




Fruit of
the Spirit



*Dedicated to my true friends
from “Nowe Życie” (“New Life”) in Poznan.*



Tomasz Kruczek

Fruit of the Spirit

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against
such things there is no law.*

Gal 5:22-23 (ESV)

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VOCATIO
PUBLISHING HOUSE





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*For this my son was dead, and is alive again;
he was lost, and is found.*

Luke 15:24 (ESV)

“I’m sick of it all! I want out of here!” the boy’s voice carried through the little country house.

His father was tinkering with whatever he liked to tinker with when he needed to relax. *It’s going to be bad...* thought a little boy looking at his dad, and then at his brother who just ran into the house with that big announcement. *It’s going to be really bad.* He put down the comic book he was reading ready to retreat to his bedroom. *Dad will completely lose it. It will be a fight like this house has never seen* – a little boy kept thinking.

But dad did not raise his voice at all.

“What do you mean you want out of here?” he asked quietly putting his tools away. His hands were shaking slightly. Despite his calm voice, he must have been upset.

“Simple. I’ve had it!” the boy sounded hysterical. “I don’t want to live in this hole of a town! With all of these rednecks! Nothing ever happens here! No future! Next month I’m done with junior high school and I’m moving to the city, to any school, as far away from here as possible!”

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ISBN 978-83-7829-180-0



“Son...”—the father began “but we talked about it so many times...”

“Yes, we did!” Michael was almost screaming “or you did, and I just listened! It was you who wanted me to stay here and go to this place you all proudly call school! “Finished school? Grab a tool!” That’s what they say about us. They’re ridiculing us! I don’t want this kind of life!”

“I thought we had an agreement” dad said stressing each word “we discussed this on so many evenings.”

“Agreement? Yeah, right! I don’t remember agreeing to anything!” Michael’s eyes welled up. “All I did was nod to whatever you decided.”

“Listen” dad said with authority “you were supposed to stay on the farm, finish trade school and take over the work! We have lived off this land since your great grandfather settled here. Then your grandfather took over, then me. You are next. We have always been farmers!”

“But I don’t want to take anything over! Let Rob take over! You can give him my inheritance, too! He can play with dirt all he wants. He likes it. I want a different life!”

“What kind of life?” the father asked. “Do you have specific plans? What are you going to do?”

“I just want to get out of here as soon as I can, whether you agree or not” Michael walked by his younger brother and ran upstairs slamming the door behind him. Then he turned on the music as loud as he could.

*

In the afternoon the whole family gathered for dinner. Mom kept wiping her eyes, dad looked distressed, and Rob

seemed a bit scared. And Michael? Having mustered enough courage to tell his dad how he felt about becoming a farmer, he felt kind of free, as though a large yoke had been removed off his shoulders. He felt happy, though mom's tears and dad's sadness bothered him a little. But he couldn't have done anything different. He felt like a prisoner from the time he started junior high school. He craved a different life. *If I really put my mind to it, the sky is the limit* – he thought. *It's as simple as that!* After all, if his parents want him to be happy, they will not try to stop him.

“So, do you want to go a trade school in the city?” dad asked. “Where will you live?”

“In the dorm.”

Mom wiped her tears again and whispered: “But it's so far. How will you manage on your own?”

“Mom, please.” Michael pouted his lips in disdain “I'm an adult.” “Well, almost” he added seeing his father's look. “I will manage.”

“You can't even clean your room, and you want to go into the world” mom said, this time a little louder. “You are not as independent as you think.”

“Independence is not just about cleaning my room!” Michael said angrily.

“Let's all calm down. Fighting isn't going to accomplish anything” dad interrupted. “You want to live in a dorm? Fine. How are you going to make a living?”

“Well, I thought you'd at least pay for my dorm...” the boy replied uncertainly. “Plus, I'd find some little job.”

“You won't find a job” dad shrugged his shoulders. “They don't hire kids your age. “

“But I...”

“And besides”, dad would not be interrupted, “if you're leaving the house to study, you need to study, and not work. Work will have to wait.”

“Then give me enough money to study and live on!” Michael demanded.

Father was quiet for a while. He was thinking and calculating in his head. Finally, he nodded as though to accept his own decision and this strange situation.

“All right” he said “I see that your mind is made up.”

“Yes! It has been for a few years now!”

“Why didn't you tell us sooner, then?” Mom asked with sadness in her voice.

“I was afraid! I didn't think you would listen! I didn't think you'd let me! I thought I would have to live on this farm and ride the tractor for the rest of my life” Michael sounded off.

“When you don't leave all your heart in the soil, the soil does not yield its harvest” dad said somewhat philosophically, and then added in a more serious tone: “If you have really thought it through, and it's not just a whim of yours, and you want to be on your own, go ahead. But you have to find a good school with a good dorm. And you have to study hard, and not just play. You will get money. We will start a bank account for you. You will be in charge of it. Be wise. You know what they say: easy come, easy go.”

*

Later that evening, when the parents were alone, mother asked:

“Where will we get money for all that?”

“I've been putting money aside for years” said dad. “For him, to have a good start when he takes over his chunk of the farm. For him, to buy a house and machinery. I didn't want him to farm with bare hands, like my father and I did. He chose a different path... We can't help it. It's his life and his free will. I expect of him to study hard and not

fool around. He's not even eighteen, yet. This freedom he's dreaming of is not as attractive as he seems to think. He will surely miss our care."

*

Six months at the dorm have flown by really fast. It was snowing outside. Michael was resting on his bed in a warm room. He was happy. He'd just returned from a short Christmas break at home. In fact, he didn't see his family much, because except for the Christmas dinner, he spent most of the time on the computer. He was sent off with a backpack filled with home made food. He needed it, too. The money was running out, because he had been spending it a little too freely. But he needed some new stuff. The clothes he'd brought from the farm revealed his small town roots. He needed something more fashionable. Then, he needed a new laptop, a smartphone, and a few gadgets that would help him fit in more. And last, but not the least: parties. Never before had he had so much fun! The problem was that most of these parties happened on weekends, and he had promised to visit home as often as possible. He somehow forgot about that promise. There was always some suitable excuse, some little lies that he himself learned to believe in: an exam that he had to study for all weekend, or a paper he needed to write. Important books needed his attention, as well. How could he go home when there was so much studying to do?

He got out of bed and opened a pack of cigarettes, then sneaked through the hallway to the dorm's bathroom, where he popped a one in his mouth and took a whiff. Soon he won't have to hide his habit. After all, he's an adult. Almost. The teachers tend to be more lenient with older students. There are worse things in

this world than cigarettes. On the other hand, they're not so cheap...

*

Mom entered Michael's room and looked around with sadness. The mess was insurmountable! After Christmas, the boy left in a hurry. He had so much "studying" to do, that there was no time to tidy up. It was a sad Christmas. As much as everyone tried, the atmosphere was dreary. Michael constantly complained about this or that. He did not like the gifts, either, though mom had spent a lot of time making the grey, woolen sweater for him. Despite the freezing tempera-



ture, the sweater was now lying on the bed accompanied by some dirty socks and T-shirts. All of that reeked of cigarette smoke, but she wanted to believe that it was just the smell of the city. Slowly, she started to pick up the clothes.

“Leave it. Don’t do it” her husband voice came from behind.

She turned around. Tears were filling her eyes.

“Why? It’s such a mess.”

“Michael will do it when he’s back.”

“Next time he won’t have time again.”

“That’s not what I meant” dad’s voice expressed both anxiety and hope. “When he’s back for good. When he comes home.”

*

The dorm manager’s office looked like it has not been renovated in years, and the manager himself seemed a bit old-fashioned. He looked out of place in his old suit and worn-out shoes. But that was just an impression. Michael stood in the door of his office with his head down. He was pale and nervous, his hands were shaking.

“Come in and close the door” he heard and quickly did what he was told.

“I have this report here” said the manager calmly looking at a computer printout. “It shows me that you’ve managed to break every possible rule we have on these premises. This is a dorm, not a disco club! You’re supposed to be inside at a certain hour, you’re supposed to do your house chores. You’re not supposed to smoke, drink and...” the manager looked at him sternly “... do drugs!”

“But I never did any drugs!” the boy groaned.

“I am not accusing you of that, but if you deliberately ignore all of the other rules we have, it’s easy to imagine

that you might also break this one. Why should I believe you, then? But let’s leave it for now...” the manager looked at Michael with care. “Tell me, how is it possible that you were seen at a rock concert, though no one had granted you permission to leave, and when you came back the teacher on duty smelled alcohol on you?”

“All I had was liquor filled chocolates” the boy took offence. “Are these not allowed, either?”

The manager nodded.

“And the cigarettes? It was just tobacco flavored chewing gum, right?” he said ironically. “As a matter of fact, I have a pack of gum like that. You lost them recently.”

He took out a pack of cigarettes from the drawer of his desk.

“Listen to me. You’re lucky this is our first talk, but remember, you do something like that again and you will be expelled. Got it?”

“Yes” the boy whispered.

“That’s it. You can go.”

Michael quickly left, happy that the manager did not expand on his self-willed concert outing. He leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. That was a close call.

It did not take long for him to regain the confidence. He returned nonchalantly to his room.

“How did it go?” his roommates asked.

“All cool” he smirked “he tried to scare me, but then let go. I pay to live here, and he needs the money. I need a cig!”

“Are you nuts? Not in the room!”

“Why not?” he put the cigarette in his mouth and puffed as though it was his last one. “What can they do to me? Tomorrow’s Friday. Time to plan some party!”

His roommates shouted for joy. There was no better friend in the whole dorm than Michael. Everyone knew that.

*

The music in the club has been pumping loud for quite a while now. It was one of those places where one could really feel like an adult. Nobody checked the age. There were no rules. With a little bit of cleverness and discretion, there were no limits. Cigarette smoke was all around, and the booze the boys smuggled in made the world spin.

“Who’s the coolest guy around?!”

“Michael! Michael!” a choir of enthusiastic voices replied.

Michael was sitting at one of the tables surrounded by his buddies and some amused girls.

He loved to shine. He loved those parties! Loud music, the admiration of his friends, flirtatious looks of the chicks. What a life!

“Michael!” one of his friends shouted directly into his ear “are you not afraid to go back to the dorm in the shape you’re in?”

“What are you talking about?” the boy shouted back smiling. “I am not going back tonight. They think I went home for the weekend, and my folks think I’m sound sleep at the dorm. And no one can get hold of me because, look, my phone battery just died. It’s all good!”

“Do you want it to get even better?” some low-pitched voice asked. A tall, slim man in a leather jacket approached their table.

“You bet, I do!” the boy outshouted the music. “But I don’t think it’s possible!”

“Sure is!” the man smiled. “You just need to know how. Want to talk?”

Michael got up and followed the stranger out to the lobby. The man looked around carefully and pulled out a small bag with a few colorful pills.

“You know what that is?”

“I think I have a good clue, but I’m not into that kind of stuff. I’m not a druggie.”

“You’re scared” the man snorted.



“I’m not scared of anything!” the boy wanted to sound tough. “Nothing scares me!” he repeated. “But I don’t want this stuff.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve promised myself not to touch drugs.”

“First of all” the stranger’s voice was now friendly “these are not drugs you’re thinking of. These are mood enhancing pills. They will also make you feel...” he paused meaningfully “... tougher. You have no idea how much they improve your stamina. You will be able to party for many days straight and not feel tired at all. Plus, you know what they say: rules are to be broken. So, where’s the problem?”

“Well... actually, there is no problem... I guess.”

“You’ve got some heavy studying to do, don’t you? This will double your energy! Wait, what am I talking about? Triple!” the man kept tempting. “Anyway, everyone’s into it now.”

“Everyone?” Michael was surprised.

“Sure thing, but not everyone wants to admit it” the man sounded convincing. “So? Want some? I’ll cut you a deal, because I have a good heart. Fifty percent off, just for you. Your friends will love you for it. You will be even more popular.”

“Okay. Deal.” Michael extended his hand.

He loved popularity.

*

The dorm manager’s face was bland. He was drumming his fingers on the desk.

“I warned you” he said.

At that very moment the teacher on duty entered his office. “His room is clean. We didn’t find anything” he said.

“Well... At least we have no grounds to call the Police” the manager made a face as if his tooth was hurting. “Unless we count the demolished bathroom.”

“Please! Don’t!” Michael was almost crying. “Sir, I will pay for all the damage. I’ve got the money!”

The manager shuffled some papers on his desk, and then moved them to the side.

“All right. You will pay for the damage, and then you will pack and get out of my sight. I have already notified the school. They don’t want you, either. This is a good school and it’s not for everyone. Go back to where you came from.”

Michael was silent. He knew he didn’t stand a chance. He can’t get away with it this time. The pills he bought from the stranger didn’t turn out to be as harmless as he’d thought. That night was his worst nightmare. He could not remember how he had made it back to the dorm. He was supposed to spend a night at his friend’s place. He did not know how he had flown into a rage when he demolished the newly renovated bathroom. *How come nobody heard that? Why didn’t anyone stop me?* he thought bitterly.

But on that weekend, the dorm was almost completely empty. The teacher on duty was an older gentleman, always tired and hard of hearing. He figured it would be a quiet night, after all what could have happened in a nearly abandoned dorm? He turned on the television and watched an action movie. His room was filled with the sounds of gunshots, loud screams and music. This cacophony could not be penetrated by the sounds of ongoing destruction coming from the bathroom down the hall. And even if the teacher had heard something, he would have probably concluded it was part of the movie he was watching. It wasn’t until the next morning that everything became clear. That’s



when Michael was found sleeping amidst broken sinks with a bathroom floor for a bed.

The manager moved away from his desk and handed Michael a list of damages with the costs that needed to be covered.

“This is what I paid six months ago for renovation” he said dryly. “I expect you to transfer the same amount to our account today.”

Michael looked at the numbers in disbelief. All of a sudden, he felt dizzy. This was all the money he had in the bank. He was left penniless. He squandered everything.

With heavy heart he returned to his room and started packing.

“They busted you big time, didn’t they?” said one of his friends with pity.

“What are you going to do now? Go back home? To your little town?” another roommate sneered.

“Don’t be stupid” Michael tried to sound at ease “I’m never going back there! I’ll be all right. By the way, do you guys have any money to spare?”

“I’m totally broke” said one boy with fake laughter.

“I don’t lend money. You know that” said the other.

“But I can give you a hundred for your cellphone.”

“A hundred?” Michael was outraged. “You know how much I paid for it!”

“Do what you want. You won’t sell it for more anywhere.”

Michael thought for a while, then he threw his phone on the bed.

“Give me that hundred.”

*

The summer was coming to an end. It was a cool and gloomy day. Michael was walking down the road. The wind drove the rain in his eyes, and the mud was getting inside his shoes. The passing cars splashed his pants, but he didn’t seem to mind. He was going back home. For three long months had had been wandering around train stations, abandoned buildings, and shady joints. He has had enough.

For the first few days after the dorm disaster he tried to keep in touch with his friends from the dorm, school and club. All in vain. The same people who used to party with him before, did not have time for him anymore. When his money ended, all of his fake friendships ended, too.

He did not want to return home. He felt ashamed and was afraid of his parents’ reaction and the scoffing neighbors. He was trying to salvage whatever little pride he had left in him, and tried to convince himself that he could do it on his own, that he would show everybody what he was made of. He quickly understood the terrible situation he found himself in, and by his own doing, too. It only took two nights before he got robbed at the train station. He lost his backpack and barely made it from day to day. His life had become a series of running and hunger as he had been to places and met people he had no idea existed. The evil he had seen was worst than his worst nightmares.

The desire to return home came suddenly. He had just been chased away from the back of a bar where he looked through garbage cans for some food. Sitting on the ground in a dark alley, he started crying. He had not eaten in two days and was afraid to go to soup kitchen. After all, he was a minor and a runaway. Someone would have surely sent him off to some institution. Tears were smudging his mud covered face. That’s when the strange beggar showed up. Michael felt someone’s hand on his arm. Right in front of him, there stood the most disgusting bum he’d ever seen. He was dirty, scarred and covered in rags. The man stretched his bandaged arm and gave the boy a can.

“Here. Eat it” he rasped.

“What is that?” Michael was hesitant.



“Dog food” the bum chuckled.

“Are you crazy? I’m not eating that! That’s gross!” the boy was appalled.”

“No, it’s not” the man laughed. “Some people would give a lot for a can of dog food. Like those who are dying of hunger.”

“But I’m not dying yet. Can’t you tell?” Michael was angry.

“Maybe...” the man said and shook the can. The boy looked at it with distrust. But he was so hungry, terribly hungry. As disgusted as he was, he scooped a little bit of the brown pulp with his finger and put it in his mouth.

“That is yucky!” he shouted. “On my dad’s farm the dog gets much tastier food than this!”

“Sure! But that’s on your dad’s farm, and I see no farm around here” the bum scorned. “Your dog can’t share with you his delicious meal right now” he smirked spitefully. “Wait. If the dogs on your father’s farm eat so well, why don’t you go back home?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m ashamed and afraid, that’s why” Michael answered truthfully.

“But he’s your father, right?”

“I’ve squandered all the money he gave me. All of it. I destroyed his trust and love. I destroyed everything...”

“Hey! Don’t get all wound up about it!” the man’s face became serious. “Maybe it’s worth a try! Maybe someone who cares so well about his dog, will also want to care for you again. If worst comes to worst, you can share room with the dog and the two of you can share the bowl...” he grinned.

Still laughing loud, the bum walked away without saying ‘good-bye’, but before he disappeared round the corner, he yelled:

“Go back home, kid! This is not a place for you!”



And so Michael was on his way back to his town.

The boy turned into the country road that led to his home, then stopped. He was afraid he wouldn’t have enough courage to continue. *What am I doing? What did I come here for? They will kick me out! They won’t let me in!* – These thoughts were rushing through his head. But something kept pushing him forward. Maybe it was hunger, or maybe he just missed the places he knew so well. He tiptoed from one tree to another. The closer he was to his home, the longer it took him to get to the next tree.

All of a sudden, he heard the dog barking. It was his dog, Buster. That was something he did not expect. After all, Buster knew him really well. *Maybe I’m so dirty, he can’t even recognize my smell*, boy thought and then raised his head. In the gate of his house, he saw his father. Tears filled Michael’s eyes. His father seemed a lot older to him, as if during those months he aged by several years.

“Easy, Buster!” the father shouted at the dog and then

turned toward the boy. “Who are you? What are you doing over there? Why are you hiding behind the tree?”

Very slowly Michael walked toward the path leading to his home and then stopped with his head down.

“It’s me, dad. I am back” he whispered and cringed expecting harsh words, rejection or something worse.

“Michael...?” he heard his father’s quiet voice.

The boy would have preferred to be yelled at. He would have preferred to be called names instead of this quiet, doubtful voice. His knees got soft and he slumped to the ground. He tried to muster whatever courage he had left.

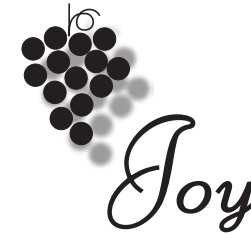
“Dad, please... Hear me out” he whispered. “I ruined everything, I squandered all the money, and I did terrible things. I am a wreck. I know things will never be the same. I have been such a disappointment and you will probably disown me... You have every right to kick me out, but I am so exhausted and hungry... I can sleep in the barn and eat whatever leftovers you have. I will work hard and try to make up for all the wrongs I’ve done, if you only give me the chance. I don’t know what else to do. I have nowhere to go.”

Those last words could barely be heard, as though the boy whispered them to himself.

His dad’s strong arms embraced him as he pulled him up from the ground.

“Michael! My son! You came back!” his father couldn’t hide his emotions. “We had no idea what had become of you! We thought you were dead already! Hey, people!” he yelled towards the neighbors “Michael is back! He’s alive! And everyone thought he’d died! Look at him! He’s back! My son is back!”

Then the father took the son into his arms and held him just like he used to many years ago. Michael gave out a huge sigh of relief. He was home.



“Listen up” the father sighed sitting at the table “I have some bad news for you.”

The whole family: mom, Susie, Margie and Patrick, looked at him surprised.

The father was quiet for a while, as though he was about to say something very difficult. The silence was so intense that even the dog popped his head out of the basket to check what was going on.

“What is it?” mom asked. “Go ahead and tell us!”

“I lost my job” father took a deep breath “today was my last day in the office. Everyone in the office was let go this morning. Our company was shut down.”

“What are we going to do now?” mom buried her face in her hands.

“Don’t worry. I will find something else” father tried to comfort her. “I know it might take a while, but we will make it somehow. The problem is we will have to be really frugal from now on. I hate to tell you this, but our vacation this year will need to be postponed.”



“But we were planning to go to the coast!” Susie moaned.

“And I thought we’d go abroad” Margie sniffled like she was about cry.

“I know, but this year we have to stay home” dad said. “We couldn’t go anyway, because our car is gone. But I promise you, we will think of some fun things to do. You won’t be bored. There are so many interesting things around here.”

“Right. Some dead nature, the woods and a pond. That’s supposed to be interesting and fun?” Margie’s sniffing turned into a full blown weeping “I’ve seen it all a million times!” Her tears, big as peas, were flowing down her face and onto her pink blouse.

“What about you, Susie? What do you think?” asked dad.

“We have a computer, TV and books” Susie shrugged “I think I can make it. Plus, I don’t like traveling, anyways. The sea gets old pretty fast.”

“About the computer...” said dad “we only have one left. I had to turn in my company laptop.”

“Awesome” murmured Susie “Just awesome.”

“Dadda has no job!” Patrick burst out with joy hitting his bowl hard with a spoon, spilling his porridge all over the floor.

“There we go” dad frowned looking at mom all worried “one daughter’s all in tears, the other one doesn’t care, and our baby son is happy for me.”

“Come on, dad...” said Susie with shame “you know it’s not like that.”

Margie ran up to her dad and hugged him, still crying.

“You know what?” mom chimed in while cleaning porridge off the floor “maybe it would be a good idea to pray about this vacation of ours, and ask God to give dad a new job?”

Margie sniffled again and nodded. Susie mumbled something, shrugged her shoulders, which in her specific Susie’s lingo may have meant “sure, why not?”

They took one another’s hands and bowed their heads for prayer.

*

Later that evening, mom and dad took the dog for a walk down the country road where a row of white houses with little front yards led to a thick wall of trees in the neighboring woods.

“What’s your plan?” asked mom.

“I will find a job” dad replied. “In my profession it shouldn’t be too hard. For now, I can take on a few projects and work from home. We will manage with one computer, somehow.”

“No doubt, honey” mom smiled. “But what about the kids’ summer break? Two months at home... It can’t be good for them. I’m afraid the girls are going to turn into couch potatoes.”

“When I was their age” said dad “it was unthinkable for kids to spend their vacation time in front of a TV or a computer. Even when we did not travel, we’d spend time playing outside.”

“When you were their age” answered mom “there were only a few channels on TV and no one knew what a computer was. How are you going to beat technology today?”

“When I was their age” riposted dad “we had imagination. Some of us never lost it” he winked at his wife and smiled “Imagination is the best weapon against boredom! Wait and see!”

*

On the first day of summer break, the girls noticed a few small packages in the hallway. They were piled up neatly, as though waiting for something.

“What are those?” Susie wondered.

Mom came out of the kitchen. “These are your dad’s idea number “one” she said.

“And what idea is that?” Margie looked at the packages suspiciously.

“For starters” said dad popping his head over mom’s shoulder “we’re going to camp in the yard.”

“Camping in the yard? That makes no sense!” Susie murmured.

“Of course it does!” dad was not discouraged. “I’m planning a few backpacking trips in the area, and before we do that, I’d like to teach you how to pitch a tent and make campfire. I want you to experience what it’s like to sleep under the stars.”

“What if there are spiders?” Margie’s eyes went big.

“No worries, baby. They won’t get us” mom smiled “there are special nets in the tent. No bugs can get inside. So? Shall we start?”

“Fine” said Susie without conviction “but if we don’t like it, we’re going back to our room.”

“I’m going back if I see one little spider!” Margie added.

“Itsy bitsy spider...” their baby brother started singing.

Pitching the tent wasn’t easy, though mom and dad said it would only take a few minutes. All four of them worked hard to finish the task. Finally, the tents were up, right there in their own yard, between two fruit trees.

The girls dragged air mattresses inside one of the tents and sat down.

“Pretty cool!” said Margie. “We have never slept in a tent before. Always hotels or motels.”

“Right!” said Susie watching the sunrays gleam through the tent’s fabric. “Staying at hotels is just like being home.”

“Know what? I think I’m sleeping here tonight. And you?”

“I don’t know yet...” Susie hesitated “I still think it’s a little dumb.”

“But wait! Where did you get all this stuff from anyway, dad?” Susie became suspicious. “Two tents, air mattresses, mats. Aren’t these things pretty expensive?”

