Nezha whispered, wrapping herself in it. Only now did she notice the tiny pale-blue stripes running through the yellow. She yawned.

“I’m so tired. And sleepy,” she moaned, on the verge of tears again.

She didn’t even think about getting up. If Father came back now, she’d surely get slapped—one of those hard, man-sized slaps that made stars explode before your eyes, blood spurt from your nose, and sent you tumbling from your chair.

Klara sat beside her and hugged her, stroking her hair. “Mama will be home soon,” she said.

After a few minutes, the sound of a key rattled in the lock. Nezha and Klara froze. Nezha stiffened her back even more; the icy pain in her knees no longer mattered.

Their mother stopped dead in the doorway. “For heaven’s sake… Klara, what happened?” She buried her face in her hands, shaking her head.

“She was an hour late from school.”

“Nezha, stand up. Right now!” Mama said.

“I can’t… not until he comes back…” Nezha wept.

Mama rushed to her, pulled her to her feet, quickly tugging down her sleeves to hide her own bruises. She hugged Nezha tight, wiping her cheeks with a gentle hand. The yellow blanket with fringes slipped to the floor.

“How long…?” Mama turned to Klara.

“I don’t know… I think five, six hours…”

Mama shouted a foul curse. Then another. Two more. She pressed her lips tight so her daughters wouldn’t see her cry. “Come, both of you,” she said, pulling them to the table. “Sit down.”

She made them hot cocoa, then looked each girl deeply in the eyes. “This can’t go on. Instead of talking with you, explaining things, he sends you kneeling—every time, for everything. Talking…” She stopped. After so many years, she knew talking to him was useless. She’d tried too often, only to pay the price.

“I’ve been thinking… I found out about an empty flat,” she said quietly.

“You mean the three of us could move out?” Klara asked in disbelief.

Nezha just stared. Suddenly a thousand thoughts rushed through her mind. Bright, joyful, colourful, fluffy, warm thoughts. That they could go—just the three of them. No more constant fear of shouting, blows, punishments, things smashed, endless commands…

That would be so wonderful.

And it was wonderful. Now Klara and Nezha each had their own room, their own bed. Nezha loved to curl up in hers with her soft yellow fringed blanket, counting the pale-blue stripes.

Of course, the sisters still sometimes got into trouble—they were healthy girls, full of energy and ideas, sometimes a little crazy. But whenever things went wrong, Mama sat down with them straight away and explained her worries, her fears, and the unpleasant consequences that even small mistakes could bring. Mistakes we each had to answer for ourselves.

And in the end, almost always, the sisters realised Mama was right. After all, she’d been in the world much longer than them—plenty of time to soak up the wisdom of the universe.

Mateja Gomboc

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

"Look how tall a tower I've built! And so high!" Vita shouts proudly.

Brrrrummm!

The tower of blocks crashes across the living room floor.

"What a clumsy kid you are," Mum sneers, still watching her soap opera. "You can't even build a tower! Pick up every block right now! Not a single one left on the floor!"

Vita slowly and carefully picks up the blocks and tosses them back into the box.

"You're making a racket like a tractor. Give it a rest! You're getting on my nerves," Liam snaps from behind his computer.

"It'll be done soon …"

"It had better be done soon," Mum hisses, gets up from the couch, switches off the TV, and goes into the kitchen.

Vita runs after her.

"Mum, Mum, can I have some juice?"

"Juice? Are you crazy? You'll wet the bed if you have a drink now," Mum snaps.

"Pee-pants, puddle-maker, bed-wetter," Liam calls from the living room.

"You be quiet – you were no better at that age," Mum scolds him.

"But … but I'm thirsty," Vita says softly.

"Here, two sips. That's enough. And you'd better watch it if the bed's wet in the morning!"

The front door opens.

"Daddy's home!" Vita runs to the hall with Runo the dog.

"Where's my sweetheart? Were you good today?" Dad exclaims, crouching down to scratch the dog behind the ears. "Were you happy to see me, huh?"

"Daddy, Daddy, today I learned a new poem by heart! Can I recite it to you?"

"Can't you see I'm tired? I want some peace. And then you come with some poem…"

Vita sighs but quickly tries again: "Then I'll take your shoes off for you!"

"Out of my way, brat! Get out from under my feet before I kick you! Scurrying around like a rat…"

He goes into the bathroom to shower.

Vita slumps back to her little corner of the living room and spends the rest of the evening drawing quietly. She listens to her parents talking in the kitchen and Liam hammering at his keyboard.

"Come on, kiddo, off to bed now," Mum comes into the living room, Dad right behind her, sitting on the couch and turning the TV back on.

"Can I tell you the poem first?"

"You're still on about that poem! Oh, if you must… Fine!" Mum rolls her eyes.

"A letter came from a faraway land, from a faraway land, from a distant… a distant… No!… From a foreign land… no!… From a far-off place…"

"You don't even know it! Why show off?" Liam laughs from behind his screen.

"You call that learning a poem by heart?" Dad shakes his head with disdain.

"Off to bed! Maybe the right words will come to your head while you sleep," Mum points to the door.

"No, not her, she's too thick," Liam mutters.

Vita steps into the bathroom. She takes two, three steps. Suddenly her foot slips on the tiles, still wet from Dad's shower. She falls backwards, cracking her head on the edge of the toilet. The last thing she sees is black, impenetrable darkness; she hears a rushing sound fading away.

"Vita, darling, no! What happened?"

"Sweetheart, my God, what's wrong? Did you hit your head?"

"Quick, wet a towel! We have to get to Emergency! Vitka, my little one, open your eyes! Open your eyes, please!"

Andrej Brvar

THE SOAP OPERA

I used to call them Uncle Mirko and Aunt Gizela, even though they weren't really my uncle or aunt. They were just Mum and Dad's friends.

"Come by again! We'll be glad to see you," my parents would say.

"Take care – but not forever," Uncle and Aunt would joke back.

Uncle Mirko bought me tarot cards for my birthday, and sometimes we all went to the pastry shop for blueberries – chilled, juicy, rolled in sugar right to the last one. Two summers ago we even went on holiday together on Hvar. Through my mask I watched a world of fish and shipwrecks, salt collecting on our lashes and eyebrows like snow in winter. In the evenings we went to the tavern for grilled fish and squid. When Uncle Mirko had had a drink or two, he kissed Mum on the mouth, and Mum kissed him back, though she wasn't tipsy at all.

We also took a trip together to the land of windmills and to Venice – where the streets are made of water – and Dad walked with Aunt Gizela, his arm around her waist. He called her Gizi and told her even her scuffed-up shoes looked sweet.

Then – wham! – suddenly they all got deadly serious. No more joking, no more trading stories. And if anyone did tell one, nobody laughed. And then – whoosh! – just like that, no more Uncle Mirko and no more Aunt Gizela. No more "Come by again!" No more "Take care – but not forever."

Mum stared into herself more and more, changeable as April weather, and sometimes tears slid down the folds by her nose. Dad watched her when she looked away, rubbing tobacco between his fingers, sharpening my pencils and crayons, or dusting the ficus leaves. Sure, they used to lose their tempers now and then, but later it was almost every day. With veins swelling in their necks they hurled wood under each other's feet and sand in each other's eyes – meaning, instead of admitting what the real apple of discord was, they broke their spears over pointless nonsense. Then they'd retreat into silence again, slipping out to the balcony to smoke, smoke like Turks.

They became what's called a high-conflict couple, until at last they both told me: Dad – that he was getting divorced and marrying Aunt Gizela; and Mum – that she was getting divorced and marrying Uncle Mirko.

But – crikey! – where does that leave me? With whom and why, in this crazy merry-go-round, this wacky soap opera? Am I supposed to start calling Uncle Mirko "Dad" and Aunt Gizela "Mum," or what? Who'll go to parent-teacher meetings now, who'll sign the forms for my child allowance? Who'll take me—the fifth wheel—along on holiday in August? Where will I be for New Year's, and where on my birthday? Will Mum still come tuck me in at night if I kick off the blanket? Will Dad and I still go to the trotting races, and afterwards to the stables to look at the horses?

Do I even have a home anymore? Did they ever really care about me the way parents are supposed to? And most of all – how am I supposed to live with this damned baggage? Will I ever see the world in colour again, bright and clear? Or from now on will it always be as if the sky is just one big cloud, as if the swallows have flown away and emptied the air?

Cvetka Bevc

SUCCESS

Andrej stared in shock at the paper with his maths test. In the top corner was the grade. C. He kept repeating it to himself.

He couldn't believe it. He had never got a grade lower than an A, maybe once or twice a B. He was the best student in the class. He had even won the Year Three maths competition.

"Andrej, what's going on with you? You'll have to try harder," came Ms Petra's voice, shaking him from his thoughts.

But he had tried. He always tried his best. That day, when they'd done the test, his tooth had hurt so badly he could hardly concentrate. He hadn't wanted to admit it, though. That would have meant showing that even he wasn't perfect. And he wanted to be the perfect child, the one his parents would always be proud of. But how could he tell them he'd got a bad grade?

"It's not that big a deal. I got a D, and I'm just glad it wasn't an F," said his classmate Marko, trying to cheer him up.

Andrej ignored him. He couldn't compare himself to Marko. And Violeta, who was always right behind him in class ranking, had got an A. That meant she was now first. The thought sent a wave of panic through him.

For as long as he could remember, Andrej had wanted to be first. Not just in grades, but in chess tournaments, in running, even in who finished lunch the fastest. Praise always made him glow, especially when it came from his dad. Usually, Andrej was thrilled when Dad came home early as it was so rare. But today he secretly wished Dad would go away on a long business trip, so maybe he'd forget about the maths test.

But Dad didn't forget. He kept close track of Andrej's results.

"So, how was maths?" was his first question instead of a greeting.

Andrej mumbled something, his face flushed red. Dad immediately sensed something was wrong.

"Show me the test paper," he said sternly.

Andrej reluctantly pulled it from his bag and handed it over.

"A C!" Dad's voice shot up instantly. "I'm completely disappointed in you. So this is how you study? You're just lazy. You'll never amount to anything!"

Mum rushed in from the kitchen when she heard the shouting. When she found out what had happened, tears of disappointment welled in her eyes. Andrej almost wished she would shout too; that would have been easier. Instead, he dragged himself to his room. Mum and Dad's arguing followed him. He pulled a pillow over his head to block it out, but it didn't help.

"How's he supposed to take over my company one day with results like this?" Dad fumed.

"A C isn't the end of the world. He'll bring it up," Mum tried to reason.

That gave Andrej an idea. Of course he could improve it. He grabbed his maths book and started studying at once.

But Dad wasn't convinced. As punishment, Andrej was denied dinner. Dad said that way he'd remember better and wouldn't dare bring home less than an A again. By the next morning, Andrej was so hungry his head was spinning. Mum pressed a packet of biscuits into his hand, but he threw it away. *I don't deserve this*, he told himself.

When Ms Petra called on him in class, she was surprised. He wanted to solve problems from memory, without writing anything down. He had been doing that at home too, convinced it would prove he deserved an A and special praise.

"All right then," said Ms Petra. "Add 5 to 27, subtract 7, and then add 8."

Andrej hid his hands behind his back and started moving his fingers. It helped him count. His dad had taught him that trick.

"Thirty-two," Andrej announced triumphantly.

"Wrong! It's thirty-three!" shouted Violeta from her desk.

Panic gripped him. He wouldn't succeed. Everything went dark, the room spun, and he collapsed.

"Don't call my parents," he whispered weakly to Ms Petra as he came round. "Please ask Grandma to come."

They carried him to the school infirmary. His grandmother arrived quickly and took his hand, her eyes full of understanding. When he told her what had happened, he burst into tears.

Grandma understood right away.

"It's good you told me, Andrej. You're obsessed with success—addicted to it. That's not healthy. There are more important things in life. I'll talk to your teacher, and especially to Mum and Dad. But you must promise me you'll see the school psychologist. Problems like this can be solved. And don't forget: to me, you're the best boy in the world," she said, hugging him tightly.

Andrej felt a huge wave of relief. Grandma did exactly as she promised. She explained everything to Mum and Dad, and they started treating him more gently. So did Ms Petra. Talking with the school psychologist helped too.

Grandma was right: problems can be solved, as long as you share them with people who listen with compassion.

Amadeja Godina

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

I rub my aching eyes and glance at the clock. "Oh no, it's so late already! I should've been asleep ages ago. I really need to log off," I tell myself, just as Evgen25 sends me another funny clip I simply have to watch. Just one more… and another… and another… Then I'll really put the tablet down and go to sleep.

The next thing I know, my alarm is blaring. Not again! Morning already, and I've got school, but I'm exhausted. Then I hear the ping from my tablet, which I'd fallen asleep holding. I pull it out from under the covers and see ten new messages from Evgen25.

"Hey, Ina, are you still there?

Do you want to meet me?

I'd love to see your photo, Ina.

We could call tomorrow. A video call?

Why aren't you answering me? Ina, that's not nice!

Do you even know who I am!?

I'll forgive you if you write back tomorrow.

I want to tell you a special secret. Just between us."

Reading his messages makes me feel… weird. Something's not right, though I can't explain what. Still, against my better judgement, I type back.

"Good morning, Evgen25, sorry, I fell asleep."

"Ina, that wasn't nice of you. But fine. How about a video call?"

"I can't. I'm late for school. I'm getting dressed right now."

"Then at least send me a photo of yourself."

"I can't, Evgen25."

"What do you mean you can't? Do you even know who I am!?"

"Actually, no, I don't!" I fire back quickly, then put the tablet aside, unsettled, just as Mum calls me for breakfast again.

For two hours, no reply. I start wondering if maybe I should just send him a picture, when I realise I've lost internet connection. That really annoys me. But then I hear the teacher's voice, and I shove my phone into my bag.

"From today on, everyone in this class will put their phones in the box each morning. You don't need them during lessons or breaks."

"Nooo! Why? That's not fair!" we all groan.

"I hear you," Ms Alenka says. "So explain to me why it isn't fair."

"Because we can't play games."

"Because we can't watch videos."

"Because we can't look at photos."

"Because my phone is mine."

"Because we can't go online. What are we supposed to do instead?"

"Time without a phone is time for using your voices. First you'll talk with me, then with each other. Let's start. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes! You're Ms Alenka! Choir director Alenka!" we shout all at once.

"Excellent. Now, do you know who you're really talking to when you chat online? Do you trust those people?"

