HUPE

inspire
&be inspired

HUPE in Story Land

DIGITAL ALMANAC

2025

2025

NATIONAL SHORT STORY WRITING
COMPETITION

HUPE in Story Land

DEAR READERS AND WRITERS,

Get ready to dive into the wonderful worlds created by our talented students! This Short Story Almanac is a compilation of our recent writing competition, filled with young voices and interesting plots. It's the final product that shows the power of imagination and the creativity of young writers.

We would like to express our thanks to **all the students** who participated. We admire your wish to write the stories and your bravery in sharing them. Our deepest appreciation goes to the **mentors** who supported and guided these young writers.

Finally, we wish to express congratulations to the **winners**! Your stories are truly exceptional. To every student who contributed, you've helped to make this almanac a collection of creativity, grit, and love for the written word. We hope you enjoy this collection and are already looking forward to seeing your brilliant stories in next year's competition!

Your HUPE team

CONTENTS

PRIMARY SCHOOL - 5TH AND 6TH GRADE

Janko Horvat Kovačićek
BEING A PENNY ISN'T EASY **2**

Nevija Vulić
YOU ARE MAGICAL **4**

Petra Djaković
MAGIC LIBRARY **7**

Vinka Mikloušić
THE WOODEN STORY **9**

Ella Jamnić
AUGURI'S STORIES **12**

Hana Leich
THE UPSIDE-DOWN STORY **15**

Tia Grabarević
THE BIRTH OF NIGHTCORD AT 25:00. ..... **17**

Lara Sršić
A TOWN'S HERO **20**

Maria Sušanj Butković
HOW DID A HEARTBREAKER GET HIS HEART BROKEN? **22**

Niko Jurčić
THE BOY SANTA CLAUS **25**

Ana Matota
THE STORY OF MY FAMILY **26**

Sven Vuković
TRAVELLED BACK IN TIME **28**

Mila Rekić
THERE IS ALWAYS LIGHT IN THE DARK **30**

Ivor Rujak
MYSTIC FOREST **31**

Ivan Leko
A DARK NIGHT IN JERUSALEM **33**

Ema Stojković
A DREAM COME TRUE **35**

Gabrijel Miri
A STRANGE ADVENTURE IN AN OLD HOSPITAL **37**
Marta Nekić
A TEACHER FOR A DAY **40**
Leona Lukež
A TRUE STORY ABOUT SERIAL KILLERS **43**
Korina Radić
AIKA'S TRIP FROM CHINA TO CALIFORNIA **46**
Lira Burić
AN UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS MORNING **48**
Lada Kokot
BABY **50**
Petra Vidović
CATCHING SANTA CLAUS **52**
Anja Kučan
CHRISTMAS **54**
Franka Vukoja
CHRISTMAS STORY **56**
Zaria Pendelić Poljak
FREYA'S BIRTHDAY **57**
Ana Tomić
NATURAL GIRLS **60**
Tina Trutanić
EMMA **63**
Tara Rožanić
FOODIUM MUSEUM **65**
Ines Aničić
LUCKY (OR MAYBE NOT) **67**
Lovro Jukić
MY FIRST BIKE **69**
Mario Bulić
MY WINTER HOLIDAYS **70**
Marta Zec
OVER THE WHISTLE BLOW BRIDGE **73**
Jakov Jerićević
PANDA **76**
Dora Šumanovac
PRINCESS LUCY **77**

Luka Čizmić
SAVING CHRISTMAS **78**
Greta Vidas
SCARY HOUSE **80**
Mika Ereš
SCHIZOPHRENIC **82**
Marija Tojčić
TEARS OF THE MOON **85**
Tea Kardoš
TEN GIRLS **87**
Paola Mrđen
THE ANIMAL TEAM **89**
Issa Alavanja
THE FROG'S ADVENTURE **92**
Eva Crnković
THE GREEK HERO MEETS THE ROMAN GOD **93**
Krešimir Đuretković
THE INCREDIBLE STORY **96**
Klara Delić
NASLOV PRIČE: THE LAKE **97**
Elizabeta Pavelić
THE MAGICAL FOREST **99**
Grgur Milanović
THE MYSTERIOUS SHIP **102**
Jakov Mikolin
THE ONLY WAY OUT OF THIS **104**
Sara Zadravec
THE QUEEN OF WORMS **106**
Marija Škorvaga
THE SECRET STORY OF THE SWAN **109**
Marina Čermin
THREE DIMENSIONS **112**
Tia Madžar
TINA AND THE PIRATES **114**
Iris Ćavar
NASLOV PRIČE: ZYRA THE WILD HORSE **116**
Iris Budić
PURPLE MEETS GREEN **118**

PRIMARY SCHOOL - 7TH AND 8TH GRADE

Iva Đuretić
LIFE BENEATH SIMULATION **121**

Jana Horvat
BEYOND WORDS **125**

Rikardo Šegota
BETRAYAL **128**

Mila Srzić
THE HEART TAILOR **132**

Greta Hrastović
QUIET WHISPERS **137**

Dora Štefančić
FOOTSTEPS THROUGH THE UNKNOWN **143**

Iva Gorup
A CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE **147**

Maria Šego
A DREAM THAT CAME TRUE **151**

Dora Štimac
A FRIENDSHIP THAT CHANGED MY LIFE **155**

Lea Drga
A MAGICAL FAIRY TALE **157**

Rijana Štrumfin
A MESSAGE TO GOD **160**

Fran Đurkin
A NONSENSE CHRISTMAS **163**

Ema Hanižjar
A VISITOR FOR FLINK **166**

Barbara Burić
A WITHERED ROSE **169**

Nina Slavić
ADALINE'S WORDS **172**

Lucie Traore
AN ACCIDENT IN TEXAS **176**

Petra Smješka
ANNE AND THE ADVENTURE TO THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE **180**

Tin Zubić
BACK TO DECEMBER **183**
Marta Jerčić
BEAUTIFUL BROWN EYES **185**
Mei Močinić
BENEATH YOUR SKIN **189**
Matea Kanisek
BETRAYAL AT THE LAST MOMENT **192**
Asja Kebić
CHAINED BY SILENCE **195**
Gianna Mariori Turrubiates
CHILDREN OF SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES **199**
Una Belošević Krklec
CHOOSING MY FUTURE **203**
Lena Blažević
CONNECTION WITH THE STARS **207**
Eva Šafarić
AUTUMN BEAUTY **212**
Vanessa Bogić
BRAVERY IN A NECKLACE **215**
Ela Miljan
NASLOV PRIČE: THE STAR MAKERS **222**
Paulina Zolić
THE LAST DANCE **226**
Emilly Horovski
FAMILY LIFE STORY **231**
Mia Nimac
FEARLESS ELENOR **234**
Barbara Korent
FORBIDDEN LOVE **238**
Katija Vrvilo
FRIENDSHIP **241**
Lea Margaretić
HOW I BECAME A GHOST **244**
Ana Sofia Slijepčević
ICE SKATING IS NOT FOR EVERYONE **247**
Kate Stupalo
MACAKLIĆ **251**

Mirta Kokot
MAGICAL THREAD **255**
Katja Klincov
MY PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE **258**
Zoja Ličinić
NEW YEAR STORY **261**
Carla Čulina
PUBERTY IS AMANDA. **264**
Gita Kožar
ROAD TO RUIN **268**
Roza Grbić
RUBY, THE YOUNG DETECTIVE **272**
Paula Grahovac
S&T **275**
Mia Vučković
SAD STORY OF MAGNOLIA DOLL **278**
Franjo Božanić
SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE UNSOLVED CASE **282**
Lea Gabela
STRANGE LOVE **286**
Ema Brnić
SWING AND BITE **292**
Noa Kikić
THE BAY WITH A MURDER AND POSSESSION **297**
Gabriela Regjo
THE BLOOD MOON **300**
Leon Ranogajec
THE CONFUSING FOREST **304**
Dorotea Gjurčević
THE DANGERS OF A NEEDLE AND A THREAD **306**
Ante Katura
THE GRAVE DANGER **311**
Ema Polančec
THE IMAGINATION **314**
Petra Grubješić
THE JOURNAL ENTRIES **317**
Kristijan Knežević
THE LAST HOPE **320**

Ivo Prkut
THE LAST MASK **324**
Ivan Pejin
THE LOST SHIP **329**
Tea Valić
THE MAGIC FAIRY TALE **332**
Nicole Novak
THE MYSTERIOUS FOREST **335**
Marta Ostović
THE REALITY **338**
Mila Pešut
THE FAMILY GRIN **341**
Vita Bračun
TRAVELLING ADVENTURES **344**
Kiara Friščić
TWELVE **348**
Jakov Benčak
WHEN LOVED ONES LET YOU DOWN **352**
Lucijana Čvrljak
YEAR 3008 ..... **355**

SECONDARY SCHOOL

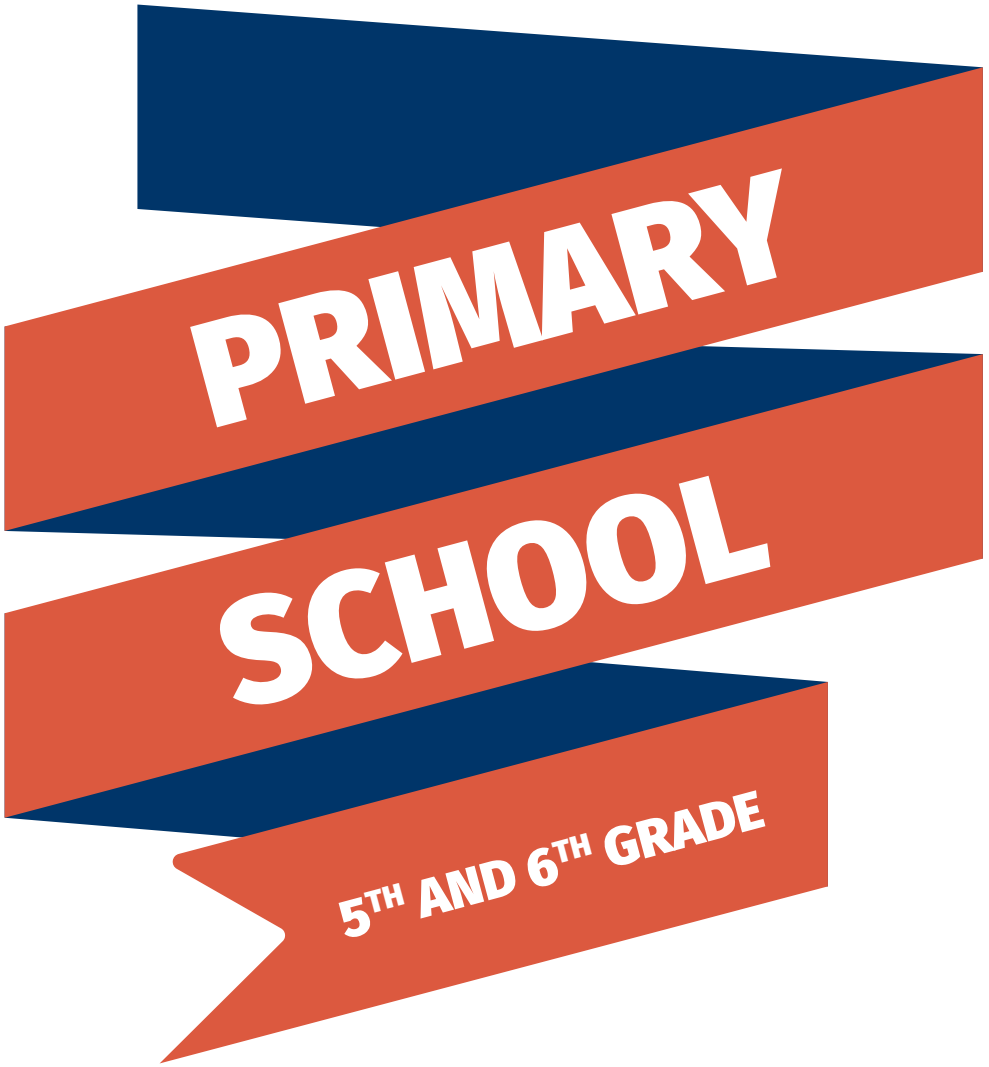
Ana Kretonić
YOU DID GOOD, SOLDIER **360**
Anabel Stojšić
NO ONE IS WATCHING **365**
Tin Karešin
THE BARD, THE THIEF AND THE WARRIOR **370**
Dina Drakulić
MERCY **377**
Tara Modrušan
A POISON AND A DREAM **382**
Aleksandar Stjepanović
LIES BEETWEN US **389**
Andro Štefanić
4M AND STIPE **395**

Helen Laić
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR NIGHTMARES COME ALIVE? **401**
Dajana Toprek
THE WRITER'S ABYSS **407**
Dominik Pap
DREAMING BOY **413**
Jakov Dekanić
THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE… **418**
Miron Plantak
DAYS IN HEAVEN **425**
Lana Siročić
THE GOODBYE THAT NEVER CAME **431**
Veronika Draženović
SELCOUTH **438**
Marisa Plavec
THE LODGE **443**
Lorena Conjar
A HEARTBREAKING BETRAYAL **449**
Doris Vojnović
AT THE BEGINNING **456**
Morana Orešić
LETTERS FROM THE ASHES **461**
Gabrijel Juričić
THE SINISTER OF THE WEST **467**
Lena Brletić
A BLOODY HARMONICA **473**
Adrian Štimac
MAN-MADE GOD **481**
Marko Papež
A ROSE BORN FROM THORNS **487**
Luka Mrkić
APOTHEOSIS **492**
Karmen Ljubičić
CRYSTAL **499**
Lana Malogorski
DESERT **506**
Maja Tušek
DNA **512**

Barbara Đuran
DOWN WITH THE FALLEN **516**
Amelia Cuculić
A LOST GIRL **523**
Dominik Kalenik
MY DUTY **525**
Patrik Miljanović
THE THREAD BETWEEN US **531**
Nika Belc
THE WHISPERING WILLOW **532**
Vivian Hope Konatarević
ETERNAL **533**
Ella Vuković
EYE TO EYE **538**
Karla Kraljić
FINDERS, KEEPERS **544**
Lucija Pašalić Špehar
FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN OF MARIE ANTOINETTE **549**
Jakov Tomac
FURIOUS WARRIOR **554**
Petar Dragičević
THE INFINITE HORIZON **560**
Sara Pajurin
JUDGEMENT UNDER GREAT ORDEALS **564**
Anamarija Vukovac
MALADAY **571**
Vito Prpić
MURDER BEACUSE OF CHEATING **577**
Lucija Mijić
MY REAL STORY **583**
Noemi Tot
MYSTERY OF ARTUR MERCER **589**
Jagoda SALMONOWICZ
NOTHING COMPARES TO FRIENDSHIP **596**
Adrian Habulin
ORDER BEYOND THE VEIL **603**
Petar Štiglić
PENITENTIARY **608**

Roko Posarić
RISE FROM THE ASHES **614**
Iris Pavelić
SECOND CHANCES **623**
Filip Brlek
SEVEN DAYS TO SAVA **630**
Lorena Marčec
THE ART OF BREAKING **636**
Eva Romana Cvijetić
THE BLACK CAT'S EYES **642**
Matej Tomaško
THE BLACK HEART OF THE EARTH **647**
Lana Vuković
NASLOV PRIČE: THE CHURCH OF FREE PEOPLE **653**
Antonio Baćac
THE HEIGHTS OF DESPAIR **658**
Sara Novak
THE LIBERATION OF PANCAKE LAND **665**
Noa Petar Vlašica
THE LIBRARY **670**
Dora Svetličić
THE LIES WE LOVED **676**
Dora Lončarić
THE LOCKDOWN **681**
Lia Ella Pintar
THE MAFIA'S PRIZED POSSESSION **687**
Nika Marušić
THE SILENT WITNESS **693**
Korina Beg
THE SKY IS FOREVER BEAUTIFUL **698**
Leona Glavan
THE UNKNOWN CREATURE **705**
Lana Brajković
THE VOICE OF FATE **710**
Noa Antonović
THE NOISE BETWEEN US **714**
Leona Fodor
THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS TOWN **719**

Ema Rogina
THIS IS NOT ABOUT CHRISTMAS **725**
Kristijan Pintera
TORPOR **732**
Mischel Andrić
UNSOLVED **739**
Dorotea Miljan
WHEN THE MOON CALLS **747**


PRIMARY
SCHOOL
5TH AND 6TH GRADE

šifra:Eucalyptus159
mentor:Marina Moćan
institution:Osnovna škola Pantovčak
autor:Janko Horvat Kovačićek

BEING A PENNY ISN'T EASY

Ouch! What is happening? Why am I being hit by a hammer? Where am I? Why am I so hot? Is that a laser!?? What sort of treadmill thing am I on? Am I in a coin factory? Which coin even am I? No, I'm next for the laser! Ahhh, now I see, I'm a penny! Wait... Aren't pennies practically worth nothing? I hope I won't be on the floor waiting for someone to pick me up for "good luck". Oh no, I'm getting kidnapped!! They are taking me in some truck! On the truck, it says "Central New York Bank"! They are taking me to a bank!? I can't stand to be in a bank! Older people always come for their pensions and create chaos! At least I hope they will put me in a safe. Why did they put me in this bag so I can't see anything!? Humankind is so annoying. They can't preserve small things like a penny!

Everything is dark. Wait tho... I see more letters on the door of the box! It says "LOAN FUNDS". Wait, are they taking me away? I just got here! Oh gosh, I think someone took a loan! I'm being carried around. I can see humans through the bag's stitching. The other human said that he wanted a loan of 500 dollars. I'm sure that person holding me gave that guy the bag. Oh no, I'm entering a car again! I don't like drives because they make me feel dizzy. Holy, this guy drives fast! My bag got flung across the trunk! Well, we already made it to the destination. Uh, the human just took me out of my bag, and I'm being exposed to some bright ball in the sky! Ahhhhhh!

There's no chance this stupid human already dropped me!? I hate humans. No, I just fell into a sewer! Why me, God, why me? I started being in a factory and a bank and ended up in a sewer!? Come on, I don't deserve this! But wait, this is kind of fun, just like a water park. Oh no, I take that back, I got launched into the ocean! Is that a fish? Why is it looking at me like that? Oh gosh, it's coming right at me! And I'm officially in a fish. Great. What is happening? Did a bird pick up this fish I'm in!?? I'm sure a bird picked this slimy fish I'm in and got it to the shore to eat it. I can see its beak breaking through the fish!

Not the shiny ball again. Oh no, the bird's beak hit me, and now I'm rolling on the street! No, that was close; watch where you're driving next time! The kid is walking towards me and probably saw my shine. False alert, he missed me. What now? I'm stuck here. NO, STOP, what is wrong with these people? Why do you wake up and decide, "Oh, today feels like a good day to suck some pennies with my cleaning machine!". Like, come on, show some respect. Because of this human, I'm spinning in a bag with dust and a Coke can. Ew. On the bright side, tho, at least I'm not exposed to that shiny thing in the sky. The silly human is taking me somewhere upstairs. Finally, he took me out of that dusty bag. No, he gave me to a child!? Doesn't he know how dangerous those creatures are?? He will either swallow me or put me in his "piggy bank". Oh no, he's throwing me around! I'm back on the streets now because that creature threw me out of the window!?? Why would you want to throw me out back on the streets!? The kid is approaching me! No, he picked me up!

And I have officially been transported to a kid's piggy bank. Great.

It has been five years since I was put into this cage by an 18-year-old kid, and today is the day I finally saw movement. A human has shaken the piggy bank. Is he hitting the piggy bank with a hammer!? Who does he think he is, Thor? Finally, light! Not for long, one of these humans decides to put me in his wallet. I can hear the car engine again! Why is everyone so excited? What's that noise? I can hear a deafening whine. OH NO! We are at the airport! There's so much noise; everyone is talking, planes are taking off and landing, and the lady is saying human language on the microphone. Believe it or not, we are boarding a plane! I don't know where we are going. I'm pretty sure the guy carrying me used me to buy a drink. What is wrong with these people? And now even the flight attendant dropped me on the ground!! And, of course, a snotty kid picks me up! And we are taking off! Yippee, I guess.

It has been thirteen hours since that kid picked me up and put me in his pocket. I heard some humans talk about Italy and Rome. Again, the drive. Are they taking me to some water source? I hear water-FONTANA DI TREVI!! Do not throw me in, do no- really kid? You threw me in a fountain for "good luck"!

It had been two years in this dirty water, and finally, someone had collected me! I don't know where they are taking me, but anywhere is better than that fountain! I hear familiar sounds... COIN FACTORY! They are going to melt me into another coin! Ouch, that's hot! And I'm a liquid. At least melt me into something that's not useless.

Woah, I'm back in a solidified material, and I can't wait to see what coin I am! I'm so shiny! I'm even multi-colored! What does it say? It says "1 EURO"!!!

šifra:NV171012
mentor: Alenka Taslak
institution: Osnovna škola Dore Pejačević Našice, Našice
autor:Nevija Vulić

YOU ARE MAGICAL

Castor was sleeping until sunlight entered through the window and woke him up. He opened his blue eyes and smiled when he realized that today was the most important day in his life: the 1st of September, the day when he would attend School for Gifted Children.

He made his bed, put on his worn-out brown jacket, and left the room.

"Good morning, uncle Dean," Castor greeted a tall man in the kitchen.

"Morning Castor. Today is your big day. Are you excited?"

"I can't wait to go," Castor answered happily, but then his smile disappeared, and he lowered his head.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked worriedly.

"What if they think I'm a freak because I have magic? Besides, I'm not a noble," Castor whispered and bit his lower lip.

"Listen to me, all those children are talented at something, I can't deny that. But you are special, Castor. You have the rarest gift of all. You have magic. I know you are scared they won't accept you, but don't let that stop you," Dean hugged Castor.

"You are magical. And about nobility, one knight said a long time ago, 'Nobility is defined by what you do, and not by who you are.'"

"Thank you, uncle," Castor smiled.

Horses could be heard outside, so Dean explained to Castor that his friend was also going to the City of Vester.

"William will take you to the school. Don't worry, you'll be great," Dean caressed Castor's dark hair and gave him the food he had prepared.

"Thank you, uncle, for everything," Castor said and ran to meet William outside. He climbed the wagon and waved to his uncle as they started their trip.

Time flew by and before even noticing, they arrived in front of a building that looked like a small castle. Castor got off the wagon and waved goodbye to William.

He took a deep breath and climbed the white stairs. In front of him were tall doors, and above them, a large plaque with a silver inscription: School for Gifted Children. The boy knocked and took a step back. Soon, the door opened to reveal a woman.

"Hello Miss, my name is Castor. I came to enroll in this school," the boy introduced himself and bowed politely, just like his uncle taught him. The woman in front of him smiled and introduced herself.

"Hello Castor, my name is Selene Starfall. Please enter."

Castor nodded and entered.

"Let me take you to our meeting hall. Follow me."

So, the boy followed her.

Soon, he found himself in a spacious hall with children sitting on chairs, chatting.

Miss Selene wrote the names of the children in her book and then explained the arrangement of rooms in the school.

After two weeks of getting used to school, the children were divided into several groups. Apart from Castor, there were two girls and two boys in his group. Among them was Geoffrey Anderson, a tall, cocky nobleman and the biggest bully in school.

The day of revealing their talents came, and Castor was getting nervous. How would the other students react to his magic?

Althea, a girl with short brown hair, was the first. She had the ability to recognize, among a bunch of different plants collected around the kingdom, which were medicinal and which were poisonous. She could also make any potion to heal people.

After her came Morpheus, whose abilities were very interesting to Castor. Morpheus was a Dreamwalker, and he had the ability to enter anyone's mind while they were asleep.

It allowed him to enter someone's nightmare and control it. Everyone was impressed.

It was Castor's turn. He closed his eyes and concentrated. When he opened them, they were no longer blue but purple, and a beautiful golden butterfly appeared in his hands. Everyone was stunned. Miss Selene clapped, and soon everyone else followed her.

"Magic is among us again!" She cried with happiness and hugged Castor tightly, who smiled from ear to ear.

Geoffrey stood away from the others, his face sour with envy. He couldn't help but be jealous of the orphan boy with the rarest gift. Despite his nobility, he didn't have what he wanted.

It had been a few months since Castor had revealed his magic to others, and now he noticed how Geoffrey was acting differently. He abandoned his friends and didn't leave his room for a couple of days.

Castor decided to talk to him. He knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

"Go away!" Geoffrey growled from the other side of the door.

"It's Castor. We need to talk. Open the door, Geoffrey, or I'll open it."

No answer.

Castor sighed, opened the door with magic, and stepped inside. Geoffrey was sitting in the armchair, crying.

Castor knelt down next to him.

"Tell me what's bothering you. Maybe I can help."

"Why would you want to help me? I'm a mean person anyway," Geoffrey stammered.

"I don't think you are truly mean."

"You don't?"

Castor shook his head.

"I can see that you are sad. Tell me what's wrong."

"I can't read, and because of that, my parents forced me to become a warrior. And you have magic, and you can do whatever you want."

"I can teach you to read."

"It's pointless. I tried to learn, but it's like the letters are swirling."

"You have dyslexia. That can be fixed."

Castor's eyes changed to purple, and he healed Geoffrey. Geoffrey grabbed a nearby book and read from it.

"Thank you, Castor. You are truly magical," Geoffrey hugged Castor.

"You're welcome, Geoffrey."

Castor and Geoffrey became best friends, and when they grew up, they changed the world together.

šifra: pd2008
mentor: Marina Štambuk Poparić
institution: OŠ Milana Begovića, Vrlika
autor:Petra Djaković

MAGIC LIBRARY

One cold winter's afternoon, a girl named Sophie went to a library without knowing which book to pick up. When she finally arrived to the library, there were some people sitting quiety and reading their books.

While she was walking around the library and looking for some books, she didn't realize that the librarian was missing. She didn't really know what book to choose.

She was impatient so she took one book from the bookshelf. It was Dr. Seuss, "*The Cat in the Hat"*. She opened the book and suddenly the letters started mingling and they jumped off the page at her very eyes. She couldn't believe what she saw. The letters bounced in the air and they arranged themselves in a sentence which said: „Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple"

„Really ? Can you give me the answer to my problem?" she asked silently so that no one could hear her.

She flipped through the pages and there it went again, the letters rearranged and stood in different order. This time it said: „Why fit in when you were born to stand out?"

„That's the problem, this book can really read my mind" she muttered in astonishment.

„I have no real friends. I cannot fit. I am totally different from others. My classmates only hang out with me to copy my homework and when they need my help."

„Maybe this book is telling me that it's good to stand out in the crowd. Maybe I don't have to change myself in order to please others."

„Thank you Dr Seuss, you really are a smart man and an excellent writer.", she said.

Then she saw the book which reminded her of her early childhood. „I've watched a cartoon but I've never read it", she thought. It was *Winnie the Pooh*, a cute little teddy bear and his marvelous adventures. She opened the book and the letters separated from the paper and they lined up in a row, saying: „You are braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think".

„Thank you Winnie for teaching me that lesson. I've lost my faith that others will accept me and become my friends. Now I realize that I have to be my own best friend despite others." she whispered as if she was whispering a prayer of a sort.

The last book she picked was Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, and she was already impatient to read the quote from this book.

The letters showed up again as if she was dreaming. This time the quote was saying: „There is a kind of magic in you."

„There is a kind of magic in this library, too.", she thought and stood there amazed by this message and thankful for having someone believe in her. Books are my best friends because they speak honestly and they encourage us to be better people. She noticed that the librarian appeared. „You want to read all three books. That's excellent. I wish more kids read books as you do", she said with a mysterious smile and a spark in her eyes.

Šifra: HappyGirl5
mentor: Senka Javorović
institution: OŠ ''Ljubo Babić'', Jastrebarsko
autor:Vinka Miklošić

THE WOODEN STORY

A long time ago, in the woods, in a small wooden house, lived Charlie with his little sister Molly. They lived alone and Charlie had to take care of his younger sister. Every evening Charlie was telling her a bedtime story. And this is how his Wooden Story goes.

''Molly, I am going to tell you a story.'', he sterted; ''So, so, long ago there was a small forest in the far West. In that forest lived a girl named was Sophie. She had long, brown, wavy hair and she always wore beautiful dresses and shiny sandals. She had a pet, one bear that would always protect her. The bear's name was Berry the Bear. The forest was full of different animals, but the forest was not just an ordinary forest, it was magical! Animals could talk, walk on two legs and even read. Some of them even wore glasses and hats. Sophie would always play with them. Unfortunately, like every story, this one has an evil man, too. It was Mr. Badwoods. He hated the forest and he wanted to destroy it completely. Nobody knew why.

One day Mr. Badwoods made a big special bomb in his laboratory. It was a bomb that does not explode, but drops smoke. What kind of smoke? Well, the smoke which would destroy the magic in the forest, so animals would become just ordinary animals, without any special powers.

When he finally finished the bomb, he needed to wait for Day-B. And he waited and waited.

The day came. Mr. Badwoods took the bomb to the special place, just in the heart of the forest. Fortunately, Sophie and Barry the Bear were taking a long walk through the woods because it was a nice sunny day and then they noticed Mr. Badwoods. Sophie knew that something had to be done so she ran to the Old Square where an owl Cupcake lived. Cupcake was very wise and she knew everything.

''Cupcake! We immediately need your help!'', screamed Sophie.

''Oh, my dear, what happened?'', asked Cupcake.

''Berry the Bear and I saw Mr. Badwoods putting the bomb near here. I think he wants to destroy our forest!'', Sophie explained.

''That will not happen while I am alive!", Cupcake grabbed a special box; ''In this box, my dear, is all we need."

Cupcake opened the box. It was filled with binoculars, maps, scissors, hats and on the top, there was even a compass. ''And what shall we do with that?", Sophie asked.

''My dear, I was in The Woods War 2. I know what am I doing.", answered Cupcake proudly.

''I will take one hat for Berry the Bear.", decided Sophie firmly.

Cupcake took a look on the map of the forest and made an amazing plan.

''So, as you can see, we are here, at the Old Square and the bomb is right here. Mr. Badwoods is probably waiting here, in the bushes in Old Avenue. We will go through Fox Street where he can't see us. Berry will keep an eye on Mr. Badwoods and call for me when Mr. Badwoods won't be looking at the bomb. Then, you will tell me that and I will go for it.", explained Cupcake.

''Wow, your plan is amazing!", Sophie was surprised with such a great plan.

Cupcake and Sophie called Berry the Bear to join them. He took a hat happily and they walked into Fox Street.

''Oh, I see Mr. Badwoods.", Sophie said and pointed on him.

''Shhh, we need to be quiet. Or he might see us.", said Cupcake to make everyone quiet.

And they waited for the moment patiently… and the moment came.

''He is not looking at the bomb! Action! Action!", whispered Sophie.

Cupcake stood up on her toes and started to walk quietly. She came close to the bomb. It was massive and looked like a tree. Cupcake needed to find the whole in that "tree" in which was a mechanism. Cupcake found it. In this huge mechanism they found three strings. One red, one blue and one yellow. One will make the bomb explode, one will make bomb drop the smoke and one will detonate the bomb. Cupcake was really nervous because the destiny of the whole forest was on her back. She decided to cut the red one which usually means fire, but maybe Mr. Badwoods wanted to make them confused. She took scissors and cut the red one any way. It was so brave of her.

But nothing happened.

That means she did it! Cupcake did it!

''You did it! Bingo!", Sophie was already celebrating.

''It's not time to celebrate, yet. We need to find Mr. Badwoods.", Cupcake was determined.

After some time of searching they finally found him.

‘’Mr. Badwoods! Why did you want to destroy our forest?”, asked Sophie politely.

‘’Well, I thought everybody here hates me.”, he answered not very politely.

‘’We never said we hated you, you just weren’t open to talk or hang out with us. We thought you didn’t want us as your friends at all.”, Cupcake explained how they saw him and what they thought about him.

When everybody explained everything it was time to celebrate. Everyone in the forest was invited to the party which was at the Old Square. There was a lot of food, drinks and animals.

By the way, Mr. Badwoods soon became a good person and now his great inventions are helping animals. He even made “Drinky”, a brand of magical drinks that help you when you are sick. If you drink one, you will be healed in few seconds. And that is the end of the story about the forest on the far West.

Charlie finished the story and Molly fell asleep. He lay down on the bed and fell asleep too. What a good brother he is. Good night, children.

šifra:koliko2305
mentor: Tatjana Kristek
institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek
autor:Ella Jamnić

AUGURI'S STORIES

Hello! I'm Naomi Endo, and you might remember me from last year. I discovered that youkai (demons) were real in my previous story. After that, I developed an interest in paranormal investigations. I'm here to share a story about the first demon I encountered.

This demon's name is Aguri. She passed away 5 months ago at the age of 441. She has lived through many eras, and I am here to share what I found out about her life. The only possession she left was a beaten-up, old diary.

The first entry reads as follows:

Day 1 - I was arguing with my parents, and they kicked me out of the house saying they did not want me there. I didn't want to stay there because of the judging looks I got from everyone. I got away from there quickly and began my journey to Kyushu. I stopped by this beautiful village near Mount Fuji. The view of the mountains was amazing, but I had no money, so I had to sleep outside. Tomorrow I will travel somewhere else and do a few odd jobs to earn some money. (She included a beautiful, detailed drawing of Mt. Fuji.)

Day 2 - I started my journey and stopped at a village called Yaizu. The sea was beautiful. I found a stick. I sharpened it and used it as a spear to catch fish the old-fashioned way. I caught 8 fish and sold them to a nice old man running a grilled fish skewer stall. I slept near the beach. When I woke up, the first thing I saw was the ocean.

After I read the diary, I took a nap and, in my dream, I woke up in 16th-century Osaka. There I saw a young Aguri getting into an argument with her parents after she had rejected an arranged marriage, and after she got disowned. She left home, and it took her 2 weeks to travel to Kyushu. I got to witness her journey. She had visited a lot of places and got amazing views of Japan; I saw her drawing them in the journal and it still looked good after 400 years. When she made it to Kyushu, she met a foreign girl who was facing prejudice in Kyushu for being a darker-skinned Vietnamese woman. They quickly became friends and after a year had to return to Osaka after people threatened to execute both for a crime they didn't commit. The

women caught a boat at the last minute, and they traveled back to Osaka with a merchant. They got there after 9 days. When they arrived back, Aguri hoped no one would remember her and who she was. She had to help her friend Uyen with injuries after she got chased by Samuri. They both set up a camp in the forest and as Aguri fell asleep looking at the stars, she heard crows singing in the graveyard. She couldn't fall asleep after that. She went to check that place in the graveyard, and she saw her 4-year-old sister's name scrawled on a headstone. The same little sister who she had taken to the market every week and who she had spoiled and had bought toys for every chance she got. Losing her beloved little sister broke her. She started crying. I was like a ghost seeing this happen. I couldn't interact with her. I just had to watch. After that, she was approached by someone from behind.

Right after that person approached her, I woke up to my brother aggressively shaking me to wake me up.

"Hachi! I told you to wake me up normally!" I shouted at him

"Finally! Mom wanted me to wake you up because it was dinner time" he told me.

"Already?! How long was I asleep for?" I said in a surprised tone while getting up to go eat.

"I was beginning to think you died" he replied jokingly.

I went to the kitchen and ate with my family. After that, I stayed up until 5 am reading the diary again and doing some research. Since I wasn't tired after the nap, I fell asleep at about 5.30 am and finally got to continue the dream.

As that person approached from behind, I didn't recognize them at first, but they looked somehow familiar. Right as they started talking to Aguri, I realized it was Hori. He didn't look human, and it was clear that he was a demon. (I don't know how someone can become a demon, so that's what I'm researching. I know demons look different, uncanny even.) Just after I recognized him, everything faded and I woke up again. I was feeling very tired, and I fell back asleep one more time. In this dream, time skipped, by a lot. It was already the Taisho era - 200 years after the last dream. Now I saw an older, different Aguri. She was protecting Uyen from Hori. I couldn't hear a lot, but I caught the main point of the conversation. Hori was trying to kill Uyen for some reason. He got so mad he knocked Aguri aside. He didn't even have to touch her. The strange force from before moved her out of the way and kept her there. She had to watch Uyen die and both of us were powerless to stop him.

The next 2 centuries were a nightmare, with her being controlled by Hori and no one noticing their existence because they were pronounced dead 200 years before. To survive and make money Hori targeted business owners to kill and impersonate

until humans started getting suspicious about the unusually long lifespan, then they staged the person's death and moved on to the next person. That is where Ms. Aoi comes in. She was an Airbnb host and Hori's last target. He had Aguri take her place and after 5 years of that, I stayed there and discovered the truth. I discovered Aguri had a curse placed on her which made her controlled by Hori, almost like a puppet. Her life was tied to his and she died while under his control, which resulted in his death as well.

šifra:HL222
mentor:Dijana Oreški Vidović
institution:III.OŠ Čakovec
autor: Hana Leich

THE UPSIDE-DOWN STORY

Once upon a time there was a little girl called ... Wait, wait, are we sure the story should go like that, because I think you already know that story? I think those stories are kind of boring. Maybe we can change some things in the stories we know. Imagine a story where the prince turns into a frog, where the little mermaid doesn't save the prince, where the prince doesn't find the girl who lost her shoe, where the princess isn't shy and scared but strong and brave? Maybe I can tell a story that's a little bit different? Let me try to write a story like that, an upside-down story.

So, Rose is a girl that hates stories about princes, princesses, witches and goblins, just like I do. She lives in a castle, with every room you can imagine, but she is still bored. Jack is a boy who works in the kitchen and he's in love with Rose. Jack often tries to go to the top of the castle to see Rose, but every time he tries, the guards catch him. One night he makes it to the top of the castle, and sees Rose`s bed, but no one is in the bed. He looks out of the window and sees Rose running away from the castle. Jack jumps out of the window and follows her. Together they run through the forest and they find a portal. Rose quickly jumps into the portal and Jack follows her. When they arrive to the other side, they see all of the characters from famous fairytales and stories they know like the little mermaid without her voice, the poor Cinderella waiting for her prince, the wolf who is about to ruin the first house of the three little pigs. So Rose decides to change the story about the pigs and saves them quickly by taking the wolf down. Jack starts to panic, but Rose tells him that he is safe with her. Jack beats his fear of scary things and decides to go along. Together they are changing storylines and Rose is now a strong superwoman helping everyone in need. Finally, they arrive to the last story that's called Nightmare. "What? I have never heard about that story", says Jack. But they said they would beat the evil in every story and make them more interesting. They faced a lot of monsters and survived, they can do it, but when Jack turns around, Rose disappears. The Nightmare stole Rose. Jack is in panic and tries to find Rose, then hears a voice saying: "I was waiting for someone to start changing the stories." Jack is scared and he doesn't know what

that means or what he should do. Then the voice continues telling his evil plan: "I will turn every story into a nightmare, no more parties for princes and princesses, no more love, no more justice." A giant black creature appears holding Rose - it was the monster called Nightmare. He takes Jack and throws him back through the portal into the woods. Rose wakes up and sees that Jack is gone. She tries to fight Nightmare but she is not strong enough so she starts to call for help. Suddenly, all of the characters she helped are coming to fight the Nightmare. With their powers they are trying to defeat the dark shadow but it's not enough. All of a sudden a bright light starts to shine through the portal- it`s Jack holding a giant mirror projecting sunrays onto the dark creature. Nightmare slowly starts to turn into dust and disappears. "How did you know what to do?" asked Rose "Where did this creature come from? And how did our story-changing help him?

Jack explains what his dad used to tell him when he was a little boy. His dad would say that every nightmare disappears when the sun comes up, so Jack used the sun light to defeat the monster. Children are scared of the dark because then nightmares come, so the parents help them feel safe by reading them stories, the stories they are familiar with. When we change stories we let nightmares appear. Some things don't need to change and boredom can sometimes be good.

Wait… That can't be the end. If this is an upside- down story, maybe the villain should win? Hmmm, I'm not sure I would like that, because I do like love stories. So, let's say that Rose and Jack return to the castle and start dating, then get married and live happily ever after. Looks like this might be a prince and princess story after all…

mentor: Tihomir Matković
institution: Osnovna škola „Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić“ Sl. Brod
autor:Tia Grabarević

THE BIRTH OF NIGHTCORD AT 25:00.

A mysterious music circle that operates at 1:00 AM (25:00), and whose identities are shrouded in mystery.

The clock struck midnight. The streets outside were silent, bathed in the faint glow of distant streetlights. Inside her room, Kanade Yoisaki sat at her computer, the pale light of the screen illuminating her tired face. If someone could see it right now, it would be obvious she hadn't been taking care of herself. She hesitated for a moment, then hit send on her keyboard. Her message blinked onto the screen in an anonymous chatroom:

"Looking for collaborators to make music that can save someone. If you feel like you're drowning, we can create something together."

For Kanade, this wasn't just a creative project - it was her lifeline. Ever since her father was diagnosed with amnesia and couldn't remember his own daughter nor anything else, to be exact, she had retreated into herself, pouring everything into music. She believed that was it was all her fault that her father had amnesia since when she made a song for him, everyone showered her in compliments over it because of how good it was. Her father thought that his talent wasn't as good as his daughters' so he overworked himself to the point of exhaustion and believed if she could create songs that resonated with others, she might find a way to save herself too.

The response came later that night, from a username Kanade had never seen before:

"I can write lyrics. But it won't be cheerful. If that's okay, let me know."

The words were simple but heavy, carrying a sense of despair that caught Kanade's attention. She leaned forward, typing a reply, using her online name:

"That's perfect. I'm K. Let's work together, Yuki."

Mafuyu Asahina stared at the screen, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. She had only stumbled onto this chatroom by chance, during one of the endless nights when she couldn't sleep. On the outside, Mafuyu's life looked perfect---good grades, a polished appearance, a mother who adored her while also secretly manipulating her. But inside, she felt like an empty shell. Why did she agree to this? She didn't

know. But something about Kanade's message had resonated with her.

"I'll send some lyrics later."

It wasn't a promise---it was a statement. Mafuyu closed her laptop and laid back on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

Several days later, Kanade received a file titled "Concept Lyrics." She opened it, her breath catching as she read the lines. The words were raw, almost painful, but they had a beauty that matched the melodies in her head. She started composing immediately, weaving Mafuyu's emotions into her music.

But Kanade knew the song needed something else---visuals.

Ena Shinonome scrolled through her social media feed, biting her lip. Her art account wasn't doing as she'd hoped, and the comparison to other artists---especially her father---was eating away at her confidence. A new notification caught her attention:

"Would you be interested in working on a visual design for a song? We need someone who understands emotion."

The message came from Kanade. Ena didn't know much about her, but her profile included a snippet of an unfinished song. Ena clicked play and the haunting melody filled her headphones.

"This…," Ena murmured, sitting up straight, *"This is good."*

She typed a quick response to Kanade's message:

"Send me the full song when it's done. I'll think about it."

Kanade didn't hesitate to send the file. As Ena listened, the lyrics struck her deeply. She found herself sketching ideas, unable to stop until the image on her tablet perfectly captured the mood.

The group began to take shape, but something was still missing. Kanade needed someone to help arrange the songs, someone with technical expertise and a unique perspective. That's when Mizuki Akiyama entered the picture.

Mizuki was browsing music forums when they[1] came across a thread discussing independent projects. One post stood out---a clip of a hauntingly beautiful song. Mizuki clicked on it:

"*Whoa,*" they whispered. "*This is amazing!*" They scrolled down and found Kanade's contact information.

"Heya! ~ I heard your track and loved it. Do you need an arranger? I'd love to help bring your music to life!"

---

[1] Mizuki Akiyama is a non-binary character using primary pronoun'' they ,''hence this isn't an error.

Kanade responded almost immediately:

"Yes! We really need someone like you."

And so, the four of them found themselves in a shared chatroom named "Nightcord at 25:00." one late night.

Kanade started typing:

"Thanks for joining, everyone. I want to make music that saves people, but I can't do it alone…"

Mafuyu replied first:

"The lyrics will probably stay dark. That's all I can do."

Ena chimed in:

"That's fine. I'm used to working with raw emotion anyway. Don't hold back."

Mizuki added a playful response:

"And I'll make it sound amazing! Let's show the world what we've got!~"

The chatroom went silent for a moment, the weight of what they were about to create settling over them.

Kanade finally wrote:

"Then it's settled. From now on, we're Nightcord at 25:00. Let's meet here again at 25:00 (1 AM) and try to make something unforgettable."

Over time, their collaboration grew deeper. Although they started as strangers, kept their names a secret as well as their appearances, their shared struggles brought them closer together. Each of them carried pain and pure despair that stopped them from loving and accepting themselves---Kanade's grief and struggle to care for her own needs, Mafuyu's emptiness and depression, Ena's insecurities and jealousy of better and younger artists, and Mizuki's identity struggles. But in the sad and depressing music they created together, they found a voice for their emotions and a connection they couldn't find elsewhere. They felt safe and loved with one another and were slowly getting better.

Nightcord at 25:00 became more than just a project---it became a sanctuary, a place where they could be honest with themselves and each other. And through their songs, they hoped to reach others who might be feeling the same way as them and save them… like they wish to save themselves.

Though their journey was far from over, one thing was certain: in the silent hours of the night, when the rest of the world was asleep -

Nightcord at 25:00 had found its purpose and its own will to live.

šifra:LS223
mentor:Tatjana Mioković
institution:OŠ Retfala Osijek
autor:Lara Sršić

A TOWN'S HERO

Once in a small town, there was a girl. She always did all her tasks and studied well. One evening her parents were supposed to go to a dinner with family members but, she wasn't behaving very well to her parents, so she didn't go to the dinner. Her mother made her a list of chores to do before they left. After her parents left, she went to do her chores, but then she heard a knock on the door. She opened the door, but there was no one in front of the door. The only thing she saw was an envelope on the floor. She decided to do her chores first, then open the envelope. Before doing her last chore, she started to open the envelope. She opened it and the text was: ''Keep this, you will need it.", and then she found a necklace inside the envelope. She put the necklace on, kept the note in her bag, and went to do her last chore. She had to go to a forest, to get some wood for warming, it took her fifteen minutes to come there, by the time she arrived there, she felt tired. She saw something unusual. There was a blossom tree in the middle of an oak forest. She sat under the blossom tree and fell asleep. When she woke up, she was shocked. She was in a forest full of blossom trees, she decided to walk through the forest. Eventually she found a town, and it looked exactly the same as her town, it was just covered in blossom trees. As she was walking down the street, it looked just like hers, and she found a house that is no different than her house. She knocked on the door, and a girl her age opened the door. The girl that opened the door said: " Hello, do you need anything? I'm Julie". The girl said that this is her house and her parents are waiting for her. Julie told the girl that the house isn't hers. The girl started explaining her story of how she came here. After some time Julie let the girl in the house. The girl was surprised that the interior in the house was different and more botanical. Julie introduced the girl to her parents and since it was night they went to sleep in Julie's room. The girl heard glass break, so she went to check what is happening. Everyone else was sleeping. She saw three burglars going to the basement, so she took that chance when the burglars went down to the basement, she closed the basement door and locked it. She knew that there was a chance they could somehow get out of the basement, that's why she prepared extra.

She spilled a bag of pearls in front of the basement door and put tape on the door so they couldn't leave that easily. She hid in a room so she could see them if they leave. After a few minutes they broke the door, but two of them tripped. The third burglar helped them get up and she heard them opening the front door, so she went to follow them. The burglars were talking about how they did a successful robbery. After ten minutes of walking they stopped, entered a building, put their bags down and fell asleep. She took their bags and their ID cards and was headed to the nearest police station. They noticed that the stuff is missing and saw the girl walking. They started running after her, but she noticed them and started running too. She saw a dead end one hundred meters away, and she took a turn. They were near her, but she jumped over a fence and over a wall. They did the same. By the time they jumped over she was a bit further, but she had very low energy and stopped. She didn't see them coming, they were so close to her but she started running again. She saw a police station near and rushed there. She reported all three of them by the time they got there. The policemen said that they have been looking for them for two years, and that she will be rewarded. She declined the reward and said the most important thing is that they are found. By the time she walked to Julia's house the sun was slowly rising. She was so tired that she immediately fell asleep in Julia's room. After a few hours she woke up and saw herself on the news. The policemen knocked on the door, she opened the door and they declared her a town hero. They gave her a medal with little blossoms on it. She was so delighted, and she said goodbye to Julia, Julia's family and the town. She went to the blossom tree where she came from, put her hand on it, and came back to her town. She went back to her house. When she told the story to her parents, they didn't believe her at first, but she showed them the medal and the necklace. Since then, her parents have called her a town hero.

Student: Maria Sušanj Butković
Teacher: Pamela Grozdanić
School: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

HOW DID A HEARTBREAKER GET HIS HEART BROKEN?

My mother told me a story of a young girl whose name was Lily. She was 23 years old and she was heartbroken by her ex-boyfriend Mark. Mark was also 23 but he was only a few months older. Lily was devastated and sad but she wanted to focus on her education so she started to work hard on her future career instead of spending her time crying.

A few weeks later, she applied for a new job. It was an acting job and Lily wanted to be a part of the cast in the reality competition show called "Squid Game 3". When the job interview was over, she anxiously waited for the results. Unfortunately, she was rejected, but luckily she didn't give up. It was hard, especially when she missed Mark so much even though he broke her heart.

After three weeks, she decided to make a movie trailer for the exact same show she applied for but got rejected. She posted the trailer on YouTube and it became one of the most viewed videos. This encouraged her to make more trailers. Her imagination was unstoppable and she moved on to the latest movies like "Frozen" and "Wicked". She even did short movies about celebrities like Billie Eilish or Margot Robbie. The number of viewers was getting larger each day and she became very successful, rich, young woman!

Two months later, she was still doing these short movies and trailers and she even became almost as famous as some people she made movies about!

One day, this young girl was editing her videos as usual. Her coffee mug was half-full and her life started to feel good again. Suddenly, she heard a text on her phone and read the name of the sender. It was her ex-boyfriend's name, Mark! That freaked her out, but she managed to read the text.

Dear Lily, it's me, Mark. I'm really, really sorry for what I did and I would like to collaborate with you on your next video since you are a true professional. So, what do you think? Do you like the idea? Please let me know as soon as possible!

With love, Mark.

She was a little bit suspicious of him but she decided to send him a reply after three days.

Oh, hi Mark! I would like to work with you. Just send me one of your videos that you have already made and we will meet. Is that alright?

She wasn't expecting that he would send the video, but to her surprise, he did. The video was followed by this message:

Dear Lily, I'm sending you the video I made a few hours ago. What do you think? Do you like it? Looking forward to hearing from you.

All the best.

"Okay", Lily said to herself. "You have to watch this video and decide what's the best thing to do". She watched the video over and over again until she saw some teeny-tiny letters. She paused the video and zoomed in only to figure out that this video had a watermark inserted but Mark obviously didn't do a very good job removing it.

Lily was very furious but after a few minutes of thinking, the idea of sweet revenge came to her mind so she replied the following:

This is great! Let's meet on Thursday at the café where we used to go when we were together. Does 5pm work for you?

She knew he would agree so she found the person who created the video and asked him to meet offering him a collaboration with her. She started getting ready for the 'meeting' knowing how sweet the revenge would be after all that careful planning.

The clock struck five and she entered the café. Mark was already there, waiting and drinking his mint tea as usual. When she came, Mark's face turned bright red like a tomato. You're probably wondering why, so here is the answer: Lily came to the café with the real creator of the video. Mark rushed to the restroom to wash his face and find the plausible explanation as quickly as possible. Nothing came up so he tried to leave the place without anyone noticing so he peeked out and saw Mike, the creator, and Lily sitting at the same table Mark was sitting earlier. Since there was no way that he could leave without Lily and Mike noticing him, he came to their table, and he opted for the blunt truth.

"Lily, I'm sorry for what I did, that video I sent to you was not mine. I am so sorry, please forgive me. I made this whole situation up just because I missed you and I only wanted to see you", Mark said looking embarrassed.

At that point Mike abruptly stood up and said: "How dare you steal my four-day worth of hard work? And you did it only to win your ex-girlfriend over? Are you crazy?"

Mike lost control and started threatening to Mark: "I will call the police because of your action, they call it intellectual property theft. You better find a very good lawyer!"

If Lily hadn't jumped in, the conversation would have probably lasted for days. She spoke angrily and firmly: "Will you finally stop? I'm sick of you two fighting! I'm done and I'm leaving!"

And she did. Lily left the café, leaving the two very angry men behind standing in silence.

Five years later Lily was still doing what she loved, but this time as the main director of the new movie called 'How to train your dragon-Live Action'.

I glanced back at my blank page of my new book and I have to say, I'm really lucky my mom told me this story. I could still hear her voice: "You should never give up and let anyone put you down…" I know I won't!

šifra: GreenFlower
mentor: Suzana Tolić
institution: Osnovna škola Cvjetno, Osijek
autor:Niko Jurčić

THE BOY SANTA CLAUS

Once upon a time there was a wonderful boy, he was 10 years old. He loved his life, he loved the time he spent with his family. That was the best for him! But he wanted to celebrate that one day of the year when every family should be together and socialize, because he knew that everyone is not happy for Christmas.

The poor boy couldn't please everyone so he was sad but he didn't want to give up. He thought and thought for days and nights until he came up with a present, yes! a present. The boy didn't have enough money to buy so many presents, and he knew that his family was the best present he had, and he didn't need anything else for himself. He remembered that he had a lot of extra toys. He just didn't know how to bring toys to thousands and thousands, and millions and millions of children in just one night. He took a big bag, his toys and a sleigh, and he put on his jacket, gloves, scarf, hat and boots. He also took some candle which he had to keep and not light up and spend immediately. He set out on a very long ride. He went to the streets around his house and left gifts. He knew that he still had a long journey ahead of him, The snow he was passing through was like a snowy desert. The boy had a little more to do and to reach the last houses, because soon the sun would rise. But there were no more presents for the last house, and then he noticed that the last house was actually his house.

In that moment he woke up realizing it was all just a dream. His dad was next to his bed and he surprised him with his favorite toy car. The boy jumped into his father's arms and they hugged. And dad was proud of his son.

šifra:AM423
mentro:Tatjana Mioković
institution:OŠ Retfala Osijek
autor:Ana Matota

THE STORY OF MY FAMILY

My mom is a wonderful woman, she is kind-hearted, caring and very honest. Except, there is one thing that I personally don't think many people would expect. She is a bit sick, and she has also had quite a bit of operations, regardless of that, she still cares for me and my sister even though my sister doesn't live with us anymore. That truly proves how kind-hearted she is, she has dark brown hair and light green eyes, and she is an amazing cook. She works as a cashier in a furniture store, she has been working there for the past sixteen years, her co-workers really have a good relationship with her, since she is an easy-going person. My mom is very kind to people, and she often gives money or food to the homeless, which some people rarely do. Me and my mom live in an apartment building with five floors, and we live on the third floor. We moved into the apartment building almost three years ago, since I also had to move schools, in the start, I found it quite hard to get used to my new class, but soon enough, I found a way. It used to be easy for me to hang out with the students in my class, but now, it seems like everything has changed. All of a sudden, some girls in my class make fun of me for random things, such as listening to certain music, which I don't understand why that bothers them so much, it's just music, after all. They have even made fun of me for hanging out with boys. Regardless of that, nothing can stop me. For myself, I would say that I am quite an outgoing girl, and I make friends easily, it just depends on the person I'm trying to be friends with. My mom and me are incredibly happy together, we even help each other in certain situations, such as household chores. A year ago, my sister moved out of our apartment and got a place of her own with her friends, Nera and Laura. My sister doesn't really visit us that often since she works most of the time, she is a nurse in a hospital. Whenever she has the time, she visits us for lunch. I really love my sister, except she doesn't really show her love towards me, she's just a person who doesn't show love or affection towards people. I am the complete opposite, I love showing affection towards certain people I like or feel comfortable with. My mom loves me and my sister a lot. She even tells us that every single day, which I really appreciate. I love my mom so much,

even though she sometimes gets mad at me for getting a bad grade in a subject, she still loves me either way. That just proves how loving and caring she is. Except, these past few days, my mom is still recovering from one of her operations, meaning that I must help her with a bunch of stuff, which isn't a problem for me. I really like helping people, whether it is for homework, or for small things like paying for their food, or even helping them clean their room. The thing about me is that I'm a bit quiet and sometimes I like keeping things to myself, it depends what situation I'm in. As for my grades, I would say they are average. I am really good at English, I've spoken English fluently since I was four years old, and I have straight As in English. Except I'm not really that good at math, which is why I go to tutoring lessons, as for my sister, she has always had good grades, even in high school she passed with straight As, which is why I'm trying to be like her, except now I understand that you don't need to follow peoples footsteps in order for you to be successful, you can make your own path of success, which is my main goal in life for now. I have many hobbies, such as drawing and dancing. My mom keeps telling me that I could be an artist, or even a dancer when I grow up. I will most likely go to an art school so I can practice being an artist in the future, since art has always been very interesting and fun to me, and when you are an artist, you can truly express your emotions with your art pieces. Part of me wants to become a dancer, since I really enjoy dancing, it really doesn't matter what type of music you're dancing to, since my sister used to be a dancer when she was little, I wanted to be like her, except she used to dance traditional dances from different countries around the world. My mom, my sister and me have never been happier with each other, since we support each other in every decision we make, we really are a happy family.

šifra:SV323
mentor:Tatjana Mioković
institution:OŠ Retfala Osijek
autor:Sven Vuković

TRAVELLED BACK IN TIME

One cloudy day, I woke up and decided to go on a morning walk. I got ready and headed out. It was a really beautiful morning. I felt like something was off. The birds were not singing, my neighbour was not on his porch, the mailman was nowhere to be seen. Simply, it was really weird.

Although, I continued with my walk. I took a step, after step, and the sound under my feet kept getting louder. Suddenly, I fell into this massive hole. I hit my head really hard on some kind of a pole, and quickly enough I became unconscious. I had this weird dream where I traveled back in time. About an hour later I finally woke up. This box that I was in was glowing and it had some kind of diamonds on it. I found a really tight opening. I barely fit. When I got out, I felt like I was hallucinating. I was in some kind of a forest. It was really a dream come true. I really like nature, camping, surviving, hunting and scavenging. I am really into that type of lifestyle. My smile was bigger than ever. I immediately started to look for a shelter. I was hoping for some kind of a cave with a water source nearby. Not long after, I found exactly what I was looking for. A cave with a river nearby. It was perfect. The cave was not too deep, but not too shallow. I had to sit down for a break. Then, I took a medium-sized stone and cut some smaller trees with it. I made three piles of wood. The first pile of wood, I used for upgrading my shelter, the second pile, I saved for later to make a fire, and the third pile, I used to make weapons. I made a fine bow and some arrows. Back home, I hunted with a compound bow, so I was used to it. I was hungry so I went for a hunt. I was looking to kill a few rabbits or a whitetail deer. I covered myself with mud and leaves. I was looking like one of them prehistoric clan leaders. I walked a lot, until I heard a moose. It was a very powerful sound. I think it was a mating call. I crouched and began to approach it. I finally saw it. It had giant antlers. I got to a point where I was really close to it. I prepared for a shot, and I shot it straight into a vital organ. It is a strong animal, almost like a tank, so it put up a fight, and ran for a little bit. After a few steps it fell down face first. Of course I was able to track it down. I mean, I am, in my opinion the best hunter I know. Those

antlers were really a collector's piece. I already know a place in my cave where I am going to put them. I had to cut it up for easier transport. I was just scared of potential predators. I was mostly scared of bears. I was carrying it back to my cave. It was extremely heavy. I was almost home when a black bear jumped in front of me. I was scared to death. I started making some primal noises to hopefully make it run away. To my surprise, it started to get away from me. Soon enough it was nowhere to be seen. I was just happy that I am still standing strong and healthy. I continued to walk to my home. I arrived safe. I stored the moose meat, while I went to get some water. I carried the water in a dugout log. Now it was time to start a fire. I got some rocks and started slamming them together. I was not working, so I tried a different approach. And soon enough I made a fire. It was the most magnificent fire I have ever seen in my entire life. I immediately started boiling the water. After a while it was drinkable. I also cooked the moose meat. It was really delicious. I got some pine needles for my bedding. I set them up in a corner of my cave. After looking at the stars and listening to animals, I went to sleep. I immediately fell asleep. It felt like one of my best sleeps ever.

When I woke up, I found myself in a house. Turns out that this amazing journey was just a dream.

mentor: Ivana Kasunić
institution: Osnovna škola Nikola Tesla, Rijeka
autor:Mila Rekić

THERE IS ALWAYS LIGHT IN THE DARK

Back in the day, when humans still didn't exist, there was a dog named Kira. She lived in a world where animals did everything humans do today. She went to school and had afetr - school activities. She played the guitar, played football, and she liked to sing. She had many, many, many friends. She believed her life was perfect. Or so she thought.

One day, she was playing outside with her brother, Borna, when her mother, Tara, came and told her that her childhood best friend, Alice, died. Her heart dropped at that moment. She meant everything to her! She cried days and days in her room. She wouldn't get out. All her close friends would visit her, but she refused to talk to them.

The only time she left her room was to go to the bathroom or eat something. Her family and her friends missed her so much. After seven days and seven nights, they decided to write her a letter. In the letter, they expressed how they missed her so much. Her friends pushed the letter under her door. Kira read the letter.

She realized that even though she lost her best friend, there were many other people who loved and appreciated her. She finally left her room. Everyone was overjoyed to see her. Remember, in the hardest moments, there is always a light.

mentor: Ivana Kasunić
institution: Osnovna škola Nikola Tesla, Rijeka
autor:Ivor Rujak

MYSTIC FOREST

Long, long time ago there was a village called Lumbergenn. It was in the remote area deep in the mountains of Switzerland. Village was really small, only thirty houses and it was surrounded with the forest that villagers called Mystic forest. People in the village had a lot of stories about it. Some of them used to say that forest was haunted by the spirits of people who got lost in there, and some of them said that there were witches and ghosts.

Only one boy knew that there wasn't anything evil or anything bad in the forest. His name was Nicholas and he always wanted to go in that forest, he felt weird connection with it like something was pulling him inside. Nicholas had two friends, Emily and Ben, they knew that there is something special about Nicholas. On one particular day they made agreement that they will go into the forest and prove everyone that there is nothing to fear.

So they did. They sneaked out at night. Nicholas took the tent, Emily took sleeping bags and Ben got food and they were ready to sleep in the forest.

They were walking on a forest path and already noticed weird things. They saw fireflies glowing pink. They thought they saw a little creature run in front of them but they figured out that they were sleepy so they were imagining things that weren't real. They set up a camp, cooked dinner and got ready to go to sleep. It was a calm night.

But, the morning was disaster. They woke up and saw human shape standing outside a tent. They were too scared to even make a sound. Nicholas started breathing heavily but somehow gathered all his strength. He took his bottle and stormed out to attack whatever was there. But it disappeared.

Children were puzzled. They saw something - it couldn't be their imagination. Everyone was standing still. Then they heard something or someone with weird voice who was calling "Nicholas come here, don't be scared". Everything was telling them not to go, but they still went. Ben had a shovel with him just in case something happens. They were walking and then they saw it - it was a fairy standing on a branch of a tree. They didn't even say a word, and fairy started talking. She said "Nicholas, Emily and Ben we need your help, Mystic forest needs your help".

They were stunned - how did she know their names? Why them? What does she need help with? They couldn't resist the plead. With trembling voices, the children said "How can we help you?". Fairy started telling them a story. It wasn›t any story, it was a story about Mystic forest. The fairy told them that was the most beautiful forest in the whole world, until one day when all of a sudden forest started shaking, goblins started coming and turning most joyful forest into the dark side. Now half of the forest is black and dark.

Fairy was done with the story and Emily yelled "We can't let them win they will destroy the whole forest". "That's why I chose you to save the forest!" said the fairy. She started walking away and the children followed her.

After a long walk they saw a castle. It looked so unreal. Gold everywhere, walls made of gemstone. The king's throne was all made of gold and his pillow was made of silk.

The king was sitting on his throne watching them and said "Mystic forest is in your hands, now. You have to kill goblins and turn them into normal people. You can use the ruby of life" The children came to the king and he gave a gift to each of them.

Nicholas got a golden armor and a golden sword. Ben got a green suit, bow and many arrows and, last but not the least, Emily got slingshot, ring of invisibility and finally the ruby of life. King said that they were ready to go but they need to have in mind that they are not here to kill but to give life.

They thanked the king and started walking up the hill. When they got to the top they saw millions of goblins. In the middle of the hill, there was a black tree with black hearth that was controlling all the goblins. They knew what they had to do. Ben tied up the rope to another tree and to his arrow and shot the black tree so Nicholas can climb up to the tree. Now Nicholas had to destroy the heart of the black tree. He started crawling on a rope. Emily put her ring and started walking through the crowd of goblins to get to the tree. They came to the heart of the black tree. Nicholas stabbed it and Emily put ruby of life into it. Everything flashed, forest became nice again. Goblins were people again and everything was joyful.

But then they woke up in the front of the door they sneaked out from. They thought they were dreaming but then they saw a fairy waving from forest and they felt something in their pockets. It was a piece of gold and a piece of paper. The nots said "Thank you. Never forget, Mystic forest".

They were so happy. They went to their houses and went to sleep.

THAT'S HOW FRIENDSHIP SAVED THE MYSTIC FOREST.

šifra: ADNJ-I
mentor: Sandra Brcko
institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb
autor:Ivan Leko

A DARK NIGHT IN JERUSALEM

It was summer 1176. A boy named Diego, about 17 years old, was working in the field in Venice with his parents. He was tall and strong, so he was ideal for the army. After having to decide between escaping his harsh rulers or working pointlessly with his poor family, he decided to become a knight of Jerusalem.

Diego hopped on the warships and, along with the other depressed soldiers, was ready to fight. Diego wasn't really fond of fighting over religion, he himself was Catholic but he thought war generally was a horrible thing. The soldiers saw a nearby Arabian camp, so they decided to raid it. It resulted in a victory for the Crusaders, but at what cost? Young men, even children, died in gruesome fighting. Fortunately, Diego made it back to his camp safely. He couldn't believe what he saw. The only thing running through his head was ''I wish I had starved…". He sat down, staring at the sunset, praying for everyone fighting alongside him and everyone fighting against him. The world was messed up, and he knew that.

Diego was born into a very poor family, he worked hard while barely, BARELY making ends meet. Even after all of this, when he landed in Jerusalem, he took everything back. The Crusaders decided to take a break because they were low on water and food. No one really thought much of it, but Diego was smart. He realized that if those ships were going back to Europe, he could go home. He was on the verge of jumping on the boats, but then the general asked him: ''Where are you heading, soldier?". Diego replied: ''I'm just helping them carry the supplies…". He was sweaty and nervous which showed that he was clearly lying. Fortunately, his general couldn't see or hear very well, so Diego was able to get away with it. He returned to his camp but he was very, VERY close to being caught and severely punished. After some deep thinking, he realized there was no escape. You either die in battle or live long enough to return home with blood on your hands. He didn't want to think about it anymore, his body needed rest. But there was something bothering him. Something that wasn't war or his family.

He got up and realized something was drawing him to a nearby cave. Diego slowly got closer to the cave and, for some reason, he heard… growling? Diego was surprised that something was growling in a cave, but he didn't care. He had a sword and a shield. Of course, he had to light a torch, it was pretty dark there. As he was walking, the growling became louder and louder. After about 15 minutes of walking, he found the animal. It looked like a giant lizard-snake hybrid and it was trying to attack him. This animal is called a cave wyrm, a being of legend. Any person who would find this animal and bring it to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire would be paid a fortune. They would be set for life. Diego was determined to capture the cave wyrm. He remembered how poor his family was. He remembered how much he had to work to barely feed three people, the only thing he could eat was cabbage soup. A single bowl of cabbage soup. This animal was Diego's chance for redemption. Of course, Diego didn't just jump on the animal as he knew how dangerous it was. Instead, he devised a clever plan.

The cave had gone through multiple earthquakes, so it was full of rocks and dust. Diego analyzed his surroundings and decided to climb up and tie a large rock to a rope. Of course, he had to clear up the dust since he couldn't see well. ''Five… four… three… two… FIRE!" Diego shouted before releasing the rock. The rock hit the monster… and it just woke it up. It was much tougher than Diego thought it was. And faster. The cave wyrm quickly climbed up to Diego and bit his armour. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but Diego was wearing chain armour. It bit through his torso. The bite was lethal. Diego tried to shout for help, but no one heard him. Diego's body wasn't found, nor was the cave wyrm's. Not even its shiny scales, nor its sharp teeth. Diego's parents were aware that he was dead. All the soldiers came back except for him, and only two people (his parents) realized.

One fateful day, 849 years later, a few scientists from Germany decided to have a look at some caves. The ominous animal was finally found. It's being kept in a laboratory in Berlin, it is a descendant of multiple species of marine reptiles around the world, just like Komodo dragons. Everything was found except for Diego's body. His fighting was worthless and his soul seeks vengeance. Because of this, all who enter the cave will be cursed by the ''Screams of Venice". This curse is also known as… Diego.

šifra:RJ2003
mentor:Antonia Drlje Petrić
institution:OŠ Spinut, Split
autor:Ema Stojković

A DREAM COME TRUE

Melody is a nineteen-year-old girl who goes to Yale University and owns a cute and small coffee shop. One day a boy walks in.

"One ice coffee, please. ", says the boy.

"Sure. Here you go. ", Melody says while giving him the coffee.

From that day he starts coming to the coffee shop every day. After a few days Melody finds out that his name is Josh. They become friends. One day he asks her to go with him on a trip to New York. She accepts.

When spring break rolls around she packs her bags and they leave for New York. They visit few museums and galleries. When they finish, it is already dark outside.

"Well today was fun.", says Melody while smiling.

"Yeah, it was.", Josh replies, also smiling.

They like each other very much. The next day they visit historical museums. In the evening, they go to a magic show.

Suddenly, Melody wokes up. She is in her bed and realizes that the whole Josh and New York thing was a dream.

The next day a girl named Lily comes in the coffee shop. In time her and Melody become friends. After a few months Melody tells her about her New York dream. Lily recommends that she writes a book about it because she found it interesting. Melody takes her advice. While writing the book something feels wrong. She thinks that it is too realistic. So, she googles Josh. In his Instagram account she sees pictures of them in New York and realizes that their trip was real. She can't believe her eyes. She wants to find Josh so she searches and searches for his address. She tells everything to Lily who says that she is delusional. But she doesn't care and keeps researching. After few days she finds his address. He lives near her so she comes to his dorm room. She knocks on the door. The door opens and standing there is Josh.

"Hey, you were in my coffee shop and we went to New York together.", says Melody

"Yeah, that's right.", Josh replies.

"So, why didn't you call me?", asks Melody.

"I'm so sorry. I had a family emergency and had to go back to my home town. I just came back. I was planning to go to your coffee shop in the afternoon."

"I thought our trip was a dream."

"Why would you think that?", Josh asks.

"The last thing I remember was the magic show and waking up in my bed."

"Don't you remember that magician tried to hypnotize you. I can't believe it really worked!"

"No, I don't remember that. I can't believe that something like that happened to me but I'm so glad it wasn't a dream!", says Melody. "Let's go and get some coffee!"

They become inseparable and go on many trips together.

One day they go to Paris and that is when Josh proposes to Melody. Soon, they get married. The wedding was perfect. Now they have two kids and they are very happy together.

mentor: Marina Đura
institution: Osnovna škola Belica
autor:Gabrijel Miri

A STRANGE ADVENTURE IN AN OLD HOSPITAL

It all happened a few years ago in my primary school's bathroom. It was Tuesday. Jack, my best friend, came up to me and said: "Hey Michael, I was scrolling through YouTube and came across that weird abandoned hospital a few miles away." "Yeah", I said, "what about it?" "So, there is no working security cameras and there is no active alarms apparently", he said.

"Are you thinking what I am thinking?", I asked with joy.

Later that week Jack, my second best friend William and I took our bikes and rode about an hour and a half to the hospital. We wanted to explore it. It was a fresh spring morning, 9:37 a.m., to be exact. We were a bit tired, but we brought a ton of snacks, so we ate almost all of them immediately. Jack and I are both 11 years old and go to the sixth grade, I met him at a local playground 7 years prior to coming across William, which I met at my football practice 7 months ago. William is a big dude who is 13 years old and weights more than Jack and me together. Which explains why he ate his and ours onion and cheese flavoured chips. It was 9:49 a.m. and we went through the almost collapsed entrance filled with rust and moss. "I hope everything goes well…", said Jack nervously. William then burped, as usual, and our laughs echoed through empty halls of the hospital. We continued through the giant, once very crowded, but now quiet hospital. After some walking, we stumbled upon a black wheelchair covered in towels. William thought it would be funny to sit in it. When he sat down, the wheelchair collapsed. "Is this wheelchair made out of cardboard or what?" he said jokingly.