“Not at all” dad smiled triumphantly “I got the tents from a friend of mine. He organizes youth camps. We can use them all summer! The other things I bought a few years ago. I’ve always wanted to take you all camping, but for some reason we never got around to it. I have more interesting stuff that’s been lying around for years. Some of it is much older than you! I’ll show you.”

Dad walked briskly inside the house whistling a happy tune.

“Hey!” suddenly the girls heard a familiar voice. “What are you up to?”

They peeked outside the tent. The twin sisters from the house next door were looking at their camp through the fence.

“We are camping out!”

“I heard that your dad lost his job” said one of the twins in a rather mean manner “and you’re not going abroad for vacation. I bet you’re just gonna have to stay home” she added even more spite.

“We are s-o-o-o... sorry!” said the other twin with a phony smile on her face. “We are going to Greece. And maybe to Croatia. It’s going to be awesome!”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be so excited” said Susie trying to sound sassy.

“Why? Are you jealous?” the twin asked as though she wanted to pick a fight.

Susie put on an innocent face.

“Jealous? No way. I just heard that there is some strange virus going around in Greece.”

“Virus?” the twins got a bit uneasy.

“Yeah. I heard that a lot of tourists get some nasty rash.”

“You are a liar!” the sisters were mad.

“Susie, stop it. It’s neither good nor smart” Margie begged in a whisper “you’re being mean.”

“I know, but...”

She didn’t finish because dad came outside carrying a large box. The twins greeted him politely and ran into their house from which, after a minute or so, a raucous laughter could be heard. It was the twins’ father.

“I do not like them!” said Susie.

Dad put the box down.

“Look what I’ve got for you. Sit down.”

He handed them two shiny, red jack-knives.

“What? We are not boys! Why do we need knives?” Margie blasted.

“If you’re going to be camping and hiking, you will need a knife, just like any boy would. And these will come in handy as well” dad showed them two sturdy flashlights and two metal mess-tins.

“It’s getting interesting. Are we getting machetes, too?” Susie couldn’t hold back the irony.

“Susie!”

“Just kidding! Actually, this jack-knife is really cool.”

“Lunch time!” Mom shouted from the kitchen. “Anyone up for some camp pancakes?”

After lunch, with mom’s help, the girls gathered all the camp necessities and clothes: sweaters, coats, boots, and waterproof jackets. It took a while because both girls had to negotiate every single outfit mom questioned. As a matter of fact, if it weren’t for their mom, they would have packed the entire wardrobe.



Then, they had to organize some camp food. Mom said that camp is camp and she was not going to cook in the kitchen any more. The three of them went to the grocery store.

On the way back, they saw their neighbors leaving for vacation. Their car was packed to the rims. The twin's dad honked as the car was rolling off the driveway. The girls

noticed that he turned to his daughters and said something. It must have been funny, because everyone in the car laughed.

"They're laughing at us!" Susie said angrily, clenching her little fists.

"Let it go, Susie. They're just happy to be going for vacation" said Margie, though she felt a bit sad.

"Why the long faces?" said mom in a playful voice. "Our vacation will be fantastic, too. You will see!"

*

It was nearly evening. The sky was clear, not a single cloud. The sun almost completely descended on the nearby forest. The birds were chirping 'good night' to each other. The whole town was sinking in the quiet of the coming dusk. The neighborhood looked desolate. Only a few lights in the windows here and there.

The whole family gathered in the backyard. The lights were off. The house was now covered in darkness. When dad started a small bonfire, its flames gently illuminated the silhouettes of everyone gathered around it. It was all kind of... magical. Each of them had a cup of tea and a tasty sausage on a stick that sizzled in the fire.

"Just like the old days" dad sighed "Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

"These sausages taste a lot better than the grilled ones" Margie was surprised. "I think they're better."



“They sure are!” said mom licking her fingers. “In the past no one had a grill, but people somehow managed to cook outside.”

One after one, stars began to pop up in the sky.

“Look. The baby’s out” mom whispered. Patrick was sound asleep in mom’s lap, his face buried in the sleeping bag. “Nothing better than sleeping under the stars.”

The girls got tired, too. It was a long and exciting day for them. As they stared into the dancing flames, their eyes began to close. If they don’t go to bed at once, they will fall asleep sitting up.

“Should we sleep in the tent?” Susie’s voice was still filled with hesitation.

“I am going to” Margie’s answer was accompanied by a big yawn “There is no way I’m dragging myself back inside now.”

They went inside their tent and carefully pulled the zipper behind them. Tucked into their sleeping bags, they quickly drowsed off, but not before Margie uttered a short prayer: “God, thank you for this day...”

Susie’s quiet and rhythmical breath left no doubt: she was sleeping like a rock.

The first day of vacation came to an end.

*

Susie woke up in the middle of the night. She didn’t know where she was and why there was so little space around her. It was completely dark. She stretched her arms and touched the rustling surface of the fabric. *Right! I’m in a tent!* – she remembered and went back to sleep.

But then she heard noises coming from outside. Scraping, crackling and then loud squeaking followed by howling. She could feel the little hairs on her neck prickle. She

wanted to scream, but couldn’t produce a sound. *Run! Run to the house, to my room!* – she thought in panic. *How did I get talked into this crazy idea? Sleeping in a tent? It’s madness!*

She got hold of the flashlight. The beam of light moved chaotically across the walls of the tent. Her fingers stiff from fear, she finally unzipped the entrance and crawled out. At that very second her eyes met the eyes of the ‘scary monster’ flexing his little tail, like cats often do.

He was rubbing against the tent’s wall and painting circles around the ropes with his little paw.

“You scared me!” Susie breathed out with relief and stroked his striped fur.

The neighbors left the cat behind, and he was taking advantage of his freedom.



Now he decided to explore the yard on the other side of the fence and found this strange little house in the middle of it.

Silly me! I wanted to run home thinking it was some wild beast! – the girl laughed quietly to herself. She looked up and...

“Wow!” she was filled with awe. Never before had she seen so many stars in the sky. Millions of tiny, shiny lights. Right through the middle of them all, there was the Milky Way. It was even brighter and more beautiful than all the rest. It looked to her as if it were within arm’s reach.

“How is it possible that I have never seen so many stars before?” she whispered.

“Because normally at this time you’re either asleep or watching TV” her dad whispered back. “Did you really get scared of that cat?”

“A little bit” she nodded. “But thanks to him I got to see this awesome sky.”

“Yes. It’s truly a magical view” dad agreed. “And look, it’s right here in your own backyard. All you have to do is look up!”

“You know what, dad?”

“Yeah?”

“This can really be a cool vacation!”

“I think so too, baby.”

*

They were returning from a week’s long camp in the woods. Only a mile or so and the whole family would be back home. Everyone was tired, but happy and even the heavy bags attached to their bikes did not bother them. There was a lot of laughter as they remembered different funny things that had happened.

“Do you remember the forest ranger’s face when we saw us pitch tents?” mom shouted.

“And the cooking!” dad chimed in. “I will never forget scrambled eggs with mushrooms and noodles with raspberry mousse! That was delish!”

“I liked the potatoes cooked in fire the most!” added Margie. “The crunchy skin was just the yummiest!”

“And you Susie? What did you like the most?” asked dad.

“Roasted pike!”

“I cooked that pretty well, didn’t I?” dad bragged.

“True. The pike was scrumptious. Too bad you didn’t catch it!” mom said half-jokingly.

“It was bad luck, that’s all. If it weren’t for that super nice fisherman, I would have spent the whole day on the river for nothing! An empty handed, defeated pike hunter!” dad laughed loudly. “I would have shown off if it hadn’t been for Patrick. He’s such a tattletale! “Fisher gave us fishy! Fisher gave us fishy!” dad tried to imitate the boy’s voice.

“You know what?, it was the best thing, though”. Susie stopped the bike and looked at her family with sparks in her eyes. “When daddy was cooking the pike on the fire and it was raining. He was holding the umbrella over the fish and got all soaking wet! There was water in his shoes!”

They could have gone on and on. For those few holiday weeks they were able to explore the world that had always been very close to them, but which they had ignored for so long.

They biked through the surrounding woods, they discovered new trails and explored the lakes.

Tents and barns were their hotels. They made new friendships and learned to enjoy the little things, because



everything around them brought them joy. In the evenings, they sat around a campfire and talked, and talked, and talked... There was so much to talk about! Sometimes they were joined by a host of a barn at which they were allowed to camp. On one night one of them brought his violin. The music traveled through the neighboring fields. This was a different kind of music that one could not hear at a disco club. It was sentimental and raw, the kind that most people today have forgotten.

“Oh, yeah...” Susie sighed. “That was the best vacation ever.”

And they didn’t even leave their town...

Right in front of their house, they saw their neighbors pulling in the driveway.

“Hello, neighbor!” dad saluted.

“Hi. Hello” the neighbor growled back with a sour face.

“Is everything ok? You seem upset” asked mom.

“I am exhausted” he replied. “What a nightmare! It was the worst holiday we’ve ever had!”

“How come?” dad was surprised? “I thought you went to Greece...”

“We did go to Greece” the man interrupted impatiently. “Only it turned out that the travel office offer was completely different from what we found when we got there. The hotel was lousy and much further from the beach than advertised. The food was disgusting. And the company? Just terrible, I’m telling yah.”

“Plus we got robbed” his wife added from the car. “We had to go through a lot of red tape to get our documents back! No more Greece for me, ever!” she finished bitterly.

The twins were leaning against the car.

“How did you like it?” Susie asked politely.

“Don’t ask” the girl shrugged. “It was awful. Once we got robbed, all my parents did was fight. And you? Did you have fun?”

“Best vacation ever!”

“You’re kidding! In your backyard?”

“That’s right. Though it wasn’t just the backyard.”

“That’s ridiculous! And so unfair!” the twins almost cried. “We were supposed to have a cool vacation, not you!”

Susie winked at her sister.

“You know what?” she smiled at her own idea. “You can still have a fantastic vacation. It’s only August. Our dad got a new job, so we can’t join you for long walks, but there’s good news!”

“What good news?”

“We have two tents. We can pitch them again in our backyard. One for you, and one for us. Would you like to sleep under the stars?”



The old man was resting in a big armchair covered with floral upholstery. His legs were covered with a thick blanket. Next to the armchair, on a small table, there was a cup of tea, a worn out Bible, and a plastic bag full of medications. The man was half sleeping and half meditating as he looked at the fire in a small, cast iron stove. The room was dim and quiet, except for ticking of an old, wooden clock. The wind whistled outside. From time to time, a stronger gust shook the windows, but the February cold did not get inside the house.

Out in the hall, behind the closed doors, the man's son, grandson and his wife were talking quietly.

"Are you sure this is the end?" asked the young woman grabbing her hus-

band's hand for comfort. She needed assurance and safety.

"Unfortunately, I think it is" the grandson sighed. "That's what the doctors are saying."

"I don't know what to do" the woman's eyes filled with tears.

"I'd like to remind you that my father is almost ninety years old and he's been through a lot" said the son, a well-built older gentleman stroking his long, grey beard. "I know him well enough to tell you that he probably doesn't



want us to tip-toe around him like he's some antique piece of china."

"But..." she cried "he's leaving us! They're giving him a week at the most..."

"My dear" the son said firmly "my father wanted to be with us in this time. He asked for it. He basically broke out of the hospital. If it hadn't been for the staff, he would have made a rope from bedsheets to climb down. Shocked? So was I when I saw the bedsheets tied together. Let's act normal, shall we? After all, he's still alive. "As long as you breath, don't say that you're dead", as one English general used to say."

"Hey! Anybody there?" they heard the old man's resolute voice.

"We're here, grandpa" said the woman.

"I promised my great grandchildren a story" he reminded them. "Could they come here?"

"Is it not going to wear you out, grandpa?" she said worriedly and opened the door slightly.

"Stop with your story already, my dear. I am the storyteller here! Yesterday I promised to tell them something, and I always try to keep my promises. Hurry up, or I will go find them myself" he rose in his chair a little, as though he really wanted to get up. The woman went out to call the youngest members of the family.

*

"Today's story will be as true as it gets" the old man looked at his four great grandchildren with twinkly eyes. They all sat on the carpet in front of the armchair and focused their eyes their great grandpa. Only the oldest girl sniffled and cried quietly. Her younger brother tried to comfort her, but when he touched her hand, she huffed at him angrily. The

youngest ones did not understand what was going on. They were waiting for the promised story while building the tallest wooden block tower in the world.

"What are you crying for, pumpkin?" the old man asked.

"Because I... I heard them talk..." she whimpered.

"Well, then it's good that you're crying" he replied with a pretended rebuke. "You must be ashamed. It's not nice to eavesdrop on other people's conversations. Not nice!"

"But that's not why I'm crying!" the girl protested. "It's because I heard such terrible things."

"What terrible things?" great grandpa asked with curiosity.

"About you. That you... that you..." those awful words just would not come out.

"That I am dying?" he smiled gently.

"And you say it with such peace?" one of the boys cut in. "You're not afraid? Not even a little bit? Ah! When I think about it, I feel so terribly sad... And I'm so afraid. Very afraid! Grandpa, you must be joking! How can you talk about it so peacefully?"

"I can!" the old man smiled at his own thoughts. "Especially when you think of all the things I've lived through, and for that long. Listen."

*

The city looked like one enormous whirl of fire. In the distance hollow thuds of artillery were heard. Sounds of machine guns and screams of people were combined with the rumble of collapsing buildings. A boy with a mail bag on his shoulder was dashing through the piles of rubble. He stopped frequently, then squatted and looked around with caution just to start his dangerous run again. Another

round of bullets flew by too close and made his ears ring.

He fell to the ground, right next to an upside down German vehicle. When the cannonade stopped for a while, he raised his head and... froze. Inside the wreckage of the car



he saw a little girl curled up under the seat. She looked at him completely terrified. Tears were flowing down her eyes.

“Where did you come from?” he asked.

Instead of answering, she tried to wedge herself even more under the seat.

“Do you not understand what I’m saying to you?” he asked with irritation. He had a job to do and a long way to run still, and this girl would not cooperate...

“Yes... no... *ich verstehe... ein bisschen*¹” she whispered.

“You German?” he asked surprised.

A sudden explosion tore apart one of the walls of a building behind them. The ground shook. Chunks of rubble and glass were flying everywhere around them. The boy moved closer to the distorted car door.

“What are you shaking for?” he scolded the girl. “You should not have attacked us! We didn’t start this war!”

“I not started...” she objected in a weak voice. “I have... *ich bin sieben Jahre alt*². Stupid war! My dad dead! My mom dead! Uncle gone somewhere. I here alone!”

¹*ich verstehe... ein bisschen* – I understand a little (German)

²*ich bin sieben Jahre alt* – I am seven years old (German)

“I not started! I not started!” he mocked her. “Of course it wasn’t you!” he barked looking in her wet eyes. “You’re just an innocent kid, aren’t you? What are you staring at?”

Another explosion shook the ground. The boy reached out his hand to her.

“All right. You’re coming with me. Your uncles are going to blow this place soon!”

“*Nein!*³ Uncle come back! He be angry! He often angry!”

“We’re going whether you want it or not! You are my prisoner! I’m taking you captive!” he said with firmness and puffed out his chest proudly. Why, he just captured his first ever prisoner. It does not matter that the said captive was hunkering down clad in a torn dress and stockings full of holes. A captive is a captive. *I will let the commander worry about the rest*, he decided with confidence. *Maybe she’s a daughter of some German big shot? Maybe we can use her somehow?*

They ran amidst the ruins, from one gateway to the next. They stopped at some basement to catch a breath and rest a while. All of a sudden, the rumble of shotguns was pierced by a loud whine of a diving plane. The engines roared louder and louder. Then the emergency sirens went off. Finally, there was a terrific boom followed by complete darkness.

“What is it?” the girl asked with terror.

“They bombed us! We’re buried. Buried, you understand?” the boy was screaming in panic. “I will die here because of you! If it weren’t for you, I would be far away from this place now!”

“Leave her alone. She’s just a little kid” came a voice from the dark.

³*Nein* – no (German)

The next moment, the light of an oil lamp penetrated the blackness enough for them to see a boy. He was skinny as a beanpole, his body covered in filthy rags.

“Welcome to my world” the pile of rags said.

“Who are you?” asked the boy visibly scared.

“I’m Isaak. I’ve been hiding here since the collapse of the uprising.”

“What? The uprising has not collapsed yet!”

“I’m talking about the ghetto uprising...”

They sat on some boxes in a tight nook surrounded by all kinds of shelves, bags and packages.

“I’ve been hiding in this basement for about a year now” said Isaak. “My whole family is dead. Everyone. I got away... and now I’m all alone. But I won’t give up! They will never get me!”

“I see you have some food here...” the boy pointed at a small makeshift pantry. “There are three of us now. The food won’t last too long. And the chance that someone finds us is slim... And you? How did you end up here?”

“There was a secret passage, but now it’s buried in rubble” Isaak waved his hand with resignation.

“I fear. Not my fault” said the girl.

“It sure isn’t. What’s your name?” asked Isaak.

“Martha” she replied.

“I am Ted” the boy also introduced himself. “But everyone calls me Dasher. That’s because I deliver mail faster than anyone else. Today is the first time” his voice trembled “I might not deliver. Tomorrow might not be different.” He kicked the bag with anger. The letters spilled out onto the rubble covered floor.

There was silence. Martha started piling the letters. Ted looked at it with indifference until a small flyer caught his eye. It was printed by the insurgents. Then there was another one, and another one.

More slipped out from between the letters. He picked up one of them and started reading, and as he read, he was more and more amazed.

“What is it?” asked Isaak.

“Here, read for yourself” Ted handed him one of the flyers.

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” “It’s a Psalm...” the boy was surprised “written by our king David.”

“Yes” Ted agreed “it’s Psalm 23. We learned it at school.”

“I too know it” Martha smiled shyly.

“You know what just occurred to me?” Isaak said in a serious voice. “King David had a really hard life, but God helped him and...”

“... He will help us, too” Ted finished. “I am sure of it” he added with confidence.”

“No help for me. Uncle fight with Polish people!” the girl spoke up. “He don’t like Polish! Very much!” Martha’s eyes filled with tears. She quickly wiped them off with her sleeve.



“And you Martha? Do you like Poles?” Isaak asked gently.

“I had a nanny. In Danzig⁴. She Polish. Very liked that nanny. She teach me speak Polish a little. Daddy died far away. Uncle came home very angry! Very, very angry! He

⁴Danzig (German) – now Gdańsk, a city in northern Poland

told nanny to go. I cried. Other Polish I don't know. Only you. I like you, but I am afraid, too" the girl admitted in broken Polish looking at Ted with fear in her eyes.

"Don't be silly" said Ted. "I was just teasing. You don't need to be afraid. We won't hurt you, I promise."

They all got quiet buried in their own thoughts. Martha broke the silence.

"What now? What we do?"

"Let's pray first" said Ted. "If God hadn't intended to help the three of us, He wouldn't have reminded us of this psalm."

"You are right!" Isaak agreed.

They bowed their heads and put their hands together to pray.

After a while Isaak's confident voice announced: "Let's start digging. We have to find the entrance to the canals."

*

"Yes, my dear" the old man smiled. "All of this was amazing... The meeting itself in that buried basement: a young insurgent courier, a German girl and a Jewish ghetto run-away. Three kids in the middle of the war nightmare. Each of us came from a different world, and each of us lost their parents in Warsaw. We all feared dying of hunger and thirst in the rubble of that basement. But God helped us! We maneuvered through the debris for one long week. God watched over us... Nothing crumbled on us, nothing crushed or collapsed... We found the way to the canals that Isaak talked about and managed to get out of that death trap."

The old man pondered for a while, his eyes were absent.

"Our paths never crossed again" he continued "but right then, it was the first time I understood that God had His own plan for our lives. If you give your life to Him and trust Him with all of your heart, you will never have to be afraid of anything, because there won't be anything to be afraid of."

"What about later? Did God ever help you later in your life?" asked the older of the girls.

"Yes, He helped me many times. But this story is not just about God helping us."

"Then what is it about?"

"It's about being sure that everything will end well, because God is with us. Everything that goes on, goes on because He had planned it so. That's why whatever is going to happen, will happen because it's best for us. I lived through the war, I got married, I have children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. True, things have sometimes been really hard. But back then, in that basement, I discovered something else. This discovery changed my life forever, though I didn't realize it at the time."

"What was it, Grandpa?"

The old man leaned over and opened his worn-out Bible. He pulled out an old, yellowish piece of paper from between its pages. He carefully smoothed it out in his shaky hands.

"Look, this is the flyer we found in my bag. The other side of it read:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord", and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." One of the boys read it loud.

"This is a passage from the tenth chapter of Paul's letter to Romans" grandpa explained. "I didn't notice this verse until I left the canals. I hope the other two saw it, too. Each of us had the same flyer."

“What does it mean, Grandpa?”

“This means that I do not have to be afraid. I am always at peace. Even now. Especially now. I know that when I die, I will enter eternal life. I will be at a completely different place. I will live forever with God. This is God’s gift,

the gift of salvation.”

“And all I have to do is say that Jesus is Lord?”

“Not quite!” the old man smiled. “Saying it is not enough. You have to believe with all of your heart and understand very well what your mouth has said. And you

have to accept all of the consequences of belonging to the Lord and the Lord owning us. Remember that: all the consequences.”

“What does this word mean? Conseq... what?” one of the younger boys was struggling to say it. “It’s a really hard word.”

“If there is something you don’t understand,” the old man pointed at the door “ask the grownups. They will explain things to you. And when you grow up yourselves, you will explain it to your own children.”

He rested his head on the pillow.

“Now go. I have to rest” he whispered “I am very tired.”

All the children tiptoed out of the old man’s room as he went into deep sleep.





The son looked at his father's peaceful face with love. Everything was fine. He slowly closed the door.

The old man was sleeping and dreaming about this small boy with a mailbag, a girl in a torn dress and a dreadfully skinny boy wrapped in rags. They all walked quietly along the dark canal. They knew that they were nearing the end as they saw a ray of light shining through the open manhole. That light was their promise of life, it carried a breath of fresh air and the radiance of a brand new day. It was a passage to a whole new world.



Patience

Yurek was sitting in the pew looking at his work with disapproval. The clay cup he had made looked like a pancake, as if trampled by an elephant. He clenched his teeth. Since the very first day of the arts class he's been trying to make something that would at least remotely resemble a cup or any dish, for that matter. But every time he tried, the effect was the same: a hopeless lump whose consistency was far from perfect. The clay mass would either leak between the boy's fingers and drip down the potter's wheel with the excess of water or become hard as a rock and could not be formed at all.

The instructor walked up to Yurek's table and looked at his work with displeasure. He did not even know what to say. The lump of clay on the wheel spoke for itself. And pretty loudly, too.

"It didn't come out right" the boy stated the obvious.

The teacher only nodded.

"I messed it up again!" Yurek raised his voice. "I can't do it. I just can't!"

“Maybe you should try again?” the instructor asked.

“What for? I will blow it again” the boy shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve tried so many times and... look at it!”

The man sat down next to his student. Crossing his arms he looked calmly at the boy.

“It was the same with the pictures of the mountains, putty dog and most of the other things you’ve tried.”

“I’m all thumbs! I’m good for nothing...” the boy felt tears coming to his eyes. He gritted his teeth and flexed all his muscles trying to hold it together.

“That is not true” said the instructor stressing each word. “I saw your notebook in the teacher’s room.”

Yurek turned red. He knew exactly what the teacher was talking about. Last week the math teacher was checking everyone’s notebooks. Instead of math exercises and homework, his notebook was filled with drawings of towers, knights, dragons and castles. Page after page. He drew with whatever was available: pen, pencil, crayons or markers. The math teacher loudly expressed her annoyance to the delight of the whole class. She said Yurek was taking math too lightly, and one cannot be successful in life without good knowledge of this subject. He got the worst possible mark and a sarcastic

remark in his notebook. Then she took that notebook to the teachers’ room and showed it to the entire teaching staff including his arts instructor.

“To make it clear, I don’t approve of what you’ve done, because during math you should be doing math and not



draw dragons” the instructor said firmly. “You deserved that mark, no doubt about it. On the other hand...” the tone of his voice became more cheerful “those drawings were really good. You deserved the highest mark for those” he added jokingly. “You really can draw well” the man’s eyes sparked with playfulness. “Too bad you don’t do so well in my class. So, what is up with that?”

“I don’t know, sir” Yurek was embarrassed. “I guess, it’s like this: when I have to do something I don’t like doing, I want to be done with it as soon as possible. But when I do things I like, it’s a different matter. Math is really boring...” he blurted out and then became quiet. He was in trouble anyway, because it was obvious he did not pay any attention during math.

“It seems that other than interest, you also lack patience. Look, Martha is finishing her cup only now. It’s her first! In the same time, you made seven of those. That’s about two, three minutes per cup. No wonder they all turned out like they did. Maybe you should try to work more slowly, but with more precision?”

“Fine. I will try” the boy agreed cautiously. “One last time.”