"Not always. Rarely. Usually not," most answer. I stay quiet.

"And how do you know when the internet is making you feel worse instead of better?"

"When chatting makes me feel weird."

"When I'm exhausted but still staring at the screen."

"When my eyes hurt from too many games."

"When I forget I promised to meet a friend."

"When I don't want to visit my grandma anymore."

"When I can't fall asleep and hide my phone from my parents."

"When videos make me sad or angry."

"When I forgot my bike," someone adds, and the whole class bursts out laughing.

"Matija, how did you forget your bike?" I ask, baffled.

"I went to get a sandwich and left it by the shop. While I was leaving, I was busy downloading a new app. Walked right past it and forgot. Next day – gone."

"Ms Alenka, what can we do so we don't feel weird like that, or forget important things?"

"Before I dive into the endless world of the web, I play a game called The Rule of Five. It has five goals I always try to follow:

1. I never tell anyone who I really am.
2. I never share my passwords.
3. I don't believe everything I see online.
4. I always tell a trusted adult if something online worries me.
5. I check how I'm feeling and how long I've been on my phone or tablet."

Ina realised that she, too, usually felt just like her classmates when online—strange and tired—but she always came back for more. If she wanted to enjoy digital technology, she first had to learn how to stay safe and protect herself.

Jurij Popov

THOSE PUPPY-DOG EYES

The day was heavy, pressing everything down. The sun had slipped behind the clouds, which thickened into a dark grey mass full of water, threatening to pour down at any moment. Even the birds seemed to feel it; their singing had fallen silent.

Nusha—her mother sometimes called her Nushka, and she loved hearing it—felt sad. She wasn't sure if it was the weather or the weight of everything that pressed on her young shoulders every day. She was in Year Seven. Her mood shifted with the sun. *I'm a child of the sun*, she told herself. When it shone, her heart sang; when it was hidden, sadness seeped in. *Do other people feel this way too?* she wondered.

She turned into the neighbours' yard, a place she had been sneaking into for a while. Behind the last woodshed, between it and the wall that separated the property from the next house, she had found a little nook just for herself. A few discarded planks, a rotting piece of plywood, some rubbish, a dented bucket and a pile of bricks, an old blanket, and a patch of weeds. The woodshed roof stretched far enough to cover her hiding spot, so she could even slip there when it rained. Hidden from view, no one chased her away or scolded her there. She could sit in peace, dream, or cry.

"Who are you? Oh wow, what big eyes you have! You're adorable!"

The words tumbled out of her in a rush of delight. Next to her brick seat crouched a puppy, and the first thing she noticed were its wide, frightened eyes.

"What are you doing here? Don't you know this is my spot?"

Her voice was gentle, never harsh. She loved animals, and as soon as she saw him, she knew he was a suffering creature. She scooped him into her arms. He didn't resist; he was limp, almost weightless, trembling, his heart pounding wildly.

"What's happened to you? Where did you run from? I can see you're starving, right on the edge of survival."

She reached into the bag she'd brought along. It contained a snack. She tore off a bit of bread and crumbled it into her palm.

"Here, eat. Don't be afraid. I can't give you too much, I don't even know if you should eat bread. Maybe a bit of salami instead—I swiped some from the fridge. Mum yelled at me: *'No lunch for you until you bring your grades up!'*"

There were more and more of them. Failing grades. School didn't love her anymore. How could she love it back? Once, she had managed, but now she couldn't keep up. Not with anything. Her classmates teased her. Her teachers scorned her. At home, Mum had been strange lately. One day she would scream and hit her – sometimes even with a belt; the next she would play with her and her little sister. Then came the pills, and she turned into a lifeless body… until she had to be taken to hospital. And Nusha had to take care of herself and her sister. There was no time left for school.

"Oh no, I need to pick up my sister from preschool! Bye for now."

She came back again a few days later. The puppy was waiting. She lifted him into her arms and whispered into his ear. She was surprised he didn't make a sound, as if he were mute. Only those huge eyes, always watching her. He cried out once—only once—when she stroked his side. It wasn't a bark but a kind of meow, like a cat. She pulled her hand back quickly. Something was wet there. She held it closer to her face: diluted blood, or maybe blood and pus together.

"Do they beat you too? Is that why you ran away? Don't worry, I'll take care of you now. Things are better for me too. I met a kind boy who understood me. He gave me some pills, blue ones, said I'd feel better after. And I did – just like the sun had come out again. I'm a bit worried, though. He said I have to give him something in return. Money or something valuable. Yesterday I took twenty euros from that dish Mum keeps on the counter. She won't miss it—not in the hospital. And I grabbed some rings too; she has loads. I'll give them to him, and he'll give me more pills. See? There are still kind people. Don't worry, puppy, I'll take care of you. Both of us."

They stared at each other, both with big eyes—his wide with fear, hers with…

Kaja Kramar

NIGHT

At night, people speak quietly and walk with softer steps. Even the sea rolls more gently, as though it caresses the rocks and whispers them bedtime secrets from the other side of the ocean.

But what I like most about the night isn't its quietness; it's its darkness. Sometimes you see only a tangle of shadows and a few vague shapes. Sometimes it's so dark you can see almost nothing at all. Darkness can help you hide what you fear most. Darkness had always been my ally, hiding everything I dreaded. Until that morning.

…

Our house isn't big, but it isn't small either. It stands at the edge of the forest, far from the bustle of town. The forest path leading to it is lit—like a single ray of hope—by a lone streetlamp. As the colder days draw near, the path feels even lonelier than usual. The howl of the autumn wind reminds me of wolves, and the swirl of leaves dancing in the sky feels like a celebration of nature ending yet another cycle of life.

It amazes me how nature can always change its form when conditions no longer favour growth. If only humans could be so flexible and willing to do the same.

It's well past ten when the calm is shattered by the sound of heavy, limping footsteps on the rain-wet ground. Then comes the loud pounding at the door. "Open up! Open up, I said, or else …" roars his deep voice. I know the words are meant for my mother. When the door stays closed, the pounding escalates. Through the window I see our neighbour, hidden behind her curtain, watching what's happening outside. When our eyes meet, she disappears—as she always does—but I know she's still there.

After a few minutes the door finally gives way with a crash. I hear shouting, the smashing of plates, glasses, and furniture. As countless times before, I close my eyes and pull the blanket over my head. My hands rest on my chest, feeling my heart hammering wildly.

Then I hear the heavy, staggering steps begin to climb the stairs. He hasn't found my mother. The steps come closer and closer to my room. I know the lock won't hold against his rage. Ever since my father left, he comes more and more often; that's why I always lock the door before I go to sleep.

Mama? Where are you, Mama? I think, though I know she won't come. I've long since stopped hoping she'll rescue me. It's always only a question of whether it will be her or me.

The door gives way, and I hear his loud, heavy breathing. The metallic rattle of his belt buckle as he unfastens it turns my trembling body into a formless shell – the shattered remains of a pale body carrying only ruins of a soul. Pain spills from my heart one last time, bitterly poisoning my being.

He grabs me by the hair and roughly drags me out from under the covers. His breath reeks of alcohol; only the open window softens it a little. He clamps his arms around my waist, his big clumsy fingers reaching for my nightdress. He tears the fabric from my body with force. My legs are so weak I can barely stand. I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for it to end, for him to toss me aside like rubbish and leave.

Inside, I feel emptiness. The moon still quietly lights our yard as if nothing has happened. I lie down when the rain begins. Raindrops beat against the windowsill like tears on my pillow. This time, I'm determined to put an end to it all.

Morning comes. I get up, dress, and head to school. Mum left for the bus stop two hours ago, off to work. It's easier this way. We avoid meeting. We save ourselves the downcast looks, the exchange of meaningless polite questions. This is how we've lived for the past months, passing by each other. Not because we don't love each other. I know she loves me, and I love her. But shame, despair, and helplessness paralyse us so much that we can no longer look each other in the eye.

When I reach the school, I don't go to class as usual. I wait for the bell to signal the start of lessons. When the corridors are empty, students and teachers in their places, I walk slowly towards Ms Koder's office.

She isn't the kindest or friendliest teacher at school. On the contrary – she's the strictest. But she's also fair. She's the only one who notices my tearful eyes and quietly asks if I'm all right. The only one who, after giving me a failing grade on a test, scribbles her private mobile number on a slip of paper and adds, "If you need help, call me."

How many times I've cursed myself for crumpling that paper in panic and tossing it in the nearest bin! I feel she's the only one who has really noticed something has changed in me. As if something has vanished and something else has been born at the same time. Every child who experiences what I have grows up overnight. Inside them rises an invisible monster they don't know how—or have the strength—to banish.

I hesitate at her door, and when I knock, I instantly regret it. My head is empty; cold sweat trickles down my hands. *What if she doesn't believe me?* I feel like I won't be able to force out even a word.

Then Ms Koder opens the door and looks at me with her piercing blue eyes. I'm grateful she doesn't bombard me with questions. Grateful she lets me sob on her swivel chair for the first ten minutes. Grateful she makes me chamomile tea, something to occupy my trembling hands. Only then does the avalanche of words pour out—the ones I can tell only her.

If it weren't for Ms Koder, my secrets would still be hidden by the silent night.

Maja Centa

A GENTLE HEART

Nin was an only child. He lived among the ruins of a family. His parents fought. His mother left. She made a new family for herself. His father was angry. And away at work a lot.

Nin found refuge in nature. He had a favourite tree, which he loved to climb.

Every genuine connection with his peers meant a great deal to him, but there were very few. He was very alone. Robbed of childhood too soon.

At school he withdrew into himself. He built dream worlds in which his mother and father accepted him. He imagined, too, that at school everyone liked him.

In the afternoons he played dark video games on the computer—a way to forget the pain of school. Because he was so serious, he was different from his classmates. He couldn't feel like part of the class.

He had a crush and fell in love for the first time. He decided to write her a letter. The popular girl got the letter and read it aloud to everyone waiting in the hallway before class. They laughed …

Sonja, who was in a parallel class to Nin's, wasn't among them. She and Nin had been friends since kindergarten—they'd grown up as neighbours in the same apartment block.

After the ridicule at school, Nin went home. In tears, he collapsed on the floor, sobbing so loudly it echoed through the empty flat.

He went into the bathroom, found his father's razor blade, and cut himself for the first time. It stung. The sharp pain became real. Then it faded. Relief. Drops of blood slid down the tender skin of his forearm …

The next day after school he cut again, parallel to the first scar. And again …

That weekend it was very warm. Sonja came by to go to the river with him. When they sat on the pier by the bank, Sonja noticed that Nin was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. She asked him if he wasn't hot. Nin hesitated …

Then he rolled up his sleeve. He showed her the wounds, the thin lines of dried blood on his skin. Sonja felt a tightness in her chest. She didn't know how to respond. Finally, she asked: "Why?"

Nin felt sadness, then anger. He began to sob … Through his tears he told her everything. How lonely he was at home. How he missed his dog who lived with his mother. How he suffered at school. About being unlucky in love. He cried for a long time. Sonja gently stroked his back.

Eventually, he calmed down. He went back to the flat and fell asleep on the sofa.

Sonja was deeply shaken by what Nin had revealed. She knew he was a kind, respectful boy, and she was very worried. She turned it over in her mind for a long time, wondering what to do. Finally, she told her mother. Her mother waved it off, saying it was nothing serious and that Nin was probably just seeking attention.

Even so, Sonja didn't sleep all night. She kept thinking about how to help her friend.

On Monday, during the main break at school, she found Nin. She took his hand and led him to the big yellow door. In the window beside it, next to a drawing of the sun, was a single word: psychologist.

They sat down on the bench. For a while they just sat in silence.

At last, Nin stood up and knocked. A young woman with a wide, compassionate smile peeked out.

"Come in, come on in!"

Aksinja Kermauner

ORPHEUS' LITTLE BOX

The noise in the classroom quickly died down when Ms Špela walked into 6B. The pupils straightened up and pulled their chairs closer to their desks, as she always reminded them to sit up straight.

"Good morning, everyone! Today we're going to talk about our home town. Since you're all from Ptuj, we'll explore its history, its interesting buildings, and its traditions."

The children exchanged looks; their brains switched on, and the questions came pouring out: "Can we do the kurents? The lords from the castle? The monuments on Panorama Hill? What about the Mithraic shrine?"

Ms Špela nodded with satisfaction. "Of course! All of that—and more—counts."

They divided into groups, but blonde-haired Maja was left out of every one.

"She can't help us," muttered one of the boys, Tine. "What could she know about the world if she can't see it?"

Maja sat quietly off to the side while the others searched on their phones. She listened carefully to their conversations. When they started talking about the Orpheus Monument in the town square, she could no longer hold back:

"I know the story of Orpheus and his lyre really well. I can tell that special, moving love story!"

Her classmates looked at each other and shrugged. "Fine," said Tine. "But you'll only tell it."

The next day, when they began putting their presentation together, they hit a problem—they had to present the story in a way that would really grip the whole class, but they couldn't agree how.

"I have an idea," Maja suddenly said. She pulled a small cardboard box out of her bag. "This is a magic box! I've put objects inside that are connected to the story. If you touch them, you can feel Orpheus' journey."

At first her teammates didn't believe her, and Tine even started to tease. But Maja insisted. Brina was the first to be brave enough. Slowly she pulled objects out of the box and laid them on the desk: pebbles for the hard road Orpheus walked through the underworld to find his dead wife Eurydice; a silk scarf for the touch of their love; a bird's feather for the lightness of the poet's song. Finally, Maja reached to the bottom of the box and took out two silver beads. She struck one against the other, and a beautiful sound rang out.

With each object, Maja told part of the tale. Her words captivated the class. Everyone wanted to feel the objects and hear the sound of the silver beads. Her group suddenly realised that Maja saw the world differently—with senses that felt almost magical.

On the day of the presentation, Maja told the story while her classmates passed the objects around. When she finished, the whole class burst into applause. Ms Špela was delighted.

"That was something special," she said. "We felt the story on our skin and in our ears."

Maja smiled. She was happy she could show her classmates and teacher that she lived in a world just as full as theirs—only through different senses.

"Without you it wouldn't have worked," Tine quietly admitted after class.

For the first time, Maja felt that she had truly been accepted. Her blindness was no longer a barrier but a bridge between her world and theirs.