On the opposite side of that wheelchair is an old operation room. Inside there were multiple operation tables and many still sharp tools. We were a bit creeped out by the knives but we went in anyway. We took some photos but then something big fell close to us. We were frightened. It was 10:34 a.m. now. William grabbed his flashlight because it was quite dark inside. He turned it on and a powerful light turned a once dark room into a wonderland. "It is so bright, I can't even see properly", Jack

said. As soon as we stepped into the hall, an orange cat jumped at me, but missed and flew straight to the exit. "Whoa, that cat almost jumped on me!" I said trembling. After that weird cat thing, Jack said: "Let's continue, we could go to the basement…". "Bad idea…" William cut off Jack. "Why, are you scared?", they continued arguing. Then I had enough and quietly left to the nearby cafeteria. It was huge, with about three hundred tables, with two chairs each. I looked in the kitchen that was around the corner and it was completely empty. Not even a single pan or fork was there. Just a couple of half- empty wine bottles and two fancy wine glasses. After some time I went back to the operation room where I realized I was alone. Jack and William where nowhere to be found. It was so quiet I could hear the cat hissing at a bird somewhere around the exit. Then I looked around a bit only to find an empty cheese and onion chips plastic bag. I knew William probably dropped this. That bag was in the second hall leading towards the doctor's offices. I knew I needed to find them so I did the only logical thing; I went looking for them. It was 11:21 a.m. I was a bit scared to go alone but I had to do what I had to do. I was walking with heavy steps towards the first conference room. It was pretty long and filled with coffee machines and tables. They looked like someone's birthday party. Then I went to the second office where there was a singular table, this time without the chair. Something felt off, like there was somebody waiting to jump on m-"BOO", someone shouted. I quickly turned around and saw no one, other than Jack and William. I was furious at them as they were laughing. I grabbed a book placed on the table and threw it at William right into his left arm. "Dude, it was only a joke! I swear we didn't want to scare you that much." they chuckled. "Don't do that EVER again.", I said to them. "Anyway, what were you guys doing?", I asked them. "So, after you left we settled and noticed you were gone. We thought you just went to the other hall, so we went there too. However, Jack had an idea, to scare you. So that's what happened.", said William. "Dude it was not me!", Jack quickly acted innocent . "Shut up you liar", proved himself William. "ENOUGH!", I shouted. " I am sick and tired of your arguing.", I silenced them down. "Michael, but-" "There is no but Jack." "Let's just shrug it off and go home", William said.

Jack and I agreed and we walked to the exit. After a bit of walking we stumbled upon the same cat that almost caused us a heart attack. He was chill so we just petted him and continued. Nothing really happened after, aside from Jack tripping on a piece of ceiling that probably fell. It was around 12:20 p.m. We sat on our bikes and began the journey home. After like twenty minutes, Jack's rear tire got flat. "Oh oh", Jack realized what happened. So the situation is: we found an old chain on the side

of the road and tied Jack's bike to mine. And if you are wondering where Jack is… He is sitting behind William. Kind of uncomfortable if you ask me. We all got home safe and healthy.

Author: Marta Nekić
Mentor: Bojana Palijan
OŠ Ivana Zajca, Rijeka

A TEACHER FOR A DAY

Last night, I had the strangest dream ever. I dreamt that I was no longer a sixth-class student but a teacher! Suddenly, I saw myself standing in front of a very noisy class, wearing a big, shiny badge with my name on it. I couldn't believe it – me, a teacher! The students were throwing paper aeroplanes and laughing. I thought, *How hard could this be?*

When the bell rang, I had the most brilliant idea: *If I'm a teacher for a day, why not make school rules more fun?* So, I announced my first cool rule: *From now on, we'll have only fun classes, like "How to Avoid Exams" and "Advanced TikTok Dancing"*. The students cheered so loudly that the principal peeked into the classroom to see what was going on. He raised his eyebrows, and I gave him my best *trust me* smile.

Then I introduced the second rule about classroom behaviour: *You don't need to bring books to class. Instead, bring snacks, and you can eat them during the lesson, but only if you share them with the teacher.* They all laughed out loud and started pulling out crisps and chocolates. My desk soon looked like a snack bar! Being a teacher was absolutely delicious!

Next, I announced that we would have nap time instead of boring breaks. So, everyone spread out on the floor and took out their pillows and blankets. John took out his superhero pillow, while Matt had a blanket with a shiny solar system. Soon, the classroom became very quiet, except for the sound of snoring. Some snored louder than others, sounding like a mini orchestra. Some murmured in their sleep, asking for a slice of pizza, while others were tossing and turning as if they were dancing. I thought it was the most peaceful break ever!

Finally, I said: *No more boring lessons! From now on, we are going to learn using memes, YouTube videos, and games.* So, maths, which most students don't like, became an exciting treasure hunt. We solved puzzles to find chocolate bars hidden all over the school. Boring history turned into an interesting storytelling competition, and one of the students wrote about a caveman who went to a pyjama party, and it was a blast. Science became a Wacky Scientist contest, where students had to invent a funny experiment, like a flying potion. English became a story-writing contest

where the heroes and villains were based on their classmates. PE became a backward Olympic Games where students had to do everything but backwards, while in music, they made their own musical instruments. They had so much fun that they didn't want to leave when the bell rang.

But just as I was about to say my best rule – *No more exams!* – there was a loud noise. It was getting louder and louder until… I finally woke up. It was my annoying alarm clock reminding me it was time to get up for a new school day. A bit confused, I realised it was just a dream.

Phew! I told myself, *Being a teacher is more complicated than it looks!* I don't think I could handle all those snoring and snack-sharing every day. For now, I think I'll happily stick to just being a student. After all, the only rule I must follow is: *Don't forget your homework!*

šifra: sage5678
mentor: Ajrin Floričić
institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan
autor:Leona Lukež

A TRUE STORY ABOUT SERIAL KILLERS

Hi everyone, I'm Karla Keryed. I'm going to tell you about a true (scary) story that my college friends and I experienced. So, let's start from the beginning.

Today is Friday, but it's not an ordinary Friday. It's Friday the 13th, and as legend has it, accidents happen that day, but that's probably a lie...

We had the holidays because Christmas was approaching, and like every year we went on a trip. Most of the college girls went, but this year fewer of them did because the other girls spent time with their families, so only a quarter of us went. Last year we were in California, it was very nice. We saw almost the entire Advent. This year we went to San Francisco. We immediately got our flight tickets and set off. We drove for a very long time, for a whole day. We were a little afraid that something would happen because there was quite a lot of turbulence…

When we arrived at the hotel, everything was decorated. Then, we took our room number and headed to it. After we unpacked, we went into the city to the largest shopping centre and shopped to our heart's content. We bought the entire shopping centre. I'm kidding, but that's a lot.

We came to the garage to put the things we bought in the car. After that, we went to a restaurant to eat something because we were starving. When we got to the car, no one was there because the centre had closed because it was too late.

Suddenly we heard the sound of the elevator creaking, which meant that someone was in the elevator. We were very scared, but luckily it was a security guard who came to close the garage door…

We got to our room in the hotel around midnight… Then we watched a movie but it was more like a horror movie but it wasn't that scary. I didn't want to watch it. I'm very afraid of horror movies because I have nightmares at night, but since most of the girls agreed, I agreed too… I couldn't even close my eyes all night because I was scared, while everyone was sleeping like a rocket…

Suddenly, I heard someone walking down the hallway. The sounds of shoes were getting closer and closer to our room. I imagined it couldn't be one of the staff be-

cause everyone was sleeping… I had a feeling it was in front of our door, but I wasn't sure… All of a sudden, he started knocking on our door like a regular (I wonder why us, what we did). I started to wake up the girls, but they couldn't wake up. I started to panic, but thank God everyone woke up.

It was as if someone standing in front of our door was guarding us with something... We were so scared that we started banging on the door with an umbrella to make him move away... We weren't sure if we could speak up. He could accidentally break in and who knows what he would do to us... After a while, we heard footsteps as if he was leaving... Our hearts were beating like a hundred times an hour, but we somehow gathered the strength to open the door and see if anyone was outside...

Luckily no one was there. The burden fell off our hearts, and everything was fine...

We decided to go to the hotel reception and ask if anyone had entered the building who wasn't on the list... But the receptionist said that no one had entered in the past 30 minutes, only that a stranger all dressed in black had come and said he was looking for some of his relatives, the person the receptionist had seen had been outside our door. We decided to go investigate who it could be. We couldn't figure out who it could be, but in the end, we decided to pretend that nothing had happened.

The next night we tried to close our eyes, but it was hard because we were so sleepy. Our oldest friend found a friend on the second floor and went to see her. She didn't come for a long time, which was really strange because whenever you go to her she always comes back right away. We went to the room where the girl was, we knocked and knocked but no one opened the door. We noticed that the door was unlocked and went in... The room was completely empty (all in chaos as if a bomb had gone off) we ran downstairs. The receptionist told us that two men were carrying some people and said that he had immediately called the police, he tried to run after them but they had knives in their hands, which meant they had kidnapped our friend.

This was the worst trip so far because nothing like this has ever happened to us. We rushed to the police and told them what the girl and our friend looked like.

We started investigating. We searched and searched for clues, we even asked around on the street, but no one knew. The police found a picture of the kidnapper and gave it to the receptionist to see if he saw it because only he had seen it… That it was him, the kidnapper who had been in prison for kidnappings several times.

In the end, we thought we would never find them and who knows what he had done to them. Poor girls, but the police found them, they literally hid in a mouse hole. The girls were good, but they were too scared, those stupid kidnappers would have stabbed our friends in the arm if they said anything or if it was found out but thank God they didn't do anything.

They were sentenced to many, many years in prison because they had kidnapped someone for the umpteenth time. So, we decided to return home the next day. That was a lesson for us for the next time, we never went that far again…

šifra: krašrizi
mentor: Srđana Vranjičić
institution: OŠ Pučišća
autor:Korina Radić

AIKA'S TRIP FROM CHINA TO CALIFORNIA

Panda Aika lived in a small village on the edge of China. This village has the river Kai; because of that, the pandas are engaged in rice cultivation. Aika has a boat for three people and rides on the Kai river every day with her best friend, Paki. Her father, Meju, is very caring and taught Aika everything about boats. He doesn't want Aika to travel because when her mom, Majaji, left to try to sail to California, she never came back. Before leaving, every evening, Majaji told Aika about different animals and their appearance. She thought that there were lots of flowers and trees, just like in paradise.

Aika loved stories about rough seas the most. Because of these stories, Aika decided to leave with the ship at dawn and not tell anyone, as she knew that her father would not agree with it. Paki saw that Aika was putting water and food in the boat. She knew that Aika wanted to escape because lately, she had been obsessed with questions about the way to the other side of the world. Paki boarded and spent the night without Aika's knowledge. Aika started the journey. When she reached the beginning of the Red Sea, she stopped because of a storm. Her boat broke against a rock, and that's when she saw Paki. She was amazed and a little angry with herself that Paki had been hidden.

The monkeys on the island repaired their boat, and Aika and Paki collected bananas to eat for their trip. They thanked the monkeys and moved on. They travelled through storms, so they stopped again in the south of Spain. When they stopped, they saw Aika's mother, Majaji. Aika immediately ran to hug her. Majaji told her that she had been there for a month and had made friends with the bulls because all animals must know sign language. They would give them fruit.

Together, they continued to travel to their destination. It was difficult and complicated to get there because of the eddies. When they arrived, they realized that the end of the world was not as they imagined, but even better, because all kinds

of animals were together there. They received a very warm welcome and slept over. They returned in three days because it was very windy, and the currents took them straight to their village. Meju greeted them angrily, but when he saw his wife, he hugged everyone. They continued to live together.

The end!!!

author: Lira Burić
mentor: Erna Jukić
institution: Osnovna škola Hreljin

AN UNUSUAL CHRISTMAS MORNING

It was a sunny Christmas. The smell of my grandma's delicious cookies woke everyone up. I was very excited to eat them, so I rushed to the kitchen. Outside the window of my kitchen I saw everything covered with snow and the street was decorated with Christmas lights which shined like stars. I had a feeling like we were living in a fairytale. I looked outside again and saw something amazing! Reindeer were flying in the sky! They were big and had beautiful, shiny horns. Below them were sleighs, and in them sat Santa with a smile on his face. It was an unusual sight! I was excited and confused! How could this be happening?

One of the reindeer, with a red cap and gold bells around his neck, came to my backyard. When I opened the door, the reindeer was looking at me with its big, warm eyes. Before I knew it, I was in the sleigh. I was confused again, but I felt happy. I guess anything was possible in that moment. And so my incredible adventure began. I jumped on the sleds, the reindeer started running, and I felt the wind in my hair and a great happiness in my heart. I saw houses, forests and rivers which I didn't see before. It all seemed like a dream. I saw a million little lights in the distance, and it was all very magical. Christmas! We've landed on a magical island full of delicacies. It's hard to believe, but there was also a cake house and chocolate trees and a long river of milk. Well, there were also little elves who worked on making toys. They were cheerful and smiling, and each of them had his own little assignment. There were all kinds of toys, the most beautiful in the world. Everything was full of magic, and I could choose whatever I wanted. There was everything from wooden trains to teddy bears. I didn't know what to choose, so I told my grandfather to surprise me and that I'd be glad to have a present when I found it under my tree. After we had fun and played, Santa showed me a magical garden where plants with colorful flowers grew. Each flower had its own fragrance, and when I smelled it, I felt a happiness that filled me. This was truly a magical place. After we'd spent the day playing and having fun, Santa brought me home. He wanted me to remember that any magic really comes from the heart because when you share your happiness with others, your magic will grow. Well, that makes sense. I wanted to stay in that magical world forever, but I knew that my family and all my friends were waiting for me to celebrate Christmas.

We landed in front of my house. The reindeer took off again and left a brilliant trail of light. I walked into the house and everyone was glad to see me. I told them all about my adventure and they couldn't believe what they heard. I felt very special because this amazing adventure happened to me. After everything that happened, I enjoyed the rest of the day in a warm home with my family. Christmas morning was filled with magic, happiness and lots of love. I went to sleep with a smile on my face, knowing that every Christmas would be special if you had love in your heart and friends around you. And so ended my incredible adventure with an unusual guest. Every year, when Christmas comes, I look back on my trip and always hope to meet my red-cap reindeer friend again!

šifra:LD111
mentor:Dijana Oreški Vidović
institution:III.OŠ Čakovec
autor: Lada Kokot

BABY

Once upon a time, far, far away, there lived a girl named Kim Sophia. From a young age, Sophia loved to daydream, draw, write, paint, sing, dance, socialize with people, and talk: she was a very chatty, and lively little girl.She was 6 and a half years old. Besides being very social, she loved animals deeply. Whenever she saw any animal, she felt the need to pet, stroke, and cuddle it. She was made for animals. One day, while walking alone in the street to fill a bucket with water, she spotted a small lion. A very small one. A lion cub. He was very cute, cuddly, and licked Sophia from their first meeting. Sophia was very caring, and as soon as she held any animal, she never let it go. She named the little lion Baby. At one point, she blushed with sweetness and decided to take him home.

When she got home, she showed her parents the new family member she had found, hoping they would like the cub named Baby. But her parents were not at all happy or satisfied with the success and happiness Sophia had found. Her mother said: "What do I need that ugly animal in the house for?! Just an extra burden! As if one child and a house to clean isn't enough for me?!" And her father was generally an enemy of animals. With any animal he encountered or that Sophia would encounter, he would drive it away. He said: "I agree! I don't want any animals in this house! I want money!" Little girl Sophia was really sad to hear those words come out of her parents. She went to her small room and started crying. Her little lion had fallen asleep quickly and she hugged him so tight because her parents hated him. Then she fell asleep too, hugging the lion.

TEN YEARS LATER: Now Sophia is 16 years old. With years, by spending time with the cub, she created a connection and was able to communicate with Baby. But when she was 13, her mother passed away because she was terminally ill. And her father left her alone and went to Florida where he found a new wife. But a very rich one. Sophia has been living in nature with Baby near the forest called: The Forest Of Life. She went to the forest and found a beautifull tree with green leaves. She started singing and walking around the tree. Then she said: We need to go find a new place to live. We can't live like this. She grabbed Baby and started running through

unknown paths. In a couple of minutes she found a strange wooden house with the door turned to the forest. The girl was very curious about the house, so she decided to see what's inside. But before that, she said: "Is anybody in here? Can someone please open the door?!" Then she knocked. She heard the voice of an old lady who said: "Who could that be in this time of night?" Sophia wasn't scared. She was a brave girl. The old lady opened the house door and she was astonished. She asked: "A kid?!" Sophia said: "Hello. I would like to introduce myself. I'm Kim Sophia. I'm 16 years old. My mother past away and my father left me alone and went to Florida and got married to some rich woman. I live alone and I've been wandering in the nature with my pet for 3 years. Can you help me find a new home? I am an orphan."

The old lady was pleasantly surprised. She said: "HAAAWH! Please come in my darling, I have some tasty food so I can feed you, I have a cosy bed!" You know, that lady was actually a witch, but Sophia was so tired, hungry, and unaware of where she was at all, that she fell for the lady's offer and proudly entered the house. The unknown witch already finished her dinner table with lots of cookies, cupcakes, fruit, soup and buns. Sophia was surprised when she saw the buffet table in the Witch's house. She firmly sat down on the chair and began to eat. Sophia began to talk to the Witch, not knowing it was really her, and asked her: "How is it to live in this house?" And then they kept talking. But when she saw the Witch holding a knife from which some greasy liquid was dripping, she realized what was going on. Then Sophia awkwardly said: "Mmm…Alright then. It really was a delicious dinner, I'm going to bed and good night!" And she quickly and firmly closed the bedroom door. She's a witch! She whispered to Baby. She put a sleeping potion in the buns. Baby had strange expressions on his face, which meant he understood what Sophia was talking about. Sophia threw herself onto the bed and fell asleep. Then Baby jumped into action and started waking Sophia up.

Sophia woke up for a moment and began to close her eyes again, but in a few seconds, Baby found a large well with water and let her drink. Sophia drank some water to refresh and awaken herself. When she drank the water,she saw the witch's magical flying machine and decided to take it, but at that moment, the Witch opened the bedroom door and said: "Hey you! Aren't you sleeping?! You won't escape from me! And the witch ran towards Sophia and Baby!" Sophia was a little scared, but then she set the empty well under the Witch's feet, but she suddenly jumped over it. Sophia got very scared and took out the ladder, climbing up to grab the flying machine. To save the situation, Baby jumped in to help and threw himself at the witch!

After the battle with the witch, Sophia and the Baby managed to take the flying machine and they finally flew away.

šifra:STORM
mentor:NATAŠA GRUBIŠIĆ
institution:OŠ SESVETSKA SELA
autor:Petra Vidović

CATCHING SANTA CLAUS

On snowy Christmas Eve in 2011, a family of 5 called the smiths were getting ready for Christmas. The kids, Lucas (14), Anna (8), and Lily (5) were helping their father Chris decorate the Christmas tree while their mom Sophie was baking cookies.

After the Christmas tree was decorated, Sophie asks Lucas "Can you take out the cookies in ten minutes, I'm tired and I want to go rest for a bit". "Yeah, whatever" Lucas responds. Lucas sat down next to the oven and started scrolling TikTok on his phone. After fifteen minutes Lily smells something weird and she starts running around the house and saying "FIRE! FIRE! CALL THE FIREFIGHTERS!!!", in that chaos Lily falls and spill the flour that was next to the microwave. Nobody cleaned up that mess because they were worried if is Lily okay and if there is fire in the house. Then mom woke up and they realized that is 11 pm and they need to get ready for the Christmas Eve service. After the service they all go straight to bed. When they wake up on Christmas, they see big footprints in the flour. Upon seeing them, Lily and Anna believe that Santa Claus left those footprints, but Lucas didn't agree with them and call them losers for believing in Santa Claus. After that Christmas Lily and Anna spend a whole year coming up with a plan to catch Santa Claus, they called it "operation Ho! Ho! Ho!". It's Christmas Eve, Lily and Anna can't wait to tell their friends they caught Santa Claus. This year the Smiths are decorating the Christmas tree and baking cookies, but they decided that this year, they're not going on the Christmas Eve service because their kids always fall asleep when they are there. They finished decorating and baking early so everyone except Lily and Anna went to sleep earlier than before. That night they made a trap, set up cameras, bought ice cream to stay awake and hide in the pantry. While the girls are eating ice cream and all the other family members are sleeping, turns out Lucas didn't go to sleep either. He stayed awake and spied on them. All goes perfect except one thing the girls fell asleep too soon. So, they didn't hear the bell when it rings, and no one looked at the monitor. But Lucas is still awake, he is ready for when the bell rings, because he realized that the girl's plan is not that bad, and he was sorry for saying they are losers. The bell is

ringing, and Lucas is yelling "Girls wake up your poor plan is actually working and I'm speechless". The girls wake up run to the living room. As soon as they got into the room Santa turned into magical powder and got away. But he didn't go to the north pole, he just went to another house to deliver a unicorn as a present. While Santa is still busy with delivering the unicorn, Lily, Anna and Lucas ran to Santas Clause's sleigh and hid in it because they want to know what north pole looks like. After Santa Claus went back to his sleigh, they took off. While they were in the sky, Lily and Lucas were watching the beautiful stars. Lily curiously wanted to ask Santa why he didn't leave any Christmas present under their Christmas tree. So, she moved closer to Santa Clause's shoulder and yelled "Hey, Santa, why you didn't leave any Christmas presents under our Christmas tree?". Right after she said that Santa dropped the reins, and the kids fell off the sleigh, and they landed in Africa, where it's too hot to wear a cap, boots and other winter clothes. So, they decided to go buy summer clothes, after they bought summer clothes and figured out where they are, Lily says "I want to go see giraffes and if I don't, I'm going to scream". After Lily said that Santa says „Well, that is why you didn't get a present for Christmas", after he tells her that, she started to run, but Santa didn't care because he knows Lily fears being alone. So, they started to think how to get back to the America because they need to deliver presents, well Santa Claus needs to. Anna had a plan which is "We can go to high school, learn physics, stop the time and then we can get back to America". "That's a brilliant idea, but we don't have that much time and you're only nine so you can't go to high school" says Santa Claus, "I have a better idea, we can sneak into a boat and go to America" says Lily, who came back because she got scared. Their plan is to find a boat to America, sneak into that boat and finally Lily, Anna and Lucas can be at home. They find a boat and sneak into it. Now they just need to be quiet, and everything will be fine. But we all know that Lily can't be quiet, so they tired her out until she went to sleep, and everything goes perfectly. When they arrived, they realized that they don't have a sleigh so Santa made a new one and in that moment Lucas, Anna and Lily are surprised, "You idiot, you could have just made them when we are in Africa" said Lucas, Santa just looked at him and said "I had a plan, come on I'm Santa Claus Ho! Ho! Ho!". After that, Lucas just sat in the sleigh and said, "I know you're Santa Calus but come on, we need to get back home because I'm tired", "Me too" said Anna, "And I'm tired too, Santa" said Lily. They all sit in the sleigh and in ten seconds they arrived back home.

In the morning, they go to church and Lily forgot about Santa, but when they came back Lily saw many presents under the Christmas tree and a note that says:

Dear Lily, Anna and Lucas, Merry Christmas!

-Santa Claus

author: Anja Kučan
mentor: Erna Jukić
institution: Osnovna škola Hreljin

CHRISTMAS

Once upon a time there was a girl named Mary. She was smart and went to the 7th grade. Mary wanted to celebrate Christmas because she didn't know what Christmas was. Mary found out that at Christmas you get big and beautiful gifts and that big snowflakes fall which always delight her. She immediately loved Christmas, she told her mom what she learned about it. Mom told her, "Mary, we still decorate the pine tree for Christmas, we put up the nativity scene, we put up the lights and we make snowballs." Mary said "Mom, thank you for telling me something else about Christmas, now I love it even more". Mary happily went to get the pine tree, the crib and the lamps. Mary immediately decorated the pine tree, and there is still 2 days until Christmas. In those two days Mary was full of happiness, she was very happy, she couldn't wait for Christmas.

On the second day, Mary met her new friends, she started telling them how she had decorated the pine tree, put up lights, placed the nativity scene under the pine tree, and that she was just waiting for big snowflakes to fall. Her friends told her that Father Christmas enters houses through the chimney and that Christmas Eve is before Christmas, and according to tradition, the whole family is called on Christmas Eve and enjoys a family meal together. Mary was delighted with the things her friends told her. Christmas Eve came, her mom invited the family for a family meal. The table was full of food that Mary loved. The whole family was delighted with how Mary decorated the house for Christmas. Mary went to meet her dear friends because she could maybe learn something more about Christmas. Her friends told her about a green boy who didn't like Christmas his name was the Grinch. The Grinch didn't like Christmas because his friends made fun of him because he was green and since then he didn't love Christmas. Later he loved it. Mary listened carefully to the story and enjoyed it. Mary said "He was the same as me except that I wasn't teased by my friends at school." Then Mary and her friends left because mom called Mary she had to go to dinner.

On the third day, Christmas came, which Mary could hardly wait for. Mom told Mary to wish everyone a Merry Christmas, Mary did it. Then Mary went to look under the pine tree and saw a lot of presents wrapped in decorative paper. Mary

immediately started opening all the presents that were under the pine tree. Mary received teddy bear in one gift, school supplies in the second gift, a Christmas gnome in the third gift and a tablet in the fourth gift. Mary was delighted with these gifts. Then she went to meet her friends to tell them what she got and to see what they got. Mary's friends received some classic gifts, and Mary told them how she got a tablet. Her friends were delighted with her gifts. Mary had to go home because her grandmother came. Mary ate fine fritters with Nutella for dinner with her grandmother and mother.

Mary's dad was on a ship so he couldn't celebrate Christmas with his family, but Mary told her dad everything that happened at Christmas. Mary, mom and grandma ate a lot of fritters. Then Mary went to sleep. The next morning Mary woke up and saw her dad. Mom told her that Dad got off the ship so he could see Mary. Mary loved this moment when dad came to her because she hadn't seen him for long time and she wanted him very much. This was Mary favorite moment. It was the best present for Mary, even better than tablet, then Mary ran and hugged her dad. Mary's dad had tears in his eyes when he saw her. Mary said, "Dad, you brightened up my Christmas, this was my favorite Christmas and the most special Christmas." Dad says to Mary, "My Mary, I missed you a lot and you made my Christmas even more beautiful even though I didn't celebrate it." Mom sat in the kitchen with tears in her eyes and watched the love between Mary and Dad. Mary enjoys these moments very much, because her dad came, its Christmas and she has a lot of real friends. Mom came into the living room and hugged Mary and Mary's dad. That hug was beautiful to watch. Mary promised her mother that she would celebrate every Christmas and that she would like to see her father to be home every Christmas.

šifra:CHRISTMAS
mentor:IVANA KOZIĆ
institution: OSNOVNA ŠKOLA „AUGUST CESAREC", IVANKOVO
autor:Franka Vukoja

CHRISTMAS STORY

Today is Christmas night and we are baking some cookies for Santa. I'm so happy! I wrote him a letter. Next to the letter, I put some cookies and milk. At 10 o'clock, I went to my bed. I was so excited, I didn't want to sleep. Then I got an idea. I went downstairs with my phone. I put it behind Christmas decoration and got back to my bed.

On Christmas morning, I got downstairs, I looked under the tree, and there was nothing under it. I watched the video, and I didn't see Santa. I called my friend, and she said she didn't get a present, too! She had an idea. We went to North Pole and asked elves why didn't Santa come and they said that he's missing. Me and Kaylee asked if we can help find Santa and save Christmas. Elves said that we can help. We went to the sleigh, and on the sleigh there was a letter that Santa wrote. It says: Dear elves, I couldn't deliver present, maybe if you find me, we can save Christmas! We went on sleighs and rushed to find Santa. On our way, we found Santa's footprints, we followed it and it lead us to a big cave. There was an evil elf, he stole Santa and his presents. We asked him why he did it, he said that he hates Christmas so he wanted to stop it. He showed where was Santa. We rushed to deliver all the presents. When I woke up I saw a lot of presents. We saved Christmas!

šifra: zp2513
mentor: Gabrijela Radoš
institution: Osnovna škola Izidora Kršnjavoga
autor:Zaria Pendelić Poljak, 6.c

FREYA'S BIRTHDAY

Oliver, Freya and I were just talking in the school courtyard between physics and Latin class. Oliver and Freya didn't take Latin, but they still waited for me every Friday. Just by that, you can see how great my friends are. Randomly, Freya got a notification on her phone. She checked it. Her eyes immediately lit up and her smile widened. It was unusual to see her like that, since she was always so calm and stoic.

"Oh. My. Gosh. Char, guess what? I enrolled into an ice skating class!" Freya exclaimed. The pure joy and excitement in her voice was evident.

"Wait, seriously?! No way, congrats!" I replied. I was so happy for her, knowing she trained hard to enroll.

"Congrats! So when do you start?" Oliver asked, also noticing Freya's happiness.

I looked at the large clock on the wall. Latin class was starting in two minutes! I grabbed my bag, waved goodbye to my friends and rushed down the hall. The school bell rang. Finally, I found the classroom I was supposed to be in.

"Good morning, sorry I'm late!" I apologised to the teacher, who already started the lecture, even though it was the last lesson today, and the winter break was tomorrow. The lecture was long and boring, about grammar. I glanced at the clock. Still half an hour of class left. I liked Latin, especially because of how interesting the history behind it is, but the grammar part is still boring. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the bell rang, signalling the end of class. The teacher gave us a bunch of homework, as always. I hurried to leave as soon as possible, putting my headphones and jacket on.

I walked out of the school. Oliver and Freya were waiting for me.

"Hey, Charlotte. Took you long enough." Her tone was casual and calm, as usual.

"Yeah, I know. Imagine sitting through a long lecture on grammar, though."

"Fair, but still."

As we walked home, talking about a lot of things at once — as we usually do — Oliver's eyes randomly lit up and a slight smile appeared on his face. He looked like he was staring at nothing, like he got an idea. As Freya went home, he asked me:

"Hey, isn't Freya's birthday in, like, two days?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so. Why do you ask?"

"Why don't we throw her a surprise party?"

"You're a genius!"

"I know, right?"

"Nevermind, I forgot about your arrogance."

Oliver was often confident, maybe too much.. We immediately started planning. Oliver thought about where we should go to and what we'll do, while I planned how we're going to distract her. It was a tough challenge, but nothing can stop us… Except for getting grounded. But that's never a problem to us. Anyways, back to the topic — Freya has two twin sisters who love telling everyone secrets. It's annoying, honestly. But they're always out shopping, so they shouldn't be able to spoil the surprise. I decided we should just act like we forgot about her birthday until the surprise. She probably wouldn't make a big deal if we forgot anyways. We'd just act like we're going to the library to study. Oliver said we should go ice skating for the surprise, since Freya always talks about it.

But for some reason, I felt like someone was watching us the entire time. As we were planning, I heard someone snickering behind me. Immediately, I turned around to see Freya's sisters, clearly plotting something.

"Of course you'd be here."

"Well, that's a bit rude, don't you think? We were simply going shopping." The taller one, Iris, replied, a mischievous smile on her face.

"Yeah, as if I'd believe that."

"Okay, fine, you caught us. Maybe we should just spoil the surprise early, don't you think? I'm sure Freya would love to find out about the skating session." Lily, the other twin answered.

With that, the twins left. I turned to Oliver and suggested we could buy her a new pair of skates. We went to the nearby mall.

"Well then, seems like Iris and Lily don't know everything. That's a good thing."

"Yeah, I guess so. Still, half the surprise is practically spoiled."

"We still have the other half."

"Fair enough."

We looked through the store to find some ice skates in her style, but most of them were either light blue or white. Exactly what I'd wear, but this wasn't

about me. So, we tried to find some skates she'd like, until eventually, Oliver found them. A black-and-red pair which fit perfectly with her grunge-like style. So, we bought them and waited until the next day. I called Freya to ask her to study with us, and she agreed, as always. She seemed like she didn't know about the surprise. I waited for her and Oliver in front of our school, but we started going a different way instead of the library.

"Uhh, isn't the library that way?"

"Yeah, but I found a shortcut." I lied, knowing she knew where we were going, but still.

We went on, until we got to the ice skating rink. Oliver gave her the skates, and she realised the surprise wasn't just the ice-skating session, but also a brand new pair of skates. She was very happy. Oliver and I didn't have our own skates, so we just borrowed some from the store. We had a great time and we skated all day. Oliver fell 357 times. And yes, he actually counted.

šifra:THUNDEER
mentor:NATAŠA GRUBIŠIĆ
institution:OŠ SESVETSKA SELA
autor:Ana Tomić

NATURAL GIRLS

One Monday, three girls named Sailor, Layla, and Hailey, went to school. First class was Maths. ” Girls, today is teacher giving us short test:” says Hailey. ” We know…” says Layla. “ But computer science is also today!” says Sailor. “ Lets ask teacher to go to the library during Computer science !” says Hailey. “ Sure! ” they agreed.

In the library they noticed strange shelf. “ Amm, girls is it normal that the book shelf glows?!” asks Sailor. “ What in the world is going on?!” (Layla). The one big book starts flying. After a couple circles book lands in the Sailor’s hands. “ Should I open it? ” (Sailor). “ Well… I don’t know…” (Hailey) “ The book comes to you, go ahead ! ” (Layla). “ Fine.” (Sailor). Sailor opens the book. The big portal appears! The portal was colorful and strange to girls, they even couldn’t imagine that some think like that is even possible! “ Girls, I can’t believe that I’ m saying this, but I will enter in the portal !” (Sailor). “ Ok, we will go too! Come Layla!” (Hailey). They enter in and they start glowing! “O my God! Sailor, you are glowing!”(Layla). “What?!” (Sailor).

And then, the little fairy appears! “Hi girls, our queen send me to give you a message that we need help. This is the map which will lead you to the queen’s castle. And you are glowing because you are getting your powers, you two will glow too! See you around!” says fairy. And then Hailey and Layla start glowing! The voice from the sky starts talking : “ Sailor you will have power of the universe, Layla you will have power of the ice and Hailey you will have the power of the nature and you can also change the weather! We gave you those powers because you will be more helpful to us with them. Now go to queen!” ”What did just happened?!” (Hailey). “ Well we got the powers, and we will have to help them.”(Layla). “So let’s go to the queen!”(Sailor). On the way to the queen they saw a waterfall made of chocolate. The sky also changes it’s color every hour. ”Girls what do you think about this place?” (Sailor).“ For me it’s awesome, for you Layla?” (Hailey). “ It’s ok… I am a bit worried what will our parents say when they realise that we are gone in some magic world and we don’t

know how to come back!" (Layla). "I didn't think about that before, but I think the queen and this magic world are prepared everything." (Hailey). "I'm not worried, I just think everything is fine…" (Sailor). Shortly after, they saw a big castle!

"Wow this is so beautiful! I never saw something like that!" (Hailey). They wanted to enter in the castle, but the big troll stopped them! "Hi girls, I am sorry, we all know that you are here to help, but without the message, I can't let you in…" (troll). "But we didn't get any papers!" (Layla). "I am very sorry, but if you didn't get any papers, you can ask the elf for other information." (troll). "I guess we will have to ask the elf…" (Layla). "Hi sir, I think you know who we are and we need your help. Can you help us to go to the queen. " (Hailey). "Oh, I know who you are, and I can help you. The fairy is new here and she just got the job so she is stressed because you are important guests…" (elf). "Sorry but we don't care, just help us so we could get to the queen!" (Layla). "Sorry madam, fairy forgot the papers, here they are!" (elf). "Thank you, sir, we are sorry because of being rude ☺." (Sailor). "Layla, you can't be rude because you aren't patient! Little elf just wanted to justify the fairy and explain what did happen and

maybe he wanted to share that with us!" (Hailey). "Girls, focus!" (Sailor). Troll let them go in the castle. "Well, hello girls, listen carefully!"(queen)." Some body is kidnaping our solders and at night destroying the town! Even in the castle has been the robbery! In your human world this is maybe normal, but in our world that is unbelievable! Can you please do something?" (queen). "We will try, can you direct us in the case? (Sailor). "You can start at the house number 19; the owners are suspicious." (queen). "Let's go girls!" (Layla). They start running to the house! When they came, they knock on the door. "Hello, can we talk with you please?" (Sailor). The door opens! "Oh, hi! Sure, why not? But your two friends will have to wate outside." (the owner of the house). "Fine, girls go researching in other houses!" (Sailor). They just run away. So where were you last night and the few other nights?" (Sailor). " Well, first of all, my name is Ell, and I am a different creature, I am the creature between the human and the elf. By the way, I confess I wasn't home, I was at the private hidden disco club at the middle of the forest. I wasn't supposed to tell you this. Please don't tell anyone!" (Ell). "Thank you for that information." (Sailor). After she said that, she climbed on the star, and she flies away. "Hey Hailey, what do you think, what happened in that house?" (Layla). "I actually don't know, but I think Sailor knows something." (Hailey).

While Sailor was flying on the star, she saw two thieves in the pink police suits! "This town is really amazing, cops wear pink suits, but their hands was full of boxes. I'll come closer." (Sailor). The gold was sticking out of the box! "Hey you! Stop!"

(Sailor). "Run!" (thief). Thieves were so fast, so Sailor lose them. "What, where did they go?!" (Sailor). And then she saw them, but she didn't start yelling, she just starts to follow them. "Sir, the one of those girls is still out, we kidnap two, but we miss one, we are so, so sorry sir, and you have to know that she almost revealed where is our refuge!" (thief). "You louts! We just need to kidnap the queen and become the kings, but now you ruined everything!" (the gang boss). "What?! They kidnap Layla and Hailey?! What am I going to do?! Ok Sailor, calm down! I think I'm going to get a drink!" (Sailor). And Sailor went to the bar. At the bar she drinks mushroom juice with an apple. "This is actually tasty!" (Sailor). "Hi Sailor!" "What, who are you?" (Sailor). "I am the new kid from your world and I follow you and your friends, I want to help you, by the way I have power of the water. I almost forgot; my name is Freddy!" (Freddy). "So, you want to help me, Freddy?" (Sailor). "Well, I am stuck here just like you so why won't I help? (Freddy). "Omg, thank you so much!" (Sailor). "Come on, I found the house where we could stay and think out how to win the gangsters." (Freddy).

Next morning, they were ready to fight! Nobody didn't know how they prepare for the fight, but if they say that they are ready, they are!

"I miss Sailor…" (Hailey). "Me too! I hope she is fine…" (Layla)

"Hey, we know that you two are guilty! And now prepare for the big fight!" (Sailor). "Oh, we are already prepared!" (the gang boss). And then the fight began! But two gangsters captured Freddy. "So, Sailor, you lost three friends, and you will still fight?" (the gang boss). "You know I will!" (Sailor). "As you wish." (the gang boss). They were fighting so hard! Sailor failed on the ground and the gang boss pulled out the sword. "So, do you surrender ?" (the gang boss). "Never!" (Sailor). "Then you will fill my sword on your skin!" (the gang boss). Sailor was

angry, so she starts glowing and she says loudly: " Now you will fill my anger!" (Sailor). And she pushes him away and he was gone forever! The gangsters run away, and the girls start hugging.

Queen appears: "Thank you for helping! I will send you to your real word, I am doing this fast because your parents will get worried, your reward is in your world!" (queen).

Girls came back to their real world.

"What did just happen!?" (Hailey). "I don't know, but I know that happened something very nice! By the way, let's go to class!" (Sailor).

At the end..

Girls never told me what the reward was, and I know that the story is maybe weird, but I kind of like it.

šifra: tttopp
mentor: Srđana Vranjičić
institution: OŠ Pučišća
autor:TINA TRUTANIĆ

EMMA

Fifteen years ago, two wizards, who had a baby in their arms, were passing through a magical forest. The magical forest is beautiful but dangerous. It is somehow alive, and it hates wizards and witches, even though a witch lives in it. In this living forest resides the strongest witch in the world. She is immortal.

The wizards with a baby went to the immortal witch. Her name is Olivia, and she is evil. Everyone is afraid of her. The wizard, whose name is Max, said that he thinks it's stupid that female wizards are called witches. Emily replied, "Max! We have to give this baby to my sister, and you're thinking about that!? I love this child. Our daughter is beautiful." Max said, "Yes, she is!"

Emily is Olivia's younger sister. Emily and Max came and left the child together with a letter in front of the well that is by Olivia's house. The parents of the baby raised their magic wands, and the mom said, "Convert one brown eye as a sign of mom's love." Max said, "Convert one brown eye to hate us." Emily flared up and said, "Why? You are a cold-hearted monster! How could you do that?" She ran, and he ran after her.

Later, Olivia came home and looked at the little baby. Olivia took the baby. Fifteen years later, it is the child's birthday. Her name is Emma. Olivia renamed her, and now Emma is fifteen years old! Emma said: "I am fifteen years old! Why don't you tell me something about my parents?" Olivia replied, "First, I will give you a present. Close your eyes." Emma closed her eyes, and Olivia put a necklace around her neck. "I gave this necklace to your mother when she was 15 to ask for her forgiveness because our parents didn't want to take her on a trip. She threw it on the floor. That night, when I was making a magic potion, your mother deliberately set the house on fire. The fire spread and burned the whole village down. My sister blamed me for the fire and everyone believed her. All my friends turned on me, only Mia remained a true friend. The villagers chased me out of the village, and then I went to the magical forest."

Then Emma said, "Aunty, but you didn't start the fire! I hate my parents!"

Olivia said. "After lunch, when you eat the cake, you will go for your first walk in the forest by yourself."

Emma and Olivia had lunch and cake.

Then they talked, and it was time for Emma to leave. Emma went to the magical forest, where she saw many friendly creatures. Emma thought the magical forest wasn't really dangerous. She continued walking and saw a dragon. She knew she couldn't run away because the dragon was faster, and she wasn't going to fight because the dragon was stronger. So, she stood in front of the dragon and looked into his big eyes. The dragon threw her onto his back. After a while, he put her down, and she ran away, scared.

She came home and told her aunt what happened. Olivia looked at her and said that only a wizard the dragon ever loved was cursed for life. Will Mia appear in the story? Did Emma's eyes save her? Is the dragon good? The end?

šifra: tr1301
mentor: Gabrijela Radoš
institution: Osnovna škola Izidora Kršnjavoga
autor:Tara Rožanić, 5.c

FOODIUM MUSEUM

Imagine a place where all your dreams come true. When I close my eyes, I think of a world where there is no ordinary museum, but there is only a special and magical museum of food. In my imagination there is a place just like it, and it's called Foodium. Foodium is not just like any other place. It's a museum full of colours, different tastes and smells. There is no boredom in it because everything is interactive, fun and delicious. In my mind, that food museum isn't just a place to watch, but a trip through various cuisines of the world where every visitor becomes a part of the journey.

My food museum looks like a huge cake from the outside. Imagine a building coated with layers of rainbow whipped cream, sprinkled with colourful sprinkles. These sprinkles of course light in the night, making the most beautiful building in town. On the entrance huge doors made from "speculaas" cookies await you to say the magic words that serve as the entrance ticket; "I love trying new food".

Inside, everything looks magical. The museum is divided into four floors, like four chapters in a cookbook. Each floor speaks its own food story. Visitors receive an empty plate at the entrance. While they visit different floors, they can choose what they like, and they can put it on their plate. At the end, they leave with a specially designed menu, tailored just for them by professional chefs.

First floor is the land of salty treats. Everything here looks like a feast. Tables full of cheese, pasta, pizza, spicy dishes and sauces. The walls are covered with real vegetables that slowly swing in the air. The visitors can try anything and everything; from warm soups to freshly baked bread. Another special effect is that every table in the museum has "magical plates" that whisper the flavour of the dish you are looking at.

Second floor is probably the most magical place in the museum; Candy Land, of course. The walls in Candy Land are made from chocolate, and lamps on the whole ceiling are huge lollipops made from sugar. On this floor there is also a special foam pit made from the softest marshmallows. The tables are full of cakes, ice cream, doughnuts… they come in all shapes, colours and sizes. When you pick your dessert, it just magically transports to your plate. Honestly, a true delight!

Third floor is the most adventurous one because it is a world of exotic food. Here you can find everything from all over the globe – Japanese sushi, Indian curry, Mexican tortilla, and much, much more. Every dish comes with a story, a story of origin. In the middle of third floor there is a huge globe. When you touch the globe, a server, dressed as an explorer comes to you and gives you a plate of the food specific to a region that you touched. Fun, and exciting, but if you don't like to try too crazy things, make sure you know your geography!

We slowly move up to the last floor of the museum, the world of drinks. This is the floor where everything sparkles – glasses and cups full of colourful mocktails, warm chocolates, fruit juices and smoothies. The visitors can create their own signature mocktails that are made by food fairies.

When you pass all the floors, you exit the museum through a tube. On the exit you are awaited by chefs that are creating a personalized menu based on your preferences. They are professionally dressed in tall white hats and white uniforms, but as they are looking at your plate they are laughing, and they are telling a lot of jokes. Finally, you leave this place with a plate full of your favourite food, that looks like a true artistic masterpiece.

My Foodium museum is not just a place for food, but a place where one can play, learn and explore. Each floor is special in its own way and shows that the world of food is full of details and differences. Here, there are no rules but one; be brave, and try something new! Maybe Foodium exists only in my imagination, but who knows - maybe it comes to life one day. And, and if it does, I am sure everyone will enjoy in the magic of food, just like I am as I am imagining it.

šifra: thyme1234
mentor: Ajrin Floričić
institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan
autor:Ines Aničić

LUCKY (OR MAYBE NOT)

Finally, the bell rang for the end of the penultimate class, math. My best friend Brianna and I left our things in the classroom and went into the hallway.

The hallway was chaotic because everyone was already tired and wanted to go home.

The bell rang for the beginning of the last class, our history class.

We went to wait for the teacher to call us into the classroom.

A few moments later the teacher called us inside and we started the class. We always do well in history. Most of us in the class love history but we are also a little afraid of the teacher. Finally, the bell rang for the end of class. Everyone couldn't wait for the end because it was Friday, and they had shortened our school. When the bell rang for the end of the class, we all got ready quickly and went outside to wait for the bus. When the bus arrived, we got inside and headed home. As always, it was noisy on the bus, and everyone was tired... When the bus arrived, I got off the bus and went home. When I got home, like every day, I ate and went for a walk with my dog Hugo. Today I decided to take my dog for a walk in the woods. It was a new, beautiful promenade, so I had never been there with Hugo before.

While we were walking, at one point the dog started pulling me. He was so fast and strong that I had to let him go. I couldn't find him, so I called him. It took me a while to find him. When I found him, he was barking and digging a hole. I went to see what he was digging and pushed him aside. At the bottom of the hole there was a large gold coin shining. Nothing was visible on it. It was covered in mud. It was almost as big as my palm. I thought about cleaning it and looking at it, but I decided it would be best to put it in a bag and take it to my parents. I quickly caught Hugo and put the gold coin in the bag. When I got home, I showed it to my mom, she asked me how I found it and said it could be valuable. She suggested we call the historians and they said to bring it to the museum. We took it to the museum and they said they

would call us in the morning. In the morning, they called us from the museum and said that the coin was used in ancient times and that it was priceless. The next day I was already in the newspapers, and I received a reward of one hundred thousand...

And then my dad woke me up and told me that I was late for school.

šifra:TORNADO
mentor:NATAŠA GRUBIŠIĆ
institution:OŠ SESVETSKA SELA
autor:Lovro Jukić

MY FIRST BIKE

I have a bike which I got for my second birthday. I started riding it when I was three, and now it's my brother's and he still has it and rides it.

Let me tell you how it looks like. It's red with yellow stripes and a yellow number 16. It's got Kenda wheels and Shimano deraillur. I was very happy when I got it. I learnt how to ride it very fast. One day, my dad and I were riding from our home to my grandma's. We were about 5 kilometers away from her place. We started to ride the bikes and it all went pretty smoothly. We were about four hundred meters from her, when I turned to him. Then, my dad sudendly shouted: "Watch it! Trash can!!!", but, it was already a bit too late - I bumped into a big, yellow trash can. I wasn't injured but, when we arrived, we told the story and everyone was laughing the whole evening.

On my seventh birthday, I got a new bike. My sister got mine and she learned to ride it when she was three.

šifra: dr1234
Author: Mario Bulić (5.c)
Mentor: Marta Barišić
School: OŠ "Jesenice", Dugi Rat

MY WINTER HOLIDAYS

My family and I decided to spend these winter holidays on a trip. We decided to go to Italy and visit some famous cities.

The trip started on Saturday at 9 am. Mom had prepared all the necessary things. Dad put everything in the trunk and checked if everything was OK with the car.

The first city we spent the night was Trieste. Dad parked the car in the garage because parking is always hard to find, especially in those old towns. We went out and explored the town. Trieste is a very interesting and beautiful city, and it was even more beautiful when the lights were lit in the evening. As it was the Advent time, everything was decorated and there were many small houses selling their products. That's how we came across a little house with a sign: "Nadine fritule i palacinke". Of course, we were amazed by that and we immediately went there to buy some food, and the lady who served us spoke Croatian like everyone who was working there. That was great.

On the second day, we left for Florence. Our apartment was a little away from the city, so we travelled to the city by train. That was such an interesting experience. We bought tickets at the station. Then got on a train that was crowded with people. The train took us right in the centre of Florence. Florence is a beautiful city full of various statues, monuments and old buildings. We made the most steps that day because we had to see it all and, of course, take lots of pictures. And at the end of the day, when the lights were on, we saw a big Ferris wheel shining near the road. The view from the Ferris wheel was great.

The next day, we visited Pisa. There I saw the Leaning Tower which was big and stood at an angle. I couldn't take my eyes off it. There were many people around. Everyone wanted to take a picture near the famous tower which left me speechless. The feeling was great and if I go to Italy again it would be just to see the tower. In the evening of the same day, we walked around Florence at night, and everything looked even more beautiful.

It was Christmas and I was not at home. Mom said that it was important that we were together thinking about the gifts that would be waiting for us when we get home. That day I only got drums from my parents as a gift so that I could cheer when "Orkan", my favourite football club, plays. Christmas was the day to visit Rome. Dad said it was an ideal day because no one was working, and it wouldn't be crowded around the city. The drive took us almost 3 hours. We found a parking lot right in the centre, and in the end, we didn't even pay for it because it was a holiday. Then the walk to the Vatican began. The first stop was the Colosseum. We took lot of pictures. There were some people walking around who were rude and pushed bracelets into our hands to buy them. After Colosseum we visited Victor Emmanuel II National Monument, The Pantheon and Castel Sant'Angelo. Finally, we come to the Vatican City. There were lots of people and police. I look at the balcony with the red curtains from where the Pope speaks to the crowd. I thought all the people of the world were there, it was so crowded. I was so amazed wit the buildings and squares I didn't know where to look. Everything was so attractive. We left the Vatican and went further to Rome because mom wanted to take some picture at the famous Trevi Fountain, which was also crowded with people. We reached the Spanish Steps, and I keep my head high because at every step there was a monument, a building, or a fountain, everything was so well preserved and arranged. And then we returned to the Colosseum again, and I imagined the gladiators fighting inside. We came back to our apartment tired but full of experiences.

The next day we went to Imola. There is a Formula 1 racetrack. There were a lot of people on the track because on that day it was free for the visitors. There I took pictures of the place where Ayrton Senna died. Dad said he is the best formula driver of all times.

San Gemignani was our next destination. It is a small town on the hill at 324m height known as the Town of Five Towers. We walked around and enjoyed the beautiful streets and towers. After that we were heading to San Marino which is located at 749m above the sea level. The view from the top of the city is impossible to describe. Beaches on one side, green hills on the other side and white peaks in the distance. We climbed the city highest tower and the view from there was even better. We were hungry and we sat down in the restaurant. We chose the table by the window, and we looked at that wonderful landscape. It was so unrealistic. I must say that we made over 15,000 steps every day. All the places we visited were very beautiful and remarkable. Sometimes I felt guilty because my friends were at home, but I thought that maybe I would never see this again and I should enjoy it. Travel time was coming to

an end. We left San Marino and head to Rimini to get to know its beaches and maybe see Croatian coast across the sea. The beaches are not as beautiful as ours. The sand is very fine, and the beach are several kilometres long. And there was another big Ferris wheel, and we decided to go for a ride to see endless beaches better.

Finally, our journey ended. The drive home took several hours. And we were a bit tired but happy. We were constantly turning pictures in our heads and on our mobile phones. I must admit that I felt even happier when I came back home.

I took my cell phone and went out to see my friends. Because it's time to shoot firecrackers and celebrate the New Year.

Student: Marta Zec
Teacher: Pamela Grozdanić
School: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

OVER THE WHISTLE BLOW BRIDGE

Back in the 1800s there was a group of friends, between the ages of seven to eleven. Their names were Julius, Laquisha, Jennifer, Micheal, David, Elizabeth and Charlotte.

One day they were in their neighbourhood, playing ding-dong ditch. They came to a house near the end of the neighbourhood where the woods began to show. Not far from the house was a bridge over a river right at the beginning of the woods. The bridge was very old and made out of wood. The children rang the doorbell of the house and ran. They looked around realizing there was nowhere to hide, except for the place under the bridge.

Once they hid, an old angry man came out of the house, furiously looking around. He saw the group of kids hiding under the bridge, trying not to fall into the river. He started walking towards them in a hurry, yelling something. The group ran into the woods. It was a very windy and foggy day so the suburban neighbourhood felt unapproachable. The kids could not see anything at all. They started to fall. They thought they were falling in the river, but a few seconds later they hit the ground, which was strange. The children woke up unaware of what had happened. The days passed by slowly and they were reported as missing.

"What happened?!" Jennifer asked in horror.

"And, where are we!?" Julius added.

"We fell into the river. Remember?" Micheal stated.

"No we didn't! If we did, we would be in the water", Elizabeth said.

"She's got a point, Micheal", David stated.

"How did we even get here? I remember vividly how we fell into the water." Laquisha questioned.

"My father told me about a legend of The Whistle Blow Bridge. Back in the 1700s, a girl called Annabelle once crossed the bridge. When she got to the woods she further explored the forest and was never seen again. According to the legend, Annabelle continued to haunt the forest", Charlotte mentioned.

"Please, that's just an old tale grandparents would say to their grandchildren so they wouldn't cross the bridge", Micheal commented.

"It sounds pretty believable to me..." Elizabeth mumbled in fear, scared of the ancient tale.

"Don't be scared, Lizzie. Charlotte is just trying to scare us", David assured Elizabeth.

They were on some kind of lawn, an old one. They walked a little bit further and suddenly saw a flashlight beam in the air. They screamed once again and saw the whole area changing. The place started to look magical and they were standing in the middle of the room filled with sweets and candies with gingerbread people walking all over the place. The children were confused at this madness. They decided to talk to the gingerbread people.

"Hello, what is this place?" Elizabeth asked.

"This is Candyland. Every candy in the world was made here", the gingerbread man answered.

"C'mon Elizabeth this is all just a dream. You need to be less naive", Micheal said.

"Then, why are we all dreaming the same thing?" Jennifer asked.

"And, why are we all in the same dream?" David added.

"True", Laquisha muttered.

"Do you need to get out of here? I see you're not candy. I can show you the way to the palace", the gingerbread man requested.

The gingerbread man walked them to the castle where the current gingerbread queen lived. Once they got there, they snuck in and went to the queen's room.

"Well, hello there! What do you need?" The gingerbread queen asked.

"We need to leave! We're not from here! Do you know how?" Elizabeth questioned.

"Elizabeth, when you wake up everything will be normal. I'm telling you all, this is a dream", Micheal responded.

"This isn't a dream. Yes, I do know how to go to the human world again. Except... You won't look or be the exact same", the gingerbread queen corrected Micheal.

"What do you mean?" Charlotte asked curiously.

"Nothing, nothing", the gingerbread queen avoided the question.

"There is a train station at the centre of the city. Once you get there, ask the workers for the "Chocolate diamond" train. They allow only humans on that train so you'll come back home in no time. Also, here is the map!" The gingerbread queen gave the children a map to the centre.

The children all started walking to the centre of Candyland. Once they got to the centre they found the underground train station and the workers, just like the queen said. “Hello! Which train do you need?” The train station worker asked.“Chocolate diamond”, Micheal responded.“Oh! Right this way”, the worker answered and showed them the way to the train.

They got inside the train and sat on some random seats. The train started moving. They were scared because they didn’t know where the train would stop. Once the train stopped moving, they saw their neighbourhood outside the window. But, it was all grey, like the world had lost all the colours. There was no one walking and it wasn’t nice. Not even a sound was heard. They stepped out of the train and walked around the neighbourhood for a while until they saw the missing posters of themselves. They turned around confused after hearing a rustling sound that water makes. They saw the Whistle Blow Bridge and a girl on the bridge. The girl from the legend? They blinked in shock. She was gone the next second. They looked inside the river and there was no reflection.

In the real world, their parents were devastated of what had happened to them. The police department didn’t close the case of the missing children. It was still opened but there were no new discoveries. Grieving parents started looking for them. They reached the end of the neighbourhood and saw something red in the river. They went to check it out and after they looked inside, the water revealed their children’s dead bodies floating.

šifra: PPPP-J
mentor: Sandra Brcko
institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

autor:Jakov Jerićević

PANDA

Once upon a time there was a panda who was madly in love with another panda. He first met her in a jungle while gathering bamboo. He wanted to grab a bamboo stick, but the girl panda grabbed it instead. He looked into her beautiful shiny eyes and he knew that he was in love with her. Two whole years passed and he didn't make a single move. One day hungry wolves came to eat the pandas. One wolf came to the girl panda's house, but the panda saw him and he jumped on the wolf with his belly to save the girl panda's life. The girl panda was very thankful to him for saving her life. The panda asked the girl panda if they could go on a date. The girl panda said yes. In the evening the panda and the girl panda were in a fancy restaurant. They both ordered bamboo caviar. The panda asked the girl panda girl what her name was. The girl panda girl replied: "My name is Ari and what is your name?" The panda replied: "My name is Xiaopong." Ari said that his name is very nice, and he said: "Thank you, you have a nice name too!" After the date, Xiapong and Ari started going on more dates... On one date Xiapong asked Ari if they could be boyfriend and girlfriend. Ari replied: "Yes! I would love that!!!" Three whole years passed and Xiapong was so in love with Ari that he acted as if she was the only panda on Earth. Soon, Xiapong asked Ari the most unthinkable question: "Will you marry me?" Ari was in shock but she immediately said: "YES, of course." Their wedding was held in Po's palace. They were very happy. Twenty years passed... Ari and Xiapong didn't like each other anymore. They both knew it. They decided to break up and Ari said: "Fine, I wish you a happy life." Xiapong replied: "Ok, you too. Goodbye!" They went their separate ways but remained friends to this very day.

šifra: DxyB2425
mentor: Nataša Ćoraš
autor:Dora Šumanovac

PRINCESS LUCY

Hello everybody, meet Lucy. I want to share her story with you because it's really interesting.

One day Lucy's mum came to her room and said: "We are moving to London". Lucy started yelling at her mum like crazy: "No mum I don't want to go to London. My family and all of my friends are in Croatia". Then Lucy's mum said: "We are moving, I don't care, be

ready tomorrow in the morning". Lucy started packing and she cried.

In London she didn't have a lot of friends. She only had one best friend. Her name was Jasmin. Jasmin had a brother, his name was Lucas. He was in love with Lucy. Lucy and Jasmin were ugly. That's why they didn't have a lot of friends. Lucy had peers who bullied her.

There was a beautiful boy named James. Lucy was in love with him, but he had a girlfriend, she was ten times prettier than her.

One day, Lucy's grandma, a mother of her dead dad, asked for Lucy. Lucy never saw her grandma, but she knew who she was. When they met, grandma said the biggest secret of her life to Lucy. LUCY IS GOING TO BE A PRINCESS. Lucy came to live in grandma's house. There, Lucy got her hair done, her make-up, her nails… She was so pretty. She would even drive to school in a limousine. Her best friend, Jasmin, did not seem to like happy Lucy. She got her a hat so that Lucy can cover her beautiful hair. Lucy was in class when her classmate started yelling to professor that nobody can have a hat on in a classroom. Lucy took of her hat. All the girls started to touch her hair. Jasmin was so angry. Nobody knew that Lucy is a princess, until one day she moved to castle.

She started to realize that she actually never was in love with James. Actually, she was in love with Lucas.

Now, her husband is Lucas and her best friend is her godmother. Lucy and Lucas got a beautiful baby girl named Mia.

šifra: dr2222
Author: Luka Čizmić (5.c)
Mentor: Marta Barišić
School: OŠ "Jesenice", Dugi Rat

SAVING CHRISTMAS

Everybody loves Christmas, especially me and my brothers. We love Christmas because we get good presents from Santa. I love him because he gives me presents.

One Christmas eve I was feeling very sick. My mother told me that I cannot go outside. That was not very fair because my brothers and my cousins played outside in the snow. I did not like that, and I wanted to play outside, but I watched Home Alone and ate cookies. When I went to get more cookies, I saw something in the sky looking like Santa crashing a kilometer away from my house. I told it to my mother, but she told me that I have a bad headache and that it was just my imagination. I told my cousins that I needed them right now, they came, and they did not believe me either. I told them it was real and that we will not get presents.

They said that they would help me to save Santa, inside I was so happy but on the outside, I was so serious. We went to save Santa. They were not optimistic they were saying that we would never find Santa, but I was optimistic. After two hours of looking for Santa, my cousins wanted to go back I said that I would not give up. When my cousins were going back then I heard someone eating cookies and eating milk. I assumed that it was Santa. I was going slow to him because I was scared, I came to him and asked him what happened. He told me that his reindeer felt sick.

I asked him how that happened, and he explained that it was colder than usual on the North Pole. I asked him if he can distribute presents without reindeer and he told me that was not impossible. I offered him our helicopter. He said that he could only do it if he pours a magic potion on it so it could go fast. I agreed with that. We were so happy. I asked my dad if he can drive us to our garage and he did it because he knew it would make the whole world happy. We picked up our helicopter and we started flying without anyone knowing that, except my dad. Santa told me that he was so grateful that he crashed near my house not someone else`s. While we were flying he asked me some questions like what my name was, how I spotted him, why I decided to help him and what I was doing when I saw him.

I answered every single question he asked. Then I asked him questions that I have always wanted to ask Santa, like what his favorite color was, if he ate cookies and drank milk at every single house he gets them. He told me that his favorite color was red, that he ate cookies in almost every single house and that he drinks milk in almost every single house that he got in. I was happy because I believed that he was a closed and quiet guy. Then we came to the first house he entered through the chimney, and I waited on the roof, he entered exactly like in the movies. It was so strange to see him. On the second house it was the same as in the first house, but in the third house mom and dad were still awake so Santa told me to act like a scout selling cookies, I accepted that offer. Then I rang the doorbell and mom, and dad came to open them. I acted so well because they bought twenty boxes of cookies. Santa did what he needed to do, and I was proud to say that I was the best scout ever. Everything was normal in the rest of the city.

Then we came to Zagreb, a Croatian capital city, it was our first big city, and we knew that it will be hard. In our first 10 houses mothers and fathers ware awake. I pretended to be a delivery boy, selling milk door to door. It was working pretty good, but in our last house people did not want to buy any milk. They had a baby so I said to Santa that I would wake up their baby. They would run to its room and then Santa would leave presents. My plan worked out and Santa told me that I was a smart kid. I was so happy because a very important person told that to me, a little kid.

In the rest of city, everyone fell asleep so we could do our job. It went great, and it was very fast and easy. We did the rest of the east Europe. Because everyone fell asleep. Then we did the rest of the Europe, I was coughing, and my throat was hurting, then I realized why my mother told me not to go outside. I told Santa that my throat was hurting because I was sick. He told me that I was a hero because I saved Christmas. My throat stopped hurting because Santa said that. In my mind I was thinking what would my family say when I come back. I was wondering would they be happy or would my mother be mad on me because I did go out when she said me not to. We did rest of the world easy because everyone was asleep.

I cannot believe this adventure is over I had so much fun but I can now proudly say that I saved Christmas.

author: Greta Vidas
mentor: Erna Jukić
institution: Osnovna škola Hreljin

SCARY HOUSE

In our village there is house that I thought was scary when I was little. One day I passed by house and wondered who and what was actually in it. Some pressure is coming out of the house. I told everthing to my parents and friends but they didn't belive me. I started researching on my own. I was still young at the time I didn' t think much, and I decided to enter that house by myself. That was not a smart idea. When I entered something swallowed me, there was a strong pressure, even greater darkness and I scared. I started shouting and then I passed out. I woke up on the street in front of scary house. I quickly moved away. I felt as if the house spat me out, it sounds strange but that's how it was. I didn't know what to do! It was a strange feeling! It wouldn't be like that if I didn't start dreaming about that same house every night! That was strange! When I grew up I stopped thinking about the house until some people moved in it. I remebered my nightmares with the house, I stopped thinking that it was scary because who else would move into a scary house, until I heard a noise from inside. My parents thought that family had a baby, but I didn't think so. It started to get even weirder when that family never left the house. I never saw them, but I knew they were here because I heard the noise every night, it became more and more strange to me. I didn't know what to do when I remembered that I could ask my best friend to go inside with me. We got ready, and when we arrived in front of the house, there was no pressure like there was when I was little. When we entered the house, all the lights were on. There was no one inside, but crying was heard. We searched the whole house but there was no one there. When we came in front of the door it was written: you beter run away! This house is more than haunted! Don't come back again! We were interested in who wrote it and what was actually going on. And whoever it was, he was right! It wasn't that scary for us, but when I told my parents they were worried because they had already heard me talk about the same house many times. About that terrible house. Now they already thought that there was something in it. I honestly didn't know what was happening! My mom told me a story when she was little she also had nightmares about the house. That suprised me so I asked her why she didnt tell me that before. She said that she didn't tell me be-

cause she didn't want to introduce me to that story, she thought that my nightmares had stopped and that I wouldnt have anything to do with that house anymore. She told me that I am a special child because I can hear everything that happens inside that house. I didn't know that the others didn' t hear it. My mom was like me too! When she admitted to me what was realy wrong with that house, I decided to ask her if we could manage and discover the secret of the terrible house so that it would become ordinary, normal. We started, we had no ideas, but we didn't give up, wich was the most important thing. We researched on the internet what could be in the scary house. We received a lot of information, we didn't know wich one was corect, so we started thinking about something else. Regardless of what the message said on to enter the house any more, mom decided that we would go in so that she could see what was actually happening. When we came in we saw a little girl crying, but we didn t see her whole body because she was half a ghost. We asked her why she was crying, so she said that had always same dream. Her family had abandoned her and she can't get out of that dream. We concluded what was happening. It was not a problem in the house at all, the real problem was about people. There were five of them. Five with negative thoughts. They were unhappy in life. They kept dreaming the same dreams, ugly ones. That's why they ended up here! We discovered that they need to be saved from that. That could only be solved by the real owner of this house, the one who lived in it before. It was difficult to find it, but we succeeded after a while. It was an old man who knew everything about that house. He said that we just need to remove that bad energy coming from the house. We asked him how, so he said that we should figure it out ourselves. We tried, searched, thought, but nothing came to mind. Until one day mom remembered that there was a terrible picture there that we could remove and thus remove that bad energy with the picture! Mom and I tried to get into the house, but we couldn't, as if she locked herself. We tried knocking, banging on the door, and windows, but no one was inside. It was a bit scary because when we passed by there last time we saw that someone was inside. Mom and I cooperated, so we tried to push the door, but that didn't work either. Days passed like that, and the house was locked all the time. One day we tried to enter and succesed. No one was in the house, but we took the picture anyway.

When we took down the picture, this never happened again. The point is that mom and I cooperated and were persistent!

šifra:SB 123
Author: Mika Ereš
Mentor: Ivana Borozni
School: Dragutin Tadijanović, Slavonski Brod

SCHIZOPHRENIC

6. December 1996, Friday

It was winter, it was snowy and cold. Jack was working as an lawyer. Since the snow was more than 1 meters high in his town, he decided to take annual for next Friday, and 7 days until that, he'll find a way through. Since he was single, he decided to rent a cabin.

He went on a website RentACabin.com and started looking for one, he found one cheap in the middle of the woods, so he rented it for Friday 13th December. Jack was so happy and excited. He looked into description but the only thing it said was: BE CAREFUL!!!

Jack thought it meant to be careful not to break something, but it meant something different.

13. December 1996

It was 5 AM and Jack was already packed, he left his house and headed towards his car.

He was driving on the highway. It was still night because it was 6 AM.

He arrived in 8 AM and saw the owner waiting outside, John Zeds, John gave Jake the keys and left without a word, he thought he was shy or something.

When Jack opened the door he saw a dark hallway, he turned on the light to see better and the cabin was almost empty.

There were little decorations and it was all black.

He didn't wasted much time and wanted to explore.

The cabin was small but enough. After Jack explored, he decided to breakfast while watching TV.

They had a small, awful TV, 480 p, and one row of LED lights wasn't even working, shortly, you can't see anything. Jack was disappointed.

It was getting dark in 5 PM so Jack went to explore the woods. He found nothing

useful. When he came back home in 8 PM, the TV was on, but he was sure he turned it off. He thought maybe some glitch or he forgot.

He went to shower in 9 PM and while he was showering, he heard a glass break.

He went down to check, and he saw a broken glass on the floor, he got goosebumps because he knew he didn't touch any glass the whole day.

He thought he wasn't alone. He shouted: Hello?! And no one replied of course, but 5 seconds later he heard wood squeaking. He was terrified but didn't wanna give up.

He picked up a bar he found in the kitchen and went upstairs, he entered the bedroom and no one was there, just about when he was relaxing, the door shut behind him. He was now more scared than ever. He took a deep breath before leaving, when he opened the door, there was a black figure standing on the stairs for a moment. Now he knew he's not alone. After that, the power went out. He headed downstairs and rushed to the exit but it was locked, when he turned back, he saw the figure again for a moment. He started walking back and then he felt a hand touching him he turned back and no one was there, but when he turned back to front…

A FACE WAS IN FRONT OF HIM FOR A MOMENT!

He couldn't hold it anymore and started crying of terror.

He tried the door again and they were open he rushed through the woods. He saw a figure again but it didn't stop him, he saw many faces and people. He was running all night and he came back to city, he rushed to the police and told them about everything. The police came with 20 officers, but when they entered the house, everything was normal, there was no sign of anything scary or paranormal. Police drove the man to the hospital to check if he's okay. He was fine, but for some reason every nurse and doctor recognized him. He was there many times. Why?

He was schizophrenic.

Now it all made sense.

Jack Walker eventually died of old age in 2029, but the black figure was always haunting him till the last breath.

THANK YOU ALL FOR READING THIS SHORT SCARY STORY NOT BASED ON TRUE EVENTS.
I HOPE YOU DIDN'T ENJOYED BECAUSE WHAT'S THE POINT OF A SCARY STORY IF YOU ENJOY.
SOME INSPIRATION I DIDN'T GET BY MYSELF
AT FIRST I WANTED TO DO IT WITH AN APARTMENT BUT THEN I REMEMBERED
FEARS TO FATHOM EP 5: WOODBURY GETAWAY
IT'S A VIDEOGAME WHERE A GUY AND A GIRL WERE IN A CABIN WHERE WEIRD STUFF HAPPENED
THE SCHIZOPHRENIA IDEA WAS BY ME AND I GOT IT IN THE MIDDLE OF WRITING THE STORY SO AT FIRST THE NAME WAS Haunted Cabin BUT NOW IT'S Schizophrenic, AND NO I DIDN'T ADD THIS TO HAVE MORE WORDS BUT SO PEOPLE KNOW WHAT WAS IN MY HEAD WHILE MAKING THE STORY.

Šifra: Lovegood
Student: Marija Tojčić
Mentor: Marija Jukić
School: Osnovna škola Ivane Brlić Mažuranić Koška

TEARS OF THE MOON

In the deep forest realm, there is a unique lake. Its name is Tears of the moon. This lake is special. Every night when the moon cries, its tears fall into the lake. One tear was not ordinary, it had a special power to fulfill the wish of whoever is brave enough to find it. People of all world are coming in search of this sorcerer tear, hoping that he will fulfill their wishes. Heroine Aurora is a brave girl. She is going in very incredible and challenging adventure. Aurora's wish is for the world to be free from war and conflict. She dreamed of a peaceful world where people help and respect each other. She wanted all people to understand the importance of love and understanding. She wanted all conflicts to be resolved in a peaceful way. Lucius Nightsgode and Morgana Blackthorn searched for the moon's tears. They were the most evil people in forest realm. Their wish is the world is theirs, to start more wars and conflicts. They wanted people to live in hatred and conflict. Aurora knew they were most evil people but she wanted them to understand the importance od love and understanding, that the world should be a safe place to live. She decided that in this adventure we need to change them and make them good people. Lucius Nightshode and Morgana Blackthorn the Aurors wanted the worst. They were setting various deadly traps for her, through which Aurora had to pass without getting confused. Aurora wanted Lucius Nightshode and Morgana Blackthorn to be her friends in order to explain them what are love and understanding. Lucius Nightshade and Morgana Blackthorn just pushed Aurora and continued to talk about how they would be the rulers of the world. One of Aurora's most difficult obstacles is to cross Wizard Village. When Aurora entered in Wizard Village she was greeted by witch magic and dark streets. Sreets are dark, like labyrinths. Houses are magic and look like straight out of horror movies. To Aurora's ears reached out wolves and owls terrible sounds. People look like out of fairy tales. They were dressed as black vampires and mostly there were witches and wizards. People maintained magic. Aurora had to go through all kinds of activities. The scariest and most fun activities were making potions, playng strange instruments, reading fortunes and predicting the future using a crystal ball.

The journey through this village was not easy. Aurora had to go through a forest of terror, solve puzzles and test her courage. She had to cross all these obstacles in order to get to the mysterious key that unlocks the door to the tears of the moon. Aurora passed Wizard Village leading to the forest of dread. Lucius Nightshode and Morgana Blackthorn wanted to overtake Aurora but they couldn't pass the wizard village even though they were wizards. Aurora found the door key that unlocks the door of moon tears. But when she was walking towards the key, the terrible Dragon came. He stabbed himself with a poisonous thorn that Aurora was supposed to take out. But she was afraid of his look. Dragon was big and he had gray scarles sifting under the moon. His eyes were big and green colour,his eyes revealed his external features. On the back of dragon is poisonous thorn, which he earned while rescuing people in need of help. Dragon's wings were monstrously large with lightning-like cuts. He is very rade dragon. His looks angry but he has a good soul. Aurora is very scared, she runs away of him. Dragon is followng her. Aurora sees kidness in his eyes and helps him. Dragon thanked Auora and asked for a wish from him. Aurora said to help her get moon tear. They opened together the door of moon's tears. Wish-fulfilling tear was on the moon. Dragon and Aurora together flew to the moon.