“It will be your last time today. We finish class in ten minutes” his instructor replied.

Yurek reached for a ball of clay to form the bottom of the cup. He flattened it, and it looked quite okay.

So far, so good, he thought. “*Now I need to make a thin roller and wrap it around the bottom.*” He went on to roll a lump of clay. His hands worked fast to shape a roller of irregular proportions. The boy looked at it and decided it was good enough. He could always make another one and connect the two. It will be good.

It wasn’t good.

The next roller he formed was too big and too heavy. *No big deal. I will even it out and pull it up.* Yurek quickly glued the two pieces together. It didn’t look too good. *Water will smooth it out and it will be okay.* He nodded to himself trying to feel confident. *Water will smooth it out.* He dipped his hand in the bucket and scooped up some water. A few minutes later a cup was formed on the wheel. Not bad. Yurek was just about to show off his work of art, when the cup caved in. It was too thin and too diluted.

That was too much! The young would-be potter got so mad, he crumpled the clay into a ball and threw it out the window as far as he could. A loud slap was heard as the heavy lump of clay landed outside. A shrilling sound of car alarm followed. Everyone rushed to the windows. They looked outside in shock.



It was quite an unusual sight! The windshield of the principal's car was decorated with watery clay. The principal himself was standing there, too. He looked in disbelief at his car, then at the windows of the arts classroom, and then at his nice suit which was hit with the debris. With every second his face was turning purpler. The students ran back to their pews making a lot of noise in the process.

The art instructor clenched his lips and sent a chilling look around the class. A hollow clutter of the principal's boots filled the silence that followed.

"He's coming... the Head is coming" anxious whispers rolled throughout the room.

The principal opened the door and stood still. His eyes were shooting thunderbolts, and his face announced a terrible storm to come. Oh, the rain of tears was coming!

"Sir" he said to the instructor in the sweetest voice possible. "Was this supposed to be some artistic experiment?"

The art teacher was in a tough spot. The principal had every right to accuse him, a professional with extensive experience, of being incapable of controlling his class.

"Who did this?" the principal's voice became angry.

"It was me" Yurek stood up with his head down.

"Why did you think it was a good idea to throw a lump of clay at me and my car?" the principal asked with irony.

"The cup... it didn't come out right..." the boy was muddling his words.

"Follow me."

All pale and feeble, Yurek obeyed.

In the office, the principle took off the stained jacket and demanded:

"I would like an explanation. And it had better be a good one! I've been hearing about your antics almost every week, now."

"I... I don't know why I tossed that cup out the window. I had no idea you were standing there... I was mad because it didn't come out right and..." the boy tried to hide his frustration, but the tears flowing down his face gave him away.

"I hate the arts class!" he burst out. "I am no good at it!"

"No good? I've heard something else" the principal seemed a little calmer. "I saw you math notebook, so I don't buy that "no good" nonsense of yours" he looked straight into the boy's eyes. "It's not the talent that you lack. You need more patience and self-discipline. It's about time you started working on these qualities."

Yurek was surprised. This is not what he had expected.

"I appreciate your courage. You admitted your wrongs, you didn't lie or try to trick me" said the principal. Then he took a deep breath and added: "This is what we're going to do. You will apologize to your arts instructor, and when the classes are over, you will wash my car."

Yurek was stunned. Not only did the principal not yell at him, call his parents or suspended him, he told him he was talented! That was hard to believe!

"What about your jacket, sir?" he asked quietly.

"I will take care of that. I don't want you to lay your impatient hands on it" the principal joked.

The boy shifted from one foot to the other, hung down his head and mumbled:

"I am really sorry, sir... I really didn't mean to..."

The school bell rang. The principal nodded with approval.

"Nice of you to apologize" he said and sent him off.

*

When the classes were over, Yurek started on the car. It didn't go too well. The clay dried and it was not easy to separate it from the wipers. It filled every little crack, covered the windshield and the hood. It didn't take long for the boy to start feeling impatient. He felt like throwing the rag to the ground.

"Hang on. I will help you" suddenly a voice came from behind.

With sour face, Yurek turned around and saw a student from another class. They sometimes passed one another in the hall, but never talked.

"Why would you?" he asked suspiciously.

"For two reasons. First, I've been meaning to talk to you. Second, I know how to clean these cracks."

He pulled out a small toolbox out of his bag. Out of the bag came a plastic spatula, a cloth, and a soft, thin wire. He tore the cloth into a few narrow pieces and wrapped the spatula with one of them. Then he attached the wire and showed Yurek the tool. Now, it was a lot easier to reach every crack and clean the clay out.

"Thanks for your help" Yurek was finally cheerful. "And what was it that you wanted to talk about?"

"I heard that you're good at drawing castles and knights..." he began.

"Oh, no" Yurek interrupted. "How do you know that?"

"A little bird told me" the boy joked. "But seriously, everyone's talking about it" he added bashfully seeing his fellow student's annoyed face.

"Can't keep a secret in this place" Yurek said with sarcasm. "I guess the whole school knows about my math notebook disaster."

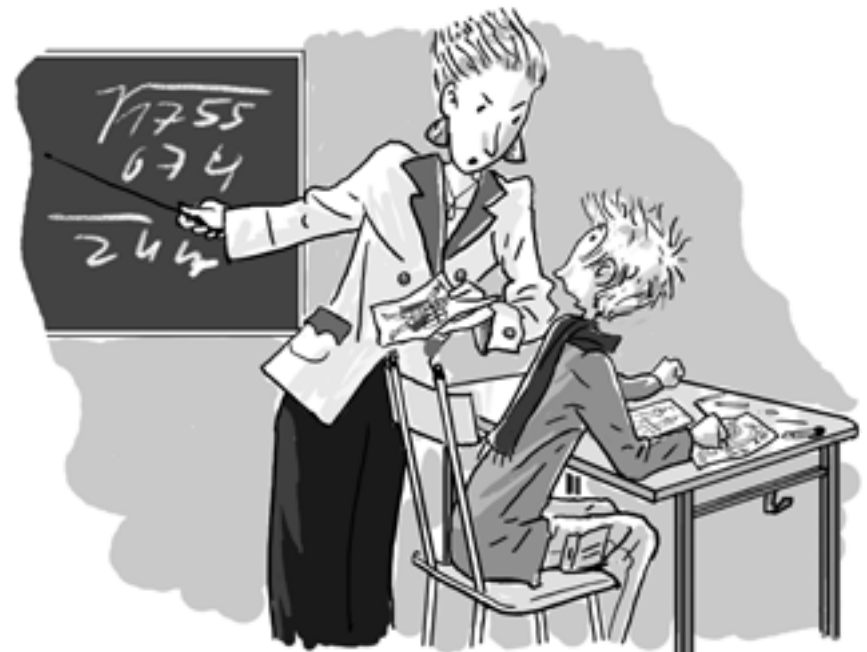
"Give it a break. It's not about math. It's about your drawings" the other boy said playfully.

"What about them", asked Yurek?

"Well..." the boy opened his toolbox. It was filled with all kinds of strange tools about which Yurek knew nothing about. "I go to this arts club with a couple my buddies. We do cool stuff there. There is one group that makes model planes, another one that makes model ships. We build mockups."

"Mockups?" Yurek perked up. "What kind?"

"For example ones that depict old battles. Or fantasy mockups. We want to build the ruins from "Lord of the Rings". And "Pirate Island" the boy spoke with enthusiasm as he continued to clean the clay off the principal's car. "Right now, we're working on a mockup of a medieval castle. It's really cool! It will be a miniature of a real thing!"



Well, not really a miniature. It will be about six feet tall. It barely fits in the room!” the boy seemed genuinely thrilled.

“Wow!” Yurek listened and became more and more intrigued. He’s always been interested in castles.

“We have to complete it for a fair that’s taking place two months from now. We need more hands. Would you like to help out?”

“I don’t know...” the boy hesitated. “I don’t know if I can. I’ve never done anything like that.”

“No worries. We will show you everything. Let’s meet on Friday after school. Here’s the club’s address” he handed Yurek a small, brown business card.

*

Yurek couldn’t wait for Friday to come. Right after school he ran to the club. He didn’t stop until he saw a big gate that opened to a large garden. Down the garden alley there stood a great mysterious house that resembled an old castle. He was welcomed by a large, yellow dog which lazily waved his tail, sniffed him and saw him off to the door. Yurek knocked. A few seconds later a boy opened.

“Hi” he said. “My name’s Patrick. Some people call me Stunt Man.”

“Stunt Man?”

“That’s right” the boy smiled. “That’s because I constantly get in some kind of trouble, but I always come out unscathed.”

They walked through a hallway to a large room filled with about a dozen boys and a few girls. They were all working on something. The room resembled a school assembly hall, except it was full of various mockups, car miniatures, toy soldiers, and all kinds of artifacts of unknown

origin. Armor shields were hanging on walls, and the shelves were lined up with knight helmets. In the corner, there was an antiquated clothes hanger stand. It had a carved rim that served as a holder for umbrellas or walking sticks, but instead was used for swords, sabers and rapiers. There also hung other pieces of armor, to complete the picture. What really made an impression on the boy was the fact that all of these armor articles were not just cheap imitations one could buy at a supermarket. They all looked as if they have just been used by real knights in real battles: helmets and shields had many dents, and the shiny, jagged swords with worn-out hafts looked like they have been used by many brave warriors.

“Do you fight here?” Yurek asked.

“No, but we practice sometimes” Stunt Man answered. “Some of the older boys organize knight tournaments. Do you like the swords?”

“Yeah. They’re great!”

“You want to hold one?”

“Can I?”

“Sure, you can” said a young man who approached the boys. “It’s not as heavy as you might think.”

“This is our instructor, Mr. Blaise” Patrick introduced the man to Yurek.

“And you must be Yurek, correct?”

The boy nodded.

“I’m happy to meet you” Mr. Blaise smiled and handed Yurek one of the swords. “Go ahead. Take it. It won’t bite you.”

Yurek grabbed it with both hands and looked with fascination at the unadorned, pointed down hilt guard. When it came to bladed weapons, he knew just about everything there was to know. He had spent many long hours reading books about them and even more time drawing them. He

often wondered what it would be like to feel the weight of a real sword in his hands, to touch its pommel and blade... His dream was just coming true.

“I see you’re quite excited about becoming a knight!” Mr. Blaise joked. “You must know that tournaments are just icing on the cake. For now” he added in a more serious voice “I can offer you hard work on our mockup. Are you in?”

“I am not sure if am any good at it, sir” the boy said nervously.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way, as wise people say. I don’t see why you wouldn’t do well.”

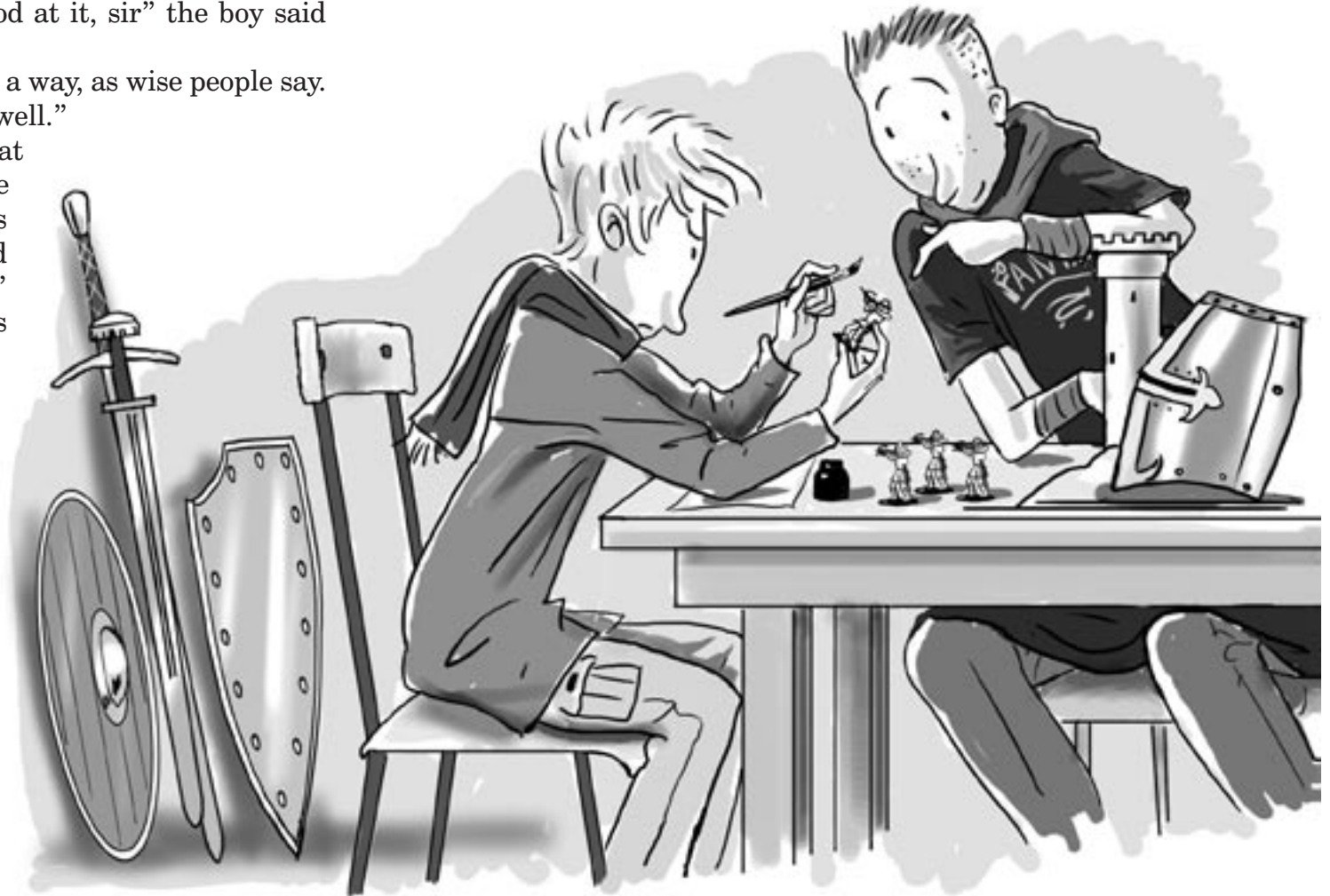
“Because I am really bad at those kinds of things. One of the worst in my class. It usually takes me only a few minutes to build stuff, but it never comes out right” he blurted it one breath. “My arts instructor says I have no patience.”

“That’s because you can’t do anything well in just a few minutes. You know what?” the man looked at the boy playfully “I will tell you a secret. I used to be very impatient myself, but I worked on it and managed to change it. If you work on it, you will succeed, too! It’s important not to get discouraged and to keep trying. What do you think? You want to give it a shot?”

“I guess so... Yes.” Yurek did not hesitate any more. He really liked being there.

“Great! Why don’t you sit at the table over there and paint those figures?”

Yurek looked at a pile of plastic crossbowmen and frowned.



“All of them? There are like fifty of them! I won’t have enough time!”

“What do you mean?” the instructor winked at the boy. “Didn’t you just say that you do everything quickly?”

“Well, yeah... but this can’t be done.”

“You shouldn’t assume that something cannot be done, because then you set yourself up for a failure. There’s always a way, remember? The right technique is half the success.”

“Is there a right technique to paint those?”

“Of course there is. You start with painting one element with one color for each figure. For example, make all the breastplates gray. Then you can paint their pants brown or some other color. And then you do all the other parts: bows, quivers and helmets. What do you say? Challenge accepted?”

Yurek nodded enthusiastically and started to work.

It didn’t go very well, and he even thought of going home a few times. But every time he raised his head, further on the same table, he saw plastic figures that have already been finished by someone else. Not all of them were perfect, but whoever worked on them did not give up. *If they could do it, I can too*, he thought and pressed on.

Time went by really quickly and before he knew it, it was time to go home.

“Not bad” Mr. Blaise said.

“But I haven’t even done half of it, yet” Yurek sounded worried.

“That’s okay. You can finish next time” the instructor replied.

Yurek wasn’t in a hurry to leave. One thought that occurred to him while he was working bothered him.

“How to be patient?” he asked shyly. “How can I be patient like you and everyone else here?”

Mr. Blaise looked at him as if he had expected this question.

“Good question. Do you know how to ride a bike?”

“Of course I do” the boy shrugged. “I’ve been riding for a few good years now, ever since I got a bike from my grandma.”

“Were you able to ride it from day one?”

“Well, no. I fell a lot at the beginning” Yurek winced at the memory of his scraped knees.

“But you’ve learned.”

“I have!”

“That’s what patience is all about. You had no idea how to ride a bike when you first got it. But you tried again and



again until you did it well. If you hadn't tried, your bike would still be parked in your basement."

"So I can train to be patient just like I did with the bike?" Yurek shook his head with disbelief.

"Exactly! Practice makes perfect. You train and wait for the effects."

"I didn't think of it this way. I thought you're either patient or not. I thought it was just a quality we have or lack."

"Not quite. Wait, I want to give you something."

The instructor disappeared in one of the rooms and soon returned with two little plants in plastic cups.

"These are tomato seedlings. Take them. I grew them myself" he said proudly. "Do you like tomatoes?"

"I love tomatoes! But these seedlings are so tiny. It's hard to believe they will produce big red tomatoes."

"They will, trust me. You just have to patiently care for them."

"But I don't have a garden..." Yurek fretted. "Where will I replant them?"

"Don't worry. This kind can be grown in a pot or on your balcony. Just make sure they have enough light and..."

"I know! Water!" the boy interrupted. "I have to water them!"

"That's right" Mr. Blaise said cheerfully. "These plants are going to test your patience. If you care for them, water them daily, fertilize them, remove the dry leaves, support the branches with poles when they're grown, they will pay you back with wonderful fruit. I was patient with these seedlings. Now it's your turn. If you want to see fruit, you need to be patient and diligent. Otherwise, no tomato salad for dinner."

*

Yurek looked at the seedlings with sulky eyes. He put the cups on his desk. *I will try*, he thought. *No big deal if it doesn't work. I just won't have home grown tomatoes, that's all.* Then he grabbed two old pots from the top of his wardrobe. They used to be plants there, but now they were just weeds. He tossed those away, replaced the soil, and planted the tomatoes in it. Then he watered them and put the pots on the windowsill. He was going to let them be his roommates for a while until he learned to water them regularly. Then, he would put them out on his balcony. Yurek smiled at the plants and thought: *Don't you worry. I can do this!*

He was ready to practice patience.



Kindness

The apartment was very small, just two rooms and a kitchen. Old fashioned furniture barely fit inside and clashed with a dull radiator, pipe fittings that ran across the wall, and a big plastic window. This cramped interior looked as though some absent-minded scientist has transferred it in a time machine from a different century and randomly dropped it here. The woman bustling around also looked like a character from an old painting: short, pudgy, with rosy cheeks, dressed in an elegant gray skirt and a white blouse. Her white bouffant hair brought to mind genteel old ladies of the past.

A boy sitting at a large round table covered with a lace cloth was stirring tea in a fragile porcelain cup. He wondered whether he would manage to drink the tea without breaking it.

“I’m glad you’ve accepted my invitation” the woman sat across her nephew with her own cup of tea. “You said on the phone that you wanted to work for the whole month.

I guess nothing has changed?” she gave her young guest a warm smile.

“Nope. Nothing’s changed” the boy replied resolutely. “That was the agreement with my parents. If I want to go to the scout camp this summer, I need to make money to pay for it. The money situation has been tough recently...”

“I know” she nodded with understanding. “Your mom said they had shut down the factory in your town and many people lost their jobs. What a shame.”

“Half of the town was laid off including my parents. Dad is trying to find something. Mom wants to open a preschool in the part of the house that’s unused. You know, where my grandparents used to live. But it will take a while to get things rolling. For now, it is what it is. They can’t pay for the camp...” Mac wasn’t going to cry over spilt milk. He was looking for a solution and found one. “That’s why I called you, auntie. You said you could use help during winter.”

“I could, indeed” she said with a bright face. “I’m busy as a bee.”

She seemed very happy about having things to do. “And there are things around the house that need attention and for which I don’t always have the time.”

She stood up and walked over to an old, beautifully carved wardrobe. She opened one door. The hinges gave out an awful squeaky sound. All of the shelves were filled with binders and colorful cardboard boxes. In the drawer she pulled, there lay some thick, yellowed envelopes.

“This is my treasure trove” she laughed. “Results of many years of work. Various notes, documents, pictures, drawings and more. It finally needs to be organized.”

“Quite a pile you collected, auntie. But honestly, this is work for a few hours” Mac worried. “What would I do with this for a whole month?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself...” his aunt joked. “Come, I will show you the rest.”

Mac was expecting to see another pile of papers in the other room. *Another couple of hours of worth of work*, he thought.

“Come inside” the woman held the door for him.

He entered the room and looked around speechless. Besides a bed as huge as aunt’s other furniture, there was a solid L-shaped desk. By the window, there was a state-of-the-art monitor. The keyboard and mouse were hidden in a sliding tray. On the opposite side of the desk, there stood the latest model of printer with a built-in scanner and copier, and... a pre-war typewriter.

“This is my office” said the aunt proudly. “This is where I work when I’m back home from the newsroom. I’ve been using the computer for many years now, but have kept my mom’s old typewriter. I like it so much I couldn’t just throw it away. I guess I’m sentimental, because working on it would not be very practical, even though it still works fine...” she paused seeing excitement in the boy’s eyes. But he wasn’t looking at her vintage gadget. His eyes were firmly set on the high tech computer equipment.

“You might get sick of it” she said joyfully.

“Sick of the computer? Do you want me to work on the computer?” he smiled broadly. “What needs to be done?”

“Everything in this wardrobe needs to be archived and documented. Every binder and every envelope. All of it! You will need to date every document.”

“But it will take all of your disk space!”

She looked at the boy amused.

“The fact that I serve tea in antique china and have feelings for my mom’s old typewriter doesn’t mean I’m some backward old weirdo. I appreciate modern gadgets and that’s why I bought an external disk. How does two terabytes sound? I believe it will be more than enough to store everything.”



Mac was shocked. He had no idea that someone his aunt's age would have a clue about the latest achievements in technology. What a surprise!

"Surprised?" she laughed heartily. "Kids your age consider thirty year olds to be old people who are only interested in South American soap operas. You're not the only ones who got enchanted with computers" she added, as though reading his mind. "It's a fantastic tool. You will get the chance to see it tomorrow. Today, we have a day off! Maybe you want to go to the city and sightsee a little?"

"Where would we go?" he asked with curiosity.

"We could go to the concert hall."

"I've never been to a concert hall."

"Then it's about time you went. What's this face? You look like a scared rabbit."

*

The next morning Mac was awakened by intense howling. He opened his eyes and for a second or two wondered where he was. Still half-asleep, he looked around and fixed his eyes on the desk with the computer. Excited, he got out of bed. The computer he had back home was old and slow. This was something else. *Time to get to work*, he thought with eagerness. The kitchen table was laid for breakfast, and the note propped up against the sugar bowl said: "Start with the highest shelf on the left. I will be in the newsroom until late. Call me if you need anything. Bon appétit, Aunt Anne".

Attached to the note was her business card with the address of the newspaper and the phone number.

He ate the breakfast to the sound of the howling dog which went on even as the boy patiently scanned one document after another. *Thank God this job doesn't require a lot of attention*, he thought.

All of a sudden, a series of thuds came from the apartment next door. The subwoofer boomed a steady rhythm of rap music accompanied by offensive lyrics. Windows were shaking, aunt's fragile china was vibrating in the cupboard, and the dog was howling. It was mayhem! The house was sinking in the sea of noise. *That's just terrific!*, the boy thought, *how do I make this dog stop? Maybe this rap lover plays music so loud to drown out the dog?*

At about noon a fight broke out in the hallway outside. Someone was screaming, someone else was cursing and calling the Police. The music got even louder. Apparently, whoever was listening to it, liked the rapper's foul language more than the profanities out his door.

Mack lost his focus.

The fight continued for another thirty minutes. Then the music got quiet. Only the dog kept howling.

*

Aunt Anne returned in the late afternoon.

"You don't look so good, my dear" she said with a smile as she walked through the door. "Did the work wear you out or was it the neighbors?"

"Work? You call it work? It's fun!" Mac raised his thumb. "But this awful howling, the music, the fighting... how do you cope with it all, auntie? How can you work in such chaos?"

"It's a nightmare, isn't it?" the aunt made a sour face as if she just tasted lemon. "It's been like that in this building for years."

"Dog howling, loud music and fights?"

"Not just that" she replied with sadness. "I will tell you more, if you want. Get ready. On Mondays my fridge is usually empty and I dine out."

“Pizza?” the boy perked up.

“Not a chance” the aunt said teasingly. “We are going to have something totally different, but equally tasty.”