Tanja Jelenko

HOW MOJCA TAMED HER FEAR

One August night, Mojca couldn't sleep. The next night was just as bad. And the one after that. And the next one … Something was troubling her. There was fear in her room. But the fear had no shape and no colour. It was simply there, in the corner, and it kept waking her up at night.

It wasn't like before, when a shadow would make her think of a terrifying wolf that would creep up to devour her the moment she closed her eyes. No, there was no wolf-shaped shadow this time. This fear had no form at all. Soon she realised the fear wasn't actually in the corner of her room—it was inside her, lying in her chest, inside her little heart.

For a long time, Mojca didn't even know what she was afraid of. She told no one. How could she? She didn't know what to say. She was scared but didn't know of what.

Day after day she grew more exhausted. When she looked in the mirror she saw she looked different from before. Her lips, which used to stretch into a wide smile, now turned down at the corners. Her eyelids drooped. With the help of the "Feelings" picture chart on her bedroom wall she worked it out: her face showed sadness.

Mojca began to think it through. "I'm scared, so I can't sleep. Because I don't sleep, I'm tired. Because I'm tired, I can't do anything fun. I can't colour, draw, sing, dance, or even read … Because I can't do anything fun, I'm sad."

"It's all the fear's fault," she said out loud. "But what am I afraid of?"

And as soon as she asked herself clearly, the answer began to appear. August was ending and so were the holidays. She was afraid of September, afraid of school.

She had always felt different from the other children. No one at school wanted to sit next to her. In Year One she had a friend, Ana, who had helped her, even shared a desk with her. Ana didn't mind if Mojca was slow. She understood when Mojca had to get up and walk around, or when she needed to sit and colour quietly while the others did maths. Ana had even tried to calm her when she flapped her arms from excitement or stress.

But last year everything changed. Ana stopped wanting to be with her and chose new friends. They talked about things Mojca didn't understand. When Mojca came near, they fell silent. Once she saw one of them point at her and tap her finger on her forehead. Mojca knew what that meant: the girl was telling the others that Mojca was stupid.

But Mojca wasn't stupid. She knew she wasn't. She had read every encyclopaedia in the school library. She knew things her classmates didn't—especially about baroque manor houses and their formal gardens. When she tried to tell Ana and her friends something interesting about them, they just waved her off, pushed her away, and tapped their foreheads …

School had felt horrible. The start of the holidays had been a relief. But as August drew to a close, fear crept back into her heart. Fear of the new school year. Fear of being mocked again. Fear of sitting alone at her desk. Fear of … everything. And she grew sadder and sadder.

Her drooping eyelids and mouth corners didn't escape her mother's notice. Mojca couldn't explain how she felt, but her mother gently felt her way to her daughter's heart. She recognised her pain. She sensed her story.

Mum knew Mojca couldn't count on Ana's friendship anymore. Ana was just another girl growing up with fears of her own. But Mum also knew there would be an adult who could understand Mojca—maybe the school librarian? Mojca had always loved going to the library.

On the first of September, Mum walked her to school, just like she had in first grade—even though Mojca was now in Year Three at Meadow School. Mojca walked beside her bravely. She didn't flap her arms. She didn't cover her ears at every loud noise. And together they went straight to the school library—Mojca's refuge.

The librarian welcomed them kindly. Mum didn't have to explain Mojca's distress. The librarian saw it, understood it. Without any fuss, they made a plan:

Mojca could come to the library whenever she needed to escape her classmates' teasing looks. She could come whenever she was so curious about something she couldn't wait until the end of class. She could come whenever she was so worried that even waving her arms or covering her ears wouldn't help. She could come simply when she wanted to get to the bottom of something.

There would always be a friendly librarian ready to find a book for Mojca—because the secret is in the book, and the book is a secret. And there would always be time, at least for a short chat about even the strangest topic. And the librarian would never say, "That's silly." In the library there would be someone who simply *understood*.

That September Mojca started sleeping better. Fear still tried to creep into her heart, but now she knew how to tame it.

Benjamin Žnidaršič

FROM ONE TETRAPLEGIC TO ANOTHER

With tears in my eyes, I send you this message of encouragement.

I know how hard it is. But I also know how many gifts life can offer to those who are brave and persistent, who keep walking the path of overcoming.

I too was struck by what people call a "blow from above." It was a beautiful sunny Sunday. After picking mushrooms, I wanted to surprise my friends with some cherries. But as I climbed down the tree with a basket full of them, the branch broke. I lay there under the tree, staring up at the outlines of clouds from a perspective I'd never seen before—and unable to do anything else. Something had snapped inside me. My head and my body stopped speaking to each other. They refused to work together.

It hurt. Not just the surgery, the long days of lying down, the transfers from bed to wheelchair, the endless physiotherapy. The hardest part was facing myself, facing this new life. A life of dependence that was killing me inside.

It felt as if all my youth had been stolen. I watched through the window as friends went to festivals, still laughing and having fun. I sat on the sidelines like a spectator. My dreams of a happy family vanished. How could I, looking as I did, ever support a wife and children? I was only a shadow of what I had been.

What stung the most were the "encouraging" words of parents and doctors: that things would be all right, that I had to look on the bright side. *What do you know about this*, I screamed inside. How can you compare your problems with mine?

When friends invited me on outings, my stomach knotted. I'd have to talk about my condition again, I thought … No thanks. I'll stay home. And the darkness and emptiness around me only deepened. Does any of this still have meaning, I asked myself. Or am I just a burden … Those were truly moments of deep despair.

But they say that when the night is darkest, that's when the dawn begins.

One day, while talking to my assistant, I muttered, "What good is school to me? I'll

never be able to work!" As if he'd stepped on a spring, he snapped back: "And what about us—the ones here with you, helping you, loving you … Is that nothing? It's not being in a wheelchair that will finish you off, but shutting yourself off and feeling sorry for yourself. You act as if every path is closed, as if you're the only one this has ever happened to!"

I fell silent. And felt ashamed. This man had been dressing me, feeding me, patiently serving me for months—and I hadn't even noticed. "So what do you suggest?" I asked. "Today you're coming with me," he said. "We're going to roast chestnuts and listen to a concert."

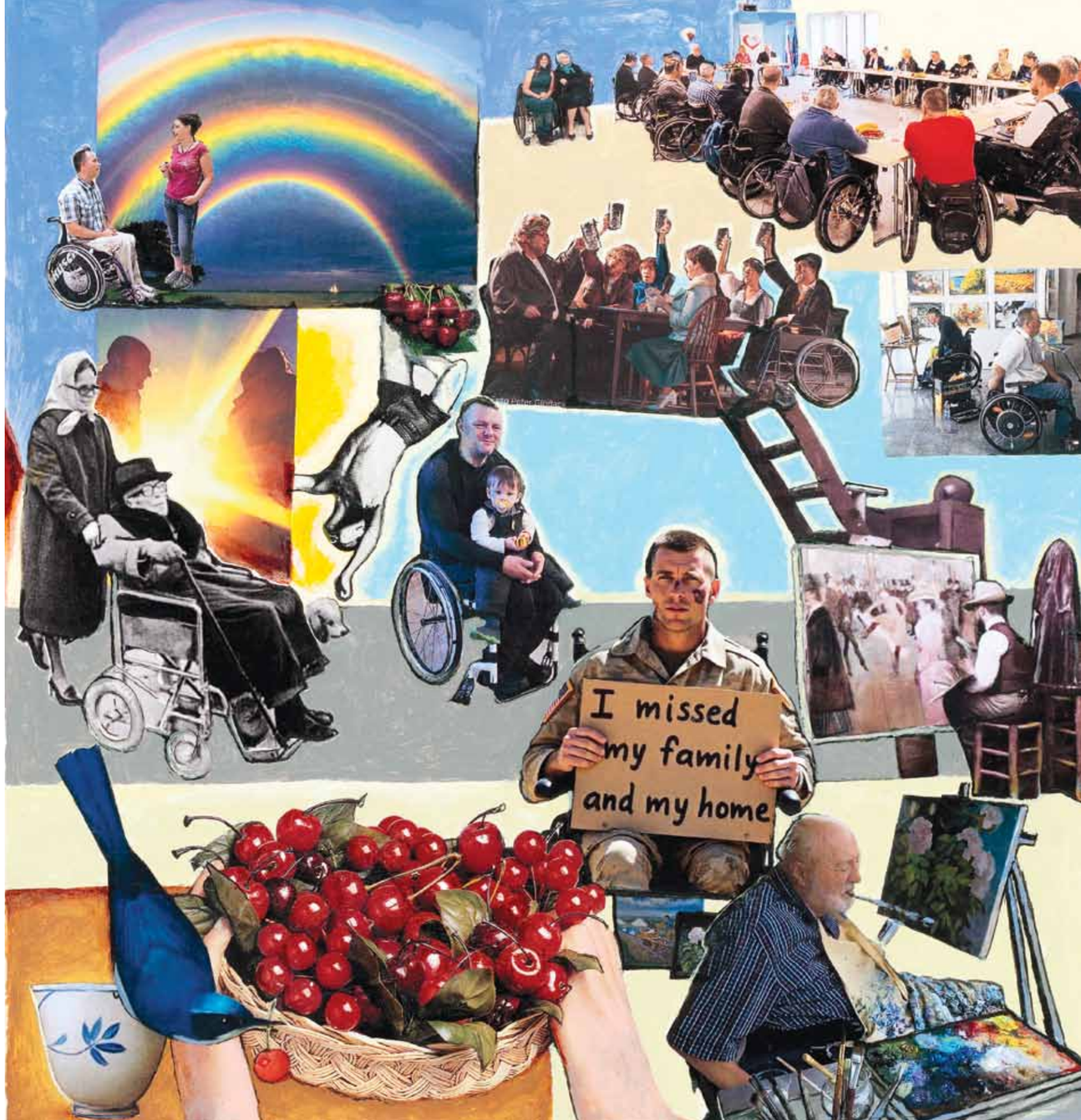
We drove to Kamnik, to a special education and rehabilitation centre that was holding an open day. And what a surprise awaited me there! I met new friends with similar experiences. We shared our real stories. A whole new world opened up. And it was precisely the people I'd been avoiding—other disabled people—who taught me about life, showed me new paths and new goals. I got countless opportunities to grow and to see things differently. I became actively involved in the Association of Paraplegics of Slovenia.

And as is often the case, when one door opens, others follow. I discovered I had a gift for writing poetry. My soul began to find expression again. Then I learned to paint with my mouth, and I trained in computer work, which helps me enormously. I've poured my energy into community work and even into entrepreneurship. I've done what I could for others and kept developing as a person.

So to you, dear fellow tetraplegic, I want to say: you are not alone. I don't know what tomorrow will bring you, but you must not lose hope. You are more than a diagnosis, more than pain. You are you—with your thoughts, your story, your voice, which has value. That is something no one can take from you. Your strength lies in your mind, your will, your ability to find what brings you joy and gives you life.

Being different does not mean being lesser. Life isn't only one path, one way. You may feel as if all the doors are closed, but there are many you haven't opened yet. Please don't stay alone in this. Seek out someone to talk to—a therapist, a counsellor, a person who can help you carry the burden and look for solutions that fit you. There are people who truly understand what it means to live with physical limitations, who know what it's like to feel as if you don't belong. They've found their path and can help you find yours.

Every day is a chance for something new, even if it's only a moment of feeling a little lighter. Allow yourself to hope.



Cvetka Sokolov

THE STAR ON THE BLANKET

"Why don't you draw your little sister?" asked Jasna.

I felt my lips tighten into a thin line all on their own. I barely shook my head and kept staring at the mouse's snout on the picture above her head.

"If you talk about it, it will feel easier," Jasna coaxed.

I don't want to talk. I want everyone to leave me alone. Especially Jasna.

"When you finally cry, you'll feel better," Jasna kept on. If only she knew how little she knows!

"I want my mum," I said.

Jasna sighed and got up from the table. "Another time," she said, before opening the door to the office. *Another time I won't be here*, I thought.

Mum was sitting in the waiting room with Dan in the pram. "Are you finished already?" she asked in surprise.

Jasna shrugged. "There's no point," she said. "Let's wait until Mili opens up." *You wait.*

Mum looked at me anxiously. "Jasna wants to help you," she said. "Why won't you let her?" *Because.*

"Don't worry, Mrs Kotar," said Jasna encouragingly. "Time heals all wounds." *I don't want my wound healed, I don't!*

On the way home Mum chattered to Dan and cooed at him. How can she smile? How can she allow her wound to heal—just let it heal? She should never be happy again!

"Mili, do you think it's easy for me?" Mum asked when we got home. "But life goes on…"

"Maybe for you and Dad," I burst out, "but not for me! I'll never forget Izi! Dan will never replace her—never!"

"What are you saying?" Mum exclaimed. "None of us will forget Izi. And of course Dan will never replace her. No one can replace her. No child, no person can ever replace another—Izi, you, Dan… each one is precious and irreplaceable."

Before the funeral Aunt Ana had said to Mum: "At least you still have Mili…"

Mum lifted her tear-streaked face and stared at Aunt Ana in shock. Her wide-open eyes asked: *How can you even think anyone could replace our dear Izi?!*

Even though I knew she was right, it hurt. How much of the emptiness left by Izi had taken hold of Mum—including the part of Mum that should have been mine? Now that Izi was no longer sick, now that she was dead, would I still be sent to Grandma's more than home?

No, no, that didn't happen. But it felt as if I were alone at home, even though Mum was sobbing in the bedroom. Mum. Mum, I'm here, I whispered through the wall. *There's a hole inside me too. My insides ache too. If only Dad came home earlier to comfort us!*

And then, half a year after Izi's death, they announced: "We're going to have a baby." And we did. Dan. And Mum started smiling again.

Mum repeated: "Every child is precious and irreplaceable." She paused for a moment, then went on: "But that doesn't mean that…" Her voice started to shake, but instead of pity, it stirred up anger in me.

"Yes, it does mean that!" I said. "You should never be happy again, you hear!"

"Our little angel in heaven, our star," said Mum with tears in her eyes, "would surely want…"

"She'd want to play with me! Yes, that's what she'd want!" I cut her off. "But she can't! She'd want to meet our little brother! But she can't! She'd want to start school next year! But she can't! She can't because she's gone!"

"She can't, no, but…" Mum began.

"You lied!" I shouted. "Izi's not some star in the sky! She never comes down to comfort me. And how could she be both in heaven and behind the rainbow? How do you even get behind a rainbow? You can't, because it doesn't exist!"