Aurora's wish came true. World is a safe place to live. There are no conflicts and wars. All world lives in harmony and respecting each other. Lucius Nightshode and Morgana Blackthorn understood what love and understanding are. They turned evil wizards into gentle and kindhearted wizards. All people understood that not all is about money and that not everyone is the same. All the world celebrated Aurora's achievement and enjoyed a safe home.

mentor: Tea Grčić Težulat
institution: Oš Marka Marulića Sinj
autor:Tea Kardoš

TEN GIRLS

Ten girls lived in a castle. They were called: Mariposa, Melita, Monica, Monisa, Matilda, Melany, Mirna, Miranda, Maribel and Marina. Their mother's name was Mlorya, and their father's name was Mark. Melita, Monica and Marina are the youngest. All three are eight years old. All the girls loved to cook. The oldest are Miranda, Mirna and Melany. All three are seventeen years old. The other girls are fourteen years old: Mariposa, Monis, Matilda and Maribel. Their mother moved to a new town because of her parents, so the girls were left alone with their dad.

They were playing, dancing, and having fun together until aunt Laverna showed up. They all had a connection to the letter "M." With her aunt came her servants and her pet monkey Skoki. Ten girls also had a cat named Floki. Skoki and Floki couldn't stand each other. They fought and fought all the time. Ever since aunt got here, they have not been dressed in colourful colours anymore, they have been dressed in grey and black and they have had grey dancing shoes every day. Since the arrival of the aunt, the girls have had to adapt to a new way of life. They had to wake up at seven o'clock, they had breakfast at nine o'clock and lunch at twelve o'clock. They had to go to dance practice every day at four o'clock in the afternoon. Their dinner was at seven o'clock every day. Eventually, they were locked in a room in the castle because the aunt wanted to poison their father. It was Melita, Monica and Marina's birthday. On their birthday, the oldest girl Miranda gave them 3 books for each of them. When Marina dropped the book on the floor, they saw the same sign on the floor. They read the book, and it said how to open the magic door by dancing from the oldest girl to the youngest. They followed that dance and opened the magic door. Behind the magic door was the magic water that cured all diseases. They took some magic water and kept it to themselves. After that, they saw the dance floor where their mother always stayed. Behind these magical doors grew desire blossoms that fulfill every desire. Their aunt found out about that magic door because her pet Skoki showed her. Their aunt tried to open the magic door, but it didn't work. When the girls returned to the

castle, they saw that their father was in great pain. They remembered that they had brought magic water with them and gave that water to their father and healed him.

Mother returned to the castle, saw their aunt making tea and putting poison in the tea and chased her out of the castle. After the mother's return, all of ten girls and her father were happy and danced all night. Their mother told them that they would never leave them alone again, and they went to sleep.

author: Paola Mrđen
mentor: Erna Jukić
institution: Osnovna škola Hreljin

THE ANIMAL TEAM

We all know Christmas is a happy time, at least that is what I think. What we don't know is that in the dark there is something sad and it hates Christmas. The sad monster is a dog. It is big and strong. As I said, it hates Christmas. So, a group of animals stop The Dog from destroying Christmas every year. The heroes of this story are called The Animal team. They are animals and many species in the team and their enemy is called The Dog.

This Christmas was calm. The Animal team is eating their food. They are getting ready for Christmas. What they don't know is that their enemy is planning an awful plan.

The Animal team leader said: I don't think this Christmas will be good, my friends.

Then the team's spy said: "You are not wrong. This Christmas will be bad."

Everyone was scared. Team's spy said: "I'm ready to go spy The Dog." Everyone applauded for the brave spy. After a long time since the team's spy was on his mission the leader was very scared of the spy. That night the spy returned. He was injured. The team cured him. Then he told them everything. The Dog plans to destroy the town with his new weapons and ruin Christmas. The leader wasn't scared. He was happy to know The Dogs evil plan.

The team's scientist said: I can make a weapon to stop the evil dog, but I need some time.

The leader said: "How much time my friend?"

Two days at least said the scientist.

"But how can we attack The Dog if we are here hiding in are cave", asked the leader's girlfriend?

The leader said:" We will attack The Dog in two days time so we can use our weapons."

After two days The Dog attacked the town, and the team was ready to stop him. Scientist's weapon was successful, and The Animal team won. They lock him in their cave to watch over him.

The leader said: "Well the job is done!"

He asked The Dog:" why do you hate Christmas so badly?"

The Dog told them his story. He started: "I was born in a family who did not know what Christmas was. One day a female dog told me about this holiday. I spoke to my family about it and how we should spend it together. They were mad at me. So, they left me in the garbage. I was living alone. It was sad to see my friends spending time with their families."

When I was alone living in the garbage, I started to be mad and I promised that I will destroy Christmas and this town which made me evil. My mom told me that evil animals are not born, they are made.

You are right, but there is nothing evil in animals, said the team leader.

"Everyone can be good", added the spy.

"I was alone, you don't get it", said The Dog.

Let me tell you about my childhood, said the leader. I was the same as you, born in a poor family. Everyone was happy, except me. My dream was to be a hero. Everyone laughed about my dream, so I left my family. I found this cave and lived in it since then. Look at me now, I have become my dream. I saved the animals that laughed at me and more. I could have become an evil animal like you, but I choose the good side.

"Do you have something to say", said the spy?

"You don't have a sad story spy, don't you", said The Dog?

The spy said:" everyone in this team has a sad story of their childhood."

"Okey you three. Time for ", said someone. It was the leader's girlfriend.

"I thought that in this team there are only boys", said The Dog.

"Nope, there is spy, my girlfriend, scientist and me", said the leader.

After some time, everyone was sleeping except the dog. He was thinking about what the leader said that animals are not evil. His thoughts were everywhere in his head. Thoughts like: can I be good too or what is good, what is bad. He felt someone close to him. It was the scientist.

"Helo why are you not sleeping", said the scientist.

"Go away! I am not sleepy", said The Dog.

You will be told by the scientist calmly and go away.

After some time, The Dog was sleeping. In the morning the team had to help the town. So, the scientist had to stay with The Dog. They talked and said that The Dog must join the team. The team returned so the scientist told them his plan to let The Dog in the team.

That is a great idea! We can show The Dog how to be good said the spy.

One minute later the team let The Dog free to be a part of the team, but he escaped. Everyone was in a bad situation because The Dog was going to destroy the town.

"What shall we do", said the spy.

"I don't know", said the leader.

"Oh no, oh no, oh now we are finished", said the team together.

The Dog was free but felt sorry. They helped him and he did not say goodbye. He decided to go back and join The Animal team.

" I will go back", he said.

That is what he did. He went back to the cave to say sorry. At the top of the cave, he saw his friends.

The Dog said:" Hi friends, sorry I have escaped."

"That wasn't cool", said the spy.

"But we give second chances", said the leader.

The Dog apologized. A year later Christmas was safe because The Dog was a good guy, and he was a part of The Animal team. This story teaches us that we always have an option to choose whether to be good or bad.

šifra:IA1805
mentor:Antonia Drlje Petrić
institution:OŠ Spinut, Split
autor:Issa Alavanja

THE FROG'S ADVENTURE

Everything was great, but Happy eventually got bored of his simple life. He decided to go on an adventure. He packed all his things in a green backpack and started walking.

After quite some walking he saw a strange forest. It was loaded with fly agaric mushrooms. The tallest mushrooms resembled trees, the shortest one grass and the medium mushrooms looked like flowers and plants. Happy was very tired after walking that far so he decided to sit under a tree. He ate some of the food he brought and drank some water from his frog shaped bottle. After the short brake Happy kept walking. A little bit farther from the mushroom forest he saw a big pond with lots of frogs. There he made new friends but couldn`t stay long. Happy kept walking. In the distance he saw a waterfall and it`s beautiful rainbow colors. He stayed there for a while watching and admiring it. It started getting dark, so Happy got in his sleeping bag and fell asleep next to the waterfall.

When he woke up he decided to go back home. The main reason for leaving was that he liked his peaceful life and wanted to live like that again. After coming back to his little cottage Happy was visiting his friends almost every day. He realized that, by going on that adventure he saw many beautiful things, met new friends and most importantly – he learned there is no place like home.

mentor: Kristina Pavličević
institution: OŠ „Dobriša Cesarić“, Požega
autor:Eva Crnković, 6. a

THE GREEK HERO MEETS THE ROMAN GOD

This year, the Olympus wasn't above New York and the Empire State Building. It was above Europe. Actually, when Olympus moves, all of the Greek creatures move with it. For mortals, it would be hard to see any of the Greek creatures. Especially the famous Greek gods. Well, even the children of the gods, may or may not see them. If you're lucky, you will see them well, maybe once. And those magnificent gods were all at Olympus today, on the winter solstice. So today, above France and the Notre-Dame, a lot of things were happening. Some of the gods were spending their time with their children. Lucky children, that got to know who their godly parent is. And so, Athena was telling some Greek stories to her children, Apollo was teaching his kids how to do a perfect haiku. But, trust me, when it comes to any kind of poems, try not to have Apollo as your teacher. Poseidon, Zeus and Hades, they did not have any kids. Or at least, not any new ones after World War II. Nobody knows why, but that is what they said.

Dionysus was really angry when Zeus announced it was time to start the winter solstice. He left the grapes he was literally inhaling, while Aphrodite was watching him with no approval.

-As you all know, - Zeus started. -...Kronos is starting to plan his escape from Hades' prison. I know this is not a good idea, but we should find some demigods to fight him and, -

-No demigods are fighting Kronos, Zeus. - Athena said –If they are trying anything, they will try to stop him, but not by fighting him. -

-We don't have a lot of time. - Dionysus said, like he actually cared about this. -Let's just pick some demigods and that's it. -

-If I may speak, - Athena commented again. -We need two demigods and one other creature. Three are way more than enough. -

-I agree. - the whole Olympus said. The gods mostly listen to Athena. I mean, she is the goddess of wisdom and war.

-I know who will go then. - Zeus said. Everybody started to listen, even Dionysus. When Zeus says something, that thing is it. And nobody may complain.

-I prefer my son, Heracles. We should go with Perseus too. And Chiron, he is a centaur, one of the best we have. -

- And so, we all agree. - said Athena, and every god on the winter solstice repeated. Everybody was shouting: -And so, we all agree! -

Heracles, Chiron and Perseus had already met. So, making a plan shouldn't be so hard right? Well, you were totally wrong. The next hour was absolute yelling. Chiron had a plan, but...

-Are you CRAZY! - Perseus shouted, -He is KRONOS! We will be so done if we try that! - -I think Chiron's plan is better than your plan, Perseus. - Heracles was the wisest of all of them.

-If it's like that, I AIN'T COMING! - Perseus was, indeed, a drama queen. Drama king, to be exact. You don't know what a real drama queen is if you have never seen Aphrodite when she cannot find her lipstick. Ugh, that night was rough.

-Then don't come. - both Chiron and Heracles shouted. As Perseus left, they were on their way to Dedalus' labyrinth. Their plan was to make Kronos enter the labyrinth and try to fight, but he couldn't fight if they made him go into a small room in the labyrinth.

And so, they were on.

If somebody knew how to get into and out of the labyrinth, that is Chiron, but they both knew they don't have time because time in the labyrinth moves way faster. While they were making a shield, just in case something bad happens, there he was.

Kronos.

Kronos had his Scythe and it looked like it was dunked into greenish poison. It was Ladon's poison. They needed to be careful, Ladon's poison was made to kill anybody who touches it. But did Heracles and Chiron plan that? Of course they did, Kronos aways shows up with his Scythe. And so, the show was on. Kronos, while swinging his Scythe, unleashed a whole group of Greek monsters. There was Hydra, and there was Cerberus. It looks like Kronos stole him while escaping Hades' prison. There was Empusa, too. But Empusa won't be a problem, because her left donkey leg was in a roll bandage. It took Heracles a few times, while riding on Chiron's back, to get Kronos' Scythe out of his hand.

-You need to get closer to him! - Heracles said, while Kronos was aiming both at him and Chiron. Here comes another try, and Kronos almost got to injure them. Under the Eiffel tower, or most likely somewhere else because they already moved

a lot from the entry of Daedalus' labyrinth, time was moving like chaos. It usually moves faster there, but when Kronos is the god of time, so for a split second it was slow, then normal and then really fast. The last time, Chiron tried to come closer to Kronos, and Heracles aimed perfectly. Kronos' Scythe dropped on the floor and all of Ladon's poison was on the cold floor of Daedalus' labyrinth. And, once they thought everything was perfect, Chiron stepped into the poison. At the exact same second, he was on the ground, as well as Heracles. Chiron's face was blank with no expression.

-Aim at him, - he said, his voice sounding like the blowing wind. -I will do what I can. -

And Heracles did what he said. He tried everything, but nothing helped. While sitting behind him, Chiron grabbed an arrow and a bow from a nearby skeleton. His arrow reached Cerberus' eye. The next second, Cerberus was running. He bit Empusa's already injured leg. Cerberus was now running to Chiron, and Heracles just ran away from the room they were in.

On the way out, he found Janus. The god of choice.

-You need to save Chiron! - said the left head. -No, who cares about Chiron? - said the right head. In that second, Heracles got out his sword, his Anaklusmos, swinging it into the left face. He's fallen into a hole. Tartarus.

-That's what you get for being selfish. - Janus' both faces replied.

kookaburra:
Dubravka Zebec
Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovački
autor:Krešimir Đuretković

THE INCREDIBLE STORY

Hello everyone, I have something cool to say, I found dragons in my garden!!! But for this story we need to go a few years back. Something about one and a half year ago. One day I came home from school. I saw something in the garden. I went to see, and it was a lovely dragon. It said: ''I hope you are not scared!" I was shaked but fascinated. It told me it was lost and should be in Romania for the holidays. I showed him the way and it flew away. After two weeks, it came back with its family. They were in such vibrant colours and shiny scales, pure fantasy. All of them thanked me for helping the dragon came back to Romania. They told me stories about their adventures. They flew over mountains, swam in the Black Sea, and saw beautiful places. And from that day they visit me from their mysterious homeland every few months. They promised to return with more tales and treasures from their journeys. Each visit from my dragon friends fills my heart with wonder and reminds me that magic can be found in the most unexpected places.

šifra: Kaktus420
mentor: Tea Grčić Težulat
institution: Oš Marka Marulića Sinj
autor: Klara Delić

NASLOV PRIČE: THE LAKE

There was a small lake in the middle of the jungle. No one alive saw that lake in person, they have only heard stories about it.

But one day a girl called Amara was a bit to curious about the lake and she decided to explore it.

She wanted to know the truth. That night Amara sneaked out out of her home with only a blanket and some food. She walked for three days through the jungle, but she didn't know that a boy from her village was following her.

The jungle was dark and scary, and when she found the lake, it was nighttime. Then something magical happened. The lake was glowing teal. All the fish in it were dead. It looked toxic. Amara decided to take a sip of the water. She came above it and bent down to drink the water but then she got pulled back by the vines that were hanging from the trees.

She tried again, and again, multiple times but the vines kept pulling her back by her legs.

Amara was about to give up and then she saw a white tiger that was guarding the lake. That scared her off for the night. The next morning, she decided to try one last time. She prepared her blanket to cover the vines and food to distract the tiger. The plan was great. And it worked! But the last time she tried drinking the lake water a mermaid came up and pulled her into the lake. The boy watched in disbelief while the mermaid dragged Amara into the lake.

While Amara and the boy were awa, the village was worried about them. When the boy came back, he told the village what happened, they were terrified.

After that no one saw Amara again.

Now 7042 years later.

There is me.

I am writing about my adventure to the lake into my diary.

I'm Kora, the best explorer of my time. And this is my journey to no man's land.

The Lake.

I decided to bring my two colleagues on the trip.

Andrea and Lucas.

At the beginning of our journey we asked the locals in which direction we had to go. They said to ask the family in the yellow house and pointed to the house.

We knocked and the mother opened the door. She welcomed us and gave us some tea.

The mother told us to go north and we would find the lake.

As it turns out the boy that followed Amara was their great, great, great grandpa and his name was Josua.

After some time and tea, we left and decided to go in the jungle. This is the part of the story that no one told us about: there were three mountains and a river on the way to the lake.

We walked through the jungle for five days. It was exhausting. And finally, we saw the lake!!!

It was beginning to darken so we set up a tent. The lake was glowing just like in the legend, the fish where dead and it looked endlessly deep. I noticed that our tent was smaller than before, then I remembered: the vines! We ran out of the tent as fast as we could. The vines took our tent and pulled it into the jungle, and then they grabbed us and held us in the air.

Luckily, I had a pocketknife, and I freed us.

The next morning the fish where alive and well, our tent was back and it was sunny.

Tonight, we will go in the lake. Andrea will go first, then Lucas and lastly me. We lined up and Andrea went in. Somehow, she melted in a second! Because of that Lucas was hesitant but now we had bigger problems, the white tiger showed up.

It wasn't very big, but it was still dangerous. We managed to trick the vines, so they pulled the tiger into the forest which gave us time to go away alive. Just as we were leaving mermaids where singing. Then they came up and Lucas recognized one as Amara that went missing. Everything was connecting. The lake was cursed. It was so deep because mermaids were living there. Lucas ran away in a panic leaving me there all alone, but the thing he didn't know was that I cursed the lake.

The mermaids were my helpers and the lake was just a portal that only I could go through. At the end of the portal is my castle. I'm a witch named Alexandria, Kora, the explorer was just my disguise, for living thousands of years.

I sure know a lot, so I make fake stories. The village was cursed and Amara was always a mermaid.

This is not the end.

Šifra: ForestFairy
mentor: Senka Javorović
institution: OŠ ''Ljubo Babić", Jastrebarsko
autor:Elizabeta Pavelić

THE MAGICAL FOREST

Dear children, I am going to tell you a story about a magical forest. You probably won't believe me, because it is a quite weird story, but I'll tell you anyway.

One day, a mouse walked through a forest named 'Magical Forest' and he was the only animal that knew why the forest was called like that. It was night, a perfect time for walking through it, except for mice and rats because of owls, of course.

''Hoot, hoot, hoot. What a sweet dinner for me.", an owl spotted him.

''Please, do not eat me.", said the mouse; ''I will show you why this forest is called magical."

''I don't care why it is called like that. I am hungry and I will eat you.", said the owl.

''No, please, don't eat me, I will not deceive you!", said the mouse.

''Shut up, I already feel mouse meet in my mouth."

But then the owl came up with a great idea. She would follow the mouse and when he showed her why the forest was called like that she would eat him.

''Okay, I will follow you", said the owl; ''But if don't like the reason, it won't be good."

The mouse was shaking with fear, he was terribly scared because he thought: ''What does it mean - it won't be good?" He didn't know that the owl planned to eat him. And they started their yourney. The owl was flying and the mouse was walking.

The owl and the mouse were very sleepy so they needed some rest. They found a perfect place to sleep, an abandoned cave. But they didn't know something about that cave - it was not abandoned. That was bear's cave. They stayed there whole night, but soon they realize that it wasn't a smart idea to sleep there. Next morning when they woke up they saw the bear that was looking towards them with the expression on his face as if they were the most delicious meal he would ever eat. They were scared like never before.

''Yum, yum, yum", said the bear; ''What a hearty meal just for me, let's see... a mouse and an owl ... yummy."

''No, please, please, do not eat us, please!", said the mouse and the owl.

''Why should I listen to you?", asked the bear; '' What will you give me?"

''I will show you why this forest is called Magical Forest.", said the mouse.

''I already know why it is called like that, it is because I live in it!"- said the bear.

''Don't be such a boaster, it is not because of you.", said the mouse.

''What did you say to me?", yelled the bear; ''Now I will not just eat you, I will first chop you, then I will fry you and then I will eat you. And I will do the same to your friend."

The mouse was terrified and the owl started crying.

Then the mouse said: ''Please, let us go, we will just go away, sorry for sleeping in your cave". But the bear was thinking and also came up with the same great idea - he would eat them when they show him why this forest is called magical.

''Okay, I will let you go, but I will go with you.", he said.

And so they continued their yourney, but with one new member. It was 9 a.m. when they came in the part of the forest named ''Black Fire", because allegedly in that part of the forest lived a black dragon that belched the fire.

''Roar, roar, roar. Who has dared to enter my kingdom? I will eat you all!" - roared the dragon.

''No, please don't.", said the mouse; ''Don't you remember me? I am Marty, the mouse! Your friend from old days."

''I don't remember you. You are lying to me!", said the dragon full of anger; ''You can't deceive me, I am not stupid!"

''Sorry for lying to you", said the mouse; ''I just needed a passage to show these animals why this forest is called magical forest."

''I will not let you go!", said the dragon; ''except if you give me a very good reason for that."

''I will bring you a present from there!", the mouse said.

''It's a deal." - replied the dragon.

Soon they came to the tree with a big hole in it.

''Let's go inside the tree.", said the mouse.

Other animals were surprised but they listened to him. When they came into the hole they found themselves in some strange, other world. In that world animals didn't eat each other. The only thing they needed for survival was water. They found some water in a magical spring, drank it and because of that water they were never hungry. And because of that the owl and the bear didn't have need to eat anymore. They experienced the change deep inside them. Finally, they realized that they could be friends with other animals, they could have fun all together and have a very happy life. They felt a need to be good to everyone around them.

So, remember dear children, next time when you will be walking through some forest and maybe you will see a tree with the big hole in it - DO NOT destroy it, because now you know ... this just may be a passage to the magical world.

šifra:Quokka123
mentor:Dubravka Zebec
institution:Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovački
autor:Grgur Milanović

THE MYSTERIOUS SHIP

The sky was all gray, and the sea waves of the ocean groaned under the roll of a great boat travelling through the fog. It was a decrepit sailing ship, full of history, notorious among the maritime folks of the coast. It was known as The Heavenly Flame though it never illuminated anyone except when its creaking wooden logs, weathered from countless voyages, sounded.

On board was a young sailor named Luka. Luka was a newcomer, however, he demonstrated a stunning level of courage and resourcefulness. Having been born in a small fishing village on the coast, he has always wanted to sail, sea, discover faraway lands, and experience the adventures that lay beyond the horizon. This ship, The Heavenly Flame, had been his dream, but soon he would discover it was also his nightmare.

Some morning, with the sun rising over the horizon, Luka saw something weird. There were no other sailors on board. The captain, a mysterious old man with scars on his face, had disappeared, and the rest of the crew seemed to be in some sort of trance. Their bodies were stiff, their eyes vacant, and in their ears, faint, unconscious melodies seemed to echo.

Luka had no choice. He had to take control of the ship. He first went to the captain's cabin. Inside, it was chaotic. When papers were scattered about a desk, an aged, discolored map lay there. It marked a destination that didn't exist on any other chart. Two red lines marked his course—across the sea to a mysterious island.

Without much thought, Luka decided to follow the path. Even with a dread response on the heart, there was a power within that was compelling, unavoidable. He couldn't turn back now. He continued to steer the ship, following the map's direction, until soon, a deep darkness fell over the water.

With every swirl of the fog, the ship settled in a zone of unnerving quiet. There were no sea creatures, no birds, no wind—only darkness and an unsettling stillness. At that moment, Luka heard something. It was a sound—someone whispering. He couldn't make out the words, but he knew he wasn't alone. He took a deep breath,

his heart racing. Begining to sense, perhaps some magic, or perhaps just being burnt out, he was certain he was being summoned. The ship slowly veered toward an island that wasn't on the map.

The beach was covered with a dirty song that seemed to take the shape of human footprints. With every path leading into the forest, the prints grew clearer, almost as though they were being left by the souls of past sailors. Human shapes were striding towards the unknown, and Luka had to run after them.

The forest was very dark, and with each footstep the feeling of darkness became more and more intense. It sounded as though everything was creaking, as if something was trying to draw closer. Suddenly, in front of him appeared old ships, trapped in the trees like some sun-faded monuments. But on one of the ships, something was alive. Through a window, a hand appeared, reaching for him. It was the finger of a young man wearing a ring of a bird.

"Whoever steps here will not return. This island is home to the ghosts of every lost sailor, eternally frozen," the narrator says.

The crew wasn't here by accident—they were trapped, caught in the island's curse.

Should he leave and forget everything, or free the sailors trapped here and risk becoming one of them forever? His fingers moved on the sheet as faint sounds of former times brushed by in his ears.

Luka decided. There was no turning back. He crossed the threshold of the ship and started the way. The crew, sighing, closed in behind him. They all disappeared.

The Heavenly Flame, the ship without a captain, continued to sail into the blue, but now a new crew was aboard. They had become part of it—forever.

šifra:JM123
mentor:Tatjana Mioković
institution:OŠ Retfala Osijek
autor:Jakov Mikolin

THE ONLY WAY OUT OF THIS

Hi, I'm Linda. I love being in nature and riding my bike. I'm 13 years old. I currently live in London. I have recently moved here from Chicago.

One peaceful Saturday I was riding my bike through a nearby forest. It's what I usually do on weekends. I was riding my bike, and suddenly a dog appeared in front of me. It was a golden retriever. It was so cute and beautiful. It seemed tired, and kind of scared. I was sad and sorry for the dog, and I decided I was going to bring him home. Or better to say adopt him. Even though I decided I wanted to adopt the dog, it didn't mean I was going to adopt him, because I needed my mom's approval. And the thing that scared me was the fact that my mom didn't like dogs or even any animals. But I decided I would at least bring him home. And that's what I did. I brought him home. When my mom opened the door, she looked very confused and skeptical, but when I explained to her what happened, surprisingly, she let the dog in the house. I was shocked but grateful. Firstly, we bathed him, and he was so dirty. Then we used a comb to make sure he didn't have any bugs. After a full clean of the dog, we all went to sleep, because we were really tired. The first thing I did in the morning was to give a name to my dog. I named him Kelly. The first week he was really scared, and he wasn't so social. But after a week he started feeling more and more comfortable with us, and we started cuddling. I can't describe with words how amazing is that feeling. It's so beautiful it feels like a dream. On the weekend I went to a massive shopping mall, to that famous pet shop. I spent a lot of money on Kelly, but I don't regret a single penny. That's how much I love him. One day I was just making breakfast in the kitchen, when all of a sudden, I saw six golden retrievers, sitting politely in my backyard. They seemed really similar to Kelly, but I wasn't quite sure if they were his family until he came to the door and saw them. I immediately knew they were family. Kelly's face and body expressions told me everything I needed to know. When Kelly became a part of our family, my mom changed drastically, she was much calmer, and she had so much empathy for everybody. And I asked her if we could let in the puppies, just for a little bit until we find their future owners. And

thankfully, she said yes. So I let the puppies, but unfortunately, I set up some blankets and a bit cozy environment in the basement, because we didn't have enough space for eight dogs in the house. I put some signs in my city that I'm giving away those dogs, and in ten days I didn't receive a single call. And on that random Thursday night, I was thinking what to do. And that's when I thought of an idea, which was for me „the only way out of this". I thought of opening a dog shelter, it sounds crazy but I think it is a really good idea. And that's when I knew, I had no time to waste. I opened my laptop and started texting companies, on the most polite and formal level of my life. I emailed and contacted over 50 companies and potential sponsors, but in the next three days, nothing happened, nobody replied, but I wasn't planning on giving up so easily. I was texting, calling, and thinking for ten days straight when I finally gathered five sponsors willing to finance the shelter. That feeling was just like your dream came true. In two months, the whole shelter was opened, and the dogs were placed. Not so long after my shelter was one of the most popular ones in the whole country. That feeling was truly amazing.

I think my story is pretty rare and amazing. My story shows that anything is possible, but not so easily. Every miracle needs time and effort. But anything and everything is possible if you put in every effort and trust me you will achieve it. The message I want to give to everybody is to follow their dreams and follow a popular quote that says „The greater your storm, the brighter your rainbow". Whoever says anything or makes fun of you because of your dreams or goals, don't bother a single bit.

Student: Sara Zadravec
Teacher: Pamela Grozdanić
School: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

THE QUEEN OF WORMS

"WHAM!" I heard from the street. ''I am trying to sleep! '' I mumbled to myself. I got up to the window to see what the noise was. Some salesperson dropped boxes on the ground due to some kid running into him. The kid was in dirty clothes and was hiding apples in his small brown leather bag, so I assumed he was from a poor family and was stealing from the nearby fruit vendors. Out of nowhere, a cloaked figure appeared. The figure helped the salesperson, put the boxes back on a stack and lectured the kid in rags about stealing. The figure managed to do all that without wishing to be thanked, almost like it was avoiding exactly that. This figure was actually the city hero and almost all citizens talked for days how this mysterious character saved the city from the Corruption that originated from a big worm. The citizens named the enemy The Queen of Worms. The rumour has it that the so-called hero found that corrupted liar and stabbed it, which I have to admit, sounds pretty impressive. I waited for the salesperson and his boxes to go away and finally got back to sleep.

The next day.

"Ding-dong!", the bell in my store lightly rang as someone entered.

"No, nope, I have work to do and I cannot deal with this today", I said to myself while walking downstairs.

"Hello, welcome to The Forge. How can I help you?" I asked.

"Hello old friend!" The visitor smiled and uttered the words in that overly delighted tone of voice.

"Nari! That name is enough to put me in a bad mood", I muttered under my breath.

"What do you want?" I asked noticing her entire arms wrapped in bandages.

She started with some small talk and then she casually asked me to buy a new sword while talking about her new mission. It annoyed me but there was nothing I could do. I was just standing there and wondering if there was something in her story that she didn't want to mention. I also couldn't stop wondering where she bought that coat. It was obviously made for men.

…"The mission I'm getting sent on requires someone who knows their way with weapons and a lot about them, someone who is an expert on old artefact storages for weapons that are at least a century old", Nari was rambling on.

I was surprised at the audacity. She made something of herself and left me. She forgot about me, her best friend. I was hurt, but decided to give her a chance so I let her persuade me. Finally, she said that the pay is good, which won me over. I also knew accepting the deal was the only way to get rid of her.

"Fine, I'm in", I heard myself saying.

It did sound enticing. Old weapons are what I actually love. I started packing some necessities, but Nari told me that her employer already prepared the tools, and that she got food. I looked at her and she nodded while pointing at the bag. I checked it and everything was there. I just took my musket. I'm not good at fighting so a fire-arm is better for me. On the way there she explained that the storage was in a cave located a few hours from the city and surrounded by infected creatures. We only had to get in, take the valuable items and put it in the bag. I told her I understood, and we finally reached the destination. The trees were green and looking vibrant and impressive. The birds were singing, and it was peaceful. The closer we got, the quieter everything became. I noticed the change in the area.

"The trees here look dead ", I said with concern. Nari replied that they were dead without any empathy. It was out of character for her. We haven't spoken in such a long time, so it should not worry me that she changed. But her entire demeanour changed the moment we passed the first dead tree; she looked more distressed. I shouldn't have even worried about her. I shouldn't have, but I did. Since the local hero story started circulated, we haven't talked...

"We're here", she said. It caught me off guard. I was lost in my thoughts.

"There are a lot of infected... I don't know what they are anymore. The storage is right there", Nari pointed the old wooden door but she seemed... unlike her usual self.

I headed towards the cave trying to get through.

"I have to cut their heads off. You stay here", she said while drawing the sword she bought from me.

She was quick with it. Each head she cut off, more worms crawled out and squirmed away. But I saw a drop of crimson on her arm. She got bitten.

"Quick, take the bandages off we have to disinfect it!" I raised my voice and rushed over.

"It's fine, let's go in now", she said calmly.

"No, we have got to clean it or you will get infected", I insisted.

She said it was fine, told me to go in the storage and said she would explain on the way back. We took everything valuable, went back and left the bag at the employer's

doorstep. When we got back, she explained: "I was the one who killed The Queen of Worms, but its corpse is not gone so it attracts these creatures. I killed the creatures too and got infected. The only solution was to cover myself, isolate and continue with the missions alone in my cloak."

"That's why you left me?", I barely caught my breath to ask.

She nodded.

Later when I went to the other room and came back, she was gone.

She left and I know she won't come back.

"I will miss you", is all I could think whilst a tear rolled down my face.

mentor: Dubravka Zebec
institution:Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovčki
autor:Marija Škorvaga

THE SECRET STORY OF THE SWAN

Many years ago, there lived two swans in an enchanted lake. One was a male, the other happened to be a female. The female looked ethereal and elegant, while the male was mysterious and bold. One day, a girl was walking by the lake. She looked so happy and joyful, her appearance was too pretty to be described. She had perfect glossy and silky hair, almond-shaped eyes that were dark brown like chocolate, hydrated glass skin, and pretty, moisturized, plump lips. She looked like a model. I was so jealous. The male swan couldn't take his eyes off her. I felt overshadowed. I was always the center of attention, and now a human takes my spot?" said the female swan. She couldn't help but stare into the girl's soul. She felt anger, as if she had been betrayed. The female swan went missing that night.

The male swan knew he had a chance with the lovely girl who would walk by the lake. But the girl, named Iva, hated him because of his immature and childish behavior. She noticed the female swan wasn't at the lake, so she was really confused. She went around the whole lake about four times, but the female swan was nowhere to be seen or found. The girl decided she would dive into the lake if needed since she saw the female swan as an inspiration and a beautiful goddess. The male swan went up to Iva and told her, "You're so pretty, and I'm so handsome. We're a match made in heaven."

Iva replied, "Yeah, but you can't even say the alphabet without stumbling in front of me because you don't have enough confidence." The male swan was furious about that but still thought about the chance that she maybe liked him.

In the meantime, the female swan was underwater. No one knew that she was secretly an angel, but one thing for sure that everyone knew was that she was antifragile—not even an iceberg could break her. Still, she wanted to know who that girl was ASAP since she was known for stealing the spotlight and attention from her. She said to herself, "I want to find out who she is, but I have better things to do than stalking a girl I've never seen or met before."

The male swan had a lot of disgusting actions. He would tell the female swan to bite him, while the female swan wanted him to cherish her love. The male swan

didn't know that Iva lived in another country—Cheshire, or whatever you call it—but when he found out, he was cool with it and found it really interesting. Iva still saw the male swan as crazy. I mean, a swan doesn't fall in love with you every day! Plus, Iva knew her place and knew she had a crown on her head.

One night, as Iva was walking around the lake, she randomly said, "Oh, how I hate when people put on tons of perfume." The male swan jumped out of the water and said, "Ditto." Iva was terrified. Not only was he nonstop trying to get her attention, but he was also following her around. It was written all over him that he wanted drama, and it was easy for him to make drama since he knew his actions were wrong.

The female swan didn't like the way the male swan treated her, but still, she loved him. He was her true love, and she couldn't stop thinking about his smile.

Back to the beginning: After Iva was done yelling at the male swan for following her, she asked him, "What's your ETA?" He was confused and didn't know what that meant, so he asked, "What does that mean?" She replied, "How would you know if you aren't human? It stands for Estimated Time of Arrival in slang." He was upset because of the incident, so he said, "Do you know the story of Eve, Psyche, and the Bluebeard's wife?" She said, "No, I don't know." He answered, "Because you're not a swan. You see, everyone has their story, and so do I!" Iva was a straightforward person and decided to zip her mouth shut so no one would get mad.

While they were arguing, the female swan was thinking about becoming more fearless and confessing her love for the male swan, but it wasn't easy since the male swan was hard to love. Either way, the male swan always said, "How sweet of her to do that for me" when she would buy him something.

It was time to come out. The female swan got out of the water, looked around, and started floating up in the sky, saying, "How do you like that?" She admitted to being an angel. She spread her wings wide open, even though she was really hurt when she saw the male swan talking to Iva. She didn't care, knowing he was hers and only hers. Everyone would call him "Hype Boy," but she called him "Shining Voice."

The male swan asked, "How come you were an angel this whole time?" She said, "I've been an angel since the beginning of this story. Remember? It's said this is an enchanted lake. The first time I stepped into this lake, God blessed me in my heart. He loved me like this normal swan I was, and I knew I had potential in becoming more."

Iva said, "Well, that is some lucky girl syndrome," and started smirking. The female swan touched the male swan. It was like the Midas touch. He happily said, "You're mine." Iva carefully took out flowers from her bag and poured them into the lake.

Then she said, "And I need some new jeans, so I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

At their wedding, the female swan revealed no celestial powers, but they lived happily together, unconcerned with others' opinions, eventually expanding their home near a vibrant island called Pink Venom.

author: Marina Čermin
mentor: Erna Jukić
institution: Osnovna škola Hreljin

THREE DIMENSIONS

Hi, my name is Sarah. I am 14 years old, and we live in Canada. By 'we' I mean, my uncle, aunt, my dad and me. Before someone asks where my mom is, my mom died in a car accident, when I was 10 years old. Now I got use to the fact that she's gone. The worst thing about her being gone is that my dad has a new girlfriend named Michel. She is the worst. She makes me do her chores because she's lazy. [I roll my eyes]. Every time my dad walks by, she pretends she's cleaning the house, baking, and cooking dinner at the same time. No one can do that, only people with five arms. Later that day, my dad took me to fencing classes. The second I closed the car door I saw a piece of paper in the car door. I took the paper and I read it fast, so I'm not late for training. After training I wasn't tired at all. That's when I read it carefully and it said:

Run away, Run away
If you may - if you don't, you will be the beasts pray.
3 holes you shall go in - one left, one straight, one right,
Two loose, one tight.
You may be stuck in a loop,
The only way to get out is to save me and you.

I got the fact that I have to run away from home so, I listened. I took my things and went to the woods, at night. I was scared to leave home, but I was brave, and I left. It was a long walk, like really long. I felt tired, but I kept going. From afar I saw a big wall but, when I kept walking closer, I saw a big closet. I was confused why would a big closet be in the middle of the woods? I was curious so I opened it, and there were three holes. Now I was more confused than before. Is this magic? [I thought to myself]. Probably not because I live in a town with no festivals, or anything fun. I really wanted to feel the feeling of fun. So, I walked into the first hole and the second I blinked I was in the kitchen talking to my uncle. My mind was blown. When he asked me a question, I wasn't talking so I don't break any time system. Now I remember talking about this with my uncle four days ago. That's weird? Now I have to repeat these four days, and that's when I got a bad grade, so I have to study. When

I came home, I was scared to tell my dad I got another bad grade, but I told him, and he wasn't happy.

[Four days later] Now I walked in the second hole. The second I blinked I was in the past again, this time I was watching tv in my room. I wasn't shocked because I've been through this. But this time I was four months behind. Now I have to go through these boring four months again.

[Four months later] It's time to go to the last tight hole. I was kind of scared, maybe I am going to get stuck. No! I am brave, I am smart, I can do it! I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I was home, and the second I was in the loop I heard my mom say: 'Bye everyone!'. I wasn't sure if she was going to the place where she had her car crash, so I asked her. She said that she was going to the store. My brain clicked, oh, no! Mom, stop! She was already in the car on the street. My eyes started watering, I kneeled to the ground, and I sobbed, and sobbed. 'I guess I wasn't the hero I was meant to be [sobbing]. I have an idea. I opened the door, and told dad 'dad we have to leave'. We hopped in the car and we drove 100mph.The second my dad turns to ask me where are we going, I say; 'watch out!" [in slow motion]. We tried so hard not to hit it . And we didn't hit it that hard but there was still glass everywhere. The second I blinked I felt glass opening my skin and throat. BOOM!!!! We crashed into a red car. I slowly opened my eyes and saw my mom in the red car. I fell unconscious. After 20 minutes I heard loud sirens and suddenly felt that a person was carrying me to a big white truck. I reached to my mom to say goodbye, but no one was there to hold my hand. And suddenly I felt a small hand touch the tip of my fingers. It was mom! She was ok!

But I wasn't. I was losing a lot of blood. But I still don't get it? [I thought to myself, while the doctors were stitching me and my mom] I don't know how I forgot this moment ?! [flashback]

Suddenly my body started to shake but what has happening in my brain, you don't want to know.

Mom came sneaking in my hospital bed, holding a green bottle full of black liquid [that was memory loss liquid] and chugged it down my throat. But she was protecting me from the memory of the car accident, so I don't remember it. All I remember was that my mom died, nothing else.

[The next morning] Why am I here? [thought to myself] I was scared, so I ran away. When I came home, there were newspaper on the table saying: Huge car accident in Canada! A 34-year-old woman survived. I was confused, but maybe it was someone else.

[one day someone knocked on the door] I opened it, and it was mom! I hugged her so tight, and I started to tell her my whole adventure.

mentor: Ivana Kasunić
institution: OŠ Nikola Tesla, Rijeka
autor:Tia Madžar

TINA AND THE PIRATES

Once upon a time, on an island, far, far away, there lived a fairy. Her name was Tina. She lived on an island surrounded by the ocean but she still had an imaginary border that she couldn't cross.

One day she felt a little naughty and decided to cross the border when nobody was looking. She thought, ''Why aren't we allowed to cross that specific border? What could possibly go wrong?". But that's where she was wrong.

As she was flying, all of a sudden, a big ship approached her. Turns out that, that big ship wasn't any ordinary ship, it was a pirate ship. When Tina realised what kind of a ship that was, she immediately got scared. She was above the pirate ship and she was trying to fly away as fast as she could but it was already too late. She felt a strong pull and suddenly she was on the pirate ship.

- Who do we have here?? - said one of the pirates - We have a lot of fairies here who tried to cross the border.

- What do you mean ″you have″??-asked Tina.

- I mean, we have, because every fairy we caught we trapped in a jar and nobody escaped and even if they would try to get out, we would catch them and lock them in an even smaller jar and seal it so tight that not even the strongest person on earth would be able to open it - said the pirate. Tina got scared, she thought, she was going to be stuck here forever.

The pirates gave her something. That thing put her to sleep. When she woke up, she saw a lot of fairies crying and screaming for help. Tina tried to find ways how she can escape from the jar. Nothing was working and the other fairies said:

- Don't even try, we have been trying for years and nothing has worked.

Tina thought all hope was lost, but then she saw a familiar face, but he wasn't in a jar. She realised that was Cosmo, a fairy from her land. He can turn into anything he wants whenever he wants. So, when he found out Tina was missing, he decided to turn into a pirate and check if maybe pirates trapped her. He knew if she was with the pirates, she would be in a tightly sealed jar. He had a magic backpack with him, where he put the strongest fairy and some rope (don't worry the fairy could breathe).

Cosmo and the strongest fairy (her name was Luisa) grabbed the rope wrapped it tightly around the lid of the jar and started pulling. They managed to open the jar and then Cosmo said:

- Come on Tina, let's go before they see us.

Tina replied:

-I'm only going if we can save the other fairies as well.

-Ok, is that ok with you Lisa?

-Sure, that's fine with me.

They quickly saved the other fairies and left. Tina and the other fairies were very grateful because Cosmo and Lisa saved them.

When they got back Tina's mom was very angry because she crossed the border, but also happy because her kid was safe now. Later the whole island had a big celebration because this was the first time fairies ever came back after being trapped by the pirates.

šifra: Zyra
mentor: Sanja Božinović
institution: Osnovna škola Nikole Hribara, Velika Gorica
autor: Iris Ćavar

NASLOV PRIČE: ZYRA THE WILD HORSE

There is a beautiful, dense forest far away in British fields. All kinds of woods are there. Birchwood, Oakwood, Sugar maple, Yellow-poplar and a lot more. It's spring. Everything is covered in dark green tones. The sun is shining through the leaves, the birds are chirping. That is Zyra's home.

Zyra is a beautiful wild horse, and her forest is like heaven. It is so big that she could roam around all day. Zyra loves to run freely in the plains, and the clearings in the forest. Everything in that forest is covered with moss: rocks, trees, podzol, rooted dirt. It is so soft you could sleep on it. That's why Zyra's den is comfortable. The whole forest is magical, with berries and wild strawberries that Zyra eats, even more than grass.

Now Zyra is resting but she is not very happy today. She had some berries for breakfast, but now she's run out of food. There is no more food in places near her these days, the forest has changed.

Still hungry, Zyra starts another food search. She is roaming and looking. While searching, Zyra accidentally finds an exit from the forest. The scene is so beautiful to see, the sky in golden shades because it is already the time for the sunset. Zyra is afraid because she's never been out of the forest. She looks carefully. What is that place in front of her? It looks like a farm.

Zyra decides to go there and check it out. On her way, she sees many animals: chickens, birds, rabbits, a few sheep, but no horses. Is Zyra the first one to ever see that farm? She notices a fox stealing the berries from the backyard, and she is sure there is food on the farm. She slowly heads to the farm, then she speeds up. She tries to be as quiet as possible. She investigates the place. The animals ate quite a lot of berries, so Zyra must be careful.

Zyra does not know that the owner of the farm is an old granny who lives there on the plains, with her chickens, sheep, and two piglets. She never feels lonely, because

her thirteen-year-old granddaughter Jane visits her every month. Jane likes all animals, especially horses, and learns about them hoping to get one when she is older.

Jane is visiting her granny now and she hears Zyra trotting in the backyard. It's usually very silent in the backyard. No big animals ever come. Jane takes a peek outside. Can you imagine Jane's surprise? There is a horse in the backyard, but not just any horse, a wild horse! "Oh, my goodness! A horse!", Jane surprisingly exclaims. She sneaks to see her better and grabs a carrot to give it to her.

Now Zyra is nervous and surprised. "Don't be scared, horsy." "It's okay…I'm just a simple girl!" Zyra slowly takes the carrot. Jane pats Zyra's head. "There you go. Carrots are delicious. I like carrots, too!"

She stares suspiciously into Jane's eyes. Zyra steps back, neighs, and canters away. After that, Jane hasn't seen her for several days.

After a few days, when Zyra is out of food again, she must go to the farm again. When she comes to the farm, she grabs the first food she sees and snorts. It is not as good as the carrot last time.

Jane hears the same sound again. It's Zyra again! Sne approaches her slowly. "Shh...! It's fine, nothing bad can happen to you now!", Jane pats her. Zyra gets relaxed. Jane is amazed by this beauty. "Woah! I've never seen such a slick mane and such an elegant tail! It's a female, a female Clydesdale! I like her dark brown colour and her beautiful big eyes. Her hooves are big, too! Stay here, Zyra, and be quiet! My grandma could hear you…I am going to get you some fresh apples!" But Zyra doesn't understand Jane's words and is not happy to see Jane leave.

"Jane, dear, would you help me finish this apple pie, please? Oh, and I would really need the apple you are holding!", Grandma calls from the kitchen. Jane hesitates. What should she do? She knows the horse in the backyard has to be taken care of. She doesn't know what to do: help her grandmother or go back to the horse. Is this horse her new friend or a dangerous creature that could knock down Grandma's fence? She decides to help her grandmother. When Jane is back, she can the backyard is empty, there is no Zyra. She has run away. "Well, at least I got a chance to interact with a horse from close up!"

The evening is slowly covering the sky pink. Jane heads back inside. "Grandma, do you like horses?" "Well, sweetie…Our family were all equestrians in the past, expert horseback riders." Jane listens carefully. "I would like to become an equestrian one day "Maybe you will, but now…go to sleep. It's already late!", grandma replies.

After some time and a few more visits to the farm, Zyra decides to stay with Jane. Jane is very good at horse riding now. She knows a few tricks. She has become an Equestrian, and she loves her horse. Zyra loves her back. They sometimes go together to explore Zyra's forest. Big races and adventures are waiting for them.

Šifra: Storyline2025
šifra mentora: Eyeliner2025
mentor: Anna Maria Popović
institution: Osnovna škola Ivana Kukuljevića Belišće
autor: Iris Budić

PURPLE MEETS GREEN

I ran from the door of my house to the entrance of the forest, cheerfully saying 'bye' to my mother. I chased the wind jumping around the trees. It was all so empty.

As I sat down to rest I noticed a dark figure roaming near me. Standing up, I slowly walked to it. I saw a fox with black fur and a strangely familiar red symbol on its forehead. It was missing its tail.

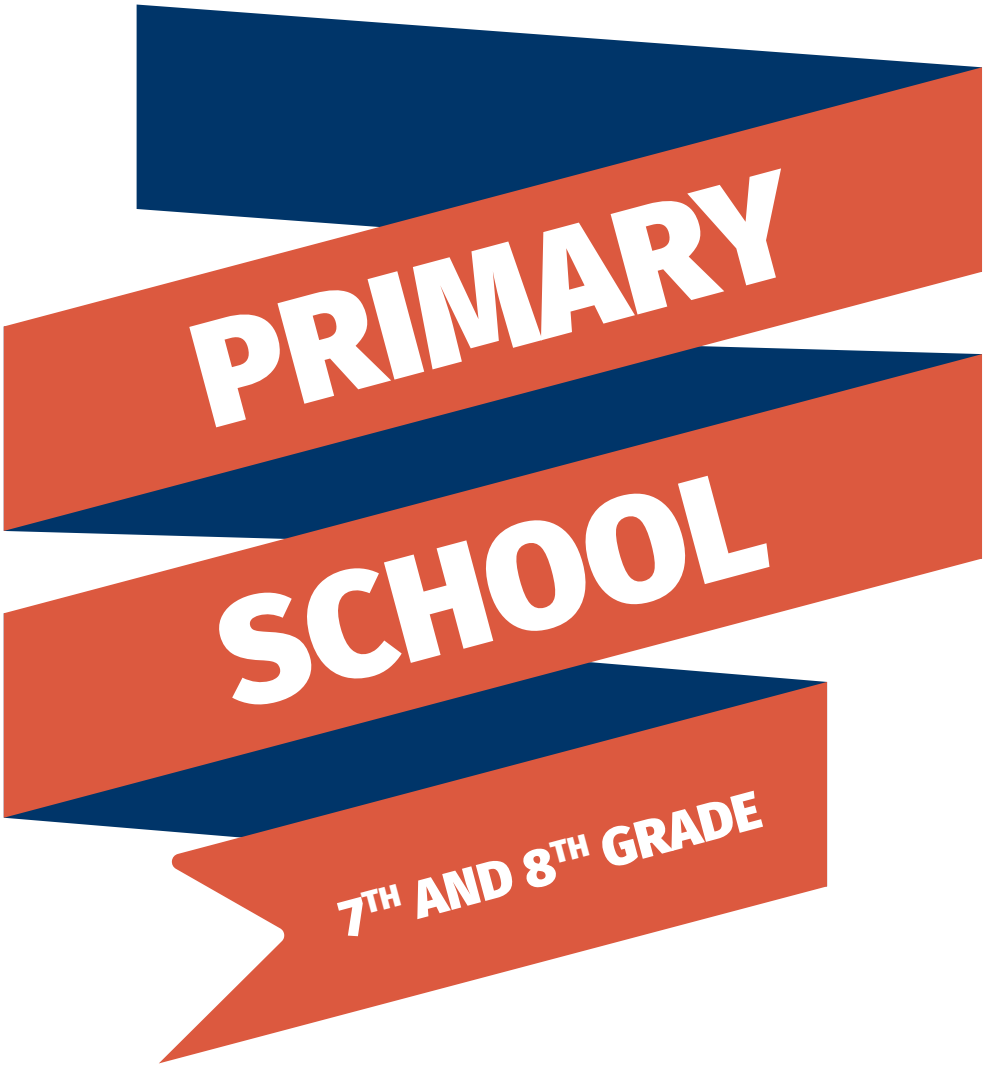
-Hello fox, I'm Freya! What is your name?- I spoke loudly, but the fox didn't answer. I sat down next to it, softly saying -It's alright, you don't have to tell me.'- **But it ran away so quickly, its green cloak of leaves and moss falling to the grass.** I decided to go back home and tell my mum. Going through the fields I thought to myself about how unusual the fox was. I had never seen a fox like it before, no tail and green eyes. I walked up the stairs to the door, opening it and going inside. I went to my mum and told her what had happened. How the forest was empty, how the only thing there was that fox. Mum listened intently and at the end told me with a smile -Dress up how you like, ask the fox to watch the fish in the nearby river. Be its friend, Freya.- I listened to her suggestion, went to the closet and picked out my favourite dress. It was dark blue and puffy, golden stars covering the chest and back. I took my black stockings and a bow, put my feet in my golden shoes. I combed out my spiky purple hair and tied it with a cloth. I went to hug my sisters and mum before sprinting out. The fox was in the same place as it was before. I noticed it was sleeping calmly. I didn't want to wake it, so I went for a long walk.

I sang the songs an angel once had sung to me. I laid in the field filled with such colourful flowers. The red roses danced with the orchids, the daisies following alongside them. Cherry blossoms kissed the lilies and the sunflowers looked longingly at the Sun. A butterfly landed on my hand, I put it on a blue flower that was standing next to my chest. I noticed that there were many of them and so I counted them all and learned that there were about 29 of them that I could see. I looked to the sky, observing the clouds. One looked like Clara, the good angel that told me all about

herself and her angel friends. Another one seemed to be a sleeping dragon, it reminded me of Aimilios, my sister when she was so tired of chasing squirrels that she immediately fell asleep in a tree nest.

I continued my walk and went to a nearby village. I greeted all the people, I saw that Miriam had ripped her dress. I decided to help. First, I asked Mrs. Annie for the supplies which she gave me quite easily, then I sat down and sawed it back up. Miriam thanked me and we gave Mrs. Annie her things back. Alice who is Miriam's twin sister told me that their father got injured while he was out hunting. We went to visit him, I made him some tea and helped change his bandages. He and his wife were wondering if my family was alright, I told them that everyone was fine. He told me that he found something in the woods and that he wanted to give it to me. His wife went to go get it, as she walked back I noticed a frozen rose in her hands. He explained to me that he saw an animal drop it near a tree. He couldn't tell what the animal was, but he thought that it was a fox. I quickly ate some stew with them and left, continuing my walk.

I went to the forest, seeing a pack of wolves playing with each other. I asked for permission to join them in their game of tag. They happily allowed me to join in on the fun. We chased each other around the forest, leaping across small streams that hummed the songs of the goddess Sari. We found some sticks and threw them around. I felt a mysterious presence watching over me protectively. I sadly told them my goodbye and went to find the fox. It was sitting there calmly and I asked it to follow me. It surprisingly walked right behind me, following my steps. When we finally got to the grand river the sun was already setting. We sat down and observed the fish that were swimming around. I cheerfully pointed out all the fish and said all the information I had learned from the books we kept in our library. The fox was nodding softly, still not making a sound. –Those are glintle, they scavenge for food with gandles. Glintles are good at finding it, gandles are bigger and stronger and they protect glintles and the food. Those big, spiky ones are riverwraiths. They are really strong and usually eat things the same size and larger than them.- I would tell the fox, but it never said a word. I talked all about the fish, the small and big ones, the weak and strong ones. I even told the fox about the fish hidden in the deepest of caves, yet it stayed quiet. I eventually ran out of things to say, as I was looking around for inspiration I noticed that a girl replaced the shy fox. She looked at me and smiled, -I'm Kurami- she said. And for some reason all I could do was quietly greet her with a 'hi'.


PRIMARY
SCHOOL
7TH AND 8TH GRADE

šifra: id311211
mentor: Maja Penava Aleksić, prof.
institution: OŠ „Blaž Tadijanović“ Slavonski Brod
autor:Iva Đuretić

LIFE BENEATH SIMULATION

In the immense expanse of the starry heavens, the once destroyed Herta space station that orbited around The Blue pulsed with life and activity, its normally empty halls suddenly echoing with chatter of researchers and clatter of shoes. Despite the chaos, two minds, each a paragon of genius, worked in a secluded area of the station – a private lab reserved for the collaboration of two geniuses, Herta and Mei.

Mei, draped in a flowing robe embroidered with scenes of ancient tales and theatrical performances and a white lab coat, adjusted her glasses as she leaned over a complex biogenetic model. Her hands moved with precision, weaving simulations of human evolution with the effortless grace of an artist embroidering silk.

Next to her on a metal stool, sat a life-size puppet, its appearance 50% accurate to the younger, teenage version of the other genius, Herta herself. She never attended her lab in physical form, always using her remote-controlled puppet. The Herta space station was just another one of her discarded projects, so it was never that important to her. It's empty, eerily lifelike amethyst-colored eyes followed every move Mei made, tilted its head curiously.

"You know…", the puppet's hollow voice rang through the half-empty lab,

"For someone so obsessed with life's mysteries, you spend an unusual amount of time doing…. *this*.", a hint of amusement was present in its voice.

Mei looked up from the model, a soft yet graceful smile playing on her lips. "Art is a part of life, Herta. Every thread is like the existence of life itself", she stated in a soft tone. Herta's puppet shifted its position, now leaning closer to Mei, silently observing the biogenetic model on the table.

"How poetic, Mei-Mei. But isn't imitating life itself what the Simulated universe is for? Real existence…Real threads… well, as real as the Simulated universe can get, that is."

Mei shrugged, setting the model aside. "You only see the function, never the beauty. The Simulated universe is logically and functionally made, yes, but it lacks the soul of real human touch and art that breathes into our endeavors.", a moment of silence creeped up on them, but it didn't last long until Herta made another comment. "Beauty doesn't solve equations, Mei.", Herta retorted, a hint of amusement in the puppet's tone.

Before Mei could respond, the lab's intercom buzzed to life. A disembodied voice, one of the many lab assistants informed them of an anomaly found in the newest installed system of the Simulated universe.

Herta's puppet leapt to its feet with an uncanny grace, dusting the dust off its dress. "Finally, something interesting. Come on now, we don't have all day for this!", it said, imitating Herta's impatient nature.

Mei also stood up from her chair, adjusting it back into its place. "Maybe you should start seeing these interruptions more than just mere puzzles to fix, Herta. Even anomalies, glitches and errors have their own stories."

The two made their way to the central simulation chamber, where vast monitors displayed cascading streams of data. On one screen, a virtual ecosystem flourished—a planet teeming with lifeforms, from iridescent creatures swimming in translucent seas to towering flora swaying under a digital, emerald sky.

The anomaly, however, was a peculiar one. A single species of insect-like beings had developed the ability to weave intricate, shimmering patterns into their hives. The patterns bore a striking resemblance to the ones Mei had sewn onto one of her old cloths.

Herta's puppet leaned closer to the screen, its eyes narrowing "How did *this* happen? It's not in the algorithm or code.", Mei's expression softened, her gaze filled with wonder, perhaps even a hint of fondness "Perhaps it's a reflection of something greater than the system itself —an echo of the universe's inherent artistry."

Herta rolled its eyes, giving Mei a nudge "Or a glitch.", Herta's puppet began typing on a nearby console, seeming fixated on getting rid of the anomaly. As the puppet worked, Mei stepped closer to the screen, her fingers lightly brushing the edge.

"What if we let it be? Let's see how this anomaly evolves. Maybe it holds more answers to questions we haven't yet asked",she suggests.

Herta paused, its fingers hovering above the keyboard, looking over to Mei with slight disbelief in her tone "You're saying we do...Nothing...?', it tilted its head.

"Not nothing,' Mei replied. "Observation is its own kind of action. Sometimes the most profound discoveries come when we step back and watch."

Herta's puppet glanced back at the keyboard and back at Mei, considering the suggestion. "Fine. But only because I'm curious to see if your 'artistic anomaly' crashes the system."

Mei smiled lightly "Then we both win, don't we?', Herta's puppet rolled its eyes once more, leaving the anomaly be. It walked over to Mei, glancing up at her.

"I guess so. But if that thing makes the system crash, you will be the one to repair it! I am not going to repair something that wasn't my fault.", the puppet crossed its arms, giving the taller woman a glare.

Mei chuckled ruffling the puppets hair affectionately "Don't worry about it. I'll make sure everything goes according to plan. Your precious systems won't need any repairing."

Herta huffed, adjusting its hair. The two slowly made their way back to the secluded laboratory, a comfortable silence filling the air as they made their way back to the lab.

As the days passed, the anomaly thrived in the simulation, its patterns growing increasingly intricate and harmonious. Mei observed it with rapt fascination, sketching designs inspired by the ever-evolving creations, while Herta's puppet feigned indifference, occasionally muttering about "overhyped glitches".

But then, something rather unexpected occurred. The patterns began to interact with the broader simulation, influencing ecosystems, stabilizing conflicts, and creating an unprecedented equilibrium. The once chaotic simulations became works of delicate balance, as if the anomaly carried an intelligence beyond mere code.

One evening, as Herta's puppet and Mei watched the simulation in the dimly lighted lab, a new phenomenon emerged: a humanoid figure made entirely of glowing, shifting patterns. It reached out, its movements deliberate and graceful, before pausing to gaze directly into the lab's camera.

"What is it doing?", Herta's puppet asked, leaning forward to inspect the anomaly.

"It's acknowledging us," Mei whispered, awe filling her voice.

Before Herta could protest, the figure extended its patterned hand, as if offering an invitation. The screens shimmered, and the simulations data loaded into a singular, radiant thread winding its way towards the console where Herta's puppet sat.

"It wants to communicate," Mei said softly, her gaze meeting Herta's. Herta hesitated, her puppet still as she weighed her choices.

Finally, with an exaggerated sigh, the puppet reached out, its porcelain fingers brushing the console's interface.

In an instant, the lab was flooded with vibrant, colorful projections and holograms —memories, stories, and visions from the anomaly's perspective. It revealed not just its existence, but its intent. It was seeking understanding, connection, and perhaps even companionship. As the vibrant projections faded, leaving the lab in its usual dim lighting and hum of machinery, the two stood in silence.

"It's not a glitch nor error," Mei finally said, her voice steady. "No," Herta admitted, her tone begrudgingly respectful. "It's...Something else entirely. Enigmatic even, if you could call it that," the puppet admitted, something that was unusual and rare.

"Something enigmatic, yet so beautiful at the same time," Mei added. The puppet turned to her, tilting its head, "Don't get used to me agreeing with you. Or admitting something," the puppet crossed its arms, looking up at the taller woman.

Mei simply just gave it a fond smile, speaking up in a gentle yet teasing tone, "I wouldn't dream of it, Madam Herta."

Herta, a usually not so emotional individual, for the first time in at least a decade gave a small barely noticeable smile. Mei noted maybe she should do this more often, just to make the puppet a bit more expressive. And as the two returned to their work, a new energy filled the secluded room.

The anomaly was no longer an error or glitch to be fixed or ignored—it was a doorway to a new frontier, one that would test the limits of their understanding, challenge their philosophies, and, perhaps, redefine the very nature of life itself.

šifra: točkica
mentor: Ivana Pavlic
institution: Osnovna škola Belica
autor:Jana Horvat

BEYOND WORDS

On faraway encanting fields, there stood one farm. In a white house, there lived a man. He didn't hang out with people, he didn't have any friends but he had his sheep. People often told stories he got into a family fight, and that from then, he tolerated only sheep. He had heard those stories, but didn't want to pay them any attention. On his farm, there also lived two border collies. They were best friends ever since birth. The first one was named Betty, and Dottie was the name given to the other one because of the black dot on her forehead. Their job was to guard sheep across the big green fields.

Dottie was the energetic friend. She always had the best jokes, and Betty always rolled with laughter at them. She also had this one trick, where she would run around Betty excatly three times after she sneezed. It was Dottie's way of saying bless you. It seemed silly to Betty, but Dottie always said that it really didn't matter what we said after someone sneezed. Together, they were unstoppable! And without each other they were incomplete, so they were inseparable.

One sunny morning, when they were supposed to get up and check on the sheep, Dottie was not there. Betty looked everywhere but couldn't find her. There was just this tiny red mark on the road, something Betty found quite unusual, but didn't have time to inspect it. She knew something bizzare and odd had happened, since the master was acting strange that day, too.

That day his family came to visit. They had a little girl. The girl was crying, and her mother was saying something to the master. Betty didn't understand what was happening, but they did. Dottie was hit by a car! The master's daughter was trying to persuade her father to come and live with them. She thought that the sheep were too much of a job for him and that the family had already forgotten about the fight. She just wanted him home but he couldn't leave his sheep there alone. The conversation was starting to sound aggresive and the family went back home. Later that evening a cute little lamb with a black dot on the forehead was born.

Betty kept on waiting and looking for Dottie, day by day. She was quite lonely on the farm. As the time flew by, the little lamb wasn't so little anymore. She was never really afraid of their guardian dog. In her mind, nothing changed. She tried to play with Betty, but Betty was always ignoring her! With her very first look at her feet, she became aware why. She had hooves! And then it hit her: it must have been that blue car. She didn't remember anything after that! Did it hit her? How is this possible?? She started to bleat frantically, but it didn't help with anything.

Despite the circumstances, Dottie never gave up. Every day, she tried to communicate with Betty. Betty was very confused with the strange behavior of the sheep. Her heart was aching for Dottie. One day, she sat next to that peculiar sheep and looked at it. Something was familiar, some strange feeling about the animal. Finally, Betty noticed the dot on the forehead! In that moment, everything clicked. Betty looked at the sheep again, analyzing her behavior, and sneezed. The sheep dashed around Betty excatly three times. No other sheep would to that. Betty didn't know how that was possible, but it was really her soulmate, Dottie! She barked with happiness, knowing Dottie didn't forget about her. It was a miracle they could undestand eachother without words. A wonderful miracle! They spent the entire day playing together. In the evening the dog and the sheep were so exhausted they fell asleep immediately, curled up together on the autumn leaves. Other sheep watched them with disbelief, since no sheep had ever been friends with a dog. The stars were shining brightly high in the sky and two friends slept like babies.

From that day they were constantly together, best friends like before. The master noticed that and wasn't happy about it. He didn't want his dog to play with a sheep. His dog was to guard them, and by playing with one of them, he couldn't even guard himself. The other sheep wanted to spend time with Dottie, but she was constantly playing with Betty.

One day, the master drove somewhere by car, and Dottie and Betty let loose and made the most of the time they had. They ran through the glades like gazelles. Preoccupied with running, Betty forgot to look after the other sheep. While two friends were playing in the golden grass, all the sheep dissapeared! They were nowhere to be seen!

Betty started panicking and running around the fields sniffing the air. How long have they been gone? There was a forest nearby, so maybe that's where they went! The master would be home soon, and she knew she would be in big trouble if she wouldn't find them. Dottie started running towards the forest nearby so Betty raced to the house to alarm Dottie if the master would come home. There was no plan, they just wanted to find the sheep.

Dottie stepped into the forest. The squirrels watched her curiously from the treetops, jumping from one branch to another. ''It would be so practical", Dottie thought, ''to turn into a squirrel right now!" She could just jump from one tree to another, and have a bird's eye view of the forest. Then, something white moved behind a tree. Dottie slowly began to approach the tree, aware that predators lived there too. A few moments later a short baa was heard. They were there! The sheep were there! And just as Dottie began to call them to come back home, she heard Betty bark. She turned excitedly, but Betty was not alone. The master was beside her with an angry look on his face. Betty looked very sad, and she tried to explain Dottie in dog language what had happened, but this time, Dottie didn't understand. She was angry. For the first time, they both wanted words they could understand, they wanted to speak the same language.

What Dottie didn't know was that the master hadn't returned alone. Just as Betty noticed him coming home and wanted to alarm Dottie, the little girl, the master's granddaughter, stepped out of the car, grabbed the dog and rusher into the sheepfold to play with some sheep, too. But then the master noticed the sheep were gone. He was worried the incident would make him seem unable to take care of himself and his animals. So when they finally found the sheep, the master was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. Being so under the influence he didn't notice the little girl playfully walked away.

When the master and his family took care of the animals they noticed the little girl was gone. The sun was setting. The master crashed out of the house, calling for the little girl. They all rushed headlong towards the forest searching for the little girl. It was getting dark rapidly. Everyone was frantic and distraught with worries. Rushing through the forest with frenzy they couldn't hear or understand what the others were yelling. They were both dangerous for themselves and no help for the little girl. Suddenly, in one brief moment of silence a silent sneeze spread through the forest. Both Dottie and Betty sprinted towards the sound. The loud rattle they made when they found the little girl attracted the others, as well. When they approached Dottie and Betty were enthusiastically running circles around the little girl.

The master was ecstatic when he saw them! He hugged the girl, and then he hugged Betty and Dottie, too. When the family saw that sentimental scene they decided to move in with the master and spend his old days with him. The little girl loved playing with Dottie and Betty and she never got lost again because they would always find her.

Love comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes you find it when you least expect it. It doesn't matter what you say or what language you speak. What matters is what you do, how you express ourselves and how you treat your loved ones.

autor:Rikardo Šegota
Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić

BETRAYAL

"Hey Ravi, are you writing?" I asked. "Yes boss, every single word!" said Ravi jokingly. "Okay, we should start then. Write that I took a deep breath."

"Boss took a deep breath while looking stressed, "said Ravi while pretending to be writing that.

"Okay, let's begin. Jack Crimson, the captain of the 8th station – NYPD, an official report on recent crimes. Date of recording: 7 January 2008."

"Hello everyone, as my colleague said, I am Jack Crimson, the newly promoted captain of the 8th station, NYPD. I am going to give you the relevant facts of the last cases."

While I was briefing the members of the press, I couldn't keep my mind from wandering, the emotions were too strong.

Everything started on 11 October 2007. There was a body found in Central Park. I, as the lead detective at the time, was used to those cases and since I just got back from vacation, I was given the case. The body itself was… creepy. There was a miniature angry face carved into the victims' chest, like an emoji. We had several suspects and finally arrested one of them and sent him to court, I mean, the case was closed for us on 17 October. Then 30 October rolled around. I was called at around 2 a.m. It was a private number. I answered and someone in a distorted voice said: "Hey Jack, I think you would be interested in my new toy."

"Who is this! How did you get my private number? What are you even talking about?" I screamed.

"No, no, it's not the time to get aggressive, but I think you would be really interested in someone. Just for the record, we are at your favourite place, Central Park," said the caller calmly. I knew at that moment I was dealing with a psychopath, so I forced myself to calm down and say: "Who is there with you? Why are you calling?"

"It will be in our best interest for my guest to tell you."

He then gave the phone to someone. I will forever remember that moment. "Jack! Oh Lord, it is you! Please help! He's threating to kill me!" She continued, "Oh, it's. . .

"He hung up while my wife was still on the line. I had many questions racing through my head. It did not matter since I was screaming at the top my lungs: "NOOOOO! DON'T YOU DARE TO HURT HER! YOU PSYCHO!"

I already had my coat on and was leaving the house because the caller was… holding my wife hostage. I was crying for the first time in years. I already called my station. Even though I was driving 40 over the speed limit by the time I reached Central Park nobody was there. Only her lifeless body at the same spot as several days ago.

The captain came about half a minute after me and he immediately asked me to step away. He had to do it, otherwise, I would have contaminated the crime scene. I was still blind from rage, so I pulled out my gun and pointed at the captain, I don't know why I forgot everything he did for me. I screamed and cried, my eyes became blurry, I didn't see anything. I threw my gun to the captain. My will to live was slowly diminishing. But then… My phone rang. It was like 15 minutes ago. I answered. The guy on the other line said in the same distorted voice, "Oh my! How sweet you are when you are angry. It was right to give the gun, because if you didn't, I would have needed to intervene and then my fun would stop so early on." I looked around hysterically becoming paranoid about every light. At that moment Ravi and Josh came. Captain, Ravi and Josh were calming me down for some time. After some time, the captain said to me: "I think this case is too much for you. You maybe want to take some time off." Ravi and Josh didn't like that idea, so they protested. After some disputes the captain agreed and said, "You can work on this case, I hope your feelings won't impede your expertise. But I am warning you, one more breakdown or just an outburst, you are off the case." I agreed. Then he turned to Josh, but Josh stopped him. "Don't worry boss, I'll be okay."

First, we searched the area and found a burner phone, the one that the call was made from. The crime scene, on the other hand, was spotless, no fingerprints, nobody heard anything, so he was using a silencer. He was in a lonely spot, no witnesses, heck, there wasn't even a hair or a footprint. They checked the body two times and found nothing, but during the third inspection the forensic pathologist found something unexpected. The same angry face with a message *Miss me?* Finally, a clue. We went to the prison where the guy we had arrested was held, but with no luck, there was not any evidence that he could be involved in this crime. We did bring him for questioning though, but that did a whole ton of nothing. For the first time in my 22-year-old career I was left dumbfounded. Then 3 days later something unexpected happened. We found another victim. He also had an angry face carved into his chest, but this time we got another clue in the most unusual way possible! The killer

left a sticky note on the victim. The note read: *zahapvu 9*. It was a Caesar cipher and after decoding it said: *Station 9*. The first thing we did in the morning was to head for Station 9. Their captain greeted us, but he was extremely surprised to hear my name. We asked him what was wrong and then he said something weird: "Detective Crimson, according to the officer at the reception desk, you came here yesterday at around 8 p.m., gave him an envelope and said that someone from Station 8 would pick it the next day." At that time, I was at my station, the captain saw me, Ravi saw me, pretty much everybody saw me. We took the envelope and left. Under the UV light the paper revealed its message. The most surprising thing was that there were even my fingerprints on the envelope.

The message itself was creepy, "Dear Jack, how do you like my impersonation of you? I studied you well, your accent and the way you walk. I will claim 8 victims, then I will disappear. As you can see, I can give an Oscar worthy performance, so don't trust anyone. Don't be surprised if you find your fingerprints somewhere again. Love, your most hated psycho."

I was left speechless. Why was I targeted? Why is this happening to me? I went to Josh that evening because I needed someone to talk to. He calmed me a little and said that it was not my fault. It was like everybody was hearing what I was saying but he was the only one who was listening. Good old Josh, we practically grew up together. Going to police academy together was so natural for us and since we worked in the same station, our duties sometimes overlapped. But the strongest bond between us was Josh's sister Ellen, my dear wife.