*

The restaurant was rather small, with only a few tables, but had a cool vibe. Its interior was simple but functional and the whole place was adorned with beautiful plants. They picked a table in the corner. Mac tried to mind his manners the way his dad taught him: sit straight, keep the elbows off the table, don’t look around... He was really tense. There were no restaurants like that in his little town. All they had was a small bistro that served very few dishes and a pizzeria. Neither of them boasted many customers. This was his first time in a real restaurant. The meal his aunt ordered for him was delicious and beautifully served. The boy was under the impression that everyone here knew his aunt, and that she also was friends with everyone and enjoyed being in this place. When they were done eating, she moved her plate away, leaned back and said hesitantly:

“I promised you an explanation... In the past our apartment building was pretty normal. It was quite, clean and just nice... I cannot even tell you when this changed” she pondered for a while and then continued with noticeable reluctance. “It all happened gradually and almost undetectably, until one day a fight erupted among the neighbors and an open war began. I don’t believe anyone actually knows how it started or who started it, but as you can see, it’s getting worse and worse.”

“I don’t get it. After all, everyone suffers and nothing good ever comes out of it for any of the neighbors. What is

the fight about? Do you know these people, auntie? Who are they?” the boy wondered.

“On the ground floor there are two guys who are always arguing about politics. Back when there was martial law in Poland, one of them was a police officer and the other was active in the anti-government movement. They hate one another and will not miss any opportunity for a brawl. It’s verbal, of course, but very frequent. The older guy who lives above them just loves to scream at everyone and complain about everything. He likes to pick on kids. If he ever sees kids on the lawn in front of the building, he chases them away and calls the Municipal Police.

“That’s not cool! They’re not doing anything wrong!” Mac was outraged.

“Other things are not cool either. You saw the dirty walls. And it was probably the same kids who broke the intercom” she said with irony. “The flower pot in the staircase doubles for an ashtray, and no one remembers it used to be a beautiful plant. No one cared for it and it finally died.”

Mac was shaking his head as she told him stories.

“Next to the raucous old man” aunt Anne continued “lives the owner of the howling dog. She works all day long. The dog stays at home and howls. Next door is the place where the “Great Professor” lives” the aunt painted quotation marks in the air. “He never cleans the staircase when it’s his turn, he never greets anyone. Instead, he managed to flood the whole floor once or twice. Up on the second floor we have the loud music lover and the family that likes alcohol a bit too much. They often fight and sometimes it gets physical. It’s the twins from that family that often get in trouble with the older man from the first floor. And then, there is yours truly, the arrogant old lady from the second floor.”

“Auntie! You don’t want to tell me that you’re involved in all these fights, do you?” Mac opened his mouth in surprise. She was embarrassed. She blushed and looked away.

“Well...” she sighed. “At first I was an ideal neighbor: kind, nice, understanding. But it wasn’t from the heart. I felt like I needed to admonish them, teach them a lesson. That wasn’t nice of me at all. I was just snobbish. Not too long ago I realized that I was just as bad as everyone else.”

“How is that possible?” Mac couldn’t imagine this distinguished lady screaming at her neighbors or making graffiti on the walls.

“I just considered myself better than the rest of them. I was above all that. I stopped noticing my neighbors and I stopped caring that my behavior might bother them. Since they all bother me..., you know what I mean? I felt justified.”

“But what exactly do you do?” Mac didn’t give up.

“Different things. I take baths really late at night, for example. Or I am noisy in the kitchen early in the morning, I type on the typewriter, and not because I have to turn in some article, I just like typing on that old thing.

“But that’s not a big deal. You bathe late because you go to bed late. And the typing...”

“You’re wrong, my dear” the aunt interrupted. “The sounds from the bathroom carry easily throughout the building, that’s the acoustics we have here. And the typing can be heard on the whole floor, especially early in the morning.”

“I guess you’re right. The bathing and the kitchen noises can be a little...” Mac became quiet. He wasn’t sure how to finish the sentence. “But the typing? This building isn’t that quiet to make it stand out.”

“It is at four in the morning.”

“You know what, auntie?” Mac pondered for a while. He stared at the glass of juice, as though it held the answer to this difficult situation. “In the building I live in it used to be the same. But now it’s completely different.”

“Why? What’s changed?”

“Everything. The neighbors like and help each other. I think it could be the same here.”

“How do you think that could happen, kid? Do you think you can snap your fingers and make people change their behavior? Or go visit them and ask if they could start being nice to each other and they will just listen to this young stranger and live happily ever after? It’s not a fairy tale, my dear” the aunt sounded irritated. “There will not be a happy end. These people will not cooperate.”

“I am not going to ask them to. I don’t want to force anyone to change.”

“Then what do you want to do?”

“I think I know... but I will keep it a secret for now.”

*

It was late in the afternoon when Mac knocked on the neighbor’s door. The dog was barking its head off. The woman opened the door slightly and gave him a suspicious look.

“What do you want?” it seemed that she could bark, too.

“Good afternoon. I’ve been living here for a few days” he started off with uncertainty. “I was just thinking whether you would... Would you let me walk your dog? I have a lot of time. I could take your dog for walks. He’s probably lonely being locked all day long... and stuff” he finished. The lady’s unfriendly look and her harsh tone made him feel uneasy.

“What about the dog? Is it too loud? Does it bother you? Does it play on your nerves?”

“He is a little loud, that is true. But that probably means something troubles him. I bet he feels lonely all by himself in an empty apartment. Maybe he misses you or maybe he’s afraid? I would like to help him. I don’t like seeing animals suffer.”

“Do you know how to care for a dog? It’s a live creature, not a toy” she said sounding a bit more approachable.

“I have a dog myself, so yes” Mac smiled. “I miss my Samson. If I could play with your dog, we would both feel better.”

“Samson? Your dog’s name is Samson? That is too funny!” she said surprised and added cheerfully. “It’s nice of you to want to help. It’s true that the dog is home alone most of the day and no wonder it howls after me. Do you live with Anne?” she asked.

“I do.”

“Well, then you can take her for walks. And yes, it’s a girl. I will give you spare keys.”

“What is her name?”

“Delilah. What a fit for your Samson, huh?” she laughed loudly.

*

Mac was slowly putting his plan into action. He was excited about his first mission of walking Delilah. The dog seemed a lot happier, but when he dropped her off at the empty apartment, she wailed even louder. He decided to take her with him to aunt Anne’s apartment after walks. It was a lot quieter now, but that was not a perfect solution. After

all, he didn’t live here for good and would be gone one day. He didn’t know what to do.

On one morning as he was running down the stairs with Delilah, he bumped into the fighting neighbors from the ground floor.

“And what did you do? You hunted people down and threw them in prison!” the older man was red with anger and he waved his hands an inch away from the other man’s face.

“I never hunted people! You’re crazy! I had other things to do!”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?” the man asked ironically.

“You know it well! I’ve told you a million times! I was a dog trainer! I trained police dogs to help fight crime!”



To look for narcotics and pick up scents! They're better than people" he looked pointedly at his accuser. "And smarter!"

"Sure, sure! And you also played trombone in the police orchestra. Nice story! I've heard it a hundred times!" he replied spitefully. "If you're so good with dogs, why don't you do something about that howling beast from upstairs."

Mac stopped.

"Excuse me, gentlemen" he stood in between the fuming men. "I couldn't help but overhear... This is a really good idea!" Delilah barked joyfully in agreement. "If you are an experienced dog trainer, maybe you could help me with Delilah? I'm not sure I'm good at taking care of her. Could you help?"

The former opposition activist looked cunningly at his neighbor and said:

"So? Are you going to agree to this experiment? This is your chance to prove that you really didn't put people like me in jail."

"I didn't put you in jail, did I?" the other man retorted. "And nobody else did!" he added triumphantly. "That's how much of an activist you were!"

Seeing that the fight was escalating, Mac quickly interrupted: "So? What do you think, sir? Can you help?"

"You know what? I will!" the man accepted the challenge. "I don't like that howling either, just as I don't like this guy's constant babbling."

"So, do we have a deal?"

"We do."

"Thank you very much!" Mac was very happy and so was Delilah which she showed by wagging her tail.

*

Mac's idea worked again. After only a few days of training, Delilah stopped jerking the leash, learned to heel, and didn't howl any more. The retired dog trainer spent nearly a whole day with the dog. The owner of the dog was both surprised and thankful for this new development. She also seemed happier offering kind words and a smile to the trainer. To the shock of all the neighbors, the brawls between the two men ended, too. Mac decided to move to the next part of his plan. Each afternoon he grabbed a mop and thoroughly cleaned the staircase. Graffiti was the tough part. Scrubbing the walls worked only for one day, as the next day graffiti appeared again. He did not give up. With his own money he bought a few plants and put them on windowsills. But soon someone decided to claim ownership of the pots which saddened the boy deeply. There was nothing he could do about that. He could, however, do something about the dirt, and so he continued his daily mop and bucket ritual. One day he heard a door slam on the top floor followed by a pitter-patter of running feet. It was the twins from apartment number 6. They were a little younger than Mac.

Seeing Mac at work, one of them said:

"Dude, why are you doing this?"

"To make it clean and nice."

"But why do you care? You don't even live here."

"I am living here this month."

"That's just stupid. This makes no sense. It has always been dirty and always will be, no matter how often you clean."

"You're trying to bite off more than you can chew" the other twin showed off his knowledge of idioms. "Can't you see? What you're doing is useless."



They both laughed scornfully and ran downstairs.
“They’re right!”

Mac heard a low voice behind him. A big, thuggish-looking man was walking towards him, swaying from side to side. His elbows bent, arms wide, insistent look.

“You can’t change anything here” he repeated after the twins.

“Maybe I can, sir...” Mac looked straight into the man’s eyes without fear. “I think the changes need to come in small steps. One thing at a time. And not in some distant place, but starting from here.”

“And what then? Everyone will be happy, right?” the man mocked.

“No sir, but it will be better. At least a tiny bit better.”

“Sure. Watch me change into a tux and run to the theatre.”

“Ha!” the boy laughed trying to imagine this bundle of muscles tucked into a tuxedo. “How about if you turned down the music a notch and maybe swear a little less? And you could help me clean or at least talk those twins into helping me. I am sure they would listen to you. You like rap and hip-hop, they respect that.”

“Are you not afraid of me at all?”

the man was surprised.

“Not really. After all, we’re neighbors.”

“Hmmm... right. You don’t hurt the neighbors, right? Know what? Maybe I will help you. Maybe... And don’t call me ‘sir’. That annoys the sh...oot out of me. Call me Jaw-bone.”

*

Early next morning the boys from apartment 6 knocked on aunt Anne's door. They looked rather unhappy holding plants in their hands.

"Jawbone told us to let you know that the pots were found" said one of them nervously.

"And that we have to help you clean" added the other.

The walls needed scrubbing again. The three of them went to work on that, though the brothers didn't quite know what to do. Maybe this was the first time ever they held brushes in their hands. The whole thing made them laugh. They fooled around but somehow slowly the work was being accomplished.



When they got to the first floor, they heard a door unlock.

"Grandpa Punk is coming" said one of the boys.

"Who? What?"

"Grandpa Punk. That's what we call him, because he always grumbles about something, yells at us and calls us 'punks'. And we pull different pranks to rile him up. It's a lot of fun."

They got quiet, as Grandpa Punk opened the door loudly. He was indeed old and rather small in posture.

"What kind of mischief are you into again, you punks?" he roared and struck his cane against the floor. He was in a combative mood, as usual. "I will show you...!"

The twins dropped the brushes and ran up the stairs where they leaned on the rail and watched the old man from a distance. They wondered what Mac would do.

"What are you doing here, punk? All you rascals do is make trouble! Why are you vandalizing the staircase?"

"I'm not vandalizing it. I'm cleaning it" the boy answered calmly.

Grandpa Punk looked around suspiciously, but the bucket filled with detergents left no doubt.

"All right then" he said. "And what about those two punks?"

"Those two punks are helping me."

"They are helping you? Those two?" he flare up. "Let me tell you something, those two are troublemakers and all they do is cause problems."

"Maybe so, but today they helped clean most of the graffiti from this wall."

The man shook his head in disbelief.

"That is something else" he said. "That is something else, I'm telling ya."

"Thanks" one of the twins whispered.

“For what?”

“For covering us.”

“I didn’t have to” Mac laughed. “You really were helping me, weren’t you?”

“I guess so” the other boy smiled.

There was no need to brush the walls the next day. They were clean.

*

In the evening Mac heard a knock on the door. He opened and saw a tall, slim man who seemed a bit nervous.

“Good evening” he said, then cleared his throat and ran his hand through his hair.

Mac greeted the man with a friendly smile.

“I.. I am the father of the twins. They told me about you. I know the walls are now clean and all...” he struggled with words. “I thought... I thought I could paint those walls. I know how to paint. It wouldn’t take too long... Except, I don’t have any paint. Can’t afford it at the moment.”

“That’s a great idea! I will think of something. If I give you money, will you buy paint?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea” he said worriedly. “Money doesn’t like me. You’d better buy it yourself. I can tell you what kind of paint is needed and once we have it, I promise to do give you brand new walls.”

“Deal. I will put something together” the boy was excited about this project.

*

The last of aunt Anne’s pictures was scanned and transferred onto the disk. His task was completed.

Mac sighed and turned off the computer. Tomorrow he will return home. First, he will go to the store to buy all the things he needs for his scout camp. He’s already picked an inexpensive backpack and a sleeping bag. He will need to have enough to buy a ticket home, and whatever is left will go towards the camp fee. The pocketknife he wanted would have to wait. That’s okay. He can survive the camp without it.

Like every Monday, on the evening before, he made a date with aunt Anne in the city. This was their farewell dinner. He was supposed to go to the restaurant by himself and wait, in case she had to stay longer in the newsroom. He left the apartment. The refurbished walls smelled of fresh paint. *The painter kept his word*, Mac smiled. The windowsills boasted beautiful plants and the floor was clean. Even the intercom worked.

Soon Mac was in front of the restaurant. He walked in and to his amazement saw almost all of his neighbors there. Grandpa Punk went up to him.

“We would like to thank you, mister” he said in an emotional voice “because you’ve changed us all this past month.”

“But I didn’t do anything...”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jawbone laughed. “You did a lot! Am I right or what?” he looked at all the people gathered round the tables. They all nodded with approval. “We have a gift for you” he finished and picked up a large box from under the table.

“Come on, now. Open it!” he heard the excited voice of Delilah’s owner.

With shaky hands, Mac tore the box open. Inside the box he found a beautiful backpack with metal frame, sleeping bag, mattress, mess tin and a flashlight. He couldn’t believe his eyes! The stuff he got was more than he could afford!

“I don’t know what to say” he was touched. “Thank you!”

“We are thankful for you, mister” said Grandpa Punk. “I hope that every time you look at these gifts, you will think of us.”

“I wouldn’t forget you, anyways” the boy said with a big smile. “Plus, I’m not going to the end of the world. I will visit aunt Anne and all of you soon.”



Mac put each gift on the ground for everyone to see. He was so happy! There was a lot of laughter, talk and hugs. He was among real friends.

The silence that followed caused him to raise his head. “Professor...” one of the twins whispered.

“He hasn’t spoken to anyone in years” the other one added.

The man approached Mac.

“Dear boy” he said in a deep voice “I had forgotten what it meant to help others. I had forgotten what kindness was. You reminded me of these things. Thank you. I would also like to leave you with a little gift.”

Professor was holding an old etui made of smooth, shiny leather. “This is my pocket knife. It is very old and superbly made. I used it at every camp I’ve gone to, when I was a scout, just like you are today.”

He handed Mac the knife with the hilt made of deer horn. “I hope you can use it for many years to come” he said to the boy, and then turned to all the neighbors. “To you all, I owe an apology for my behavior. Please forgive me. The method of small steps that Mac told us about worked. Every passing day is better than the day before.”

“That’s right, professor!” Jawbone clapped his hands with excitement. “Right on! And you don’t need to apologize. After all, we’re all neighbors, aren’t we?”



An old, rickety bus was traveling very slowly down a narrow, rural road. A few sleepy passengers looked out the windows with boredom.

Jonny was sitting on a sunken seat covered with poor imitation leather. He tried to surf the net, but every time his fingers touched the tablet, the bus bounced on one of the many holes in the road as if it wanted to increase his irritation. Yes, he was irritated and angry. This anger settled in his heart many months before, and it grew bigger and bigger, like a big balloon, and when it couldn't grow any longer it exploded with a loud boom. In those moments, Jonny did not mince words as he screamed and stomped his feet with recklessness. Sometimes he would even toss things and destroy whatever he had at hand.

Then he felt regret, but that only ignited his rage. The vicious cycle repeated itself. His friends started avoiding him, discouraged by his constant outbursts.

It all started in December, right after Christmas. His parents told him they were getting divorced. They said

they had the right to be happy. He did not understand. To him, his home and his parents were all the happiness he needed. He had never before gone through any hardships and thought it would stay like that forever. But that didn't happen. His father moved out. His mom stayed at work until early evening hours. He spent most of his time by himself playing on the computer or looking for something to watch on TV until late night. He had to get used to quick microwave dinners and pizza.

When he was growing up, he felt safe. Mom and dad were always there. All of that ended on the day they decided to split and things would never be the same since then. Jonny couldn't wrap his mind around it all. He didn't know what the future would bring and could not accept this situation. When he realized there was nothing he could do to fix it, anger took over. He was outraged! He was mad at his parents, mad at the school psychologist, mad at his teachers, and even mad at the Internet and television. Jonny was mad at everyone and everything, and he did not hesitate to show it whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Before he knew it, the summer break came. This year it was in July in August, but this fact somehow surprised his parents. They did not think to plan any camps or trips for him. Not only was he not able to spend this time with both of them, but each of them had their plans and they did not include him. Jonny was fuming with anger. Even the many gifts he received as an apology did not appease him. And they had reasons to apologize! Summer with the grandparents! In their forest lodge! Just thinking about it made him want to cry. He only stayed with them once when he was three years old, and he could not remember anything. He simply did not know them. Yes, he's seen the photographs and said "hello" on the phone when they

called, but that was it. Jonny's parents could never find time to visit them. Work, social life, holidays abroad took all of their time. Whenever a miracle happened and they found time to plan a trip, some disaster happened: a broken car, dad's friend visiting from another part of the world, mom's sudden business trip. Always something.

Now he was on the way to see his grandparents. By himself. First, he had to ride a crowded train, and then transferred onto this joke of a bus. He was angry all the way, and he looked it. None of the passengers wanted to strike a conversation seeing his face. He didn't mind that at all, either.

Jonny took his eyes off the tablet and looked outside and saw vast fields that seemed to go on forever. What a dreadful sight! The landscape changed for a short time when the bus reached a small forest.

What a hopeless wasteland, he thought. *I must have traveled back in time! This bus is as old as my folks! And those people? Look at the clothes they're wearing! Second hand stores and flea markets! I bet none of them ever heard of the radio, let alone the Internet!*

Soon the bus made another stop and a large woman got on. She was carrying two baskets. One covered with a white cloth, and the other one had a tenant – a live goose!

This one doesn't even realize the war is long over, the boy thought with sarcasm and sneered.

The woman must have taken his smirk for a smile, as she wobbled through the whole length of the bus and sat next to him.

"Where are you going, boy?" she asked.

"Just ahead" he muttered and quickly returned to his tablet as though it could make him invisible.

"And what is ahead?" she didn't give up.

He looked at her coldly.

"The forest lodge."

"Ah! You must be the forest ranger's grandson!" she exclaimed causing everyone on the bus to turn around.

How embarrassing, he thought. *I think I'm going to jump off this bus at the next stop!*

"The ranger will be so happy to see you!" she continued not caring that the boy's face was going from pale to red and back. "You will have to get off soon, my dear. The lodge is just behind this forest."

He quickly got up relieved. His sudden movement scared the goose which hissed loudly and then bit him on the buttock.

"Ouch!" he shouted. "What is this beast?"

"You frightened her when you jumped up all of a sudden, dear" the woman laughed boisterously. "Balbina gets scared easily, don't you baby?" she looked at the goose and smacked her lips.

Jonny felt he was about to explode if she said one more word...

The bus came to a screeching stop.

"The Lodge!" the driver announced.

Jonny exhaled with relief and started towards the door grimacing and limping. Stupid bird! Who would have thought a goose can bite this hard!

"Hold on!" the woman hollered. "Let me make it up to you. Here's something to munch on. Take it." She produced a plastic bag from the other basket and started filling it with apples.

"Are you going to be long, granny?" the driver said with a smile. "I'm on a schedule here."

"Don't you worry. You will get some, too" she replied cheerfully.

Jonny's stood there squeezing the handle of his bag harder and harder. *I hate apples!*



“Here!” the woman said. “Give these to your grandpa. Ask her to make you an apple pie.”

I hate apple pies! But he didn't say anything. He wanted this ride to be over, so he grabbed the bag and jumped off the bus as if someone was chasing him. He didn't even say 'thank you'. How could he thank for all the embarrassment he experienced?

The driver honked the horn, the bus engine roared and moved on in a cloud of smoke. Jonny was finally alone. He looked around and couldn't believe his eyes. This cannot be true. This cannot be the right stop. Oh, my! The goose lady said that was it, and so did the driver, but there was

nothing here except for a thick wall of trees and a narrow path. On the other side of road there were only fields, all the way to the horizon. They smelled of compost. Everything was so quiet.

The boy clenched his teeth. He looked at the stop. There was no bench. What a surprise! He sat on his bag and pulled out his phone to call grandpa and ask him to come get him. No signal.

Sure! Why would they have signal here? Even birds don't fly to this God-forgotten place! They turn around at the bus stop before.

As if to prove his theory wrong, there was a sudden loud squawk. He jumped to his feet, scared and saw a big, colorful bird on one of the trees. It tilted its head, studied the boy's face and squawked again, even louder. *Okay! I get the message. Birds do fly here,* Jonny shrugged.

He rested again on his suitcase and tried to find GPS signal. Holy cow! He was really out in the sticks! How can one connect to any server from here? He threw his useless phone to the ground. *What am I going to do now? How do I find civilization again? Where do I sleep and eat?* Tears filled his eyes. *How could they just leave me here?*, he pitied himself. *It's so unfair!*

With a corner of his eye he saw something move on the road. A horse was slowly pulling a cart. The farmer on top of the cart had a cowboy hat on. Jonny wiped his tears and quickly found the phone in the grass. As the horse wagon approached, he could see more and more details. Head down, the horse was dragging its feet as if it was ready for a nap. The farmer was already past that stage and snoring. The wagon was filled with some tin containers. Seeing

the boy, the horse brayed quietly. The farmer opened his eyes.

“How did you get here, young man?” he shouted.

“By bus” Jonny shrugged. “I sure didn’t come here on a plane.”

The man propped his elbows on his knees and loosened the reins.

“Maybe you drove here and wild boars stole your car?” the man showed he could also be sarcastic.

Then he got serious. “Speaking of planes. They tried to land one during the flood. That was something else, I’m



telling you. Terrible times for the people here. No help could reach the village, that’s how bad it was...”

“How far is the lodge in Little Mill?” the boy interrupted impatiently.

“Around three, maybe four miles.”

“That far?” Jonny groaned. “How will I get there?”

“How about walking? I’m sure you’re fitter than you look. You can do it. When worst comes to worst, maybe you can catch a plane!” he added jokingly seeing the boy’s miserable face. “All right, all right, chin up, young man. On my way back, I can pick you up and drop you off the lodge.”

“When will you be coming back?”

“Two hours. Three at the most.”

The boy felt hopeless. Apparently, people here had a special concept of time. One mile or one hour didn’t make much difference. He didn’t have a choice. He had to get to that stinking lodge one way or another. The sooner, the better. He has to quickly call one of his parents and ask them to come and take him from this awful place.

“I guess, I will walk.”

“As you wish” the man said. “Maybe at least I can deliver your luggage for you?”

“Nah. It’s okay. I will make it.”

“Wait. Have some milk before you go!” the farmer jumped off the wagon with vigor and opened one of the containers. He poured some milk into a tin cup and handed it to Jonny. “You can keep it. It’s a gift.”

The boy looked at this unusual present with suspicion. Meanwhile, the dairyman jumped back up, smacked his lips at the horse, and took off slowly.

“God bless you, young man!” he bid farewell.

Jonny shrugged his shoulders again and looked at the cup of milk with disgust.

He was going to pour it out as soon as the wagon was far enough. *This milk smells really strange*, he thought, but decided to take a little sip. It tasted very much unlike the milk from the city that he was used to. It was cooled and surprisingly delicious. It left a taste of fresh butter and a sweetness of Milky Way candy on his tongue. No! It was even better than that! He gulped it down and put the cup in his bag.