"It's just something people say," Mum sighed. "When I think of Izi, I really do feel she's with me." Her eyes flicked to Dan in the pram. He slept peacefully, as if his big sister hadn't just been shouting at the top of her lungs.

Mum's lying again. Dead Izi can't be with her. Dead Izi is gone and will never come back. And yet… in the evening, when I hold her bunny tight and whisper to it that I miss her too, so much it hurts, sometimes it really does seem as if she'll come down to our bed and speak.

"My head's going to explode," Mum sighed, rubbing her forehead. "I'm going to lie down for a bit. If Dan wakes up, please call me straight away, will you?"

I nodded. When she closed the bedroom door, I went to my room. I drew a picture I'd never show Jasna—me, sleeping with Ushko in my arms, a window full of stars, and a star on my blanket lighting up the room as if the sun had come out in the middle of the night.

Suddenly Dan started crying. I ran to the pram. Mum surely hadn't slept enough yet. Her head really might explode if Dan and I woke her too soon.

I rocked the pram, rolled it back and forth across the living room and started speaking softly to Dan: "If you stop crying, I'll sing you our sister Izi's favourite song." And I did. Dan stopped and stared at me with wide eyes. When the song ended, he kicked his little legs and gurgled. "All right," I said, "then listen to her second favourite song." After the third song I began telling him how lovely it had been with our sister Izi before she got sick, and how much I miss her. We even quarrelled sometimes, but when someone you love as much as I love Izi dies, that doesn't matter at all. "If we both wish really hard and think about her a lot, maybe one day she'll visit us…" Did I just lie to my little brother? No, surely not…

I was about to go to my room for the drawing with the star on the blanket to show Dan when, in the bedroom doorway, I saw Mum. Tears were streaming down her face, but the most beautiful smile in the world played across it. I ran to her. She opened her arms wide and caught me in an embrace.

And then we cried and cried and cried together.

Vinko Möderndorfer

A TIME WITHOUT ANGELS

He loved his grandmother most of all.

When the two of them were left alone—after Granddad was buried—it was wonderful. She let him go to bed with her while it was still light outside. The boy would ask her all sorts of things.

"Why do birds sing? Why don't stones live? Why does night always come in the evening? Who takes care of all that?"

And in the middle of his questions, Grandma would turn to him, look him in the eyes, and, worried, repeat the same thing she said every night:

"I won't always be with you. Maybe only a little longer. You must be ready. Soon I will die. Just like Granddad. Then you'll be alone. Do you know what you must do when I die?"

"No, Grandma."

"When I die, the most important thing is that you mustn't be afraid. Do you understand?"

The boy thought for a moment … then swallowed hard and whispered, "I understand."

Grandma lay beside him, eyes now closed.

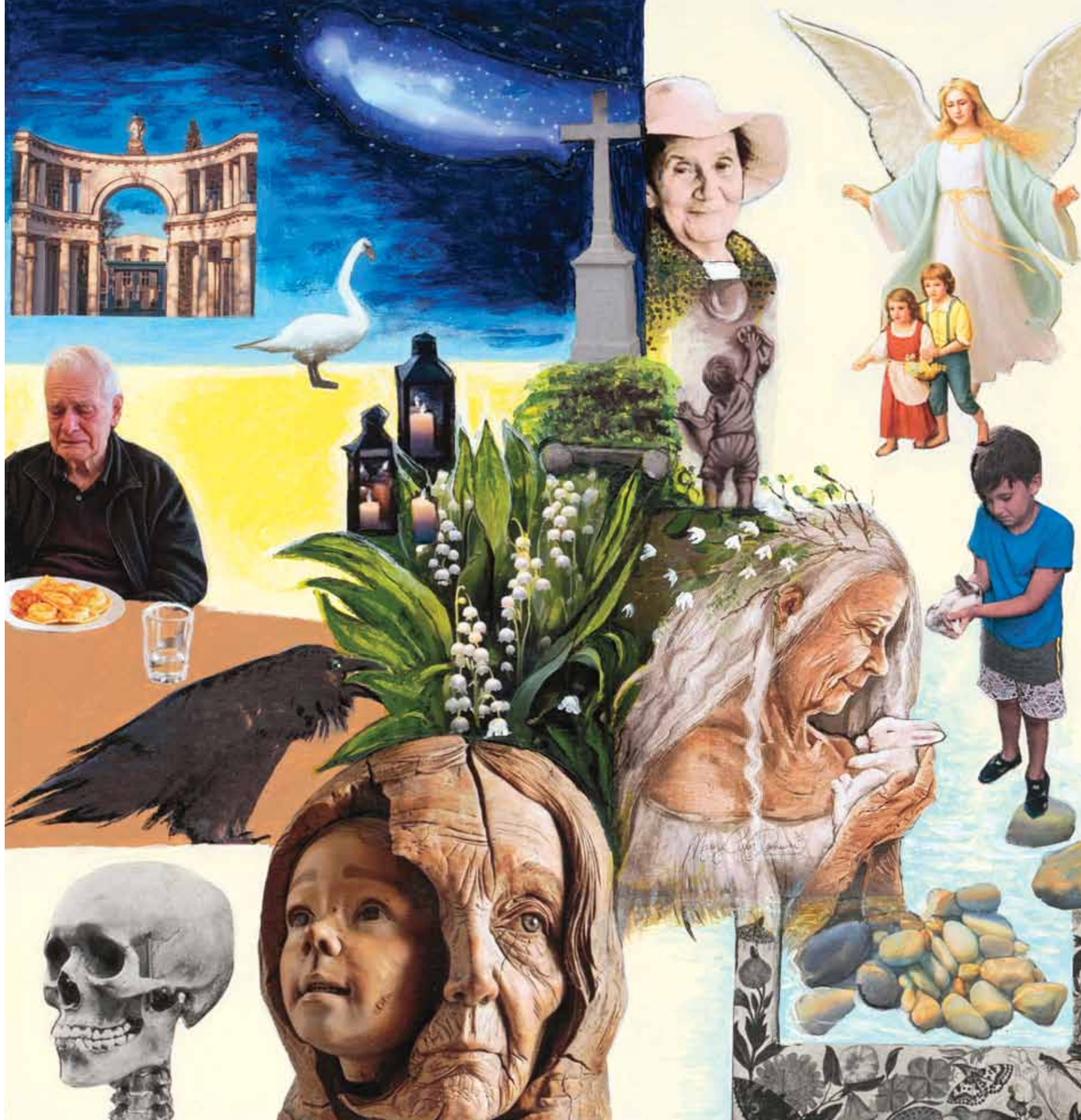
"There always comes a moment when no one watches over you anymore. There always comes such a time. A time without angels."

"But Grandma, I'm still a child!"

"When I die, you won't be a child anymore."

The boy didn't really understand. Her talk, repeated evening after evening, no longer embarrassed him. He only shrugged and went on asking questions—more for the warm, even rhythm of her voice, which soothed and calmed him, than for her answers. Deep down he knew that what she was preparing him for would happen one day. One day she really would go, and at that moment he would become grown up.

"When I die, you'll have to dress yourself. Make sure you dress warmly, and don't forget your scarf and hat! When you leave the house, don't forget to turn off the lights, and don't forget to lock the door. In the drawer there's a slip of paper with your mother's address.



Give it to the people in the yellow house at the end of the road. Don't be shy. I've already asked them to help you if needed. That's all … And love me …"

This went on every night. Grandma was afraid for him. She wanted to protect him from her death, to make sure the world wouldn't stop for her six-year-old grandson when she was gone.

Otherwise, the days passed quietly and happily. Every day they went to the cemetery, and every day Grandma laid a bouquet of flowers on Granddad's grave. The boy stood back, wondering whether he should confess that he was the one who had wished Granddad dead. That he'd wanted him to fall, that he'd squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists, chanting inside himself: *"Because you don't love me, fall into the ravine!"* Yes, Grandma, I killed him.

In the evenings they sat in the kitchen and Grandma fried white bread dipped in beaten egg. She sprinkled the golden slices with sugar and set the plate before him. They drank cocoa and laughed. Those were the happiest evenings of the boy's life. Only sometimes, when a strange weakness seized Grandma and she had to slip a tablet under her tongue, did she renew her entire story of dying. She would ask anxiously, and the boy would answer.

"When I die, dress warmly. Will you? And don't forget to lock the door. You know where the slip with your mother's address is? You do?"

That evening she was calmer than usual. It was still light outside when they lay down. She turned to the wall at once—something she had never done before. Normally she recited her fairy-tale lesson about her death and his duties as a grown-up. Not that night. When she kissed his forehead, her lips were cold. Her hands, as she smoothed his hair, were soft—too soft, like only the shell of a touch. They lay there a while as dusk gathered at the window. Now and then the boy held his breath to hear hers. She was breathing, even and quiet. *Is now the right moment?* he wondered. *Should I tell her my secret?* He held his breath again, listening.

"Grandma, are you asleep?"

She didn't answer. He tugged at her elbow.

"Are you asleep?"

She stirred and moaned.

"No, I'm still here."

"You know, Grandma … I killed Granddad. He didn't love me, so I killed him."

Silence again. The boy stared at the ceiling, where the fading square of light from the window traced itself. *Whatever will be, will be!* he thought. *If she won't love me anymore, she won't. I had to tell her. So she knows how bad I am.*

"Grandma, do you hear me?!"

Grandma said nothing. The boy sat up and leaned over her, peering at her face. Her eyes were closed. He held his breath. She was breathing evenly. She must be asleep.

"Grandma, did you hear what I said?"

He shook her gently by the shoulder. She roused a little. Her eyes opened with difficulty. She whispered faintly:

"I'm tired. Leave me."

"Did you hear what I told you?" he pressed.

"I did, yes," she murmured, and her eyes began to close again in small jerks, as if leaden eyelids fought with her fierce inner will to keep them open, to keep looking at the world.

"Aren't you angry?"

"No."

She barely moved her lips and then drifted into an even, weakening breath.

The boy lay on his side beside her, content.

Outside it grew dark. He felt his grandmother's back against his own, shielding him. He was comfortable and safe. He had told her what was on his heart and she wasn't angry. Not at all. Satisfied, he closed his eyes. He feared nothing anymore—not werewolves, not robbers with bloody knives, not rotting hanged men stuffing naughty children into their sacks, not drunkards sitting on liars' beds at night breathing live fire from their mouths. Nothing. Everything was outside, behind the safe, shut window. His angel lay behind him and watched over him. Everything bad he had done, the angel forgave. The angel didn't love him any less, even knowing that sometimes he was a spiteful, lying little imp who took revenge in his mind, who was ugly and mean in his thoughts.

That's what angels are for—to love us even when we pluck their wings or gouge out their eyes in mischief. Angels love us as we are …

He fell asleep.

He woke up.

Quickly. Suddenly. As if someone had switched on a light in his head.

It was the dark of night. Behind his back it was cold. Like lying next to a stone. When he turned to touch Grandma, the stone shifted. Cold. Dead. Nothing is so dead as a human body.

"I … I killed her too!" the boy almost cried out.

"I told her what I did to Granddad, and she died of sadness. I'm a bad person. A very bad person."

He closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep. Until morning there was nothing he could do. Until morning he could only sleep. Tomorrow would be a new day. A new time. A time without angels.

In the morning he woke up. Looked once more at Grandma, who was now completely white and cold. On her hands, neck and face long reddish blotches had appeared. With his small fingers he lifted her eyelids. Her pale blue irises had rolled almost under her brows; the edges were turning milky. He climbed down from the bed and carefully pulled the blanket up to her neck. He picked up her dress, which had fallen from the chair, and folded it neatly at the foot of the bed. He didn't want the people who would come to see Grandma to find her clothes in disorder. Then he got dressed himself. He wrapped a scarf round his neck and put a cap on his head. He switched off all the lights. Checked everything once more. Then he opened the door.

On the threshold he paused and looked back toward the half-closed bedroom door.

"Grandma, I'm going now!"

He locked the door behind him twice, carefully. Halfway between the garden gate and the road he stopped. Had he forgotten something? He went back. In the drawer of the kitchen cupboard was the slip of paper with his mother's address. He took it and tucked it into his pocket. As he passed the bedroom again, he stopped at the door. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists so hard it hurt.

"When I open my eyes, Grandma will be sitting up in bed, yawning wide, and she'll say: 'Good morning!'"

He peeked into the room. Nothing happened. She still lay there, covered up to her neck. On tiptoe he left the house and knocked on the first door of the big yellow building at the end of the road.

"I think my grandma has died," he said to the people who opened the door.

Liljana Jarh

A CHILD'S SOUL

In every town and village, there are children who love nothing more than to listen to stories. Tales of magical beings and adventures give them the feeling that extraordinary things really can happen. In stories where good triumphs over evil, their young hearts find peace, making it easier to fall asleep and dream sweet dreams.

Jacob had been able to read on his own for a long time, but still he preferred it when his mother read aloud to him. Her voice was warm and pleasant, and she knew just how to change it. It became deep and heavy when a bear stomped through the story, sweet and sly when a fox purred and coaxed, and thin and squeaky when a frightened little mouse piped up.

Through her reading, the colourful world of children's books felt closer and more alive to Jacob. Every evening he looked forward to the moment when his mother would sit down beside his bed and begin to read. With her voice, he would travel safely to strange places, among goblins and dragons—to Puss in Boots, and, most often and most happily, to Pippi, Annie, and Tom.

Jacob also liked to hear the same stories over and over, even though he knew many of them by heart. Often, he imagined himself as strong as a fairytale hero or as powerful as a wizard who could set everything right.

His mother always ended the reading the same way: "I love you."

And he would answer, "To the universe and back eight times."

Those words were their little secret, because Jacob knew that when you draw the number eight lying down, it becomes the sign for infinity. Infinity is greater than all the stars in the darkest night sky. Even to the universe is far.

He loved it when he beat his mother to it and said, "I love you" first. Then she would add, "To the universe and back eight times," and hug him tight.

A few days ago, a big ambulance brought Jacob's mother home from the hospital, where she had been treated many times before. Jacob noticed that this time she was paler, more tired, and walked with difficulty. Since then she had lain in a special hospital bed at home, resting a lot, needing help to get up, leaning on a walker. The serious illness had made her small and weak. Because her hair had fallen out, she always wore a scarf on her head. His grandmother and his aunt Mija—his mother's sister—had become ill in much the same way. The doctors had not been able to help them.