It was December 2007, we lost three more people to that monster. The public was panicking about the serial killer, but everything calmed down at Christmas. Josh and I visited my wife's grave. I don't think I have mentioned it, the whole situation was horrible for him as well. He felt extreme sorrow since he couldn't protect her. "You know Josh, we can't catch him. It is like he has us in the palm of his hand. He will always be one step ahead of us. We are powerless and useless", I said to him being really bummed out. "Maybe he is one step ahead because he has an insider. Think again and try to recall if you have seen anything suspicious lately." said Josh while trying to cheer me up and give me advice.

My phone rang. It was Ravi. "Jack, where are you? Come to the station immediately!" "Whoa, slow down, Ravi. What happened?" I asked. "You'll see! Come, now!" I stormed off. When I came everybody was running up and down through hallways. I went to the captain's office. And there was our captain … dead. "Ravi, what happened?" I asked. "We don't know! But what we know is that the same guy is respon-

sible for this," Ravi said in distress. I told Ravi what Josh observed, "Josh thinks we might have a mole." "Why would he think that?" Ravi asked. "Well, if there is a mo . . .," I stopped. "You are thinking what I am thinking, right?" asked Ravi. "Yeah, he has one more victim left, if we go out with false information, he might reveal himself on the last victim." So, I made sure that my target hears about a hair that we apparently found in the captain's office, and which should be analysed by tomorrow. I finally went home.

Three hours later a new body was found. The same emoji. There was a sticky note on the body, "Even the hair analysis won't help you to find me!" Ravi read the note and said, "He swallowed the bait!" I stormed out to Josh's apartment but then, something hit me.

I woke up 4 hours later, in an abandoned building at the edge of the city. I was tied up to a chair. Josh noticed me and said: "Oh, good morning Sleeping Beauty. How do you like my hideout?" Before I spoke, he said something: "Just tell me Jack, why did you have to ruin everything? I worked so hard not to get caught. I could have disappeared. You could have forgotten about me! BUT NO! Little Jack must save the day and catch the killer! Well, guess what, this is not a TV show or a book! Good guys don't always win!" I was sitting there silent. His breath was heavy. I asked him: "Why Josh? We were friends, a family!" He gave me a cold look, shivers ran through my spine while I was staring at those empty eyes.

He said: "Friends? Friends! We stopped being friends the second you married my little sister against our parents' will. My mother got a heart attack from the stress. And then my father committed suicide because he couldn't handle the grief. You took them from me! And now I took everything from you!"

I was stunned and afraid. He aimed his gun at me. I closed my eyes but then the SWAT team broke in. I got his gun and aimed it at him. "Go ahead! Finish me and prove that you are just like me!" Josh yelled. The pictures of the captain's body and my wife's body flashed through my head. I dropped the gun and said: "I am not like you. We both know betrayal doesn't come from enemies but from friends. Do you remember when we were kids, I said that I would take a bullet for you? Well, I didn't expect you to be the one pulling the trigger."

šifra:ms31052011
mentor: Ana Polombito Karamatić
institution: OŠ oca Petra Perice, Makarska
autor:Mila Srzić

THE HEART TAILOR

A tall figure made it's way down the street. It was a man, the heart tailor. The entire village called him Mr. Tailor. The awfully cheerful guy always had a toothy grin plastered on his face, his pale, ivory skin: pristine and untouched, shining from the sunlight. He was dressed in a red suit, suitable for his job. He was the HEART tailor after all, and hearts are... well, red. His short platinum hair sparkled in the light as he walked, his movements graceful, light, almost as if he was floating.

But where was this so-called Mr. Tailor "floating" to? Perhaps to the store, maybe to take a stroll in the park? Nonsense! It's Monday, he's going to work!

Mr. Tailor whistled down the street as he strolled down to his shop, unlocking the door and setting down the keys on a cabinet by the entrance. He flipped the sign on the door to say "open". The man turned on his gramophone which played smooth jazz. The rhythm made him whirl around his shop. He danced like he had two left feet, but that didn't stop him from enjoying himself.

Not even one song had passed, well, the songs were quite long, but Mr. Tailor had just arrived to his shop, could it be a busy day? Who in the world might need their heart tailored at... He looked at the clock, 8:30 a.m., "Who in the world needs their heart tailored this early ?!"

Not that he was mad, more like...mmm how would he explain this? Confused? Disillusioned? Perplexed? Well, whatever it was, it wasn't in a bad way. He fixed his little beret and brushed a strand of his blondish-white hair from his face.

"Enter, the door is unlocked!"

"Hah.. oh... God... I got here as fast as I could! I know you're probably a busy gentleman and this - my request may not be that easy but I need it as soon as possible!"

Overwhelmed. This lady was immensely overwhelmed! She spoke in a breathy and quick manner, almost as if trying to get out as many words as possible; not to waste time.

"Ma'am, please calm down! The workshop is open and I have plenty of time. What do you need?"

He hoped to seem comforting, truth is, he wasn't that good with emotions and feelings, so a distressed woman running into his shop at half past eight on a Monday wasn't exactly what he had hoped for.

"I'm so, so sorry!! I really don't want to seem like some lunatic just running into your shop like this..."

The lady stammered and buried her face in her hands, her red lipstick stained her palm a little.

"Please, sit down miss, tell me what you need and I'll try my best to help you."

God... how awkward... Why are his social skills so bad? The woman sat down, her red dress hugging her body nicely. Her auburn hair was a bit frizzy, he assumed it was from the wind. No way such a gorgeous lady left the house without brushing her hair - it already looks like she takes good care of it, it's shiny and long.

"Alright... Alright... um. So... this is my heart...", she states before presenting her heart. It's a gorgeous, scarlet heart. Pulsating, but spotless - sinless.

"This... It is my heart... and-" The woman with auburn hair added before her sentence was cut off.

"It's perfect... Have you, truly, never sinned?"

"Well, by what my heart tells me, I have not... But the problem is... I have never, and I mean ever, felt romantic feelings..."

The tailor was startled by that, no love? Ever?! Not that he was much of a romantic himself, but he knew something was wrong.

"Hm... will you let me check your heart for a second?", he requested, walking over from the couch to the working station. The lady handed him the heart and he examined it with haste, taking into account that the woman was in a hurry.

"Has your... has your heart ever been purified?", the man asked, tilting his head to the side in confusion while the lady mumbled something.

"Well... um... no--"

She twirled her hair in embarrassment while Mr. Tailor just stood there wide eyed, his mouth agape.

"WHAT?! NEVER?! Are you sure? Like one hundred percent?!"

"Yes... I, um, thought I'd save myself that expense by remaining sinless... A heart-smith even told me that a sinless heart has no reason to be purified..."she said, with an embarrassed smile on her face. The auburn haired woman avoided eye contact at all costs.

"Well...Purifying hearts is not my field, but I've read about it...Are you sure there are no heart-smiths in town?", he inquired, looking at the flustered and embarrassed

girl in front of him, his cheeks turning a bit red, too, just from the sight. Then the auburn haired woman spoke again: "I'm sure... I mean, I've looked everywhere. They're not working during the holiday season... and I need this as soon as possible."

"Hmm... Well, why do you need it so soon? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

Why was he so interested in this? So interested in HER? He didn't even know her name, he'd remember her as "the lady with auburn hair" forever.

"I'm um... I'm getting married soon... Well, arranged, by my parents. But maybe, with the right heart I'll grow fond of him?"

Mr. Tailor's eyebrows furrowed a bit as she answered, he had just met her for god's sake, why is this woman having an effect that on him already?!

"So, um, how do I do that? Get my heart purified?"

Once she asked that question, Mr. Tailor's eyes shot up as he was snapped back to reality.

"Ah, right, well I've seen cases like this and the way to purify your heart is to ease your mind, meaning, you should do something that relaxes you."

He suggested with a huff, looking away and crossing his arms while simultaneously tapping his foot onto the hard floor of the workshop.

The girl looked at him, "Ease my mind you say...and how long would that take? I'm getting married in...about 3 weeks."

The heart tailor stopped tapping his foot so he could hear the lady speaking clearly before he replied: "Actually that amount of time is perfect, it usually takes around two weeks", he spoke with indifference.

"Great! I won't take up any more of your time. How much do I owe you, kind sir?"

"Oh, err...nothing really. I didn't do much."

After hearing the heart tailor reply she couldn't help but look a bit shocked before laughing, her smile was wide and her laugh was loud. Her cheeks turned bright and her teeth shined.

"Nonsense! I must give you something, no? How about I treat you for a coffee?"

The man looked at her while she spoke and replied: "Well, miss, as much as I appreciate it... it would be unsightly for a woman to pay for a drink when a man could, would it not?"

Her laughter turned into a smile, still just as bright. "Well when you put it like that..."

Her sentence was cut off by the man speaking again: «I would love to accompany you.»

Her smile widened again before she quickly took her bag and went outside of the work shop. The tailor took the keys he previously set down on the cabinet by the entrance, turned the sign to say "closed" and locked the door.

They walked to the nearby café, it was just down the street, not that far away. As they sat down and ordered a drink the tailor spoke: "I never really caught your name, if you don't mind me asking that is, what is it?"

The woman tilted her head before answering, "It's Edith, Edith Morrigan. May I ask what yours is?"

He smiled slightly and spoke again, "Edith...what a nice name. Mine is Viktor Hart."

She giggled slightly, not wanting to seem rude. She found it interesting how his last name even sounded like the word heart.

"Your surname sounds very fitting for your job, though I must say it's nice."

The smile didn't fade from the tailor's face as she spoke, in fact it got wider ever so slightly.

They kept on talking while sipping their coffee, laughing and getting to know each other. The heart tailor didn't really have friends, so this experience was new to him. Afterwards, even though the man insisted on paying, because that would be polite to do as a man, she ended up doing it because he helped her beforehand.

The next morning, before work, the heart tailor went to the same café. To his surprise he saw Edith again. They decided to sit together and drink coffee together again. And again, and again, and again...The next few days, they would sit in the cafe, sip coffee and talk.

One normal Tuesday, they were in the same spot they used to always be at. The tailor decided to make another move.

"Edith...um, I thought, if you wanted to, I could show you this very beautiful place. It's not far from here and I think you'll like it, would you like to meet me here before sunset?"

"Ooo of course! I'd love that!"

The lady said happily, she seemed to be happier every time they spent time together, and so did the heart tailor.

At around half past four, the two saw each other in the café. The man waved at the lady so that she'd notice him.

"It's not far from here, but we must hurry if we want to make it before sunset.", the tailor remarked before beginning to walk. They walked for around 10 minutes.

"Ahem, if you wanted to uh...you can take my hand. There are some bushes here and it's slightly rocky, so you might fall."

"Thank you for the offer, which I will take you up on because I'm wearing heels today..."

The man looked at her heels before chuckling softly and extending her hand for her to reach. They went through the bushes before finally reaching the beautiful site.

The lady looked around, flat planes rolled out as far as the eye could see. The tailor still didn't let go of her hand, he held it as he led her to the edge of the cliff, not too close because it was dangerous.

"W-wow...this is beautiful!"

She exclaimed, looking at the view. They sat there for hours, just staring into the sunset and then into the starry sky. Soon, it got late so the heart tailor walked the lady back to her estate.

For the next week, they'd go watching sunsets every day. Until one afternoon, the tailor found himself sitting all alone. He knew today was the date of the wedding. He didn't get an invite, they were nobles and he was just a tailor.

The sun began to set, he even shed a tear at the thought of not being able to watch this sunset with her. Until...

A bride! A bride was running towards him!

"V-Viktor...I didn't think I'd see you here!"

"Edith? Why are you here? W-what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry Viktor...I just can't. I told my parents that I've fallen for another and they didn't accept it! They told me to choose between him and them. This is the only way."

She took a step closer to the cliff, Viktor now wide eyed.

"Edith, w-what are you implying?!"

"I can't choose between you and my parents, Viktor. I have to be free..."

She took another step, looking him into the eyes. First her right foot slid off. Viktor couldn't do anything, he was shocked. Then her left foot. He tried to catch her but Edith went down the cliff like the sun behind the horizon.

He fell to the ground onto his knees, or so he thought, but nothing was beneath him.

šifra: Bungo39
mentor: Melinda Tupek
autor: Greta Hrastović

QUIET WHISPERS

San Mitldon was not the kind of town that usually saw a lot of excitement. However, tranquillity was not what Charlie Anderson wanted. Ever since she was a child, she had been brimming with energy, always looking for something interesting to explore, often dragging her two friends, Anya and Ray, along for the ride.

At the end of their street stood an old house from the 1800s. Charlie yearned for an opportunity to explore and suggested they sneak in one day after school. Anya couldn't refuse, while Ray was much less eager than the excited girls.

"This place is going to fall on our heads," he muttered.

Anya rolled her eyes as she stepped through the door. "Calm down, Ray, it's just a house," she scorned. Amused, Charlie giggled as the two bickered, as usual.

The air inside was thick and musty, the kind that clung to your lungs. The house was dark and gloomy, making exploration without a flashlight impossible. Luckily, they had brought one. As Charlie's eyes got accustomed to the dimness, they were drawn to a dusty desk in the corner, its surface cluttered with yellowed papers.

"Guys," Charlie uttered, her voice barely louder than a whisper, "check this out!"

Anya leaned in, her usually friendly expression now turned serious. Ray, who was more cautious, hung back. In the silence, Charlie thought she heard a faint whisper.

"It's just the wind," she told herself.

However, her curiosity got the better of her, and she started looking through the papers. Her friends soon joined her. At first, it was hard to tell what was depicted on them. Some looked like notes, while others had sketches.

Anya spoke up, "Oh, wait! I think these are inventions!" After studying them in detail, the others agreed.

"I wonder to whom these belonged," Ray pondered.

Charlie decided, "We should continue exploring. We'll figure it out."

The three friends started exploring the room. It appeared to be a study. Aside from the desk, tall bookshelves were filled with volumes of old, dusty books. Ray was drawn to the books at once.

"Oh, I think I'm in heaven!" he whispered looking through the titles.

The trio wanted to get a better look, so they decided to open the heavy, velvet curtains that were draped along the far wall. Anya drew back the curtains, and instead of seeing the expected sunlight, notes and sketches cluttered the wall. Charlie took a step back and paused. The two girls were in awe.

"Well, I didn't expect this!" Anya exclaimed.

It was obvious these were inventions, but it was hard to make sense of them. Ray joined them and quickly realized that some of the strange notes were book titles with numbers scribbled around them. After some thought, he concluded that the numbers must correspond to page numbers.

"Wait I think we've stumbled onto a code! These are the names of books in the library, so the numbers must be pages!" Charlie yelled excitedly, "Let's check it out!" They chose a book with a very worn-out cover called *The Relic* and turned to page 178. "Beware the dangers of trespassers…" was underlined.

Anya spoke up, "Well, that didn't help."

"Don't give up so quickly, it's just the first book. Come on, let's get another," Charlie encouraged.

Anya nodded and swiftly picked up a book called *The Lost Cause*. They found page 209 and read the underlined sentence: "Louis walked across the creaking wooden floor of the great hall..."

Charlie interrupted excitedly, "Trespassers…creaking wooden floor…Hey, this is a creaky, wooden floor! Maybe one of the floorboards is loose?"

The trio started searching when Anya yelled, "I found it!"

Charlie and Ray quickly approached Anya, but she had already lifted the loose board. There was a small, dark hole in the floor.

"I'm not putting my hand in there!" Ray protested.

"Don't be such a baby!" said Anya as she stuck her hand down the hole. It was much deeper than she had anticipated, and soon her whole arm was in the hole up to her shoulder.

Finally, she felt something and pulled it out. It was an antique box covered in dust and tiny spiders.

"Gross…It looks like it's going to fall apart," Ray exclaimed.

Charlie took the box and, with some difficulty pried off the lid. Inside, they found an old, leather book. Written on the cover in gold letters was *The Journal of William Morris*.

"That must be the inventor's name!" Charlie yelled out.

Ray had had enough adventure for one day, so he firmly suggested that if they didn't get home soon, they would all be grounded. The girls reluctantly agreed, and Charlie put the book in her bag.

That evening, Charlie met her friends to analyze the journal.

"I wonder if this is about his inventions, or something more personal," Anya cheerfully exclaimed. "I hope it's the latter!"

"I guess we're about to find out," Charlie replied as she skimmed through the barely legible, old-fashioned handwriting. "Nothing groundbreaking so far. He's just describing his life."

Ray leaned back and murmured, "What did you expect? He probably made his journal dull on purpose so that if anyone found it, they wouldn't take a second glance and wouldn't find out too much."

"Oh, you mean like us?" Anya giggled.

"Exactly. Wow, we're already doing the opposite of what he wanted," Ray scoffed.

The journal's pages were a messy blend of intricate sketches and untidy notes about Morris's personal life.

"Alright," Charlie started, "from what we've gathered, he was twenty-eight when he wrote this, had no close relatives aside from his mother, and a friend, Victor, who shared his ambitions. Perhaps they were partners?" Her brow furrowed as she read the inventor's disjointed writings. Suddenly her eyes widened in surprise "Wait – most of the words are black, except for a few red ones. Maybe this is a clue?"

"Let me see that," Ray demanded as he took the journal. "I think it's a message… if we rearrange them correctly." Ray began writing down the red words. He finally said, "Alright, we have open, stairs, close, books and important. I think there was a bookcase near the stairs. He might have hidden something important behind it," finally showing some genuine interest.

"There was! We should check it out tomorrow after school," Anya suggested eagerly.

"I'm in! What about you?" Charlie turned to Ray, who hesitated and then nodded nonchalantly.

The following day, the three friends went straight to the house. The setting sun cast long shadows over the old, creaky house. Inside, the house felt even more suffocating than before. They made their way to the bookcase. "This is disgusting…" Ray muttered under his breath.

"Relax, It's just some cobwebs. It's not *that* big of a deal," Anya explained as she recklessly moved the fragile bookcase aside.

They cautiously stepped inside and looked around the dimly lit room. It wasn't nearly as cluttered as the inventor's atelier, but it still had a disorganized charm about it, with stacks of long-forgotten items scattered randomly across the spruce floor. Just as they started exploring, a faint melody momentarily drifted through the silence and sent shivers down their spines.

After a few minutes of silence, they walked around the dark room. "There's something on the table!" Anya blurted out as she ran up to it, the others followed her quickly.

Their eyes became fixated on a strange and unfamiliar item. Unable to discern what it was, Ray soon became uninterested and began investigating the yellowed papers on the table. After examining them, he announced, "Seems like this is a description of the invention – his lifelong project, left unfinished."

"Maybe we could finish it?" Anya said, her voice laced with uncertainty.

"We can try, but I doubt we'll succeed. We're just a bunch of kids. Morris was an inventor, and *he* couldn't finish it." Ray scoffed and shook his head.

Charlie exhaled sharply, "You're such a pessimist! Look at the bright side for once! I'm sure we can do it. Still, we should figure out what it's for."

"I already have," Ray uttered, "According to these, he planned to make a communicator that could send messages to any point in time. In all honesty, it just doesn't seem realistic to me."

Anya lightheartedly nudged him with her elbow, "Who knows?! Maybe *we* will succeed!"

"Alright, get to work!" Charlie smiled and gently shoved Anya towards the stack of papers. Ray came to inspect the communicator while the two girls started reading through the notes. "Morris planned on using steam power. That's not a great energy source," Charlie said, deep in thought.

Anya turned to Ray "Check if it's powered by steam!"

Ray responded with a miserable sigh "Okay, okay! No need to yell at me…" Ray continued his inspection and realized, "It isn't using steam, but some very primitive batteries! They must be too weak, … it just needs better batteries!"

"So, you mean that the invention works, and this is the only problem?!" Charlie eyed Ray, waiting for confirmation. The black-haired boy tilted his head and grinned.

Anya jumped up and yelled, "I have money! I'm going for supplies!" and with that, she was gone.

"…I really hope she gets the right things," Charlie commented with a nervous grin.

Anya soon arrived with the supplies, and they began working quietly, too focused to talk. The room was silent except for a faint whisper which was heard now and then. They worked tirelessly until they were finally finished and ready to start operating the communicator with the help of directions scribbled on the papers.

"Okay, here goes nothing…" Charlie said, her voice shaky and cautious; she pressed the black button, "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Everyone held their breath. An unexpected response came through –a muffled cheer and the sound of hurried footsteps. A warm, but oddly familiar voice rang through the room. "Victor, it worked! I can't believe it!" the voice exclaimed in pure glee. Then, more directly "Hello? Who's on the other side?"

Charlie and Anya breamed with joy, in contrast to Ray, whose eyes widened and mouth fell agape.

"There's no way...," said the horrified boy.

"Is this William Morris?" Charlie asked boldly.

A warm chuckle echoed from the device and the inventor replied, "Why, yes! Who might this be?"

Charlie was eager to respond, her initial confidence faltering slightly. "My name is Charlie, it's the year 2025. My friends Ray, Anya, and I explored the house in which you… well, probably resided in. We found your invention and thought we should fix it."

The voice grew solemn, yet intrigued, "You fixed it? After all this time? Truly remarkable…but I don't understand why."

Charlie looked nervously at her friends and then continued, "We found your work and saw how much effort you put into it. We couldn't let it fade away."

The trio patiently awaited an answer. There was a sigh, "You really are exceptional. I'm astonished, but you don't understand the gravity of the situation. I'm afraid," William took a short pause as he tried to think about how he should put this," This is far too dangerous. Used recklessly, it could disrupt the very fabric of time!"

Ray moved forward, alarmed "Wait, what? Disrupt time?"

As the batteries drained, William's voice became fainter, "There's no time to explain. You must decide wisely; either destroy it…or master it. Ensure it's used for good. I fear this is goodbye, at least for now. Good luck." His voice faded into a familiar whisper and was gone.

They sat in silence, trying to recover from the weight of the inventor's words. Charlie stood up and finally broke the ominous silence "We can't destroy it… This is history, his legacy…!"

"But what if we're not ready for this?" exclaimed Ray.

Anya smiled, "We'll figure it out together. We always do."

The room fell silent again. They realized that this wasn't the end of their adventure, but only the beginning.

šifra: Cozy Macaron
mentor: Davorka Nekić
institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko
autor:Dora Štefančić

FOOTSTEPS THROUGH THE UNKNOWN

When I was little, I loved the mountains, and my dream was to travel the world on foot. Yes, on foot. Sounds crazy, right? But that seemed perfect for me. I thought that through adventures and challenges, I would meet other passengers. However, I met just one—a peculiar one, to say the least. He seemed almost out of place like a character plucked from another story.

Yet, that's how my adventure truly began.

Anna: *Alright, let's do this! Today marks the start of my journey—just me, my backpack, and the open road. Don't worry; I've got this. I might not be the most resourceful person in my circle, but determination is my middle name. If nothing else, this adventure is my chance to prove that to myself—and maybe to inspire someone else along the way.*

Now, where's my shirt? The new one. Oh, not in my wardrobe? Of course! Why would it be in an obvious place? Oh, look, my toy collection! Why are you still there? Focus, Anna! Essentials only. Food, check. Clothes, check. A few treasures to remind me of home? Check. And snacks, too. Who embarks on a journey without chocolate or lollipops? Ice cream doesn't travel well, but I'll manage. I'll toss in some greens to feel responsible, and the nutritionists can thank me later.

Standing at the doorstep, backpack packed and heart pounding, the girl took one last look back.

Anna: *Home, sweet home! You have been good to me, but it's time for me to spread my wings and fly. So many places to see! But wherever I go, I'll carry a little piece of you. Now, I am going to new horizons, exciting new places, and discovering more about myself.*

Being bold as ever, she set off on her adventure, determined to discover the unknown. Years passed as she wandered the world, soaking in the crunch of leaves under her boots and the hum of the unmapped territories. One evening, as she strolled through the woods, she heard a low, melodic humming, almost like a lullaby but slightly off.

Intrigued, she followed the sound, only to trip over a root. When she glanced up, her breath caught.

What is - ?, she whispered. In front of her was something completely unexplainable. Was it an alien? A new species? Whatever it was, it didn't look like anything she had seen before. She grabbed her camera and snapped the shot, but there was nothing when she checked the screen.

OK, that's weird!, she muttered. *It was right here, but it isn't visible in the photo. Great! A ghost alien, maybe?*

That night, she set up camp, keeping a very responsible 65-foot distance from the creature. Close enough to observe it but far enough to make a run for it, just in case. In her head, that distance felt much closer.

When she woke up after noon, her jaw dropped. The strange creature had moved closer to her tent. More precisely, it was sprawled out right on top of her tent.

Come on!, she groaned.

Walking on her tiptoes, she gave it a gentle nudge.

The creature grumbled: *Stop it! Can't you see I'm sleeping, you silly girl?* She froze.

Anna: *Excuse me. Did you just talk?*

The creature opened one glowing eye and said: *Excuse you? Who's the one ruining my nap here?*

Anna: *Well, grumpy, you are lying on my tent! I can't pack it up with you there, so move!*

The creature replied lazily: *I don't feel like it!*

Anna: *What am I supposed to do – cut it out from under you?*

The creature: *Sounds like a plan.*

Frustrated, **Anna** muttered: *Oh, this is gonna be a long journey…*

The next morning, when she woke up, the creature was gone.

Anna muttered to herself: *Seriously? Where did that little nuisance vanish this time?*

She was a bit anxious but quickly shook it off. She took her backpack which was slightly heavier than she remembered but she thought she had simply overpacked.

Anna set off down the path surrounded by the forest which seemed alive with the sound of rustling leaves and the occasional chirp of a hidden bird. Hours passed and

she hadn't seen a soul. She enjoyed the solitude. There was something peaceful about the sound of her boots against the ground and the whisper of the wind in the trees.

Suddenly, a tiny cottage appeared out of nowhere, nestled between the trees...as if it had been waiting for her. It was charming but a bit eerie, too. Curiosity got the better of her, so she approached cautiously and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

Anna: *Hello? Anyone there?*

Still, nothing. She hesitated a bit, but then she opened the door and entered. Inside, the place was straight out of a fairytale. It was cozy and magical, with warm light coming from the fireplace and the shelves full of dusty books and strange objects. She couldn't resist touching everything and wondering about the person…or a creature who lived there.

She was very tired and the sofa beside the fireplace was so inviting. She sank into it, and before she knew it, she fell asleep. The moment her eyes closed, the backpack started to rustle. The creature came out, blinking in the light of the fireplace.

Where the heck am I? the creature grumbled. A bit disoriented, it looked around and then saw the girl, snoring softly on the sofa.

Oh, absolutely perfect! the creature murmured. *This is all your fault! Dragging me away from my home! Typical human!*

Of course, the creature conveniently forgot that he climbed into the girl's backpack.

As much as it wanted to stay mad at the girl, the cottage wasn't half bad. There was food (its nose had already sniffed a loaf of bread and sausages on the kitchen counter), it was warm, and best of all, there was a place near the fire perfect for a nap.

The only downside? Well…the girl. The creature thought the girl was loud, messy, and too human for his taste. But she was OK while sleeping, so the creature decided to enjoy the peace while it lasted.

The next morning, the events from the previous night were a blur for the creature. Feeling restless, it wandered outside, where it spotted a shimmering lake just beyond the trees. The water looked inviting, and the creature dove in. The water felt refreshing against his skin, but the blazing sun became unbearable.

The creature muttered: *Too much sun for my taste!* and headed back to the cottage.

As soon as the creature entered the cottage, the girl's cheerful voice rang out: *Good morning!*

The creature froze. Anna's voice scared him so much that he stumbled over his own feet, curled up into his protective armor, and landed on the carpet.

Anna: *Hm…are you okay?*

Hearing her voice again, the creature curled tighter like a hedgehog.

Anna realized she had scared him, so she decided to wait patiently.

With a softened tone, **Anna** said: *Hey! I'm really sorry about that. I didn't mean to scare you. How do you even do that? Curl up like that so quickly? Is it an instinct?*

The creature's muffled voice came from within the armor: *Yes…and I don't call attention to it – it's embarrassing.*

Anna: *Embarrassing? Are you kidding? That's like…super cool. You're like a tiny armored tank.*

After a moment, the creature cautiously uncurled itself and said: *Tiny?*

Anna quickly responded: *Hm, I meant…compact.*

The creature muttered something, but it didn't seem too offended.

Anna gestured around the cottage.

Anna: *Anyway, this cottage seems abandoned. It definitely looks like it's been empty for a while.*

The creature: *Really?*

Anna: *Yep! I'm planning to stay here for a while. What about you? There's plenty of food, it's warm, and there's a cozy spot to sleep. Plus, it's free.*

She smiled at the creature: *What do you say, Curly?*

The creature smirked: *Well, little human nuisance, it does check all the boxes: food, warmth, and naps. Great minds think alike, after all. I say…bring it on.*

The girl laughed: *This could be the start of something interesting.*

The creature: *As long as you don't interfere with my nap schedule, I'm in. But remember – if you snore too loudly, I'm out.*

Anna rolled her eyes: *Deal. But if you eat all the food, you're on dish duty.*

The creature: *Dish duty? Let's not get carried away, human.*

The two shared a smile, the first sign of an unlikely friendship forming between them.

Outside, the wind whispered through the trees, hinting that their adventure had only just begun.

šifra: pikiizvrk
mentor: Vlatka Pacelt
institution: OŠ Gornje Vrapče
autor:Iva Gorup

A CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

An old black cat was sitting near the window, watching the snow melt as it revealed the busy streets of Norway. He glanced at the scar on his paw, remembering what caused it.

* * *

″I am not going anywhere! ″ angrily yelled Oliver. Suddenly, the entire hall was filled with silence. Each pair of eyes in the hall looked straight at Oliver's large, green eyes. Oliver knew that in the end, they would convince him, but since he was a stubborn cat and didn't want to be told what to do, he continued fighting for himself. Unfortunately, 134 of 212 cats from the Cat Council picked you, so you have no choice but to do what you are asked to. ″ said the major cat while smirking.

The Cat Council meeting was held every two weeks, and all the cats from the town had the obligation to attend it. The meeting took place in an abandoned school, and it was held at night, while people were asleep. The school didn't lose its elegance and luxury despite being closed. Oliver felt nostalgic while walking the school hallways. He imagined all the events that happened on the same ground he was standing on, but he couldn't say the same about other cats. They didn't care at all – everyone came for the meeting and left right after it ended. Many stray cats considered the major cats useless since the only thing they would have done was talk behind everyone's back, but since the stray cats had no choice other than to attend the meeting, they would just sit quietly and listen. Oliver was one of the most known cats from the Cat Council, but not for a good reason. The cats knew him well because of his wacky personality, which often caused him trouble. The Cat Council meeting was very secretive, and there was a list of rules that cats had to follow. All the rules were invented by the major cats, and one of the most important ones was to agree with everything they said or suggested. Since no one was brave enough to stand up against the major cats, everyone just agreed to follow the rules. So, when the major cats suggested that

Oliver had to go to Oslo for a week, Oliver's future was determined. While he was walking along the streets of Bergen this morning, as he usually did, he noticed the streets were oddly empty. The problem was not the lack of people but instead the one of cats, which could mean only one thing. He realized there was a meeting taking place and was running late.

When Oliver stepped on the cold tiles of the abandoned school, he rushed to the door where meetings were held. His dirty black paw slowly opened the door, and he was ready to receive a bunch of mocking looks. He wasn't wrong at all – the cats turned to the door as soon as they heard him. Oliver was sure that he had interrupted something important because the major cat looked as if he was cut off in the middle of a sentence. Oliver could read on his face that he was unhappy about his entrance.

* * *

Oliver felt like lightning struck his mind. He felt shivers coming down his spine as he was walking to his shelter. Do they hate him so much as to send him on a trip that could cost him his life? Only six days were left until his adventure in Oslo, but he was still not ready to fully sacrifice his life for the nation. As the days passed, Oliver started feeling like he was turning into a shadow. No one would notice him, and he was as light as a feather, but on the inside, he felt like a giant, heavy rock was put on his heart, and there was no way to push it off.

As the day finally came, Oliver was struggling to get out of his poor carton bed, and when he managed to get up, a tiny little snowflake fell on his nose. ″There are some things that you just have to do. ″ Oliver said quietly. He packed his stuff and slowly left while looking at the nearby cats who joyfully played in the snow. As he was stomping through the snow, he took a last glance at the Norwegian streets and then hurried so he could catch a train.

* * *

Oslo was a giant city full of different cats and people, but Oliver would snatch every time he got near them. In Oslo you were even more unnoticeable, and that bothered Oliver. You could rob a bank, and the people wouldn't even notice – that is how busy they were. One day when Oliver was casually lying near a toy shop, a white cat whose fur was as smooth as silk passed by. She had beautiful, large blue eyes that looked right into your soul, and Oliver couldn't help but look. Their eyes met, and

they kept looking at each other, feeling confused but excited at the same time. They were like Yin and Yang, exact opposites but complementary. She introduced herself as Holly and said that she came from Trondheim to Oslo for a business trip. As days passed, Oliver and Holly kept talking and seeing each other more often. During his time in Oslo, Oliver met many other friends, but Holly was different. He has never seen anyone more beautiful or intelligent in his life. It was more than just a friendship; it was love.

One sunny afternoon Oliver remembered that he had to complete the task he was given by the Cat Council. Since it would be a lot more difficult if he were to do it alone, he asked Holly if she could help him. She looked a bit confused when she heard his words of request, but after some thinking, she agreed to help him. Oliver and Holly planned on how to smoothly complete the task, and everything was set. The chosen night had come, and while Oliver had a tough time waking up, Holly was already awake and was patiently waiting for Oliver near the toy shop. They exchanged looks full of love, and Oliver whispered to Holly: ″Ready? ″. ″I was born ready! ″ Holly said. Oliver could sense both fear and excitement in her voice. They both knew it was time, so they began walking down the half-empty streets of Oslo. While climbing down the chimney of one of the first houses they visited, Holly accidentally scratched Oliver while struggling to find a support she could place her paw on. The scar was not too deep, but it began to bleed, so Holly licked his paw to disinfect it. Since Oliver's paw did not hurt at all, they continued breaking into the houses using different methods. They had no trouble climbing to the roof, but going down the chimney was a different story. After collecting all the gifts from the houses, they went back to the main square and acted like nothing happened. They hid the presents somewhere only they knew and quickly whispered words of goodbye to each other and went to sleep. Oliver could not sleep the whole night, and he was still awake when the sun rose. He felt like he did something unforgivable, but it was so thrilling at the same time. Sometimes you need to risk it all for a community, and that was exactly what he did. But why couldn't he sleep then? Oliver was bothered by something mysterious and questionable. He noticed something when he and Holly were separating at the end of their experience. Holly's eyes were filled with light, but the light was so troublesome that Oliver could not read the emotion she was feeling at that moment, and that gave him chills.

* * *

The clouds covered the sun above Oslo, and only some of the beams broke through the clouds. Oliver was sitting in his usual place, near the toy shop, when he heard unusually loud steps. Oslo was always filled with strange noises, but he could sense that trouble was getting closer with every step and that it was coming right towards him. Two muscular cats with unique uniforms were striding right to the place Oliver was lying at. When Oliver saw their badges attached to the uniforms, he needed only a second to realize that they were there to arrest him. But how did they find out? The streets were empty, and he and Holly double-checked every hidden part of the streets, just to find out it was some rats smelling the trash. A bit of white fur was peeking behind the police officers, and Oliver didn't even have to guess who it was. He could recognize that fur from miles apart. Holly. His Holly. What was she doing with the police officers? Could it be a misunderstanding? Oliver brainstormed all the reasons she may have been there, but when she stepped out, he observed her eyes and knew immediately. Her large blue eyes were now looking at him mockingly like they were making fun of him. Was it really Holly or just her lookalike? ″It was him who did it! ″ Holly said while pointing at the black cat curled up by the toy shop. ″Holly? ″ Oliver said quietly, but all his hope was lost, and all he could do was wait and accept his fate.

Oliver came back to Bergen empty-handed. The cats did not arrest him, but they prohibited him from coming anywhere near Oslo. He failed everything there was to fail. When cats from the Cat Council saw Oliver walking up to them with a sad face, they kicked him out without a second thought. He was back at being on old, rusty streets, having to make an adorable face so the people passing by would give him food. Days passed, but cats were just turning away from Oliver like he smelled bad, which was not a lie. He sacrificed himself for everyone, but no one thanked him. Instead, they left him out on the streets like some garbage. They didn't care about all the painful things he had to go through. Years later Oliver was still on the streets, and despite all the looks he would get, he enjoyed city life. You can do whatever you like, whenever you want, and nobody sets up stupid rules that make no sense. As years passed, Oliver grew, and everyone eventually forgot about him. But little did they know that the black cat was carefully absorbing all the information and that this Christmas he was going to try something new. But this time he will make sure not to fail, just so that everyone gets a taste of his tea, which was surely bitter rather than sweet.

šifra:MS12345_17
mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split
autor:Maria Šego

A DREAM THAT CAME TRUE

Suzie was an ordinary girl. She had luminous blond hair and blue eyes deep like an ocean filled with shades that shifted with the light. She always dreamt about horses. Her love towards those noble powerful animals began when she saw a movie about a girl riding her beautiful black horse. From that moment, everything in her life changed. Everything was dedicated to horses from books, drawings, even toys. Every moment she had, she would spend learning about them. When she turned 13 years old, her parents enrolled her in riding lessons. It was the best moment of her life. In those lessons, Suzie learned how to behave with horses, what and how to feed them, brush them and of course how to ride them. Even though she enjoyed every moment, she had an icky feeling that something in her life was missing…Like a puzzle that could make her feel complete…

Unfortunately, she didn't have her own horse, her best friend with whom she could share the most beautiful moments. Every night, before falling asleep, Suzie would think about having her own horse. It would be a big, powerful horse with a silky black coat with deep eyes full of wisdom and strength. She would call him Noir. That name would perfectly fit her imagined beloved pet…One night, after she fell asleep, she dreamt of being in a meadow surrounded by a deep dense forest. The sun was setting while the golden rays enriched the grass below her feet. In front of her stood Noir. He was just like she imagined. Tall, dark and confident. Everything felt dreamlike, she couldn't believe her eyes. She was both scared and excited. While she approached him cautiously fearing that he would disappear, Noir tilted his head carefully touching her with his warm nose. You are my Noir, Suzie said softly while the horse looked like he perfectly understood her. In that dream, Suzie was riding Noir through the forest, across the field and by the rivers and lakes. His gallop was as light as a breeze, and she felt unbelievable freedom and happiness. It was a beautiful breath-taking experience. They overcame every fear together. She didn't have a worry about anything. It was everything she ever wanted. Unlike every day, that dream approached it's end. The warm morning sunlight brushed her face as she slowly

opens her eyes. Her heart unbelievably racing just as it was while riding, she could still feel Noir's dreamy, silky fur. After a glimpse of consciousness, she could feel the quietness of her room. No birds singing, no flowers blooming, and unfortunately no Noir. Her heartrate settling while fading to reality, she reached under her pillow where she keeps her diary. She wrote about the breath-taking experience with her dream horse. She felt a rush of mixed emotions, mostly happiness. She laid still on her bed surrounded with horse plushes settling with reality with a warm smile across her lips. Maybe someday, she said softly to her plushie. She knew that dreams are a guide to reality. A couple of days go by and Suzie was sitting on the porch daydreaming about riding her beautiful horse. She heard her father's footsteps. He came to her with a gentle smile while saying:"Hey Suzie, I've got a surprise for you. "Her heart rushed as her voice was trembling while asking what kind of surprise. He said: "You will see! "She followed her father to the car not even thinking what kind of surprise her father would give her. They were driving for a while and she couldn't wait anymore. When they arrived, they were in a huge meadow. On that big meadow there were a lot of horses who were gazing the grass, but only one in particular caught her eye. He was in an enclosed place. That horse was tall, powerful with a black dream-like silky coat exactly like Noir from her dream. Suzie couldn't believe her eyes. She asked her father if that is really her horse. He nodded his head signifying that it is her horse and that she can call him whatever she wants. She ran towards her horse while tears dripping down her face. "I am going to call him Noir!", she said while gently touching his warm nose. Noir gently tilted his head, just like in her dream. Suzie felt that reality is more beautiful than dreams. Now she has her true friend right by her side with whom she can share beautiful memories and adventures together. For the next few weeks, they spent every moment she could spare together. They bonded very quickly just as she thought, sharing moments of quiet understanding of each other. Noir seemed to understand anything she said to him and communicate to her in ways only she could understand. Their beautiful memories together began on their first ride together with her family. The wind went through her beautiful blond hair, sunlight brushed her face with warmth and care, a beautiful experience that was very similar to the one in her dream. As Noir galloped through the woods, Suzie felt nothing but freedom, just like it was only them two. Every adventure was breath-taking and wonderful, until the challenging ones arose. There were times where the horse was scared to face challenging obstacles, and there were times when Suzie was scared, but with patience and work they overcame them together with no fear. As the days passed Suzie grew more comfortable with Noir. She could feel his intelligence

and care with every step. She knew that with him she could make any dream come true. One morning on a cloudy day, Suzie decided to take Noir out for a ride. A couple hours pass by, Noir and Suzie are resting. Suzie felt something odd, the feeling was undeniable, and she couldn't confirm the sense that they were alone even though she couldn't see anyone. Noir suddenly raised his head as if he had sensed something…something that had made them uncomfortable…They quickly rode back home but Suzie couldn't have ever thought that their lives were about to change from that moment. That night, after the sun has set, Suzie took care of Noir's coat. While brushing it, she found herself concerned about the weird but powerful feeling… Over the next few days she felt concern, as she couldn't shake off the weird feeling of her chest. They both decided to go back to the forest. Noir and Suzie decided to be calm because they always have each other. She felt a stable hum in the air as if the forest was inviting them. As they were walking, they heard a voice that said:" Suzie and Noir, don't be alarmed this is just a message", a mysterious voice spoke from the depths of the forest. Suzie nervously said: "Who are you?" the voice replied: "I'm the master of this forest, I've been watching you bond with your horse and I wanted to say never give up on your dreams! You and you horse can do anything you desire but remember to never give up! Good luck on your upcoming adventures! " Suzie's heart stopped racing and she felt calmness go through her body as she uncovered that that feeling wasn't there to harm them, it was there to make them more confident in their bond. A couple of years passed by, the master of the forest communicated with them about how the forest needs them to save it from the cruel human hand. Whenever they came in the forest, birds would start singing and the flowers dancing. They became best friends to the forest animals and plants. Suzie and Noir would visit the forest every day making their bond stronger and happier. There was no end to their adventures. One evening, a big fire occurred in the forest. The whole world was shocked and concerned, especially those innocent forest animals and trees. When Suzie and Noir came closer to the forest, all they could see was sadness and the forest calling them to step in and help them. That's when Noir had a strange feeling that felt like magic, he felt like he needs to step in. Suzie knew that something was happening and that Noir is going to do something that is going to save the whole forest. With his special power, Noir made the sad and exhausted trees cry. Tears coming out of the trees, you could only hear sobs of sadness. The crying made the forest fire turn off. This wouldn't have happened if there wasn't for Noir and Suzie. The next day, the whole forest was renewed. Laughter and happiness resounded through the whole forest. They couldn't be more grateful for them, but this wasn't the end for the forest

troubles. After a few days, a bundle of hunters appeared searching for does and other animals they could use to make themselves satisfied. Instead of birds singing in the forest, you couldn't hear anything. The whole population was scared and tried to hide from the cruel people. The hunters targeted those little roe deer. Sadness reigned from the forest once again. Only sobs and cries could be heard. It looked like nobody would come and help them. The forest mothers were sobbing and crying as they thought that they were never going to see their children again. But again, like always there were Noir and Suzie, the unbreakable bond. They came to a conclusion to never let any trouble disturb the population of their beloved forest. Noir and Suzie rushed to help little roe deer. They were trapped in a cage. The hunters planned to use their bodies for a lot of stuff. Suzie sat on Noir and flew to the shelter where the little heartbroken does stood. Noir destroyed the cage where the little dears were being trapped in and helped them return to their forest. Together with magic, they flew back to their unhappy and disappointed forest. When they returned back, the forest could finally breathe. Everyone felt relieved, that those little does came back to their mothers happily running. Again, this wasn't going to be possible if it weren't for the guardian angels of the forest, Noir and Suzie. Noir came to a new conclusion. He decided to breathe his magic into the forest so that from that moment, the whole forest could be protected. Nothing bad can happen. It will be protected from everything, and especially from cruel people.

From now on, only good people will be invited, who will share love and happiness with the whole forest team. Now from that moment, the forest will live life of no worry something bad is going to happen and celebrate with the good people. It would be great if we have one Noir and one Suzie in our life because then we would be complete.

šifra: 202507
mentor: Tamara Pleše
institution: Osnovna škola Ivanke Trohar, Fužine
autor:Dora Štimac

A FRIENDSHIP THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Long ago, I was at a sleepover in Delnice during the summer break. On my last day there my friend and I decided to go hang out with a friend of hers. Her name was Paulina, and we instantly clicked. All three of us spent time together and I added Paulina on Snapchat, to be in touch. School started and so did my training. Just for context I am training finsswimming since I was little. As in every training session, I exercised before the start and then Paulina entered the pool. I was in disbelief. Normally, we screamed and hugged because we did not believe it was us. At the same training, at same sport. And that is where our friendship started. Basically, it wasn't that long ago seeing that was only in 2021. Since we know each other, I do not know what did not happen to us. The trainings with her are not boring, how they are when you are alone. We gossip about literally everything and everyone. She knows all the gossip from my school, and I know all the gossip from hers. A friend who introduced us to each other hates us now, due to how good duo we are. She actually gossiped about me in their school, so I would think that Paulina did that. Of course, Paulina told me that, so we do not like her that much right now. The gossip we share with us is so juicy and mentally ill that if we share it with someone, we will probably end up in mental hospital. Competitions with Paulina and my friends from training are even better. Especially if we need two to three days, so we need to sleep in. My dearest ones were in Kecskemét in Hungary, Zagreb and Pula. The funniest part is always in the rooms before we go to sleep. Pula was really hard for me because I was sick, but that was an important competition. I shared a room with Paulina, two more girls and two boys. Since I was sick, I went to bed early and all of them were still out with all of the kids and grown-ups. I was already half asleep when they came into the room and then the foolishness began. They jumped and screamed around the room like there is no competition tomorrow. Worst of all they sprayed mosquito spray like we were in a gas chamber. We all almost suffocated. We eventually fell asleep probably around midnight. But the next day due to all that, the night before I won a third-

place medal. While speaking of competitions, our club organizes a camp at our local lake Lepenice where we are doing underwater orientation. We are there for about a week and have "training", lunch, free time... That is swimming but also searching for "columns" using the compass. It is confusing at first, but when you get it, it's fun. This year Paulina finally came to this camp. She slept in my tent along with my cousin Toni. The trainings weren't that hard, and Paulina got it immediately. During the rest of the day, the majority of the time we were at the other "beach" where was the mol we jumped off into the water. That was entertaining, even some of my classmates came, swam and jumped with us. The nights in the tent were amusing. All three of us would first argue about who would sleep where, then we would party in that tent, afterwards Toni and me would annoy Paulina. After we annoyed her, she would fall asleep while Toni and I would be playing games on our phones. Sometimes it was Paulina, sometimes Toni and me of course. And at the end of the camp there was a competition. Surprisingly, I won a third-place medal, Paulina was incredibly good for the first time. So, Paulina and I always have an enjoyable time at the competitions. We had quite a few sleepovers together. One time she slept over at my house and the very next day I slept over at her house. That was incredibly fun. Considering that at my house we annoyed my little brother, and at her house her little sister. At her place we literally stayed out until night fell. This summer she slept over at my house since we were learning to become divers. That night was hilarious thanks to the bunk bed in my room. I usually sleep on the lower bunk bed, so Paulina needed to sleep on the higher bunk bed where my brother sleeps. My brother adores Super Mario, and he has a big poster of him right by his bed. Seeing that poster at night, to put it midly, she went crazy. She was crying all night saying that he looks like he is going to kill her. My mom was furious at us since I was crying of laughter and Paulina was just complaining. In the end we passed for the diver. It is very fun diving; you can see the fish and shells. Paulina and I made a whole collection of shells while learning to dive. When we are not together, because Paulina lives in Delnice, we are always talking and chatting. If we are not chatting through Snapchat, we are definitely sending each other fun videos on TikTok. We send them on a daily basis, and I laugh a lot. She really knows when I am feeling a little bit down and certainly knows how to cheer me up. She is a better friend than some friends I have known for longer. Even if we argue, we made it up in 5 minutes maximum. She is a person I need when I am sad, happy or angry. I am always trying to make her smile when she is not. She cares about me, and I really appreciate it. She will always be the one I will tell my secrets and problems. Here we are now, four years later and still best friends. Paulina is the person I needed the most. I truly love her and thankful that she is in my life.

Mouse123
Dubravka Zebec
Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovački
autor:Lea Drga

A MAGICAL FAIRY TALE

Once upon a time in a small town, there lived joyful and wonderful creatures, but not just any creatures—they were half-human, half-animal. It might sound a little strange, but they lived like all of us humans, if not even happier and better. Like people, they were all the same, but not everyone had the same animal form. There were sloths, bunnies, roe deer, monkeys, turtles, cats, dogs, and more.

They all changed over time. For example, very young children in that small magical town would be small rabbits or small roe deer because they jumped everywhere and were playful. Teenagers, however, would turn into lazy sloths because some teenagers are lazy. Those who were hardworking and smart became monkeys. When they grew up and became parents, mothers turned into cats and fathers into dogs. Grandmothers became snails, and grandfathers became turtles because they were very slow at old age.

All these transformations happened while they were sleeping. You might be wondering what these magical and wonderful creatures were like when they were first born. At birth, they emerged as eggs, and overnight, when the egg hatched, they became half-baby, half-animal.

These magical creatures believed that all animals in the world were the same as them: happy, able to talk, and playful every day without any fear of being attacked or eaten. In fact, they didn't even know that they could be eaten by others. They thought all animals ate magical fruit that they found on the ground or on magical trees. But little did they know…

The world beyond their own was much more terrible and dangerous. One day, like every other happy day, all the animals were playing and jumping around when suddenly there was a loud, strong bang. The animals didn't know what it could be. They all turned toward the dark forest on the other side of their town. Staring at it while hiding behind the magical trees, one of the monkeys, whose name was Mimi, came closer to the dark forest and peered into it. Suddenly, two strange creatures she had never seen before grabbed her and put her in a bag.

The two creatures were actually people who ran away with her in the bag. The other animals were stunned and couldn't believe what was happening. Several hours passed, and Mimi suddenly heard voices. She thought it was her family talking, but when the people pulled her out of the bag, all her happiness disappeared. She didn't know where she was or what was happening.

She found herself in the middle of a circus, surrounded by humans who had come to watch the show. Mimi was devastated. All the happiness she had known was replaced with fear and discomfort. She couldn't feel her legs as she stood frozen, staring at the crowd. The circus manager touched her with a stick and ordered her to climb a tightrope above her.

She thought it was all a bad dream. The circus manager spoke like the animals she knew, but he looked very different. He wasn't an animal. Suddenly, he started yelling at her and hitting her with the stick. Scared, Mimi ran to an isolated room in the corner of the circus. There, she saw a strange, beautiful creature that looked unreal.

When Mimi approached her, she asked, "What kind of animal are you?"

The creature replied, "I am a magical fairy. My name is Archa."

Mimi asked for help. While they were talking, the fairy teleported Mimi into the woods. Mimi's heart was racing, and she was angry with herself for getting too close to the dark forest where she was kidnapped. She turned to thank the fairy, but Archa had disappeared.

Mimi started walking and was happy to see a roe deer. Thinking it was her friend, she ran toward it. She tried to talk, but the roe deer looked confused. Something in Mimi's head told her to back away. As soon as she stepped back, a lion pounced on the roe deer.

Terrified, Mimi ran as fast as she could. After a while, she stopped to rest by a tree. Hungry and tired, she searched for magical fruit but only found mud and branches. Just then, the fairy appeared beside her.

"What's happening?" Mimi asked.

The fairy explained, "This is the real world, not the magical one animals imagine. Normal animals must fight for food and survival every day."

Mimi found this terrifying and worried about her magical friends and family. Were they safe, or had the same people come for them too? She had to return home.

Suddenly, a hand pulled Mimi into the bushes. She turned to see an old turtle muttering words.

"I know who you are and where you came from," the turtle said.

"You can talk to me?" Mimi asked.

"Yes. I was once like you, but I had the same terrible experience," the turtle replied.

"How can I return home?" Mimi asked.

"There is only one way," the turtle said. "You must find a magic book hidden in this forest. Here's a map. Good luck, and stay safe!"

Mimi thanked the turtle and followed the map. When she reached the spot marked with an X, she dug into the ground with her bare hands. She finally found the book, but the first page said, "To return home, find the missing page in the dark cave behind you."

She entered the cave, where the book lit up like a torch. After walking for what felt like hours, she found the missing page. Placing it back into the book, the book began spinning and flying around.

Suddenly, Mimi woke up back in her magical town, surrounded by her family and friends. They were overjoyed to see her and asked her what had happened. Mimi explained everything and used the magic book to protect the town from humans forever.

From that day on, the animals lived in peace, their joy unbroken, and their trust in the magic that bound them together stronger than ever. They all lived happily ever after.

šifra: Artist8
Student: Rijana Štrumfin
Mentor: Maja Čajko
Osnovna škola Sveti Križ Začretje

A MESSAGE TO GOD

On an early Christmas morning a little girl named Victima was writing a letter on a bloody piece of paper she found on the ground while the "thing" was chasing her. She hid under her bed and held her breath so that the "thing" couldn't hear her. She found a pen and started writing a letter. It was her only option, there was nothing else she could do.

You see.... it all started on a Christmas evening at 6:13 PM. Before that it was all normal, she was sitting on the couch with her parents enjoying a Christmas movie and then..... it all started. As soon as the clock hit 6:13 PM the TV stopped working, the room became dark and cold in a second and there was this sound..... the sound that somehow didn't sound like anything at all but it was so loud. They were too confused and scared to do or say anything. They were just sitting there, shivering in fear, they knew that they were being watched by..... something..... and they had a feeling that it was dangerous. They sat there for a minute and then something broke into the house. It was loud, it sounded like screams of a creature dying, and it looked terrifying..... it was so frightening to look at it and it looked like it was covered in blood. It looked like it had wings... but... those also could've been limbs or who knows what! The creature seemed to have a human-like head. When it moved it sounded like opening an old rusty door but its body was made out of flesh..... at least it looked like it was. It was truly a disturbing sight and to make it even worse, after the creature finally opened its 136 eyes, it fixated on Victima's dad, jumped on him and ripped him to shreds. Her mum was crying and yelling with terror. She jumped of the couch and tried to run away. She ran and the creature chased her. The creature was much faster so it quickly caught up with her and did the same as it did to Victima's dad. Victima stood there petrified as she was watching the most horrible thing she had ever seen in her life. She ran to the balcony in an attempt to escape from the creature. The creature didn't see where she went so she was safe there for the time being. But she couldn't hide there forever, she needed to do something. But what? Victima stood there in fear for a bit, but then she remembered what her

so-called "crazy grandma" told her. "If you ever get in trouble and you can't find a way out, speak to God! Send him a message! He always answers. He is the only one who can fix everything!" Those were the last words her grandma told her before she died. At the time Victima thought that her grandma was just overly religious, which she was, but now it seemed there was nothing else she could do. Her grandma was always a bit dramatic like that. She would also do some really weird things in order to "satisfy God's demands". She claimed that God was speaking to her and that was why she was doing those things. "But what are those things that she was doing?" you may ask. Well, once, Victima's mother saw her pouring a little bit of blood into red wine. Nobody knew where that blood had come from because she and her husband were vegetarians. Also, when her cat died, she cut open the cat's chest and hung it by the tail on the ceiling so that blood would drip over the toys the cat played with. And there were a lot more of those things that she had done, so the rest of Victima's family avoided visiting her and they never listened to her advice. They didn't trust her and that's why they called her "crazy grandma". But Victima didn't have any options. Grandma's advice was the only thing she had. She took a deep breath, opened the door of the balcony and ran as fast as she could towards her room but the thing that killed her parents was chasing her. She managed to escape from the thing and she picked up a piece of paper she found on the ground right next to the remains of what used to be her parents. She got to her room unharmed and locked the door. She remembered what her grandma used to do. She would take a piece of paper and start writing down all of her problems and feelings. Then she would pray to God for at least 15 minutes. After that she would light a candle and turn off the lights and after a few minutes the candle would go out by itself and the paper would just disappear. Victima took a pen from her schoolbag, hid under the bed and she started writing:

"Dear God, I need your help more than I have ever needed it before. Today was the worst day of my life... It all started last evening at 6:13 PM. A horrifying creature appeared seemingly out of nowhere and it ripped my parents to shreds right in front of me. I... I don't know what that thing was or what it wanted... I just want to live but that thing is going to kill me and I know I don't have much time left. When I look at it... I don't even know what I'm looking at. It's full of blood, it has way too many eyes and it makes such a weird sound when it moves, it sounds like... opening an old rusty metal door. I don't know why is that thing here but I know that it's not supposed to be. I was never more scared in my life.... I don't know what to do anymore, I know that it could and will find me and kill me at any moment. But I don't want to die. I have so many questions. What is that thing? What does it want? Why is it here, why

is it in my home? Is... is all of this some kind of a punishment? What did I do wrong? What did I do to deserve this? Please tell me what I did to upset you. Just tell me and I promise I'll fix it. I'll do whatever you tell me even if I end up like my grandma, hated and untrusted. I... I don't want to die. Not like this. Please, just give me a sign. Save me from this monster. I know you can..." Those were her last words. Her last attempt to save her life, but she failed. The creature figured out where she was. It broke the door and entered the room. Victima froze, she didn't even dare to breathe. The creature looked around the room and it found her. It grabbed her by the neck and pulled her from under the bed with its claws. Then it bit her head off and ripped her body to pieces.

The creature that killed all of them was an angel. It was sent to kill Victima's family. Why? That's the question that isn't going to get answered. Victima and her parents aren't in heaven or hell because hell is a place where God banishes all the angels that disobey, it is not a place for human souls. And heaven is a place where God takes the people he considers worthy of being his servants and turns them into angels. All angels are brainwashed, they aren't there to live, they are there to serve and if they refuse, they are sent to hell to suffer for eternity. Servants are sometimes sent to kill humans on Earth. They are not only killed, but every picture of them, every memory or even proof that they have existed are erased. That's what happened to Victima's family. Their remains cannot be found and their memories are erased from people's minds. It's like they have never existed in the first place. But why were they chosen? We will never know…

šifra: Swifty7
Student: Fran Đurkin
Mentor: Maja Čajko
Osnovna škola Sveti Križ Začretje

A NONSENSE CHRISTMAS

Sleep well my little angel, mum said. But it is Christmas Eve I can't sleep, I said. Then count how many stars there are in the sky and you will fall asleep, she replied. When she left, I remembered that tomorrow we were going to my grandma's house for lunch. Grandma Suzy, who is my mum's mum, comes to visit us every month because she lives close by, but grandma Anna, my dad's mum, lives far away and I don't see her very often. The last time I saw her I was very little so I was very happy that we were going to her house for lunch. Late at night I woke up because I was thirsty. I got up and went to get myself a cup of water. When I came downstairs, I saw a bear stealing our presents. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! I rubbed my eyes to see if I was dreaming and, luckily, I was! I woke up and decided to get some water. After I drank it, I went up to my room and went back to sleep. In the morning, I woke up at 6 am and ran to my parents' room to wake them up because it was Christmas morning. Then I woke up my older brother Jake, too. After we all got up, we went downstairs to open our gifts. Jake was first, he got the new PlayStation 5 and some games with it. He also got a new iPhone AND new shoes that he wanted for months. Then it was my turn! I opened my first present - it was a little play horse! I was confused because I didn't ask for that. Then I opened my second and third present. The second present was a cute handbag which I asked for and I was happy that I got it. My third present was a rotten piece of sandwich that smelled like fish. That was weird! I asked my parents why I got all those strange stuff and Jake got all the stuff he wanted, but they just laughed it off. After we ate breakfast, my mum made cinnamon rolls. They smelled delicious! I couldn't resist so I took one. After a few bites I realized it tasted differently. My mum told me that it was a prank, and she had put lard instead of frosting on the rolls. When I heard it, I screamed and ran to the toilet to vomit. When I came back from the bathroom my whole family was laughing at me. I said that it was not funny and that they should not do that ever again. When we were getting ready to go to my grandma's house, I went to find my make up and out of nowhere Jake jumped on me and sprayed pepper spray in my

eyes. My eyes were burning and I couldn't see anything. I screamed so loud that my mum came running to my room. She asked me what had happened and I said that Jake had pepper sprayed me, but she just said - Mary, don't be such a baby! That is nothing! The she told me to wash my eyes and get ready to go to grandma's house. When I was in the bathroom washing my face, I was wondering what was happening to my family - first the gifts, then the cinnamon rolls and last this stupid pepper spray that I didn't even know Jake had. We finally got ready and went to my grandma's house for lunch. It was a very long drive, but when we finally arrived, grandma was waiting outside for us. But something was strange - she was dressed in a Sponge Bob costume! When she saw me, she ran so fast that she almost fell because of that big costume, but still hugged me so tight that I tough all of my bones would break! After we hugged, I went inside the house to say hello to grandpa, but he was sleeping in his armchair. When grandma saw me trying to say hello to him, she yelled - LOUIS CHARLES GEORGE WAKE UP! YOUR CHILD AND GRANDCHILDREN ARE HERE! He woke up and jumped up from his armchair. I said hello and hugged him. Then we sat down to eat. The plates on the table had weird writing on them that said I love Sponge Bob. First, grandma brought out a pink soup that had pig legs in it, she said it was inspired by My Little Pony. When we ate the soup, she brought out twenty Krabby Patties that she had made herself because she loved Sponge Bob. After lunch she said that there was no desert and brought out a CD player. She put on Gangnam style and started dancing. She danced for fifteen minutes and when she was done we went home. On our way home, I asked my parents if they knew why grandma made such a wired lunch and at the end started dancing. I thought it was just not normal. But mum said that I was just being rude. Then I said that I thought the whole day was weird, with the way they acted in the morning – the presents, cinnamon rolls and that pepper spray. Mum told me not to talk to her like that or I would be grounded. After our little fight dad stopped at the begging of a forest and told us to go and look for some mushrooms we could eat for dinner. I didn't like his idea, but I also didn't want to start another fight. We were probably wandering through the forest for thirty minutes but couldn't find anything. Suddenly I heard heavy breathing and I thought it was Jake just trying to scare me. When I turned around I realized it wasn't Jake, it was something much bigger – a huge grizzly bear that was very hungry! I screamed and we started running very fast. I thought I would die, but then I saw our car and we all managed to get in and we drove off quickly. After we came home, I went into my room. I was exhausted so I crashed into my bed. Suddenly I heard a voice saying - My little angel, wake up, it is Christmas morning. It was my mum. I was so happy

it was all just a weird dream! I jumped out of the bed and hugged her so tightly. She asked me why I was so happy, and I said that I had a nonsense dream. She laughed, but I was really happy that everything was back to normal. I didn't even care about presents anymore.

šifra: PANDA
mentor: Ana Katruša
institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice
autor:Ema Hanižjar

A VISITOR FOR FLINK

A long time ago, on a planet named Kolormagetik there was a Kobold named Flink. Oh, everybody loved Flink. He was alone. „But why was he alone? , you may think. Well, let me tell you a story about a tragic event that happened a few decades ago, back when Flink was never alone.

It was just normal day in Kolormagetik, everybody was just hanging out with Flink at his house. At one moment, Flink thought he saw someone that he has never met before. He didn't think much of it, maybe he just didn't recognize one of his friends (oh boy, was he wrong). Just a few seconds later, something VERY unexpected happened. The lights flickered, the door slammed shut, and the group realized something otherworldly had just been unleashed. What had just been unleashed was a portal to another dimension, triggered by the mysterious stranger's presence, causing the reality around them to warp and bend. The stranger wasn't a Kobold, but a person from a parallel universe (he introduced himself as Leonard McRosswelt). He gave Flink a choice: to stay at home and wait for the ending of the world or to follow him, because he said, and I quote: „wanted to save them". Flink was very confused, and so was the whole group. He wanted to stay at home, but who knows, maybe the world will really end, and this could be the only way out. So, the only logical choice was to follow him.

Once they entered the portal, the temperature instantly dropped, the air thickened, and there were shadows forming on the wall. Flink heard someone say: "Welcome, to this new planet, which is better known as Earth". Everybody was confused, except for Flink. He had a memory from this planet, but everybody always told him that it was just a dream. But no, Flink remembered the very moment from the last time he was here… See, Flink wasn't like other Kobolds. He didn't like doing things that are natural to Kobolds. For an example, he always hated how nobody did any activities in their free time. As a child, he was hyperactive all of the time. He didn't even look like the other Kobolds. But now, all of the nice memories came back to him. Like how he learned to ride a strange thing they like to call a bike, when all of his

friends came to his place, they ate cake and Flink had the best time of his life. However, there was only one memory with his true family (the only sad one). Everybody was panicking, and in the middle of all that, Flink was left alone. His mom left him at home, because there was, and I quote: „Only room for 1 *human*!". "WHATT?!", Flink thought, "I'M NOT REALLY A KOBOLD?!". Yes, at the beginning he was very upset that he wasn't actually a Kobold. Leonard told him that this planet was collapsing when he was just a little kid, so his real family put him in an indestructible capsule to save him. But now, the whole Kolormagetik was falling apart, and they didn't even notice it. Leonard took them to Earth to save them, and to find Flink's real family, because they were the best scientists that ever existed. They found the elixir of life, philosopher's stone; they even made the indestructible capsule! This was a lot to take in for Flink. He just found out he wasn't from the planet which he was raised on, he doesn't even know his real parents AND for all these years he has been living in a lie.

So, once again, Leonard gave him a choice: to leave all of his friends on this planet, to build a new home, to start a whole new civilization and, of course, if they are lucky, make Earth their new home OR they can leave everything behind, try to find Flink's real parents who could make more progress than all of the Kobolds combined could in 3 years – the only problem was, Flink's parents could only be on Kolormagetik, if they survived. This was a hard decision to make for Flink. He took a lot of time to think, he spent days thinking how he could disappoint everyone. Some Kobolds feel like the only right choice was to come back to Kolormagetik and save everybody else on that planet. On the other hand, most of the Kobolds thought that it was only safe to stay here, because according to Leonard, the whole Kolormagetik will soon fall apart. There was not a lot of time to lose, so he needed to act very quickly. In one moment, Flink said:" I have made up my mind", he continued: "I need to save our planet".

Most of the Kobolds were very understanding, and some just had to make peace with that (even though they desperately wanted Flink to stay, because he was the only one here that was familiar with this planet). He came to Leonard and said: "I have made my decision", with an insecure voice, he continued, "I am going back to Kolormagetik, to save everybody". Leonard was very surprised, he knew that Flink usually went to the safer choice. When Flink said that he is going all the way back to the planet of Kolormagetik, Leonard knew that it was something very special. Without any hesitation, he gave Flink a portal to Kolormagetik, opened it, and told Flink: "Good luck, I really hope you will manage to succeed and save everybody". Flink was surprised, since Leonard was usually a bit more professional, and of course, appreci-

ated it. He said goodbye to every Kobold, and full of hope, entered the portal. When he arrived, he saw nothing but dust. He explored, digged, yelled, having high hopes. A week later, Flink was ready to give up and leave Kolormagetik. Until… he heard a little voice that told him someone is coming towards him. Flink didn't believe it. On the way to the portal, Flink finally saw someone! He could not believe it AND he was also a human! He got super excited, asked him some questions, and guess what! He was Flink's long lost brother! He told him where the rest of his family was, and that they were the only people left on this planet. He met his family, and he never felt happier. He took them to the portal and saved them. The rest of the Kobolds that were on Earth threw them a huge welcome party!

After a while, Flink saw that he and his friends were very different, they were more relaxed, while Flink could not stay still. Flink decided it would be better if he would be alone. A year later, he moved in a little cabin in the woods. He and his friends couldn't be happier! Everybody still likes to visit Flink. And everyone lived happily ever after.

šifra:Plot of shadows2025
šifra mentora: Eyeshadow2025
mentor: Anna Maria Popović
institution: Osnovna škola Ivana Kukuljevića Belišće
autor:Barbara Burić

A WITHERED ROSE

It was the middle of August while Mr and Ms. Hupper and their agent Mr. Greg were talking about their run-away son Sanri and where he could be. First, it was just crying and calling everyone to help them and their family to find their son. Then, it was also screaming and yelling and trying to call him to come back. They were a wealthy family who had always thought that money could buy happiness, but Mr. Hupper's son proved them wrong. With the loss of their son they started putting up posters on the local street light posts and trees offering the reward of one thousand golden tokens. At that time the golden tokens were worth a lot. Asking almost everyone in the village if they had seen him, only one person had seen him. It was a daughter from the low-paid family who was outside when she saw Mr. Hupper's son pass by. Her name was Analia Domerson, a kind and polite girl who loved nature and would always offer to help with anything and would sit high up in the trees singing and painting with anything she found. Analia saw Mr. Hupper's son Sanri running away without hesitation after a big argument with his father who as Analia said ''went east to the woods" and from there he disappeared. The Huppers sent their guards and a detective, Mr. Gruberton, to find their son, but there were no signs of their son Sanri. Mr. Greg who was Ms. Hupper's agent had a slight smile on his face while the house was full of crying and shouting. Not even their pet cat could sleep from all the loud sobbing. Since there was no way of finding their son they called Analia to show them the way to the woods. Meanwhile Sanri, was hiding in a little town nearby. Considering what he could do now since he ran away. He still missed everyone at home. He was thinking about everything he said to his father, how badly he hurt his father. Analia went to look for him because the guards told her so. She would stop by a few times admiring the beauty of nature, and even store some of the flowers in her pocket. One of them was a beautiful wild rose. They walked and looked everywhere but just could not find him. It was late at night, Ms. Hupper was sitting on the edge of the bed thinking, while holding their cat. Lost in her mind,

scared for their son's life, it was a real disaster. A few days later, while traveling by train to the little town nearby, someone passed by Analia. It was Sanri running away from the guards. Analia left the train as well and ran after them trying to catch up. They headed towards the woods. The guards didn't have luck on their side of the river since Sanri ran away disappearing. Across the river there was an abandoned house with wooden windows and plants growing out of them. Seeing the guards go on the other side to look for Sanri, Analia ran over the bridge to the side where the house was. She walked in, terrified, seeing Sanri hiding in there. As soon as he saw her he started running away knowing she would try to make him go back. He knew he would have to face his father again and discuss the argument with him. Analia ran after Sanri trying to get him to stop. Sanri got tired from running and fell over a fallen tree. Analia didn't want to rush him to get up so they can go back, and she asked him why he ran away and how did he get that idea. Sanri told her every little detail of why he ran away, starting from why he and his father got into the argument. His father didn't have the audacity to tell his wife about what they fought about. Analia found out throughout the story that not only did he get in a fight with his father but also Mr. Greg, the agent that no one had any suspicion of, told Sanri to get out of the house or else he would have to tell his father about hate Sanri has towards his father. The reason why Sanri was so furious and hated his father was because Ms. Hupper was not his real mother. His father re-married after letting his wife die in a fight with the village people. Analia started understanding the whole situation between him and his father. She just couldn't accept the fact that his father had done something so bad to his own wife, who was supposed to be the main woman of the house. The walls filled with photos of her were now full of Sanri's step-mom's photos. Sanri loved his mother just like everyone would, she meant the world to him. She took care of him while his father would often just start arguments with his mom over some not important stuff. Analia realized the story was kind of similar to her brother's. Her brother Sebastian was not her real brother, but she still loved him as if he was. Sebastian was thrown on the streets after he and his parents got into a fight. He said that his mom was never scared to talk back, and that affected his father in a really bad way. Sebastian and Sanri really had much in common when it came down to their parents. Just Sebastian was more closed than Sanri to talk openly about it. He lived through a trauma that still follows him. Analia asked Sanri if he wanted to go back to the village so that he could meet her brother. It was a hard decision for Sanri, he wasn't sure if he could believe Analia. At the end he accepted the offer and they walked back to the train station. The train station was crowded with people.

They waited for at least two hours just to get on one of the trains. They had to walk for half an hour to get back to Analia's home. When they walked in they were greeted by Analia's mother who was surprised to see Sanri. Analia told her mom everything while they were having dinner. Her brother was not home yet since he was working overtime just to get a few more golden tokens. He got home late, he earned six tokens. It was more than any family could imagine. Analia introduced her brother to Sanri. They got along very well as if they knew each other for a while now. The village was silent, everyone sleeping in their houses. Except for Analia's family. They were up till late, talking and laughing. In the morning they all went to Sanri's house together. The door was opened by two of the guards, who started questioning Sanri who didn't really answer their questions fully. After all, they let him in with Analia's family waiting outside. Sanri invited Sebastian in since he wanted to make sure with his father if he maybe had any siblings. When they walked in, Sanri's mother ran up to him, hugging him, not letting go of him. She was crying, questioning why he ran away. Sanri's father couldn't believe he came back. Sanri felt bad for blaming his father, so he just blamed Mr. Greg for threatening him. Mr. Greg had to apologise and promise not to do anything bad or else he would be kicked out of the house. At first, all the attention was on Sanri until his father realized Sebastian. He asked who he was and what was he doing there. Sanri was scared to ask him the question he wanted to ask since he had met Sebastian. He asked his dad if he had a sibling since he and Sebastian had really similar stories. But they just happened years apart. His father didn't know what to say, but realized that the boy next to Sanri was actually his son. He told them the truth but didn't want to take Sebastian away from his family now. He offered Analia's mom for them to move in with them since they had spare rooms, but Analia's mom declined the offer saying that it was better if they just stayed living that way. He didn't want to force them understanding they maybe just got used to liking the peace they had in their own house. In the end, they all got a family photo together. The picture was hanged in the big hall of Sanri's house and Analia's mom put the picture up on their kitchen wall, so they can always be together as a family even if they don't live together. And even though Sebastian is not related to them nothing would change his feelings towards his sister and his mom. On Analia's table there was a vase with her rose which has withered since she was gone for a few days.