He looked around again. Not a living soul. He walked towards the wooded path and into the forest. The suitcase rattled behind him and jumped on bumps, rocks and tree roots falling over all the time. Jonny was getting angry again. He barely walked a hundred feet and was ready to quit. Sweat was flowing down his neck, and the cool sneakers he was wearing were already full of sand and hurting his feet. *If they cared about me, they would have picked me up from the bus stop*, he thought feeling more and more bitter. *I wouldn't have to tear through this jungle. But do they care? No, they don't. And neither do my parents!*

All of a sudden, he heard the sound of a bike bell. The warning came from a girl who was riding behind him on an old, dilapidated bicycle. A few years younger than him, she was fair-haired, wore a long dress that was too big for her and rubber boots. *Here comes the local beauty queen*, the boy thought mockingly.

"Hi!" she said huffing and puffing and stopped the bike right in front of him. "You must be Jonny."

"I must be" he growled.

"Your grandparents asked me to come meet you at the bus stop and help you. They couldn't come because their car broke down" she spoke fast and kept wiping her sweaty forehead leaving dark dust smudges on it."



“I can manage. I don’t need some girl’s help.”

“Why are you so...?” the girl didn’t finish. She made a gesture as if not wanting to have an argument.

“Anyway, girl or not, but I can help you. You can barely walk. You’re limping...” she said trying to appease him. “What did you do to your foot?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re right” she replied unabashed. “Here, let me help you with your suitcase. I will put it on the back of the bike. It will be easier than trying to pull it on these little wheels.”

Jonny didn’t react or help.

The girl took out a piece of string out of her pocket, then picked up the suitcase and placed it on the bike’s carrier. He was surprised at her strength.

“Hold it here” she commanded.

She impressed him so much, that he did as he was told without a single complaint.

The girl pushed the bike slowly and carefully.

“At this pace we will get there tomorrow. I have a better idea” Jonny grabbed the bike.

“Are you going to push it? I thought your feet were hurting. Can you manage?” she asked with concern.

“I’ll just ride the bike to the lodge, and you can walk.”

“Wait! You can’t...”

“Yes, I can” he interrupted. “You were going walk anyway, weren’t you? It will be easier with the suitcase.”

He jumped onto the bicycle losing balance for just a second and pedaled away.

“Wait!” she yelled after him. “There’s one dangerous...!”

“I’ll be fine!” he didn’t let her finish.

“Stop! Don’t go that way! I’ll show you a better way! There’s a turn we need to take!”

He wouldn’t listen. Yeah, maybe she’s strong, but apparently not too brave. Girls! Without saying ‘thank you’, he left her behind with one little bag and a sack full of apples. All he thought about was getting to that lodge and calling his parents. He wanted to go back home. As soon as possible!

The path ran along a small but steep rocky slope. Jonny was riding fast. The wheels bounced on the rough terrain, but he didn’t look or care. He just wanted to get to the phone as quickly as he could.

When he hit a large rock, there was no time to react.

The bike stood on its front wheel, while the back wheel was spinning like a top. The boy panicked. As hard as he could he pressed the hand brake down, knowing that he was in trouble. With the suitcase on the carrier, the bike swayed from side to side and rolled down the slope.



Somewhere in the distance he heard the fading voice of the girl, and then the whole world went upside down.

*

He woke up the next morning tired and hungry. He was in bed covered with a thin comforter. His hand hurt a lot. In fact, everything else hurt, too: every muscle and bone. He groaned at the sight of bandages, plasters and cast. What a pile of misery he was! He slowly started to remember yesterday's accident: the pain in his hand, the ride on the wagon to the lodge, and then the trip to the hospital. *That is just great!*, he thought. He looked at the wooden walls of the lodge and tried to sit up, but could not.

"Better stay down" he heard his grandpa's low and quiet voice.

He walked up to the boy's bed and put a cup of water to his lips. It tasted so refreshing.

"You're up already, grandpa?" Jonny asked softly.

"Old people don't need much sleep."

"Were you here all the time?"

"We took turns with grandma."

Jonny wanted to disappear. He was embarrassed about it all. The girl, the farmer who ended up helping him. He didn't even talk to any of them after the accident. Hurt and exhausted, he slept like a baby until now.

"How are you feeling, Jonny?"

"I guess, I'm better. Except, all these people helped me, and I..." he paused not knowing what to say.

Grandpa looked at him with a big smile.

"This is not a good time to worry about that. You're alive, that's what counts. You were pretty lucky" he added putting on a more serious face. "It was a close call. Your

head hit the ground just an inch away from a large rock. It could have been crushed like an eggshell."

"How did the farmer find me so soon? I thought he was going to be returning a few hours later" the boy asked in a weak voice.

Grandpa pulled up a chair next to his bed.

"Kate heard your screaming and the noise. When she found you, you were knocked out, so she ran to the lodge for help..."

"Kate?" the boy interrupted. "Her name is Kate? I remember she was trying to revive me, but I passed out."

"She's a brave girl" grandpa said. "Old Jimmy saw her and turned the wagon around. It's not easy to get lost here, because there's just one road, but for you, a city slicker the forest can be scary. And the suitcase was heavy, too. So Old Jimmy decided to help."

"Old Jimmy? The one who carried milk on the wagon? He gave me some to taste in a tin cup" the boy recalled.

"That's right! Old Jimmy is always ready to help. He's our hero" grandpa said with pride.

"Hero? What did he do?" Jonny was curious.

"Some time ago, we had a big flood here. The water was high, people had no access to the outside world. After one week, everyone's supplies ran out. Whatever reserves people had, got flooded. To make things worse, there was a shortage of drinking water. Everyone remembers the 1997 flood here. The water stood for almost a month. Some parts of the land were not accessible for even two weeks. In some places the water was so high, it reached the roofs. Yeah... and there was another disaster. There was one lady, Theresa is her name, who's had asthma for many years and needed to use an inhaler every day. Well, that thing got lost in the water. She couldn't breathe, she was suffocating.

They sent a medical helicopter, but the water was so high it couldn't find a place to land. Jimmy was on that chopper and decided he would parachute down with the new inhaler. Jumping in those conditions was dangerous! He didn't know where he would land. The flood carried all kinds of objects. He managed to land on the roof of a barn. What an acrobat! Theresa got her inhaler and medications, and Jimmy stayed in the village after he fell in love with one of the local girls. He settled here and owns a farm now."

Jonny was silent, his eyes fixed on the comforter. He felt ashamed for treating this man so unkindly.

"But, to finish the story" grandpa said. "When Kate got to the lodge, Jimmy was already transporting you to the village, to the Caraways, because they're the only ones with the car here. Well, I also have one, but it broke just before you got here on the bus. It's an old piece of junk. Good thing Mrs. Caraway had just gotten home."

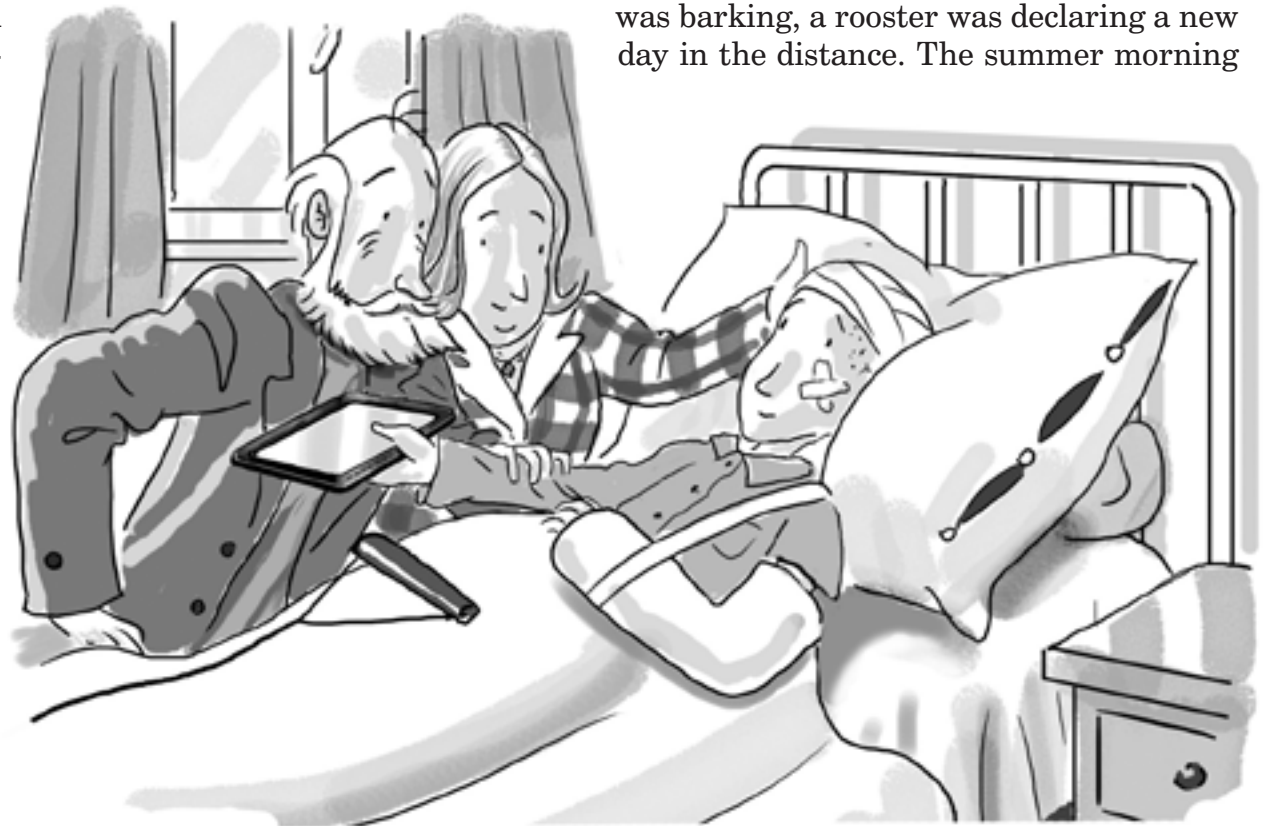
"Yes. I remember some lady driving me to the hospital" the boy whispered. "But it was all blurry. This Jimmy man put me on the back seat and off we went."

"Mrs. Caraway, she's a character, you know?" grandpa laughed. "She only got her driver's license a few weeks ago. People in the village joke she should return it, because she is afraid to drive. But with you in the back, she was like a race driver! She left you at the hospital with Jimmy and came back to get us" grandpa smiled broadly and continued: "You know, she was blaming herself and Balbina for your accident, because Balbina bit you on the buttock, I heard."

"Oh, no" Jonny moaned. *This goose woman who gave me apples is Mrs. Caraway. If it weren't for her...* He had another reason to feel even more ashamed. "It's not their fault, grandpa" he said quietly.

"I know, I know" grandpa nodded. "You were really fortunate. You only broke your hand and got some bruises. They were going to keep you in the hospital, but they know your grandma. The people in the village also come to her for advice rather than travel all the way there" he laughed. "They say that a doctor never retires."

It got quiet in the room. The only sounds came from the outside. The birds were chirping, the dog was barking, a rooster was declaring a new day in the distance. The summer morning



brought the smell of the forest, fresh milk, sun-heated soil, and freshly cut grass.

Jonny closed his eyes.

Grandpa tiptoed out of the room.

The boy did not sleep. He was thinking about it all. *I behaved like... like... a jerk. I was mean to all these people as if they had hurt me in some way. But it's not their fault my parents had divorced. They probably didn't even know about that. I was rude to Old Jimmy and to Mrs. Caraway. I took Kate's bike and left her on her own. And if it weren't for all of them... They were not mad at me, though they had reasons to be. They didn't pay me back. They helped me.*

Tears were going down his face. He will apologize to them. Maybe they will forgive him.

The boy spotted his tablet on a table next to the window. It suffered a few scratches, but survived the accident. He wanted to reach for it, but changed his mind. *There's probably no Wi-Fi here, anyway.*

Outside the window, he heard voices. It was Kate, Old Jimmy, Mrs. Caraway and grandma.

“The poor guy's asleep” grandma said. “He needs sleep. That's the best medicine. He will be up and about in a day or two, I'm sure. In about a month, they will take off his cast. He's young, he will recover soon. Sit down, my dears. I'll bring some apple pie. I made it last night from your apples, Mrs. Caraway.”

I had to keep my hands and head busy to release the tension...

Jonny heard shuffling of feet and creaking of wicker chairs.

“I don't know how to thank you. If it weren't for you all, I don't know what would have happened” grandma was moved almost to tears.

They're not mad at me, Jonny thought. They were really worried about me. More tears flowed down his cheeks. He looked at the tablet again, reached for it and put it away in one of the drawers of his night stand. *You know what? I don't think I'll be needing you.*



Faithfulness

The wooden sword whistled through the air and struck the trunk of an old cherry tree. The tree shook and sprinkled the ground with an array of white flowers.

“You missed!” Willie shouted with triumph. “You always miss, ha ha!” he laughed spitefully. “Obviously, I have to be the general! You’re younger and you can’t fight!”

“So what?” Mark retorted. “Not everyone has to know how to fight! I am a lot smarter than you!”

“Oh, really?” Willie said ironically. “And how is that going to help you hit the right spot? That’s all you had to do. Simple. Your school grades are good for nothing here.”

“Maybe not! But the brain can be very useful. A general needs to have a lot of smart ideas, and you don’t have any! All you can do is fight and run around with that wooden sword” Mark puckered his lips. “How long can you play this game?”

“You’re younger” Willie repeated. “You’re supposed to listen to me.”

“I am not going to! Forget it! And I’m not younger!”

“Yes, you are. You were born half an hour after me!”

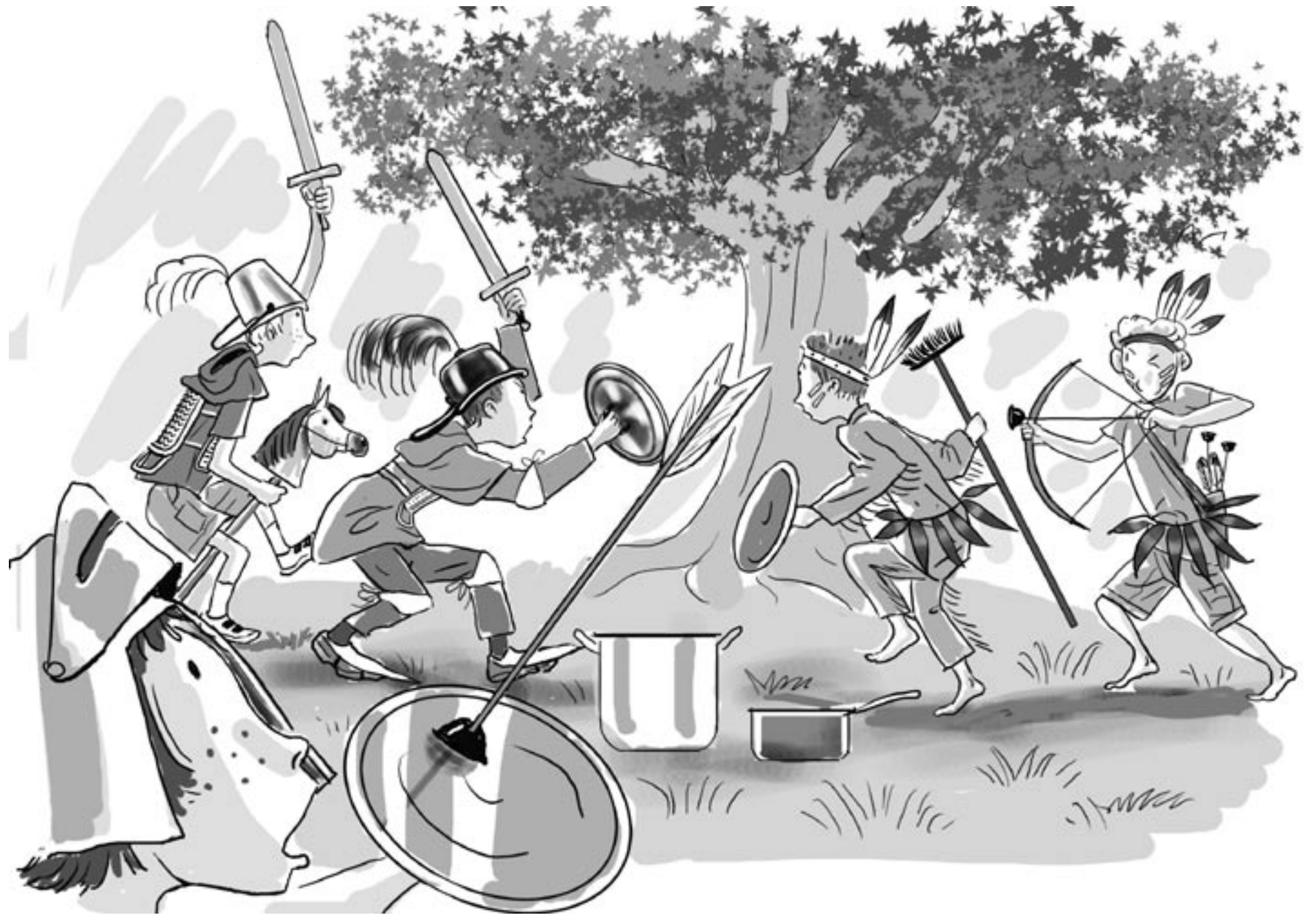
“How do you know? Maybe it was the other way around and they just made a mistake at the hospital? I could have been first!”

“Dream on! They couldn’t have made a mistake. We’re not identical.”

Willie was not right. Maybe they were not technically identical, but people often mixed the up. Even their own mom. When they were quiet and in the same room, it was very difficult to tell one from the other. But other than looks, they were just as different as could be. Willie was full of energy. He could run around all day with his sword, play the ball or shoot arrows, as evidenced by his scraped knees and torn clothes. None of the trees in their big garden was safe when he was there.

Mark liked peace and quiet. He loved reading books in some quite corner and spent a lot of time watching bees during the day or stars at night.

The boys lived in the country. Their parents’ orchard doubled as a playground for most of the neighborhood kids, and the twins felt like it was their job was to manage all of them. Willie’s games always turned into knight crusades or battleship wars. Mark preferred to make everyone look for treasure, travel to other planets or discover new lands. In those moments, the orchard turned into a distant planet, desert island or an oasis. They loved playing in that orchard. There was only one problem. A big problem. Both of the boys wanted to be the leaders, because being the leader gave them the right to think of the next game to play. It also meant that the other twin would have to submit. All of that turned just about every game into a fight, and sometimes that’s all it was. The boys could never find a compromise. It got to be so bad, that everyone had enough. The games ended, the fights didn’t.



One of the neighborhood boys had an idea:

“Maybe you could share leadership? One month Willie, next month Mark. That should be fair.”

This sensible idea was an excuse for another fight. Who would lead first? That could not be settled, and everything went back to the way it was.

During one of the disputes as to who should be the general, the boys started to shout really loud. Their fists clenched, fuming eyes, angry faces – a brawl was about to break out.

“You’re stupid!” Mark yelled. “I should be the leader! How can anyone with a brain your size be in charge of anything?”

“Stupid? Me?” Willie’s face turned red. “I’m smart enough to find your noggin with this fist!”

He rushed at his brother snorting like an angry bull.

Mark reacted with equal fury. He closed his eyes and recklessly thrashed his arms around.

“Ouch!” shouted Willie in pain. “My eye! You gave me a black eye! I’ll get you for this!”

The boys started wrestling. They fell on the grass and rolled around while hitting each other.

Suddenly, they heard the steady rumble sound of an old engine.

“It’s dad!” they both shouted at the same time and got on their feet.

A big, loud, green tractor rolled into the yard. It was worn out by years of service in the fields. The sun and the rain left many blemishes on the once shiny paint. It shook slowly, like an old man trying to walk without a cane and roared defiantly coughing up billows of black smoke. The boys’ father parked it in front of the porch and turned off the engine. He jumped out of the cabin. Dressed in a plaid shirt, dungarees and rubber boots, he looked rather incon-

spicuous, but that impression would quickly have to be abandoned. There was some peace and poise about him. The way he looked and all his gestures exuded confidence. He managed a large piece of land and did it very well. Their big house was in great shape, the pond they owned was full of fish, and the orchard was not only beautiful for the eyes, but provided good quality fruit. The man enjoyed great reputation in the village, and it was for a reason. He was the village headman, something like a mayor in a city.

He stretched and looked at his sons. The color of Willie’s left eyelid was just starting to look like that of a ripe plum swelling more and more. His cheek was red, and it would probably turn all shades of red in the coming days. Mark’s shirt was torn like a flag of a defeated army.

“You’ve been fighting again...” dad said unsurprised and narrowed his eyes. “I don’t get it. How can you think that fighting will ever solve any problem? You know very well that’s not how it works.”

The brothers looked at the ground.

“What was it this time? Same as ever?”

“Yes, dad. Same as ever” Mark blurted out. “Willie always wants to be the boss. He says he’s better than me and that I can’t be...”

“That’s not true!” Willie interrupted. “He’s the one saying those things!”

“Take it easy, boys!” dad sat on the step of the tractor. “I’ve heard all of this before. It’s not your first fight. It’s another fight when neither of you wants to knock it off!”

The boys were ashamed, but stubborn.

“Well. Seems like we have a problem” dad sighed and turned towards the house: “Honey, will you come out for a second, please?”



Mom stood in the door. She looked at the boys and put her hands on her hips which usually meant she was not happy.

“Again?”

“Again” dad nodded. “Maybe it’s time to have a man to man... to man. I think we will go for a little trip. Just the three of us. Would you make us some sandwiches, honey?”

“Why do you need sandwiches?” mom said with sarcasm. “Can’t those two warriors hunt some food?”

The boys weren’t sure what to think. They expected to be scolded, and instead they got a trip? They looked at their parents puzzled.

“That’s not a bad idea” said dad. “Except I’m not sure if this is hunting season. Let’s just go with the good old picnic basket with a bottle of raspberry juice and some potatoes.”

He clapped his hands.

“Run inside, boys. Grab your sleeping bags, mats and some warm clothes. You can bring the jackknives you got from grandpa. Mark, I think we could use your binoculars.”

Still confused, they ran to their rooms.

“I hope I can straighten these whippersnappers out” the man whispered to his wife. “These fights are getting old.”

“Yes. Something needs to change” mam agreed. “After all, they’re brothers, not enemies.”

*

The tractor rolled slowly down a sandy road drowning the sounds of all the buzzing cars on the nearby highway. The boys were sitting on two small seats mounted just above the wheels. They didn’t even think to complain about the comfort or the noise. It wasn’t every day they got to ride on the tractor.

They enjoyed every minute of it. The ride took about an hour until they got to a small hill. In the middle of it there was a shrubbery which looked like a small island in the middle of an ocean.

Blooming shrubs surrounded a red boulder overgrown with moss. It's because of this boulder that the hill was never plowed. Now it was home to many wild bushes which have gradually overtaken almost the whole area. There were legends that the locals liked to tell vacationers about this particular hill shrubbery.

The father stopped the tractor and turned off the engine. Suddenly, it became very quiet. The boys jumped onto the grass. Their ears filled with the music of nature: crickets were singing, bees were buzzing, birds were chirping. Green fields braided with rows of blue cornflowers and red poppies spread all the way to the horizon. The wind carried a strong aroma of blooming orchards.

It was beautiful.

Dad opened a big container attached to the back of the tractor and took out a tent, supplies basket, a bag of potatoes, and a large sack filled with firewood.

"You pitch the tent, and I will move the tractor" he said to the boys. "We can't park it too close to the fire. Safety first!"

The boys worked fast and soon their small, blue tent was up on the edge of the field, right at the foothill. Dad stretched a big hammock between two trees and put a blue canopy over it.

"You sleep in the tent, and I sleep in the hammock" he ordered.

It was nearly an evening when they finished putting up camp. When they placed the last rock in the circle where the fire would be and neatly piled up all the wood, dad said it was time for a walk.



The boys explored the area touching every tree and climbing every boulder, with dad's help. Mark's binoculars came in handy when they spotted a hare dashing through the meadow and a flock of birds in the sky. Out in the distance they even saw a herd of deer.

When the setting sun colored the clouds red and the sky become dark blue, they became tired and sat quietly on the mats. Dad started the fire. They pierced the sausages with wooden sticks and roasted them over the flames. They sizzled invitingly and gave out the most wonderful smell. The buns and the juice mom packed for them were delicious, too.

It was getting dark. The firelight warmed their faces and reflected their silhouettes on the ground. And then it got completely dark with the darkness that can only be experienced away from city lights.

When water started bubbling in a pot set on three rocks on the edge of the fire, dad made some fruit tea and then, using two sticks, he placed a few potatoes in the hot ashes.

“Before the potatoes are ready, let’s talk about these fights of yours” he said.

“Dad, no!” the boys shouted in unison.

“It’s been so much fun!” Mark added. “Why ruin it?”

“That’s right!” Willie agreed.

“Well, well, well... listen to you two! You can agree on something, after all” dad teased. “I am not going to ruin anything. Just the opposite. I hope to be able to fix something” he added in a more serious tone and threw a few more logs into the fire. Tiny sparks shot up towards the sky.