Jacob didn't want to talk to anyone about it. Not even his relatives. He became quiet and withdrawn. When he came home, he didn't even greet his mother, but slipped quickly through the hallway into his room. He hadn't wanted to visit her in the hospital either, even though she had wished to see him. At school, when his classmates played during the break, he didn't join in. He stood off to the side, alone, feeling like he wanted to run away or disappear.

It hurt his mother, but she understood that children are frightened by their parents' illness and weakness. She understood that Jacob would rather hide from everything that scared him or felt unfair. Still, she missed her little boy terribly. She would look sadly toward the door, and when he tried to sneak past the room where she lay, she called to him softly, almost like a whisper: "I love you."

He stopped and said nothing. His throat felt tight when his mother repeated, "Jacob, I love you."

Slowly he went inside, came up to the bed, and took the hand she held out to him. "To the universe and back eight times?" he asked.

His mother gave a small smile, stroked his hair, and answered, "To the universe and back eight times."

Jacob climbed onto the bed beside her. He told her what he had learned at school that day and how spring was waking up outside. Snowdrops and crocuses were blooming in front of the house. Then he opened a book and read aloud to her his favourite story.

Slavica Remškar

A REAL MUM?

Did all the children finish their homework? Yes, all of them!

"You can play in the play corners until your parents come for you," says Ms Iza.

Hurray! Hela and Juri hurry to the building blocks.

Yesterday afternoon they had started building a parking garage for their toy cars.

The tall building with its winding driveway would have space for all their cars—and even for the cars of the other children. Oh yes, they would even charge parking fees!

Ms Iza is pleased that her children are playing so nicely: some with blocks, others in the play kitchen, some looking at picture books… She steps out into the hallway and chats with the cleaning lady.

Through the open door she hears the clatter of falling blocks and loud voices, but before she can return, little Mia tugs at her skirt: "Ms Iza, come quick! Why is Hela angry? Why is Juri sad?"

Ms Iza hurries back with Mia. The blocks are scattered across half the classroom. The parking garage is gone. Now Hela is the one crying, hiding her face. Juri is furious, stomping his foot: "What's wrong with her? I didn't do anything! She just kicked it down and pulled my hair!"

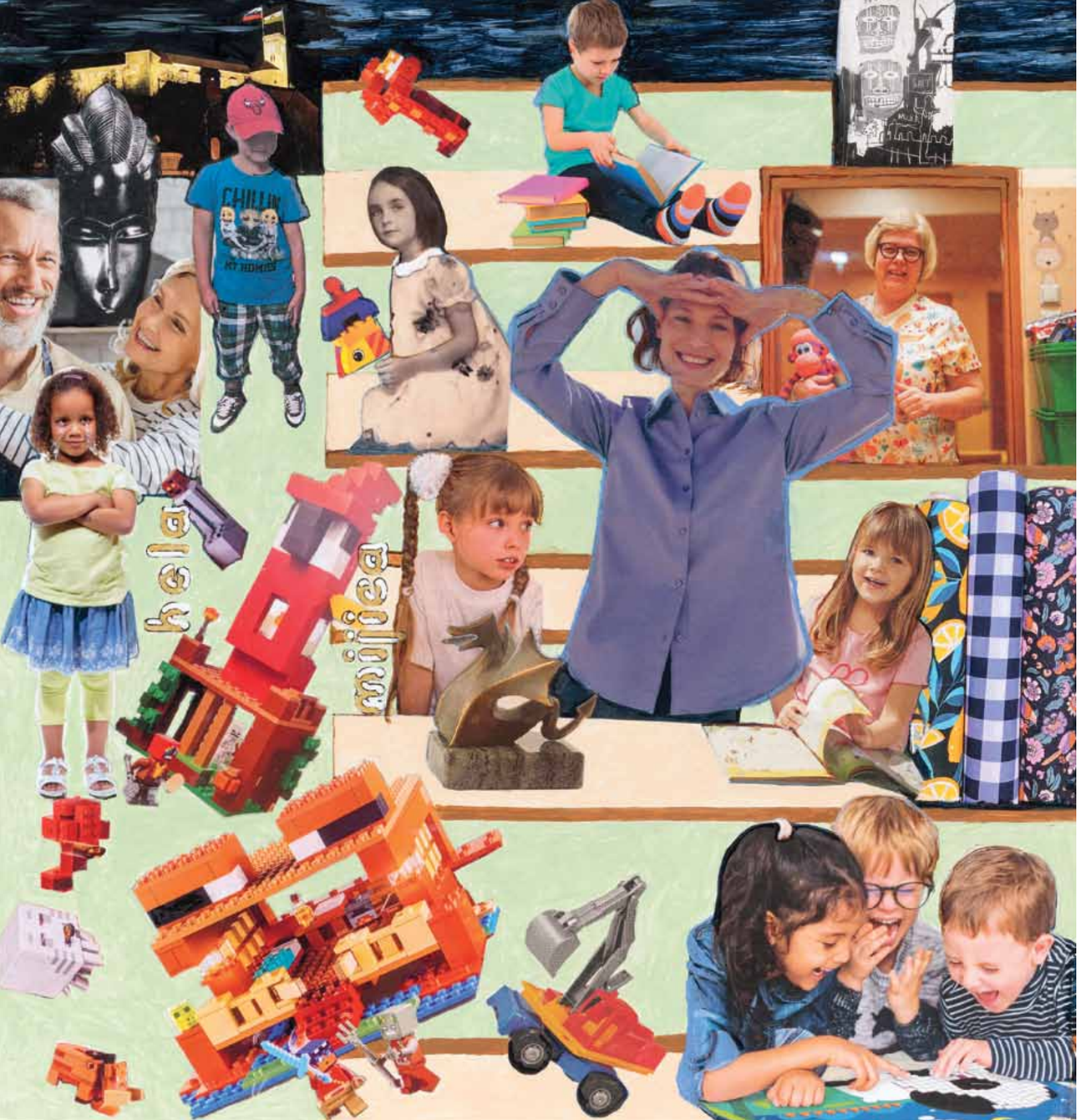
Hela won't uncover her face. She sobs: "You did do something! You hurt me! You said my mum isn't my real mum because she didn't give birth to me."

Juri shouts back: "Everybody knows that! You don't look like her at all. Your mum's white and blonde, and you're dark."

Then Toni speaks up: "My dad says Hela was adopted, so of course she doesn't look like her mum or dad."

"Let's all calm down," says Ms Iza gently. She pulls Hela, sad and angry, under one arm, and Juri, sad and angry, under the other. "Come on, let's sit in a circle—our talking circle."

When they've all sat down on the cushions, they hold hands and sit quietly for a moment. The only sound is their breathing.



Then Ms Iza tells all the children, Juri included, that Hela's mum is her real mum.

She didn't give birth to Hela—she adopted her. And adopting a child is just as wonderful as giving birth to one.

Hela lifts her head proudly and looks at Juri. Then at Toni. Then at all her classmates.

They nod and say yes, yes, Hela has a real mum too.

And little Mia repeats softly to herself, so she won't forget: "If you adopt a child, it's just as wonderful as if you gave birth to one."

Tjaša Zorc Rupnik

BECAUSE I AM – I ASK

God watches me.

He sees everything.

That's what they say.

He sees me when I turn over in bed at night and don't pray.

He sees me when I think something bad about Miha, who took my ball on the playground today.

He sees me when I forget to say "thank you" or "please" or when I think about things I'm not supposed to.

At school they tell us God is loving and good. At home they say he's strict. In catechism they say he's merciful. At Mass they talk about sin and punishment. When I ask why he would punish me if he loves me, Mum says, "Don't ask questions like that. Trust."

But I don't understand.

Every Sunday I sit in a church pew. Everything is gold, glittering, magnificent. The priest raises the host and talks about suffering, the cross, sins.

Sometimes my thoughts wander.

I'd like to stand up and go outside. Or pretend to pray.

But I'm not allowed.

God sees everything.

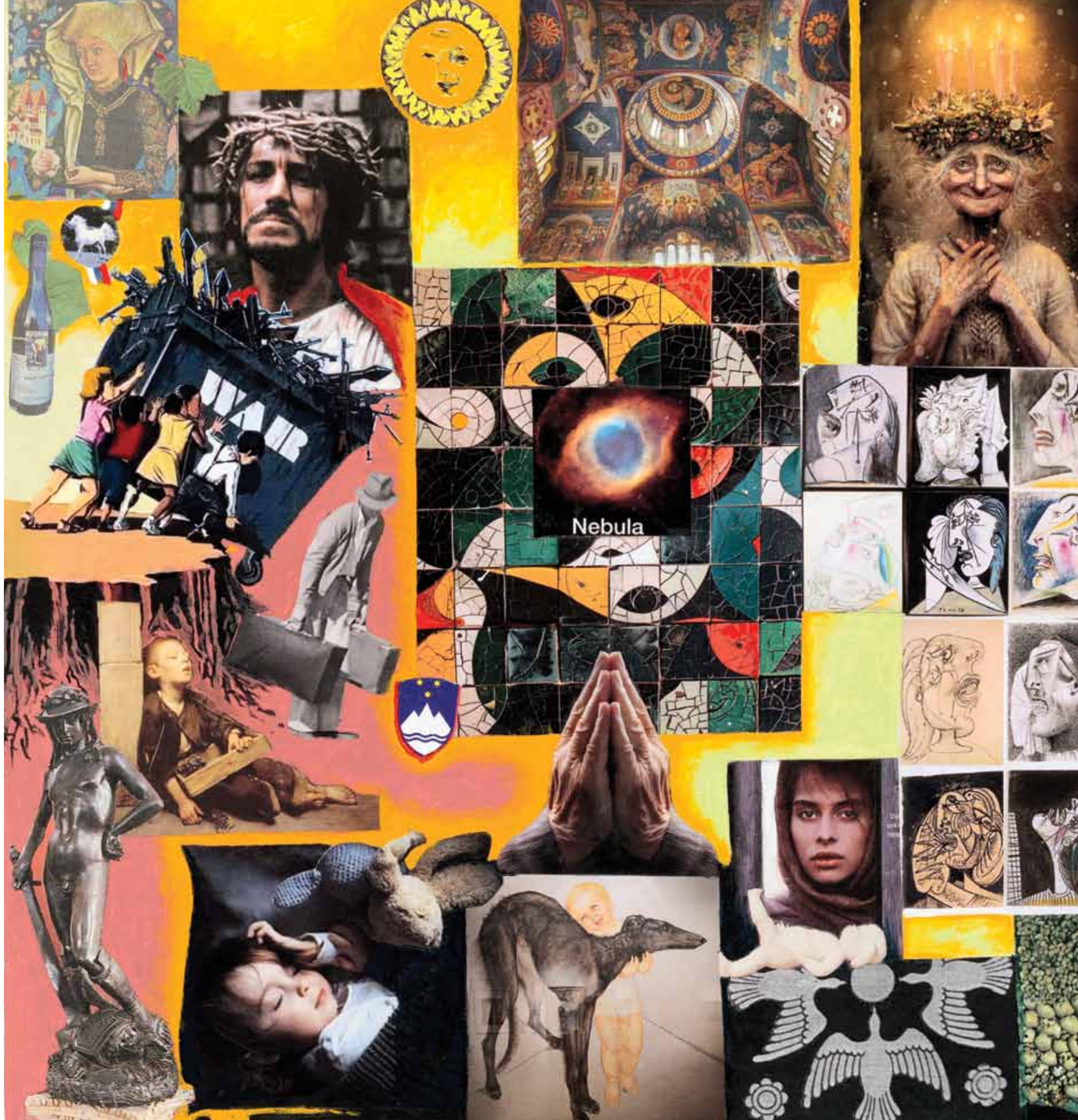
That's what they say.

Lately I wake up with a strange feeling in my stomach. As if I've done something wrong but don't know what. As if someone is watching me, waiting for me to make a mistake. They say it's my conscience.

But why then does it feel like I'm suffocating?

I dream about hell. About falling into a black emptiness where no one is. Where burning hands reach for me.

I dream, too, that I stand before God. He asks why I've been bad.



And I don't know what I've done wrong.

On the street I see a beggar. My uncle tugs at my sleeve and says, "Don't look, God is testing him."

I see a drunk man shouting at his wife. Grandma says, "His sin will catch up with him." I see a child on the news, covered in dust, eyes open but not breathing.

I say, "Why didn't God save him?"

Dad shakes his head. "Don't ask questions like that. His ways are mysterious."

But I can't stop asking.

If God sees everything, why doesn't he do anything? Does he look away? Or… does he not exist at all?

At night, when I pull the blanket over myself, I'm supposed to pray. But I don't. And for the first time I can remember, I don't feel guilty.

EXPERTS ON THE UNHEARD

MIRA, MIRA – PACKING ON THE POUNDS …

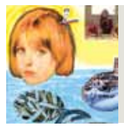
In a time when electronic devices too often take on the role of raising children, mental health struggles among young people are becoming increasingly common. Mira, in addition to difficulties with excessive body weight, faces feelings of inferiority as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression. Her distress is deepened by peer bullying and the absence of a supportive social network. Food often becomes her main source of comfort, trapping her in a vicious cycle of emotional eating. When the anxiety becomes overwhelming, Mira scratches her arms and neck to release the tension, though the relief is only temporary.

In this story we can observe a clear element of parental helplessness. Constantly rushing from one obligation to another, Mira's parents fail to notice the intensity of her daily emotional struggles.

Yet Mira's story takes a turn: her distress is recognised by the school's professional staff, leading to her inclusion in a programme designed to support healthier lifestyles. These kinds of programmes provide access not only to doctors, (clinical) psychologists, kinesiologists, nutritionists, and occupational therapists, but also to a multidisciplinary approach that addresses the full complexity of young people's struggles with excess weight. Such programmes often prove to be turning points in stories that might otherwise have ended far more tragically. Beyond lifestyle changes, they also offer young people and their families a valuable social support network, which can have a profoundly positive effect on mental health.

Mira comes to an important realisation: that her weaknesses can, in fact, become her greatest strength. And it is a strength that, personally, I wish every child could one day discover within themselves.

Kaja Krajc



Kaja Krajc, MA, Psychologist and Trainee in Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy Development and Research Associate, *National Institute of Public Health.*

NIKO, THE SPOILED BRAT

Spoiling in children is a phenomenon we encounter with increasing frequency, both in schools and in clinical settings. A child is considered spoiled when they receive everything they want but nothing they truly need.