šifra: NS12345_17
mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split
autor:Nina Slavić

ADALINE'S WORDS

Adaline was a 16-year-old girl. She lived in a small town with her mom and brother. In the middle of the city there was a big building, in which people worked a special job.

They worked in a word center. Their job was to give random number of words for people to use per day. If people didn't use all of their words till midnight they would be killed. Adaline sometimes got ten to fifteen words but sometimes it was a couple millions. Adaline's dad left her and her mom for another mistress and never came back, so Adaline had only her mother and brother. Words were able to be transferred to other people so Adaline's mom, brother and her always helped each other out. Adaline's mom soon got sick by a very cruel disease and died. Adilene and her brother Noah which was 3 years younger than her, had nowhere to go except to their dad. He already had a daughter named Akoi and she was around Noah's age. They all lived as any other normal family until one day. Sheila, Akoi's mother, started acting weird. She always showed that she loved Akoi more but all out of sudden she started showing it more and more. Adaline and Noah didn't really care at all because they didn't like her either. One day Adaline started getting bigger and bigger amounts of words. Every day it was more and more and she started having problems using them all. She talked a lot, saying short words over and over again. She usually said words like: in, I, me, he, to, so... But every day it was harder and she barely used them in time. One day she got 15 million words to use, but that wasn't all. She spoke all day but numbers were barely getting smaller. It was already 10pm and she had 9 million left. Noah and Akoi took some of words same as her dad but it was barely helping. She used last of her words at second till midnight and saved herself. It passed a whole week and numbers were still getting bigger. Adaline's dad had the same problem. It lasted for a long time until he couldn't take it, he was killed because he didn't use his last 20 words in time. Everyone was sad but Sheila was acting weird. She cried crocodile tears but she cried more her nail broke. Adaline and Shelia finally didn't have a reason to like each other so they made it very clear they didn't. Noah was very loved

by Shelia all out of sudden, she took him as her own son. Adeline started getting transferred words. Somebody gave them to her every day. One day Adeline reached 78 million and she started the day with 53 million. It was already night and she was not even close to using them all. Everybody helped but it wasn't worth it. She used little less than half but was still stuck with 35 million. Everybody knew it was the end. Noah and Akoi cried knowing they were unable to help. Shelia acted all sad but they all knew she was celebrating inside. Adaline succeeded to get all the way down to 11 million but was running out of time. Shelia wasn't talking at all. Adeline asked her multiple times how many words she had left but Shelia wasn't answering. Adeline knew something was wrong and was suspicious. It was almost midnight and Adeline was done. She ran down the stairs into the hallway to say it to everybody. Everyone celebrated but Shelia was standing opposite her with an evil smile. One minute till midnight and Adeline was transferred 12 million words. It didn't say by who but she knew bi Shelia's Evil smile. Adeline froze, one tear slipped by her cheek. She hugged Noah and Akoi and closed her eyes. She was shoot. Kids were terrified, crying and screaming. Shelia looked at the top of her head and saw new amount of word. ¨Ops! ¨ She said holding a wine glass in her hand. A man took Adeline's body away saying sorry to her family and disappeared.

It's been two years. Adeline opened her eyes. She was in a room full of light. Everything was white. She was wearing knee-high boots with high heels, tight black leggings, black long sleeve tight vest, belt and black fingerless gloves. She got up saw herself in a big mirror and saw her long black hair which was brown before. She was shook seeing her brown eyes being ocean blue. She ran away from the mirror not even recognizing herself. She was scared. Soon a woman walked in. She was wearing all black similar to her and stood opposite of her. Adeline wasn't scared she was just confused. She started yelling at the woman: ¨Who the hell are you, and where am I? ¨ Woman smiled and answered: ¨Project 01, Adeline. You are in the No word war project, NWWP. We take people who didn't succeeded in using all of their words in time, and bring you here. These words killed to many people, it's time to end this. You are the first one who survived and to help us. ¨ Adeline was happy to hear that and agreed to help them in this war. Adeline learned all about their plan and went back to her home town. She Was now a new person; they named her Faith so she didn't have connections to her past. It was impossible to transfer words to her but she could take them if she wanted to. It was almost midnight. She went to a few houses and took their word's. Next, she went to her own old house. Nobody was home except for Shelia. Shelia froze. Adeline transferred her 1 billion word's that she collected over

the day and it was ten minutes till midnight. Shelia tried her best to transferred them back but soon she accepted her faith. Shelia yelled Adeline's name but Faith wasn't responding. Ding dong, midnight rang. Shelia was terrified. Man looked at Faith and she just smiled and left. Adeline was now happy because now Shelia couldn't ruin Noah's and Akoi's life like she ruined hers. Soon she found out that Noah actually worked at the Word center and gave words to people. Akoi was also their secretary, which disappointed Faith. She needed to Fight her own siblings. She saved a lot of people and it was time to go to the Word center. She went alone for the first time. She didn't care about anything except her siblings at that time. She got to the secretary's office. Akoi saw her and panicked, she took a pair of scissors and threatened Faith. Faith smiled with both hands in the air. Akoi recognized her after a few minutes and hugged her. Akoi and Noah were both just 15 years old and Shelia gave them this job. Faith was very clear; she told them both to go as far as possible from here. They were confused but listened. They went to another town and left their jobs right away.

It's been 4 months. NWWP was irritating Word center and it really became a war. It grew into a real fight. It was very bad for people because of all of the riots and mess but they knew it was time to get till the end of the words per day. Town was a mess. The air was gray from all of the fires, houses were razed to the ground, but people were happy. Everybody knew it was almost the end. One day it started raining and it rained heavily for weeks. Fires were turned down with a lot of other mess but that didn't stop either of both sides. Faith got in many fights, got many injuries, but didn't give up. One day Fait went to Word center with five of her close friends. It was brutal. They killed, and they were killed, but couldn't stop. From five Faith got down to one friend. All they needed to do is to click a button, but it wasn't that easy. Faith clicked it and it was all done. Faith and her friend Emma celebrated shortly but then the Word company building got on fire, it was all made out from glass and very high. There was nowhere to go, the building was catching flames quickly. It got down to the fact that only one could make it out alive. Emma and Faith got in a fight, both wanted to sacrifice themselves. There was one small door, and one needed to hold the button so the other one could pass. They were running out of time. People were watching them. They were trying to turn down the fire but it was impossible. Faith held the button and pushed Emma through the door. Emma tried to stop her, but it was too late. Faith walked to the glass window. People could see only her black shadow leaning on the glass window and waiting. Everybody was confused. Emma ran out at that moment. She was crying and watched Faith with others. Faith looked down and spread her arms. Everybody was so confused. Al out of sudden they heard

a crack. The whole building collapsed. They just watched Faith fall with the building. Emma tried to run to her but was stopped. The fire was still big. People were crying and screaming. Faith somehow walked out of the fire. She was injured but few men helped her walk into a safe area. After that day words were never counted again.

After she recovered Faith went back to Noah and Akoi and they all lived a normal life.

šifra: curly hair
autor:Lucie Traore
Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić

AN ACCIDENT IN TEXAS

"Oh my God! Where is my shirt? I lost it again," shouted Thomas while running around the house trying to find it. "Katyyy!" yelled Thomas from downstairs. With no response, Katy came downstairs with the blue shirt full of white dots. "Oh, you found it. Thank you so much," Thomas reached his hand wanting to grab it. "I found it in your laundry, it's dirty, you can't pack that," Katy stopped him. Thomas just sighed and went upstairs. After a few minutes, his mom Megan called him on the phone. They were getting ready for meeting her in Texas tomorrow.

"Mom says we're going to meet at the restaurant tomorrow at 6 pm. We must hurry because we don't have much time left. It's already 8 pm and we have to find a place to stay in Texas," said Thomas. "Don't worry, we'll figure it out," said Katy while zipping her bag. After two hours, they finally packed up everything for tomorrow. They were both exhausted. "Should we book an apartment or should we stay in a hotel?" asked Thomas while almost falling asleep. "We can book an apartment," said Katy. Thomas was already snoring. Katy sighed and took his phone to book an apartment near Megan's home. They're staying in Texas for 2 days. If everything goes smoothly at the dinner with Megan, the second day will be reserved for fun. Katy and Thomas's plan was to visit San Antonio. Although the night was quiet, which was not usual in their neighbourhood, Katy couldn't sleep, she was too nervous and too excited. She was worried how Megan will react when she sees her because of the year gap between her and Thomas. Katy will be 25 this year and Thomas already turned 42.

"Are you seriously already getting ready? It's 6:30 am, we have 30 more minutes," said Katy after Thomas woke her up. "Sorry, honey, I woke up at 6 o'clock. I didn't know what to do," said Thomas while brushing his teeth. There was no use trying to fall asleep, so Katy just went to the kitchen to make some coffee. "Do you want one as well?" Katy asked him. "I'm good, thanks," responded Thomas.

"You can take our bags to the car, I'll be with you in a minute," said Katy. She locked the house and wished herself luck. "I'm so happy that Megan will finally meet you," said Thomas while reversing the car. "But I'm worried what she is going to say

when she sees me and finds out my age," said Katy. "I'm sure she's going to accept you the way you are. We're together because we love each other, and that's the most important thing," said Thomas trying to calm her down. Katy agreed with him and decided to enjoy the drive. "Should we listen to some music?" asked Thomas winking at her. "Sure," smiled Katy and turned the radio on.

After seven hours of driving, they arrived in Austin. Thomas was struggling to find a parking lot near the apartment. There were a lot of tourists because it was July. Thomas finally found a place for his car and Katy helped him to get the bags out of the trunk. They were impressed by the apartment when they got inside. "Should we start getting ready for the dinner or we could have a short tour to the city center?" asked Thomas while unpacking his bag. "We should definitely get ready and go directly to the restaurant," said Katy. Thomas agreed with her. They got ready in thirty minutes, well, Thomas did. "How much longer?" asked Thomas. "Five minutes only, I promise," yelled Katy from the bathroom. When she finished putting on her makeup, she got back to the bedroom and said: "Well, what do you think?" Thomas couldn't stop looking at her. She looked stunning. "Oh, my God. I literally don't know what to say," said Thomas while looking at his fiancée.

They left the apartment and decided to walk to the restaurant. They wanted to make sure not to be late so they arrived in the restaurant at 5:50 pm. Megan was already sitting at the table and waiting for them to come. Megan stood up and hugged Thomas, "I haven't seen you for so long. I'm so happy to see you today." And then she looked at Katy. "Oh, I didn't know you have a daughter," , she said sarcastically. Katy could already see that Megan wasn't happy with her age. "Mom, this is my fiancée, Katy," said Thomas. Megan, looking a little disappointed, shook hands with Katy trying to stay calm. Katy smiled politely and sat down at the table.

"So, how old are you Katy?" asked Megan. "I'm turning 25 soon," Katy didn't expect Megan to be that direct. She didn't want to let Megan distract her. "You're 24 then?" said Megan almost in shock. Katy was so uncomfortable and didn't know what to say. "Honey, can you please go to the waitress and ask her to take our order?" said Thomas only as an excuse to talk to Megan alone. When Katy went, Thomas asked his mom, "Why are you acting like this? I told you that she's a little bit younger than me, but that doesn't change a thing. I'm with her because I have never met a person like Katy in my entire life."

"Look Thomas, I know that you love her. But are you sure she loves you back? I mean, it might be that she's using you because of your money. I just want the best for you," said Megan. "She isn't using me for my money. You really shouldn't judge

someone before you get to know them. I know what I'm talking about. And we love each other," said Thomas. Megan sighed and said, "Look, I've warned you. Just don't crawl back to me when she takes all your money and leaves you." "That's not going to happen because…,"

"The waitress will be here in a minute," Katy interrupted him.

"Don't you see he's talking? Can't you just wait like ten seconds?" Megan was openly showing her contempt.

"Mom!" said Thomas.

"No, she's right. I'm so sorry. I should've waited," said Katy. When the waitress came, she took their order. "It will be ready in around 45 minutes," said the waitress and went to the kitchen. Thomas was coughing. "Are you okay?" asked Katy while handing him a glass of water. "Now you're acting like you care about him," said Megan. "Okay mom, that's enough!" said Thomas angrily, you started criticizing her from the moment she came in the restaurant."

Megan gave him a weird look. "I'm going to the bathroom to calm down. You're giving me a headache," said Thomas. He stood up abruptly, not looking where he was going, he banged his foot against a low shelf with plants and the next second he was on the floor, his right arm was strangely twisted under his body. The two women jumped but Katy was faster, she got down on her knees trying to help Thomas stand up but the pain in his arm was too strong and he just shouted, "I can't move my arm, I think it's broken, call 911.

The ambulance came quickly, the older guy after realizing it was not life-threatening situation, asked Thomas for his healthcare card, looked at it briefly and cold-bloodedly explained that his health insurance had expired. If he wanted to be taken care of, the amount had to be paid immediately. "Sorry, dear," he looked at Katy, "I forgot to make the payment, you know I'm bad at these things."

Megan stood to the side, partially enjoying the scene, not believing that fate had rewarded her with a quick action that would expose Katy's hidden motives.

"Okay, don't worry, the money is not important, what's important is that you get medical help, I'll pay the bill," Katy said, turning to the paramedic and handing him her bank card.

Megan felt dizzy when she heard the sum Katy had to pay. On the other hand, Katy didn't seem to have a problem paying, she kept looking at Thomas, trying to figure out if his arm hurt.

After four hours, Thomas walked out of the emergency room with his arm in a cast. Katy was overjoyed because he didn't need surgery. Megan waited for them outside the hospital, feeling dizzy from everything that had happened in the last

few hours. Only now did she begin to realize that things weren't as she thought. She knew she had to apologize and ask Katy for a fresh start.

Megan smiled and said to Katy, "I'm sorry for everything I said today. I was wrong about you. I was just worried about Thomas. I should have listened to Thomas, and to you, of course. I promise it won't happen again. A wise man once told me that nobody should be judged before they get to know them."

"It's okay. I forgive you. The most important thing now is that Thomas is safe and okay," said Katy, "to be totally frank with you, I don't even care what you think about me any more."

Megan had to laugh at this honest confession. Katy had every right to even ignore her future mother-in-law.

"You're right, my dear, I needed this lesson. I hope I've learned it now, and thank you for being my teacher. I invite you to be my guests, and we definitely must repeat the dinner, it's on me."

penguin:
Dubravka Zebec
Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovački
autor:Petra Smješka

ANNE AND THE ADVENTURE TO THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

Once there was a princess called Anne. When she was 13 years old, she got tired of her boring life in her palace, so she sneaked onto a pirate ship. Usually, pirates would kick out people like her, but Captain Calypso had mercy and decided to adopt her and train her to be the next pirate queen. She changed her clothes and hairstyle, and then they sailed off so her real parents would never find her.

At first, she would often get seasick because she wasn't used to living on a ship, but she got used to it after a couple of weeks. By the time she was 15, she had learned all the basic skills: first cooking, then tying different kinds of knots, then polishing swords, and lastly, swordplay. When she turned 16, she became a real member of the crew.

One day, they heard about an island in the Bermuda Triangle. Many had tried to find it, and maybe some did, but none came back to tell anyone about it. There were legends about strange creatures but also legendary ships full of gold, whose captain was the one and only Henry Avery, also called the Pirate King.

On April 21st, their journey started.

Day 1 - They travelled for miles and miles. Everyone was okay and happy, except Anne, who had a bad feeling about the journey.

Day 5 - The crew was busy with their usual daily activities: cleaning, cooking, and navigating. The only entertainment they had was music and card games, which they played at night next to a lantern when everyone was done with work.

Day 15 - They started to run low on food and drinking water, so they limited the food and water to the bare minimum.

Day 20 - They were almost out of food. Anne wasn't sure if they were going to make it.

Day 30 - They had been starving for two days, but luckily, they saw... an island! It was a miracle! The story wasn't just a myth. But if the island existed, so did... anom-

alies. They had to be very careful.

When they arrived at the shore, they dropped the anchor and went to explore the island. At first, it seemed like a normal island with just a beach and a forest. Half of the crew decided to explore the forest while the rest stayed on the beach. The first part of the crew was led by both Calypso and Anne. As they got deeper into the forest, they noticed more weird things. First, there was a bird that sounded like someone screaming. Then there were blue strawberries, square watermelons, purple mangoes, round bananas, flowers that looked as if they were made of cotton candy, and many more strange things.

As they reached a clearing in the middle of the forest, they saw a strange group of people. They were short, like dwarfs. They lived in a little village, sang strange songs, and spoke a strange language. When they noticed Anne and her friends, they started chasing them with little spears. The crew tried to run away but fell into a trap that the tiny people had made. They almost managed to escape, but they were hit by blow darts dipped in a sleeping potion.

Three hours later... Anne finally woke up. They were tied to trees around the village. She tried to scream, but she had a cloth in her mouth. The tiny people didn't know how to speak English. But Anne knew one thing: they wouldn't let her and her crew live after discovering their secret.

They untied her and the rest of the crew and dragged them to the biggest house in the village, straight to their king. Even the king didn't know English. Anne thought they were doomed. As the strange people decided how to punish them, they realized Anne's crew didn't understand them, so they brought another man from their tribe who didn't look quite like them. He was a bit taller and skinnier than the others. It turned out that he could speak English.

He said that they would throw her crew into a volcano so they could never go back home as punishment for discovering their island. Anne tried to make a deal with them. She was prepared to do anything to save her friends. They promised to let them go if they fulfilled two conditions: first, to help them get rid of the mermaids, and second, to never tell anyone about what they saw.

Anne agreed, but then she realized... mermaids! They had to save her friends who had stayed on the ship. Everyone ran as fast as they could to get to the ship. It was already nighttime, and the closer they got to the ship, the louder the sound of the mermaids' singing became. They had to put beeswax in their ears so they couldn't hear the singing.

The mermaids had mind-controlled the part of the crew that was on the ship and made them fight against the other part of the crew. It was a very tense fight. Anne's team was winning until... one of the mind-controlled crew members stabbed Calypso. Anne caught him and tied him with a rope, just like they did to the others. She ran to Calypso but couldn't help her.

The short people came and started to heal Calypso. Anne was now furious. She took her sword and ropes, tied up the mermaids, and put them on the ship. The little people and Anne saved Calypso and the rest of the mind-controlled crew.

The next morning, they decided how to punish the mermaids. They jinxed them so they could never talk again. They freed the mermaids and made sure they never came near the island again.

The little people introduced themselves as The Shorties. They invited Anne's crew to a feast, and they all ate and sang together. The next day, The Shorties gave Anne and her friends plenty of food, drinkable water, seeds of their special plants, and half of Avery's gold.

Anne's crew thanked them for their kindness and left. When they got back to their hometown, they didn't tell anyone about the island to protect their new friends, but they planted the seeds in vases and kept them for themselves.

And that's the story of Anne's adventure to the Bermuda Triangle.

Student: Tin Zubić
Mentor: Maja Čajko
Osnovna škola Sveti Križ Začretje

BACK TO DECEMBER

Last winter I went on a vacation with my family to New York. I am 22 so I don't really travel with my family anymore. I live in Los Angeles and my parents live in Texas. I wasn't sure about going and then something in my ear whispered - *Anna, you should go*. So I decided to go. We travelled for about 5 hours by plane. It was a really stormy night and while we were sleeping the propellers of the plane broke and the plane crashed. We barely survived. The trip turned into horror. My parents and I were in the hospital for 2 weeks. I was wondering why I heard that voice in my head if this had happened. I thought it was my fate. We were in Ohio while recovering and then we went to New York. It was already December, so we decided to stay until Christmas because my birthday is on 26th December. This time everything was okay. We visited many places in New York - Times Square, Statue of Liberty and The Plaza Hotel. It was really cold while we were there. One day I went skating. While I was skating, I bumped into a guy and fell. He smiled and helped me to get up. I was so embarassed. Then I realized who he was! It was Ian, we went to the same high school and he was my worst enemy then! I was wondering why he smiled at me. Did he even recognize me? The next day my parents and I went sighseeing again. We went shopping and we ate some delicious food. The last day I woke up early and decided to explore New York by myself. My parents were still at the hotel. It was so nice and peaceful to go alone. It was time to go to the airport so I went back to the hotel. My parents were gone! *OH NO!* I said in my head. They took all my stuff. Why would they do that? I was scared because I didn't know New York too well. I called my mum, but she didn't pick up. I didn't know what to do. I went outside and started walking down the street when I saw Ian again. He asked me if I wanted to go to the cinema with him. I didn't know what to do, so I just said yes. He said that we should meet at 7 pm in front of the cinema. I still wondered where my parents were. Luckily I had some money in my wallet. I went for lunch and when it was time I went to the cinema to meet Ian. He was already waiting for me. We went in. He paid for my ticket and bought me popcorn. We watched *It Ends with Us*. It was such a great movie. After the movie he asked me if we could meet again. I asked him if he lived in New

York. He said that he lived in Los Angeles. I said that I lived in Los Angeles as well! Then I told him about what had happened, how our plane had crashed and how my parents had left me here in New York. He asked me if I wanted to go home with him because he was alone here on vacation. I went with him. He bought me a plane ticket. He was happy to help me.

When we arrived in Los Angeles, he asked me where I lived. I gave him my address and he said that he lived just a few blocks away from there. When he dropped me off at my house I saw my parents and a big gift wrapped with a red bow. I told them I was really upset that they had left me and asked why they did that. They told me that they prepared something special for my birthday. I unwrapped the gift and was shocked when I saw what it was - a brand new car! I was so happy. They told me to go inside. When I came into my living room all my friends were there. I was really happy. They sang Happy Birthday to me. Then my parents explained everything – Ian called then while we were in New York and told them that he would like to spend more time alone with me so they came up with that plan to leave me there. Later that day Ian called me and invited me on a date. I said yes. I put on a dress and he picked me up at my house. We went to a famous restaurant. The food was great, really delicious. We talked a lot and laughed all the time. I told him I was really glad that I bumped into him while I was skating. He laughed and said we could spend more time together. I said that I would love that. After dinner we walked for a while and then he drove me to my house. The next day I told my best friend Ava everything - how I met Ian and that we had so much fun together. She asked me why I was hanging out with him if he bullied me in high school. I told her that people could change. She was looking at me really suspiciously while I was talking about him. Later that day Ian sent me a screenshot of a text Ava sent him. It said - *I would love to go out with you*. My heart stopped when I read that text. I tought in my head – *Why? Does she want to betray me*? I was so mad. I called her and told her that we were not friends anymore and blocked her on all social media. Later I talked to Ian and explained everything.

It has been three years now, and we are still together. We travel a lot. Yesterday Ian took me to a Taylor Swift concert because I really like her music. During a song called *Love Story* he proposed to me. I was so happy that I cried. The tears of joy just kept running down my face. Next year we are going to get married. I can't believe that it all happened because of the plane crash! Maybe he wouldn't be in New York the time we were supposed to come. I am so happy that all of this has happened. It was probably fate. I can't wait to travel even more and be the happiest I have ever been. I wish I could go back to that December one more time to relive everything again.

Marta Jerčić, 8.r, OŠ Kman-Kocunar, Split
Snježana Omazić, mentor

BEAUTIFUL BROWN EYES

I loved him. Who am I kidding? I still do. I will always remember that summer of 1985 – the summer I thought I met the love of my life.

The story starts at a summer camp. It was an archery camp. I was never interested in archery, but Rea, my best friend, insisted I go.

''Will there be any cute boys?" I asked with a teasing laugh.

''Oh, come on Charlotte! The only thing that you ever think about is boys! Aren't you excited about archery?"

''Yea, totally."

We laughed as she packed her stuff. Who would have thought that would be the last time I truly laughed without him being the reason?

We arrived at the camp after a long train ride. As we settled in, I noticed someone watching me. His beautiful brown eyes followed my every move. We got to know each other, a little more every day. But one day was special - July 16th.

That night it was Michael, me, and the stars. It was the night he asked me to be his girlfriend.

After camp ended, we saw each other every day. We'd meet at a park – not close to either of us, but it was our park. We even had our bench where we'd sit every day and talk about everything.

I'll never forget one of those conversations: the one about our future family. We planned to have two kids, a boy and a girl, and a cat. We'd name them Nico and Rosie. We imagined a happy family in a 2-story house, where I'd decorate every corner, and he'd love it just because it was mine.

Our park wasn't big. There were a lot of benches, but our bench was the prettiest. Every day we brought something small so we can decorate it such as little artificial flowers or pink ribbons. After some time, it looked magical.

A lot of people don't know about the park and that's what made it even more exceptional. But the fact that he was next to me made it unique.

He made me feel something I never felt before - love. Real love. He made me feel worthy. Even when I was at my lowest, he was there, promising that everything would be all right. He knew all the little things that made me happy – like lilies, my favourite flower, which he brought me every week.

Michael was perfect in every way. He's tall and has chestnut brown hair.

Whenever he was with me, he always had a smile on his face and made the funniest jokes, but with others he didn't act like that. That meant a lot to me. I never thought someone could feel comfortable next to me.

But most of all, I loved the way he looked at me – with those beautiful brown eyes.

We went to the same high school, though he was a year ahead of me. Every time I saw his tall, dark figure in the hallways, I'd run up to him and hug him tightly as if it were the last time. Until, one day, it really was.

We got together spontaneously, and I was afraid of the fact that someone could love me as much as does. After everything I have been through, the feeling of love has been strange to me. I always felt that no matter how much he showed he loved me, I bored him. The thought of him leaving me could not get out of my head.

He was so perfect in every way, and me? I was just a girl who found love in the most unexpected place.

Even though I had him, I struggled. Mentally. He always encouraged me to share my feelings, but deep down, I knew he was struggling. He never wanted to talk about himself, his life or his family. I respected his choices, but it bothered me. I was always the one to seek for help.

On October 20th, we went to our park, sat on our bench. I told him that we needed to talk. I explained how I felt – how I didn't want him to suffer with me anymore. Tears blurred my vision, and I couldn't look at him. I couldn't face those beautiful brown eyes. The same eyes that made all the good days and brought me comfort on the bad ones.

His didn't respond. He just stood up from and walked away.

It tore me apart.

I stayed on that bench for an hour, lost in thought. After that night, nothing was the same. I struggled even more, but I had no one to tell that. I had Rea, but something was missing. Someone was missing.

''Charlie, I know it hurts, but you must let him go. He was a great guy, but there a lot of fish in the sea," Rea tried to comfort me.

I always told her that I'm over him, but she knew it wasn't true.

I tried dating other guys to forget about him. It didn't help. Other guys just showed me how perfect he was.

I couldn't find a single flaw in his actions. He was just made to be ideal.

A year passed. I would still see him in the hallways, but we never made eye contact or spoke again.

Then came the summer of 1986.

Every Sunday, I'd go to our park and sit on our bench. It became my ritual - a way to relive the good memories.

One cold, rainy morning, I wore the jacket he gave me.

''Nice jacket," a familiar voice said from behind me.

It was Michael.

He sat beside me on the bench. His beautiful brown eyes met mine, but something was different. He began to explain - how he regretted not talking things through, how he thought we could have worked it out but didn't know how to react.

I asked if we could try again, but his answer broke me.

"Charlie," he said gently, ''I know you love me, but once I lose trust in someone, I can't get it back. I miss you, but you need to let go. I moved on, and you should too."

Each word felt like a dagger, but I knew he was right. I had to face the consequences of my choices.

I promised him I'd always wait for the spark to return to his beautiful brown eyes. But we both knew that wasn't going to happen.

I kept seeing him in the hallways, so one day I went up to him and asked if we could talk again. We were both more mature now, and I wanted to see if it was worth giving us another try.

''What did you want to talk about?" he asked.

''Do you maybe want to talk about something?" I asked, hoping he would bring up the talk about us.

''I don't know... Do you want to talk about Greek gods?"

I was too shocked to say anything. I didn't expect him to want to talk about the Greek gods. Even so, I assumed he was mature enough to understand what I wanted to discuss.

''Well, I definitely do not want to talk about Greek gods, so I'll start. Why didn't you say anything that night? I could have changed my mind if you said anything, but the fact that you just went away killed me."

''Well, you said you don't want me with you anymore so I figured out trying wouldn't fix anything."

''I'm sorry, Michael, that is my fault. But we really could have talked it through. We were inseparable, you knew everything about me, so why didn't you say anything? Just one word could have fixed it all."

''I don't have that charm."

I was again too shocked to say anything. I was wondering if I'd stay here or leave.

He was acting like a kid.

I got up and left. If he's not mature enough to talk like people, then it's best we don't talk.

Again, our talk killed me. How can someone who once meant the whole world to me act like that?

Rea was always there for me, offering comfort, but she understood how difficult it was for me after he behaved that way. She tried cheering me up with lots of different things, and she did succeed. After some time, I really got over him.

Years later, I saw Michael again - in our park. I was sitting on our bench, and even though he was far away, I noticed him. This time, another woman sat beside him, laughing. Their kids ran around while he watched with joy.

I looked at his eyes from a far, knowing that once they were mine. My beautiful brown eyes. I loved him. Who am I kidding? I still do.

CEFEJ

šifra: KITTEN
mentor: Katija Tefik - Baćac
institution: Osnovna škola „Ivo Lola Ribar“ Labin
autor:Mei Močinić

BENEATH YOUR SKIN

This is a story about a girl named Roxy. The story I'm about to tell, doesn't have a happy and beautiful ending like all the others so make yourself comfortable and prepare for this.

Roxy used to be a very kind and cheerful daddy's girl, but her dad was unfortunately sick and suffering from depression. She didn't realize that everything was getting worse, and one day she came home from school and found him hanging from the ceiling with rope around his neck. He wasn't breathing and wasn't moving. From that day on, Roxy and her mum were never the same again; Roxy lost her role model and her mother lost the love of her life. After that, the days just passed and life went on, but she couldn't. Roxy didn't have the will to live and nothing made sense without her father. She couldn't eat, couldn't move, couldn't talk and all she did was sleep all day every day. Roxy didn't have many friends she could confide in and talk to but she had Ruby and Samuel. They were her friends since they were 6. They knew about the situation with her dad and tried to comfort her, but they weren't very good at it. Roxy no longer knew what to do and how to soothe all that pain. Her friends didn't know how to help her anymore, so they decided to offer her something "relaxing". It was heroin. They didn't have much money for more expensive drugs, so they offered her heroin, which was the cheapest drug they could find. At first, she didn't want to take it, but she just wanted to forget about everything, so in the end she gave in. It was her first time taking it and she didn't know what to do, so she asked Ruby to show her how to do it. When she took heroin, she didn't feel anything for the first half hour, but after that she felt like she was in heaven and like nothing was important, and finally she felt relaxed and carefree after a very long time. But when it all subsided, she felt even worse than before and felt a great desire to feel again as she did when she was drugged. That is because the drugs takes you to hell disguised as heaven. When she got home, her mum was sleeping in the living room, so she didn't wake her up and just went to her room and sat on the bed. Roxy sat on the bed for hours and just stared at the wall. She felt empty and didn't know what else to do, so she fell asleep

with that empty feeling in her. She woke up in the morning even worse, but had to go to school, so she got ready and left the house. In school she immediately went to look for Ruby to ask her for more heroin. So Ruby was getting it for her almost every day and Roxy had already gotten into the habit of it and every time she took the drug she wanted it more and more. Then that day came. Today it has been exactly 3 years since her dad committed suicide. She felt very miserable and absent and decided to do what she always does when she feels that way. In fact, she didn't only use drugs when she was sad, she also used drugs when she was happy and angry and scared and actually most of the time. She knew it wasn't good for her and she tried to take her mind off it but she just couldn't. It was stronger than her. She was sweating and shaking and breathing hard and all she could think about at this moment was how she would be relaxed after heroin. Her mum was at home so Roxy just grabbed the things she needed and went for a walk. She knew exactly where to go. There was a subway in her town, full of people, but that's why she could go there, because people these days don't even care what you do as a teen. She sat down on a bench in the subway and took out the needle. This time something was different. She felt the same as before and gave herself another dose because she didn't want to feel all the pain she was feeling. She felt really sick, everything in front of her was spinning, she couldn't see anything and everything was blurry. Suddenly she found herself on the other side of the subway watching the passing trains and after one train she noticed a man behind it. She didn't immediately know who he was but something was strange about him. Roxy wanted to get closer to him, but she couldn't move. The man was calling her name and waving at her, and then she realized it was her father. Roxy woke up on the subway floor because a kind lady woke her up. She was shaking and couldn't speak. Roxy immediately started crying. It was too good to be true. For a moment, she remembered what her father looked like again, but as soon as she woke up, it felt as if she had lost him again but this time it was ever worse. She got up from the floor and then was headed home. Roxy entered the house without saying anything to her mother, went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. She couldn't believe what she had done. She knew she had to stop but now it was too late. It is a matter of life and death in this situation. Roxy knew that she had totally let down everyone around her, even if she didn't really have anyone to let down, but knew that her father would be very disappointed. Now that she messed everything up, it would have been better if she was gone. She went to the cabinet where all the medicines and pills are kept and took as many pills as she could find. She drank them all at once while sitting on the bathroom floor, filled the tub with water, got into the tub and

closed her eyes, hoping she wouldn't wake up. Her mother's loud scream woke her up and she knew immediately that it didn't work . Everything was blurry in front of her eyes and she hardly remembers anything, but after some time she woke up in the hospital surrounded with many doctors who made sure she doesn't do anything like that again. The time spent in the hospital passed very slowly. Hours seemed like days, days seemed like months and months like years. Roxy should have felt better in the hospital, but she didn't. It just got worst day by day. She couldn't do anything and had no motivation to.

She lived in a special institution for a couple of years and after that, one night she went to the balcony of the hospital and looked at the sky and people passing by. Roxy observed how quiet and beautiful the world was, how her life could have been completely different. She had destroyed her relationship with her mother and her state of mind. Something inside of her died in these past years. When she was a little girl she was so happy and full of life. A girl who adored her father and her beloved mother. Take a look at that little happy girl now. The stupid pills and drugs have ruined her life and turned it into living hell. Roxy's mother was already very disappointed with her and didn't even care about Roxy's life anymore. At least that's how it seemed. Her mum stopped visiting her after the first few months of her hospital stay. After some time, the nurse told Roxy that her mother had moved somewhere far away and started a new family. She had a husband and a beautiful little sweet baby. "At least now she'll have a kid who isn't a drug addict," Roxy told the nurse as if it didn't hurt her at all. But deep down she knew that she missed her mother very much and that she would give anything in the world if she could hug her just one more time. And so her days in the hospital were boring, Roxy has stayed there because she had nowhere to go. She missed the pills and feeling that way so quietly went to steal the pills because she decided she was going to meet her dad again. The pill box fell from her hand when she saw her dad in the white light. Her soul was so happy that it went to her dad but it couldn't take her body with her so Roxy's body was left lying on the hospital floor while she finally got to spend her precious time with her dad again.

butterfly
Dubravka Zebec
Osnovna škola Josip Kozarac Josipovac Punitovčki
autor:Matea Kanisek

BETRAYAL AT THE LAST MOMENT

Every morning was always the same. Amelia always felt that she was missing something, and that was her best friend, Bianca. Bianca had gotten mad at her back in elementary school, and Amelia didn't know why, nor had she managed to find out what happened. One night, Amelia received a text from Bianca that said: **"I'm sorry I got mad at you. I didn't mean it, but some girls told me you talked badly about me. I'm sorry I believed them. Come to my high school party on Saturday, and I'll apologize in person. The party is at my house and starts at 9:00 p.m."** Amelia was confused but decided to go to the party because she wanted to make up with her.

Saturday came, and Amelia started getting ready for the party. She didn't know what to wear, but she found a beautiful pink dress with seashells. She went to the party, and when she arrived, there were many people there. She saw Bianca, and Bianca took her to a place where no one else was so they could talk in peace. After the conversation, Bianca apologized to Amelia, and they continued their friendship.

When Bianca apologized, they went back to the party, where they danced and sang together with their friends. Amelia saw him at the party—it was love at first sight—but she knew that there would be nothing between them. Alex was the guy that all the girls wanted, but he was looking for the right one who would truly love him. After the party, Amelia kept thinking about Alex and decided to call Bianca to ask her what to do.

When Bianca came, they talked about it, and she told Amelia that it was best to follow him on social media and start talking to him. Alex noticed that she had started following him, so he replied to her, and she sent him a message. However, he wasn't interested in Amelia.

Amelia didn't want to give up and kept texting him, but he remained uninterested. Suddenly, Alex began to feel that he liked Amelia, but he didn't want to admit it. He asked her out for a drink, and she accepted. Alex told her they should meet at school on Friday at 4:00 p.m. and then go to a café together.

They met at the school, and Alex gave her a bouquet of flowers. Amelia was overjoyed; she started to feel that maybe there could be something between them. They headed for the café, and when they arrived, they sat down and ordered drinks. They talked about themselves to get to know each other better, and as Amelia spoke, Alex couldn't stop looking into her beautiful brown eyes.

After coffee, Alex accompanied Amelia home, and when she entered the house, she immediately called Bianca to tell her what had happened. Bianca was happy for her. When Alex got to his house, he texted Amelia to ask how she was doing, and Amelia told him she had a great time. Alex suggested they do it again, and she agreed.

They constantly corresponded, laughed, and talked on the phone, and Alex began to realize that she was the one he had been looking for.

One evening, Amelia was bored, so she decided to ask Bianca to go for a walk around town. Bianca agreed, and Amelia immediately started walking toward her. While they were walking around town, they ran into Alex and his friend. Alex approached Amelia, greeted her, and hugged her. He asked her to go out on Friday night, and Amelia was overjoyed and said that everything could be arranged through text messages.

After meeting Alex and his friend, Amelia and Bianca decided to go to a restaurant, order pizza, and enjoy the rest of the evening. After the restaurant, the girls decided to go home, and when Amelia arrived, she received a message from Alex. He asked her if she was free on Friday evening, to which she replied that she was free and that they could meet.

On Friday morning, Alex sent Amelia a message to be in front of the building at 7:00 p.m. because he would come to pick her up. At 7:00 p.m., Amelia went outside, and Alex was waiting for her. When Amelia came out, Alex approached her and hugged her, and then they went to the restaurant.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they ordered their food and drinks. While they were eating, they talked, and Alex asked Amelia if she would be his girlfriend. Amelia agreed, and Alex kissed and hugged her. After they finished eating, they went for a walk around town.

While walking through the city center, they passed a stand where they could win a big teddy bear. Amelia really liked the bear, so Alex decided to try to win it. To win it, he had to put five balls into a basket, which he successfully did. After winning the bear, he gave it to Amelia, and she was overjoyed.

After all that, Alex accompanied Amelia home, and afterward, he continued on

his way to his house. When Alex got home, he sent Amelia a message so she wouldn't worry about him, and then he called her, and they talked almost all night.

The next day, Amelia invited Bianca and Alex to her place to watch a movie together. Amelia told them to bring snacks in their favorite color. Alex brought blue snacks, Bianca brought green snacks, and Amelia brought pink ones. When they arrived, they worked together to decide which movie to watch and what to do afterward.

Alex and Bianca were laughing together, which felt strange to Amelia because they had never mentioned being close friends. Amelia ignored it, thinking it was nothing, and continued to enjoy herself.

After that day, Amelia and Alex spent every day together. They were either at his place, at her place, or walking around the city. A month later, Alex suggested they go to London for a few days to visit his grandparents' house while his grandparents were in Paris. He asked Amelia, and she agreed.

Alex bought the tickets, and they began preparing everything they would need for the trip. When they arrived in London, they toured the city. They visited restaurants, went on the London Eye, toured Buckingham Palace, and explored many other locations.

When it was time to go home, they packed their things and cleaned the house so Alex's grandparents wouldn't come back to a mess.

When they returned home, nothing was the same. Alex rarely replied to Amelia's messages and didn't call her, which worried her because she didn't know what she had done.

A few days later, Alex sent Amelia a message saying not to worry because he was fine but that he had to return to London to help his grandparents when they came back from Paris. Amelia wondered why he hadn't told her sooner but decided to trust him.

However, a few days later, she saw pictures Bianca had posted on Instagram. The photos showed Bianca and Alex together in Italy. Amelia realized she had been right to feel something was off.

Amelia loved them both deeply and couldn't believe they could do such a thing to her. What they didn't know was that she was sick and wanted to spend her last days with them. They didn't know that, but she planned to tell them.

Amelia passed away, and when Alex and Bianca found out, they regretted their actions for the rest of their lives.

šifra: AK26115
mentor: Maja Penava Aleksić, prof.
institution: OŠ „Blaž Tadijanović“ Slavonski Brod
autor:Asja Kebić

CHAINED BY SILENCE

I woke up on the cold floor of Whisper Alley, surrounded by many merchants and remaining people of the Poor's. You may wonder how I ended up here, so to fuel you with that information, it's sadly caused by my parents' death. The only people I had in my life were taken away from me when I was just 14, by who else than the one and only Elorians, deadly Elites and Royals who reek of power and arrogance. I despise them, I mean who wouldn't?

I slipped in my mouth some leftover stale bread from 3 days ago, I think, I don't even remember. I've decided that today will be the day to face the Elorians. Every single Poor has been talking about a ball that is held today at 10 pm, how beautiful and innocent of them, isn't it? I'm going to seek my revenge, because I wasn't raised to let people do the things, they want to do to me like I'm a toy.

I have just been doing my usual for the past few hours, stealing a few items and accessories. I actually found a pretty worthy thing, a beautiful blood red ornamental hairpin. I will probably just sell it later, but I could still use it to make myself look at least decent for the ball tonight.

I check the clock on the Moon Cathedral and see its 9 pm, better get ready. I put the hair pin in my long, black, and curly hair. I pull on my black leather pants, and a sleek black t-shirt. I strap my silver dagger with hints of dark red lines on me and start walking to the Palace.

I already know that 99% of the guards will be at the big entrance so getting in by the back door won't be really hard, it's not like I can't handle a few guards. I sneak by the enchanting Forest and come to the back door. As I already guessed, no one was there.

'*You can do it, you know you can, right',* I thought to myself as I opened the door, my movements as quiet as breath. There's a long hallway, with as many doors as you can imagine. I start searching for the ballroom, I began to sweat, I don't know why.

I was mesmerized by the beauty of the whole palace, to be more specific, the ethereal doors with golden details, breathtaking art works and gorgeous white marble floor with a pinch of gold and silver.

I walk past a massive door with golden handles and engraved white wood which radiates power. It must be the ballroom. As I open the door, I realize it's definitely not a ballroom but something even better, a library with so many different books and details on the roof and walls, I feel like I walked into Heaven.

I couldn't help myself but come in and explore this beauty. It felt like a dream, I felt like little me again, but this time like the little me that was going to the local library with dad, browsing and selecting books while my mom was making breakfast with so much love and care. I will never experience those moments again; I wish I cherished them more.

But now, now it's too late, because of whom? The arrogant and selfish Royals and their little guards. I gently close the door behind me, the last thing I need is to get caught. I walk deeper into the library, I can't help but smile; okay, maybe I even let out a little giggle.

I begin exploring every corner, every part and inch of the library. As I'm looking at the books and their beautiful, detailed pages, I realize that it must have past at least 40 minutes since I've entered the library.

I quickly leave the book I was just about to dive into and remember what I came here for. Not to look at books nor explore the Palace. Instead get my revenge, whatever happens after it, and no matter what it takes. I will give myself just one more minute admiring the celestial beauty of this place before making my way to the two-sided hell.

I will confess to you something I've never wished to say or even think about. I just hope I don't run into Raiven Riorson. Every time I see him my heart skips a beat like a flame that flickers despite the rain, unwilling to die every time I wish it to. His face is like a storm, calm yet raging, but just the thought of him pulls me closer. I'm supposed to hate him, but I can't. His family betrayed mine with the worst way possible, death.

Leaving me alone and grieving with only my thoughts and the silence of my heart keeping me company. Lost in my own thoughts, I don't even hear the echoing footsteps coming closer until the library's door opens with the ballroom's music that dances with the shadows and light of the ethereal hallway.

I turn my head, now facing the door when I see him. The last person I wanted to see right now. Raiven Riorson, the future assassin of the Royal family. He is standing right at the entrance, his beautiful black, flowy hair framing his beautiful face. His emotionless, black eyes scanning me, figuring out who I am, because obviously he had no chance to ever see me.

He is coming closer; my heart is beating faster each step he takes. "Who are you, *Dove*?" He says, his voice is as deep as a winter night, cold but somehow soothing. He is so tall, at least a foot taller than me. "I uhm, I'm Faeryn, Faeryn Ellewood" I say.

My voice is trembling. I can't help but look into his eyes, he is looking at me with curiosity and coldness at the same time. I look away for a moment, realizing that if I don't come up with a good lie, I will probably have to kill him, or he will have to do it to me.

"So, Faeryn, I have never seen you here nor heard about your name. I would for sure remember a name which is being carried by such a beautiful person as you."

He speaks, I don't really know what to say. My pale skin is 100% turning the shade of ripe cherries I ate last night. This is definitely not a good thing, considering the fact that I will have to kill him sooner or later.

"Well, I came from Sylia, I got an opportunity to get a job here in the Palace, so if you excuse me, I've got work to do" I say, starting to move away with caution. He takes my hand, and I startle as he pulls me. I feel a spark between us. I open my mouth, but he interrupts me. "You don't belong here, *Dove*", he says in a voice that sends shivers down my spine.

Think, Faeryn, think. "I already told you that I'm not from here, and if you let me, I'll go find the office", I say. The last thing I need is to be rude to him.

Suddenly, his dagger is right at my throat. "You have 10 seconds to say who you really are, or you aren't going to come out of this library alive." He says, his face radiating coldness, but his eyes never leave mine. His black eyes look indecisive, full of regret. Maybe it's just in my head, I really have gone crazy. "Why can't I do it, Dove? Tell me", he says softly with a hint of pain and guilt in his tone.

He slightly releases the dagger, gently so he doesn't accidentally hurt me. We stared at each other for a long second. I think during that one second the butterflies did at least 10 circles around my stomach, my heart skipped about 5 beats and my cheeks tried on all 134 shades of red. What will he do with me now?

"Run, now. If you don't run out of this room in 10 seconds you won't be getting out of it at all. Go", he orders, his face painted with guilt, doubt, and hints of vulnerability.

"Why did you do this?" I freeze saying it, as I'm thinking about the right decision. But instead, he is not responding, he is not even looking at my direction, it looks like he just can't get any words out of his mouth.

My feet slowly wander to the door, my gaze not leaving him. I start running, my pace gets faster every second. Maybe it's for the best. It started raining, the drops are ruining my hair, refreshing my face. I run into the Forest, not knowing what awaits

me there, what I might meet or where am I going at all.

As I'm getting deeper into the Forest, I question myself, did I save myself from death, or did I just shatter my heart into millions of pieces? The stars are my guiding light, the moon, my only companion, and my heart is my cage, I cannot escape.

šifra:ny1412
mentor:Marija Vugrinec
institution: OŠ Šemovec
autor:Gianna Mariori Turrubiates

CHILDREN OF SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES

Life is weird, and I'm sure it always has been. Sometimes, the most unexpected, strange occurrences happen without any explanation. For some people, in the most common cases, it might be something at work or at school, perhaps even within their own family and friends. My story, however, has all of the above, and even some stranger things. You can call me Elle. Just a completely ordinary 14-year-old kid. We both know that's not true– otherwise, why would this story be so important to write? Well, this all started when my family and I moved to a new country. It was during the summertime when we first moved. It was honestly noticeably quiet. The reason we moved was for the health and proper education for me and my brother. Our parents had just gone missing a few months prior, and we didn't have any close family members to take us in, and many detectives had decided to rule our parents out as dead, so we ended up in an orphanage. We got adopted just 10 months later and moved. Our new mum, Sandra, was nice to us and our new dad, Kyle, was spoiling us and was exceedingly kind and affectionate towards us. We didn't know much about them, honestly. My brother, Archie, and I had trouble adjusting to so many changes in such a short period of time, but the support of our "new" parents helped a bit. My brother and I would always secretly talk to each other about how strange it was for two grown adults to just… suddenly vanish out of thin air, without a trace left of them. Neither him nor I honestly believed they were dead, but how could they just go missing like that?

When we were moving into our new home, it was… strange. It was an unusually small, but interesting and extravagant, labyrinth-like manor, perfect for a big family, but we were our adoptive parents' only kids, so it didn't really make sense to us– but we didn't complain a word. It had fancy, polished wooden wall decor, and old fashioned, clean, and elegant carpeting. Sandra told us that the house had belonged to a powerful duchess and duke that were honoured even by their king. Although the

manor wasn't bought, we were renting half, while someone else was renting the other half. Our adoptive parents were, however, investing money to buy the manor in the future. They weren't particularly rich or anything, but they themselves came from rich families and had respectable, stable jobs. Kyle was a neurosurgeon, and Sandra was a self-proclaimed fashion designer (she was just a fashion designer's assistant and jewellery maker), but was paid very well. On top of everything, the manor was at a strangely reasonable price (to rent half). The manor was divided in two– one side was ours, the Archdales', and the other one was the DuPonts'. We spent the first couple of days unpacking, settling in and exploring some rooms. Our side of the manor had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, while the DuPonts' side had four bedrooms and one bathroom. Archie and I had separate bedrooms, one next to the other. We didn't get to know much about the DuPonts, other than figuring out ourselves that they were always going out and were rarely home. After a week of tirelessly unpacking, Sandra and Kyle had to enrol us into our designated schools. Archie was enrolled into year 5 at some local primary school, while I was enrolled to year 9 in a secondary school that is more than a 15–20-minute walk from our new home. We entered our school a month later, and I practically walked there alone. The walk there was quiet and bit deserted, but I honestly didn't mind it since nobody came up to me and disturbed me while I listened to music on my headphones. That was until I stepped into the building. It was a huge, bustling school with students and professors chatting and buzzing in the hallways and classrooms. My first day went smoothly. There were no serious language changes, and everyone was friendly. I didn't make any friends from my classes on the first day… or the second… or third. It wasn't until Friday that I was "forced" to make some friends by the school's policy that every student must join at least one club or afterschool activity. I reluctantly chose to join the music club first, considering I took a liking to the posters and marketing of the club that went around the school so far– But as soon as I did join, I was a severely disappointed and let down, since they weren't that friendly and passive aggressive, too. I dropped out the same day, and joined another club– the *Student Government, Debate and Peer Tutoring* club, or as most called it, *SGDPT*. A club of just 6 members from year 10-12. I'd say they were very welcoming. By some coincidence, one of them turned out to be my neighbour from the manor– Pierce DuPont, and he was… certainly a character, all right. Very loud, spontaneous, funny, but seemed somewhat sane and decent, compared to the music club members. Some other members I got close with that day were the only ones present that day at the club to begin with– Jayden Martinez, Jacques Freire, Connor Tofan, and some Russian kid, with whom

quite everyone struggled to understand his broken English, Sergey Volkov. We spoke and discussed some basic things with each other as an introduction. It turned out that they all ended up in a similar situation as me… Jayden's sister had gone missing and was ruled off "dead" by detectives, too. Sergey's parents went missing, while Connor's dad was unexpectedly arrested, and Pierce's dad was wrongly accused of the murder of his wife, and Jacques' dad dying in a devastating car crash, leaving most of them in a foster care program or being taken in by other family members. All of us were shocked and confused as to why our situations were so similar. We started to think it may all be connected in some way– and that's how a bond started between us. We began hanging and speaking more often, getting closer as time went on. Over the course of 7 months, we were already close friends, and we discussed many topics among ourselves.

One day, it was terrible weather, and my friends and I couldn't meet up like we agreed we would, so Pierce and I decided to just hang out around the manor instead. We went to each other's sides of the manors. After some time, we ended up looking through his room, and found some lifted floorboard in the corner of his room under a closet that he said the manor came with. We pushed the closet, curiously wondering what could be under the floorboard, even though we told ourselves it was nothing, the strong will to satisfy our imagination was undeniably irresistible. We expected there to be under the floorboard, so we didn't really get ourselves too excited - but to our surprise, it was the contrary. We found a silver, dusty, old, and slightly chipped key under the floorboard. We looked up at each other in utter confusion, and our interest was piqued. I quickly took the key, and we rushed downstairs to my family's side of the manor to look for Sandra or Kyle to tell them about it, but to our surprise... they weren't anywhere to be found. Pierce already knew his legal guardians were not home, so he knew it was pointless to look for them as well. We quickly ran to my brother's room to tell him about it instead, unable to contain our excitement about it. With no surprise on my behalf, it was to no avail. Archie was utterly uninterested. Pierce and I then decided to give our friends a call instead, but as soon as we picked up our phones, a loud thundering sound hit our ears, and the signal and power was cut off. Pierce quickly turned on the flashlight of his phone, while I stared at him in shock. Archie ran out of his room instantly and tripped over the carpets in the hallway. Pierce turned around to look at him, shining the flashlight over him. I came over to look at what he tripped over, and it surprisingly was another lifted floorboard underneath the carpet. Unfortunately, we couldn't lift the carpet, due to the carpets being stapled down on all corners in the hallway. We thought the power

would come back eventually, so we all spent time together in my room with the phone flashlight being the only source of light in the manor. Soon enough, we heard a car approaching, and suddenly the lights and signal came back. Pierce's parents came back, and he tried to explain to them what happened, with Archie and I being his alibis. His parents were confused and dismissed it as nothing, even when we told them about the key. "It might just be some key the previous owners left behind" is what his dad told us. They went to their living room, while the three of us looked at each other. Archie immediately lost interest after hearing that, being naïve enough to believe that as a decent explanation, but Pierce and I were unsatisfied with that response. Pierce then went on to tell me that his parents looked, sounded, and behaved differently just now, and he could tell that within a minute of talking to them. This raised our suspicions drastically about the manor, and something was telling us this was a terribly bad idea to get involved into this matter, but our curiosity was killing us. We searched up and down throughout the week to find any unlocked doors or secret passageways within the manor, but to no avail. We told our friends about it and discussed the various impossibilities.

Eventually, when all hope was lost for finding answers to our curious questions, we gave up - or at least that's what we agreed on. One quiet night, I went downstairs to the kitchen just for a glass of water. As I was walking there, I tripped over something that I thought was certainly a hand grabbing my ankles. I shrieked and immediately looked down to see, shining my phone's flashlight, but it was just another one of the many rugs that weren't sitting properly on the floor. I rubbed my foot lightly over the lump in the rug, and it felt like a solid surface was sticking out - being yet another lifted floorboard. I sighed and went to the kitchen for my glass of water. As I walked back to my room, I ended up stumbling upon more lifted floorboards, and the staircase felt longer than it was before. I had a sudden feeling of unexplainable dread and rushed to my room. I told myself it was all in my head and was imagining things. I drank my glass of water and laid down in my bed, trying to tell myself I was as safe as always. I slowly drifted into sleep, only the sound of the clock in the corner of my room ticking was audible. I tossed and turned, until the last thing I could recall hearing was a slowed and distorted ticking sound from the clock. I briefly remember a dream I had that night - I think it's impossible to forget. I stood in a labyrinth with pitch black water up to my knees, and the sky was completely dark, the only light being from some dimmed lanterns along the walls. The last thing I remember about the dream before waking up was hearing a gentle whisper directly in my ear: "*Elle.*" Later, my friends told me they had the same dream.

šifra:RAINBOW
mentor:NATAŠA GRUBIŠIĆ
institution:OŠ SESVETSKA SELA
autor:Una Belošević Krklec

CHOOSING MY FUTURE

There was this girl. She was quite interesting, not very sociable, but she had just enough friends not to be called lonely or friendless by the kids at school. Still, she was known for her perfect grades and behaviour. She was close with two or three people, but did anyone actually know her? What she likes and what she doesn't?

"Hello, Charlotte!" said a voice behind her. It was her kind English professor, Ms. Smith. This might be about her extra assignment, she thought. She wanted something to do since high school is almost over and not much homework is being given. While everyone used this time to take a break, she did not know what to do with herself. It will also give her extra points for college.

"I just read your report about climate change, and it was… How should I say it? Very professional but not particularly subjective. I did not want to lower your grade because of this. So how about you try again, this time writing about something you really care about?"

Charlotte was stunned. No one ever asked her about her own interests. Of course, her friends knew some of her hobbies, but her parents were never bothered to stop and ask her about them. They thought it was a waste of time. Waste of time which she could be spending studying. Charlotte did everything that her parents told her even when the only thing that she wanted to do is to lay in her room with a heavy book or to paint the amazing view she could see from her window.

"Or you could, you know… Take a break? You have been working hard the whole school year", her professor said with a bit of concern in her voice.

"Miss, it is nothing, really! I have time to write another one. I will bring it to your desk by Friday", Charlotte said.

"Very well", said Ms. Smith, now focused on the two boys running down the hallway.

'What now?' Charlotte thought. She needed to think of something. She needed those extra points. 'For what?' a voice in her head said. It was right. She did not even know what college she would go to. A talk with her best friend might help.

She soon arrived in front of Emma's door. Emma was her best friend since they started high school together. The majority of their classmates already knew each other and most were not looking for new friends. Luckly, the professor sat Charlotte and Emma at the same desk and they became inseparable to this day.

"Hey, Emma", Charlotte said, now tired after another exhausting day at school.

"Hi, Charlie!" Emma was excited to see Charlotte. She broke her leg and wasn't coming to school. Charlotte was a little bit jealous despite Emma constantly complaining about how boring it is to stay at home all day. Sometimes Charlotte and Emma seem like polar opposites, one wanting to go outside and enjoy adventures and other preferring to stay inside, where she can read and paint in peace.

"How are you? You don't look happy", Emma knew something was going on.

"Well, I need to talk to you about something", said Charlotte.

They went to Emma's room and sat on her bed.

"So, what's going on?" Charlotte could hear the worry in Emma's voice.

"You know where you want to go after high school, right? Well, I don't", Charlotte said.

"Charlie, I think you should discuss this with your parents", Emma was confused why Charlotte is talking to her about college.

"I tried but they won't listen. They want me to attend the University of Cambridge and become a lawyer, like them. It's even worse when my grandparents come to visit. They want me to attend University of Oxford and be a doctor like my grandpa once was. I don't want any of that so we always end up in a fight."

"Then you should pick something that you want to do in life. What do you like to do? What is your favourite hobby?" Emma asked.

In that moment it clicked in Charlotte's head. "I like painting", she exclaimed.

"You should become a painter then! And go to an art school!" Emma was happy to help her friend.

Charlotte hugged her best friend and left. On the way home she researched the best art schools in Britain and decided that the Royal College of Art was her first choice. She was so excited that she got it figured out so she forgot how her parents might react.

This was one of the more intense weeks. Her grandparents were staying with them. They often fight with her parents and when talking to her all she could do is silently nod. Charlotte knew they only wanted to help but sometimes they will just go overboard.

When she came home she found them surprisingly getting along at the dinner table. She hated to start such an important conversation, but she needed to tell them how she feels about college.

"I'm home!" said Charlotte.

"Oh, how nice that you have finally joined us! We were just talking about what college you should go to. We finally agreed that you should be a doctor. Are you not excited?" her grandma was smiling and waiting for Charlotte's answer.

"That is enough! I don't want you deciding my future anymore! I can decide for myself. And I did. Mum, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, I love painting. It has been my passion for the last six years. I am also extremely talented! You should check out some of my paintings", Charlotte could not hide it any longer.

Her mother was confused, "Where is this going to Charlotte?"

"I wish to attend an art school. But not any art school! My favourite is Royal College of Art. It's a really good college. Mom, I am sure you will like it," said Charlotte. She must not give up, or this will all be in vain.

"Charlotte, what has gotten into you! Are you seriously thinking you could get anywhere in life with some art school?" her father was angry and confused. He never thought that his daughter would ever want to pick a college that he didn't suggest to her.

"I am sure that I should be allowed to choose a college for myself," Charlotte was starting to get annoyed. How can her parents not understand her?

"That is enough Charlotte! Go to your room!" her father yelled.

She angrily stomps to her room and shuts the door. Crying, she falls asleep on her messy bed.

Next morning her mother woke her up.

"Hey, sleepyhead, I wanted to talk to you. Get dressed. I will be waiting for you in the kitchen."

After Charlotte put on her usual clothes, she walked to the kitchen. There, she found her parents at the table, drinking coffee. As she sat down, her mother started explaining.

"Charlie, we are sorry for last night, but you need to understand that we only want what is good for you. Also, this is the first time we are hearing something like this from you. If you had told us sooner we might have more time to consider it," her mother was trying to be as considerate as possible.

Since Charlotte just realized what she wanted to be, she couldn't say anything about that.

"And did you think about it?" Charlotte said, with visible hope in her eyes.

"It was a hard decision," her father finally spoke up, "but we determined that if this is what you want, we shouldn't be the ones stepping in your way."

Charlotte couldn't contain the excitement inside of her. She hugged her parents as hard as she could.

"Your grandparents are still sleeping but yesterday we told them and after some convincing they agreed too." said her mother, "Now let's look at what this college offers."

Later that day, after school, Charlotte visited Emma again.

"Emma! You would not believe what happened!" Charlotte couldn't wait to tell her friend.

"Oh! Let me guess! Did your parents let you attend an art school?" Emma already knew it because of how thrilled her friend is. She was so happy for her.

"Yes!" Charlotte exclaimed. They laughed until Charlotte spoke up again. "It feels so good to choose something for myself. This time I chose my future."

šifra: tiger0388
mentor: Tihomir Matković
institution: Osnovna škola „Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić“ Sl. Brod
autor:Lena Blažević

CONNECTION WITH THE STARS

There are many stars in our universe, but there are the two main ones; the Guiding Star and the Shining Star. The Guiding Star guides people who are lost to their desired spot and the Shining Star helps people see better in the dark. Currently we are in a state of Starella, Starella is a period during which both the Guiding Star and the Shining Star are visible in the sky; Starella doesn't occur often, it occurs once every 150 years and lasts for three days.

There's one very smart girl, Maria. She is extremely interested in the topic of the universe. She is also very curious, so she constantly asks her parents lots of questions. Maria was reading one of her books about stars and she came across the topic of the Starella, it immediately caught her attention, so she read more about it. She found out when does Starella happen, and she realized it was currently happening. While she was reading, she came across a legend where during Starella it is possible to see and even reach the Star Kingdom; it is a place in space where the gods of all stars live, it said that certain people were even able to enter the Star Kingdom and talk with the Goddess of all stars: Stella. The people who were able to reach the Star kingdom wrote about it, they said that Stella is all knowing and can help you with absolutely anything. Maria wasn't naive, she was curious, so she decided to find a way to enter the Star Kingdom. The question "What is the meaning of life?" was bothering Maria for a long time now, it was all she was thinking about. She called her friend Violet since she was scared to go alone.

"What?" Violet answered in a sleepy voice. "So, I read about the Starella and the Star Kingdom, and since we are currently in the state of Starella we could enter the Star Kingdom and speak with the star gods!"

"You genuinely believe that? I thought you were smarter than that."

"Shut up and come over so we can read it together."

"Alright I'm coming but don't be surprised when all of this turns out to be a big lie."

Violet came over to Marias house and they started reading the story of the man who succeeded to enter the Star Kingdom. They spent a good two hours reading it so when they finished it was already starting to get dark outside. Now they knew what to do but...

"It's already dark outside, I don't think we can go out now." said Violet in a relieved tone since she still believed that the whole story was fake.

"So? My parents don't have to know. Look, this is our chance. Starella happens once every 150 years and since it's dark we basically have only one day left."

Violet scoffed but she didn't really care anymore. They went outside quietly so they wouldn't wake up Maria's parents. They were walking around trying to find a spot where both stars could be seen clearly. They found the spot. The stars shined so brightly they had trouble looking at them.

Maria opened her book and started reading the "chant" to summon the portal. It worked! Both stars started glowing even brighter and big rays of light started coming out of the stars. The rays reached the ground and formed a platform for them to step on. They were amazed. They stepped on the platform, and it flung them up to space at the speed of light. In a matter of seconds, they were in space. Violet was so scared she started screaming,

"WHAT IS GOING ON?! ARE WE IN SPACE? AM I ABLE TO BREATHE?"

"See, I'm able to breathe so you should be too."

Maria was surprisingly calm in this type of situation. They started looking around more and they saw "star roads". There were a bunch of roads made of light for the transportation of stars. There were many stars flying around and they were all different sizes, shapes and colors.

"I thought that all stars were huge. I didn't know there were also tiny ones." Violet was looking around even more curious about what kinds of stars are there.

"Well, this one is certainly huge" said Maria while pointing at a huge round purple star. Violet screeched loudly which made the purple star notice them. It stopped and started talking to them.

"Humans? We haven't had humans here in the last 150 years."

"Yes, we are here to find and enter the Star Kingdom. Do you know anything about how we could get there?" Maria asked the purple star hoping to get some kind of useful information.

"Oh, I'm very sorry humans, I'm an old star who forgets things easily. You will need to ask someone else." The purple star looked sad since it really wanted to help. Maria realized that the purple star was kind of sad.

"Thank you so much for your help. Have a great time!"

Maria and Violet went around asking everybody about the Star Kingdom, but they have been told many different things. They lost hope until a big beautiful shiny star came up to them.

"I know the way to the Star Kingdom."

"Really? Can you please tell us?"

"Oh, of course! I live nearby, and I haven't seen humans in such a long time. So, firstly you must find the colorful road since it is the main one, then you have to go through a meteor storm, and along the way you have to find a special key to enter the gate since it locks itself every Starella."

"Can you tell us where the main road is?"

"The main road constantly changes positions, and nobody knows where it starts or ends since the universe is infinite."

"Thank you so much! Goodbye!"

Maria and Violet instantly started asking everyone around if they had seen the main road. They were running around for what seemed like hours until they saw the main road shine brightly in the corner of their eyes. They ran to the main road and asked a taxi driver to take them to the meteor storm. Violet thought it was fun that they were riding in a "star car". While they were driving Maria saw something shiny next to her, it was some kind of ring. She put it in her backpack just in case it might be useful later. The driver dropped them off near the meteor storm and they were floating in space again. Violet looked around and suddenly she was angry.

"WHAT?! I thought someone would drive us through the meteor storm not that we would have to drive ourselves!"

And really there were little meteor cars that they are supposed to drive. They "swam" to the meteor cars and sat in them. Both girls turned their cars on and started driving through the meteor storm. As soon as they started driving a big meteor flew right in front of them, they barely dodged it, and Violet was screaming. They were driving left and right, up and down while trying their best to dodge the meteors and survive. Almost at the end of the meteor storm they saw the staircase to the Star Kingdom. Maria was thrilled to see it. She screamed so Violet could hear her.

"THAT'S IT! The staircase to the Star Kingdom is right there! Speed up so we can get there quicker!"

Both of them started driving faster. Right near the end another meteor flew in front of them. It slightly hit Marias meteor car, but she was alright. They finally made it to the end of the meteor storm. Maria stared at the staircase and almost started crying with joy while Violet was simply amazed at how long the staircase was.

"You're telling me we need to walk THAT much to reach the gate to the Star Kingdom?

"So what? You'll live. We are literally about to enter the Star Kingdom and speak with the star gods and all you are thinking about is how much do you have to walk to get there."

"Oh my God, chill. We shouldn't argue now."

"You're right. Let's do this!"

Maria took Violet's hand, and they started walking up the stairs. They were walking and running for about an hour until they actually reached the gate to the Star Kingdom. The gate had some kind of lock, it had a hole to put something ring shaped in there. Maria suddenly remembered that she had taken the ring from the star taxi. She took it out of her bag and put it in the lock. As soon as she put the ring in the lock something started happening; the gate started opening and there was so much light Maria and Violet had to cover their eyes. That was it. The gate is open and now they need to enter the Star Kingdom. They entered through the gate and the god of the Sun greeted them.

"I knew humans would come here this Starella, I had a feeling. Okay I didn't have the feeling, but I definitely wish I did." He said that bravely but still jokingly. He loved to joke with everyone.

"Is this the Star Kingdom?" Violet asked. Maria disappointedly said:

"Of course it is Violet! Don't embarrass us please."

"Hey, don't be mean. Everyone is accepted in the Star Kingdom, regardless of what you are like."

They were walking around the Star Kingdom and speaking with many of the star gods. The gods told them stories, how their lives are as gods and how is it living in the Star Kingdom. After all of the conversations with the gods they remembered that they need to speak with Stella. They asked the god of the Sun to take them to Stella. He agreed and showed them the way. After some walking, they could finally see her, Stella; the goddess of all stars. The girls were right in front of her, just standing there amazed. Stella noticed them and reached out her hand for them to step on. Violet and Maria climbed into Stella's hand and she brought them closer to her face.

"I'm glad to see humans here again, it's been 150 years since I saw a human for the last time. And what are your names?"

"Wow Stella, you're so beautiful and we are so honored to speak with you. Oh sorry! I'm Maria and she's Violet."

"Thank you so much. And you both have beautiful names. So, what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

"Well Stella... The question what the meaning of life is has been bothering me for a while and I wanted to hear what your answer to that question is."

"That is a very complex question, and it differs from person to person. I will just tell you what I think." Stella thought about it a little.

"I think the meaning of life is trying to make the world better, even by doing little things. If you have any chance to make the world a better place, take it. Take the chance. You won't regret it. By doing good things it will get back to you eventually. Always try your best and most importantly don't give up."

Violet and Maria were amazed by Stella's answer.

"Wow Stella, that was so inspiring... I don't know what to really say."

"You don't have to say anything. I'm just glad I could answer your question. And you can't really say much more since Starella is almost ending. The girls said goodbye to Stella and when they blinked, they were back home. They slept well. When they woke up Violet realized she had to go home quickly.

"Bye Maria! Everything we went through was amazing!"

"Bye Violet!"

Maria went back to her room and started writing about everything that happened. She will never forget about it.

CHEETAH0503
Ivana Gradečak
Osnovna škola Ivanovec
autor:Eva Šafarić

AUTUMN BEAUTY

I was writing a letter—the kind that always seemed to emerge with the crispness of autumn air, brittle yet vibrant, much like the leaves swirling outside my window. Each stroke of the pen felt as though I were pouring my heart out, telling the world about love—a love both tender and tumultuous. The scent of damp earth mingled with the fading warmth of the season, echoing the bittersweet nostalgia entangled in my heart.

Just as the trees shed their bright foliage, I found myself shedding layers of hesitation, each word falling gently onto the page. "Dear Anna," I began, the ink pooling like golden sunlight filtering through an amber canopy. Finishing the first sentence, I looked up at the sky, filled with shapely clouds, then down at the ground, where I purposefully admired the vibrant hues of fire-coloured leaves. Reminded of her eyes, I slowly lowered my feather onto the paper, its raspy sound a whisper of my thoughts.

"Looking at the trees, inhaling the autumn air, reminds me of you," I wrote, glancing around for inspiration. Sad birds chirped over the sound of swaying leaves. I closed my eyes and absorbed the last warmth of the disappearing sun. When I opened them, I closed the inkwell, cleaned the feather, hid the paper, and left the gorgeous landscape behind.

I walked along the cold, wet asphalt road that crossed the picturesque valley, framed by magnificent mountains shrouded in grey fog—a blanket of autumn's mystery. The fog reminded me of her hugs. I took the letter out again for a quick glance. With this piece of paper, I hoped she would see how much I adored her. Her long, orange hair, her deep brown eyes, her rosy cheeks dusted with freckles. I could picture her small frame in my oversized sweater. She was the love of my life.

The more I thought of her, the faster I walked. Before I knew it, I was running, my lungs burning with the effort. I ran until I finally reached her street. A small street lined with trees, and there it was—the oldest house in the neighbourhood. Yet at first glance, it looked so beautiful you couldn't take your eyes off it, just like its owner.

On the way, I passed a little flower shop and bought her a bouquet. She loved flowers—loved them dearly. As I walked, the scent of fresh-cut roses filled the air. I imagined her fiery hair against a field of tulips, her presence the single rose that stood out. I clutched the bouquet tightly and left it on her doorstep, alongside my short note. Taking a deep breath, I turned and walked away.

The autumn wind tousled my hair and drained the colour from my lips. The wet road glistened, and the birds were gone. For a moment, I felt utterly alone in the world. That feeling dissipated when I stepped back into my home.

The room was cluttered with papers, drawings, and letters. Feathers, both new and old, were strewn across the wooden floor. I had never been a tidy person, but I always knew where my things were—or so I thought. I searched frantically for an old letter I'd written to my dearest Anna but couldn't find it.

Standing in the middle of the room, I asked aloud, "Where am I?"

To my shock, a strange old woman entered the room and introduced herself as my mother. My mother? But wasn't she dead? What was happening? The old woman touched my face and called me "son."

"I just want my Anna," I whispered, stepping away. She sighed deeply, and not long after, I saw the most beautiful sight—red hair, glowing like a flame, and those magnificent coffee-brown eyes. It was Anna.

Warmth and happiness flooded me as she hugged me tightly. "My sweet boy," she said, holding me as if she'd never let go. Suddenly, everything made sense. The old woman was indeed my mother, and Anna—my precious Anna—was my love, my life.

Later that evening, I found myself heading back to her house. The autumn breeze carried the scent of leaves and fading sunlight. Her coffee-brown eyes sparkled in the dimming light, reminding me why I'd first fallen for her.

As we sat together, her eyes gazed into mine with an intensity that made the world blur. I leaned in and kissed her soft, rosy lips, feeling as though time itself had stopped.

When I pulled away, she smiled at me, her expression radiant. I felt alive, free, and safe. She whispered the words that sent my heart soaring: "Can I stay at your house? My mom doesn't need to know."