“I want to tell you a story” dad smiles. “The story of this boulder.”

“We know it” Mark shrugged. “We know all of them! Everyone seems to have one. About the giant that brought it here or that it fell from the Moon...”

“That’s true” dad replied with a smile. “There are lots of legends and fables, but there is only one true story. Not many people remember it. It’s been replaced by silly tales to feed the curious tourists. The story I want to tell you I heard from my grandfather, who heard it from his grandfather, and so on. It’s been told in our family for hundreds of years. But if you’re not interested, we can just hit the hay...” he finished with a sly smirk.

The twins’ eyes sparkled.

“Dad! You can’t do that! Now you have to tell us!” they both demanded.

“Okay. I will tell you” dad agreed. “A long time ago this land was governed by a king who had three sons. They were all born on the same day.”

“What? Royal triplets? That sounds phony already. It can’t be a true story.”

“It is as true as it gets, just listen. For some time the king was trying to decide who would become his successor. He was getting older and would gladly give his throne to one of the sons. According to tradition it was the firstborn son that should become the next king. There was just one problem: no one knew which of the boys was born first. They were identical. The king had to come up with a different plan. He would wander around his many chambers and gardens trying to think of the best solution. One night, after talking to his advisors, he finally knew what to do.”

The boys listened to every word with excitement.

“On the next day, when the inhabitants of the castle got out of their beds, they were speechless with horror. Soon the news spread across the kingdom: the king was gone. He was missing! Everyone looked for him everywhere. They checked every nook of the castle, from bottom up. Every house in the court was searched. The king simply vanished!”

“Vanished...” Willie shivered.

“Vanished into thin air!” dad repeated. “It was agreed that the three brothers would venture out to look for their father. They were supposed to leave immediately and meet again in one year and one day. The meeting place was the big, red boulder on the hill right in the middle of the kingdom. If their quest was unsuccessful, one of them would sit on the throne.”

“Wait, dad! Are you telling us that it’s the same boulder as the one on this hill?” Mark was stunned.

“Yes. It is the same boulder” the father smiled. “Didn’t I tell you that this story was true?”

Mark couldn’t contain his shock.

“Don’t interrupt!” Willie said impatiently. “What happened next, dad?”

“The young princes” dad continued “set out on their journeys. Each went in a different direction. The first one traveled north. He rode his horse for a long time until he reached a sandy beach. The sea extended before his eyes as far as he could see. In the distance he saw a sailing ship shining in the sun. Much nearer, close to the beach, there was a small boat rocked by waves, and in it, a knight in a shiny, gold armor. He waved in a friendly way and said:”

“Welcome, my prince who is known for bravery! My companions and I are about to set out on a sea voyage to unknown lands. We expect to battle pirates and have many adventures. There are treasures to be found. Join us.”

“I can’t” the young man replied. “I am seeking my lost father, who is the king. If I don’t find him within a year, I have to return to the castle and present myself before the council that will decide who will become the next king, me or one of my two brothers.”

“How do you know that the king hadn’t gone to the sea?” the knight asked. “Our voyage is not going to take longer than a year. You will be back on time.”



The prince was silent. He liked adventures and would gladly join the knights.

“This expedition” the knight tempted “is your chance to become rich and famous! This is your chance to gain experience and return in glory. That will make you a better candidate than your brothers.”

“That’s true. A king should know a thing or two about expeditions to battle enemies” the prince agreed.

He jumped into the boat and sailed off into the unknown to gain riches and glory.

“I’d like that, too” Willie sighed. He wished he had brought his wooden sword with him. Irritated, he threw a stick into the fire making sparks fly.

“The second son” dad carried on “went in the opposite direction, to the south. He rode his horse until he got to a mountain range.

There, up on a very high mountain he saw a tower so high, it almost reached the clouds. The prince couldn’t take his eyes off it. Wondering what might be inside, he began an arduous climb to reach the top. When he got there, he saw three old men sitting at the foot of the tower. They had long, grey beards and wore trailing robes. Lots of strange objects were lying on the ground. The young man had no clue what they were for. He welcomed the men, bowed and asked:

“What is this place?”

“This, my boy, is an observatory” one of them answered in a screechy voice.

“An observatory?” the prince was surprised. “And what exactly do you observe here?”

“Life. Life in any form. This is where we become knowledgeable about the stars, the inside of the Earth, and the depths of the oceans. We observe the weather and the wonders of fauna and flora. This is where we study the old books. Wisdom rules around here, my friend.”

“Oh!” the prince was in awe. He really enjoyed being in this extraordinary place. It would be amazing if he could join these wise men in watching the stars, discovering the mysteries of nature, and reading ancient manuscripts...

“I am not surprised he liked it!” Mark whispered wistfully. As soon as the fire is out, he will be able to look at the stars. The clouds disappeared, and the sky was clear.

The air was pure. Fantastic conditions for sky watching. Dad’s voice brought him back.

“I know your problem, prince” the second of the men said. “We believe you should stay with us. It will be better for you.”

“But I have to seek my father!” the prince shouted. “If I don’t find him within a year, I have to travel back to the castle and stand before the council which will decide who will be the next king, me or one of my two brothers.”

“And that’s why you should stay with us. Didn’t we tell you that we observe all the wonders of the world here? We are wise and we know everything. We can find the answer to every question, and so we can find your father, too!”

“And if we don’t succeed...” said the third wise man “well, at least you will become the wisest man in the kingdom. The next king should be wise. Wisdom is the best way to get on the throne.”

“I will stay with you” the prince decided.

“The third son...” dad paused. He reached for two wooden sticks with which he skillfully fished out the roasted potatoes from the ashes. He placed them on cabbage leaves, as though they were plates and let them cool a little. He poured more fruit for everyone. The boys grabbed their cups.

“Tell us the rest!” Willie said impatiently. With one swift move, he drove the blade of his pocket knife into a

potato and picked it up. "That's yummy! But what about the third prince?"

"The third brother journeyed to the west, the land of endless, impenetrable forests. He rode his horse for a long time and didn't see a living soul. One evening he saw a little light in the thick of the woods. He galloped not taking his eyes off it. He arrived at a clay hut. It looked very poor."

"Is there anyone here?" he hollered.

An old, wrinkly man came to the door. His hair and beard were long and grey. He was hunched and skinny. The prince asked if he could stay for the night.

The old man sighed deeply and said with great sadness:

"Welcome, my lord. Feel at home. Stay as long as you need to, but other than roof over your head and a cup of spring water, do not expect much. I have very little to give. I am hungry myself, and not strong enough anymore to go out and look for mushrooms or fruit. There is not even a crumb of bread in the house."

"Don't worry about a thing" said the prince and shared the supplies he had with his host.

In the morning, before heading out, he hunted a fat deer and a few hares for the old man, who cried when he saw all the food he now had.

"May God bless you, son" he thanked the prince from the bottom of his heart. "I probably shouldn't ask, but would you stay for a few more days? I have no strength to get ready for the winter. I might not survive. Will you help me?"

The prince stayed.

For the whole week he hunted, fished, dried the meat, chopped the wood. He repaired the roof and insulated the hut. When he was about to leave, he gave the old man a silver coin, so that he could buy warm clothes for the win-

ter. As he stepped outside the hut, he saw a small gathering of people. They were all old and poor.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"These are the local villagers. My neighbors" the old man replied. "They're just as poor as I am. I guess they must have found out what you did for me and came to ask for help, too."

"How am I supposed to help everyone? One year is not enough!" the prince panicked. "I have to look for my father!"

"Go! May God be with you, son! I will share what you gave me with everyone. They've been poor for years. They're used to the hunger" the old man said. "But the weaker ones might not make it through this winter."

The young prince felt embarrassed. How could he turn around and leave knowing these people need his help? He wouldn't be able to sleep at night!

"I will stay" he said firmly. There was a lot of work waiting for him!

The winter came, followed by spring and summer. A year passed. The prince set out on the way back home. He was happy that he could help those in need, but there was also sadness in his heart because he didn't do anything to look for his father. He was hoping his brothers had done better and that one of them would bring the father home. They reunited at the big, red boulder, as planned. None of them had found the king. Big crowds of the kingdom's citizens came to see who would be chosen by the council to be their next ruler.

"Speak" said the first of king's advisors. "Let each one of you tell us what they've done. Your deeds will decide the succession."

The first of the sons climbed the boulder. His golden armor shone in the sun. He boasted his sword studded with precious stones.

“For the whole past year” he declared in a loud voice “I have fought in many a battle! I have gained a lot of experience and brought bags and bags of treasure. Power and riches! That’s what I am offering you. Soon we will become the richest kingdom on earth! I promise you that! I will be the best king!”

“I will be even better!” the second of the brothers shouted. To the amazement of the crowd, he was lifted up in the air on a pair of linen wings and then stood next to his brother.

“Look at me! Thanks to the knowledge that I have gained this past year, I can raise myself in the air. I have acquired the wisdom from the wisest. This wisdom will make our kingdom a world power! I promise you that!”

“What about the third prince?” people asked. “What has he done?”

The third brother stood with his head down. What could he talk about? About hunting deer, picking blueberries or chopping wood? That was not what the people expected. He had nothing to brag about. He did not do anything extraordinary. He did not find treasure or gain knowledge. He could not promise his people the greatest kingdom on earth.

“Speak, prince! Speak! Tell us what you have done this year!” the voices shouted.

The prince was silent.

All of a sudden, an old hunched man made his way through the loud mob. He raised his hands to show that he wants to talk. Silence fell over the gathering.

“I will tell you what this prince has done this year” he said loudly. “And I will tell you why he should be the next king.”

“What do you know about it?” asked one of the people in the crowd.

“Quite a lot” the old man answered.

The young prince couldn’t believe his eyes. That was the old man from the forest whom he helped survive the winter! But now he had a strong voice and a commanding tone.

“Oh!” Mark and Willie shouted with excitement. “That’s a surprise!”

“It’s not the last one!” said dad. “The old man straightened up his posture, took off a wig, and shed the worn out clothes off his shoulders. Next to the red boulder stood the king himself.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! What happened next, dad? Tell us!” the boys insisted.

“That’s the end of the story.”

“What? How? That’s impossible! That’s the end? Who became the king?”

“You can’t figure it out? The third prince.”

“But why? Why him? He said himself that he he didn’t do anything special.”

“Think about it...”

“Because he helped others? Is that it?”

“That is exactly it!” dad replied in a serious voice. “One of the king’s sons believed he would become the next ruler because of his strength. Strength and bravery are great qualities, but they’re not enough to lead others. The second son thought that wisdom would give him the throne. A wise leader cannot be underestimated, but it’s still not enough.”

“And the third one?”

“The third one” said dad “became the king because he remained faithful to his people. He was good and righteous, just what a king should be. He helped his people not caring about his own future. He gave up power, because his people needed his help. He had a king’s heart.”



The fire was slowly dying. The last flames softly danced above the ashes. Both boys were deep in thought and quiet.

“Time to sleep, kiddos” said dad. “It’s gotten really late.”

“Yeah...” said Mark, but didn’t move.

“Why don’t you sleep on that story. The morning is always wiser than the evening. In the morning we are refreshed and can make better decisions. And you have to finally decide who will be the leader of your little troop.”

“I’m not sure if that’s important at all” Mark whispered.

“Oh, really?” dad doubted.

“Really. It doesn’t matter” Willie added quietly. “We can share and ask everyone else what kind of games they like to play.”

“And we won’t fight anymore, you will see.”

The boys slipped into the tent. The fire was nearly out. Only from time to time the wind made the sparks shine brighter. But that was no competition for the starry sky. Peace,

quite and the darkness of night befell their little camp. Soon, steady breaths of the two brothers were heard.

Gazing at the stars, their father was whispering words of prayer.



Gentleness

The crowd in the school halls was getting bigger with every minute as the buzz intensified.

“There’s a fight!” the thrilling news traveled fast from mouth to mouth.

Indeed, surrounded by a circle of shouting students, two boys, like two angry bulls, stood opposite each other. Their eyes were filled with rage. The taller and older one already had some bloody scrapes on his face and his T-shirt was torn. The shorter one did not look any better. He was wiping his nose which was dripping blood leaving stains on his blue hoodie.

“You’re dead meat!” he roared with fury. “Look what you did! It’s a brand new hoodie!”

He charged at his rival like a wild bull and head-butted him right in the stomach as hard as he could.

The older boy exhaled violently, flapped his arms around trying to catch breath and fell on his back. The younger boy jumped on top of him and started punching his face.

“I’ll kill you!” he huffed.

Suddenly, someone’s strong arm lifted him up. A large, strong man was holding him in his hands like a plush toy.

“What on earth are you doing, Bart?” a familiar voice said. “Are you fighting again?”

The boy continued to punch the air, which made everyone laugh, but then he realized it was all over and his body became flabby like a muffin top. He found himself in the custody of the school... well, custodian. Bad luck. Had he gotten caught by one of the teachers, he could wiggle out and run away. At least he would try. But he didn’t stand a chance against the strong custodian. He was a former wrestler who could probably lift up half a dozen boys his size.

“Let’s go see the principal” he barked. “This is your fourth brawl this week. Enough is enough!”



Holding the boy by the collar, he marched him off to the teachers' room.

"No way!" said the secretary dropping a pile of documents on the desk. "Again?"

"Again" the custodian nodded.

The principal vigorously opened the door.

"What is going...?" he started and saw the custodian with Bart. "Ah!" he added as though this was explanatory enough. "Welcome back. Please come in."

He asked Bart to sit down. With his head down, the boy obeyed. He did not look anything like the feisty youngster he was just a few minutes ago. The principal rested in his chair and looked out the window with a word. The custodian stood by the door.

"How many fights have you had so far this year?" the principal asked. "I lost track. It's number four this week, right? Do you have anything to say?"

Silence.

"Now you're quiet like a mouse. One might even think you're bashful. But when it comes to fighting, you're always first."

More silence. As if there was no one else in the office.

"Well..." the principal continued his monolog. "There is no use in calling your parents. They won't come, as usual."

"Mom works until late, and dad goes for business trips almost every other week..." Bart finally began to explain.

"I know, I know" the principal interrupted. "You're being raised by a computer and all those stupid games."

"They're not stupid" Bart mustered some courage to whisper back.

"The notes I write are of no use" the principal continued as if he hadn't heard Bart's words. "Sessions with the school psychologist don't help, either. Otherwise you wouldn't be here now."

The boy shrugged in reply.

"You know what?" the principal looked at him with growing disapproval "I am just going to expel you from school. Just like that. No special procedures. Because you see... at the elementary school level we have the zoning system. And your parents did not change their address when they moved. We can easily transfer you to the school to which you belong, anyway."

"But..." the boy lifted his head "that school is in a totally different town... It's like 30 miles from here."

"Rules are rules" the principal said with satisfaction. "They need to be followed because they regulate the world around us. And you know what else I think? I think that once you leave, the little world that we have in this school will be a lot more orderly. You will disappear and take with you a handful of problems that we won't have to deal with any longer. Actually, not just a handful. Most of them!"

"You can't do that..." Bart blurted out. He was scared.

"Watch me" said the principal in a firm voice. "Now go and wait in the hall. Unless you don't want to find out the school district's decision. Helen!" he called his secretary "Put me through to the district, will you?"

The boy got up and slowly dragged himself out of the office. He didn't even close the door behind him.

"My God!" the principal sighed. "I really felt like expelling him."

The custodian smiled and sat down at the opposite of the desk.

"I understand you completely... But he's not a bad boy. He's just kind of lost. He live in his own little world of computer games."

"Well? Shall we go on with our radical plan?"

"Most definitely" the custodian smiled again. "My old man cannot wait."

*

Bart went inside the house. There was silence. As usual, no one was home. He threw his bag on the floor and went to the kitchen where he found a note on the fridge: "I'll be late from work today. Order pizza, do your homework, and don't play on the computer too long. Mom." Bart shrugged,



grabbed a can of corn, opened it, and went to his room. He turned on the computer. The monitor lit up. The boy entered his password and started up his favorite game. Soon he was fully emerged in its virtual world...

He is running through the hallways of a half-collapsed apartment building. A dark figure is lurking round the corner. Bart is alert. He is ready to use his automatic weapon.

He shoots fast. The bullets shred the enemy to pieces.

But more are coming. He throws a few grenades at them and keeps on running. He does not have to dwell on the consequences of his actions. The numbers flashing on the monitor give him constant updates on how many enemies he has killed. Another hallway. A bridge. Sound of a helicopter. Bart aims his howitzer. Bang! Boom! The helicopter goes crashing down in flames.

"Oh, yeah!" the excited boy shouts. "You're done!"

Another hallway. Another enemy. He lifts the machine gun and aims. He pulls the trigger.

Silence. The gun is quiet.

"What the heck?" Bart punches the keyboard with his fist. "You must purchase more ammunition" the program informed him. He does not have time for that. The enemy attacks with a karate kick. The boy immediately kicks back.

"I did not finish you off at recess" he barks "but I will do it now!"

His fingers tap the keyboard in frenzy. A few more blows and the enemy drops dead.

“Yes! You see? You see? You’re dead!” Bart raises his hands in the gesture of triumph.

“Level Complete.” *What? Already?*, the boy is surprised.

He slowly returns to reality. The clock shows 1:00 am. The night sneaked up on him. The apartment is dark. Still no one else home. Bart looks at his phone. One message: “I don’t know when I’ll be back. We’re finishing up a big project. Don’t stay up too late! Mom.”

He gets up. His head is still buzzing with the sounds of exploding grenades and the rain of bullet shells. The stroboscopic explosions still flash before his eyes... The darkness of his room suddenly appears so unfriendly. Maybe there is an enemy hiding in the corner? Bart has to go to the bathroom. The dark hall makes him feel uncomfortable. In the distances he hears muffled voices coming from other apartments. Someone just laughed, someone else’s TV screams bloody murder. They must be watching a horror movie. Just a normal night at an apartment building.

Bart feels uneasy. *Would a killer come to our house? Why? There are so many houses around. He doesn’t have to be hiding in my room, he thinks. Pull yourself together! There is no killer here.* He dashes through the hall and turns the light on in each room. He looks around with caution. The unfinished can of corn is still on his desk. He breathes with relief. Nope, there is no one in his room.

Tired, he opens a bottle of Coke. *I was supposed to order pizza. Heck with it. I can do with just chips.* He shrugs. *Why isn’t mom here yet?* The fear returns. This empty apartment, even with all the lights on, still does not seem safe. The boy runs back to his room and jumps into bed. He twists and turns not being able to fall asleep. He recalls the past day at school. This whole fight... It made no sense. He

only got in trouble for that. The empty house. Everything around him seems so hostile. Just like in his favorite game. He has enemies in both worlds. Why did he get into that fight in the first place? He couldn’t even remember. The older boy may have pushed him and told him to get out of his way. That was enough. Anger exploded within him like a grenade. There were quite a few of these lately. What if he really gets expelled? His parents will be so mad. There will be screaming and digging up all of his past sins. And worst of all – no more computer games.

Millions of thoughts raced through his head, faster and faster. He threw the comforter to the side and sat up on the edge of the bed. How to get rid of these thoughts? He powered up the computer and logged in. The game did not blame him for anything. It did not get insulted. It let him do whatever he wanted to do. It welcomed him with a friendly “Hi Bart”. Soon, with new ammunition, he was pursuing another army of enemies through the winding streets of a virtual town. He was finished when the sun appeared on the horizon.

*

The staircase was no different than thousands of other staircases in the surrounding apartment buildings. The elevator did not work. When they reached the second floor, Bart was huffing and puffing. They stopped for a moment.

“You’re out of shape” the custodian mocked. “It’s a good thing we’re not going all the way up, or I’d have to carry you!”

Bart did not answer.

“Are you sure you want to do this? You don’t have to” the custodian asked.

“I have to, I’m afraid” the boy replied irritated.

“You had a choice. There’s always a choice. This time you chose well, so...”

“All right, all right. A deal is a deal” Bart interrupted. “I’ll care for some grandpa, and the principal will keep me in school. Right? What else do you want?”

“What else do I want? I’d like to win a million dollars, son. And I think the odds of that are higher than the odds of you keeping it cool” the custodian said angrily. “You’re not going to take care of some grandpa! You’re going to help Mr. Musial. Mr. Musial! Remember that! You will do shopping for him once a week and clean from time to time. You will keep him company” he added calmly. “Mr. Musial likes to play chess, so you will play chess with him. Got it?”

“Chess!” Bart moaned and rolled his eyes. “What a nightmare! I can’t believe people waste time on this nonsense. Chess!” he repeated. “What is that supposed to mean? The principal thinks that I can control myself by learning how to move around some wooden figures? Like that’s gonna happen!”

“We will see” the custodian smiled.

They stopped in front of one of the apartments and rang the bell. They heard shuffling of the feet, and ten seconds later a slim, old man opened the door and greeted them by bobbing his head. He had grey, slicked back hair. Tie, shirt, pants with suspenders, and a sweater with pulled up sleeves. Everything he was wearing looked one size too big. It looked as though the man shrunk over the years, but his clothes – which might very well have been featured in some pre-war fashion journal – stayed the same.

“Come in, please” he said quietly. “You must be Bart?”

“Hello” the boy said.

“Hi and bye” said the custodian shaking the man’s hand. “I have to run, but next time we will play around, I promise!”

The room Bart was invited to was full of antiques, old lamps and candlesticks. The walls were decorated with many black-and-white pictures in decorative, carved frames. The boy looked around surprised. The place looked like an antique store.

“Have a seat” Mr. Musial whispered pointing to an old sofa behind a round table covered with a laced cloth. Bart flinched. On the table was an old wooden chessboard.

“Are you scared of the king or the bishop?” the old man joked. “Don’t be afraid. I’m not going ask you to do things you don’t want to do. But before you decide you don’t like something, give it a try. At least you will know what you don’t like. Anyway... I have a different request for you today. I would like you to go shopping. I have prepared a shopping list.”

The boy had a quick look at the list. It was quite long, with each item neatly handwritten.

“Okay” he nodded.

He went to the nearest store and walked from one aisle to another trying to spot the things he needed, but could not find even half of them! This man asked him to buy things that are just not available in any store on this planet! Not one! Let alone this little grocery outlet in his town. Too bad. He will just buy whatever he thinks is the right thing.

“Oh” Mr. Musial said. “But that’s not what I asked you to bring me. You were supposed to buy something else.”

“Well... I couldn’t quite read your handwriting” he lied.

“You couldn’t read it?” Mr. Musial was surprised. “Okay, then. Here’s a piece of paper. I will dictate, and you write. You can read your own handwriting, right?”

“But...” the boy hesitated.

“I really need these items” the man smiled. “I would like you to go back to the store if you really want to help me...”

“Okay” Bart sighed resigned. “Dictate.”

“If you can’t find these things in the store on the corner, go to the supermarket” Mr. Musial added. “It’s only one bus stop away. It’s a big store. They’ve got everything there. Good luck! I’m sure you will do fine, boy!”

He didn’t yell at me!, Bart thought surprised. *He wasn’t mad at all, even though he had the right to be. He knew I was trying to trick him, because who couldn’t read that neat handwriting? This man is strange...*

*

The next week brought more challenges. Mr. Musial sat Bart in front of the old chessboard.

“It’s a stupid game” the boy said.

“Can you play it?”

“Of course I can!” he said. “Well... a little” he added with a little less confidence.

“It would never occur to me that chess could be a stupid game” Mr. Musial said in a teasing voice. “After all, it’s a kingly game. Why do you think it’s stupid?”

“Because it’s boring. Nothing interesting happens” Bart blurted out. “It’s just silly figures that get moved from one place to another. At least the games I play offer some action.”

“Hm. How about a deal?” the old man smiled. “I will show you

what chess is really about, and then you can show me your favorite game. What do you say?”

“Sounds good!” Bart agreed. *At least I won’t be bored next time I come here,* he thought.

He lost the match very fast. He moved the figures without giving it any thought. After a few minutes he had no idea how to attack or defend himself.



“Checkmate” Mr. Musial said quietly. “You did not focus at all.”

“Because it’s a stupid game” the boy repeated stubbornly.

“I will wait to the less stupid one, then.”

*

A week passed. Bart came to Mr. Musial’s door with a laptop in his hand. Excited, he greeted his host.

“Here! That’s a real game. Try it!”

“Wait! I know nothing about computers” the man smiled.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Actually, this is the second time in my life I’m holding a laptop. Maybe before we start, you can tell me more about computers.”

“Not a problem!” Bart agreed enthusiastically.

For the next hour the boy talked about how computers work and he was thrilled about it. The old man was really intrigued. He asked a lot of questions and listened carefully to Bart’s answers. He was fascinated with what today’s technology is capable of.

Finally, he sighed and stretched.

“All of this is really interesting, but not good for my eyes, you know... And my back is also hurting from sitting in this position. Let’s call it a day.”

“What about the game?”

“All right. Show me.”