From the perspective of clinical psychology, spoiling arises from "too much material," but more importantly from "too little developmental." When a child is given everything they ask for without being encouraged to develop key life skills—such as patience, self-regulation, a sense of responsibility, and respect for others they fail to acquire the inner compass that guides them in living harmoniously with others. Spoiling develops when children lack opportunities to learn responsibility, respect, and a sense of community—when parents are too indulgent, when boundaries are weak, and when adults always give in to every whim. In such cases, the child does not learn the difference between rights and responsibilities.

A child whose parents remove all obstacles and shield them from frustration, sadness, or effort fails to develop essential life skills. The absence of boundaries and the lack of emotional security often underlies unwanted aggressive behaviour, contempt for others, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. A spoiled child is rarely a happy child; more often they trapped in an early stage of development.

The solution to spoiling does not lie in harshness, but in setting clear and consistent boundaries, and in showing the child that responsibility is not punishment, but a natural part of growing up. Spoiling should not be accepted as inevitable, but understood as a call for adults to teach children independence, respect, and empathy. Only in this way can they learn to live within a community without being burdened by a false sense of self-importance.

As we see in the story's main character, the turning point comes not through anger or threats, but through experience. When Niko compares his own behaviour with that of someone even more spoiled, he realises he does not want to become that way.

Tanja Pristovnik

Tanja Pristovnik, MSc, Clinical Psychologist Specialist in Clinical Psychology at the *University Medical Centre Maribor*, Department of Paediatrics. She works primarily with children, adolescents, and their families. She lectures to parents and young people, collaborates with courts in custody and contact arrangements after divorce, acts as a healthcare mediator, and advises on recognising and preventing workplace bullying.

THE YELLOW BLANKET WITH FRINGES

This story illustrates the psychological and social impact of domestic violence, with a focus on emotional abuse and punishment that ignores the child's actual behaviour. The father's actions reflect an authoritarian parenting style based on fear, strict discipline, and physical punishment. Such parenting often results in feelings of shame, fear, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem in children. Neža, who is naturally curious and open to the world, is punished for this normal behaviour, which may suppress spontaneity, harm self-image, and contribute to traumatic experiences.

The story also portrays the passive role of the mother, herself a victim of violence (as hinted by her concealing bruises), who only gradually finds the strength to make a change. This highlights the cycle of violence in families, where victims struggle to break free due to feelings of helplessness, fear, and economic or social dependence. Klara, the older sister, assumes a protective role—a common phenomenon among children growing up in violent households.

The turning point comes with the mother's decision to leave, symbolising empowerment and the breaking of the cycle of abuse. When a victim (alone or with support) strengthens her sense of worth and ability, she can access the inner resources needed to leave and rebuild her life. The new family dynamic underscores the importance of positive parenting, grounded in respect, dialogue, and emotional security. Such an environment enables children to develop emotionally in a healthy way, feel safe, and form stable relationships in the future.

Perpetrators of violence often lack the ability to recognise and regulate their emotions, or they have never learned non-violent communication strategies. Many grew up in families where violence was normalised as a way of resolving conflict. Violence can also function as a tool of control, a way to establish dominance. The problem deepens when society reinforces stereotypes of masculinity linked to power, control, and dominance, or when it excuses violence. In such contexts, perpetrators fail to recognise their behaviour as problematic.

In some cases, perpetrators also struggle with issues such as addiction, unresolved trauma that triggers violent outbursts, or personality disorders. It is important to understand that violence is not the result of temporary bad moods, but rather reflects long-standing patterns of thought, behaviour, and experience. Responsibility for violence always lies with the perpetrator.

Mojca Ojstrež Kogovšek

Mojca Ojstrež Kogovšek, BA in Social Work, Inspector at the *Social Inspection Office, Ministry of Labour of the Republic of Slovenia.* Previously, she worked at a Centre for Social Work, supporting families in the field of child and family protection. She now trains professionals in the social welfare sector and continues her own professional development through the *Institute for Reality Psychotherapy.*

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

The case of Vita highlights the harsh, insulting, and abusive responses of her parents toward her—behaviour also mimicked by her older brother, who learns these patterns from them, since parents are children's first role models.

The roots of psychological abuse are varied. Children internalise their parents' repeated reactions, identifying not only with what is said and done, but also with the emotional energy behind those responses. When such reactions lack warmth, attention, affection, relief, and explanation—and instead are often marked by anger, contempt, blame, hostility, and intolerance—the child experiences this as an intimate reality filled with fear and shame simply for being who they are. The child learns that authenticity and natural self-expression are unwelcome, and that their needs are unimportant.

Over time, these experiences becomes part of the child's personality and identity. At a young age, children cannot separate actions from identity; they understand little of the bigger picture and must be taught these distinctions. As they grow, they realise that their needs are not a priority for their parents and begin develop defensive strategies in order to survive emotionally—whether by constantly pleasing others, persistently rebelling, or withdrawing entirely. They live with the belief that they are never good enough for those closest to them. These internalised feelings and expectations become the lens through which they approach future relationships.

Naturally, the child will continue to seek closeness, warmth, and acceptance, but their way of seeking may be distorted—"turned upside down." Peers may not understand this behaviour and may reject them. Yet the child, already accustomed to rejection, repeats the same patterns, still hoping to be truly seen, understood, and helped to replace wounded responses with healthier ones. Only then can they be freed from the feelings of worthlessness, guilt, fear, and shame that were passed down by their parents.

In Vita's story, her parents only begin to give her the attention and care she needs after the sobering moment of an accident. In real life, this is often the case: children first express their distress and inner turmoil through disruptive behaviour, without understanding themselves. Unless adults help the child to recognise these inner struggles, lasting change is unlikely. Difficult behaviour tends to escalate, since unconscious defensive mechanisms are too powerful for a child to manage alone. Left unresolved, this can later manifest not only in accidents but also in psychosomatic or chronic illnesses.

Edin Duraković

Edin Duraković, BA in Cultural Studies, Marriage and Family Therapist Social worker at a Centre for Social Work, specialising in difficulties within interpersonal relationships.

THE SOAP OPERA

People enter romantic relationships hoping they will last forever. Yet life often brings unexpected turns and challenges. One of these is the ending of a partnership or a divorce, which can happen for many reasons—one or both partners may meet someone new, they may grow apart, or they may struggle to cope with certain stressful situations in the family.

Divorce brings with it both intangible losses (such as the loss of an imagined future, the dream of what could have been, or the sense of connection and belonging) and very concrete ones (such as changes in financial circumstances or even the loss of a home). It is almost always a painful process for both partners, regardless of who initiated it or why it happened.

The situation becomes even harder when children are involved. Parents, overwhelmed by their own pain and emotions, may fail to communicate openly and appropriately with their children. This is rarely intentional, yet it can leave children's needs overlooked. Like their parents, children must also process pain, fear, and uncertainty about the future. They worry about who they will live with, how their daily routine will change, how holidays and vacations will be arranged, and they often try to piece together explanations in their own childlike way.

It is crucial that children do not face these questions and fears alone. Parents should speak with them openly, explain the situation in an age-appropriate way, and most importantly, give them the space to express their worries and ask questions. While parents may comfort themselves by believing their children do not notice what is happening, the truth is that children do. They are like litmus paper: they pick up on and feel things that adults assume go unnoticed.

Divorce is undoubtedly a major upheaval in family life, but it does not have to scar a child permanently. If handled with respect and cooperation between partners—without blame or vindictiveness—it can become an opportunity for a new beginning for everyone. Ultimately, it is better for a child to have two parents who are content, even if they live apart, than two parents who remain together but unhappy.

Saška Roškar

Assoc. Prof. Saška Roškar, PhD, Psychologist, *National Institute of Public Health, Slovenia.* Specialises in the prevention of mental disorders with a focus on public health approaches to suicide prevention. *Chair of the Programme Committee for Suicide Prevention*, part of Slovenia's National Mental Health Resolution. Author of numerous scientific and professional papers, and co-editor of the monograph *Suicide in Slovenia and the World.*

SUCCESS

The story of Andrej, a primary school pupil, speaks to readers on several levels.

For adults—especially parents—it is a reminder of how powerful our words, reactions, and expressions are for children. A child first sees themselves through our eyes. Our responses become the foundation of their self-image; our praise and our criticism shape their sense of worth. The line "He blossomed with every word of praise" could hardly be more telling. Perhaps what we parents sometimes lack is not the act of praising itself, but the right kind of praise. True praise is realistic, sincere, and well-measured.

The story also speaks to us as neighbours, teachers, coaches, and others close to children. It reminds us of the importance of noticing a child in distress, of approaching them with "bright eyes full of understanding," of offering an ear, support, and guidance toward appropriate help.

Finally, it addresses us as members of a community—a community that sets the tone and creates the environment. Instead of encouraging relentless competition and achievements, we can also recognise and praise the effort a child puts into what they do.

And, of course, it speaks directly to all the little Andrejs striving to be perfect and always first. It reminds them that life is not only about victories, top grades, or success. We flourish when we do something we enjoy, even if we are not the best at it; when we spend time with people we love; when we do something kind for others.

And most importantly, if we find ourselves in distress, it is both possible and necessary to seek help and support.

Alenka Tančič Grum

Alenka Tančič Grum, MSc, Psychologist, *National Institute of Public Health, Slovenia.* Specialises in mental health and the prevention of mental disorders (especially depression, stress, and psychological first aid). She also helps design mental health programmes in Health Promotion Centres across the Slovenian health system.

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

Ina is a digital native, one of the children born into a world of constant connectedness—a world where the tablet has become a babysitter, the phone a comforter, and the internet a teacher, entertainer, and friend. Her story is not an exception but an increasingly common reality.

Ina's story is a typical example of problematic use of digital devices. In it, we see frequent signs of such use: disrupted sleep patterns, fatigue, the search for external validation through messages, exposure to safety risks, and difficulty distinguishing between the real and the virtual. These signs are not the result of a child's weakness but of a lack of knowledge that would enable safe and balanced use of the digital world.

Digital literacy means more than simply knowing how to use devices and navigate the web. It means being able to evaluate information, protect one's privacy, respect others, and recognise risks. It is a combination of technical, social, emotional, and ethical skills, without which a child remains vulnerable in the digital environment. And children do not acquire these skills on their own.

A teenager who chats with strangers at night and stares, exhausted, at the alarm clock in the morning needs someone to hand them a compass. Adults must be that compass—not by simply confiscating devices when behaviour is inappropriate, but by exploring the different aspects of the digital world together, talking about it, and checking in on how the child feels. When a child senses that they are being listened to without judgement, they are more likely to share what is happening. The internet itself is not dangerous; the danger comes when a child navigates it alone, without knowledge or support.

It is crucial that, from their very first contact with digital devices, children and young people are encouraged towards moderate, responsible, balanced, and safe use. Tools such as the Petka game can help them recognise boundaries and build awareness that they have the right to say no, step back, ask questions, and protect themselves.

Špela Selak

Dr. Špela Selak is a psychologist and communications specialist, and head of the programme board for non-chemical addictions within the *Mira Programme at the National Institute of Public Health*. She is engaged in developmental and research work in the field of addictions, especially in studying behaviours and trends in the digital environment, as well as the impact of digital technologies on the mental health of users across different age groups.

THOSE PUPPY-DOG EYES

Every person begins life as a child. For a time, their family is the only world they know. It is there that they learn their first words, how to name colours and shapes, how to count to ten, and how people and things fit together. Even before they can talk, they sense their parents' moods—and what that means for them. Within their family, they develop a sense of self-worth, learn whether they can rely on others, whether the world feels safe, and how to handle problems and conflict: through talking, ignoring, or lashing out. They learn what it means to be a woman or a man. They discover what it feels like to be loved and accepted unconditionally—or not. This becomes their truth, their normal.

We all grow up carrying our own unique baggage. When we step into relationships, and later into the families we create, we bring with us our knowledge, experiences, sense of (in)security, beliefs, and old wounds. The need for love, acceptance, and understanding is as vital for adults as it is for children. If it isn't met at home, we search for it elsewhere—sometimes mistaking manipulation for care and affection, just as in the story of the girl and her "teacher" mother. The blue pills are only a bandage on a wound: they soothe for a moment but don't heal. A deep wound needs proper care before it can close.

It's difficult to give children what we ourselves never had, which is why harmful patterns so often pass from one generation to the next. But it doesn't have to stay that way—we can choose, with the help of loved ones or professionals, to change those parts of ourselves that don't serve us anymore and may even be holding us back. That's why centres for social work offer free counselling and support to anyone who needs it.

Choosing change isn't just a gift to ourselves—it's a gift to the people who matter most to us, especially our children. And when that happens, everyone's eyes can shine with real warmth and emotion.

Sabina Košir

Sabina Košir, BA in Social Work, works at a Centre for Social Work specialising in child protection and domestic violence. Since 2024, she has been part of the *Mobile Expert Service of the CSD Central Slovenia – East*.

NIGHT

Many young people experience repeated or long-term trauma: bullying, family violence, peer violence, sexual abuse, and more. Sexual abuse of children is not just a personal tragedy—it is a wound on society. Too often it happens in silence, behind closed doors, in the supposed safety of home. It rarely occurs suddenly or in public. More often it is quiet, repeated, wrapped up in shame, manipulation, power, and helplessness. And it most often happens in the very place where a child should feel safest—in their own home.

Abuse doesn't happen because children are weak or not "careful enough." It happens because adults exploit a child's trust, innocence, and dependence. Force is not always used; often it is silence, shame, threats, gifts, or manipulation that keep the child trapped. Children often remain silent out of fear of punishment, of breaking up their family, or because they believe no one will believe them. They may start to withdraw, become unusually quiet, fall behind at school, have nightmares, or struggle to concentrate.

It's important to understand that there is no single behaviour that reveals abuse—each child processes it differently. Our responsibility as adults is not to wait for children to "say the words" (they often don't know how to), but to notice changes we can't explain away with ordinary reasons. Abuse leaves traces that may not be visible on the body but are deeply etched into a child's eyes, posture, and presence. Sexual abuse is not just a thing of the past. It can happen anywhere—even on your street, or in your child's classroom.

The author has written a story of courage and determination—the courage to begin to break free. Let it be an encouragement to us all: to notice, to ask, to believe, and whenever possible, to help bring light into the dark.