I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I replied, my voice steady and sure.

Later that night, I found her lying in my bed, her orange hair vivid against the pillow. She looked more beautiful than ever, like the first and last autumn sunset combined. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I held her close, feeling the warmth of her presence, and for a fleeting moment, I believed we could hide from the terrifying world outside.

But the morning came too soon.

I awoke to cold sheets and an empty room. Anna was gone. My mother's room was empty too. A strange hollowness gripped me as I sat at my desk, staring out the window. An orange leaf spiralled to the ground, reminding me of her.

With a heavy heart, I picked up a clean sheet of paper and dipped my feather into the ink. The sadness poured from me onto the page. When the pen fell silent, I lay back on the bed, my eyes closing one last time, finally in the presence of my A…

šifra: Nightingale036
Vanessa Bogić, 7.r, OŠ Kman-Kocunar, Split
Snježana Omazić, mentor

BRAVERY IN A NECKLACE

May 2th, 8:30 AM

If not for the occasional click-clack of its wheels on the rails, the train would have been in complete silence; it was clear that the passengers, made up of what appeared to be entirely adult citizens on their way to their jobs, weren't exactly thrilled for yet another grueling day of work, especially during the Golden Week. Amidst them, however, sat Izumi Moramo — a sixteen-year-old highschooler who, despite her younger age, appeared just as tired as the businessmen she was seated amongst. Her bright orbs were set on her own feet as she waited for the moment she reached her destination, the only place that provided her temporary comfort from the painful reality of being nothing but a laughing stock for the jock boys and a mattress for the popular girls to walk over.

Usually, the young maiden was more buoyant as she anticipated the moment the railway vehicle suddenly came to a stop and she would be able to finally reach her safe Haven. However, the previous week had been a nightmare. A group of her classmates persistently followed and harassed her, the number of people shouting insults at her only growing with each day. It was enough to crush the small pieces of self-confidence she had left inside her already shattered heart. It wasn't as if her parents, who very clearly favored her younger brother — Minato Moramo, who worked to get her into trouble every day, one way or another; even if it meant framing her for his own bad actions. The only idea that made her keep pushing forward, from locking herself in her room and skipping school, was the image of stepping before the train station and rushing into the forest that decorated the scenery behind it and plopping down onto the grass right next to the vine-covered statue from which the gaping holes in its shut eyes emitted streams of water, pouring into the flowing lake right below.

Lost in thought, Izumi almost missed the piercing creak of the train suddenly ceasing movement on the tracks, signaling the arrival to its third stop. And she knew very well where the third stop led.

She stood up from her seat, her hand gripping the messenger bag slung over her shoulder. And as she stepped to the very edge of the exit, she felt like she couldn't couldn't contain herself. The girl began to hasten, as swiftly as her feet would take her, wanting nothing more than to finally find solace in the only place she could call her safe haven, if even for just a fleeting moment.

Before she knew it, her ears filled with the sound of her urgent footsteps softening beneath the grassy ground, and her eyes feasted upon the sight of the familiar scenery in the distance. Despite slowly running out of energy, she only quickened her running motions. But the fatigue soon caught up to her, blinding her for a moment as her foot hooked onto a moss-enveloped rock, causing Izumi to trip.

A stunned yelp escaped her lips, soon followed by a groan of pain at the throbbing in her knee.

'Are you all right?', she heard a soothing, velvety voice inquire with concern etched in their tone, snapping her back into reality.

The schoolgirl, startled, tried to stand up and face whoever had intruded into what she, at that point, saw as her property. However, the discomfort in her leg caused her to stumble back down.

'O-ow… Who-… who goes there…?!' she growled, horror silently filling the girl's vulnerable body.

'Do not fret…', the voice began once more, '... I do not seek to hurt you, Moramo.'

The maiden tensed as her name was used. As she looked around frantically, her darting eyes froze when she had a staggering epiphany: the voice was coming from the large sculpture.

'W-... what? You're… talking…? A-and you know who I am…?'

A chuckle escaped the figure.

'Yes, yes… You speak to me each time you visit here, and I must admit I've been feeling guilty about never daring to comfort you. But it's better late than never, no?'

'I… guess you're right.'

'So, erm… you've really been listening to the stories I've been telling you…?' she inquired, still completely awed.

'Indeed I have. You have been through; you deserve a lending ear.'

'... That's… nice. Thank you.'

'Of course, my child... Say, I never introduced myself; how impolite of me.'

'My name is Amane. It is a pleasure to properly meet you.'

As the statue presented itself, the young girl decided it only made sense she did as well.

'Nice to meet you as well, you… you can call me Izumi. You don't have to be orthodox, really…' she timidly muttered, insisting she be referred to by her first rather than her last name; an unexpected request in the face of Japanese social rules.

Amane appeared surprised.

'Oh my,' it tittered, 'how sweet.'

A rosy flush painted across the latter's cheeks, and she bashfully waved her hand.

'Hey, I'm just trying to be nice here!' the schoolgirl clarified, shy yet amused.

And that's how Izumi made the discovery that the effigy she had been expressing her despair and loneliness to, too, had life.

Whilst she did homework and afterwards read a book, the teenager continued to converse with Amane, slowly yet surely getting more comfortable with it.

And by the end of the day, as she was about to leave with her handbag in hand, Amane stopped the girl for a moment.

'Izumi,' it called out, prompting her to turn her head to it.

'Hm…?' she hummed in question.

'Before you go… I have something I wish to give you. I feel great remorse, listening to your words filled with misery and gloom. That said, I believe I might have something that could perhaps help you.'

Izumi's eyes widened.

'Huh…? Really…?'

'Really. If you wish to reach it, climb up my back; you will spot a necklace.'

The maiden thought for a moment before nodding. She carefully hopped on some rocks to reach higher ground. And with a grunt of effort, she climbed up onto the statue.

'Found it!'

'And… There.' she notified as she untied it from its neck, holding it in her grasp.

'Well done.'

'Thanks, but uh… what is the necklace supposed to do…?'

'Well, you see, Izumi; I was created by a man named Yamada Hideki, serving to represent his fearlessness, and the necklace is blessed, and so anyone who wears it gains sudden surges of *bravery*.'

Bravery…

'You mean… it could help me with my social anxiety?'

'Exactly. That's why I wish for you to have it.'

'... Thank you, Amane. That means a lot to me…'

'Now now, no need to thank me. This is the least I could do for you after all your struggles.'

'Now, head home, my child; the train is sure to come soon.'

With a small wave, the young girl began to stroll back to the train station, where she found the ride home waiting.

That day, she returned home and faced her parents with a firm expression.

'Mum, dad… we… we need to talk.'

Curious and a tad bit concerned, they sat down next to her on the comfortable couch in their living room.

'What's wrong, honey?', inquired her mother.

'You can tell us.', chimed in her father.

With a shaky sigh, she began describing how she always felt neglected and as if she didn't matter as a result of their favoritism towards her brother.

With each word she spoke, the look of shock on their faces only became more apparent. They had never known their youngest child, who they thought to be an innocent angel, was secretly the true perpetrator of the things Izumi got into trouble for.

And when she finished, they began to… apologise.

'Sweetie, we… we had no idea this was happening.'

'We're so sorry for making you feel that way, we thought we were doing what was best for you…'

'We promise we'll make sure your brother never does this again.'

Her eyes widened. She didn't expect them to understand.

'You… you believe me?', she asked, her voice soft.

'Of course we believe you; you're our oldest daughter! We know you wouldn't lie about something like this.', explained her father.

The other parent followed: 'Even when we did believe your brother, we still knew you were a kind soul. Your brother, however… we're going to have a talk with him.'

Filled with gratitude and joy for the first time in what felt like forever around her parents, she wrapped her arms around the both in a big hug. They reciprocated, comforting and complimenting her *bravery* to finally talk to them about such a matter.

That next day, she received an apology letter from her younger brother, who handed it to her with tears in his eyes.

Izumi read the contents written in shaky, messy handwriting before gazing back down to look at her brother.

'I forgive you, Minato. It's okay.'

'H-... Huh…?', he sniffed, 'You forgive me…?'

'Mhm. Even if you are mean at times, I still care about you a lot.'

The brother, unable to keep his tears from flowing, began to sob as he squeezed her tight. The sister appeared surprised for a moment, but soon squeezed back, caressing his back in a warm gesture.

'There there…'

That was the first Golden Week in many that the family had spent finally… together.

And as the Golden Week reached its end, Izumi felt nervous about the constant insults she was likely to receive. However, with the necklace, she was convinced she could do anything.

May 5th, 7:30 AM

Moramo walked into school, feeling a few stares on her back. But she didn't seem bothered. Not today.

'All right, class; I hope you had some rest and also took break time to study. Get ready for the exam, put all of your books in your bag.', instructed a teacher.

'A test on the first day after a holiday? That has to be illegal somewhere!', groaned a male student.

'Ugh, this is horrible! Can't believe I didn't finish my makeup because I had to study…', whined a female student.

Moramo, however, remained quiet, simply waiting. And when she was handed the paper, she began to write, her strokes swift and confident.

'Okay, everyone; put down your exams. Time's up', the teacher exclaimed.

A few students seemed shocked, having still not finished half of said exam.

'S-sensei! Could you give us some more time? W-we haven't finished!', a boy pleaded.

'No, Aoyama… you had enough time to finish every task.'

The of the class sighed, not looking very proud with their work. Meanwhile, Moramo didn't appear worried; perhaps being a 'nerd' who spent lunch break alone in the library had finally paid off.

The teacher swiftly began grading.

'Saito… Yū (Very good)…'

'Shimizu… Ka (Average)...'

'Hamada… Ryō (Good)...'

'Aoyama… Nin (Acceptable)…'

And as she called students and stated their grade, most appeared horrified and disappointed.

That is when she spoke:

'Moramo… our first shū (excellent), 100%.'

Students turned to her with confused expressions and wide eyes.

'That dumb quiet girl got more than Saito, can you believe it…?!', they gossiped amongst each other, unable to believe the unexpected outcome.

For the rest of the day, Moramo sensed even more eyes on her than before. But of course, she paid them no mind.

She felt confident. *Brave*.

Hm… brave. Oh yes, the necklace.

May 9th, 8:30

The week soon ended; and by the time school was finished on Friday, she was on her way to meet the statue once more. Once she reached the third stop and left the train as usual, she rushed forward to the forest, but a bit more carefully this time.

'Ah… I have been waiting for you, dear one', Amane greeted her politely.

'Hello, Amane', she greeted back, 'How are you?'

'I am doing just splendid, my dear', it replied before continuing: 'But the true question is; how did your week go?'

'Actually, it went pretty smoothly… I talked to my mum and dad about how my brother's been treating me, so they had a talk with him and now he's much nicer. I got some good grades and even made some friends! The- the necklace really worked!', she described, a goofy smile on her face, making Amane smile.

'I see, I see…'

'Actually, I was just about to talk just about that necklace', it pointed at the piece of jewelry.

Izumi cocked her head, curiously.

'Hm…? What is it?', she questioned.

'That necklace', they began, 'doesn't give you any powers at all. It contains no blessing.'

The news caused the girl's eyes to widen in surprise.

'What?! You mean to tell me the necklace did nothing?'

Amane chuckled.

'Indeed, that is exactly what I am saying.'

Izumi couldn't believe it. She needed to know why everything went so well that week.

'Then… how was I so confident and… *brave*?"

'Well, the truth is, you simply needed a friend to support you. You didn't need any magic jewelry, just someone to be there for you.'

'I gave you the confidence to talk to your family and make things right with them; they gave you confidence to believe in yourself and the motivation to finish up schoolwork and make amazing progress.'

As Izumi dug deeply into her soul, attempting to understand her own emotions, she realized that Amane was right. She truly didn't need any magic, just the love and support of her friends and family.

'... You're… you're right.', she began, 'Your care and affection really was all I needed.'

'... Thank you, Amane. Thank you so much for helping me see the truth.'

The two spent the rest of the day laughing, playing and talking. Everything finally felt more lively, more positive. After having to go through the dark tunnel of sadness and gloom alone, the figure of stone's light helped her find the way home, out into the bright sky of joy at last.

That day, she went back home on the same train as usual, gazing down at her feet with patience. However, today, she didn't look so tired, upset or on the edge… she looked content, assured, ready to face the many obstacles of the world, and… *brave*.

Brave.

Even without the necklace.

šifra: ARTIST
mentor: Ivana Gradečak
institution: Osnovna škola Ivanovec
autora: Ela Miljan 8.b

NASLOV PRIČE: THE STAR MAKERS

In a small village cradled between the rolling hills and whispering woods, where the air shimmered with magic and laughter flowed like a gentle stream, there was a sparkling secret hidden beneath the blanket of night: a place known only to a few, endured by time and guarded by gentle hands—The Workshop of Star Makers.

The Workshop sat nestled at the top of a winding path, paved with glimmering stones that seemed to twinkle even in the daylight. Shimmering silvery vines coiled around the wooden beams, and soft lanterns hung like glowing orbs from the roof. Inside, the scent of warm honey and vanilla mingled with the faint aroma of stardust—a sweet perfume that made the heart flutter with dreams.

At the heart of this magical abode stood Mizu, a wise old star maker with hair as white as the fluffiest clouds and eyes twinkling like the very stars she crafted. Though age had etched its lines upon her face, a spirit of youth danced within her, illuminating every corner of the workshop. The walls were lined with shelves overflowing with jars filled with shimmering stardust—a kaleidoscope of colours that sparkled and shifted, ethereal and infinite. In one corner, a gentle breeze rustled small banners depicting stars' tales from ages past.

Today was a remarkable day; it marked the beginning of summer's twilight, when the sky transformed into a canvas of deep indigo painted with strokes of pink and orange. Mizu had patiently awaited this day, for it would be the first lesson of her newest apprentice, a bright-eyed girl named Lila.

Lila, with her tousled chestnut curls and eager spirit, entered the workshop, her heart racing with anticipation. She had dreamt of being a star maker since she was little, sitting atop her roof and gazing out into the vastness of the cosmos, her imagination swirling with fantasies of interstellar adventures.

"Welcome, my dear Lila!" Mizu greeted her, her voice warm and welcoming like a cosy embrace. "Are you ready to step into the world of starlight?"

"Yes! More than anything!" Lila replied, her bright eyes shining like the dawn.

Mizu chuckled, leading Lila to a large oak workbench cluttered with peculiar

tools—and here began the enchanting lesson. The desk was adorned with silver spoons that looked as if they had been dipped in moonlight, glass containers shaped like stars, and tiny crystal bowls that trapped clouds of vibrant stardust, reflecting every colour of the evening sky.

"First, we must gather our materials," Mizu instructed, carefully lifting a jar of shimmering cerulean stardust. "Each star is born from raw stardust—gathering it is a sacred duty. It is said that stardust carries the dreams of all beings in the universe. We channel these dreams into our creations."

Lila watched in awe as Mizu sprinkled a handful of stardust across the workbench, where it danced and shimmered like shimmering fireflies under the soft golden light of the lanterns. Each grain felt electric, alive with endless possibilities.

Before she knew it, Lila was being guided into the delicate steps of the star-making process. Side by side, they'd blend different hues of stardust in a silver mixing bowl, the colours swirling together like a cosmic whirlpool. Mizu demonstrated how to infuse it with hope and laughter, coaxing out melodies woven into the fabric of the universe.

"Listen closely, Lila," Mizu said, her voice a soothing hum. "The stars respond to joy. You must sing them into existence."

With a flutter of nerves, Lila began to hum softly, her voice shy yet sweet. To her surprise, the stardust shimmered brighter, twinkling as if it was dancing to her tune. Encouraged by Mizu's gentle smile, Lila grew bolder, her song rising higher, filling the workshop with warmth and joy.

As the day turned to dusk, they shaped the first star. Mizu produced a small silver mould shaped like a luminous star; together, they filled it with the glimmering mixture of stardust and enchanted it with a sprinkling of moonlight, their voices weaving a lullaby of dreams.

Just then, a flurry of tiny creatures burst from behind a shelf. They were Celestials, small magical beings with translucent wings that glowed like lanterns. They zipped around the workshop, chittering excitedly, offering their tiny helping hands. One tangled itself playfully in Lila's curls, while another swooped down to assist in the stirring of the stardust.

"What are they?" Lila giggled, enchanted by their delightful antics.

"These little ones are our helpers," Mizu explained, a twinkle of affection in her eyes. "They embody the laughter of the stars and guide us through the process."

With their assistance, Lila and Mizu pressed the shimmering mixture into the mould, and with a touch of Mizu's wand, they released bursts of sparkles into the air.

The mould glowed warmly, and slowly, a beautiful star took shape, radiating an aura of pure joy.

"Now, we must let it rest under the moonlight until twilight," Mizu advised. "Every star needs time to breathe and awaken."

Lila was mesmerized, her heart swelling with anticipation. They placed the star on the windowsill, where it basked in the soft glow of the moonbeams, illuminating the workshop with a serene light.

Days turned into weeks, each session filled with laughter, creativity, and a deeper bond forming between Lila and her mentor. Every moment was a new lesson, and every star crafted became a masterpiece reflecting bits of their souls. Nothing felt more fulfilling than seeing the sky fill with stars they had created together.

Yet, amidst all the joyous moments, Lila struggled with the weight of responsibility. The stars represented hope, dreams, and the essence of life itself. "What if I can't create a star as beautiful as yours?" Lila confessed one day, staring at her hands, fidgeting with worry.

Mizu knelt beside her, gentle wrinkles crinkling around her eyes. "Dear Lila, remember that each star is born from your unique heart. It doesn't matter how it looks; it matters how much love you put into it. You can only give what is true to you."

Inspired by Mizu's words, Lila poured her passion into every creation. She painted her dreams into each stroke of stardust, pouring in whispers of hope, laughter, and joy. And finally, the day came for Lila to craft her very first solo star.

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with hues of lavender and gold. With the Celestials buzzing around her, Lila stood at the workbench, her heart pounding with both excitement and nerves. The workshop was alive with myriad coloured glows, whispering tales of starlit nights.

Choosing a mix of pinks and soft greens, Lila began to sing a melody that rambled through her childhood memories, a song meant to bring happiness to anyone who looked upon the star. She sang of still forests, of laughter echoing among the trees, and of friends gathered under a shared sky.

With trembling fingers, Lila filled the mould, her heart soaring with each grain of stardust that she whisked together. The Celestials danced excitedly, and Mizu watched with pride, her own heart swelling for her apprentice.

After what felt like an eternity, the star was ready—its soft glow beckoning from within the mould. Lila removed it gently, holding it in her hands, illuminating the dim room with a celestial light.

"It's perfect!" she gasped, her breath caught in her throat. Before her stood a star that gleamed like fresh dew at dawn, delicate and soft, yet bearing the weight of her dreams.

"Now comes the most important part," Mizu said softly. "We must release it into the sky."

Lila nodded, clutching the star tightly, feeling its warmth spread through her fingertips. They stepped outside into the azure twilight, the village bathed in a gentle glow. The stars were just beginning to peek through the velvety darkness, waiting for Lila's creation.

With the Celestials swirling around them, Lila held the star high above her head. Closing her eyes, she whispered her wish for the star—to shine brightly and share dreams with those who needed hope. As she opened her eyes, a surge of energy coursed through her, and she released the star into the night sky.

For a moment, silence enveloped the world, and then, as if in response to her wish, the star burst forth like a firework, igniting the heavens with radiance. It twinkled with the essence of laughter and dreams woven through its core. It danced among the other stars, a newfound friend joining the celestial ballet.

Lila gasped in awe, her heart overflowing with glee. "It's beautiful!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

Mizu's smile widened, mirroring Lila's elation. "Indeed, it is—just like you, my dear. You've brought light into the world."

The stars above twinkled like a cascade of diamonds, each glowing more vibrantly than before, as if celebrating Lila's achievement. The villagers below also looked up, mesmerized by the beauty unfolding in the night sky, feeling a warmth fill their hearts.

As the night deepened, Lila and Mizu stood together, their hearts connected in the shared magic of the moment. The young apprentice had found her place.

šifra: Pz4817
mentor: Maja Penava Aleksić, prof.
institution: OŠ „Blaž Tadijanović“ Slavonski Brod
autor:Paulina Zolić

THE LAST DANCE

It was a windy evening in the year 1848. There was a big royal castle that was located in a northern French town. In that castle lived the family La Vertrée. There lived a tip-top princess, Belle, that was like an angel. Princess Belle was in her room, brushing her long, blonde, and shiny hair that was soft as silk, after taking a shower.

She felt like someone was staring at her, but she just ignored it because of their security in front of their castle. She felt that staring for weeks now, but didn't do anything about it. While she brushed her hair she looked at beautiful scenery through her window. She always enjoyed watching scenery through her window because the castle was placed next to a lake.

She was relaxing and brushing her hair, when all of the sudden she heard knocking on her window. Belle froze, she was scared and confused. She slowly turned her head to see what's happening. She saw a handsome prince standing by her window. Belle did not expect that to happen, so she stood quiet in shock. Te handsome prince then broke the silence and said: "Hey. Are you okay? Because you look like you saw a ghost or something."

After a moment of silence, Belle spoke up: "Umm, yeah…I'm okay, I just didn't expect this to happen." She said that in a quiet and shaky voice.

"Yeah I could've guess that…my name is Theodore, by the way", he said.

"My name is Belle, nice to meet you".

Theodore had black hair, dark, brown, sparkly eyes, he was tall and slim. No matter how creepy he was, Belle still found him really handsome. She was wondering about one thing, so she had to ask him: "I was wondering, how did you walk past security that is around this castle?" He quickly answered "Oh, don't worry about it, they just didn't notice me".

Belle was confused about his answer, but she didn't want to bother him with lots of questions about it. Theodore kind of looked familiar to her, but she still stood silent. Belle was shocked about everything that had just happened. They had a long eye contact, Theodore looked deeply in Belle's blue eyes while she looked deeply in The-

odore's dark brown eyes. It was just silence, but somehow that silence wasn't weird or awkward…it was… somehow comfortable.

After a few moments of their eye contact she remembered that he is still a total stranger to her so she just panicked and broke their eye contact. She said "Uh… BYE! I have to go now." Belle didn't even give him a chance to speak, she quickly closed her window and left her room. She drank a lot of water to calm herself down a little bit.

After a while, she decided to go to bed. However, she had problems with sleeping. She was thinking about everything that just happened. She was having a hard time falling asleep, and when she finally fell asleep, she had a dream about Theodore. When Belle woke up, she tried to ignore the fact that she had a dream about a boy that she had met, and because of that, she was feeling weird the entire day.

When the evening came once again, Belle was reading her red vintage book with hard covers that had a few cracks that were showing its age, when all of the sudden, she heard some knocking on her window again. The feeling of fear dawned on her once more. She opened the window and saw the man from yesterday, Theodore. Her eyes glimmered the moment she saw him.

"Already miss me, huh?" she said. They both chuckled at her little joke. He replied with, "You seem like a sweet princess, I can't lose my opportunity to talk to you." Belle was trying not to blush at his words, as she was completely smitten by his deep voice, from head to toe. "Well, I guess it makes sense now" she responded.

They both held that long eye contact again. Belle somehow didn't feel weird or as if she was in danger around him. Instead, she felt like she had known him for years. That very night, they had been chatting for a while, slowly getting to know each other better. Shortly after, they had to depart, due to Belle having to attend her family dinner. Both of them looked at each other one last time before Theodore left, their eyes filled with longing for more.

The next morning, she felt ecstatic and had slept well, especially after that she finally knew who and what kind of a boy Theodore was. Belle kind of felt excited with the fact that Theodore came from a royal family, as she did, too.

Since then, Theodore started to show up on her window more and more frequently, every time the clock struck 7 pm. The timing was very amusing to her since that was around the time they first met. On a following night, Belle was waiting for Theodore to arrive so she could start a conversation about it. When he came, she said "I'd like to ask you something, if you don't mind." Theodore then responded, "Okay, what is it?"

She asked him with a soothing voice, "I realized that before I had met you, I felt like someone was staring at me at the time you usually showed up on my window. So, do you have something with it?". There was a moment of silence, but then Theodore had a sheepish grin and sighed before speaking up, "I'll be honest with you, it was me. I couldn't help but look at that beauty of yours. You just look…heaven-sent."

When she heard his affectionate words from his deep voice, the corner of her lips tugged into a sly smile, no matter how unsettling that might have sounded. Theodore noticed Belle's soft expression, but before he could even talk, Belle's mother knocked on her door.

The sound of the knock startled both of them, before whispering for Theodore to leave before her mother sees him, yet he refused. Belle looked at him full of worry with a hint of panic, before reluctantly opening the door, hoping for the best, because her soon-to-be husband had already been picked. She finally opened the door.

Her mother rambled about Belle's royal dance for her 18th birthday that was coming up soon. Belle's mother, Marie, told her that she was going to dance with Arthur who was supposed to be Belle's arranged husband.

Belle didn't like him at all, but she had to because La Vertrée family liked Arthur's family. While Belle and her mother were talking, Theodore, who was still on Belle's window was listening to their conversation. He felt disappointed so he slowly left. When Marie left Belle's room, Belle immediately walked over to her window to see…nothing. She felt kind of confused, but she understood his departure, so Marie wouldn't see him.

The next day, Belle waited for Theodore late in the evening, but he didn't show up. She was confused, she felt weird. Theodore didn't show up for at least a week. Belle knew that something was definitely wrong. It felt really strange. And the worst part was that she had to ask him something really important, something that her family and he wouldn't expect. She patiently waited for the evening, and she felt that staring again. She immediately left te castle to look for Theodore. After more than 10 minutes, she finally found him. She was relived.

Belle came over to Theodore and asked him "Why didn't you come, like you usually did? I know we have known each other only for a month and a few days, but I enjoy talking to you".

Theodore was surprised, but he also felt good that she enjoyed talking with him. He broke the silence and spoke up "I just thought that I lost my chance with you when I heard your mother's words, because of your future husband".

Belle felt bad about what Theodore had said, so she responded "Look, I don't even like him, I don't have a choice. I'll just let you know that you didn't lose your chance".

He was confused and asked her "Wait, what do you mean by that?" Belle answered: "I want to dance with you at my 18th birthday party", she smiled as she said it.

He couldn't help but smirk at her words she said with sweet voice. "Wait , really?" he asked. "Yeah. But I have one more question. Why did you leave that fast when I was talking to my mother, she couldn't even see you, and how did you hear our conversation if you left?"

He sighed, and after a moment of silence he spoke up "I didn't leave, I was there, and I'll tell you a hint why you didn't see me when your mother left. Only you can touch me and see me, and I can choose when to be seen or not."

Belle froze there in complete shock, she was silent, her eyes wide open. She definitely didn't expect that. She was silent for a few minutes. Belle broke the silence, still in complete shock "… Am I thinking right…. you are some kind of a ghost?....."

He quickly answered, "Yes, I am." Belle was silent. Theodore said, "Hey, but don't be scared, there's only one way that can make me live again, and it can happen only once."

She responded in surprised but in still confused voice "What way?"

"If I marry the right woman I would live again, but if I marry the wrong one, nothing is going to change."

The fact was that he could be seen and touched by the right woman that he could marry, but he didn't tell that Belle that, to see what she would do. "Good to know, but you can still dance with me, right? You can't leave me alone with Arthur?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll still dance with you, princess. Don't worry" he said. Belle's heart melted when he used the nickname princess. She loved how those words slipped out from his lips with deep voice. She softly blushed and smiled a little. Both of them were happy about it.

Then it was a royal dance night, Belle's birthday. She got ready for the dance. She looked like an angel that came from Heaven. Theodore's eyes looked at her with sparkle, clearly liking what he saw.

They were slowly entering ballroom, while Arthur, who had no clue that he wasn't going to dance with her, was searching through the whole castle to find her. When Belle and Theodore got to the ballroom, everyone was in shock that they saw Theodore. They couldn't even speak. They couldn't believe their eyes.

They all waited for Arthur to come and see this. When Arthur finally came, he was also in complete shock. He couldn't speak for a few moments, but then he said with shaky, surprised tone "M-my…brother…h-how?"

The princess was confused and surprised by Arthur's words. That was the reason why Theodore looked familiar to her…His mom was holding back her tears. Everyone in there knew that Belle was the right one for him, and that she could make him alive.

After a long moment of silence, both of them started to dance. The whole dance was wonderful. When it ended, everyone went to talk to Theodore. While everyone was talking to him, Belle's mother, Marie came up to her and told her a secret: "He was supposed to be your future husband, but he went missing and lots of things changed…but right now, you are the only one right for him."

A few years after that night, Belle and Theodore were married, Belle woke his heart full of love and joy, and Theodore lived again.

Emilly Horovski, 8.b
Mentor: Tea Horvatić
Osnovna škola Strahoninec

FAMILY LIFE STORY

A family lived in North America. In New York city. The husband and wife had five children. One daughter and four sons. They also had a baby before them, but the baby died at birth. The Husband and wife were sad that day. But they never gave up. The wife and husband were top fashion designers. And they were the best at it.

The husband's name was Alex and his wife's name was Clear. Their daughter's name was Luna, she was the youngest in her family. And she was different from the other children. Luna had white hair from her birth. She inherited that from her great grandmother. She also had the gift of singing. The first brother's name was Jacob, the second brother's name was Liam, the third brother's name was Amir, and the fourth brother's name was Giovanni. He also had white hair from birth.

Their parents were extraordinarily rich. They had two private companies. They had two planes, five mansions. About fifty different cars. Three helicopters. And they even had a zoo. They were very kind to other people. One evening, the parents were returning home from a meeting, when a huge stone appeared out of nowhere on the road. But Mr. Alex failed to step on a brake and a collision occurred. The parents did not survive the crash. The companies and all the wealth were left to the children. Mom's sister Hailey took the kids to look after them. Mrs. Hailey had no husband. Her husband left her when he found out she was pregnant with someone else's child. When Mrs. Hailey found out what the parents left to the children, she decided to get rid of the children so that she and her son Peter could have all the wealth. She didn't just want to get rid of the children for money. Rather, she wanted to take revenge on her sister. She wanted her sister's children to suffer, because she had to struggle just to be able to feed her son and herself.

One evening, the brothers were playing outside with their sister when several men with black masks appeared and took the boys. Their sister tried to save them, but one of the men pushed her and she hit her head on a stone. Mrs. Hailey rushed Luna to the hospital where the doctors had only shocking news for Mrs. Hailey. The doctors told her that she lost her memories of the past due to a strong blow. However, Mrs. Hailey was happy because it was all just part of her plan. She used Luna as her house-

keeper and Luna's brothers were eventually sold into slavery. Nobody knew where they were. The brothers swore that when they grow up, they will become the richest people and that they will find their sister.

Mrs. Hailey got up early the next day and went to the bank and told the bank what had happened to the parents and children. She said that all the money and everything credited to the children should be credited to her, so that by the time Luna recovers, everything would be credited back to her. Unfortunately, Ms. Hailey never had that planned. She wanted everything only for herself and her son. Mrs. Hailey enjoyed her new life so much that she threw parties every night. Her son Clark bullied Luna and always threw things around to make it as difficult for her as possible. This has been happening for ten years. At that time, Luna had already turned eighteen. When her brothers turned eighteen, they escaped from slavery and started looking for work and they all found it and were very successful in life. They became CEOs of different technology and oil companies. They were the richest people in North America.

The brothers started searching for their sister. They had the best detectives and agents for the job. After two years, they found their sister. The brothers immediately got ready and set off to see their sister again. When the brothers arrived, they were in shock when they saw her. Clarck tortured their sister so badly that she passed out before their eyes. Even when she passed out, he continued to beat her and say bad words to her. That she is very slow, that she is lazy and stupid. The two younger brothers took their sister to the hospital while the two older brothers stayed to talk with their aunt. Their aunt blamed their sister for everything, but they didn't believe her because she couldn't do anything like that if she lost her memory and was very weak. Jacob and Liam took all of their aunt's money and everything that belonged to their parents. They threw her and her son out of the house. They told them to think about everything and ask if all this really needed to happen.

Jacob and Liam then quickly went to the hospital to see how their sister was doing. The doctors had good news. The doctors told the brothers that everything was fine and that her memories had returned. And that she needs to rest. The brothers were very happy. After a few days, Luna returned home. She talked to her brothers about everything and told them everything that her aunt and her son had done to her. When the brothers heard everything, they stood up and told her that they would fix everything. The youngest brother Giovanni stayed with his sister and entertained her while the others left. The brothers returned home in three hours and said that their aunt and her son were in prison for what they did to her.

Luna thanked her brothers. They said that there is no need to thank them because she is their sister and because they love her. The brothers prepared expensive gifts for her. However, she didn't want to accept them. She said that only they are precious and dear to her. The brothers hugged her and promised to keep and protect her whenever necessary. The four brothers and their sister were happy and lived together and protected each other. Luna and her brothers spent several months hanging out together. In the meantime, the oldest brother found a girlfriend and got married. And now they have two children, a boy and a girl. The other three brothers did not have girlfriends, yet. Even their sister Luna found a husband before they found girlfriends. Over time, Luna became pregnant and found out that she had triplets. And they were all boys.

When she gave birth to triplets, she found out that she was pregnant again, but this time it was a girl.

They all lived together as one big happy family.

šifra: 07062011
mentor: Vlatka Pacelt
institution: OŠ Gornje Vrapče
autor:Mia Nimac

FEARLESS ELENOR

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Elenor. Elenor had shimmering golden hair that flowed like sunlight through the trees, and her eyes sparkled like the stars in the night sky. One day, she went to the woods. As Elenor ran around the trees, playing joyfully, she saw a little boy her age. Maybe he will want to play with me, thought Elenor while walking towards the boy. As she got closer, the boy turned into a beautiful blue bird, as blue as the summer sky itself, and flew off toward an abandoned old house.

Our little Elenor was too curious not to follow that blue bird who was a boy just a little while ago, and so she ran after him, following him to that old, abandoned house. The bird flew into the house. Elenor hesitated but eventually went in after the blue bird because she couldn't control her curiosity. As the sound of her steps filled the halls of the house while she was walking around trying to find the bird, she noticed that the house was much bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, and she also noticed that all the doors in the house were wide open, but she didn't think much of it. Because, at that moment, all Elenor wanted was to find the bird boy, introduce herself to him, and ask him the million questions she had in her mind.

She looked around for a bit and found a clock; she was surprised it was functional. It was 11:59. Not even a second after the clock hit noon, thousands of blue birds started flying out of all the open doors. Elanor's first instinct was to cover her head with her hands, close her eyes, and scream. When she opened her eyes and realised she wasn't in the house anymore, she looked around for the bird boy. A bird flew over Elanor's head and transformed back into a little boy and sat down on a rock. That's him, thought Elenor, as she approached him.

"Hello there, I'm Elenor. What's your name?" she said.

The boy was surprised but still answered Elanor's question. "My name is Nicolas," he said shyly.

"You have a beautiful name. If you don't mind me asking, why did you run away, Nicolas?" wondered Elenor, looking at his appearance. He had hair as dark as a moonless night and eyes as bright as the northern lights in the night sky.

"I just wanted to play with you. It was boring playing all by myself," she said.

Nicolas was surprised Elenor didn't ask him about him transforming into a bird, but he was happy that it didn't bother her. "I thought you were going to hit me with a rock or something like others do when they see me," he said.

Elenor looked quite surprised when she heard this because there was nothing wrong with him at all. Well, except for the fact he can transform into a bird, he was still a normal kid. He appeared to be a normal kid, and he looked like one. So why were the other kids bullying him like that? Elenor had many questions to ask Nicolas, with sympathy, of course, so as not to come across as cold-hearted.

"That is just cruel. They are oblivious to what they are doing to you! I hope they experience how awful it is! And I hope they get stuck... wherever we are now." wondered Elenore while looking confused at Nicolas.

"Oh, I am sorry, I haven't told you where we are yet. We are in a world called Mariss. You may be wondering why Mariss. Well, it's because the royal family Marissona controls this world. They are hornets, and Mrs. Marie Marissona is the queen hornet. She is the one who turned me into this boy-bird mess. I used to be a normal boy, and kids wanted to play with me; my mommy loved me, and now she can't even look at me; she can't accept that this is her little boy," said Nicolas, holding back his tears as he explained it to Elenor.

"That must be terrible," said Elenor but maintained her supportive attitude. "Don't worry, Nicolas, we will find a way to fix you up and solve your family issue. We just need to find and talk to Mrs. Marie Marissona." Elenor said surprisingly confident.

And so, their little adventure began. How will they do it? Will they succeed in their goal? They couldn't possibly know, but they hoped that he could be normal again, hoped that they would come home safely to their families, and there was nothing that could stop them from succeeding. So, they went beyond their power, climbing mountains, walking miles and miles, and jumping over quicksands until they finally came to their destination, the castle Mariss itself!

They were walking towards the big doors that separated them from the royal family, but as they came closer, two guards stopped them.

"What are you two ants doing so close to the royal highnesses!?" said rudely the guard on the left.

"We need to talk to the royal highness this instant. You see, we desperately need the help of Mrs. Marie Marissona." Elenor explained politely.

You may not enter!" said the guard on the right while laughing with his colleague, because they thought being rude to small children was funny; instead, it made them cruel.

But our hero Elenor didn't waste a second; while they were too distracted laughing, she grabbed Nicolas's hand and ran to the door, opened it, entered the castle, and used a broom nearby to hold the big doors.

"That was awesome," Nicolas whispered happily into Eleanor's ear. "Elenor, look! – he said more loudly while pointing to a sceptre.

"We may not even have to talk to Queen Marissona; her sceptre is right in front of our noses! She turned me into this with that exact thing!" -Nicolas sounded relieved.

"But what if only she can do the magic with it?" Elenor asked wisely.

"She doesn't have any magic herself. The day she transformed me, she whispered, With the power of this sceptre, I now make you a blue jay! I perfectly remember the day she ruined my life. Just because I didn't know who she was. She is very narcissistic." Nicolas explained.

"Okay, Nicolas I have a plan. I will run there, grab that sceptre, and run back. You are in charge of escape, so when I come back, you will become a bird, grab me, and fly through the window. Ok?" Elenor said while sweating from fear.

"Got it, chef!" Nicolas agreed.

Elenor nodded and started running to get the scepter. She got closer, finally grabbed it, and ran back. As she was running back, the door suddenly opened. It was Mrs. Marie Marissona. When Nicolas saw her, he decided they were running out of time, so he transformed into a boy with blue wings, flew to Elenor, grabbed her into his arms, and flew out of the window.

Mrs. Marie Marissona was yelling at them to come back, threatening to kill them, but they did not care. Mrs. Marie Marissona sent her army to get them, but Nicolas flew faster than they ran. Nicolas and Elenor flew deep into the forest to buy more time to do the magic. Elenor raised the sceptre she had stolen and said the words.

"Nicolas, with the power of the sceptre, I now let you be the normal boy you were before, to live the normal life you deserve." And a shimmering white light appeared around Nicolas, making him the normal boy he deserved to be.

Of course, it was not over; the army was close, and Elenor had one more spell to do. "I, Elenor, with the power of this sceptre, wish for me and my new friend Nicolas to go home, to our families!" And with that, a purple portal appeared in front of them. When they went through it, they were home, safe.

"Thank you, Elenor!" Nicolas said. "You are the bravest girl I have ever met. You gave me confidence and gave me my life back. I am not a freak anymore!" Nicolas was so happy he screamed those words out. Elenor was so thrilled that she helped Nicolas that she cried happy tears. A few moments later, his mother and Elanor's parents showed up behind them.

Nicolas's mother came up to him and apologised to him. "I am so sorry, my son," she said. "I should never have reacted like that; after all, you are only nine years old. Please, forgive me."

"I forgive you. Elenor helped me win this battle! I couldn't have done it without her." screamed Nicolas excitedly.

Nicolas's mother hugged him tight, crying tears of joy, and after she was done, she came up to Elenor, thanked her with all her heart, and hugged them both.

Elanor's parents were so proud of her. They joined the group hug and started crying as well, being the proudest parents in the world. "We're so lucky to have you; you are our little angel!"- they were saying, and no doubt, they were right.

Elenor and Nicolas were happily playing every single day after their adventure, thinking that was the happy ending. But little did they know, it wasn't over. It was just the start of their friendship and the adventures that were waiting for them.

Barbara Korent, 8.a
Mentor: Tea Horvatić
Osnovna škola Strahoninec

FORBIDDEN LOVE

There was a girl named Naomi which loved a guy named Noah, but she wasn't allowed to be with him because her parents arranged a marriage with the archduke's son named Peter. This is the story of Naomi and Noah and their love despite the protests of Naomi's parents and the archduke.

One day in high school Naomi arrived on her first day and was scared she won't fit in, but that wasn't a problem. She made a lot of friends and became popular quickly, considering she was from England and that she came to Astoria. Days were going by quickly and Naomi became more popular and more beautiful each day, but then he came, Noah Thompson, son of Alexander Thompson the biggest mafia boss in the world. He saw her and their love started to bloom between them.

First couple of days they both played it cool although it didn't last long. During PE Noah took Naomi to the locker room, pinned her to the wall and just kissed her passionately. Naomi knowing who he is had no choice but to kiss him back. After a while Noah pulled back and asked her: "Did you like that, Naomi?", she nodded still blushing from the kiss and smiled at him, but her eyes stayed on his tall and intimidating 6ft tall figure.

Weeks later during lunch Noah couldn't hide his feelings anymore and decided to confess to Naomi, he came up to her, took a deep breath and said: "Naomi from my first day here I couldn't help but have a crush on you and I was wondering if you would like to be my girlfriend?", Naomi smiled and said: "Yes I would like to be your girlfriend, Noah."

The archduke's son Peter, an evil man without even a little bit of mercy, heard this and is fuming with rage, he never really loved Naomi he just knows he must marry her if he wants to be the next archduke of Astoria. With that the day ended and everybody went home and Naomi told her parents about her crush and relationship with the son of the mafia boss and her parents went into a full rage-on and started to yell their lungs on her, but Naomi the rebel she is, didn't listen and snuck out to a party hosted by Noah. There she was, the star of the party, she looked stunning in her tight red dress and her make-up. Everybody turned their heads after her and

then Noah saw her, his mouth dropped open when he saw her and his face became bright red.

Time passed and Naomi was forced to marry archduke's son Peter, she was devastated, but she knew she had no other choice, so she went to her room to get ready for the wedding she didn't want in the first place. However, her parents and the archduke forced her into the marriage, and she couldn't do anything about it. Her best friend named Grace was helping her get ready, she wanted to help Naomi, but she knew she had no chance against the archduke and his power. What she didn't know was that Naomi was still in relationship with Noah.

Couple of hours later everybody was gathered in the church of St. Cecilia where the ceremony would be held. Naomi's dad walked her to the altar where Peter, the son of the archduke, and the priest were waiting for her so the ceremony cloud start. Everything was going smoothly until the priest asked if anybody objects the marriage and in that moment the door of the church bursted open and Noah walked in with his men and aimed the gun on the archduke's son and said: "If you marry her today, it will be your funeral". Peter got scared of Noah and his men and left Naomi at the altar and ran out of the church.

He calmly went to the altar and stood in front of Naomi and told the priest to continue the wedding ceremony. With that Naomi and Noah got married and she started to live the life which she was only able to dream about, her parents stopped talking to her, but she didn't care, she was in love with the guy she loved the most.

As time passed by, love between Noah and Naomi became stronger when Naomi told Noah they will become parents, then nine months later their love reached the top when their daughter Talia was born. Time had passed and Noah became the leader of the Black Tigers mafia after his father Marcus passed away, but he became more ruthless while on missions, although the situation wasn't the same when he got home to his wife Naomi and their newborn daughter Talia.

The son of the archduke was jealous of Noah, and he decided to kidnap their daughter, ignoring he might get killed if Noah finds out which he did after Naomi called him crying with no control in the middle of the night. Noah was furious and sent his men to find the archduke's son and Talia, when Noah found Peter, he was fuming with rage as he told his men to hold him down while Naomi rushed to get Talia. As Naomi ran out the archduke's house and she heard a gunshot, and she knew that Noah had shot Peter because he kidnapped Talia and almost did the same thing to her. Naomi then knew one thing and that is if anybody is messing with her or Talia and if Noah finds out that same person won't get to live another day.

Noah came out the archduke's house and said: "NOBODY and I mean NOBODY will ever dare to mess with you and our dear daughter my dear Naomi". After they arrived home, they spent an entire day together as a family and their love only continued to grow stronger and stronger each day of their life.

Thirteen years later Naomi and Noah decided to tell Talia about the family mafia and that one day she is going to be the leader of the Black Tigers mafia, with that Talia's eyes had sparkled with excitement as they told her about it. Some years later Naomi and Noah had let Talia to lead the mafia for a week s she could get to know the job she will take on in the future.

The moral of the story is that love and determination can overcome everything.

šifra:KV12345
mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split
autor:Katija Vrvilo

FRIENDSHIP

In a big, enchanted forest lived a little girl Rose with her family. The forest was full of unusual animals and plants. The animals were jumping and talking. In the middle of the forest, there were many unusual animals and plants. The colour of birds was very bright. They were singing songs in the tall trees. Some rabbits jumped from branch to branch, Insects had shiny wings leaving light behind them while flying. The whole forest felt like a world of magic.

Rose had a mother, father, and sister Isabel. Isabel and Rose ran all day in the in the forest. They loved spending time there. They played games, petted, and talked to the animals. They would pick flowers that were glowing in the dark and they made flower crowns to wear on their heads. Every time Rose went to sleep it would always have a dream that she had many friends to play with. But her sister was the only friend she has ever had.

The next morning, mother came to the room to invite Rose and Isabel to breakfast. After breakfast, Rose went outside to brush her teeth and suddenly heard children's laughter, and she knew it was not Isabel because she was still having breakfast. She immediately began to follow the sounds deep down in the forest. Rose ran and ran through the forest trying to detect where the laughter was coming from and only stopped when she reached the 'Forbidden Wall', she heard the sounds coming from behind the wall. Everyone in the forest knew that you should not go through that Forbidden wall, because if you do, it can take you to one of the seven mystical islands.

On the first island there were many dangerous volcanoes and lava flows everywhere and you could not survive there. On the second island was a dry and hot desert without water or living creatures. What is life without water? On the third island there was a big 'Dead Forest', that forest was full of withered flowers, dry trees… On the fourth island they said that various monsters lived there. Your biggest fears live in the fifth island. But on the sixth and seventh islands it was the best, but hardly anyone went there, because on the sixth islands you could go to the city where people

live, and on the seventh you could go wherever you want, but you could also come back. Rose was in dilemma. She thought about going and meeting other people, making new friends. At the same time, she wanted to stay in the enchanted forest with her parents and sister Isabel. Rose had an idea – she would run back to her family and they would all go together, if they were lucky, to the sixth or seventh island.

Rose ran home. It took her some time to get there but when she arrived, she saw her family sad and crying. She asked them why are you crying. Everyone ran to her arms when they saw her because they had been looking for her all day. When everyone calmed down, Rose told them what she had heard and planned. Mother told her that it was too dangerous and everyone would get hurt. After that Rose was sad because she would never have friends. She did not want to run around the forest, play with Isabel...

A week later the whole family went to see the professor and the wolf wizard Arthur. Wolf Arthur told them that it is rare to hear a child laugh, that it happens once every thousand years and if they want to go, they must hurry because they have little time to get to the sixth or seventh islands. They hurried home to bring clothes and food so that they would have something to eat. When they calmed down to the 'Forbidden Wall' they were very afraid to pass. They all held hands and passed. For an hour they were in the white space where they waited in fear to see where he would come. Suddenly they shake a lot and appear in the forest. They did not know where they were. They were walking and walking in the forest before dark when they heard a voice. When they ended of the forest, they saw a playground full of happy children, big buildings, lights, cars, lots of people...

After a week Rose and Isabel started going to school, mother and father got a job. Rose fulfilled her biggest dream of having friends. Rose lived in an apartment in a building, it was unusual for her to live in a building with many people and many apartments. Rose had many friends, but she also had a best friend named Emma. Rose loved hanging out with Emma, but so did Emma with Rose. Emma often came to see Rose. Rose kept telling her about the enchanted forest where she lived. On day, Emma went to Rose's place where they played games, drew, danced, listened to music... When Emma left Rose's home, she went to get the keys to the apartment, but she saw a big colorful crystal. She entered the apartment and the whole time she was thinking about the crystal, whether it was from Rose. The next day she went to Rose to ask if it was her crystal. Rose asked her mother and father about crystal. Father remembered that the crystal was for going home, and they ended up on the seventh island where they could choose where to get the crystal to go home.

Rose and Isabel did not want to go back to the enchanted forest because they had a wonderful time in the city, and they had friends. They decided not to return to the forest but to stay in the city. After a year, Rose started high school. She had a lot of friends and realized that there are good and bad, but that you can spend time together with all of them, but she had only one true and best friend – her sister Isabel.

šifra: mhadyside638
mentor: Nika Uroš
institution: Osnovna škola Antuna Masle, Orašac
autor:Lea Margaretić

HOW I BECAME A GHOST

In a small town called Mannyside, everything is always perfect. The flowers are blooming, the trees are green, the sky is blue, and the birds are chirping an ideal melody. The people are nice, and they help each other all the time. But in Mhadyside, everything is completely different. The flowers are dull, the trees are yellow, the sky is gray, and you cannot even hear the birds singing. The people are grumpy and self-centered.

And me, Lea, I am stuck in Mhadyside with my little sister Mia. Our house is quite old and is located at the very edge of the town. The wooden floors creak with every step, cracks between the boards reveal a black abyss beneath, the walls are covered in a peeling faded wallpaper, and in certain spots, claw-like scratches can be seen. The doors and windows are heavy and broken. If you are looking too long at the window, you get a feeling like something is watching you back. The doors are even worse. When you approach them, they groan in protest, the hinges are shrieking like a warning.

This town has been cursed for decades. Legend has it that Mia and Lea Goode, two sisters who murdered a group of friends appear every night as two ghosts. Also, their bodies are buried somewhere in the town. Many people believe in this story, but not my mom. She named me and my sister after the Goode sisters. To be fair, I do not believe in this story either, but my friends Ana and Ivan do.

Four of us agreed to go outside for a walk. And as we were walking, we noticed something weird in the woods. They already started to freak out, but I thought they were being paranoid. So, we did what every average kid does. We went to check it out. Suddenly, some jerks from Mannyside almost hit us with their Mustang. It was a nice car, but still…

Mia fell and hit her head. Ouch! We quickly ran to her; her hands were covered in something green and slimy. Yuck! All of a sudden, we heard a strange noise. It sounded like someone was singing. It was a melody without words. I picked Mia up and we left the woods. The green stuff is still on Mia's hands, and now it is on

my shirt, too. Our first thought was that Mia may have upset the Goode Sisters, and awakened Mhadyside's two ghosts. We thought we were being crazy, so we laughed it off.

Then, I heard the same voice. Suddenly, a headless body started coming towards us. We ran in panic deep into the woods. It seemed like only Mia, and I saw the headless body, so Ana and Ivan stopped running, and the headless body went right through them. Both Mia and I made it to our house. Why is this happening? Is the legend true? Why is it only following us? Maybe it is attracted to the green slimy stuff? I took my shirt off and threw it in the backyard, so I do not look at it any longer. Just when we thought it was all over, the ghost went for the shirt.

A body slammed onto my front door, and the hinges groaned in pain nearly splintering under the impact. There are two of them?! Ana and Ivan got here as fast as they could, and we all started contemplating. I found an old newspaper from 50 years ago, with the front page saying: "Goode sisters have gone missing." Later, it says that an old man heard weird noises from their house that night. The terrible thing is that he died about 15 years ago, and he does not have any grandchildren. We have no one to help us; we must solve it ourselves! We need to break the curse!

It is clear that the ghosts are going after Mia and me. We need to sacrifice ourselves. My sister and I hugged Ana and Ivan and went outside. Ana and Ivan were scared and sad, we were scared too, but we bravely stood in front of The Goode sisters. We joined our hands, they started murmuring something, like some sort of spell. Next thing you know, they are inside us. Mia and I are ghosts now. I knew that made Mia was sad, and when I think about it, I was also sad, because I no longer had a normal life. As the time passed by, I got used to it.

Every Friday evening Ana and Ivan visit Mia and me at our house. The house, filled with laughter, no longer felt old and forgotten, it was thriving. And no matter how old our house was, it was always busy with people and children playing.

And me? I turned out to be a good ghost! I do not scare people because I do not go outside. Every year I can hardly wait for October 31st. I just love watching kids go trick-or-treating. It awakes my inner child. Even though I could no longer eat the candy myself, I found immense joy in watching the children parade through the streets in their colorful costumes. Hidden in the shadows, I giggled as witches, pirates, and superheroes knocked from door to door. I also had a knack for harmless mischief. When no one was looking, I would nudge candy bags just out of reach or make wrappers mysteriously disappear. Sometimes, I would blow a cool breeze past a child and tilt their hat sideways. One time I even swapped one kid's lollipop for

another's chocolate bar leaving them puzzled and confused. I loved Halloween more than any other time of the year. To me, it was not just about costumes or candy; it was a celebration of mystery and magic.

As the last leaves of autumn swirled through the empty street, the laughter of trick-or-treaters faded into the distance. And just like that, I was gone, leaving only a breeze in the air and the haunting feeling that someone or something was still there, watching.

šifra: 258Koala
mentor: Iva Šimić
institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod
autor:Ana Sofia Slijepčević

ICE SKATING IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

The sun was already setting in the eastern part of Warsaw, the sky full of colours quickly changing to a Prussian blue shade. It wasn't snowing today in particular yet it was cold since it's winter, one of the coldest seasons of the year especially in Poland. Viktor walked down the frozen pavement, letting out a shaky sigh. He was deep in some thoughts, wondering what to do during the winter holidays. He glanced up at the deep blue sky, clouds started to form like it was about to snow. He mumbled to himself :"how did the weather change all of the sudden? Well that's weird." He kept walking until he reached his house just hoping his little sister, Mira won't immediately scream or attack him for some idiotic reasons. Indoors everything seemed quiet and warm. Something felt off due to the silence; maybe his sister didn't hear him entering because she was in her own little world while surfing the internet on her personal computer. While Viktor was making himself some chamomile tea he took a glimpse at the calendar just to make sure if there was any upcoming event. The today's date was December 21st 1999. Nothing seemed new until he spotted the 23rd circled and had written on it just one word, a small reminder for something: „SWEDEN". He looked at it confused until he realised it probably meant taking a trip to Sweden. Now he was even more puzzled. Who's going to Sweden? Why? How many are going? Is he going too? He walked upstairs to ask his sister about this.

„Mira, do you know anything about what's marked on the calendar downstairs in the kitchen?" He questioned.

„What!? What are you talking about, dummy?! Is it something important?" she answered angrily.

„Maybe...I'm guessing it's some trip to Sweden. That's what I figured out."

„A holiday to Sweden!? Are you sure you're not dyslexic? Our parents didn't mention it at all!" Mira was just confused as her brother and groaned: „ I mean if it is, I won't be going to some stupid trip! I have more interesting things to do here than in Stockholm!"

„Like what? Wasting your time on that computer or hanging out with that weirdo of your friend? Come on now. I bet it'll be fine." He sighed slightly frustrated by his sister attitude.

„Whatever...leave me alone!" she yelled at him.

„Alright." He replied coldly and went downstairs to check if his tea has cooled down.

A minute or two goes by and a familiar voice was heard from the hallway.

„Viktor, are you home?" their mum yelled from across the hallway. Their parents, Natalia and Tomislav came home.

Viktor quickly responded: „No worries I came home on time."

„I forgot to tell you yesterday that we're going to Stockholm in two days. Also I'll inform your sister about it." She answered sternly.

He just nodded and went upstairs to his room do to his own thing. Half an hour ticked by. Viktor was so engrossed in the book he was reading until some bickering across in his sister's room snapped him back to reality. Took him a second to notice that Mira was arguing with their mum, knowing she was just being stubborn and trying to convince her that she would be better off at home. It went on for some time until Mira gave in. Viktor exhaled and was glad the dispute was finally over. He looked briefly at the digital clock on his desk and spotted the fact it was getting late. He was already exhausted from the long day he had at school and decided to go to bed early. The next day wasn't anything special. Everyone was packing their things for the journey. Surprisingly Viktor was genuinely excited for the upcoming trip because he's very likely going to meet Sara Karlsson, his current girlfriend who lives there. Well...how did they meet each other if she's from a different country? It was through an international student exchange, she was one of them. Also she was the only one willing to talk a loner like him. Of course he hasn't told anyone about that part, especially to his mum for the reason that she has forbidden dating to him and his sister until they're grown adults and because she doesn't trust them entirely. Later on Viktor was talking on the phone with Sara, telling her everything and how thrilled he was while Mira was hanging around with her best friend and only friend, Anastaszja. Nevertheless this day was going smoothly with no fights or bickering. Finally the day when they were going away for a while came. Everything in total, the car ride to the airport and the three hour flight to Stockholm itself was slightly exhausting.

The Swedish capital city was filled to the brim with beauty and certainly a lot of snow too. There were some Christmas decorations such as colorful lights, decora-

tions, ribbons, ornaments and so on. The outmoded buildings perchance from the 19th century made it look finer. Mira has cooled down and thought to herself: „Well this isn't too bad. I thought it was worse." While Viktor was in his mind planning on how to even meet up with Sara without getting seen by his parents or by his tattletale of a sister. The first day was also just dull. Everyone was unpacking their things and exhausted from everything. On the second day they decided to go out in the city center and spend some time there.

„You're keeping an eye on Mira while we'll go check out some things. I trust you enough this time." She uttered coldly to Viktor.

„I swear I'll try my best, mum." He muttered.

Overall Mira wanted to ice skate. It wasn't so expensive surprisingly. Viktor had some money on him and decided to let her go so she wouldn't be around to annoy him all day although he made sure by his mother's promise to look after her. She's not the best when it comes to winter sports but still wanted to be entertained somehow. He was slightly bored but not in the mood for any physical activity. He was suddenly approached by someone, he towered over him, seeming rather curious.

„Are you lost or something, kid?" Unexpectedly he didn't sound like he was local.

„Huh? Me? Oh uh...no. I'm just keeping an eye on my younger sister while my parents went to check out something." He was a bit intimidated by the person's height.

They talked for some time, getting to know each other. Viktor later on learned that the strangers name was Johan Franck. He originally came here because of a medical conference. They chatted for some time until came back, holding onto the board of the ice skating rink.

„Who are you, Blondie?" She asked clearly being unfriendly to him.

Viktor warned her and apologized for his sister's reckless behaviour but Johan did not mind it that much and found it silly in a way. Eventually he had commitments to attend to and went his way. Mira was glad he left since she wasn't so fond of him and hated his presence.

„Im going to skate some more. I despise being around you, dork." She glared at him and skated away, falling midway and blamed him for it.

Afterwards Viktor decided reach to Sara and ask her if she was available this afternoon. Unluckily she's has gotten herself in some problems and couldn't come. Turns out she wasn't no professional at ice skating and fractured her left arm two days ago. He was more worried than disappointed and wished her a swift and smooth recovery. The rest of the trip was pretty interesting. They visited some parts of the city, uncovered new insights and unveiled new perspectives.

After spending some time away, they got back home around the 28th of December. Everyone had a great time there minus the million times Mira slipped or bumped and fell due to her being unaware and clumsy of her surroundings. 31st of December came by fast too. Everyone was at home or somewhere waiting for the clock to strike midnight. Some were slightly nervous, others excited because it was the start of the year 2000, the 21st century. Viktor didn't think of it too much while Mira had the line of thinking that there was a war going to start or worse. At last the clock struck midnight; it was officially the 1st of January 2000. Nothing happened.

„I told you, Mira, that nothing would happen. You're always full of some dark ideas." Viktor commented.

„Ugh! Shut up, nerd! Everything is possible when you think about it!" Her words came out through clenched teeth.

Well now it was start of a new year and a new century. Will anything change? Will some become better people? We will see soon. Happy new year.

šifra: Macaklić
mentor: Ivana Buće
institution: OŠ Strožanac
autor:Kate Stupalo

MACAKLIĆ

It took Marin an embarassing amount of time to even realize what street he was in. As much as he didn't want to admit it to himself, he had completely forgotten the streets of Podstana, his hometown, the streets he once knew so well. He felt like a stranger in his very own home. It had been 20 years since he left behind Podstrana to pursue his career in Canada. Every day since then he had slowly started to forget the place he once called home. For some reason he thought that he would remember everything once he came back, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. He had already spent a good 10 minutes navigating the messy,narrow streets of his youth, and he wasn't getting any closer to his sister's house. He couldn't afford to be late, not when she spent all that time planning a proper reunion for him with his friends and family after two decades. He would've called his sister to give him proper directions, but of course, his phone was dead. That was just his luck. If o8nly there was someone who could help him get to his sister's house. After about two minutes or so, he turned left and was confused by what he was seeing in front of him. It was a little, rather ugly bright red hat, decorated with a bunch of flowers he didn't know the name of, lying on the floor. He had picked it up off of the dirty floor of the street, planning to-

„HELLO!!"

He was so startled by the noise he fell backwards, the hat slipping from his hand:"What in the world-„

The unneccesarily loud noise had come from what appeared to be a small boy, with rather large, pointy ears, wearing an innocent smile on his face, waving at him. „Whoops, sorry sir, I didn't mean to startle you like that." The boy smiled.

„Uh,its okay…Who are you,boy?"

„Oh, right, sorry sir, I almost forgot to introduce myself! My name is Macaklić! Surely you've heard of me!"

„Um..Can't say I have, sorry."

„Oh, you haven't? No matter, no matter, you will now! Some people who have met me might say I'm a mischievous, bratty, little boy who likes playing dumb little

pranks and causes nothing but trouble, but I'm not really not that bad! I just like joking around sometimes, 'ya know? I'll help anyone in need, as long as they buy me food. That's why I particularly get along with fishermen 'cause they always give me some really tasty fish to eat! And who might you be?"

„ Uh, my name is Marin. I'm kinda lost right now, would you mind helping me out? I have to get to my sister's house in about an hour."

„Of course, sir, as long as you buy me something to eat!"

Marin sighed and started to get back up on his feet. : „Alright then, let's go get you something to eat."

„Oh, sir, would you mind giving me my hat back! My red hat is my signature look!"

„Sure, kid, here you go." He tosses the hat to Macaklić.

„Now then", Macaklić adjusts the red hat on his head, „Let's go, sir! I know just the place where we can find some delicious food for our journey!"

The boy had lead them to a small port, where the fishermen were just coming back from a long day at sea. From what Marin could see, today had been a very fruitful day for them, and they were visibly happy about that. Good for them.

„Hi, you guys, how are you doing? It's me, Macaklić!!" Macaklić waved at them and grinned.

The fishermen took one look at him and their demeanor completely changed. They looked positively terrified. He could make out some of their quiet whispers :

„Oh god, it's him!"

„Quick, we gotta give him as much fish as we can, or else he's gonna ruin our nets again!"

„I know, I know, be quiet!"

One of the fishermen had gotten out of the fishing boat and reluctantly made his way towards them.

„Hello, Macaklić!", he said with a forced smile on his pale face. „Where have you been? We're, uh..We're so happy to see you.", he sighed.

„Hello, my old friend! I've been doing extremely well, as always, thank you for asking!"

„Let me guess, you're here for free food aren't you? Do you want sardines or mackerel this time?", the fisherman replied.

„You are right, I am here for food, but this time I'm paying! Well, I mean, I'm not paying, but my friend here is!"

„What, really?! Are you pulling a prank on me, Macaklić?!" , said the fisherman.

His disbelief was palpable.

„I'm completely serious, my friend! Besides, I wasn't planning on pulling any pranks on you! Today, that is.", he laughed.

The fisherman smiles at Macaklić, this time genuinely : „Well, that's absolutely wonderful, my friend, just amazing! Treat yourself to any fish your heart desires! The world is your oyster!"

The fisherman lead Macaklić to the fishing boats, where he decided on getting 2 kilos of sardines. Marin pulled out a 20€ bill from his wallet when it was time to pay. The fisherman handed him the change and they said their goodbyes.

„You know, I don't ghink those guys like you all that much, Macaklić.", Marin said when the fishermen were out of earshot.

The small boy looked up at him with dismissive look on his face : „Nonsense!It's just that they're a little bit salty because I ruined their nets one time! Well, maybe twice, but who's counting?"

„I bet the fishermen are.", he shot back. „Anyways, you promised you would help me get to my sister's house."

„Oh, yes, of course, sir! Just give me the address and I'll get you there in no time!" Marin reached into his pocked and pulled out a piece of paper with his sister's address written on it : „ Here."

„Okay then, follow me, sir!", Macaklić laughed as he quickened his pace.

After roughly 20 minutes of walking they finally made their way to the front porch of Marin's sister's house.

„Thanks for helping me out, kid. You wanna come inside and have dinner with us?", Marin said as he knocked on the door.

„Why do you think I got two kilos of sardines instead of one?", Artorie grinned.

The door had opened and they were welcomed by Marin's sister, Sonja. She smiled as she saw her brother and greeted him with a hug :"Marin, you're finally here! And who are you little guy?"

„My name is Macaklić, at your service!"

„Sonja, is that Marin at the door?", an elderly woman's voice was coming from inside the house.

„Yes, grandma, he's here! And so is some little boy named Macaklić!", Sonja replied.

„Wait, did you just say Macaklić?!", said the grandma.

„Yeah, why?"

Grandma quickly left her seat and showed up at the door :"Macaklić, is that really you, my friend?!"

„Of course it's me, Vice! I haven't seen you in forever, how have you been?", Macaklić smiled.

„I've been great! You haven't changed a bit, have you!", grandma Vice laughed.

„Wait, how do you two know each other?", Marin asked.

„We were childhood friends! We used to play all the time at the beach and get ourselves into a lot of trouble, didn't we? Come inside, Macaklić, let's eat!", said grandma Vice.

„You've got no argument from me, Vice!", replied Macaklić.

„Marin, we seriously have to catch up! It's been 20 years, hasn't it?", grandma Vice said to Marin, hugging him.

„Of course, grandma.", Marin smiled.

The door shut as the familiar sounds of laughter and light-hearted chatter moved to the living room.

šifra:MK444
mentor:Dijana Oreški Vidović
institution:III.OŠ Čakovec
autor: Mirta Kokot

MAGICAL THREAD

Once upon a time, in a faraway land of magic, fairies, elves, and harmony, there lived a girl that was somewhat different from the rest of them.

But let's start from the very beginning. Millie was a thirteen year old girl, completely normal, well, kind of. She wore pastel green and pink dresses, just like the rest of the young fairies. She was always playing outside, in the nature, but there was one problem, her hair was black. It was really extraordinary, black, but with shiny glitter in it. Everybody bullied her for it beacuse every single species in that faraway land was fair haired. It's not just that, everyones hair grew really fast, exept hers. Her hair has been the same length since the day she was born. It was short and formed into a bob cut. She hated the bullying, and that she was different. She wanted to end her life many times. That was until she met Cameron. He loved playing with her, and her hair didn't bug him at all. They even built their own treehouse, and made a pact to stay best friends forever, no matter what, no matter where. As time went by, they grew older together. They had fallen in love with eachother. They wanted to make it official and become a couple, but Cameron's royal family that was in charge of the village didn't aprove of Millie, so, as time went by, they drifted apart, but they never fully let go of eachother. Millie's hair started acting strange. It was always strange, but this time it was… different. It was a warm summer night, the full moon was shining, just like her short black shiny hair. Millie was sitting on the roof of her house. She could feel the breeze slightly blowing through her short hair. Then, it happened. Her hair suddenly started shining more than the moon. She was terrified and the light was blinding. People started waking up and peeking out of their windows to see what is that sudden blinding light over their little village. The forest near which she lived started burning. Her parents stormed out of the house and took her inside. Her hair was making a shiny path which led to Cameron's royal palace. She teared up, remembering all the beautiful memories Cameron and she have made in the past. Her tear lit up, just like her hair, it rolled down her cheek and fell to the floor. In that moment, everything went quiet. The forest stopped burning, her hair stopped shining, and

the path her hair made just evaporated into thin air. Millie, happy that all of this was over, but still in shock , went to sleep. The next morning king Aldon, Cameron's father, went to Millie and her family's house to confront them. He said that he never approved of Millie and this was the reason why. He banished her from the village and told her that she must never come back or else she will cause more problems. Then he left, really angry with Millie. She sat on her bed and started crying. Her mum and dad then told her the truth. She was adopted. They found her as a baby, deep in the woods, crying, so they took her in. They said to her that its best that she goes back where she came from. She was devastated, but accepted her faith, packed her things and went to live in the forest. She walked and searched for a place for hours, days, weeks. At last, she found a cave in the very back of the forest. The cave was cozy, so she had no problem setteling herself in to live. One day she ran out of food, and had to go and search for food. She found some berries, but wanted to eat something decent, so she kept looking. It was a long walk to the place where she found the berries, so she decided to find a place closer to the food source. After a long time of looking, she found another cave close by. Of course she entered the cave… let's just say it was a mistake, or was it? She wandered around the cave for a bit, until she came to the very end of it. It was really dark, so she turned on her fairy torch."I could really use some of that hair light right now." she mumbled to herself. Out of nowhere the dark started talking-„Oh yes, I suppose you really could darling." Millie, now mortified, turned up her torch all the way, and then she saw it. It was a huge black dragon. It had tiny red spikes all over it, it's eyes were bloody red. You could see it's hunger in them. It started coming closer to Millie. It said to her „I am the Dragon of Wisdom and I have all the answers you need. You were born right here. Your father was one of those. One of the elves from that disgusting village. You mother was however from right here. There was a village back here once, for people like you, but the fairies and the elves from your past home hated them and burned the village down, killing everyone living in it, you were the only survivor. Your mother was one of the people that lived in the village that once existed. Not just that, she was the queen. That's where you got the hair from, only she had it. But that's not it, your hair, it's magical. One hair of yours, if used as a thread, it can heal people. For example, if someones finger gets chopped off, you can easily sew it back on, using your hair as a thread." Millie was astonished, but she still didn't quite get the whole situation yet. She asked the dragon-„But, what does the light in my hair have to do with this?" It responded-„When your hair lights up, it is a sign that you will need to use it soon. But I don't know if that will be possible, considering my intentions to eat you." The dragon

licked it's lips. Millie screamed at the top of her lungs and started running. The dragon roared and started flying through the cave after her. She hid into a tiny crack. The dragon was furious. –„ I'm going to find you missy, one way or another."- said the dragon, and left. Millie figured out that the crack she hid in was actually a tunnel. As she had nothing to lose, she went down the tunnel. She walked for aproximately 2 hours straight. When she got out of the tunnel , she realized that she was in her own cave again. But someone was in there… it was Cameron. „CAMERON!"-she yelled. She was so excited to see her old best friend again. He said that he was going to spend the night here because his father and he had a fight. Millie, unaware of his intentions, said "Of course, stay as long as you need." They ate some berries for dinner and then went to sleep. Millie was asleep already when Cameron whispered in her ear „ I'm sorry.", and then, he did it. He shaved off all her hair. When Millie woke up, Cameron was gone, same with her hair. „MY HAIR!!!"- she screamed in horror-„MY BEAUTIFUL MAGICAL HAIR, ITS GONE!!!" She sprinted through the tunnel that led to the dragon's cave. Millie, still hiding in the crack, told the dragon-"Hey you! Look, I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want you to hurt me then. Something horrifying happened. My ex best friend, Cameron, he… he cut my hair! He shaved off every piece of it. Please help me! What do I do now?" The dragon then spoke-"I didn't tell you one thing. If your hair is cut or shaved, it can not grow back again, it has lost it's magic and the power to heal." „NOOOOOOO!!!"-screamed Millie and burst into tears. She cried in the tunnel for a while. Then she decided, its time for revenge. Millie and the dragon became friends, and planned a big revenge to the fairies and the elves of Millie's past village. Millie ran to her cave and grabbed what she nedded. Then she found it, a single hair of hers was lying on the floor of her cave. She was so happy she found it. She shoved it into her bag and their revenge began. They crushed the village, and the special part was left for the king and queen's palace. They threw King Aldon and his wife, Cameron's mother Adeline into a cauldron with boiling hot water where they burned to death. Cameron fought back and cut right through the dragon's heart with a saber. Millie was excelent at self-defending so she easily took the saber from Cameron's hand and chopped his head off. As she noticed that the dragon was using a lot of blood, she quickly stitched up it's wound with her only hair left and it was as good as new.

Years later, they found some more survivors from Millie's original village, making one of their own. There, Millie realized that she didn't need to look for a new friend because in all this fuss, she made one, the dragon. Millie than led the village that the survivors made and everyone lived in peace without being disturbed and bullied for being different.

šifra: storyteller
autor: Katja Klincov
Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić

MY PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE

I was always interested in the existence of ghosts, another life after this life and other supernatural forces from another universe. However, I have never thought that one day I will face a parallel world. Someone visited me and made sure that I remember these events for the rest of my life.

At first, I started to feel some weird energy, especially when I was alone at home. It felt as if someone or something was with me, watching me from the shadows. I constantly thought about that mystery and the energy that seemed to follow me everywhere. Every time when the darkness fell in the evening, I would feel a chill and someone's presence, but from another world that is still unknown to us. Sometimes I wondered if it would disappear or haunt me forever.