Bart disappeared into the unreal world of his game and moved around inside of it with speed and effortlessness that was obvious to see. He really wanted to impress Mr. Musial with his skills as he dashed through the dark halls shooting and doing martial arts. And... he forgot that his

host was still there. He jumped up when he felt the man’s hand on his shoulder.

“I think I’ve seen enough” Mr. Musial seemed a little shook up. He clenched his lips and breathed fast.

“You don’t like my game?” Bart took his eyes off the monitor and looked at the man. He looked sad. Or maybe Bart was just imagining that. Well, most old people don’t like computer games.

“No” Mr. Musial whispered.

“But why? Is it stupid?” Bart asked with a bit of spite. “Is that what you think?”

“Stupid? You think I want to pay you back for your opinion on chess? No, it’s not it” the man’s voice got even quieter. “This game is a lie.”

“What do you mean, a lie?” Bart was indignant. “It’s a great game! Ranked number one in military games! It was made by the best programmers...”

“Enough” Mr. Musial interrupted. He took his eyes off the computer and the boy and looked outside at the white clouds adorning the blue skies. “I am tired” his voice could barely be heard, as if the conversation took away all of his strength. “I am very tired... Let’s talk about it more next time. Not today.”

“Shall I bring my laptop again?”

“Yes, if you want to. We can meet again next Saturday.”

“I can’t do Saturday, Mr. Musial. I have some classes. We’re making up a day... And then, in the afternoon, there is some historical festival at school that I’m supposed to attend.”

“True. There are posters all over the town. Maybe I will go, too” Mr. Musial perked up. “They’re supposed to have a chess tournament. Let’s move our meeting to Monday, then.”

Saturday came quickly. It was a beautiful sunny day. The historical even drew quite a crowd to the school grounds. There was loud, upbeat music in the air to accompany many other attractions.

People could visit different booths where they could learn about history, buy books. Shiny armors were displayed right next to the cotton candy machines. Nearby, the school drama group was presenting a historical play about the first overseas voyages. Bart walked around from table to table looking at armors, helmets, swords and shields.

“Good morning, Bart” he heard the familiar, calm voice. Mr. Musial was slowly walking towards him. In his light suit and a straw hat he looked like a time traveler from the past.

“Good morning, sir” Bart replied. “Are you here for the chess tournament? Have you played yet?”

“I sure have” the old man laughed heartily. “And I lost big time! We have some talented youth here. The girl that beat me is only in fifth grade, but she played like a pro! Great tactics, I’m telling you! She’s a talent!”

“Have you seen all the booths, yet?” Bart wanted to change the subject. Chess talent. Who cares?

“I’ve seen a few” the old man admitted. “The knights are okay, but the plywood shields ruin the final effect. If they had made them from wood, they would look a lot better. And it wouldn’t cost that much more.”

Bart was silent. Wood? Plywood? He couldn’t tell the difference. They were walking together, and every couple of minutes the old man stopped to talk, and talk, and talk... Bart listened and realize that this man had such great knowledge about history. And it wasn’t just dates and

names that he could throw around. Mr. Musial knew a lot of fascinating stories and anecdotes that were never taught at school.

“Look at that!” he said at one of the booths.

He was looking at a model called “Warsaw Uprising 1944”. The model was quite large and showed the extent of destruction that happened in the city during the war. Someone carefully recreated little figures of the soldiers with white and red bands on their arms. They even had tiny machine guns hanging off their shoulders. The whole scene looked very realistic.

Almost like a game, Bart thought.

A girl walked up to them. Long, blond curls touched her wire-rimmed glasses. She was dressed like a Warsaw uprising insurgent, white and red band, gun, and all.

“Good afternoon” she said with a smile. “I see that you like our Warsaw Uprising model. I will be glad to tell you more about this scene. We worked on it for a long time and paid a lot of attention to details.”

“Good afternoon, young lady. What’s your name?” asked Mr. Musial.

“Hanna.”

“Do you like history?”

“I love history! But not necessarily as a subject in school” she laughed. “You know, this even is a real history lesson. You can learn so many things here. When we were working on this model, we had to do a lot of research, look for material, talk to people. It was just fantastic!” she was full of enthusiasm. “It’s like you get transported to a different world. And I got to touch the old artifacts...” she pointed to the gun on her shoulder. “This is a genuine STEN from the time of uprising. Have a look! It’s real, they just made sure that it can’t be fired.”

She handed the weapon to Mr. Musial. He took it with hesitation. He pressed the fingers against the stock, then the barrel. Bart could see that he was visibly moved.

“We have some original pieces” the girl ranted on ignoring the man’s silence. “Like clothes, photographs. We made a lot of models ourselves. And that’s how we created a real, small museum and...” Hanna paused surprised. “Sir? What are you doing? Sir?”

Mr. Musial listened to what she was saying, but at the same time, without even thinking, he took the gun apart. His hands moved with purpose, confidence and precision. After a short while, the weapon was dismantled and all the parts were neatly placed on the table. Some onlookers gathered and surrounded the three of them. Mr. Musial looked like he was more surprised than anyone else.

“I’m so sorry...” he said perplexed. “I’ll fix it right now.”

“That’s okay” Hanna quickly replied. “You will get your hands dirty. And that nice suit. We can do it, it’s no problem.”

“I know, but I’ll do it.”

Before anyone could react, he put the STEN back together. He did it mindlessly, not even looking at what his fingers were doing, and then handed the gun back to the puzzled girl.

“Somehow, I managed to keep myself clean” he laughed somewhat nervously. “Let me bring you some cotton candy as an apology.”

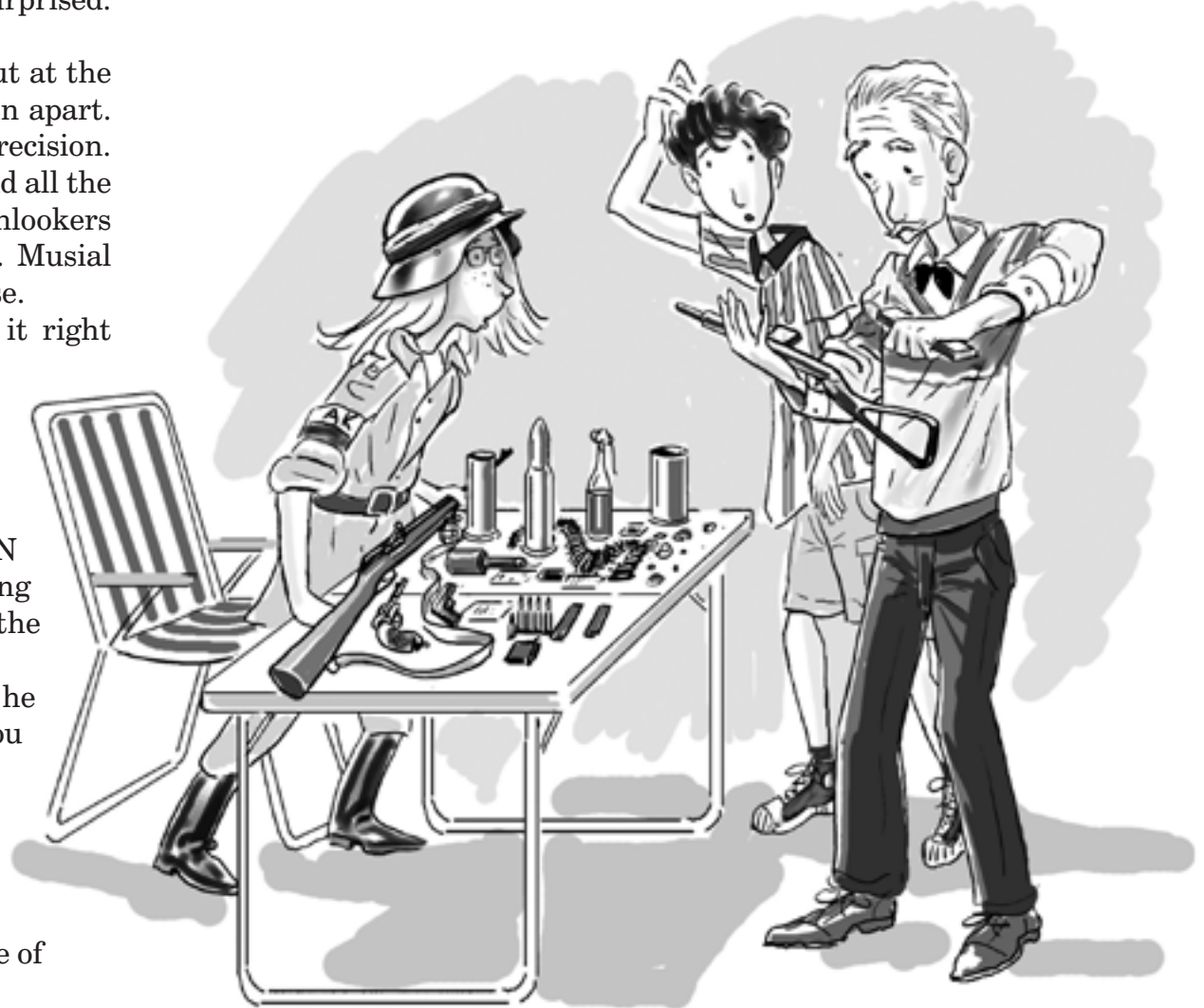
“You’ve held this weapon before...” the girl whispered with respect. Her eyes became twice the normal size.

“Judging from what I saw, you have probably done it a hundred times or more, haven’t you?” one of

the men standing in the crowd added. “You fought with this weapon.”

“Old times” Mr. Musial was embarrassed.

“Did you fight? Were you a soldier? Did you shoot?” Bart looked directly in the man’s eyes. The boy’s mouth was wide open, his eyes were smiling, and his cheeks were



burning. *I can't believe it! Such a normal old man, and look at that. He was a soldier!* He was so excited, he could not stand still. "Were you really a soldier?"

"He was. He was a soldier" came the custodian's voice from the back. "And not just a regular soldier! He was a member of a special unit trained to fight behind enemy lines. Isn't that right, dad?"

"Right, son" the old soldier smiled warmly. "Old times. Very old" he repeated.

He motioned with his head toward the crowd and walked away.

*

The following Monday the three of them sat in front of the monitor. The old soldier, the custodian and Bart. The boy felt really confused. Somehow he could not make sense out of the things he had learned about Mr. Musial. He did not know what to think about all that.

"I told you last week that the game you showed me was not real" the old man said. "Trust me, son. There is not a grain of truth in it. The city? Yes, it was similar to the one where I fought. All cities look similar when the war is raging" Mr. Musial paused and pondered. "Devastation looks the same everywhere. The flames are the same. And the whistling of the bombs sounds the same. But that's where the similarities end. Look at the ammo. You've got more than you can carry. Unless, of course, you're a Hercules. Or Samson. Or both. You can shoot your STEN with no limitations... How is it possible that it doesn't overheat after fifty, sixty bullets? Or that martial arts thing. It's funny... That's not what fighting for your life is like. Especially, that you only have one life, and not many lives, like in your game. During the uprising you die only once. Nobody gives

you another chance or a bonus for good aim. The bonus could get was to keep our life. Or the life of your comrades. This game has nothing to do with reality" he said it again more firmly. "It's a product that has to be sold. And if it has to be sold, it needs to look good. It needs to be attractive. And it is. Evil is usually attractive. You see, those kinds of games are not usually based on truth. Truth is not important here. Logics and the historical background have no significance. It's all about violence. Pure violence. This mindless game is full of evil, violence and aggression. It promotes evil, encourages evil, and then multiplies it."

The custodian sat quietly. He left all the initiative to his father. The boy listened in shock. Never before had he thought about his favorite game in this way. It was just fun, that's all. His thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Musial's sad voice.

"So much blood... so much death..."

Bart was not sure whether the man meant the uprising or his game. He kept quiet.

"You know what I think?" Mr. Musial continued. "Real blood, blood of a wound enemy, let alone a wounded comrade, is a terrifying sight. It's tough to shake off. It's impossible to forget."

"You didn't forget, did you?" the boy asked quietly.

"No, I didn't..."

"Will you tell me what it's really like?"

"There is fear and exhaustion. There is hunger and lack of sleep. There is unbearable pain. I'm talking about physical pain. We didn't have morphine for the dying ones. Our hearts broke into a million pieces when we watched our friends die. There was death. Everywhere. And nothing else."

"But you kept fighting, anyway..." Bart said.

“Yes. And if there was a need to do it again, I wouldn’t hesitate” he whispered back.

For a while there was silence.

“I really don’t get it” Bart burst out. “First you tell me that war is horrible, and the game I play is horrible. Now you’re saying you’d fight again.”

“That’s because it wasn’t just fighting for the sake of fighting. It wasn’t about running around and shooting the enemy” the custodian cut into the conversation.

“Then what?” the boy asked.

Mr. Musial took a deep breath.

“Back then it was about my wife, my son, my parents, my neighbors. It was about my village. About the whole country. And today? Today I’d fight even for stubborn hooligans like you.”

“Not for you? You never wanted to be a hero? To be someone? A warrior?” Bart was surprised. “You didn’t want to... you know, take revenge?”

“No!” the old man laughed. “I have two cheeks. The right one to be struck, and the left one to offer for more.”

“That’s some kind of a riddle that I don’t get. It’s complicated” the boy sighed and sank into his chair.

“You’re right. Life is complicated!” the old soldier chuckled.

“And nobody promised it would be otherwise” the custodian added winking at Bart. “I will share a secret with you. A good reflection is just as important in life as good reflexes.”

“All right, boys. Enough of this philosophy” Mr. Musial interrupted smiling at his son. “You know what?” he turned to Bart “I think a round of chess wouldn’t be a bad idea. It’s a lot easier than trying to solve life’s complicated problems. What do you say? Want to play?”

“Let’s play!” the boy answered with a big smile.

“No STEN is going to help you here” the custodian joked. “And the speed that you have when you play your computer games is not going to help you here. In chess you need caution and good strategy.”

*

It was raining. Bart and the custodian were walking down an empty street in their neighborhood. They had just left Mr. Musial’s apartment.

“Can I ask you something?” Bart said shyly.

“Sure. What is it?”

“What did you dad mean with the two cheeks? I don’t get it.

The custodian grinned at the boy.



inside. And not just that question. You will find a lot more answers.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a war souvenir from my dad especially for you.”

Bart opened the book to the first page. The big, washed out letters read: “New Testament. The Soldier and POW edition.”



The monotonous voice of the teacher explaining the intricacies of sculptures from the early glacial period was met with yawns. It was dull both inside and outside the classroom. A cold drizzle and dark clouds were making everything look even more depressing. The birch tree outside had shed its golden leaves. If it were not for the lamps in the classroom, everyone would be asleep.

Natalia and Milena were sitting way in the back. Natalia was diligently taking notes, as usual. Milena stared at the old birch tree out the window. Its fallen leaves covered the wet pavement. *I hate school!*, the girl thought. *It’s Friday, and I’m still here. I want out! How do I get out of here? Faking stomachache is not going to work again. Once is enough. He will get suspicious.* She wiggled in her chair impatiently.

I don’t even know if it makes sense to go home. It’s boring there, too. Unless, I get to use the computer... Maybe I will go to the mall. She yawned. The weekend was coming. Nothing ever happens on the weekend.

Suddenly, a small piece of paper landed on her table. It read: “ Saturday, 5 pm. My birthday. Party!!! Ala”. Instantly, the world outside got brighter. The autumn leaves looked like colorful confetti.

Darn! What if my parent’s won’t let me go?, she thought. She has not been doing well at school lately.

Milena wrote back: “Not sure if they will let me come. I’m behind in math and grounded.”

Another note came back within seconds: “Let’s talk during recess”.

The long awaited bell finally rang in the halls and hundreds of students flowed out of the many rooms.

Right away, Ala ran up to Milena with a big smile.

“They will let you come, you’ll see. They have to” she whispered mysteriously. “I think I came up with something... I’ll tell my dad how badly I want you to come, that it’s important for me. I will make him sway your dad. After all, he’s his boss.”

“Great!” Milena was happy with the plan. “Call him right away! If he agrees, I have a chance...”

Ala reached for her phone, dialed her dad’s number and in a weepy voice explained her birthday problem.

“Done!” she exclaimed a minute later throwing her fist up in the air in triumph. “It’s not very smart of your old man to ground you. That’s what my dad thinks. He told me that himself. He will talk to him. You will be ungrounded!”

“Yay! Party!!!”

“Oh, yeah! It’ll be awesome! Couple of guys I know are coming. They’re older.”

“Sweet!” Milena clapped her hands in excitement.

“Wait! That’s not all! My folks won’t be there! They’re going out that night!” Ala grabbed her friend’s hands and did a little dance move swinging her hips.

“You are kidding me! For reals?”

“Yep!”

“There’s just one problem” Milena sighed. “Natalia...”

“Oh, Natalia...” Ala said in a fussy voice.

“If my parents agree, I’m sure they will want her to come along.”

“ I bet they will” Ala groaned with dread. “That twin sister of yours! The most boring girl in the whole school. Bad luck!”

“Maybe she won’t want to come. Let’s hope she won’t, anyway...” Milena squinted. “You know her.”

“True! She hates parties! I just don’t get that!” Ala was agitated just thinking about that. “All she does is read books. Such a weirdo!”

“I am guessing she will do everything to stay home. She’s been reading up on some some famous painter. You know her.”

“I sure do.”

*

The family meeting was under way to talk about the Saturday event.

“We grounded you, Milena, but this situation is exceptional” the father crossed his arms. “My boss made it clear that his daughter Ala is not liked at school. He would like you to come to her birthday. If you don’t, Ala’s going to think that you are rejecting her as well.”

“Rejecting? But it’s not true that she’s not liked. Not at all” Natalia said calmly. “It’s just the opposite. She doesn’t like other people.”

“You’re so dumb” Milena barked. She was mad at her sister. This could ruin the whole plan. “If Ala does not ac-

cept someone, it's because... because..." the girl was livid. "She's just defending herself! Everyone hates her because her dad is rich. People pick on her all the time."

"Easy, young lady" dad was trying to calm the storm, and to Milena's delight. "Her dad's financial status has nothing to do with anything. He just cares for her, and that's what counts. He wants her to be happy on her birthday and not cry because her friends don't want to come."

Father paused trying make the final decision. Milena stared at him with hope and excitement.

"I think we should make an exception and let you go" he said.



Milena sighed with relief. She didn't even realize she was holding her breath all that time.

"In this situation it will be a good idea for both of you to go" dad added. "Ala will see that our family accepts her."

"But I hate those loud parties!" Natalia protested. "It's always way too noisy, too many people... and all that. Besides, I have lots of homework..."

"That's not true" her sister interrupted. "We don't have much homework."

"We do, too! You never have much, for some reason. I do."

"Take it easy, girls!" mom stopped the escalating argument. "No matter how much homework you have, it needs to be done. The earlier you start, the sooner you will get it done. Get to work, ladies!" she commanded. "I don't want to see you online!"

"But, mom!" Milena moaned.

Natalia just nodded.

*

An hour later Milena knocked on her sister's door.

"I'm done, and you?"

"Done? Already?" her twin sister was shocked. "We had a long paper to write and about twenty math exercises!"

"That's why we have the Internet, silly" Milena laughed.

"Yeah, but mom said not to go online."

Milena only shook her head.

"Did you forget that we can go on if we need help with homework?"

“But that’s not help. You just copied it off the Internet.”

“How do you know I copied? You’re always so fast to blame...”

Natalia decided it didn’t make sense to argue. She tried to tell her so many times that for her learning is acquiring knowledge. She does not study simply because she’s told to. She studies, because she likes it. For her, it’s fun to understand causes and effects of different phenomena. It’s exciting to learn new facts about interesting things or wise people, and see the world through their eyes.

Milena never listened. Her biggest ambition was to dodge as much work as possible. She liked to dump her hose chores on Natalia and then laugh at her being such a busy bee. “Studying and work will make you a dork”, she would always tease her. She had more sayings like that, and no one knew where they came from.

Natalia returned to her notes.

“Do as you wish. I am going to finish my homework. Don’t bother me” she dismissively.

“No problem. I just wanted to tell you that if you’re going to come with me to that party, you should put something nice on. What are you wearing, anyways? Do you have any normal clothes?”



“Get off my case! It’s none of your business what I’m wearing. I like this sweater. Grandma made it for me” Natalia said. She did not feel like having another quarrel, but Milena always managed to provoke her.

“You could at least do something with these zits. Natalia Zitalia” she mocked.

“Get lost!” her sister shouted angrily. “Will you finally let me study? What do you care about my pimples? You don’t have enough of yours? I’m not putting any makeup on or going to some fashion show. Forget it! I will not be laughed at for your pleasure!” she burst out.

“You don’t have to do anything that you’re not already doing. Everyone laughs at you, anyway. You’re the most boring girl in the world” Milena struck back and ran off slamming the door behind her.

Natalia was alone. She was trembling with indignation. *How could she? She’s the laughing stock with all these never ending parties! He who laughs last, laughs best! We will see who’s laughing at the end of this semester. Boring! Maybe I am boring, but at least I don’t get grounded all the time.*

She moved away from her desk and focused her eyes on the little goldfish swimming swiftly in between the aquarium plants. *Hi Goldie! Both you and I know where we be-*



long. You don’t jump out of the tank because you know that means trouble for you. I am not going to jump out of my skin. I don’t like stupid parties and I can’t help it.

She pulled her chair back to the desk and got back to her homework. It’s going to be a tough day tomorrow. Goldie’s still eyes looked at her with empathy. Or that’s what Natalia thought, anyway.

*

It started out innocently enough. Just a bunch of teenagers gathered around a cherry birthday cake. Good wishes, presents, Ala’s father taking snapshots in a hurry. But as soon as the parents left the house, the party became lively. The doorbell rang every couple of minutes as more and more guests trickled in. The more people arrived, the louder the music was.

Natalia was sitting in one of the chairs feeling an increasing anger. She was miserable. This was not her idea of fun. Locked in the basement, Ala’s dog was barked trying to compete with the all the buzz and the powerful sounds from the subwoofer. All of a sudden, there was a big crash in the foyer. A large vase hit the floor and broke into tiny pieces. Everyone froze in terror for a second, but then one person started to laugh hysterically and others followed. Empty laughter carried through the whole house.

Natalia watched her classmates sneakily. She could hardly recognize them. Short skirts, high heels, bright makeup. *They think they look more mature!*, she frowned. *No, they don’t. They look stupid. All these bizarre poses, weird faces... like they’re trying to be movie stars, or something. They do all they can to get the older boys’ attention. How embarrassing!* The boys were not much better with the smug grins on their faces. They treated students from

younger classes like little kids. But little kids would not have brought wine to a birthday party, would they? She winced when she smelled the cigarette smoke.

“Go smoke on the terrace or in the garden!” Ala yelled turning the music down. “No smoking in the house. I don’t want trouble! Though not very happy, the smokers went outside.”

Natalia kept looking at her watch. She had the impression that everything was slow motion. They promised their parents to be back by 10 p.m., but she knew it would be nearly impossible. Milena was having a blast and she would not want to leave before everyone else.

When some guy sat next to her, she flinched. He looked as though he came here by mistake. Natalia could not put her finger on it, but she thought he looked out of place. Maybe it was because he seemed just as disgusted as she was. Hidden behind a pair of glasses, his eyes definitely did not sparkle with joy.

The boy hunched slightly holding a glass of soda in both hands. He looked at Natalia as though he meant to start a conversation, but then changed his mind.

“That’s where you’re hiding, lovebirds!” they heard Milena’s amused voice. “Ala, come here and look! Your younger brother found his match! And it’s my own sister!”

Both Natalia and the boy were embarrassed and quiet.

Milena did not seem to care. She kept laughing and did not stop even when she tripped over her own feet and landed on the couch next to some older boy.

“I see you’ve already met Ben, our computer genius!” Ala stood behind the boy’s back giggling as if she had just told the funniest joke in the world.

“Good God, Milena!” Natalia exclaimed. “You are drunk!”

“No, I’m not” her sister grimaced. “All I had was a glass of wine, and if you don’t babble about it, nobody will even notice.”

Natalia looked at her sister and shook her head with disapproval.

“What’s your problem this time, Natalia?” her sister became angry. “No one can tell I’ve drunk. I will buy some chewing gum on the way home, and nobody will smell anything.”

“It’s not about whether someone can tell you’ve drunk. You know shouldn’t drink alcohol!”

“These are your rules, not mine!” Milena waved her hand dismissively. “You’re driving me nut! Seriously! You know what? I also had a cigarette. I’m not a child, anymore. What are you going to do about that? Tell mom and dad?”

“Milena! Where are you? Get back here!” amused voices came from the other room.

She stood up awkwardly, turned around and stuck her tongue at Natalia, then floated away with Ala, both chuckling uncontrollably.

“Sorry about my sister” Natalia looked at the boy in embarrassment.

“Sorry about mine” he laughed, but there was no joy in his voice. “Neither of us has any influence on our siblings.”