Tanja Pristovnik

Tanja Pristovnik, Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in Clinical Psychology, works at the Paediatric Clinic, *University Medical Centre Maribor*. She focuses on supporting children, adolescents, and their families. She lectures to parents and young people, works with courts on custody and contact cases during divorce, serves as a mediator in healthcare, and advises on recognising and preventing workplace bullying.

A GENTLE HEART

This story presents the emotional distress of Nin, a boy facing the collapse of his family. His mother leaves, and he is left with a father whose anger Nin feels deeply. Alone with his pain, Nin is invisible to both parents, who are too caught up in their own worlds to notice his need for love, safety, and emotional support.

Nin retreats into his imagination, building an inner world where his parents are ideal. In this imagined space, he is seen, heard, accepted, and loved. Dark fantasy games offer him an escape, but unconsciously they amplify his stress and lead him further into isolation. The virtual world replaces real social interaction.

His withdrawal from reality also distances him from his classmates, who fail to include him in their social circles—yet another painful rejection.

When Nin dares to share a heartfelt letter with his crush, he becomes the target of ridicule. Many young people fail to realise that mockery and gossip are forms of emotional violence that can leave lasting scars.

In a short span of time, Nin experiences several distressing events that deeply affect his sense of self and disrupt the healthy development of his identity and self-worth. His inner pain reaches its peak in a moment of self-harm with a razor.

In the story, a classmate named Sonja emerges as someone who sees the good in Nin. She believes in the kindness still within him and gently encourages him to seek help.

We all need someone who can see us for who we really are, who accepts us fully and embraces us without conditions. This is a deep, often unconscious longing. Such acceptance teaches us to trust ourselves and helps us understand that emotional distress and our resulting behaviours are sometimes just protective responses to overwhelming life situations.

With proper care and professional support, young people can become aware of their emotional states and learn how to manage them. This is how we help them break the cycle of self-harm and find a path toward healing.

Polonca Teršek

Prof. Polonca Teršek is a special education teacher and psychotherapist trained in logotherapy and existential analysis (based on the work of Viktor E. Frankl). She has many years of experience working with families, children, adolescents, and individuals in distress. She is currently employed at the Centre for Social Work in Celje.

ORPHEUS' BOX

The author presents a classroom where one of the pupils is Maja, a blind girl. At first, none of the working groups want to include her, but after she comes up with a few clever ideas, she is praised for her contribution to the group's work.

People who stand out from others in a group are often met with caution—or even rejection—at first. That can change, however, if the person shows a willingness to help solve shared problems or tasks. For such constructive inclusion to happen, though, a strong sense of self-worth is needed. That sense develops first within the closest social circle—the family—and then later through teachers at school and peers. Maja appears to have had a supportive upbringing, with tasks adapted to what she could manage and encouragement to take responsibility, followed by praise when she did well.

In Year Six the teacher's role is still crucial. A teacher could have prevented Maja's disappointment at being excluded, but later she did well to praise both Maja and the class. From the story we can guess that Maja was either relatively new to the class or had only recently lost her sight, since her classmates had not yet realised that her unusual but creative ideas made her a valuable member of any group. True inclusion happens when we expect a meaningful contribution—perhaps adapted or different—from the person who is "other." Mere tolerance or pity does not count as real inclusion.

Matej Žnuderl

Matej Žnuderl, BA Psychology, has many years of experience at the Educational Counselling Service within the Celje Centre for Social Work. He is also a marriage, premarital, and family counsellor and mediator, and serves as President of the *Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Slovenia.*

HOW MOJCA TAMED HER FEAR

Among us are children—and adults—who are different. The technical term is neurodivergent. They perceive the world in their own way, with distinctive patterns of thinking and feeling. Because of this, they often struggle to connect with their peers. They exist on the margins, like solitary figures who don't quite belong. And their numbers are growing. Mojca was fortunate to find understanding within her family, but many are not. For them, the sadness and fear are even greater.

We human beings have survived because we are social creatures. Together, we were stronger and more resilient. In recent years, however, those invisible bonds that hold us together have begun to fray. Children like Mojca are signs of this change. A rushed, high-pressure lifestyle pushes them to the surface. In a world obsessed with competition, they are left behind. Why do neurotypical children—and adults—so often reject them? Why the teasing, the exclusion, sometimes even the violence? There are many reasons, but one of them is fear. Fear runs both ways. We are afraid of what we do not understand, so we push it away. Survival in the social world can feel brutal. We may think we can get by on our own, but in the long run we cannot. The sadness and fear grow too heavy.

Neurodivergent people may struggle to communicate or form connections, but they can shine brilliantly in other areas. Mojca knows a great deal. Others may become exceptional artists or scientists. Their diversity enriches us all. Mojca found refuge from her daily emotional storms in books and in a person who truly understood her. My hope is that every child who feels different will find someone, or something, that offers them recognition and respect—someone who can embrace them and say: you belong here.

Marta Macedoni Lukšič

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Marta Macedoni Lukšič, MD, Paediatrics, is Slovenia's leading expert on autism. She works at the *Institute for Autism in Ljubljana.* Together with her colleagues she developed and led a comprehensive healthcare programme for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder at the *Department of Child and Developmental Neurology, University Children's Hospital, Ljubljana.*

FROM ONE TETRAPLEGIC TO ANOTHER

Benjamin is a man full of optimism, hope, and faith. Despite the terrible tragedy that befell him, he has found the strength to face his diagnosis and accept life as it was handed to him.

Even with his limitations, he has managed to open many doors, meet new people, discover new opportunities, and gain new insights. In his story, he shows that he has come to terms with his physical disability and offers guidance on how to confront challenges, live with them, and draw strength, determination, and hope from the situation.

Being different is not an obstacle, but a challenge. We are the ones who shape society, and it is vital to understand that life can be lived fully even with physical limitations—differently, yes, but in a way that is just as unique and meaningful. At the moment, billboards around us proclaim: "I see the person, not the disability." Those words should open our eyes to the reality of living with disability. Too often our own prejudice and ignorance stop us from seeing the essence.

The poet Tone Pavček once wrote: "Each person is a world unto themselves, strange, bright and beautiful, like a star in the sky."

Natalija Kirbiš

Prof. Natalija Kirbiš teaches professional theoretical subjects and clinical practice at the *Secondary School of Nursing and Cosmetics in Maribor* and also works in the *Department of Psychiatry at the University Medical Centre Maribor.*

A STAR ON THE BLANKET

Grieving the death of a loved one is one of the most difficult emotional processes any of us will ever face.

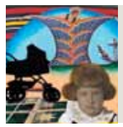
Grief can bring with it a wide range of emotions, which vary depending on how much time has passed since the death, as well as on the circumstances of how the person died. It is an intensely individual process, with as many forms as there are grieving people. Everyone mourns in their own way and at their own pace. Some cry a lot because it brings relief. Others cry very little—or not at all—and life may even seem to continue as if nothing happened. That doesn't mean they aren't suffering; they're simply coping with the pain in their own way.

The loss of a loved one is always hard, but it is especially painful when a child dies. Parents, grandparents, siblings—each experiences the loss from their own perspective and role. Parents, no matter how deeply they grieve, are often conscious of the need to keep going for the sake of the children who remain. Sometimes that effort to keep going means showing less outward emotion—not because they don't care, but because holding back protects them from being overwhelmed. Yet children may interpret that restraint as indifference, which can leave them feeling angry or rejected.

Children, too, grieve in their own ways. Sometimes, in an attempt to shield them from pain, adults may withhold or soften the truth. But pain is part of life, and children cannot be fully protected from it. They sense when something serious is happening, and it is always better to communicate honestly—even if the truth is difficult. Of course, explanations should be shaped to the child's age and personality. There is nothing wrong with admitting, "I don't know," if we don't have all the answers. What matters most is allowing children to express all their emotions, including anger, and being receptive to their way of grieving. Talking openly about death, and giving them enough time to work through the loss, is essential. Some children want to talk immediately; others need longer. Often, the shared expression of sadness—crying together, acknowledging sorrow—brings relief.

Time doesn't heal all wounds, but it does teach us how to live with them.

Saška Roškar



Doc. Dr. Saška Roškar is a psychologist at the National Institute of Public Health. She specialises in the prevention of mental disorders, with a particular focus on public health approaches to suicide prevention. She is the head of the national suicide prevention programme committee and is the author of numerous scientific and professional papers, as well as co-editor of the monograph *Suicide in Slovenia and the World.*

A TIME WITHOUT ANGELS

A Time Without Angels tells the story of a boy coming to terms with the loss of his grandmother—the closest adult in his life, the one who gave him safety, warmth, and unconditional love. Their life together is quiet and homely, until evening after evening she begins preparing him for her departure. But how do you prepare a child for the death of a loved one—for something that goes beyond his understanding and shakes the very foundations of his world? Is it even possible?

The story reveals one of the most silent and profound experiences children face in bereavement: guilt. Children don't fully grasp the meaning of death, but they sense every change, every crack in their secure world. The boy believes his angry thoughts caused his grandfather's death, and that he is now also responsible for his grandmother's.

This way of thinking is common. Children interpret the world through feelings and imagination, often in relation to themselves—as though everything happens because of them. Feelings they cannot or dare not express are pushed down inside. There they grow, and they continue to hurt long after adults have stopped noticing.

If no one recognises this suffering and helps the child carry that inner weight, it can become a deep, silent companion throughout childhood, and later shape relationships in adulthood. That is why it is so important for adults to notice and acknowledge children's emotions without judgement. A child does not need a complete explanation—what they need is a sense of safety, acceptance, and closeness.

That is precisely what the grandmother tries to give him. Through small gestures and warmth, she prepares him for life without her. Her advice is not just practical guidance but an expression of care, trust, and love—a message that she believes in him and that he will be able to look after himself.

When she dies, the boy is left with all the unspoken words. Yet the tenderness of their relationship remains within him as a foundation—a source of inner strength that allows him to feel he is not truly alone.

That loving bond, carried as a quiet imprint inside, helps transform pain into understanding, vulnerability into the strength of connection, and loss into growth. In this way, he continues his journey—even in a time without angels.

Hermina Zlobko

Hermina Zlobko, BSW, is a systemic psychotherapy trainee, Brainspotting and EFT therapist. She works at *Zavod Pamina* for Psychotherapy, Education, and Science in Maribor and Ljubljana, where she co-develops an interdisciplinary model of care combining systemic, neurobiological, and psychosocial approaches.

A CHILD'S SOUL

The story gently and sensitively portrays the inner world of a child coping with his mother's serious illness. Jakob's withdrawal, reluctance to connect, and retreat into silence are not signs of indifference, but natural defence mechanisms in response to a distress that exceeds his capacity to process emotions. A parent's illness stirs complex feelings in a child: fear of loss, helplessness, anger at the changes in family life, and anxiety at facing the vulnerability of someone who had always represented safety.

A special thread in the story highlights the importance of rituals in a child's life. Jakob's bedtime reading routine and the loving phrase, "I love you – to the universe and back eight times", are not mere habits but emotional anchors and symbols of security. When this continuity of safe attachment is disrupted by illness, the child's sense of safety and predictability in the world is shaken.

Jakob's refusal to visit the hospital is not a lack of love but an attempt to preserve emotional balance. Children often lack the language or means to clearly express their feelings, so they reveal them through behaviour—in this case, withdrawal as an unconscious shield against pain.

The story also touches on a vital theme: a child's fear of illness and death. It shows the mother's patience, understanding, and strength, expressed in her willingness to respect Jakob's pace in confronting the situation. Instead of forcing him to verbalise his feelings, she offers him a safe emotional connection through familiar words that matter to him. In doing so, she shows him that despite the changes, love remains constant.

Supporting children in similar situations means allowing them to express all feelings without judgement, maintaining a predictable daily structure, and valuing the role of touch, presence, and tone of voice. From a therapeutic perspective, the story beautifully illustrates the healing power of symbols and routine—reading becomes a bridge between separation and renewed closeness.

Children experience the world as a whole. Their behaviour is often their only way of expressing inner turmoil, which is why adults must act as attentive listeners, patient companions, and safe harbours. In this way, children can gradually develop inner resources to cope with life's most difficult situations.

Ana Kastelic

Ana Kastelic, BSc Pathology, is a systemic psychotherapy trainee working in the field of mental health. She practises therapy at *Pamina – Mental Health Clinic* and also collaborates with the *Institute for Autism and Related Disorders.*

A REAL MUM

Adoption is a deeply emotional process for everyone involved, and the reasons behind it vary. It is a story written by life itself—one of love and devotion—yet it also demands knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the ability to understand a child's developmental needs and feelings. The child has suffered separation and the loss of a primary bond during their most sensitive period. For this reason, their greatest lifelong fear will often be that of abandonment or rejection, while their deepest need will be for acceptance and safety.

It is crucial to explain to the child that their biological mother did not reject them because something was wrong with them (for crying too much, being difficult, and so on), but because at that time she was not able to care for any child. This helps the child avoid taking the abandonment personally and makes it easier for them to build a healthy identity and sense of self-worth.

Since questions of identity intensify once the child enters school and begins mixing with peers, this period is especially sensitive. They will want to be as similar to others as possible and seek areas where they can blend in. They will not want to stand out as different. Remarks from classmates about being abandoned or rejected will hurt them deeply. In primary school, adopted children are particularly vulnerable to such comments. Hearing peers say that their mother is "not a real mum" is confusing, since she is the only mum they know (even if they are aware of their adoption). They may feel ashamed, as if their family is somehow less valuable or "wrong," sad and isolated because they are different, angry or despairing when someone belittles their parents, and doubtful of their own worth. If my mum isn't a "real mum," does that mean I'm not "real" either?

Both children and adults need to understand that such remarks are not just careless comments for adopted children. They are personal wounds that can seriously shake their sense of safety and self-worth. This is why every adult who works with adopted children must actively protect their dignity, strengthen their self-esteem, and at the same time foster respect among peers for all types of families.

We must always remember that the relationships a child lives in will shape them for life. These experiences will influence their view of the world, others, and themselves. They will affect the goals they pursue, their choice of partner and friends, and ultimately who and what they become. That is far too great a responsibility to be taken lightly.

Nataša Banko

Nataša Banko, BA Psychology, with specialist training in clinical psychological counselling and other psychological modalities, is Director of the *Diagnostic and Therapeutic Centre in Domžale*, where she provides therapeutic support to individuals and couples in distress. She is the author of numerous professional articles on adoption, the book Larimar, and the accompanying text for the book *Mother Number Zero*.