I was looking at the sky during a serene night in a veil of silence. The moon was large and shone in the sky with its silvery glow. The dark blue sky was filled with countless stars shining alongside the moon. Their diamond shape mesmerized my eyes, making me want to reach out and touch them. Everything was quiet and peaceful, as if the nature was listening to the whisper from the celestial bodies. Watching it from my window, I thought about how beautiful and mysterious the night was. That night, everything seemed so peaceful. My parents were sleeping, but as I couldn't fall asleep, I watched television. I got a strange but familiar feeling, and I ignored it, thinking it would pass after some time. But the strange energy did not plan to leave me alone. Wherever I went, it would follow me like an invisible shadow. After entering the dark bathroom, from the corner of my eye I saw a woman in a creepy white dress with long, black hair. Her head was bowed down and the long hair covered her face. Realizing I saw a ghost, I rushed into my bed at lightning speed. I thought about it for some time, becoming excited and restless, full of fear that I had seen a ghost. The energy I felt didn't go away and at one point my body became paralysed. Two minutes seemed like eternity to me, I was motionless.

In the morning, I woke up and told my parents everything I experienced last night. Of course, they didn't understand anything. I felt like there were hundreds of question marks above their heads and they were just ignoring me, but I couldn't stop

thinking about that fearful night that sent chills through every bone in my body. I wanted to find out who scared me, what they have against me and why I was chosen. So, in hopes of finding out the truth, I decided to investigate. I couldn't, however, find anything that might help me to answer any of these questions.

After that terrifying encounter with the woman in white dress, I started to have strange and horrifying dreams. At first, my dreams were full of skulls, mummies, witches, and villages with dangerous people and a man in black. I dreamed about this disturbing man for three days in a row, which creeped me out.

I thought that the evil forces had finally left me alone and that nothing like it would ever happen again, but I was wrong. One more incident occurred. This time it terrified me even more. It happened on the New Year's Eve while I was walking my dog. Something was pulling me and telling me to go towards the underpass, full of darkness and shadows, and all kinds of creatures that might be hiding in the bushes. The wind in the branches, the sound of owls and other unusual animals from the dark forest nearby only intensified my fear. But I didn't want to give up because I know I'm brave and fearless. Some unknown strong force was telling me to keep going and uncover the mysteries and secrets that were hiding in there.

The closer I got to the darkness, the fear grew bigger, but I gathered enough courage and decided to move forward. When I reached the underpass and turned around, there was a man with a hood standing behind me. I panicked and immediately started to run while a million questions flooded my mind. Even my dog understood it was an emergency, so he ran like a leopard. I ran and it seemed like an eternity. When we finally exited the underpass, the scary man was nowhere to be seen. I felt relieved, but my heart was still racing and I felt an additional weight in my body. While walking back home, I wondered: who could it be?

Walking along another dark street, I knew it was possible to see the mysterious and creepy man again. I still hoped and prayed he wouldn't be there and that I get home safely. My wish did not come true because I saw the man once more. He was at the same spot as before, just a few meters away, looking straight into my eyes. He stood motionless like he was waiting for me. Frightened, I ran out of breath, not knowing if it was a human or a very creepy creature. I thought about that event all night, my heart was pounding and I constantly felt like someone was watching me from behind a tree through my window. Even though I knew that was impossible, I shut the curtains and had very bad dreams again.

The strange energy I felt continued. One evening in bed I felt that someone is touching my hair. The rest of that night was filled with discomfort and anxiety. I

couldn't sleep, every sound and shadow in the room seemed threatening. It felt as if the dark thoughts wouldn't go away and sleep seemed impossible. Surprisingly, the fears that haunted me that night quickly faded from my memory.

The morning sun and daily chores made me forget my fears. The sun was high in the sky, birds were joyfully singing their most beautiful songs. On that school day, everything seemed completely ordinary. My friends were running in the hallways, while I went to the restroom thinking that nothing could ruin this sunny day. While leaving the restroom, I turned around and the bathroom door suddenly slammed shut. An intense fear went through my body, but I didn't say anything to anyone.

For many days, the strange energy continued to follow me like an invisible ghost. In the comfort of my own home where I should feel safe, I felt strong forces passing through my body. Just a few days before the end of the schoolyear and a well-deserved summer break, there was another sunny, spring day. Knowing that we would play dodgeball during a PE class, I was happy. The mysterious energy was present again, but surprisingly, I stayed among the last in the game. I was shocked by this, but at same time happy because I have never been among the best in that game. This time, unlike previous times, the energy had given me strength, power, determination and self-confidence. Feeling that something strong and unusual was leaving me, I knew it was time for the energy to go. I'm very grateful to that force which helped me regain my bravery, strength, and confidence and to show everyone how powerful I actually am.

Time passes very quickly. Four years have already gone by since these disturbing events happened to me. Now, I'm a happy and cheerful eight-grade student, but honestly, even today, I don't have an explanation for the things that happened in those few months of that unusual year. Today, I live a completely ordinary and normal life, but sometimes I still try to find the reason why I was chosen, but I have no answers. Moments of fear, panic and dread will be forever preserved in my memory. Maybe I will never find the answers to my questions, but I think it is better that the truth remains hidden forever, somewhere far away in a parallel world where no human has ever set foot.

šifra: BUTTERFLY
mentor: Ana Katruša
institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice
autor:Zoja Ličinić

NEW YEAR STORY

Once upon a time there was a little town called Berrywell. It lay on the island of St. Melania, cut from the rest of the world, in the very middle of the Pacific Ocean. The island was so small that the town of Berrywell occupied it entirely. The houses were made of stone or old brick. People were very nice to their neighbours. In fact, they were so nice and kind that all of the citizens lived in peace and nobody was unhappy. In the very heart of the town, there was a big, beautiful park. People often went there to relax and spend time in nature or with their families. In the middle of the park there was a little lake. There were all kinds of fish in it. There lay a bridge over the lake. They called it "The Love Bridge" because couples often went on a date there. Near the lake there was a playground. After school, kids went there and played many games. Swings, slides and climbing frames were made of wood. There was also a sandpit. Children went to the playground and even played all around the park. They built forts out of wood and leaves, they made little wooden weapons, such as swords and bows and arrows. They often went home all muddy and wet, but their mothers weren't angry. They were happy to see their kids playing and using their imaginations to build new worlds.

New Year was a special day for Berrywell and its people. it was the anniversary of Berrywell itself. Yes, Berrywell was built on 1st January 1930. That's why people loved celebrating New Year. Now, we're talking about the year 1980, the 50th anniversary of Berrywell. After beautiful Christmas party, everyone prepared for that magical night. Mr Smith, the mayor, prepared everything for the big celebration. Mr Smith was a 40 year old man. He loved the citizens and they loved him. He was always positive, which was normal for someone from Berrywell, but still... As the New Year was approaching, everyone felt excited. Mr Smith prepared many different activities, such as a small theme park, big barbecue in the park, ice skating on the lake, fishing and much more. For fishing, he needed to make a hole in the ice, but, I guess, not in the middle of it, as he did. Nevertheless, everyone preferred the big fireworks display at midnight. Mr Smith didn't have to do everything on his own. He had a helper, Mr

McLarry. Mr McLarry was an old man who was here every year assisting all the mayors since Berrywell was built. He was one of the people who helped in constructing the town. He was hunched over due to his sore back. He always wore a brown cap, but everyone knew he had silver hair. He didn't have any children and he lived alone. People loved, so they helped him in doing his chores.

Finally, the big day came and everyone gathered in the park a few hours before midnight. There were many stalls with all types food and warm drinks like tea and mulled wine. There was music, as well. Kids were enjoying their games and some of them went ice skating. A small group of children made a campfire and were roasting sausages and bacon while they were telling stories and jokes. The fire kept them warm. Even squirrels, birds, dogs and cats felt this night was different and were delighted. They ate all the leftovers they could find.

A few minutes before midnight Mr McLarry went to check if everything was ready for the fireworks. Mr Smith was standing on their new stage made for this occasion only. He was giving a speech and expressed his best wishes for everyone in the Year ahead. Suddenly, Mr McLarry stepped on the stage all upset and seemed very troubled by something. He whispered a few words in the mayor's ear. Mr Smith's face dropped with sadness and disappointment. At first he was speechless. Then, he decided to inform the citizens about the problem. "I'm sorry I have to tell you", said Mr Smith, "that someone has left all the firework equipment outside and yesterday it was raining heavily. Everything got wet. So, unfortunately, there will be no fireworks tonight. I'm very sorry." With that, he left the stage, seemingly defeated.

All the people gasped with disappointment. They loved fireworks so much and were looking forward to it the whole year. It was something they talked about all the time and an experience they all had in common.

People felt miserable and a bit angry at first. They had no idea what to do. Then, they decided to find a solution to this, very unusual problem. They had to think of something fast because midnight was very close, just three minutes away. The task wasn't easy. They started running around in their attempts to make a show that resembled fireworks at least a little.

As they were trying to figure something out, there was a loud bang. Someone from the crowded park shouted: "What was that?" pointing in the direction of the noise. There were a few more bangs and the sky was shining in colourful explosions to the delight of the amazed crowd. There was another shout. This time, it was a child's voice saying: "Mom, look! Fireworks!" All the people turned to see the night sky full of fireworks. They were in awe. The show was astonishing.

Some people were wondering where it was coming from. They decided to see if it was coming from the sea. They ran to the coast and saw a boat passing by. They were right – the illuminations were coming from the boat.

Mr Smith smiled. Of course, he was the one who arranged all of the misleading and the wonderful night display. Everyone cheered because they were so happy. The surprise made the whole experience even more magical. What a great idea, to organize such a thing! Even Mr Mclarry was pleasantly amazed.

All of them, young and old, had a great time. Since then, New Year in Berrywell is celebrated in the same way even today.

šifra: theartist
mentor: Monika Samardžić
institution: Kneževi Vinogradi Primary School
autor: Carla Čulina

PUBERTY IS AMANDA.

Puberty. The worst enemy of all the children that there are. Now do not get me wrong, puberty makes us more mature, and our body and soul grow up, but the effect it has on teens is infuriating. Once a girl from 10-13 years old enters puberty it's like their entire world is seen in a different light. It's like you finally realize that babies don't come from a stork, or that Santa Claus doesn't exist. Everything annoys you, every little thing is just annoying. I know it sounds dramatic but it's not. That's what everyone told Amanda.

Amanda grew up thinking that as a teen girl she would go to parties or hang out with friends every day, but it's far WORSE from what she wanted to happen. Amanda has a younger sister Alice. Alice is 9 years old and she's the golden child of the family of course. Amanda thinks that because of Alice she doesn't get as much as attention or money or whatever else. That's not the main problem; the main problem is what's going on inside Amanda's head.

Amanda is 14 years old, a girl in eighth grade, and life couldn't get worse for her. She knows that she's a bit dramatic but it's her life and in her 14 years of living it hasn't been like this before. She feels like everyone hates her even though her family is incredibly supportive over anything she does. She doesn't really know WHY it is like that, but she isn't the one to blame. It's puberty's fault. Once she's alone at night all she could think about is this one boy who she has a crush on. But she feels sad, jealous, angry, lonely, happy but envious because that boy lives far away. She feels jealous because he has a new girlfriend now, but she still loves him, she feels angry and lonely because she can't move on from him, and envious of his new girlfriend. And those feelings have now become like an everyday thing. At night she feels sad and lonely, sometimes too tired to even be, some nights she does not care and on others, she wants another life.

A whole month passed, and nothing had changed even though Amanda hoped it would. It's like she has three phases in a month, and it repeats every month. First phase- happy. She can be motivated, productive, and spend time with friends and

family without thinking about any of her problems. Second phase- sad. Every day of that week feels like everything is crushing down on her, she isn't in the mood to study or to communicate. Third phase- defeat. That last week she just accepts everything how it is and just decides to be quiet and accept.

Body. They say that how we treat our body, it all reflects on our soul. So how would Amandas soul look like? Well like a teen girl one… Why? Well because it's not every day that Amanda or other teen girls feel happy with their own body, and it's normal. One day she's bloated, the other day she isn't. One day she feels like she's looking at a whale in a mirror but she's not even chubby, one day she is happy and confident, but the next day regrets being so confident because she thinks she showed off too much. At the end of the day, she can't decide how she wants to look because her body is still changing, so you can't blame her if she doesn't feel pretty at all times.

God. Sometimes as a teen girl it's hard to stay faithful to God, or to stay loving and trusting. It's hard sometimes not to be jealous, or not to sin in a world full of sin. Amanda is sometimes impatient, jealous or envious of other people and other girls her age. Amanda believes that her time to shine, or her boyfriend that's meant for her somewhere out there. She believes that God will give him to her once she sees herself like God sees her.

Jealousy. I don't know how, but when a girl is in puberty it just seems like everyone around you is simply better. Not in any specific way, it's more like comparing. It's like you see something you know you will never have, to have a bigger house, better friends, a boyfriend, and sometimes it's hard for teen girls because it's always someone else's life, it's always how someone else lives and what someone else haves, and it's always someone else's heart.

Family. They say family is the most important thing in our life, which I agree, but sometimes Amanda's family likes to be a little too much. Amanda doesn't really like physical touch or cuddles. Her sister Alice is the opposite, she is always clinging to your mom, always wanting attention, while Amanda sticks to her dad. She likes to talk about random stuff with him, watch sci-fi movies, documentaries, learn new stuff and just be like best friends. Amanda's dad is her real hero. And that's the good part of having a family, but it sometimes annoyed Amanda. One day she thinks her grandma nags her a lot because she didn't clean her room, one day she thinks her mom is angry for no reason, but it's because Amanda talked back to her. When her mom is angry at her she goes to her dad because she prefers him, not that she doesn't love her mom, she does, but she just gets along with her dad more.

Friends. Amanda has a small group of friends who are more of her classmates that

she has known most of her life. Sometimes she thinks that to be happy you need to have a large number of friends, which is not true. The most important thing about having friends is that you can rely on them, get comfort, and have fun. Friends are there to let you know you aren't alone, that you have someone who you can experience new things with, someone to grow up with and experience adult life with the people you can trust. Amanda loves her friends. Sometimes she feels a little… lonely, even though she has friends. She doesn't know how to describe it, but she feels like a backup friend. Sometimes when she's home alone and knows her friends are hanging out, she just feels like she only exists when someone else needs her or needs something, maybe it's all her feelings and emotions, maybe it's real. We will never know.

School and sport. Parents around the world who have a child that plays a sport never thought that they were having a tough time managing school and a sport. Yes, a sport is optional, but everyone says that sport is important for kids, especially teens. Sometimes teens have a challenging time feeling like they aren't enough, or that they're not doing a decent job because there's always one better athlete, better student, better person, it's never them that they think of, it's always someone else. Amanda has been practicing volleyball now for almost 3 years already and she really likes it. But she also doesn't like it. Does it make sense? Well, no, of course it doesn't. Nothing makes sense when you're a teenager trying to balance school, sport, family, relationships and friends. Amanda has okay grades, she tries to do better because she will be starting high school, and she needs good grades for her dream school. She thinks that her volleyball coach is a bit too hard on her, wants her to do better when she has been trying to do better for already 3 years, but she is always stuck in that phase "do better". No, she cannot do better, she wants to but maybe this isn't for her, maybe she isn't meant to play any sport, maybe she's just not good enough. And that's not only her mind set, but it's also shared with other student athletes who feel like they are just never enough no matter what they do.

The world. What's wrong with the world we live in? Well, that's a question we don't really have all the answers to right now, but we know about pollution, about the effect of phones, AI bots, addiction, war and so on it goes. But that's not the main problem of Amanda, her problem with the world is how it functions, how its building and turning into a world that she will have to live in as an adult. The prices of basic life needs in stores, poor people on the streets, the politicians, how badly other people treat disabled people, disrespect of God, and don't you think that's a bit too much to think about as a fourteen-year-old girl? Well now days it isn't because you

can't escape all those social problems because there's more and more every day and it's all around us, on our phones, TV, newspapers, they teach us about it in school, parents/guardians talking about it. So, it really is all around us.

Money. Maybe you wonder why money bothers Amanda's mind, well it's a good reason. Amanda thinks about how money will function in the future when she will be an adult and when she will have to handle her own money. Even though she can't change how the money currency and inflation will work, she still thinks about it. There's a good side to that but also a bad one. The good side is that Amanda can take that as an inspiration to get good grades and to focus on school to have a good job. The bad side is that she maybe has too much pressure in her because she is planning ahead of herself. Amanda thinks that money doesn't define happiness but also thinks that if you didn't have money, you also wouldn't be happy. So, what exactly does she want? Well, she wants to have a comfortable adult life so that she doesn't have to worry about tomorrow.

Boyfriends. Amanda sometimes wonders why it is so hard for her to be loved by a guy she finds attractive or handsome, why is it so hard for boys to like her? Is she not pretty enough? Skinny enough? Why can all her friends have boyfriends and boys that like them, but she can't? Why is she always the third wheel, or why is she always left out on all that boy drama? Well maybe because she just isn't ready to have a boyfriend, or maybe because she just doesn't have what boys want.

But at the end of the day she realized that life is not all about boys. Life is about having fun, learning from mistakes, experience, family and friends. Life is short, but not short enough to spend it crying over some boy who clearly has one thing and one thing only in his mind.

Too young for some, too old for others. Lost between their sisters and comparison, silent cries and a quiet plea, yearning to be heard and respected, yet still hides. A spark that disappeared, will return. And the pressure of being "perfect" will fade, as she starts to see the real beauty in her soul. A field of plumerias, and a gorgeous pink, yellow, orange, blue sky that reflects on the field colored in purple lavender shows her sweet hidden heart. When she will grow, the world will see the beauty of her troubled and quiet victory.

šifra: tatiana8g
mentor: Josipa Reit
institution: Osnovna škola Petra Preradovića Pitomača
autor:Gita Kožar

ROAD TO RUIN

Time is the key to everything; seconds and minutes are constantly ticking away. If only he could take it. To take time for himself, and never let it get out of his hands. "Would I be lonely?" he grumbled to himself. High school student Silas Yurin was sitting in the back of the class, his hands resting on the table and his gaze directed towards the window. The schoolyard was covered with a white layer of snow. The classroom was quiet, only the teacher's voice could be heard occasionally, but nothing managed to keep Silas' attention. Math topics didn't interest him, and the class seemed to drag on forever. He had always loved hiking and listening to old stories about deep, dense forests and tundras. A specific one about Dyatlov Pass. Nine Soviet hikers died in the northern Ural Mountains between February 1 and 2, 1959. That case is still unsolved today, which makes it even more interesting. No one knows what actually happened to those unfortunate people, only their bodies were found. Silas drifted into a daydream until something suddenly clicked. Without any specific thought, he decided to run away. The teacher was busy explaining something and everyone else was focused on their notebooks. Silas slowly took out his phone and sent a message to his best friend John: "Let's run away!" He knew he would understand right away. And just like that, the moment the teacher turned his back, Silas got up and quickly sneaked out of the classroom. He ran down the hall, avoiding anyone who might see him. No one would care where he was anyway.

There was a deep snow outside. The air was crisp, filled with the scent of winter and silence. And with each snowflake that fell, Silas could feel freedom. He arrived soon at the agreed place, an old cafe near the school. John was already there, waiting for him. "And what do you have in mind?" John sighed. "What do you mean?" Silas snapped. "I know that look, you're a walking trouble," John grinned. "Well, I was thinking about that incident at Dyatlov Pass…" Silas said excitedly. " I knew it, I'm not going there even if they pay me." "I didn't say anything about going there, but it's a good idea, please?" Silas chuckled and patted him lightly on the shoulder. "You're too predictable, but fine then. Let's grab our things." "You're lucky, I'm bored." John

gave up and rolled his eyes. Silas' dark eyes shone with joy. The two quickly dressed in winter jackets and jumped into the car full of gear. Of course, the car was not theirs, John often 'borrowed' his uncle's car without his knowledge, even though he was still a minor. They had several hours to drive to the start of the trail. They talked about everything. About boring lectures, movies they watched, weekend plans. Silas felt that everything was carefree in the company of his friend. He helped him overcome the loss of his parents; he met him when it was most difficult for him. He truly cherished him, as he was the only one who never took advantage of him and proved to be a genuine friend. Winter was beautiful, and their conversations, though trivial, felt important. He always knew that sometimes you should get away from everything, to really feel what it's like to live. That's how he kept time in his hands, it didn't run away anywhere.

After a long walk, John stopped. It was as if something was wrong. "This is not normal..." John paused, feeling the uneasiness. Silas looked towards the surrounding mountains. The air was thick, almost static, as if the entire universe held its breath for a moment. Although the sun was not hidden behind the clouds, everything around them became darker, as if time had begun to slow down. " Stop talking nonsense; it's just your imagination." Silas turned and waited for John to follow him. "What if this is… what happened to those hikers? What if this is something that cannot be explained? Maybe they felt the same way." "Don't you see? Look!" John suddenly took Silas by the hand, pointing towards what looked like shadows moving between the trees. "You're freaking both of us out, it's probably some kind of animal, and we have protection kit against bears." A thick layer of fog covered the landscape, and everything was quiet. But something made him uneasy, Silas still tried to keep his composure. He wasn't the kind of person who was easily afraid of the things that were beyond his understanding. In fact, they fascinated him. But as he stood there, he felt something that looked a bit like… a disturbance. "Something's wrong," he muttered to himself as he looked towards the hazy horizon. John walked a few steps in front of him and suddenly stopped. "What is it, Silas?" he turned toward him, recognizing the change in his demeanour. "Nothing, do you want chocolate?" he tried to distract them both. When they relaxed a bit and finally started to enjoy themselves, someone's eyes truly followed them. The boys walked and climbed. The path was a bit bumpy and difficult, but they were in good shape.

After a while they took a break and sat down on a fallen tree log. "We should set up a tent, I'm tired," John mumbled. Darkness slowly enveloped the landscape. It was clear that they had actually done something stupid, gone far away from every-

thing, without telling anyone where they were going. They both settled by the fire, the flames danced in the cool night air. Neither of them wanted to say out loud what was bothering them, the feeling of not being alone. As they sat in silence, something suddenly caught their attention. Far from them, a large elk appeared. It was strange, because usually wild animals like this avoided human contact. The antlers stood proudly above his head. Which was also weird because they lost their antlers during winter season. As the sunset cast a long red glow, it stood in the distance, watching them. John felt his heart speeding up. "Look." he whispered. Silas followed his gaze, "Don't be stupid dude, it's just a deer." But Silas couldn't ignore the feeling that something was wrong. The elk stood still, watching them, and when they began to stand up to approach, he simply disappeared into the forest, like the darkness that swallowed his form. "That was... strange," said blond boy. "I have never seen a deer like that." "Neither have I." replied Silas, feeling the hair on his neck rise. "Let's go to sleep." Silas entered his sleeping bag in tent. They drifted off to sleep, but soon a sound was heard outside the tent. There was the sound of barking – no, wait – a loud chirp of an elk. Or was it the wolves laughing? Wolves sound very scary when they laugh. A sound that did not belong to any animal they have known. Or was it a mix of all those animals? It was as if something was walking around the tent. They woke up, sweating with fear. Silas felt his blood rushing through his veins. "Do you hear that?" John whispered. "My god, I have never thought that I would die like this. What's that out there? It's like we're in a horror game…" Silas didn't really want to know the answer. The sound grew louder, now he could hear the snow moving. "Maybe it is a bear or a wolf?", he said quietly. Soon they felt a disgusting smell, it was strong, and their nostrils burned. It stank of rot and smelly shoes. "It smells like my grandmother's cooking." John said. Silas just looked at him with an annoyed face. He took a deep breath, "We can't just sit here." Slowly, both left the tent, quietly. There were no tracks in the snow. "There was no one...", John whispered. While they were trying to understand what was happening, suddenly there was a noise. Under one of the big pines something big was standing. At first, they thought it was another illusion created by the fog, but they soon realized it wasn't. The moon illuminated the silhouette. It was black, tall, with an unnatural shape. Its contours were elongated, very thin, almost as if all the muscles and bones were out of natural proportions. It seemed designed to melt into the shadows. The creature stood there like it was carefully hiding, but at the same time closely observing them. "What is that…?" John was trembling. Silas couldn't stop looking at it as it started to reveal itself. "Back off…" said Silas, pulling John towards the inside of the forest. "Quickly! Leave the things!" Silas could almost hear his own heartbeat, and John was paralyzed. It was a

huge, tall slender figure. And the skin, or something that resembled skin, was grey brown, worn and bitten. On its head was a skeleton and antlers of a deer, and he also had some wolf fur on his back. He stood on two legs although his arms were the same length with sharp claws. His heart shined like the sun hidden behind his ribs. "It's…" John didn't finish the sentence. He knew what it was, but it was a legend, something from the deepest Norse and Canadian myths. It was a being that feeds on human fear, that preys on those who are in danger, who are weak, who are unaware. Their bodies were flooded with adrenaline. They ran as fast as they could. They ran towards that misty forest that now seemed like a terrible labyrinth. But the being was closer. They felt it. Its speed was terrifying. Hunger, hunger for something that could satisfy its eternal thirst. "He was close!" John could barely breathe as he ran.

Silas took out the bear spray from the bag he had managed to grab on the run. It wasn't much, but it could at least buy them some time against something dangerous. "Hold on!" Silas shouted and took out a small bottle from his bag. The spray shot out of the bottle, creating a mist that instantly blinded the air. Without thinking, he pulled John forward. "Let's go! Now!" Through the fog and snow, they noticed a tall, old lookout. It was hidden among the trees, their only chance for safety. The tall metal tower stood upright, like a silent witness of time, rustic and changed by the years. But it was their salvation. "We are climbing. Quick!" There was no time to hesitate. They both started climbing the tall, wooden ladder. When they reached the top of the lookout, they both stopped, looking down. The creature was there, below them, somewhere in the mist. Behind them was a cabin with broken windows. Inside was some basic lumberjack equipment. "Take that!" Silas shouted, and John quickly came over, took an axe and started cutting the wooden ladder leading down. Every swing of the axe was full of determination. The ladder began to break. The moment they brought down the last wooden ladder, a deep, piercing scream echoed, a sound that could only come from a creature on the brink of rage. It was down there somewhere, maybe it will climb up somehow. At least not yet. "That was too close," said John, pale and out of breath. His hands were shaking as he held the axe. "Take that you stinky deer!" John stuck his tongue out. Silas carefully examined the inside of the cabin. And then, in the corner of the room, he noticed a signal device. Without a word, he ran out onto the balcony of the outlook and lit the torch. Red smog spread across the entire sky. He hoped that someone would notice.

šifra: SilentStorm
mentor: Nataša Bebić Bačan
institution: OŠ Župa dubrovačka
autor:Roza Grbić

RUBY, THE YOUNG DETECTIVE

Ruby is a nineteen-year-old student at "The University of Criminalistics". She decided to major in criminalistics when she was only thirteen years old because a mysterious event profoundly affected her life at that age – an unsolved mystery she hopes to resolve one day.

It started as an ordinary day six years ago. She arrived at school as usual. Her first lesson was History, but her teacher was absent. They had a substitute teacher that day. Ruby remembers well the first time she saw her substitute teacher. She introduced herself to the class and asked them to call her Miss Mel. Miss Mel had beautiful, long, blonde hair and big, blue eyes that looked like the ocean if you stared at them long enough. Her skin was quite pale, and she had freckles. Her voice sounded like a bird chirping. She was very young, and it was her first job after graduating.

Miss Mel informed Ruby and her classmates about a tragic event the night before. An anonymous person murdered their sixty-two-year-old History professor, Mister George. The class was flabbergasted by the news.

Miss Mel remained their History teacher until the end of the school year. Mister George's death occurred in November, so she taught Ruby's class for quite a long time. Everyone in the class adored Miss Mel, but Ruby felt something about her just wasn't right.

First, Miss Mel never said her full name, so everyone assumed her name was Mellisa or Melanie. Ruby was curious, so she decided to do some research to find out her new teacher's full name. Also, one of the first assignments in Miss Mel's class was creating a presentation about Napoleon Bonaparte. Everyone needed to send their presentation to Miss Mel via e-mail, but even her e-mail address didn't reveal her full name. Determined to find her teacher's full name, Ruby knew exactly how.

The school library kept library cards for both students and teachers. They were stored on the librarian's desk. Ruby planned to go through the cards and find Miss Mel's. Her plan turned into reality just a week after she came up with the idea. When the librarian stepped out for five minutes, Ruby approached her desk. There was a

bunch of cards on the desk, but Ruby found Miss Mel's card within a minute. The name on the library card simply read ''Mel". A bit disappointed, Ruby decided to wait until the report cards were issued at the end of the term because the teachers had to sign them with their legal names. This could finally reveal the mystery behind Miss Mel's name.

When Ruby got her report card, she immediately looked at the back to find the list of teachers' names. She was disappointed once again - her History teacher's legal first name was Mel. Ruby has always thought that Mel was a shortened version of an embarrassing name, which explains a hint of worry and fear you could notice in Miss Mel's big, blue eyes if you stared at them long enough. Ruby decided to write Miss Mel's first and last name down because she felt that information might be useful in the future.

Ruby was trying to fall asleep the night after receiving her report card, but she simply couldn't. After about fifteen minutes of overthinking every little detail of her life, Ruby remembered something important that seemed irrelevant before. Miss Mel had once mentioned that her first day as a teacher was the day after Mister George's death. Ruby also remembered how Miss Mel attended Mister George's funeral, even though she had never met him. She had stood in the back so his family wouldn't see her. Miss Mel had moved to Ruby's city just a week before the tragic incident making it impossible for her to have known Mister George personally. The only reason for attending the funeral could be because of a school policy. Ruby's uncle was a janitor at her school. He had a journal with the school's employee rules. Ruby decided to visit her uncle in the morning to find and check out the journal.

The next morning, Ruby visited her uncle and he showed her the journal she was looking for. While her uncle was preparing lunch for himself, his wife, and Ruby, she read the paragraph about funerals. It only stated that every employee needed to attend another employee's funeral. Ruby's uncle loved talking to Ruby so she decided to ask him about Miss Mel. He explained that Miss Mel was supposed to teach at a nearby school, but after Mister George's death, she had to transfer to Ruby's school. Ruby's school didn't have any substitute History teachers available, while the other school had several. This meant that Miss Mel wouldn't have officially been an employee at Ruby's school until a week after the funeral, because of a data transfer between the schools, which lasted for a week.

Ruby was excited that she had solved a part of the puzzle, but she wasn't close to the end of the mystery. She decided to switch her focus to Mister George. He had a daughter, around the same age as Miss Mel, and he loved sharing stories about her

with his class. Ruby was thinking about all the stories Mister George had told, and, suddenly, she realised something. Mister George, his wife and daughter used to live in the same town where Miss Mel was from before his daughter started university. After a few more minutes, Ruby remembered that Mister George's daughter had a friend named Melody, who stayed in the town they had moved from. She had always wanted to rename herself Mel when she turned eighteen. Melody and Mister George's daughter got into a huge argument just days before they left. Mister George took his daughter's side. Melody was furious. She had told Mister George that he would see her again on the exact date of his death. She claimed that he would remember her as the "Blonde Killer", someone who had followed his every step and would eventually take over his kids. Now Ruby was convinced that Miss Mel was the one who killed Mister George, but she kept quiet about it - until last summer.

Last summer, Ruby's university had offered her the opportunity to propose a solution to an unsolved mystery and she knew exactly what to do. She returned home and took a box from her childhood bedroom to her apartment near the university. Ruby was smart enough to note down, record and keep every piece of evidence during her investigation back then when she was thirteen. Now, she was ready to write down the solution using all the information she had gathered. She studied the case carefully to see what the other detectives had concluded before the case was declared an unsolved mystery. She found out a crucial detail: Mister George had a blonde strand of hair on his dead body – one that didn't belong to him. Ruby immediately assumed it belonged to Miss Mel.

When Ruby submitted her findings to the court, Mister George's cold case was reopened. They ran some DNA tests and the results showed it was Miss Mel's hair. It was a perfect match.

Ruby has been awarded two million dollars for solving the mystery. In addition, she was granted a scholarship. She has humbly told everyone that her memories of Mister George, and the stories he used to retell while teaching helped her solve the mystery.

Miss Mel was arrested, and charged with Mister George's murder, facing fifty years in prison. Ruby hopes she won't be Miss Mel's next victim if she's ever set free. For now, she is pleased she has finally brought closure to a long-unsolved mystery, and justice has been served for her deceased History teacher's family.

Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić
autor:Paula Grahovac

S&T

Everybody thought they were a perfect family, but the truth is it was far from perfect. Diane Nockinfell and her husband Dean Nockinfell had two boys, Terrence and Sal. Dean was a very tall man, unlike Diane, so Terrence comforted himself that he inherited his father's height. Oh, you are asking me why comforted. Well, there was a rumour that Terrence had been adopted. Sal was thirteen years younger than Terrence and he was only 4 when Terrence decided to leave everything behind him. Terrence ran away from home because of how Diane and Dean treated him.

He knew Sal would be safe because he could see the difference which his parents justified with Sal's age. His resemblance to Diane was so obvious that even a stranger could match the two of them. Terrence often looked a missing person poster with his photo on it, hidden in one of the drawers, trying to find resemblance to either Diane or Dean but it was *mission impossible*. Long ago he decided to cut off all the ties with his family, he moved to the furthest neighbourhood of the city. He knew it was the only way, and any other option would create problems he did not need.

With a coffee in one hand and a pretzel bun in another, Terrence was heading to the agency when he got a phone call from his boss. He really liked his job, being a private detective enabled him everything he wanted, the job was interesting, dynamic and unpredictable. It was time-consuming, but on the other hand, it gave him the freedom to organize his time as he wanted. Most of all, being a private detective gave him the opportunity and the skills to keep an eye on his 'little brother' Sal who was thirty now. His boss Roger called to check if he was coming to the office because he needed him for a new case. Roger liked Terrence, he was his favourite detective, which was quite understandable knowing that Harry was always there, available and ready to jump in. Harry was his new name that he chose after quitting his old life. Roger was sitting at his desk, partially hidden behind the paper hill. Terrence has offered several times to help him get rid of the pile, but Roger has never accepted his offer. It was his barrier which protected him from the real word. Terrence knew there was no reason for the pile, but he played Roger's game of hide and seek because Roger was a good boss. Ha has never solved a single case but at least he could find

new clients and he was good at hiring respectable detectives. Terrence was eager to start working on a new case, but Roger did not have time to brief him on the case because the new client was on his way to the agency.

"The guy will be here any minute, he is going to tell what it is about," said Roger.

That was one of the situations you can never be ready for. The guy, the new client stepped into his office, he was shorter than Terrence thought, and he was growing beard which made him look a little bit older. At first, he was petrified, he just stood and looked at Sal, his little brother. They shook hands and Sal introduced himself, "Sal Nockinfell, nice to meet you. " Terrence heard somebody's voice saying, "Harry Fellnick," and then he realised it was his voice.

"May I sit down? "asked Sal.

"Calm down, Terrence, calm down. He did not recognise you, he cannot recognise you, he was just a little boy when you left, you are a grown-up man now, you have a different name, you look differently. He last saw you twenty-six years ago," Terrence kept saying to himself. His heart went back to normal rhythm, he cleared his throat and started asking him usual official questions. Sal wanted him to find his older brother, his name was Terrence Nockinfell and he ran away from home when he was seventeen. Sal did not have any photos, not even the missing person poster. Sal was not sure, but he thought that his brother had run away because of their parents, but he did not know the reason. Terrence couldn't remember how he ended his conversation with Sal, but luckily, he had taken notes. It's hard to describe the confusion in his mind that night as he recalled his day at work.

The next morning in his office, while drinking coffee, he tried to work out tactics. He didn't know what he wanted, he had been watching Sal all these years, but he never intended to re-enter his life and pick up where they left off. He knew about Sal's wife Ashley and daughter Deb, he even knew where they lived. He thought he could ask Roger to allocate Sal's case to another detective, but Roger never did that.

He knew that Dean had died seven years ago. According to the notes, Sal was troubled by Diane's unwillingness to look for her missing son. After years of unsuccessful persuasion, he decided to embark on this adventure himself, without telling his mother a word about his intentions. Actually, telling his mother anything would probably be useless since Diane has suffered from serious dementia for years. Sal hoped that maybe seeing her long-lost son could be a positive shock for her.

After four days of 'investigation', Terrence called Sal to inform him that he had not been able to find any trace of his missing brother and asked him to give him a few more days, of course, Sal agreed. Although he had thoroughly erased all the evidence

of his previous life, Terrence was afraid that Sal might go to another agency with the same request and that another detective might start poking into the missing Nockinfell junior case. So, he was basically buying time.

Terrence had a new 'story of his life', but it was one thing to describe his fictional life to a stranger, and quite another to his brother. After a few days, he called Sal to meet him. He didn't want to talk to him at the agency, so they arranged to meet at a nearby cafe. Terrence asked Sal to tell him everything he could remember about his older brother, explaining that he might spot some clues in his story. It was interesting to listen to his own life being described from the perspective of his little brother. He knew he had to offer Sal at least some crumbs, even though part of him wanted to confess everything and end this charade.

Terrence started courageously, "Sal, there's a chance you'll never find your brother, maybe he's dead, maybe he's on another continent, but there's also a chance that your brother knows everything about you but won't talk to you."

''I'm aware of that, but anything is better than this uncertainty. In any case, I prefer this option that he's alive."

Terrence continued, ''I might have a clue, but I must double check it before I tell you anything. You must be prepared for all scenarios."

Sal's eyes lit up when he heard that, Terrence saw hope in them. ''I'll call you soon."

Terrence spent the next few days struggling with himself, trying to make the best decision for everyone. Easier said than done. He soon realized that his first escape was not bravery as he had thought for years, but cowardice. And he realized that he would not have enough courage to face the old life he had escaped from either. It was easy to find a new job, a new escape to a new neighbourhood and a new life. He told Roger that he was quitting, he owed him that much. He left a letter for Sal and asked Roger to contact him to come and pick the letter.

The new job was interesting and, most importantly, it kept him from thinking about Sal. He imagined that Sal would call him, tell him that he forgave him and wanted to see him, but that didn't happen. Maybe it was for the best. And it was so until one day his phone rang, an unknown number, but he knew it well. His mind exploded. Should he answer or not? Run away or face his old life?

This time he decided to be brave so he answered the phone.

''Hey, Terrence, mom's not well. I need you," said Sal.

Terrence felt relieved realizing he had been given a new chance.

šifra: England147
mentor: Iva Šimić
institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod
autor:Mia Vučković

SAD STORY OF MAGNOLIA DOLL

Once upon a time, on 8th August 1888, was born the youngest sibling named Magnolia. Magnolia had an older brother Alejandro and older sister Flora. Her mom's name was Vanessa and her dad's name was Leonardo. Everything was normal after Magnolia's birth…but it wasn't sadly….

After mother came back home with her daughter Magnolia, no one really gave attention to Magnolia. Alejandro and Flora had tu focus on college and social stuff, dad had to concentrate on work and mom…Mom struggled with mental health, her addictions and her comfortability of her own self who she is. Magnolia was lonely, and she was sad because no one had time for her. She had wasted her time crying and playing alone by herself. The only thing that anyone could do for her is feeding and changing her clothes. That sounds very unfortunate, but no one could do anything about it. When Magnolia turned 4 years old, she had to start going to kindergarten. She wasn't very welcomed in here for her looks so obviously she got bullied. Magnolia couldn't do anything, so she talked about it to her teacher. The teacher didn't gave any attention to it so Magnolia felt destroyed and weak. All these days in kindergarten she spent hiding in bathroom or crying. She was also very distracted from learning new things in kindergarten because of bullying. You may wonder how Magnolia looked alike, right? Well, she had long wavy blonde hair that was messy all the time and grey eyes. She also had pastel clothes and cute bows on her head. It sound impossible to bully her, but she was actually bullied for her „weird“ style and her hair for being messy. Not only that, but everyone found her weird for isolating from teachers and constant crying and she tried to explain why that is happening but no one listened… So her childhood wasn't anything better and really tough. The childhood was the start of her sad lifetime and being emotional. The worst part was the self-criticism and thinking those things the bullies said to her was truth. One of the sad facts for a child like Magnolia was Magnolia's forgotten birthdays. She found her birthday so special like every other kid, but no one really cared like she did. One day, when she told her parents about her birthday that was forgot few days ago, they im-

mediately went to store and bought some chocolate while she wanted a Barbie doll. They called her ungrateful but that is not what she meant. I know, heartbreaking… After turning 7 years old, she started going to primary school. On the first day when she came in class, everyone gave her weird looks, and no one greeted her nicely. She felt really uncomfortable and sad but since she didn't wanted to be seen as „weak one" she held her tears in her heart. She also got manipulated and ignored by classmates and the worst part is that…she never knew the reason of bullying and being ignored but also being seen as „different" even though she isn't. All these weeks and days in school she spent lonely and felling disgusted by her own self. But don't worry, there is a secret that Magnolia hid. She was very intelligent, and she always got good grades. She also knew a lot about physics, chemistry and maths. Magnolia would also spend a lot of time reading books about maths and lectures for older grades. Impressive, isn't it? One day when she was getting bullied, a classmate named Daniela saved her and nicely greeted her. Daniela told her that she is really saddened about what is happening to her, but Magnolia told her that she came through bullying for a long time. Daniela instantly became friends with Magnolia, and she promised that she will always be on her side. Magnolia couldn't explain the happiness she felt in that moment. Then, the other day, Magnolia called Daniela to hang out with her and she accepted and went to Magnolia's house. Magnolia teached Daniela how to crochet and Daniela made a heart for Magnolia. They also played with toys and spent time watching and commenting their favourite show. Daniela was impressed of Magnolia's knowledge and talents she had at just 7 years of life. After, Magnolia turned 13, she became a teenager. Her and Daniela were still friends and still hung out every day. The school system sadly became more strict and toxic which was unfortunate for Daniela and Magnolia. But that didn't stop them from having fun at school together and living a normal life, right? Well, Magnolia's parents became strict to Magnolia and took out everything on her even though Magnolia was innocent and never did anything evil. Her siblings couldn't help her because parents told them to not because Magnolia isn't „that young to not handle the parents ". But anyways, her only support was Daniela. Magnolia didn't know what to do and every day she was wondering: „What did I do to make everyone against me? ". She also asked that Daniela and Daniela said: „You didn't do anything. It's not your fault it's theirs ". Magnolia didn't believe that because she felt and knew that she is guilty for everything happening in her life now. Well, that was proven wrong what she thought at that one day when she had a big fight with parents. She couldn't take the pain anymore and said what she thought. She asked the question again: „What did I do to

make everyone against me huh? ". She also told them that they better say truth, or they would have to deal with this question every day. This time, her parents told her the truth and said that it isn't her fault and that is theirs. But there was something off…When they started to apologise to Magnolia, they didn't sound like they actually mean it…And also, it was weird that the dad was almost all the time on the phone…texting to someone…Magnolia didn't gave attention to it that much and thought it wasn't anything important. When dad went to hang out with friends, he forgot his phone. That was the right time to check his phone and guess what Magnolia saw…She saw her dad texting with other woman and he told her how Magnolia was annoying and stuff…And then, you could see the text from the woman:" I'll take care of it". Magnolia was really worried for her own safety, and she told that to Daniela and her mom. Mom said that she will talk to dad when he comes back. Daniela was also worried and said that she needs to be aware of her dad and that woman. Magnolia listened to her but…One day when she was at the dinner with her family, she saw her dad with other women he texted at the front door. She took a photo of them hugging, kissing and other stuff that was not friendly. Magnolia immediately asked her dad who is that and he said: "Darling don't worry, that is just my friend from work, nothing else". Magnolia was confused and asked: "Then why were you two hugging a moment ago?" she said. Her dad was starting to get annoyed by many questions and said that they didn't hug and that she must saw wrong. Magnolia was started to get pissed off and she showed the photos of them hugging and her dad was so angry and said: "How dare you photograph me?!". Magnolia was angry and so pissed and said: "How dare you cheat on my mom and lie to my whole family?!". She went inside as fast as she could and showed her mom the photos. Her mom was devastated and saddened by her own husband cheating on her and not believing her own child. The dad was standing right behind Magnolia and said that his is not true and edited. Magnolia's mom refused to believe and broke up with father. She was so mad at him that she packed his clothes and stuff and threw outside and said: "Now go to your real woman's place and never come back here!". Magnolia's mom started to cry but Magnolia comforted her. Her mom said that she was sorry for not giving her attention and not having trust in her and that from now on she will take better care of her. Magnolia understood but she remembered that her mom has many problems with mental health and stability so she knew that her mom couldn't control her actions to her. Magnolia wanted to help her mom with therapy and to improve her health but also her trust issues. Her mom accepted her daughters request and told her that she really appreciates someone's help, especially her own daughters help. After few months, mom's health improved and got better. Magnolia was so joyful

seeing her mom feeling better about her own self and finally being comfortable who she really is. Magnolia told that to her friend Daniela and she was so proud of her helping her mom. In school, Magnolia was still getting bullied, but she didn't cared about it like before. She found ridiculous caring for someone's opinion about yourself. Her grades were all A's but also some B's, which is impressive. This whole week her life was finally getting better and she is finally feeling loved. After she turned 15, she started going to high school. Her friend Daniela went into the same high school, so she wasn't alone in new school. Sadly, they were different grades but at least they sticked together in the same high school. Magnolia and Daniela found new friends in their classes, but they had an idea to all meet with each other and to become friends. That was an actual good idea and there was a friend group of 6 girls. They also had a group on Snapchat so they could all communicate on social media. In that group they talked about their crushes, dream jobs, hang outs and prom. They all couldn't wait for prom and they all started to talk about dresses and even what they will do on it. After few years, the prom came and friend group of 6 still sticked together. They all were dressed in beautiful dresses and gorgeous heels. Sadly, none of them won as a prom queen but at least they had fun. When they all turned 18, they all wanted to make their own crochet store since Magnolia learned them all how to crochet. After some months, the store was finally built and ready to work in it. Magnolia and Daniela were crocheters, 2 of them were cashiers and the other 2 helped with cleaning and other stuff. The store became really popular and they all were really rich. Magnolia's mom and moms from other girls helped them with selling by buying many things from their store. The girls didn't knew how to thank to them.

At the end, they were living together their whole life and their store was inherited by their daughters. The crochet store was known as the most succeed store in the town. Their daughters took a big care of the store. All of their dreams became truth: "working together forever!". None of them couldn't believe that their hard work was worth that much. Also, as a writer of this story, I think this story has many deep messages that we need to memorise. Well, the first one was: "Never be ashamed who you really are". An example for this message is when Magnolia was getting bullied and thought that the stuff the bullies told her was truth, but by time, she realised it isn't and that she is wonderful by who she is. The second message was: "Work hard and your dreams will come true". The example is when the group of 6 girls worked hard for them to make their own store selling crochets and guess what, their hard work was worth, and they all made their own crochet store. There is a lot of other messages hidden in this story, you just need to pay attention and learn at the same time.

Franjo Božanić, 8.b
Mentor: Tea Horvatić
Osnovna škola Strahoninec

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE UNSOLVED CASE

It was a normal Tuesday for me and Sherlock. We were called upon by the police, as usual, to solve another murder. It was the police chief's daughter.

She was found dead inside her room, found by her father when she had to go to school.

As the police chief was telling us where he was, his wife, and the mother of the victim, entered the room. Coming home from her acting job with an arm in a cast.

'Oh, my goodness! What on God's Earth happened to my baby girl!' she screamed out in absolute horror, her eyes filled with tears and voice shaky as she fell to the floor, on her knees.

'P-Please Sherlock, find out what happened and put the murderer behind the bars!' She screamed again, this time with more conviction. I found it odd, so I kept a keen eye on her, not daring to brush it off just yet.

I sighed as I knelt in front of the victim before turning to the police chief, Paul. 'I'm sorry for your loss sir. We'll do our best to catch the culprit of her murder.' - I said firmly. Paul just nodded and ushered his wife out of the room. I sighed as I started carefully inspecting the body, Sherlock by my side inspecting the room.

'Amateur...' Sherlock softly whispered to himself. I turned to him, standing up and approached him to look at what he had found. 'It's a bloodstain... and by the looks of its condition, it was hastily wiped off with a plain napkin.'

I commented, slowly piecing a story together. 'But look at the way the victim fell, it's impossible to be her blood. Not to mention she doesn't have any blunt force trauma.'

But Sherlock turned to me with a knowing smirk. 'Exactly... But who is currently in a cast and acted way too strangely today?' It fully clicked together at once. It was the mother.

She attacked and killed her daughter out of jealousy for her success. I held up some handcuffs and handed them to Sherlock with a smirk. 'The right is yours to arrest the culprit, Mr. Holmes.'

Later that day, after arresting the amateur murderer, we walked to the train station and took a train back to London. When we arrived at the station, we walked home. As we entered the apartment, we did not even have a chance to sit down before there was a knock.

I sighed as I stood up and answered the door. 'And to what do we owe the pleasure officers-' I could not even finish my sentence before they shoved case files labeled 'Jack the Ripper' into my chest.

'We need your help. There have been two murders already. We need Sherlock Holmes' - said the two policemen. I groaned as I thought to myself 'Great... another serial killer...'

I reluctantly started following the officers with Sherlock in a tow behind us. The officers were serious and with grim expressions. I immediately realized this wasn't a typical murder we usually do, this had to be something bigger.

As we walked, I finally broke the silence: 'So, what do we exactly know about the victims?' The police officers were silent before finally speaking: 'We know who they were... But nothing else.'

I just stared at them in slight confusion. 'Nothing? Do you at least know how they died? Any evidence?' As I asked the second question, I saw Sherlock listen closer to hear the answer eagerly.

'Well, they died by stabbing, or gutting. We don't know which one exactly killed them.' They said with a slight bit of nervousness.

I sighed, deciding to just stay silent until we reached the morgue to see the victims' bodies. But as we were walking, I suddenly saw something out of the corner of my eye inside a dim alleyway.

I whistled to the three of them to follow me as I dashed into the alleyway. As I approached the pool of blood, I almost threw up in absolute shock as I saw the victim.

They were slightly decayed, their throat slit and a knife sticking out of their neck. I took deep breaths and approached the body to inspect the wound.

I tossed the victim's wallet to Sherlock so he could get some kind of identification so we could know who they were. 'Elizabeth Stride.' - Sherlock said when he read their identification.

I nodded as I inspected the wound on the neck. 'Christ, it's so... Clean. Right on the jugular. If we didn't have the knife in front of us, I wouldn't be able tell what made it.' I said in complete awe and confusion.

I slowly stood up and started to look around the alleyway for any kind of evidence but nothing. Not a single clue. 'Sherlock? Have you found anything?' - I sighed as he shook his head.

The next day, in the middle of the night, after I had thought about everything that had happened and while I was waiting for some more news about the murders, Sherlock walked in.

'Hello John, are you alright?' He asked me as he sat opposite me in the kitchen. 'I'm... fine Sherlock. I just cannot figure out how the cut was so clean on the victim. It was almost perfect, surgical even. I don't know if even I could have done that.'

I admitted, trying to replay the whole situation repeatedly, but constantly came up with nothing new. All I knew was that the victim died by either the slit throat or the stabbing, there were no signs of struggle and their name.

'I've looked through the files of the previous victims.' Sherlock said as he handed me the documents before he continued. 'The first one also had a slit throat, and the second one was asphyxiated with a handkerchief before you guessed it, had her throat slit.'

'So, the only think connecting the victims are that they had slit throats.' I mumbled to myself in thought, glad to have some kind of lead at the very least.

I looked back at Sherlock cleaning some knives in the kitchen sink until we heard a couple of people shouting outside. I immediately jumped up and ran out into the dark night. I say a woman lying on the ground with a couple of men huddled over her.

I pulled out my gun and pointed it at them. 'Freeze!' I yelled at them. They all backed away and held their hands up 'Bloody hell mate, we're only trying to help her!' One of them screams.

Realizing they are innocent, I holster my gun and run to the woman. I gasped as I saw the state she was in. She was gutted and her kidneys were missing.

'Bloody hell.' I mumbled as I inspected the body. Knowing there was nothing I could do, I stepped back as some police officers arrived and took control.

I went back inside the apartment to find Sherlock asleep on the couch. I sighed as I washed my bloody hands and changed my bloodied clothes.

Over the next few days, there were no reports of any more victims. I was nervous but also hoping that it was finally over. I spent that free time visiting my late wife, Mary's grave after a long time, helped some sick and or injured people and calmly talked to Sherlock, until the last night.

As I was sleeping, I suddenly heard a loud scream. I jumped up in shock realizing it came from the outside.

I looked outside the window and saw a dark figure under a streetlamp and over a woman's body. I grabbed my jacket and gun hastily as I ran outside yelling 'Sherlock! Jack's outside!'

As I finally got outside, I pointed my gun at the figure yelling 'Freeze!' As the figure turned around, All I saw is Sherlock's face.

I felt relieved as I walked up in front of the body and crouched down, inspecting it. 'Goddammit... no evidence again...'

I froze mid-sentence as I saw something shiny in the woman's open chest cavity. I take it and stand up to inspect it under the streetlamp.

'Sherlock! There's evidence this time! It belongs to-' I froze as I felt something pierce my back, straight through my spine and lung with surgical precision. It suddenly dawned on me.

'N-No...' I weakly said as Sherlock chuckled. He leaned in and silently whispered into my ear 'Jack the Ripper sends his regards.'

With that, he twisted the knife and pulled it out. I fell to the floor, blood oozing from my wound and mouth. My last thoughts and words being 'My sweet... Mary...'

Before it all faded to black.

mentor: Snježana Omazić, mentor
institution: OŠ Kman-Kocunar, Split
autor: Lea Gabela

STRANGE LOVE

A long time ago there was a beautiful kingdom far from my home. There was a prince, Prince Francis, who was soon going to rule the kingdom, but his father always said:

"You will be a king once you find a queen of this kingdom."

Francis wasn't interested in any of the girls because all the girls only loved and showed interest in his wealth and power. That afternoon Francis was sitting with his family on the throne while princesses were entering. All the princesses were bowing. A princess came out.

„Oh, my prince. I came here because I love you, we are all here to show you our talents.", she said.

The princesses started dancing. The ceremony went on and on, it took hours to finish all 46 princesses.

„Son, it's time to pick the future queen of this kingdom.", the king said.

„No. I don't like any of them!", mumbles the Prince Francis

King was furious and wanted to say something but guards entered with a girl. They were holding her tight.

„Your majesty?", the guard asked pointing at the girl, "Do you have time for this girl?"

„Yes, what happened?", said the king looking at the guard.

Everyone in the room looked at the girl. Her hair is white and her eyes are red.

„This girl tried to save a witch from the doom!", shouted the guard with a fear in his eyes.

„Is this true young lady?", asked the king watching her.

Everyone was looking at her, shocked. The guard was scared to say something, but the queen noticed.

„Is there more? Asked the queen.

„She also..... hurt 14 guards.", said the guard.

The girl lifted her head and looked into the king's eyes.

„How did she do that? Why didn't you kill her quickly?!, asked the king madly.

The room was silent and the guards felt guilty and upset.

„I want answers NOW!!!", the king yelled.

„If the guards are too scared, may I?", asked the girl.

„Speak then.", mumbled the king.

„First, I'm Florella and that „witch" is my best friend.", she said.

„Was", the guard interrupted her.

Florella continues to speak and ignores him.

„Second, I beat them up with my bare hands, and third..." - she then suddenly stopped.

„Speak.", ordered the prince.

Florella starts to talk again.

„Your son is cursed." - she looks at the king waiting for his response.

„And how would you know that?", the king was shocked and scared what would the answer be?

„I'm a witch and I can see the curse. This curse is powerful and can only be made by me or Lorenzo. And I am so sorry for you Prince, but you had it since you were born.", she stops and everyone is astonished except one guard. That guard had an evil smile, he was up to no good!

„So it must be you who cursed him!" - the king was so mad but the prince was speechless along with the queen.

„The ceremony is over, everyone GET OUT!! , shouted the king.

All the princesses left with their families leaving the guards and the girl standing in front of them. Florella broke the silence.

„It wasn't me, the prince was born 1 year before me, but Lorenzo is 5 years older than me.", said Florella innocently.

„And where is that Lorenzo now?", asked the king.

„Here.", said one of the guards, every guard stepped back and Florella looked into his eyes.

„What did you do to my son!?", asked the king angrily.

Lorenzo took off the helmet. „He will never find a wife. Once he does, he will be in so much pain and once he turns 20, and that is tomorrow, he will die.", yelled Lorenzo.

„There is a way, Lorenzo, that you forgot, a witch can save him but it has to be stronger than us.", said Florella

„Good luck with that, you only have one day, Florella." - he faded away and the only thing that he left was his knife.

„You, witch, will help my son and I will spare your life. Is that clear?", the king looks at her.

„But I'll have to go through Demon World and I hate it there!", she said scared.

„That is not my problem.", mumbles the king.

„The prince needs to come with me. There is a demon who can help but he can't leave his world.", said Florella.

„I am coming, I can't wait to do some action!", said the prince happily.

Florella grabbed the knife, rolled her eyes, and left with the prince. They left the castle and went on a journey. The prince was nervous and he didn't know what to say, but Florella noticed.

„Scared?" – she asked and pulled him away from the people in the village on a meadow full of flowers. Prince was stunned.

„This is beautiful.", said the prince.

The prince's black hair was moving with the wind. For the first time, Florella noticed his green eyes. They started to walk through the meadow.

„So..... how are you?", asked Florella.

„Fine.", he answered.

„You don't seem good.", she looks at him worried.

„I'm fine.", he said angrily.

They were walking silently. It was starting to get dark when they arrived at the gates.

„Here we are.", said Florella.

The gates are cold and made out of metal. There are standing two demon guards. Florella grabs Francis's arm and drags him to the gate.

„What do you want humans?", asked the 1. demon but the 2. demon interrupted him and pointed at Florella.

„She is a witch.", he says pointing at Florella.

„A witch? What do you want?", asked the 1. demon.

„I want to see your King.", she answered.

Prince Francis was standing behind her. The demons laughed.

„You can't visit him, he is too powerful for you.", said the 2. demon with a mocking tone.

Florella was very mad, she slowly started to lose control. The prince noticed and acted fast. He gave the demons gold.

„Take it and let us enter.", said Prince Francis.

The demons looked at each other and then at gold.

„You can enter.", said the 1. demon.

They opened the gate and Florella entered with Francis. It was dark and they couldn't see anything but they heard screams and shouts.

„It's creepy down here.", Florella said.

Suddenly it starts to get hot.

„Why is it hot now?", asked Prince Francis.

„Because you are closer to the Demon king.", someone answers.

The lights turn on and they see the Demon king sitting on his throne.

„A human and a witch? What brings you here?", asked the Demon king while closely watching them.

„Heal him, please. Lorenzo cursed him, the same curse that killed your daughter.", she said with hope in her eyes.

„And why would I do that?", the Demon king asked.

„Help him.", she said.

The Demon king thinks then he smirks.

„Only if you, witch, kill my strongest demon without using powers.", said the Demon king.

Florella looks at the prince and then at her watch, it's 23 o'clock.

„Don't do that.", whispered Prince Francis to her.

Look at the Demon King.

„Bring it on.", said Florella like it's nothing.

A lot of demons gather around with humans and shadows. They form a circle and start to shout cheering for the demon.

„This is Damon, good luck, witch.", said the Demon king.

Florella looks at Damon who was entering. He is huge and he has muscles. He was all red and he was happy that he could finally beat up someone.

„A witch? You will be my lunch!", said Damon.

Damon punches her but she quickly dodges. She pulls out the knife that Lorenzo left and stabs Damon's arm. Damon didn't even flinch, he pulled out the knife and threw it at her. She catches it and looks at Demon King who is surprised.

„Not bad for a witch. But remember, you can't use powers.", said the Demon king.

Florella looks back at Damon who kicked her. She falls down on the ground and quickly gets up. Florella punches Damon and he stumbles. Damon looks at her with hatred in his eyes. Florella jumps above him. Damon wasn't quick to catch her but she already pulled out the knife and looked at it. Florella said a spell.

„Nomanda opentro.", Florella whispered.

The knife started to glow red along with her eyes. Damon turned around and looked at her.

„No powers allowed!", yelled the Demon king

Florella looks at Demo King.

„I just opened the ability of the knife.", she said calmly.

Florella throws the knife at Damon hitting him in the stomach. Damon screamed in pain.

„You won but, please help me.", said Damon scaredly.

Damon falls to the ground and everyone looks at Florella. She approaches him and pulls out the knife from his stomach. Damon was looking scared at her. Florella puts seaweed on his wound.

„Wear this and tomorrow your wound will disappear."

Look at the Demon King.

„I won.", she said with a smile on her face.

„Fine, I'll help him.", said the Demon king.

Florella looks at her watch and it says 23:56.

„Hurry up.", said Florella.

Prince Francis approaches the Demon King. The Demon king's eyes turned black and he started to quote some kind of ancient spell. Florella looks at her watch-23:57. Some demons walk to the Demon king helping him with the spell.

„We need a witch to sing.", said the Demon king and looked at Florella.

Florella walks to the Demon King.

„Which song?", she asked.

„It might sound crazy but 'Venom' by Eminem.", he answered her.

„Seriously? Why that?", asked Florella.

„I'll explain it later.", mumbled the Demon king.

Florella starts to sing and looks at her watch-23:59. As soon as she finishes the song, she looks at the Demon King.

„Explain.", said Florella with curiosity in her eyes.

Demon King finishes the spell.

„We are made out of Venom of the aliens. So.... ancient us sang it, so we brought the tradition on. Prince is ready, he is healed.", said the Demon king.

Florella looked at Prince Francis who was sitting.

„Teleport us to the castle", ordered Florella

Demon king nods and snaps his fingers, they are teleported to the entrance of the castle. They enter the castle and see Lorenzo sitting on the throne.

„Oh, you are back.", said Lorenzo.

„Where are my parents?", asked Francis.

Lorenzo gets up from the throne and walks to them.

„Dead.", he said with a smile on his face

Prince Francis looks in shock, Florella runs to him.

„You-„, suddenly she stopped.

She stops and looks at Lorenzo who is making her fly. She can't move.

„Let her go!", yelled Prince Francis

„And what will you do?", said Lorenzo mockingly, "You are just a weak human."

Lorenzo turns around and puts Florella down.

„Now, to deal with you. The most powerful witch near me? No, only one of us can be strong and that's me.", Lorenzo whispered while looking into her eyes.

With her last strength, Florella teleports the knife to Prince Francis. Francis looked at her confused. Lorenzo was talking but she wasn't listening and looked at Francis and mouth 'Remember the spell'. Francis tries to remember and then he walks to Lorenzo. Lorenzo didn't notice him.

„Nomanda opener!", Francis shouts.

The knife turns green just like his eyes. Lorenzo turns around scared.

„Put that down.", whispered Lorenzo with a shaky voice.

Prince Charlie stabs him and Lorenzo screams in pain. Soon he turned into dust. Florella looked at him. Prince Francis kisses her dropping the knife.

„My future queen.", said Prince Francis happily.

Florella smiled and a week later they got married. All the mythical creatures lived in peace with humans. What about Francis and Florella?

They lived happily in love.

šifra:123London
mentor:Iva Šimić
institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod
autor:Ema Brnić

SWING AND BITE

“Today, we have news of the popular jazz singer ‘Charles Brooke,’ who is allegedly participating in one of New York’s most notorious gangs. The police have responded and will continue to investigate this accusation.”

My heart drops as I hear the inconceivable echoes from the radio and its crackling static. Her porcelain skin suddenly became paler than usual, and her sharp crystal fangs became drab. Possibly we share the same reaction, as my hands are already trembling. A blustery wind hits against our faces despite it being a calm summer night. It’s quite a refreshment when the air is so heavy and thick. I cannot even complain; I have my girl here hidden with me, and the sweat from my body was blown away by the wind. Oh, but not even the stars are as bewitching as her. They shine so bright in the night sky, yet they can’t even compare.

“Darling, do you reckon we’ll get caught here?” - She whispers with a smirk in case someone might hear.

“Oh, you’re the berries, aren’t you, honey?”

“Dry up, darling. Just because I look like a flapper does not mean I’m that easy to flatter.” -she says, laughing off my compliment.

Oh God, how I love this extraordinary woman. I carefully take a bottle of hooch and sip it into our glasses. My eyes admired her as if she was the centre of the universe, and if I had to level with her, then I got to say she really is the entire universe to me. It’s a shame we’ve got to stay hidden, but I doubt anyone would ever find us here. We’re seated in a closed-off alley, and the rest of the gang that knows about us should be enough to protect us. After all, her father is the boss, so he’s not permitted to know. And I’m sure he would bump me off if he knew I’m the one smitten with his daughter.

“Honey, look, your song’s playing!” she exclaims, moving my head to look at the radio rather than at her charming sharp eyes. Why would they be playing my song right after they start suspecting I’m in some notorious gang? It’s not even that serious; we’ve only bumped off a small number of people and got a whole house full

of alcohol and drugs, but what's the harm in that? I mean, I got the best partner in crime, my Frances. We have the same personality but not looks. She burns in the sun, and I tan, which is a difference people might hate us for, but it's quite nice to tease her about it. My hair is slicked back, and hers is in a faux bob. She's even slightly taller than me and surprisingly stronger. We have matching scars on our cheeks from our adventure out. My eyes are like coal, and hers are burgundy, hence why at the moment my suit is of that colour, and her dress is black. It goes well with her black hair too. "C'mon and swing with me then, bearcat. Or do you need another sip to get them dogs up and dancing?" I solicited. She grabbed my hand, and we began to quickly pace against the cold concrete. I threw her into the air and caught her one last time before spinning her. The music coming from the radio was upbeat and lively, making it perfect for her and me to have our little dance. As we swirled around the floor, there was a sudden loud thud. I'll be in a lot of trouble if I'm caught with her, especially after the news. Before I could even think of what to do, she threw her body at me to cover me and turned our radio off. We've already gotten our guns prepared and even a wooden stake she carries with her. I never really understood why she would ever need it, but I figured it makes quite a classic weapon. Then, right after we got to our positions fully armed and prepared for a fight, it turned out to be a cat. All that preparation only for it to be a tiny, sneaky animal. It meowed at us with its curious little eyes and black fur. The alley is so dark that it just camouflages in it. The only light there is, is the moonlight and her diamond skin. That was meant to be the case until we noticed a flashlight staring right at us. The shriek of light was enough to leave us blinded before we could figure out what was going on.

"Attagirl, I taught ye well," said a cocky, gravelly voice. The man in front of us stood there as if he owned the place. He chortled as he cussed something about my appearance. As if he could say anything about me, meanwhile he looks like a drugstore cowboy who knows nothing about me. He just decided to show up here uninvited with his raspy voice, black suit with a cloak, long straight hair, and a torpedo. Before I could even properly observe his obnoxious, shameless, godawful, beyond-the-pale presence, I felt a sharp object going through my stomach. I heard a noise so deafening, but I couldn't recognise what had just happened. I felt a slight stinging and burning sensation, and I could notice my dark red blood rapidly bleeding out of the hole. This piker possibly didn't even try to bump me off precisely enough since I barely felt any pain. I looked up only to see my woman holding him by his neck against a wall. She can truly be quite fierce when someone messes with her or her loved ones. I would admire her entirely and thoroughly pay attention to all her facial

reactions of repellence towards him if it wasn't for the fact I am bleeding as fast as whirlwind move. That bastard keeps grinning at her like she could ever be his, and his opinion is baloney.

"Oh, look at ye, little doll. Ye act so tough, but ye know ye are mine. I'm the one who made ye into my people. How foolish are ye to be with one of them? Ye and I are both the supreme people, and the only thing he could ever be good for is singing those ear-wrenching tunes. C'mon baby, ye look so much better with me than him. Why don't ye be with a tough man like me, rather than such a lanky, dark-looking man? I'm the one that made ye into a vamp after you broke my heart, after all, sweetheart." I could tell she was utterly disgusted by his speech because as blood was still leaking out of my body at full speed, I noticed her taking a pointy wooden object from her pocket and piercing his heart. There was a reverberating scream coming from his foul mouth. I could distinguish his black rotten teeth falling out, his dark silky flowing hair turning into a few rather frizzy dry strands, his body from head to toe slowly shrinking until he just vanished into thin air. The last words I heard before my head completely fell onto the ground were her spitting out, "Let me break your heart again then." to him. I could recognise lights and shadows in front of me but nothing else. There was lots of movement around me, yet I couldn't identify my current situation. I recognised her frantic voice mumbling:

"No, no, please be alive. Please, I cannot lose you. Darling, please wake up already. Oh, you're losing so much blood; what can I do? His breathing is becoming more and more shallow. Don't you leave me now; we were meant to be together forever. Charles, I'm begging you, please just hold on a second. I'll do anything; just please keep on breathing. I'll be the best I can for you. I'll even be a housewife if you want me to. God, I doubt you'll be saved unless I transform you now."

Everything was so bright and quick until I started to bear sharp teeth into my neck. I might be the same as the love of my life now. Maybe then people will accept the two of us. If she turns me into people like her, my skin will become fair, and no one will bother me anymore. It's difficult enough to see folks like me being rejected for something they can't even control. But why does it matter what I feel anyway? After all, music might as well be the only way I can express my soul. I truly wish I could tell her I love her, but I do not have enough strength in me to even create sounds. I'm unaware of how much time had passed, but I saw her face staring at me like a cat on a hot tin roof. She seemed more distraught than she was when we broke into Al Capone's house. Why has she been worrying so much about me since I got shot? And why do I suddenly crave blood? I feel disoriented; my head feels heavy, everything is

starting to look black, and my limbs feel as if they've turned into the hooch she and I drank before the grotesque man arrived. The wound looks deeper than the Atlantic Ocean, although it's surprisingly clean. Maybe the theories of all vampires having pale skin aren't correct, since my skin colour hasn't changed at all. But I don't think it ever will change again; I'm not allowed outside during the daylight, hence why I meet my beautiful bearcat at night. This was a glorious night, even if my glad rags are now stained. If it wasn't for her, I'd be well into the afterlife already. Now I can spend eternity with the woman I respect and am immensely infatuated with. Yet she doesn't seem over the moon currently, even though we can be together forever now.

"What's eating you, doll? I'm alive, no?" I pump her this, pondering the same thing in my mind. She's always a live wire; however, lots of things have happened in a span of one night; to top it off, not even the sun has risen. It's got to be mortifying to see your lover get shot by a man who forcefully transformed you after you rejected him, then to have to bump him off in such a short time when you're aware of the fact that his reflexes are rather much more developed, and then to see your lover almost die and the only thing you can do to save him is transform him and take the progress of his music career away and make him unable to survive in the daylight. And as for sugar on top, the sap you had just bumped off just happens to be the boss of an enemy gang. It must be tough on her; she's even now tremendously shaking, and her breathing is quite rapid. She's finally got a hold of herself and her breath. I can feel her hesitating to let the words come out of her mouth, so I take her hand despite my body feeling as debilitated as ever and give her the look of assurance that no matter what happens, the two of us will be well.

"Darling, I fear that maybe the worst has happened. Oh dear, this is so difficult to even think of. We have probably only got ephemeral before they apprehend us. I'd say we got to run away to a place where not even an ant wanders in." She says in a quivering voice and grabs me to pick my body up on her back. She carries me and sings the song of mine that had been playing on the radio earlier this night as we run away into oblivion, leaving everything behind us.

SLANG EXPLANATION

Attagirl – well done
Baby – sweetheart, also denotes something of high value or respect
Baloney – nonsense
Bearcat – a hot-blooded or fiery girl
Berries – that which is attractive or pleasing
Bump off – to murder, to kill
Dogs – feet
Doll – an attractive woman
Drugstore cowboy – a guy that hangs around a street corner trying to pick up girls
Dry up – shut up, get lost
Flapper – A stylish, brash, hedonistic young woman with short skirts and shorter hair
Glad rags – going out clothes
Hooch – bootleg liquor
Level with me – be honest
Live wire – a lively person
Piker – a cheapskate or a coward
Sap – a fool
Torpedo – a hired gun
What's eating you? – What's wrong?

šifra: Sladoled198816
mentor:Tatjana Kristek
institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek
autor:Noa Kikić

THE BAY WITH A MURDER AND POSSESSION

It's four in the morning. I'm a 16-year-old girl and my name is Chiara. I live in Rome with my mom in that as everyone says, "beautiful neighborhood". I have a group of 4 friends that I go to school with and go out with. But my favorite person in the group is my best friend Nico. Nico and I were childhood best friends we were always together because our moms were close to each other, so we became close too. Nico and I mostly go out, but we are with our other friends, Ludovica and Fiore sometimes too.

Enough of the irrelevant things. I'm going to tell you the story that happened today. I'm probably never going to sleep well anymore. Today my friends and I decided to go to that one lost bay that Fiore told us about because Fiore`s past family were some explorers. He also told us that his parents never allowed him to talk about that bay and never allowed him to go there because people must not find out about it. His parents died 2 years ago because their ship crashed in the storm. The problem is we all agreed to the idea of going there. We packed our bags with some snacks and equipment. The bay wasn`t that far. It was around a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Ludovica decided to drive because we call her "The best driver of the group". She started driving and it was so fun. Fiore was sitting in the passenger seat blasting good music as always, and me and Nico were in the back seat. I was vibing to music, but Nico was sleeping like a baby. We got to the first petrol station. I got out of the car to buy myself a drink as Ludovica was filling the car with some gas. As I was taking my drink, I noticed that a weird old guy was staring at me the whole time, but I was like: "I mean, I don`t care. Maybe he thinks that I`m pretty or something like that." I got into the car, and I told my friends about the guy, and they all told me not to worry. I was looking out of my window because the sun was setting down. Moment, I looked back some car passed us, and that car looked familiar until I realized the car that passed us was the car that the weird guy was driving.