“You’re right. Milena always does what she feels like” she said quietly. “But she’s all right, you know? It’s just that sometimes she doesn’t think... So, you’re younger than Ala?” Natalia changed the subject. “You don’t look it.”

“I don’t” he agreed. His smile was a bit more confident now. “It’s just twenty minutes, you know? She was born twenty minutes before me, but she always think it’s such a big deal.”

“So, you’re twins!” Natalia said with excitement. “Just like us! What a coincidence!”

“It’s not easy having a twin brother” he said with a smile. “I wonder why so many people think that twins should always look or be like one another. We’re nothing like one another.”

“Then you probably don’t like these kinds of parties, either?” the girl concluded.

“Definitely no!” Ben admitted. “Too noisy, too crowded. It’s not for me. I like having fun, but...”

“... But you prefer to work quietly on your computer, right?” she finished for him.

“Not quite. Computers are fascinating, but you know what I like the most? Mountains. There’s nothing better. That’s where I feel so... so... small. Mountains are huge and beautiful, and...”

“...Dangerous” Natalia interrupted again.

“If you don’t show them respect, they can be. But if you’re knowledgeable and have the necessary skills, it’s a whole different matter.”

Ben lit up. He spoke with a lot of passion about this little world of his. Natalia listened to him with bated breath. Suddenly, the music stopped.

“Party’s over!” Ala got on top of a chair and yelled loud enough to shout over the noise. “My parents will be back in an hour!”

The guests replied with a collective groan.

“Let’s get to work! Everything needs to be cleaned, or this is my last party ever!” she roared hysterically.

Everyone rushed to tidy up. After thirty minutes, the house looked almost normal. Her friends started to leave.

“Hey! Not everyone at once! Stay a little longer” Ala asked.

“To party with your old folks?” one of the older boys mocked. “I don’t think so.”

“We have to go, too” Milena giggled.

“Yes, I think you should” Ala agreed. “You outdid yourself this time. Your old folks will see you’re drunk right away.”

“You talk like my sister” Milena said irritated. “I just had one glass of wine! One glass! You had just as much!” she was really annoyed.

“We’d better go” Natalia said quietly. “You will feel better after taking a walk.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” her sister replied resolutely. “We’re never ever going anywhere together again, understand? Jared will drive me home.”

“Are you crazy?” Ala looked at her with disbelief. “I told you Jared took the car without asking his dad. His father would never give him the keys. Milena! He doesn’t even have a driver’s license! And you saw him drink! Don’t be stupid!”

“He’s a good driver! He goes kart racing! He races, get it? Everything’s under control, don’t worry” she giggled again. “Natalia, let’s go!”

“Milena!” Natalia’s voice was firm and determined. “Neither of us is going with Jared! I will wrestle you if I have to! Enough is enough!”

“She’s right” Ala whispered. She looked scared. Her hands were shaking and her eyes were filling with tears. “Milena, please, don’t do anything dumb.”

Milena looked at the girls with her eyes half closed. She was thinking about something.

“Okay. Whatever” she shrugged. “You don’t have to make a big scene. Can I at least use the bathroom?” she asked sarcastically.

“Just hurry up.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I am really grateful!” she added with a spiteful grin.

Natalia and Ala waited for her in the foyer. They were getting impatient. Ala’s parents could be back any minute. More and more anxious, they looked at each other.

What is she doing there for so long?, Natalia knocked hard on the bathroom door.

“Everything okay in there?” she asked.

Silence.

She turned the knob, but the door was locked.

“Let’s try the other side” said Ala. “The bathroom has another door that mom uses to hang laundry out on the terrace.”

They ran outside.

The back door was wide open, and the bathroom was empty.



“God! What now?” Natalia was about to cry. “Milena! Come back!” she shouted.

“She already left with Jared” said Ben.

“What am I supposed to do now? I can’t catch up with them on foot!” Natalia sobbed. “God, please help me!”

“Don’t cry” Ben tried to calm her down. “We will go after them on my scooter. Milena said Jared was taking her home, right? Call your parents. They should start driving towards them. Let’s go, quick!”

Ben had things under control. Natalia did not even try to object. She wiped her tears and ran after him to the garage.

They started off. The freezing air pierced through Natalia’s body. The wind tugged at her thin skirt, whipped at her feet, tore the hair sticking out from under the helmet. She was crouching behind Ben. The helmet hid her tears and muted the words of prayer.

When Ben braked abruptly, she jerked her head. *Oh, no! Not that!* One the side of the road, she saw the car. It had probably hit a tree-trunk and rolled over. The glass was shattered and the doors were all twisted. Natalia jumped off the scooter and ran towards the car.

“Milena! Milena!” she cried desperately.

There was only silence.

*

Bright, fluorescent light was reflecting in the neatly cleaned hospital hallway. Natalia popped her head in her sister’s room. Milena was lying in bed with her leg in traction. This was her fourth month in the hospital. She lifted her head to look at the visitor.

“Hi. What’s new? Mom said this was your last operation.”

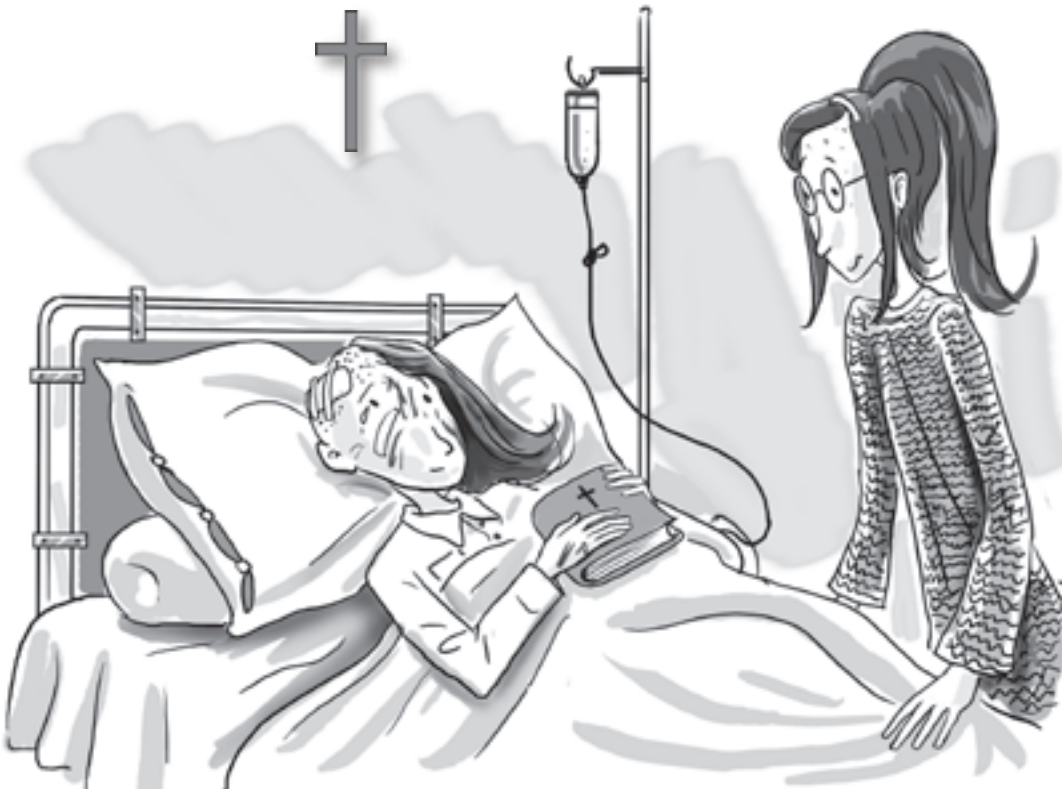
“That’s what I’ve heard. The doctors say I will walk. It will take a few more months, but I will walk! Can you imagine? I can’t believe it!” she brushed her hand through the short hair which has just started to grow back.

“I always believed it. I knew you’d get better.”

“I was luckier than Jared” her eyes welled up, and tears flowed down her face. “I am so sorry that he...”

“Shhh...” Natalia stroked her thin arm. “It’s not a question of luck” she whispered.

“I know” she turned around as though she didn’t dare look in her eyes. She wiped a tear from her face. “God, why was I so dumb?” she started crying again. “Why was I so proud and didn’t want to listen to anyone?”



“Stop. It’s not important now.”

“It is, because I’ve had a lot of time to think lately” Milena said quietly. “How I wish all of this never happened! Do you remember when I gave you the fish tank?” she suddenly changed the subject.

Natalia nodded.

“I did it out of pure malice. I wanted you to realize that you’re as limited as that fish. The fish was limited by the walls of the tank, and you by your rules. Now... I would like to be in a tank like this and never leave it again.”

“Milena! It’s not like that! I never felt I had limitations. I just know that when there are no rules, it’s easy to get hurt. Rules give us security. Outside of rules things can quickly get out of control. But all of that doesn’t mean that I am stuck like a fish! If we follow your logic...” Natalia paused and pondered “then I am a fish, but in the ocean. I can swim as far as I can. I am free. And I am safe, guarded by my rules. Thanks to them I know how to stay away from dangerous sharks and which islands currents to avoid. I am free!” she repeated with a bright face.

“Free? I’ve always thought you were the slave of your own rules.”

“Not so. You know what else? These are not just my rules. These are rules for all the creatures. Not just the ones from the ocean.”

“I would like to swim freely, too.”

Natalia grabbed her backpack and pulled out her Bible. She put it in her sister’s lap.

“It’s not that hard. You just need to have a guide.”

“Is this a map of the ocean currents?”

“You can call it that...”

The sister’s held each other’s hands. They were smiling.

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Tomasz Kruczek

LOVE IS...



In today's world, do we find room for love? Is there room for action flowing from sincere, loving heart? Definitely so. Personally, I have experienced love on many occasions: the love of my family, of my friends, and the most important one – the love of God Himself. I know that without that love I would not be who I am today. Without it none of my books would be written. In 1 Corinthians 13 we find a magnificent description of the essence of this life attitude we call love. The stories included in this book have been inspired by this very “Hymn of Love”. Their main characters are only several years old or just teenagers, still the attitude of love becomes a real challenge to them. They receive and they give love wherever they are. Have these stories really happened? Let me keep it a secret. Maybe one day we shall meet on the scouting track, and then I will tell you more. At night we will seat together by a fire, the fire I like so much, although once it used to seize me with fear. Today you also can write another chapter to my book, a story of love in your own life. Write this story with your everyday life.

Tomasz Kruczek – educator, musician, author, promoter of culture. Instructor of the Royal Rangers Poland scouting organization. Professionally trained as media educator. Writer of children and youth literature, poems, song lyrics, drama plays. For many years has been active in the historical reconstruction movement. He lives in Poland with his wife and two daughters.

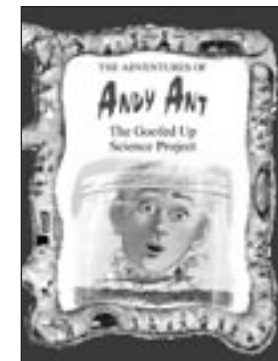
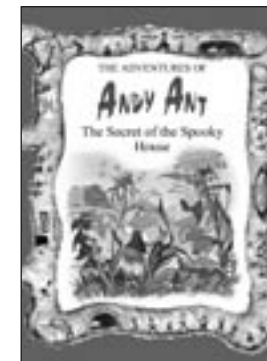
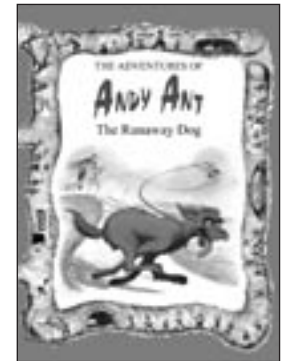
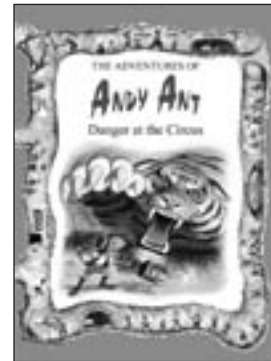
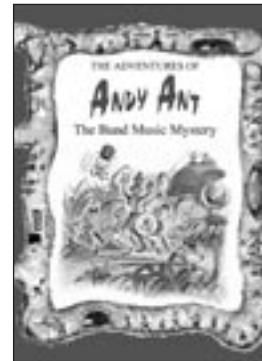
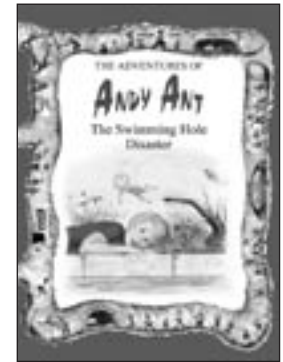
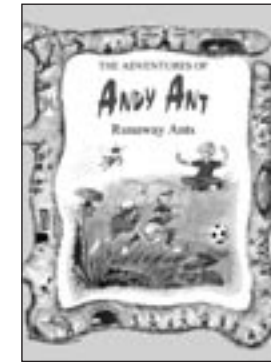
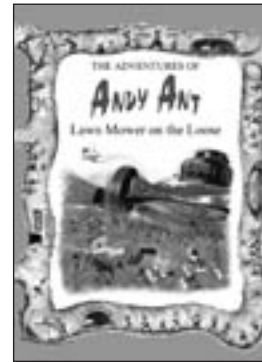
Other books by VOCATIO

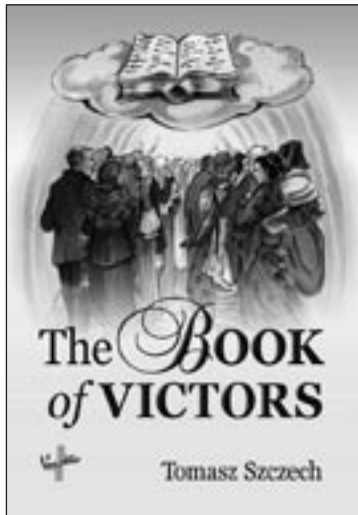
Gerald O’Nan,
Lawrence W. O’Nan
Norman McGary

**THE ADVENTURES
OF ANDY ANT**

Beautiful books about an unusual friendship between a tiny ant and a boy. Makes a wonderful reading together with Mom, Dad or Grandparents. It effectively stirs child’s imagination, enhances his sensitivity, establishes proper values, at the same time promoting traditional upbringing of a child, without unnecessary and harmful relativistic ideas. It does not include violence or brutality. Shaping young characters is mainly the task of parents and grandparents. It is worthwhile, then, to use every opportunity to encourage the right development of our children’s personality, before they get under influence other people, not always willing to motivate them in the appropriate direction.

Other books by VOCATIO





Tomasz Szczech

THE BOOK OF VICTORS

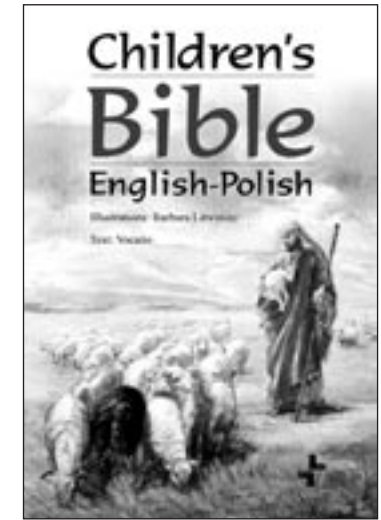
The Book of Victors is a collection of over a dozen wonderfully illustrated stories for children and teenagers. It presents the history of the living Church, starting from the final point of the Biblical narration, and describes people who, for the love of God, were ready not only to carry to others the great news of salvation in Christ, but even to die for it, if necessary. For the sake of this love, they crossed seas, overcoming their fears and weaknesses. They experienced unusual adventures, but they also preached at regular public squares. They never denied their faith in the face of hostile crowds, nor did they yield to evil rulers. They would wake up at night in order to praise God and to pray for the lost. They admonished their erring brothers in faith. They travelled to lands which seemed savage and strange. They put an end to wars and brought peace among fighting nations. Above all, however, they would point to heaven and to Jesus Christ, who had gone up there. They were not afraid to preach the gospel, even facing hostility. Although they were not perfect, stumbling time and again, they persevered till the end in their trust in Jesus. That is why the Most High is not ashamed to be called their God, and He wrote their names in His Book of Victors, to be read out before His throne at the end of time.

It is truly a fascinating book! Travel with into the past and meet Paul of Tarsus, Patrick who came to the Green Isle, Cyril and Methodius, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered in a concentration camp, and many more.

ENGLISH-POLISH CHILDREN'S BIBLE

For children learning the Polish, this book is ideal in teaching the language itself, and Christian vocabulary through well-known Bible stories. It is designed to help learn the Bible stories through the child's native language, and learn a secondary language in the process. Each story has beautiful, original illustrations to capture the child's attention, and will teach children through associating the pictures with the story and vocabulary.

This book is a great tool for learning and communicating God's word in their native language. Voice mp3 CD with the entire English text performed by Wayne Shepherd for learning proper pronunciation.

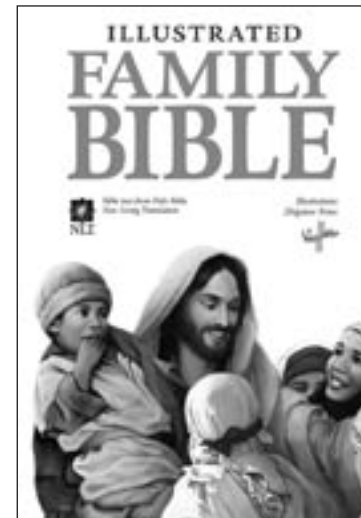


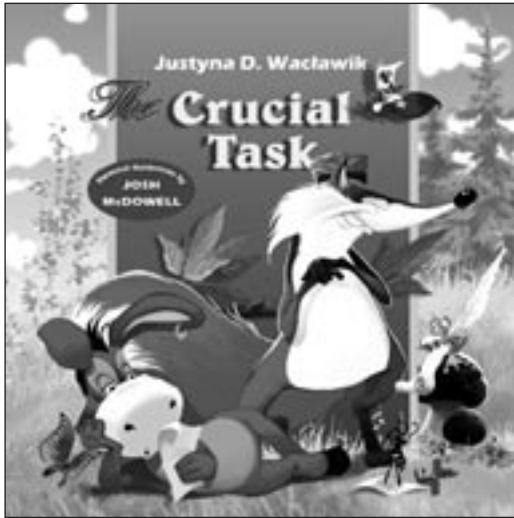
ILLUSTRATED FAMILY BIBLE

We need to bring our families back to the Bible, and that is why I am thrilled with the ILLUSTRATED FAMILY BIBLE. It is designed to re-connect children with their parents and grandparents and is a compelling resource that will draw families together as they read and study the Word of God.

The New Living Translation, used in the Illustrated Family Bible, is a favorite of mine. The language makes each story come alive and can be easily understood by everyone. An important difference between this and other books is that the Illustrated Family Bible contains the actual Scripture references, not just the Bible stories. The beautiful, original illustrations were all inspired by movies and seek to capture the attention of a visual generation.

Josh McDowell





Justyna D. Waclawik

THE CRUCIAL TASK

Parental Guidelines:
Josh McDowell

The forest animals invite you into their world of challenges through a series of ten “Character Builders” books. These books will inspire children and have a positive impact on their lives. The purpose of this series is to provide parents and teachers with the proper tools to develop healthy character traits in children.

The blessing of starting while they are young is seeing in your child established strong, solid fundamentals, developed values and shaped character when they become young adults.

The first volume in the series, *The Crucial Task*, is focused on work ethics. Each of the forest animals has their own unique character and values. Through their attitude and choices their character is revealed which affects their work and their accomplishments. This story helps children see the affects of different attitudes and values when dealing with responsibilities.

Each volume also contains guidelines for parents and teachers. Questions for a discussion are provided which link the story with Biblical principles. This will help to shepherd the child’s heart enabling him or her to think through situations and to make wise decisions.



Justyna D. Waclawik

THE TRUE FRIEND

Parental Guidelines:
Gary Chapman

The forest animals invite you into their world of challenges through a series of ten “Character Builders” books. These books will inspire children and have a positive impact on their lives. The purpose of this series is to provide parents and teachers with the proper tools to develop healthy character traits in children.

The blessing of starting while they are young is seeing in your child established strong, solid fundamentals, developed values and shaped character when they become young adults.

The second volume in the series, *The True Friend*, is focused on friendship. Each of the forest animals has its own unique character and values. Through their attitude and choices their character is revealed which affects their friendship relationships. This story helps children to distinguish between real and good weather friends.

This book contains guidelines for parents and teachers. Questions for a discussion are provided which link the story with Biblical principles. This will help to shepherd the child’s heart enabling him or her to think through situations and to make wise decisions.



Justyna D. Waclawik

INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES

Parental Guidelines:
Ross Campbell

Inevitable Consequences, is focused on the importance of making wise decisions. Young Dolphin wants to be accepted by some ocean creatures in his class. He compromises his values and misplaces his trust in these newly found friends over his parents.

These friend talk him into skipping school. During their time away from school, these friends take part in some shady activities in which Young Dolphin starts questioning. They deceive him through lies. They all get caught including Dolphin.

Young Dolphin did not realize what his friends had done because he trusted these friends. Even though he did not lie or steal, he still wounds up getting in trouble too because of his relationship with these friends. This forces him to face less than desirable consequences.



Justyna D. Waclawik

THE BRAVE HIPPO

Parental Guidelines:
Stormie Omartian

The forest animals invite you into their world of challenges through a series of ten “Character Builders” books. These books will inspire children and have a positive impact on their lives. The purpose of this series is to provide parents and teachers with the proper tools to develop healthy character traits in children.

The blessing of starting while they are young is seeing in your child established strong, solid fundamentals, developed values and shaped character when they become young adults.

The fourth volume in the series, *The Brave Hippo*, is focused on personal courage. Each of the forest animals has their own unique character and values. Through their attitude and choices their character is revealed which affects their work and their accomplishments. This story helps children see the affects of different attitudes and values when dealing with responsibilities.

Each volume also contains guidelines for parents and teachers. Questions for a discussion are provided which link the story with Biblical principles. This will help to shepherd the child’s heart enabling him or her to think through situations and to make wise decisions.



Piotr Haraszewski

THOSE PESKY BACTERIA

What parent wouldn't want their children to mature, be healthy, and learn about the world that surrounds them?

We want our children to understand the basics of hygiene, proper nutrition, safety when dealing with strangers, and the consequences of their actions. At the same time, every wise parent realizes that these life lessons don't just happen overnight. They have to be patiently taught to our children. The book series LEARNING AND GROWING-UP is intended to help parents do a better job at just that.

Those Pesky Bacteria will introduce the elementary principles of personal hygiene to children and help them understand the dangers that come with germs and bacteria in the form of various infections. The youngest readers enjoy returning to books they like and understand. They often ask their parents to read them again and again. Thanks to well developed teaching methods, the book series LEARNING AND GROWING-UP, when read repeatedly, will help our children grasp the important principles we all want them to know, especially at the age when they learn fast.



Piotr Haraszewski

SECURE COMPUTER?

The blessing of parenthood is to experience the raising of our children to mature, healthy, young independent adults. Part of that experience involves helping our children understand the basics of hygiene, proper nutrition, safety with dealing with strangers, and the consequences of their actions. We realize these life lessons and instilling values don't just happen overnight. They have to be patiently taught to our children. The book series LEARNING & GROWING-UP is intended to help parents with the life challenges of raising children.

One of the life challenges we are facing as a source of great danger among today's youth is the growing wave of virtual crime and new types of behavioral addictions. Young people today are characterized by great openness and trust, but they lack practical life experience that would help them deal with unnecessary problems. Instead of trying to ban them from doing certain things, we should strive to focus on good education and awareness which will lead to an increased self-discipline and self-control they so need in everyday life.

Secure Computer? is one of the books in the series LEARNING & GROWING-UP that helps address this challenge. It introduces the elementary principles of computer and internet safety to children and helps them to understand better the dangers of unlimited and uncontrolled access.



Piotr Haraszewski

THESE WONDERFUL VEGGIES

Should I really drink milk?

How can I stay strong every day?

Why is it good to eat fruits and vegetables?

What do the fast food restaurants do to your body?

Have you ever wondered why sometimes you feel great and strong enough to play and study, but other time you are totally “ragged”? Most of us rarely realize the great importance the proper nutrition plays in our health and how we feel. What we eat and drink effects not only the way we function and feel every day, but most of all determines our long-term well-being as well.

In the era of ubiquitous fast food restaurants, both children as well as most parent often do not realize the great consequences of serving our body with food that has no nutritional value, (and such is all processed foods and food in fast food restaurants), so essential for our cells’ healthy life and development. This little book explains it all in a simple and very suggestive way. It is excellent source of necessary and up-to-date knowledge about healthy eating and developing the right nutritional habits. It is one of those “must read” books not only for the young, but also for the adults!