BECAUSE I AM – I ASK

The story delicately portrays a young person's search for, and discovery of, their own answer to the question: whose voice do I hear when I hear prohibitions, desires, and doubts? His inner monologue traces a path from heteronomous to autonomous ethics and morality.

His parents and the Church raised him in the faith of God. Yet he does not feel at ease in church or in prayer. Something does not fit. Not only are there so many contradictory claims about God that none stands firmly on its own, but he also distances himself from them: That's what they say! In that phrase the distance from belief is already present.

Neither the golden splendour of church decoration nor the priest's words move him. If he could, he would simply walk out. But he does not: God sees everything!

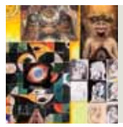
It is not only his reason that resists, but also his body: Lately I've been waking up with a strange feeling in my stomach. As if I've done something wrong, but I don't know what. As if someone is watching me, waiting for me to slip up. God? No – people say it's my conscience. Not God, but his own conscience speaks in his inner dialogue. Here faith in God begins to crumble, and heteronomous morality gives way to autonomous morality: Because I am, I ask: if God sees everything, why does he do nothing about injustice and violence between people? Does he look away – or does he not exist at all?

In the evening he is supposed to pray, but he does not. And for the first time he does not feel guilty.

No, he is not guilty of anything: he has freed himself from the fear of God and now hears the words of his own heart. He has become a person with an autonomous morality—one that, whenever it listens to its own inner voice, knows it is hearing the call of conscience, always open to truth, goodness, love, and self-questioning. Because I am – I ask: who am I, when I hear my conscience?

It does not matter whether one interprets this inner voice as divine commandment, or—for those who are not religious or are atheists—as the voice of conscience. What matters is not missing the essential: because I am, I ask – what is true, what is right, who am I? Every person carries within them the mysterious voice of love, truth, justice, and wonder at the being of all that exists.

Spomenka Hribar



Dr. Spomenka Hribar is a philosopher and sociologist who has, as a public intellectual, shaped social processes in Slovenia for decades. She is the author of numerous social science studies and several books.

OFFICIAL REMARKS ON THE BOOK

REFLECTION OF REALITY

Children, You Deserve the Best World

"Children, I know you deserve more than this world could ever give."

These are the opening lyrics of the song *Children* by the band EMF, which rose to fame in the 1990s with their hit Unbelievable. Yet it was this particular melody about children that etched itself permanently into my memory. I first heard it as a teenager—almost still a child myself—and the refrain echoes in my mind to this day, perhaps even louder than before.

We live in strange times. Technological revolutions—among them the astonishing advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence—are happening at lightning speed. One might think that, in such an era, humanity would have evolved as well: become more civilised, more compassionate, more refined, tolerant, and supportive. And yet the scenes we witness daily on our screens quickly shatter that illusion. At times, it feels as though we are regressing, even falling behind our Stone Age ancestors. I am speaking, of course, of the images of starving children in occupied territories, reaching out their skeletal arms in the hope of receiving food—an act that often turns into a game of Russian roulette. Many of these children, having come to collect food for their families, are killed—shot by those who were meant to help them. Is this civilisation? Is this progress—shooting starving children? *Quo vadis, homo sapiens?*

"They seem so far from you, but really they're close to you," continues the same song. And it's true—these children are right here, near us, yet also thousands of kilometres away: invisible, unheard, unknown, unreachable. Their image, which stirs painful emotions within us, can be erased from our phone screens with a single swipe, allowing us to drift toward more cheerful, inspiring images—of cute kittens, dancing celebrities, and made-up influencers. The cry of a hungry child, suffering daily under violence, is silenced with a flick of the finger—his face erased from the screen, and from memory.

The book *Silent Screams* is all the more vital in such times, when compassion is often reduced to a handful of clicks. It brings forth the voices of children and young people from the silence, placing their sorrowful stories at the forefront—stories we too often avoid: from violence, neglect and psychological suffering to illness, addiction and family breakdown. Each story, penned by a respected Slovene author, brings a unique voice; together they form a layered portrayal of childhood and adolescence, one far removed from the idealised image of carefree youth. Most importantly, the book refuses to let the screams fade. On the contrary: unlike a screen, paper gives them weight—it amplifies them.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the way it blends literature with both therapeutic and educational dimensions. It encourages all readers to consider what might be happening behind closed doors—not only far away but right next to us. (And often just on the other side of the screen.) Moreover, the authors do not stop at depicting trauma—they gesture toward possible solutions: the help of adults, professionals, friends, and, above all, the wider community. In this way, Silent Screams transcends the limits of literature and builds a bridge between art and care.

The book's visual identity is another of its assets. The illustrations by Mira Uršič are more than mere accompaniment. Rich in symbolic language, they enhance the texts, underscore the emotional atmosphere, and deepen the reading experience. Composed as collages, often centred around human figures, the images provide a counterpoint to the difficult subject matter. They open space for reflection and conversation, and above all, they help the reader to truly see and hear the child who is crying out for help.

The images remind us that children are mirrors of our world—and of ourselves. *Silent Screams* is a call to care: for the children who laugh in our arms, and for those who suffer in silence, far away. Because their voices—heard and unheard—are the voices of our children. They are the voice of our conscience, breaking the silence with the cry of that song by EMF: Children, you deserve the best world!

Assoc. Prof. Dr Dan Podjed, anthropologist

To the Heart of Life – Through Animals

We live in a time when appearances matter—a time when people strive to stay forever young and beautiful, and when there is an overabundance of everything... except time, tenderness, conversation, understanding, and acceptance—of ageing, of loss, of change.

And yet, each of us knows at least one such story. Even when we read them, they still move us to tears. Much has already been done in this field. At times, I wish I could stop reading and tell myself, "Surely, things like this don't happen anymore." But they do. Perhaps even right next door. But we neither see nor hear it, because we're not paying attention, or because we think it has nothing to do with us. Sometimes we choose not to see—because it's easier, or because we're afraid of getting too involved.

Although most children today have more than they could ever want, there are still those who live with great hardship. It is important that we recognise this, and perhaps offer help where we can. In doing so, we not only bring ease to others, but also find deeper happiness and fulfilment ourselves.

Stories of losing a loved one are painful because most of us have experienced such loss. But it's good that these stories also speak about grieving—about the emotions that come with it, from sadness to anger to disappointment. About the feeling that you may never be happy again. And about how to survive such overwhelming pain, and eventually live again.

As a psychologist and therapist working with animals, I meet many children whose parents love them dearly yet still struggle to truly connect with them, to reach their hearts. When they can't find an explanation

for a problem, for distress or challenging behaviour, they come to me—and to my animals. Together, we find a way forward and help communication begin to flow again.

An animal can be a friend to a child—a source of comfort, a protector, a listener. It accepts the child as they are, with all their flaws, their history, fears, and pain. It helps them overcome difficulties, build self-esteem, and feel unconditional acceptance and warmth.

Many parents see only their own expectations, wishes, and needs for their children. On the surface, it may look as though these children have everything. And yet they often lack warmth, understanding, and admiration. In some families, alcohol or drug abuse leads to aggression, leaving wives and children at the mercy of violent and indifferent husbands or fathers. One can only hope they will find help and one day move towards a peaceful life of dignity and take joy in the small things that mean the most to any child, including those who have everything: time spent with their parents, shared reading, outings, cuddles, gratitude, and praise.

This book serves as an important reminder of what truly matters: a call to return to those values, and to help as many children in distress as we can.

Dr Maksimiljana Marinšek, psychologist and animal-assisted therapist

The World of a Child's Soul

We live in an age of progress—scientific, technological, medical, and economic. Undeniably so. It ought to mean that life is getting better and better. But is it? Hardly. Psychological problems, difficulties, and disorders are not on the decline: they are, in fact, on the rise. Too often the so-called solutions offered by these advances prove to be not real solutions at all, but new problems. And sadly, it is the younger generations, our children, who pay the highest price. Those closest to them—parents, carers, teachers—cannot always stand by their side and offer help, even when they want to.

Young people today grow up in a tangle of information and digitalisation. Smartphones and social media are placed in their hands almost from the cradle. They master them more easily than their parents. And yet, when they find themselves in doubt or distress, to whom do they turn? To those very smartphones and social networks. But among the flood of information available there, the vast majority is useless, misleading, or downright false. How, then, are children and adolescents to find their way? That is one of the greatest challenges of our age—a challenge we must face both as individuals and as a society.

Working effectively with younger generations is among the best answers we have. This book is therefore something precious. In its own way, it brings us closer to the world of childhood and adolescence today—a world of bright and not-so-bright memories, too easily forgotten, but ones that define us as adults far more than we tend to realise. We now know that most psychological problems and disorders have their roots in enduring, repeated traumatic experiences in childhood. These are very often tied to relationships with the closest figures in a child's life, usually the parents. Yet parents themselves cannot simply be blamed, tempting though it may be. Such behaviour usually arises out of good intentions – I'm doing this because it will benefit my child. Let us also not forget that many traumatic experiences are the by-product of the all-too-common exhaustion and overload that parents face today, which prevents them from maintaining optimal relationships with their children. Still, that does not erase the fact that the result is harmful parenting, leaving behind repressed fears and defensive behaviours—the buried fear of abandonment, isolation, failure, or punishment.

My aim here is not to catalogue the nature and effects of early experiences, whether positive or traumatic. This book already does that eloquently. What it also reveals is the world of childhood itself, and the dynamics between parents and children—a world often more telling and more important than many are willing to admit. Within it we rediscover long-forgotten memories: the great achievements of a child's soul, and the wounds it may suffer. It is worth delving into this world.

Prof. Dr. Janek Musek, Psychologist

Heartbeats

This collection of short stories is intended for the general reader—those seeking authentic human testimonies. Each story shines a light on a specific form of hardship experienced by a central character. They stand at a crossroads: to accept a harsh fate—yet know they are not alone in it—or to hold on to the hope of a better outcome. These are stories that open the door, simply yet movingly, to the hidden worlds of childhood and adolescent struggles—struggles that often go unheard because they are too quiet, too well hidden, or drowned out by screens, expectations, and the silence of adults.

Stories such as *A Time Without Angels*, *A Child's Soul*, *Tetraplegic to Tetraplegic*, *and A Star on the Blanket* depict hopeless situations in which the protagonists come to terms with their fate. On the other hand, stories like *Because I Am – I Ask*, *Orpheus' Little Box*, *How Mojca Tamed Fear*, and *A Real Mum* highlight the individual's inner strength, bolstered by the support of key adults.

The story *TV Soap Opera* clearly illustrates how children in shared custody arrangements often end up not living in two homes—but in none at all. In this story, words—words—words are absent, drowned out by screens. A young reader might see themselves in this situation and interpret it as a call to extreme actions in order to gain attention. A warning, then—caution is needed.

Those Puppy-Dog Eyes reminds us that adults serve as role models for their children. Yet important figures in a child's life are not always parents—as in *A Gentle Heart*, where that role is taken on by Nino's friend Sonja. *The Yellow Blanket with Fringes* tells of the courage it takes to step into the unknown and to seek refuge from domestic violence. Even though the mother endures the abuse for too long, the story still conveys that it is never too late to escape a toxic relationship. A new future—though uncertain—is more bearable than a violent present.

The most precious stories are those that offer hope for a happy ending. Like a fairy tale, the conflict that follows the story's introduction seems unsolvable, but is ultimately resolved through a shift in the characters' behaviour. The burden of the past is lifted, and the protagonists begin anew. This kind of redemptive narrative is exactly what today's children and adolescents need. A story a child can identify with can offer both a plan and the hope that things can turn out well. Such are the opening stories of Mira and Niko.

The fairy-tale tone also shows in the way the protagonist's hardship is placed centre stage. Secondary characters are pushed to the margins. The spoiled boy is removed from his class and homeschooled, depriving him of the chance to develop social skills and a sense of belonging. But in Niko, this detail is not treated as important—what matters most is that the angelic class regains its paradise. The system in this story yields to a violent individual, and the outcome is a happy one—but only for the class, not for Niko.

Similarly naïve is the story of the overweight teenage girl with two emotionally distant parents—a mother who rejects Mira because she refuses to follow her strict diet regimen, and a father who replaces emotional connection with gifts Mira never asked for. After the school staff intervene, the parents are magically transformed. Mira, who has found comfort in books and snacks, finds happiness and an important life lesson at camp: that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

This collection is straightforward and unambiguous—there is no need to read between the lines. Nevertheless, it offers young readers in distress a valuable window into the challenges faced by others, and reassurance that no hardship is insurmountable. Whether through action or acceptance, each story presents a heartbeat—sometimes barely perceptible, but always real. Some stories speak of accepting a difficult fate, others of the courage to defy it. Some protagonists are supported by important adults; others are saved by their own inner strength. But in every story, a common thread runs through—hope. Hope that even the darkest corners can lead toward the light.

Let this collection be an invitation—to talk. To listen. And to feel compassion.

Mag. Mojca Mihelič, President of the Slovene Headteachers' Association

SERIES: LET'S MAKE THE WORLD GENTLER

Various authors: Ladybird on a Dusty Road
Jožica Simončič: Balances
Various authors: A Glow of Being Different
Anej Sam: Clothing
Various authors: Butterfly in the Rain
Anej Sam: Cat the Cat
Various authors: Trickle of Slovenia
Various authors: Firefly on a Palm
Anej Sam: A Book Story
Neža Maurer: You Are My Heart
Various authors: A Sun in a Den
Various authors: The Earth Has a Heart
Various authors: Freedom on Trial
Neža Maurer and Anej Sam: Neža's Path
Anej Sam: Children and Fashion
Various authors: Soul of Slovenia (Slovenian and English)
Anej Sam and Neža Maurer: A Gentle Heart
Anej Sam: It Is Right – It Isn't Right
Various authors: Man About a Dog – Dog About a Man
Various authors: My World
Various authors: Slovenia Has a Heart
Anej Sam: We Can All Be Beautiful
Various authors: The Kind of Slovenia I'm Dreaming of
Anej Sam: Time for Tea (Slovenian and English)
Erih Tetičkovič and Mojca Recek: The Best Friend of Both Humans and Dogs
Tone Partljič, Barbara Gregorič Gorenc, Gorazd Vahen: Nature Knows
Anej Sam: Embraced With Nature