We got to the beach and Ludovica parked somewhere close to the big stones. The bay was looking kind of scary because it was a bit dark outside. We got to the stairs that led us to the end of the bay. The stairs were a little bit slippery, so we had to be careful. At the end of the stairs, we found some papers, notes, and maps. We decided not to touch anything. We got to the end of the stairs until we found a cave. The entrance of the cave looked wide and dark, so we all took our flashlights into our hands. Fiore decided to be the first to lead us in I got to admit I looked a little bit worried because it was dark outside, so we didn't get lost. I forgot to say when we parked, I thought I saw someone getting down the stairs too. I told Nico about it, but he said that maybe I`m seeing things and that nobody goes here because the bay is some kind of a secret. We got into the cave, and we realized that it was very long. As we were walking through the cave, we saw some signs to lead us through the cave, so we followed them. I realized that Ludovica was far behind, but I decided not to worry about that because she always walked so slowly. We found a big Map on the wall we decided to look through it. I sat down on the stone as I was reading the notes collecting some pieces of information about the cave. Nico and Fiore were looking through the map. Unfortunately, Ludovica was just standing there, and she looked somehow different. She was pale, even though she has a bit darker skin normally. The look on her face was terrifying. Her eye pupils were wide. She looked like she took some kind of drug. I came to Fiore, and I asked something like: „Does Ludovica look okay to you?" Fiore agreed that she looked a bit sick. I decided to ask her if she was okay. As I was trying to come up to her to ask her about her health, she was saying some stuff I didn't understand much because she was mumbling. I just understood that she said something like: „I must not die today. The killer must not get to me before midnight comes." She also said something that I didn´t understand fully. I just heard something about blood. Yesterday at school we learned about different types of hallucinations but she didn´t look like she was hallucinating. The second I turned my head she started to scream: „Run, run!" I started panicking and I ran to Nico and Fiore with tears and fear in my eyes. I couldn't say a word because I was trying to catch my breath. They asked me if everything was okay, and I was screaming as I was yelling: "No!" Ludovica was running towards us, and I was screaming to Fiore and Nico to run. We also realized that someone was following Ludovica all the time. I stopped running a bit to catch air and then I saw the person who was following Ludovica was the weird guy from the petrol. He was covered in blood, and he had a bloody knife in his hands. I was bailing my eyes with tears because I realized that he probably killed people here and he also had an inverted cross on his neck. Ludovica

could run no more. I stopped because I was trying to help her, but she started crawling toward me like she had some kind of evil inside her. The weird guy was getting closer to me also, so I started running with every inch of strength I had in myself. The weird guy caught Ludovica, and he stabbed her through her back. As I was hearing Ludovica's screams that were calling for help, I couldn't turn back because I would die too, and she was also acting possessed. I got out of the cave calling Nico and Fiore. We three got into the car and Fiore started driving as fast as he could. I was sitting in the car sobbing and crying and shaking from this. I couldn't say a word. Nico and Fiore were so scared that they couldn't say a word either. They drove me to my house. I asked them if they could stay at my house because I was really scared. They both agreed. I'm still shaking, and I can't stop thinking about the way our friend got murdered while being possessed. I'm sitting here in my room writing this while they both are sleeping. I was going to get me some water and I heard a knock on my door. I couldn't even say anything. I was getting quiet so the person behind the door couldn't hear me. I decided to call the police. The police said that they would come in a few minutes. After I finished the call, I heard someone entering the house. I ran into the room where Fiore and Nico were sleeping, and I woke them quietly. They hid in the closet, and now I am sitting under the bed and writing this so someone could catch the guy if I also get murdered. I'm hearing the police car sirens and police getting into the house. They have just caught the weird guy.

I'm going to stop writing now because they are probably coming into my room in a second. I'm just saying that I don't want this to happen to anyone because this is going to be a trauma for me. Goodbye!

mentor: Nataša Bebić Bačan
institution: OŠ Župa dubrovačka
autor:Gabriela Regjo

THE BLOOD MOON

"There is still good in humankind, I'm sure of that…"

My name is Charlotte Hoshino. I was born and raised in a small village called Zephgal. Zephgal is known only for its roughness and poverty. No one cared for it, not even its residents. They just ignored it and gave up on trying to make it better.

I lived in a small cottage with my parents and my younger sister, Myra. Myra and I always spent time together and planned our future together.

One day, when we came home from school, I saw the door was open and quickly ran inside. "Mom…Dad…?" I whispered, unsettled. Their cold bodies were lying on the floor, covered in sticky blood. I noticed a small brown card in my mom's right hand. It read: " Got **you, Asterios.**" I started crying and threw the card on the floor. I ran to Myra, grabbed her tiny hand and quickly pulled her outside.

"Charlotte, what's going on?" she screamed.

"We're leaving Zephgal forever," I replied in tears.

"But what about mom and dad? Shouldn't they come with us, too?" she asked confusedly. Soon, she realised why I was sobbing so desperately. I looked back to see Zephgal, but after what had just happened, I wasn't sure if I wanted to return there again. My sister and I ran to the nearby city, Bluefields, where we spent the rest of our lives at our grandma's house. I graduated first and became a police officer while Myra was studying to be an astronomer.

"It's time for me to get a job" I said as my grandma and Myra nodded agreeably. I searched everywhere but couldn't find anything for quite a long time. Finally, there was my last hope - the Scorchborn Police Station, north of Bluefields, was hiring. "Hi, I would like to apply to work here!", I was determined.

"Sure, but you need to pass a couple of tests first." the lady at the police station replied and took me to a windowless room filled with guns. I bent down to grab one, but she immediately stopped me.

"Not so fast. You must earn one!" she said. I worked very hard every day, and after several years, my hard work finally paid off.

"Welcome to the team, Detective Hoshino!" the chief inspector smiled and firmly shook my hand. Now that I have become a detective, I can finally start an investigation into my parents' murder.

"So, Myra, how was your day?" I asked my sister while finishing off my favourite club sandwich.

"It was good, as usual. Also, someone left a letter for you!" she said casually. "Let's see what it is about!" I winked. I carefully took the small brown card out. "Hello, Detective Hoshino! Congratulations! **You got it!** I must admit, your hard work and skills totally impress me! I hope we can meet in person one day. It would be awesome to learn a trick or two from you! See you soon, Detective!" it read. My hands started shaking and sweating.

"Charlotte, are you alright?" Myra asked uneasily.

"I'm fine, don't worry about it!", I tried to keep it cool. Although Myra nodded, she still seemed concerned. I hid the brown card in my pocket since I didn't want her to read it. I went to bed but stayed awake and thought about the strange message all night. Something felt unusual and familiar at the same time.

The next day, I rushed to the Scorchborn Police Station.

"Detective Hoshino, someone left a card for you." said my colleague Hira, handing me another brown card. I breathed slowly but intensely as I took it. My mind raced with questions - could it be the same sender, or was it someone else? I read it expectantly.

"Detective Hoshino, do you agree the time has come for us to meet? I'm sure your curiosity about my identity is killing you. Meet me in Mountain View Park today at 5 p.m. sharp. **Got it?**"

Shoot, I was supposed to drop off Myra at the observatory today at 5 p.m. It is the Blood Moon tonight. How will I explain it now? Hm... Considering Myra and her stubbornness, I won't be able to hide anything, especially since she knows about the brown card. It would be dangerous to take her with me. Or would it not? I mean, after all, this could easily be someone fooling me.

I picked Myra up at 4:30 and explained I had to meet someone before dropping her off.

"I will be quick! Just stay in the car, okay?"

"Okay," she replied too agreeably.

''Suspicious," I thought.

Upon arriving at the park I noticed an elderly man wearing a long grey coat.

The man was reading a newspaper when I greeted him.

"Hello, you must be Detective Hoshino!" the man raised his head. I was a bit confused, but I nodded.

"Great! Follow me!" he said and started walking swiftly among trees. I pulled out my gun, pointed it at him and asked: "Why should I trust you?"

"Oh, detective, you don't need to trust me. You only need to trust yourself!" he said, reaching for his pocket. In a fraction of a moment, he threw a smoke bomb at me so that I had no time to escape. I collapsed to the ground, and the gas put me to sleep. Next, I woke up tied up with a thick rope.

"Detective Hoshino! You're finally awake! I see you brought your baby sister along. How lovely!" the man said grinning. "Family is everything, don't you think?" he added sarcastically.

"Myra?! Didn't I nicely ask you to stay in the car? And who are you?" I yelled at the man.

"Oh, right, my apologies! I'm Asterios, the one who sent you the brown cards", he replied.

"The one who murdered my parents", I muttered bitterly.

"Who would've thought... Where are we, though?" I asked trying to stay calm.

"On a mountain that doesn't have a name. But it's surely the prettiest mountain around Bluefields!" he replied.

"Do you think that this is legal? When my people find out, it will be over for you." I tried to scare him.

"Well, you agreed to come here, right?" he stated.

"Oh, so I agreed to get kidnapped too?" I snapped.

"That's enough! I brought you here because I wanted to challenge you to a fight!" his voice was sharp.

"A fight? Alright." I said, but then I realised my gun was in his hands. "Looking for this?" he laughed. "Here's your gun, detective! Even though I'm pretty sure you won't need it!" he said and threw the gun at me. He untied both Myra and me.

"Alright, let's set this off, detective!" he said and darted towards me. I told Myra to stay away – she listened this time! We fought hard and roughly, but I soon knocked him off with my high heels. He fell on the brittle, yellowish grass, with lots of painful deep scars on his face. Then, I heard the gunshot. Myra rushed to my side, grabbed my hands and with a look of panic in her eyes said: "I am so sorry, Charlotte!"

Suddenly, I felt something strange. A warm, red drop fell on my face.

"I'm so sorry," Myra repeated with her last breath as her body fell to the ground. The warm, red thing… It was BLOOD! I stood there, looking at my sister's lifeless

body. I was shaking. I couldn't speak. My voice… It was gone. I looked up and saw Asterios holding a gun in his hand.

"One down, one more to go. Guess who it is!" he chuckled and started walking towards me. I couldn't move… I just couldn't. I cried. I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Wait! I can't believe it! Detective Charlotte Hoshino is crying! Does that mean you give up?" he came up to me.

"Zip it, Asterios! Stop messing with me!" I could finally speak. I pulled out my gun and cocked it. Asterios looked at me in shock.

"I will show no mercy. **Got you, Asterios!**" I yelled furiously and pulled the trigger. I looked at his desperate eyes as he sank to the ground.

"And neither will I, detective," he said and shot my right hip. He collapsed, coughed out blood and stopped breathing. While crouching in pain, I saw Bluefield city lights in the distance. I looked at the sky. It was getting dark.

"Charlotte! Why would you leave the station just like that? I barely found you because of the darn signal up here and...What...what happened here?" Hira came closer and gazed at two dead bodies.

"That man, Asterios… He killed my sister. He destroyed my family." I replied in a broken voice and began crying. Hira hugged me, but nothing could help the thought of never seeing Myra again. I will never have a chance to talk to her. I will never have a chance to say goodbye.

"I'll get help. It will take time, though." Hira said softly.

"It's okay. I'll stay here for now. It is the Blood Moon tonight. It was Myra's favourite - she always wanted to see one." I smiled sadly. "I will stay and watch it for her," I said looking at the sky again.

Hira nodded silently and went down the mountain.

Soon, the Blood Moon began to rise, shining bright and red. It was beautiful, and I felt heartbroken and happy at the same time.

"This is for you, Myra," I whispered in tears.

Suddenly, I heard a rustle behind me. I turned around. Hira came back.

"I thought you might want some company," she said gently, sitting beside me. We were silent for a moment. "*There is still good in humankind," I thought.*

"Looks amazing, doesn't it?", Hira broke the silence.

I nodded.

"It really does. I wish Myra were here to see it."

Šifra: Endless2025
šifra mentora: Eyewitness2025
mentor: Anna Maria Popović
institution: Osnovna škola Ivana Kukuljevića Belišće
autor:Leon Ranogajec

THE CONFUSING FOREST

Me and my 2 friends were walking through a forest acting tough but deep inside being scared. Now, you may ask what where we doing in the forest at 2 after midnight and my answer is … in reality, I don't know as well. It was Lucas' idea and me and Oliver just followed him, I guess. It was a big, big forest like 50 km X 50 km. It was a redwood forest and it had 3 paths, 2 of them leading to the main roads and the other one leading even deeper through the forest. At this point we were almost halfway through the forest when we heard a loud bang right behind us. We all didn't know what it was. As I turned around to look at what it was I couldn't see any thing. When I looked, Oliver and Lucas were already a hundred meters ahead of me, so I started running to them. But after I passed a small hill, they were gone. So there I was standing in the middle of the forest all alone (at least I hoped so) with nothing but trees surrounding me and only some money, my phone, and air pods in my pocket and yes, yes, I know it sounds stupid, going into the forest with nothing but a phone, air pods, and money. And it sounds like some stupid horror movie but I wasn't expecting to lose my friends in the forest. I had to focus. As I was looking around, I saw something. Although I wasn't paying that much attention, I saw a tree. Now, you may think what's wrong with the tree? But it was not there last time I looked back… I panicked and started running as fast as I could. But then I saw it was as big as 300 centimeters tall, it had big horns, and plain black eyes. As if I was staring into the void of darkness then it said: "Come here, Leon, it's me, Lucas". I didn't know what to say, I just absorbed the situation that was ahead of me. On one side I had a 30 m living tree monster and out of nowhere, there was another creature, on the other. A 3m wendigo? A 3m skin walker? A 3m scp? I didn't even know at that point. What I knew was that I just needed to run and find Lucas and Oliver. I just started running into the forest not looking back. Finally, after half an hour of running I broke onto the road but it was different. It was broken, with barriers blocking one side, so I went to the other one. It was a big, big field filled with flowers and tall grass but it wasn't all

so wonderful. All of the sudden a group of people I didn't know joined me. They pretended to be my friends. Because of the shock, I believed them. We saw something at the end of the road. It was big and black, it had MASSIVE shoulders, almost like the low taper fade meme is still MASSIVE. I guess it was black but it had a granny costume. I mean, it was Halloween that day when we went camping and wondered off to the forest and when we started running from those monsters. It was like flying. So we ran to the car and went to our camp spot and set up everything for the night. I'm laying in my bed right now writing all this. Then I recalled Mia, the one from the tent next to me who moved to Germany 7 years ago. And I remembered I came with Lucas and Oliver not these people who joined me along the way. When I realised that I came out quietly and I just started running into the woods. As I was running I heard a trembling voice: "WaKe uP", "WaKe uP", "WaKe uP". I just ran and ran but the voice was the same everywhere. Not even a little bit quieter. After around half an hour I almost went insane. But it looked like it stopped at least for some time. Then I just needed to find Lucas and Oliver. When I said that to myself I saw them. They were far away but reachable. I ran to them calling out as loud as I could but they looked like they didn't even know who I was. When I was close to them they went behind a tree. When I looked they where not there. I saw them again and the same thing happened. After the 5th time, I just gave up. I took out my phone, I looked at the time, it was still 2 after midnight. No, it couldn't be? How? After some time I brushed it off, it might be my phone was broken or something like that. I didn't have time to think about that because I heard a quiet giggle. Maybe, I can't describe it. Really, it was something like a giggle, something between a giggle and a desperate cry. I know those 2 sound completely different but that's how it sounded, I swear. I got so scared I just started running. After around an hour of running I saw a little shack and went into it. It was nothing special but when you looked at my phone it was 2:01 after midnight. It felt like 4 hours and only a minute passed by… HOW? It couldn't be my phone. Or it must have been broken, I said to myself. I was listening for a while. I heard a light knocking on the shack's window. As I looked out I saw a man all in pink with a black mask on. That was all I could see. But there was something on the mask I didn't get to see. I burst through the shack's door and started running for my life. On the way, I saw every thing, every human I saw all the way through the night: the tree, the big black thing, the wendigo, the guy in pink, the doppelganger "friend group", the voices. It was like a bad dream that I couldn't wake up from.

šifra:California456
mentor:Iva Šimić
institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod
autor: Dorotea Gjurčević

THE DANGERS OF A NEEDLE AND A THREAD

Mallory was a simplistic village girl who had a dream of becoming someone well known with such a social status that every single word that came out of her mouth would be quoted and interpreted beyond anyone's imagination. She would be dressed in a gown with a fine fabric with little golden detailed roses that would shine like the ocean waters. But alas, she was a fragile girl who was seen as a woman who works to feed herself and overlooked on all her other qualities. That's why her whole life she had been saving up as much money as she can to move into the kingdom, where she can start being seen for her talent and live the life that was stuck in her head all those years. It wasn't easy moving in, she thought she experienced the worst in the village with all the labour she had to do but just carrying her things into the kingdom was agonizing with all the rigid rocks and the steep hill she had to climb. The towns people were confused, usually people with a larger income move into the kingdom. For a person to be in poverty in the kingdom was extremely rare so her simple look was frowned upon as to them it suggests that she isn't wealthy. That didn't stop her though, she was determined to achieve her one and only dream. She was extraordinary at embroidery and sewing. She would make gowns that were beautiful far beyond comprehension. That's why her plan for becoming upper class was trying to get employed in the royal family as a designer.

***

As she was walking up to the palace gates, she was both excited and anxious. While she was getting some of her best pieces ready, she was called to enter an unlabelled room. In the room she saw five mysterious men who she assumed were some noblemen that live in the palace. They seemed welcoming but because there's

a chance her dream as a designer won't ever come true, she felt some sort of tension. She introduced herself with a warm smile trying to hide the fact that her heart was racing. She showed off her luxurious gowns while explaining their qualities in detail. The noblemen were quite impressed seeing as she was a young woman with simplistic clothing.

Soon enough one of the noblemen spoke: "Well Miss Mallory, I must say I'm shocked, you have quite the talent. May I ask though, how did you acquire such a high skill level? It isn't every day that you see a nineteen-year-old girl with such professionalism in her interests."

She was stunned for a bit because she didn't expect to get complimented so suddenly

"You see I ... used to live in the village", she said with a shaky voice, "I didn't have much money so when my old clothes became fragile and had a lot of holes, I would fix them and sew the holes, or at least that's how it started. After a while I started to create clothes and that sort of became my passion. It didn't take long to learn though."

"I see. Miss Mallory, you have a prodigy level skill not many women your age have. I'm Sir Alban, a well-known nobleman that lives here, if you're willing to accept my offer it would be a pleasure to be your mentor."

Mallory couldn't believe the things Sir Alban was saying. She had never seen him until now, but she heard the towns people obsessing over him and his accomplishments, so she was familiar with him in a way.

"Yes! Of course I accept!" Mallory said joyfully. She could practically taste her future success.

***

After a week of working at the palace Mallory was ordered to make a yellow gown with golden embroidered vines and yellow mesh sleeves. This gown was ordered for Lady Elara, a noblewoman who was the queen's cousin. She was told there was going to be a royal event or better said a royal gathering of some kind. Sir Alban didn't tell her many details, just to make it the centre of attention and to put her whole soul into making it since it will determine her career from the start. He also told her that if the people at the event react well to it, that she most likely won't ever be ordered to make a gown for Lady Elara again. She didn't understand why but she figured not to ask too many questions and to do as she's told. It took her longer than usual to make this

gown, but she knew she had to show how passionate and diligent she was. Mallory was able to make the gown and couldn't wait for everyone to see it. Soon enough the day of the event came and two hours before it, Mallory entered the room to see Lady Elara gazing into her mirror.

"Good evening, I'm Mallory and I was ordered to make a gown for you. I suggested fitting you in it as well, so I make sure everything's correct" she said timidly.

"Oh, Hello. I haven't seen you around, so I presume you joined us recently?" Lady Elara asked

"Yes", Mallory responded, "This gown determines the start of my career, so I gave a lot of thought into it"

"I see, let me try it on"

Mallory starts fitting Lady Elara into the gown. She touches up every part of the gown so it's exactly how she imagined it.

"Well, what do you think?", Mallory says nervously, "Do you think Sir Alban and the other royals will like it?"

"I think it's lovely, I've never seen such a gorgeous gown before, but my opinion really shouldn't matter that much to you. No one really pays attention to me so what I say won't be of value. I'm mostly overlooked because the others don't consider me as pretty as the other noblewomen in this palace. I'm not that well-known and I'm only really in this palace because I'm the queen's cousin." Lady Elara said in a warm tone

"Oh. I'm so sorry, Miss." Mallory said not knowing how else to respond

"It's fine Mallory, you don't have to pity me. Though you asked what Sir Alban will think, I didn't know he was your mentor. You're really lucky to be chosen by him, he doesn't offer being a mentor to many people."

"Really? I'm thrilled for what's to come then. You see ever since I was a child I dreamed about being in the upper class so that's kind of why I'm here." Mallory says blissfully.

"Ah, well I must tell you that being a noble isn't as fun as it sounds. There are many complicated things that come with it. I don't mean to push you away from your dreams love, but I still feel the need to warn you that it's very difficult. There are- " Lady Elara gets cut off by the noise of a door opening.

"Lady Elara, I see you're in your dress. Come with me to meet with your beautician." A butler said and escorted Lady Elara out of the room.

After fitting Lady Elara in her gown, she wasn't told what to do. Since she wasn't going to the event that was strictly for the royals, she took the time to explore the palace to be more familiar with it. To her the palace seemed like a large grass maze so she thought it would be useful to have a better understanding of where things are. She also took the time to think about the conversation she had with Lady Elara.

***

At the royal event the royals adored Lady Elara's gown despite her being mostly overlooked. She felt whole because of the attention she never got. Even though she knew it won't last long it felt nice to just experience it. The royals at the event were curious as to who made the gown since it was like nothing they have ever seen before. Sir Alban took pride in talking about his mentee and he made her likeable to the royals. After the event Mallory started to gain popularity and was praised for having a high proficiency level. She was also more well-known because she was a member of the palace and had Sir Alban as her mentor. Mallory finally felt seen. She started to talk to Lady Elara more and she was like a mother figure for her. Her warm and wise words seemed to guide her through this big life change. They started to see each other more often, but Sir Alban didn't enjoy Mallory's choice of friendship, he thought it would be better for her development that she talks to one of the more liked royals. Mallory was puzzled but tried to listen to him, so she started seeing her a bit less than usual. Sir Alban was mostly responsible for her increased social status. Lady Elara couldn't hide it anymore and soon revealed to her that Sir Alban only cared about how she performed because of his own benefit and didn't really care about her as a person. She didn't let it get to her because that would only cause more problems, so she still listened to him. It felt like Mallory's dream was finally coming true. Everything was going well until one night changed it all.

***

It was a quiet and chilly night in the kingdom. It had been a month now since Mallory joined the kingdoms palace. She was asleep and had no worries on her mind. Until loud banging from the ground floor woke her up. This concerned her but she figured she shouldn't investigate it and went back to sleep. She woke up again but this time it was really noisy and uncomfortably warm. Now not only was she concerned but frightened at the thought of what may be going on. She opens the door to see people running and fire spreading rapidly. The extreme warmth on her skin made her more aware of the situation she was placed in. Mallory quickly starts running to fend for herself, carefully avoiding the flames until she saw Lady Elara and Sir Alban in danger. She saw Lady Elara slowly being surrounded by fire and Sir Alban pointed at with a sword by a disguised man. Without thinking she jumped in front of Sir Alban to sacrifice herself, reaching for the sword. She wasn't able to protect him long

until she was stabbed in her left arm. The pain was torturing and too much for her to bear. The man was more vigorous than her, so it was difficult. She managed to fight of the man as hard as she could and started running towards the exit. She couldn't bear hearing the horror around her. She didn't care about anything except getting out alive of this torture device of a palace. Lady Elara looked back at her with sorrow in her eyes, as she was consumed by the flames. The fumes started choking her, so her adrenaline spiked. When she got outside, she managed to catch her breath. At first what just happened didn't sink in. But the realization that she left Lady Elara to fend for herself struck her. The crimson blood running from her arm meant nothing to her when she saved Sir Alban because he's more socially valuable, rather than the person she truly cared about – Lady Elara. "Was the pain worth it?" she kept asking herself while the terror was subsiding. Wishing she could turn back time and save her instead.

***

The reason the fire happened was because three men thought the social hierarchy wasn't fair and wanted to kill as many people in the palace as possible. In the end only three people died – the queen, a maid and Lady Elara. To this day Mallory is seen as a hero because she saved Sir Alban. Many celebrated her existence just like she dreamed of, but she didn't enjoy not a single drop of it. She couldn't look at any of their faces knowing she was the reason Lady Elara died. She realized she was extremely similar to Sir Alban, she only cared about being a well-known noble instead of the things she should've cared about. After that Sir Alban ignored her and focused on the other people he mentors, confirming what Lady Elara said. She never understood why she said that being a noble was hard but now she knows what she meant. Mallory now sits in the palace without Lady Elara or the ability to do what she's passionate about. She regrets that awful night oh so bitterly. Now instead of having a dream about being a noble, she has a dream about being that simplistic village girl again.

šifra: AK12345_17
mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split
autor: Ante Katura

THE GRAVE DANGER

All matter is composed of atoms: incredibly small structures that house different combinations of three particles, known as protons, neutrons, and electrons. At the centre of each atom is a "nucleus" (the plural of which is "nuclei"), where neutrons and protons are bound in proximity together. Most nuclei are stable, meaning the makeup of their neutrons and protons is comparatively static and unchanging. When you fuse together (fusion) or divide (fission) the nuclei, the process releases an incredible amount of energy in the form of light (enough to blind you), heat (three to four times hotter than the centre of the Sun), and the most devastating of them all, radiation (if you are inside a 60 kilometre radius of even the smallest ever nuclear bomb produced, you would have an 87% chance of getting cancer immediately.)", Said an advisor to the president of the United States of America, "I do NOT want you to repeat the stuff that happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki… 53 years ago! For cripes' sake, the anniversary is in 3 days! It is August 3rd! "

"Perfect timing", said the unfazed ruthless president while thinking if he would use one or multiple. After asking his advisor who quit his job at once after that question, he was not really obstructed by anything. Everybody knew that he did not like China. They did not like him as well and the two were on the brink of a full-on nuclear war (as the president would send the bomb, they would not be on the brink anymore). The president, 3 days later, made a short call to McConnell Airbase (somewhere in the Nevada desert, location classified) and a LOT of bombs with the, you guessed it, nuclear warheads flew halfway across the world to hit Chinese metropolises such as Beijing, Chongqing, Harbin, Chengdu, Shanghai, Changsha and Guangzhou.

Wang was a little boy who lived in Harbin. He had some friends, and they were inseparable. They would mostly go to the town square together and look around in the flea markets. One day, they were at the market admiring the old lady selling eggs when they heard something sounding like sirens. A very loudspeaker sounded: "This is not a drill. Get to a safe underground bunker right now. The type of danger is unknown, but most possibly lethal. This is not a drill". Wang tried to stay calm and

told his friends that there is a bunker somewhere north. They started running, but so did the rest of Harbin. There was not really much space in the bunker, so everybody wanted to get there first. Wang ran as fast as he could, and so did his friends. They were 5 kilometres away from the bunker. While mass panic was ruling in Harbin, the president was relaxing in Washington watching over as the bombs were about an hour away. Back to Harbin, Wang and his friends were much closer to the bunker. As they were running, Wang had a thought. Where was his family? Where were the families of his friends? They were selfish and forgot to go with their mothers and fathers. They must have been worried sick. Wang knew it was too late and there was no turning back. He and his friends hoped that their family at once went to the bunker, and they would find him there. "Oh well, ought to keep running", thought Wang. As they were running, the president, back in Washington, was holding a press conference for TV. A reporter asked the president his thoughts on the incoming war with China. He, against the advisors' advice, told the public about the attack. He expected a positive response highlighting his patriotism and his dedication to the States. Instead, people were disgusted, shocked, and motivated to stop the attack as there was still time. A reporter originating from China, got up, punched him in the face and the Secret Service did nothing. This was clearly a sign that the Secret Service was turning against him. The president was quickly overthrown, and the people of Washington came out of their houses to help defeat the bombs. The Secret Service did not need the help of the people as they already had a rocket for emergency deactivation of nuclear bombs. A message was sent to McConnell Airbase and the prototype XR-75 Archangel Rocket capable of reaching a speed of 13 285 kilometres per hour. The rocket lifted off in a matter of minutes and was ready to reach its destination in a matter of time. Back to Harbin, Wang, who was unaware of the emergency deactivation protocol, came to the bunker and saw horror… People were fighting to get in the bunker. There was blood and teeth everywhere. Wang did not want to get involved in fights and his friends had the same thought. Wang just stood there, helpless… What could have Wang done? The bombs were close to Harbin, they just passed over Japan! While Wang was thinking, the Chinese government tried to contact its East Asian neighbours for help, but all the countries backed out as stopping the bombs meant stopping the United States. Nobody wanted that. China was desperate. What could have they done? The US is going to cripple their economy, kill many people and destroy key infrastructure and world supplies. By killing off China they would have killed themselves. A few seconds after their conversation a radio transmission from the US came.

The bomb was stopped by the XR-75 Archangel Rocket. They were joyous and happy to inform the people that there was no more grave danger. The people in Harbin were still fighting over the bunker when the announcement came over the loudspeaker: "The deadly alert has been neutralized. The danger is no more. Return to your homes and be thankful for the US people. " Wang was overjoyed and started sprinting home. His friends did as well. The people of Harbin were overflown by guilt because they beat people to a pulp just for there to be no reason to do so. They were all locked up in the Harbin Maximum Security International Affairs Prison and served 10 years each. Those who killed people got life in prison, of course. That is the END.

šifra: story2810
author: Ema Polančec
mentor: Ana Bahat
institution: OŠ Vladimir Nazor Budinščina

THE IMAGINATION

„It›s 11 PM already? "said Sasha „I barely started reading Haunting Adeline.." she whined, putting the bookmark on the 23rd page in the book and setting the book aside. „Oh well, there›s always tomorrow… "With a sigh, she got comfortable in bed and turned off the lamp on her nightstand, falling asleep.

This is Sasha, she is a 15-year-old book lover with a modest life, she has tan skin with some freckles on her cheeks and nose, silver, grey eyes which shined like two fresh diamonds, and she has dirty blonde, almost golden curly hair reaching to her hips. On one hand, she is creative, kind-hearted intelligent, and brave, but on the other, she is stubborn, inattentive at times, and can sometimes be too straightforward and laidback. A lot of people think she is weird, although she is just…unique.

Sasha wakes up, in a field, two humanoid figures hanging over her, looking down at her in confusion. When she sat up, the two jolted away slightly, surprised by her sudden movement. „Ah-Mandy, she›s alive! "a surprised, soft male voice exclaimed. „I see that, Theo."Said a strong yet baffled female voice. Finally, Sasha saw the two figures more clearly. It was an elven demon boy and a vampire woman. The boy was pale-skinned, he had emerald, green eyes and fluffy soft brown hair that was to his neck. He had a long slim dark purple tail with a spear-like end to it, along with a pair of small dark purple horns on his head and pointed ears. He seemed no older than 16, he was just a tinge taller than Sasha and seemed like a nervous, anxious, nice, and soft guy. As for the woman, she seemed to be around 18, with dark skin, short black hair, round glasses resting on her nose along with golden shimmering eyes and a pair of sharp fangs. She seemed like an outgoing, dominant, and responsible yet sassy person. „Uh…Who…Who are you? Where am I? "asked Sasha, in somewhat of a daze. „We could ask you the same thing, human. What is your business here? "The woman said strictly and warily. „Amanda…She's obviously confused, maybe even scared, you could try being nicer to the newcomer...? "said the boy. „No. Theodore, you know humans are not allowed in the Land of Tasal! It's too dangerous. "She replied sharply. „Tasal? Doesn't that mean 'wonder' in Arabic? So…Land of

Wonder? "when she spoke up, the two stopped their bickering, their attention now on her again. „Please, don't mind my friend, she can be…A little narrow-minded, at times "the boy chuckles nervously, giving Sasha a hand up. „I'm Theodore, you can just call me Theo, though. And 'Miss Strict' over here is Amanda, but I call her Mandy.." the boy, now known as Theodore, said, hoping Sasha wouldn't freak out. „You two are like something out of a story...Oh, right, my name is Sasha, a pleasure to meet you guys. "Said our dear Antagonist. „Pleasure's all ours-"Suddenly, Theodore gets cut off by Amanda „Speak for yourself, demon. I still don't trust it." She said, her eyes narrowing at Sasha. „But Mandy! She radiates no evil! Her heart is as pure as the rivers that flow through the Land of Tasal, I can feel it! "said the sweet boy. „A pure souled human? Impossible. Humans crawl with flaws. "The suspicious Amanda states, „Hm…Alright fine, I give her one chance. But one chance and one chance only, got it, girl? " Amanda said with a tone of authority. „Yes, ma'am "Sasha replied, with a slight smile. Sasha talked with the two for some time, finding out how she had appeared in this Land of Tasal, a place full of magical beings and things, a place full of nature and peace. The two beasts explained how the human race was banished eons ago, for their destructive and unruly behaviour. After that talk, Sasha managed to earn Amanda's trust. Currently, they were taking a walk through one of the many wonderful forests, which was full of life and nature. Animals happily roaming around, both ones from Earth or some new beautiful beings that she could only imagine in the real world. They got to an opening, a lake with a field full of exotic and wonderful flowers. Theodore pulled her down into the thick grass, chuckling. Sasha looked at him, a small, confused smile on her beautiful face. „What are you doing?" She asks, curious, gazing over his shoulder to see what he is doing in the grass. „Wait! You can't look, it's a surprise! " He said with a soft laugh. Sasha sighed and threw her upper body into the grass, looking up at the clear, turquoise sky. It was so…Magical. That was the only way she could describe it. It was something not even the most magical science fiction books couldn't describe. Sasha was glad she got into this situation. She made two Magical friends in a Magical land, a real dream. She thought about how beautiful everything here was, the nature, the sky, the residents… she liked her new companions, Amanda warmed up to her too, and Theodore was just…so nice to her. So sweet, so pretty, so cute. His soft, messy, fluffy brown hair, his big, dreamy, emerald, green eyes, his adorable smile, his gentle demeanour, his laugh, his voice...then, it hit her. She likes him. Sasha likes Theodore. Blood flushed her cheeks, thinking about it... Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by that same lovely voice she was thinking about… „Sasha, I'm done! Look! " he said cheerful-

ly. Sasha sat up, looking into his hands. He held a delicate necklace, it had flowers hanging, with an emerald in the middle, and it looked gorgeous. He put it around her neck. „That's for you, so you have something to remember me by. " he said with that heavenly smile.

„Thank you, Theo. I'll cherish it like the biggest treasure the world could have... though, you're memorable, you know. Your voice is as soft as the most loving lullaby, sung by the heavenly angels…and your face is more magnificent than any painting ever made in the whole wide world, you're so out of this world that you're too phenomenal to be true…"She said, unable to hold in the love she developed for him in such a short time. „W-what?.." Theodore stuttered out, as red as a strawberry. Adorable. He was bewildered by her words, processing all the compliments she addressed to him. When Sasha paused and processed her own words, she started to blush as well, due to embarrassment „O-Oh my-I'm sorry I was just-" She tried, but couldn't find the words to explain herself, suddenly, Theodore said in a shaky and flustered tone. „I…I like you too, Sasha..", then Amanda speaks, looking down at the two sitting in the thick grass, the redness on their faces contrasting the healthy green grass „Lovebirds, hm?" she chuckled with her hands resting on her hips „come on, save your lovey-dovey for later, we gotta move." The two snap out of their dazed state and quickly fumble to their feet. They continued to walk, they walked for a while, and the tension between Sasha and Theodore was almost palpable… soon, it started getting dark, a few stars appearing in the now magenta-coloured sky. They decided to go to the field nearby and rest there. The trio lay in the grass, looking up at the sky, which was consumed by a dark indigo colour. The sky was filled with stars and constellations, a never-ending number of them. It was peaceful…after a few more minutes passed, a portal opened up, leading into the human world, the three of them sat up, looking confused. „What...?" Said Sasha, confused. „I think that's your queue to leave, Sasha." Amanda commented. „Oh…Well, I guess this is goodbye. " Sasha said, looking at the two new friends. „I'll miss you guys. " She said, hugging Amanda and Theodore. „Maybe we see each other again? Who knows. " Amanda reassured Sasha. „Bye, Sasha, we'll miss you too…" Theodore added. They said their goodbyes, and, right before Sasha walked through the portal, she gave Theodore a peck on the cheek, to which he blushed. She waved at them one last time and walked through, the portal closing behind her.

Sasha woke up in her bed, it was morning. „Huh…What an odd dream… It›s a wonder what the imagination can do." She smiled a got up and ready for the day ahead of her, wearing a pretty necklace with flowers and an emerald on it that she mysteriously woke up with…

mentor: Sandra Bačić Lončarica
institution: OŠ Antuna Masle Orašac
autor:Petra Grubješić

THE JOURNAL ENTRIES

4/16/2009

Journal entry #1 Gnomes

My name is Mason and I am a scientist who has recently moved to this small town called Rivertown to research the paranormal and unexplained. I've always been fascinated with things that are out of the ordinary such as aliens. Now that I'm older, I decided to put that fascination into something productive. I was doing some research on where most of these sightings of aliens or creatures such as the Loch Ness monster or Bigfoot have been spotted. A lot of them seemed to be in this sleepy town in Canada. My first discovery is gnomes. I was taking out the trash when I heard some shuffling around coming from inside of the container. At first, I thought it was a racoon, which I would have returned to the forest, or a stray cat, which I would have fed a little, but when I opened the lid that was when I saw it. A gnome was munching away on my trash. Gnomes look pretty similar to the Christmas gnomes or garden gnomes. They all have red pointy hats and wear generally similar clothes, a T-shirt with overalls on. They live deep in the woods in a small lush cave. The gnomes also have a queen. I am 99% sure that she is the only female living among all the male gnomes. The gnomes, or maybe just their leader, are pretty smart. When they face a threat they all form into a shape that makes them look like a giant gnome. Their weakness is unknown to me. The only reason why I was able to get away from them was because their queen helped me.

4/20/2009

Journal entry #5 Mermaids and Mermen

While I was walking though the forest near my cabin I started hearing some strange sounds, so I followed them. I did not find the source of said sounds, but they did lead me to a big open lake. I saw various creatures in the lake like some ducks, fish and something that looked like a hawk. When I pulled the hawk out of the water, since hawks aren't usually in water, I found out that its bottom half was an octopus. A hawktopus. I would usually write about all the anomalies I find, but this one is far too stupid. But, going back to the topic, after I put the hawktopus back in its place, I

noticed a large fish-like tail coming out of the water - like a whale's tail. I walked over towards the docks for further inspection, leaning my head down towards the lake when I got startled by a woman's head popping out of the water curiously in front of me. I noticed that her lower half was fish. She was a mermaid. I tried speaking to her, but she seemed non-verbal. I assumed no mermaids knew how to speak, but I was wrong. She dived into the water and brought some others with her. They were male though and could talk. I asked them some questions and found out that they were pretty similar to humans and weren't a threat to us. Mermaids can be mute, deaf or even both. They can get sick or have birth defects. They are very similar to humans, besides the fact that their bottom half is fish like. Regarding mermaids and mermen in general, it seems like Ariel is a pretty accurate representation.

4/22/2009

Journal entry #7 The wechuge

Recently, I've been researching about this particular creature. It's called the wechuge. It is similar to a wendigo. Both of them being cannibalistic beings. The wechuge is a creature that appears in the legends of the Athabaskan people in the Pacific Northwest. Strangely enough, that's where I currently am. Considering all the other mythical and unusual creatures I've encountered, I bet this one is out there somewhere. I'm still not exactly sure what it is since it is described as a being made of ice in one tale, but other descriptions exist in other tales. One thing that is similar in all tales is that it is eternally hungry. Constantly seeking out prey, mostly human, to devour.

On the other hand, I have been feeling like someone is watching me. Perhaps it's not even a human. I think I'm just being paranoid, though. Probably, from being alone too much. I need a research assistant.

4/27/2009

Journal entry #12 The fortune teller

I have been paranoid lately. The feeling of eyes on me has not gone away for 5 days, so I've decided to go to a local fortune teller. Sure, people might say fortune tellers just steal your money and tell you lies, but after this encounter, I think this one might be real. How did the reading go? She took my hands and told me to clear my mind. Then, she told me she could sense the unease and stress from me. I just brushed it off until she asked "Have you been dealing with the paranormal recently?" I froze up and stuttered out a positive answer. She looked me in the eyes and said seriously "Whatever you are looking for, don't go after it anymore. It is an evil spirit and it has attached itself to you. If you keep searching, it will get to you before you get to it."

The last sentence sent shivers down my spine. I got up and paid her for the reading. Finally, I left feeling more uneasy than ever. The rest of the day and night I just slept. I needed it considering how messed up my sleep schedule is on workdays. Despite what the fortune teller said I will keep looking for the wechuge. I will not give up.

4/31/2009

Journal entry #16 The wechuge, again

I think I might be getting some clues about this thing. I've been finding random icicles all over the forest. I've noticed that they're following a little trail leading from the mountains. They also seem to be getting closer and closer to my house each time I find one, but that's just my imagination, right? Right!? More information about why the icicles are out of the ordinary is that they seem to be broken off of a bigger block of ice instead of forming on the trees or branches in the forest. I should also mention it is April and I'm definitely not in Alaska or Antarctica. This has to be a clue leading to the wechuge. There's no other logical explanation. Now, if I do encounter this creature, I have to make sure I have some matches and rope on me. All other things to make a campfire I can find out in the wild. The reason I need these items is because in the legends of the wechuge it is defeated by being tied over a campfire and left there over night until it melts. The only thing I am confused about is how to trap it over a camp fire in the first place.

5/....

Journal entry #NOT IMPORTANT

I saw it, I saw it, I saw it! The wechuge, it's real! It's as real as the paper I am writing on right now! I must sound like a patient straight from an asylum, but if anyone ever ends up reading my journal you must believe me! It is a giant creature made of pure ice. It looks like something straight out of Scooby-Doo except it's actually real and not someone wearing a mask. It must be around 10 feet tall. Its ice is blue as if it were a part of a glacier. The giant ice creature seemed to be already melting due to the weather getting warmer. I caught it retreating into a cave at the foot of the mountains. The wechuge seemed to be pretty smart considering those caves are always freezing cold. Its hearing isn't very good or maybe it is completely deaf. I stepped on a twig while looking at it and I was sure I was done for, but to my suprise, it did nothing. It didn't turn around, didn't look around. Nothing. It was a little bit odd, to be honest, but I didn't think much of it.

On another note, I might be crazy, but I think there's ice forming on my windows? I'm going to go check it out.

(The rest of the journal is empty with traces of ice on it. It looks like the author just suddenly disappeared.)

šifra: Dexter
Student: Kristijan Knežević
Mentor: Marija Jukić
School: Osnovna škola Ivane Brlić Mažuranić Koška

THE LAST HOPE

It was 2057, a World War broke out that had ruined the humanity. There was a big conflict between the West forces and the East forces that soon turned into a war, which wiped out the whole humanity. Guns were firing, bombs were exploding, nuclear weapons were poisoning both the planet Earth and the humanity. No matter how many underground bases were made or how much has technology developed, none of the humans could survive in such harsh conditions.

Two years later, there was a strange figure walking around abandoned cities that had grown grass over them. That strange figure was a human, and his name was Jack. Jack was usually paranoid about wars that would destroy humanity, so he was prepared for every bomb that was dropped on his underground base. Jack was exploring shops, malls, underground bases that were full of corpses due to the radiation spreading in order to find food and water to survive. Jack was searching every building he saw, you could even say that he explored half of the New York city. Jack usually went to a nearby beach when a sunset would happen, knowing after he dies the planet Earth will be empty and full of abandoned buildings. He would often ride a bike wherever he wanted or if he found a car then he would drive around for fun because no matter what law he broke he is the only human left. 20 days later he found a plane that was completely untouched and filled up with gas so he thought to himself „It would be a shame if I left it to rot…". The plane was the newest model „Airway 23B", which could fit up to 230 people, so Jack decided to mark the place he found the plane at and rush to his underground base to take all the supplies he stored in his underground base. There were too much supplies which Jack couldn't hold, but Luckily he prepared a car that had a big trunk so he managed to fit everything inside and drive back to the plane he found. When he got back, Jack took all the supplies out and put them in the plane. Everything was going according to plan until when he realised „Oh shoot I don't know how to operate in a plane!", which made Jack stressed. Since humanity was gone for more than two years the internet and all the companies with it collapsed making Jack not able to search up for tutorials. „I

must find a way!“ he said, looking around for books with instructions on operating a plane, but he just wasn't lucky enough. Later on he found an abandoned airport with a lot of planes which made Jack get an idea. He decided he would use the planes from the airport to train every day untill he can operate one. Days, even weeks passed by with Jack training every day. He crashed around three planes and two more were left untouched. Jack began losing hope, but on the fourth plane he managed to fly it without scratching the plane. Jack was very happy. He landed back at the airport and decided to fly the Airway 23B he found while exploring. Jack checked every part of the plane in case if there's a broken piece. After he didn't find any broken pieces Jack decided to fly the plane towards Europe. He was flying over the Atlantic Ocean and everything was going well until he got in a major problem which was that one of the propellers broke because Jack didn't notice a broken component inside the propeller before he was flying the plane. There were six propellers and the left one was broken. Jack thought to himself „It's just one propeller out of six what can possibly make it worse?“.

As he was getting near the south part of France, hoping to land in Italy because it was the country with the least radiation, he broke another propeller, but on the right side making the plane with four left functional propellers. Jack tried to land in Rome, but he didn't learn fully yet how to land properly and he realised that none of the planes he trained in weren't the same model as the Airway 23B. Jack soon passed over Italy and he was above the Adriatic Sea not knowing how or where should he land. He soon came to Croatia where he managed to land in Zagreb. Since Jack wasn't too good at flying the plane, as he was landing he crashed the plane a little bit but luckily Jack wasn't hurt. When Jack landed in Zagreb, he was shocked to see the city completely untouched. What actually happened was that the people evacuated to Switzerland in order to get protection, but the East forces bombed Switzerland the moment people got inside the country. Jack found a van in which he could put all of his supplies. He drove around the city for a few hours and found shops that had some food and drinks, most of it has rot, but the canned goods were unharmed. After Jack took them he decided to live in a house he found in the city. The house was perfect for him, it had enough rooms for Jack to stash his supplies and organise which room will be in use for. It's been 5 months, he is celebrating his birthday in 2 days which made Jack happy, but also sad. It was Jack's birthday, he just turned 23 and he took out some cans of food and candy bars while singing himself a birthday song. He was full of joy, but also full of sadness because he is the last person on Earth just singing himself a birthday song and eating by himself instead of being in a big house with his

friends and celebrating. „That's enough" he said, „There is no possible way that I can be the last human alive, there is probably more people, but hiding…" A day later he decided to explore every place he can find in hope to see another human being. Jack checked around Sesvete, Krapina, Karlovac and many more places just to find them empty. Jack was furious but also sad. As Jack was about to enter his house, he saw smoke and heard gunshots from about 2-3 kilometers away. Jack instantly got in his van and drove to the place where he saw the smoke in. When he came to the destination, he saw that the whole house burnt down. Jack wandered around for a little bit, exploring what had happened to the house and if there is any alive human. As he was going back to his van dissapointed, he was suddenly knocked down to the ground and something wasn't letting Jack move, that was a human, her name was Lucija. „Let go of me!" Jack said, „Što ti je?" Lucija replied, „What?" Jack said confused because he didn't understand a word Lucija said to him. „Aha pa ti si iz Engleske valjda" Lucija said, „I don't know what are you talking about, but let go of me, I won't hurt you" Jack replied, „Alright" Lucija said. As she was moving away from him he said „What's your name?", to which she replied „Lucija, and yours?" „Jack.", Lucija asked him „Where did you come from Jack?" to which he replied „New York, and you?" to which she said „I live here, since the humanity was wiped out i have been living here wandering around and doing stuff i wanted to try." Jack was confused so he asked her „So we are the only people left in this world?", she said „I believe so yeah." Jack didn't want to miss out on the company after searching for a living human so he offered Lucija to drive her back to his home. Lucija agreed, saying „I have been wandering around and I don't have a lot of stuff anyway." Jack drove Lucija to his house, after they both got in the house Jack asked her „How come you survived the war?" to which Lucija replied „ After ther East forces and the West forces started having arguments, I knew the war would come so I prepared a bunker and made it as strong as I could." Three days later New Year came and they both celebrated saying to each other „Happy New Year 2060!" Two weeks later, they gained trust on each other and they were cooperating with every task and mission they had. Lucija learned Jack some skills he didn't know, while Jack learned Lucija some skills she didn't know, and everything was going great. Lucija asked Jack „Is it possible to find a pet, atleast a dog so we can have more company?" „I don't know", Jack replied, „I hope so". A day later they decided to explore around Slovenia and Hungary so that they could find a dog. They were in Ljubljana ready to leave untill they saw a German Sheperd wandering around for water. When they tried to get near him, he growled at them, making them sure that if they took another more step he would attack them.

Jack took out some food he found in his van and threw it to the dog to try taming him. It somehow worked, so Jack and Lucija became happy that they got themselves another friend. After they got back home, Jack organised a room for the dog. While he was organising the room, Lucija asked him „What should we name him?", Jack said „I don't know, Rex maybe?", Lucija replied „That name sounds good for him, let's do it." So there they are, Jack, Lucija and Rex surviving in a world where only them three are alive. Lucija asked Jack „Do you want to learn the language i grew up with?", Jack replied „Sure." Days, weeks even months passed with Lucija teaching Jack Croatian language, but soon he learned basic words and then more complex stuff. Soon New Year 2061. came and they told to each other „Sretna Nova Godina 2061!" Time passed and now It is 2073, Jack and Lucija have two dogs, a cat, and two kids named Lucas and Ana. They are proud that they will be the two people that will get this world back to normal.

It is now 3342. and there are a few million people alive that are getting rid of the abandoned buildings and planting crops that have been secrtely spreading after radiation stopped being harmful and after the fruit and vegetables rotten out inside the buildings or in the dirt. The humanity is saved and there is a statue made for Jack and Lucija in honor of making the planet Earth a place full of life again.

šifra: 1VY
OŠ Kman-Kocunar. Split
Snježana Omazić, mentor
Ivo Prkut, 7.r

THE LAST MASK

In the city of Maskhaven, every citizen hid behind a mask. Without the masks, the Echoes came—monsters from the darkest corners of the human mind. Nobody knew what Maskhaven exactly was or how the echoes appeared there, but the citizens only knew one thing. The masks were protection, an armor against the Echoes.

The elites of the city put a big wall around the whole city.

"If you leave the city, you leave everything behind."-said an elite.

Masks were necessary—bought from skilled craftsmen or passed down through generations. But for Orin, an orphan barely living in alleys of the underground, a proper mask was something he couldn't afford. His cracked mask barely fit to his face, leaving him to the whispers. Still, he survived by staying in the shadows, stealing food, and avoiding Maskhaven's cops, the Veilguards. One night, while escaping a pickpocketing attempt, Orin stumbled into a forgotten corner of the city—a temple surrounded by vines. He dug, bit, and fought against the vines till he found an entrance. He saw something that shouldn't have existed: a room filled with used and thrown masks.

A specific mask glowed brightly in the center of the abandoned temple, as if it were alive. It called to Orin, even though he felt uneasy about it. With nothing to lose, he put on the mask. Suddenly, everything changed. He saw the Echoes as living figures, not just shadows. Each Echo followed a masked citizen he imagined walking the streets of Maskhaven beyond the temple walls. What shocked Orin most was his own Echo, which did not follow him like the others.

It reached out and spoke to him face to face.

"You are not who you think you are," it whispered.

The temple door burst open before Orin could make sense of the words. A squad of Veilguards! They had lifeless black masks. The leader, a mysterious person known as Captain Marrow, pointed a bat at Orin.

"Take him," Marrow shouted. "That mask is forbidden."

Orin turned towards another entrance and ran till he stumbled to the streets. The veilguards were behind him, but the new mask gave him speed and strength he never thought he could have, but it also drew the other Echoes closer. The Echoes circled around him, whispering secrets of Maskhaven's hidden history—of a time before masks, when people faced their truths without fear. The veilguards lost trace of Orin since he went to a secret place, a place where he found shelter with Maeve, an old retired mask maker who had once been a close friend of his deceased mother. Maeve's workshop was filled with unfinished masks and strange tools, and her tired eyes widened at Orin's new mask.. "That… that's one of the Originals..That glow.." Maeve whispered, trembling. "The first masks made to tame the echoes. We believed they were destroyed centuries ago. The rulers of Maskhaven feared the Echoes' power since they could reveal truths that might mess up the city's strict and carefully put order. The Originals could tame the Echoes, turning fear and pain into strength. But those who wore them became a threat to the city's elite. If you can learn how to use the mask, just like the Elites did, you might be able to free this city. But it won't be easy. The Echoes will test you. They'll force you to face everything. And when I say everything, I mean it." Maeve said, her voice a whisper. As Orin trained with Maeve, he unlocked the mask's potential. He learned to talk with Echoes, figuring out their secrets and using their power. His Echo revealed memories of his parents—warriors who fought against the creation of the masks and lost. He never knew much about his parents. Only because of Maeve's storytelling did Orin learn about his parents, their past, and the fights they had once fought. With the Veilguards hunting him down and the city's rulers desperate to return the mask, Orin had to choose; continue running or confront the city elites. To free Maskhaven, he had to expose the elite's lies and awaken the Echoes from every citizen. But first, he would have to face and understand his own Echo.

Orin stood still at their dimly lit shelter. The mask shimmered on Orin's face and shared forgotten truths with him. It had already shown him the Echoes—monsters tied to every person in Maskhaven. Now, Orin had to face something even more scary: his own Echo.

As he stepped forward, the ground shook. A bright flash blinded him, causing him to step back. The light faded quickly, leaving a heavy silence. In front of him stood an Echo like no other. It stood tall above him, its edges shimmering like a distant star. If they could be called eyes, its eyes were dark, like the night sky, filled with galaxies.

Orin's breath caught in his throat. This was no ordinary Echo. It was his Echo.

"You..." Orin whispered, "What are you?"

The creature tilted its head and replied softly, "You have awakened me. That mask you found is the key to the truth."

Orin stepped back, his legs shaking. "What truth?"

The Echo's eyes shone brightly. In that moment, Orin felt a strong power within him, a power he couldn't explain. The Echo grew brighter, and he could see his past, showing memories from when he was a baby. He saw his parents fight.

The creature spoke again, its voice both ancient and timeless. "You are more than you think.

The blood that flows through your veins and the memories you've forgotten are not your own, Orin. You are the son of those who went against the city's rulers, the ones who fought to reveal the truth of the masks. The masks were not created to protect... but to control."

Orin's mind raced. His parents, were the warriors who went against the creation of the masks. He had always thought they had died in vain, their fight nothing more than a failed attempt to change a broken system. But this… this creature, this Echo, was telling him something different.

"You have their strength now," the Echo whispered. "Embrace it."

Orin felt the mask pulse against his face, its power flowing like a tornado. The creature seemed to vanish into thin air, but Orin didn't feel as if it was gone. Instead, he felt it within him—the knowledge, the power, the connection to everything he had once been.

His Echo was gone, but the power it had given him remained. The world around him seemed to fall away, and for the first time, Orin understood his purpose. As he left the temple the whispers of the Echoes were now louder than ever. He could feel them—every single one of them—alive, their voices calling out to him. But he didn't fear them. The mask's power was his now, and with it, the power to change everything. He had one goal: to reach the highest building in the city, the towering building where the elite of Maskhaven were.

The journey there would not be easy. The Veilguards, the elites..everything fought against him. But now, Orin was more than just an orphan with a broken mask. He was something more, a force that could fight against the foundation of Maskhaven. The journey to the building was long and hard. The streets of Maskhaven turned like a maze, always watching and waiting. The Veilguards had no chance against him now. As he passed, the Echoes flew around him, their whispers becoming clearer and louder. They showed him the hidden paths, the weak spots in the city's defenses.

When he reached the tower, Orin found it surrounded by Veilguards.

"Stop him!" shouted Captain Marrow.

But Orin was no longer afraid. He called the power of the Echoes of every citizen. The world begins to shift around him. The Veilguards gasped, their movements as if they were drunk. He was faster than they could react, his body moving as fast as thunder, his mind sharp and clear. The Echoes, his Echo, guided him, showing him the path to the top of the tower.

At the top of the tower, the Council of the foundation waited, their faces hid behind the same lifeless masks worn by the Veilguards. But Orin could feel their presence, the weight of their power, the lies they had spoken for centuries.

"You've come far, orphan," the Council said, the voice cold and calculated. But this is where your journey ends."

Orin stepped forward, "No," he said, his voice echoing through the chamber. "This is where everything changes."

With huge power, he reached out, his mind connecting with the Echoes. He could see their pasts, their secrets, their lies. The truth of Maskhaven, of the masks and the Echoes, was now his to command.

The Council trembled.

Orin raised his hand, and with it, the power of the Echoes fired through the room, shattering the masks. As the masks shattered, the Echoes that had once haunted the city were released, and Orin stood at the center of it all—no longer an orphan but the one who would awaken Maskhaven to the truth. The elites' masks fell, shattering like thunder. But what was behind the masks was even more terrifying. Instead of revealing human faces, the masks turned into Echoes, changing forms, turning into living creatures born from the darkness of the people who had worn them. The first Echo took shape before Orin—a tall, twisted form, half human, half monster. It spoke in a thousand voices at once, its words sharp and cold.

"You dare challenge us, orphan? You think you have the power to defeat us?"

Orin didn't flinch. He could feel his own Echo. It shouted inside him. It was no longer a mere shadow—now, it was part of him, a force. The elites—those who had ruled Maskhaven from their tower for centuries—had no faces now, only their Echoes. Their Echoes were just as intimidating as them. They used their Echoes to take control of Maskhaven. They knew about the truth, what a person with an Echo could really do. The person who they once were has been erased, and their fears and desires are now their warriors. But now, no longer were they the untouchable figures behind their masks. They were exposed, vulnerable, and terrifyingly powerful. The Echoes of the elites surged forward, but Orin was ready. He called upon the mask's power, and the Echoes that flew around him answered. The creature that had once

seemed alien to him was now his ally, a force he had learned to command. His own Echo came to life, its light connecting with his own, forming a shield that swallowed the oncoming attack.With a roar, Orin responded, his hands shining with energy, and sent a blast toward the first Echo. The explosion hit its target, and the creature screamed in agony as it turned into shadows, only to reform seconds later. Orin's heart raced, but he wasn't scared. His power had grown since he had first put on the mask. The more the Echoes of the elites attacked, the more Orin felt himself growing stronger.

But there were more of them.

Orin continued to fight mercilessly against the Echoes, but the Echo in the middle whispered gently to Orin, "Wake up, my dear."

"Nephew?" Orin whispered, his voice breaking.

Then, Orin blinked, and he was in the warmth of his room.

"You slept like a baby for the past twelve hours! When did you go to sleep last night!?", teasingly asked his aunt Maeve.

Orin stared at her, confused. "Auntie? What happened to the Echoes? The Council?"

Maeve's smile softened. "You must've had a vivid dream. Today's a hard day for you, Orin."

Orin woke up, realizing the Echoes and Maskhaven were one big dream.

Today marks his 15th year without his parents..how could he forget?

šifra: singer
Ivan Pejin
Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić

THE LOST SHIP

A long time ago there lived a captain who worked on a ship. His name was Michael, although everyone called him Mike, because the name itself fitted his personality better. At that time, he was fifty-eight. He had a family that consisted of 3 sons, 2 daughters and his wife.

Mike didn't sail for a few years, and then he got an invitation to start working on the same ship that he had worked on before. His wish was to sail again, so, he decided to accept it. When the time came, he went to the local dock, so that the ship could pick him up. His family also came with him. They said goodbye to each other, Mike got on the ship and waved at his family for the last time. As soon as the ship set off, Mike's wife started panicking and feeling paranoid because she thought something wrong was going to happen to the ship. But her children didn't believe her at all, and they just rolled their eyes, because they were sure everything was going to be alright with their father.

After the ship left, the chief officer showed Mike his cabin, Mike entered it and looked around. The first thing he saw was unusually large bed. On the bed, the sheets looked as white as a cloud. In the corner, there was the biggest wardrobe you can imagine. Everything in his cabin was astonishing. He slowly walked across the cabin, and he felt like he was in heaven. He lay down and felt the softness of the pillow. He had a hard time forcing himself to go work. He quickly unpacked and walked out the cabin. When he got to the bridge, he stopped in front of the closed door, thinking of all the years he had missed while he wasn't working, and he realized he had missed a lot of enjoyment too. Before he entered the bridge, his heart started racing, he couldn't wait to enter the room again after so long time. As soon as he stepped inside, his eyes widened and his body froze, he felt as if some current passed through his body and gave him goosebumps. His mind raced, as if he were there for the first time. When the co-captain saw his face, he knew that something was not right. He asked Mike why he was so stunned, but Mike just laughed it off, thinking that he will get used to all the new and different things in the bridge in a short time.

Mike sat down in his chair, and in an instant, his arms began to sweat, and his legs started shaking like there was an earthquake. After some small talk with the co-captain, he started clicking some buttons, hoping that he will get lucky, and the co-captain won't find out that he forgot everything. If anyone found out that he didn't know how to start the ship, he would get kicked out of the ship immediately. Mike didn't want that to happen, because he needed the second chance to experience how good it was to pilot a ship again. The co-captain saw Mike's weird behaviour, but he didn't think much about it. After a while, and it felt like ages for Mike, his shift was over. He left the bridge, and his problems slowly started to fade away, he was feeling much better. His legs didn't shake anymore, he didn't feel stressed.

A few hours later, he checked the schedule, and he saw that it was dinner time already. He couldn't wait for dinner, because of all the stress, and anxiety he wasn't aware he was starving. He took his dinner feeling proud that he could eat in the ship's cafeteria again, however, unlike the bridge, the cafeteria didn't change a bit. He sat down at one of the tables in the cafeteria. When he tasted the food again, goosebumps came back. His eyes started sparkling. It was the best food that he had ever tried. He couldn't stop eating, but all of a sudden, he saw someone familiar in the distance. While the person was approaching, he realized who it was. It was the co-captain. The co-captain sat down and Mike immediately started shaking because he was afraid that he realized what was going on. After some small talk, the co-captain asked Mike about his behaviour earlier today. Mike couldn't stop shaking and he quickly answered, "I am just getting used to the new working space," he said. The co-captain looked him weirdly in the eye, but he didn't say anything.

Mike finished his dinner and he went to his cabin. He started doing his schedule for tomorrow because he liked to keep everything organized. When he finished the schedule, it was already late and he went to bed.

A few days passed by. One morning, Mike woke up and quickly got out of the bed. He combed his grey, short hair, his hair usually looked like a wet racoon in the morning. He got dressed and looked at the mirror that was standing next to the door of his cabin. His hair looked great, he was wearing a grey shirt and a black tie, which really stood out against the grey shirt. He was also wearing blue jeans, which weren't really for work, but he knew that nobody would care about his jeans, because they had more important jobs. Before he left, he checked the time, and he saw that his shift was starting in 5 minutes, but the bridge was 7 hallways away from his cabin. He ran, as fast as he could to get to the bridge in time. Once on the bridge, he had a really hard time catching the breath, but he slowly managed to take a deep breath

which enabled him to normalize his breathing. This time he wasn't shaking as last time. The co-captain was already there, so he did all the work. Mike sat down in his chair, and the co-captain told him about the bad weather that was coming towards them, so they decided to change the route. The two of them started searching for an island which they hoped might be their shelter during the storm. However, there weren't any islands close to them.

They had a strange feeling that something bad was going to happen. They could see the storm far away, it was slowly coming towards them.

The island still wasn't in sight, so they had to fight the storm hoping to win, hoping for the best. The storm was the biggest Mike had ever seen. He felt like he was having a seizure. His head was hurting so much, he almost fainted. The wind was so hard that the tiny parts of the ship were being torn off, the rain flooded the closed parts of the ship. However, the worst of all were the waves so high that the whole ship was swinging, almost flipping over. During the waves, Mike threw up several times, he didn't know if they were going to survive.

Everyone hoped that the storm would last for a few hours at the longest. But that wasn't the case. After hours and hours of severe fight against the storm, the ship couldn't hold it anymore. She broke in half. The whole crew started screaming, their lives were flashing in front of their eyes, the people were praying to God to survive, some were crying. Mike tried calling for help, but there was no one to come to his rescue. At this point, he knew there was no hope. The panic was replaced by despair. Slowly, the ship was sinking and there was the time to send the final goodbye to the most loved people, family and friends. An hour later, most of the ship was below the surface.

Months after the tragedy there were no signs of the ship. The shipwreck was safely nested deep down on the bottom of the ocean. Mike's children were losing their hope.

Mike's wife had no hope, she knew from the very beginning that Mike had gone on his final journey.

šifra: Bella123
mentor: Tina Parać
institution: OŠ kneza Trpimira
autor: Tea Valić

THE MAGIC FAIRY TALE

The windows of the houses were fogged up, showing signs of early autumn. When midnight rolled around people of the town Welly Delly were fast asleep. Except one teenager girl, Sally Rose. She was tossing and turning on her bed. Tomorrow, she is moving to a new city, to a new house. Mr. Brown, her father, got a new job at a new company which is why they're moving. He will be the director of the company named Toy Heaven, which made toys and plushies. He was a tall, beefy man and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, although he did have a very large moustache. Mrs. Brown was a thin and blonde with a slim neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of the time craning over garden fences, spying the neighbours. Sally Rose woke early the next morning. Although she could tell it was daylight, she kept her eyes shut tight. The soft voices of her parents could be heard downstairs as they packed the last of their things into the car. She completely forgot that they were moving today! She quickly got up and dressed in something comfortable for the drive. She helped her parents and for a moment her mother, knowing how sad Sally was to be away from Welly Delly, thought she had accepted the decisions. But deep in her heart, she was still in sorrow and pain. The ride was quiet. The only thing that could be heard were the meows of her cat Lorelai and the music on the radio. Most of the time she was lost in her thoughts, but as soon as she picked up her favourite book, her mother turned around. 'Sally, dear, I have completely forgotten to tell you about something!' – her mother said excitedly, a glint of excitement in her eyes. 'Yes mum?' Sally murmured softly. 'In our new house, there is a room which is full of books, they are stacked everywhere. It looks like a small library and it will be only yours!' Sally immediately looked at her mother, 'Really!?' her mother just smiled gently at her. The whole drive to the town of Bellino, where she will live soon, she imagined how does that little library looked like. Did it have only detective books? Romantic books? Mysteries and crimes books, her most favourites? 'We will be there soon.' her father said, his voice deep yet gentle. Thought the window, she could mostly see forests that were slowly losing their dark orange, yellow and brown leaves. When they

arrived, the house looked dark, almost scary. But they easily ignored that and started carrying their luggage from the car into the house. It was much warmer and more comfortable in the house. On a right side of the house were a small kitchen and a dining room. On the left side was a large living room with a large couch and an armchair. Their cat Lorelai was already sitting on the armchair. 'Mom? Mom!?' Sally said a bit louder than she should. 'I'm in the kitchen, I am doing the dishes!' Sally quickly ran to the kitchen excitedly. 'Soooo… Where is that little library you mentioned in the car?' Sally said nudging her mother playfully. 'Oh dear, let's go see it. I think its upstairs somewhere.' Both of them went upstairs to find the room. When they finally found it, it was smaller than exceptions. The books were dusty, they looked as if no one had touched them for years… 'This is the library you told me about?' her voice was full of disappointment. 'Uhm-... It will be better when we clean it, I promise!' her mother tried to cheer her up a little. In the end, they both remained silent. There were only fairy tales on the shelves. Sally stepped forward, took one of the thicker books, blew off the dust. 'Here are only fairy tales for small children, there is nothing for me!' she raised her voice. 'Love, you are still a child. You have a lot of time. I think that you will like the fairy tale that you just took off the shelf. Our elders didn't say: "don't judge book by its cover" for nothing!' her mother smiled softly at her. 'Fine, we will see…' and just when Sally was about to say something more, they heard her father downstairs, calling her mother to help him with some luggage. Before her mother left the room, she gave Sally a small smile then left. Sally groaned in annoyance then went into her bedroom. Her room was at least bigger than the other rooms. She placed the fairy tale on her bed and then laid down next to it tiredly. After that afternoon, she tried to give the fairy tale a little chance but it was too boring in her opinion. She concluded in her head that this fairy tale is boring and no one would be able to change her mind because she is stubborn. She slowly fell asleep while hugging the book closer to her. Fog can be seen through the window, it is slowly starting to rain. In the middle of the night she woke up, hearing some strange noises coming from the corridor. 'What now?' she murmured half awake, half asleep. She turned to the other side, ignoring the strange noises. She thought that she was hallucinating, until it got louder. She got up and walked towards the corridor from where was the noise coming from. The sounds were louder and louder. It was dark because everyone was asleep, she could barely see. She was greeted by the fairy tale she had tried to read the night before, it was lying on the floor, opened. 'Wait… What is this doing here?' she whispered quietly. Sally stepped closer, feeling a strange force pulling her towards the book. When she touched the book, everything turned

black, she though she was falling into a black hole and closed her eyes tightly, Sally fell into something soft, afraid to open her eyes. 'Are you also forgotten?' she heard a weak, soft male voice. She slowly opened her eyes and saw two strange boys, both of them were familiar to her… A small shocked sigh came out of her mouth when she realized. They were in one of the pictures in the fairy tale. She was in a state of shock so she didn't hear him. Trees were in a weird shape, birds are replaced with dragons, it all looked surreal. 'Who are you? Are you also forgotten?' the boy repeated his question. Sally was still in shock, yet continued looking around. 'M-my name is Sally Rose Brown. I am not forgotten… At least not yet… W-why are you asking me that? Where am I?' in her eyes you could see a glint of fear. When they saw her fear, they decided to introduce themselves to her. 'I am elf Bonny and this is my brother Ronny. You somehow ended in our fairy tale. You are the first in years to read our book.' she looked around, everything seemed quiet. 'Hey, why is everything so quiet? No offence, but the fairy tale was so boring!' Ronny sighed sadly while Bonny almost started crying. 'Hey… Hey, its fine! I take it back, the book wasn't so boring!' Sally panicked, she thought she made them sad but it was actually something else… 'No, its not your fault, you actually saved us!' Bonny started 'Because of you we are awake, you have read the book to our chapter. Everyone is asleep… In a forgotten sleep.' his voice got quieter as he continued 'Every time a character is completely forgotten, when no one reads the book, it goes into a sleep and doesn't wake up till someone remembers them.' Sally's eyes widen. 'I know you are too lazy to read this book, but now me and Bonny will show you the true beauty of our fairy tale.' both of them took her by her hands. They took her everywhere, to every park, every corner of the story. Slowly she began to love the fairy tale. They headed towards the main area. She saw candy trees, chocolate snowman's, everything covered in sweets! They ran together until in front of her eyes she slowly started to see black again. At that moment she suddenly woke up. It was all a dream. That night she read the whole fairy tale. She found a new love for reading, even a reason to read more. She had almost read all the books in the little room that week. In the end her mother was right. We must not judge a book by its cover.

šifra:NN555
mentor:Dijana Oreški Vidović
institution:III.OŠ Čakovec
autor: Nicole Novak

THE MYSTERIOUS FOREST

Kiera was a curious 14 year old girl who lived in a small village during 1970s and 1980s. The village was surrounded by mountains and forest, with population of around 40 people who barely left it. The villagers often told stories about the forest and missing people. Even do some of the villagers didn't believe in those stories, there was an old villager who had 86 years, Kiera's grandpa who believed in the story and always say „Kiera, I saw what's in the forest." but never go in the details…

One sunny afternoon, when Kiera's parents and villagers had some kind of meeting, she decided to use the opportunity and investigate 'The Mysterious Forest'. She packed her backpack with flashlight, a water bottle and some food. „Don't tell anyone about this, Max!" , she said to her dog as he barked. Even do she was scared she wanted to know the truth about 'The Mysterious Forest'. Villagers used to tell stories about mysterious forest to scare kids, but were they lying or did her grandpa really saw something? She approched 'The Mysterious Forest', stood there for a while, then entered.

At first, it was really really dark, so she used the flashlight to see better. She was in shock. But why? Because there was a path surrounded by bones and dead trees! She bravely followed the path saying to her self „I'm brave. I can do it." As she was walking, Kiera heard strange noise. She asked „Who's there!?", but no reply. She asked again, but same thing – no reply. She stood behind the tree, but didn't lose the track of the path. She was curious about where does that creepy path ends. She turned off the flashlight, but then somebody touch her behind. She screamed and ran as fast as she could not knowing was she following the path or lose the track of it. She tought she ran away from weird creature that touched her but she couldn't unhear the loud foot-steps in the distance. She quickly turned on the flashlight just to see where she is. She was in panic. There wasn't a path anymore nor dead trees, just bones looking like they belong to people. She then saw a big, black shadow standing in front of her. Kiera wanted to ran away but the shadow grabbed her, leaving the backpack on the floor…

While the shadow was carrying Kiera somewere, the villagers found out that she was missing. Her parents looked everywere but didn't find any tracks, then thankfully, Kiera's grandpa came to rescue: „She's in the forest." he said, but again, didn't go in the details. It was already late and nobody from the village wasn't enough brave to go in that forest at night, so they promised they'll look for Kiera tommorow. Of course, her parents didn't accept that, beacuse till tommorow morning, anything can happen to her. Kiera's parents weren't happy to have that kind of thoughts, but sadly, that was the reality so they decided to go and look for her. Her parents just took one flashlight, bat and dogs (including Max) from the village.
As they approached the mysterious forest they got bad feeling but they were ready to do anything for their child. Dogs started barking like crazy and pulling into the forest, looking for Kiera's smell. They all went in the forest finding the same thing Kiera did; a path, bones and dead tree's around it. As they went deeper in the forest, something unusual and different was going on with Kiera and mysterious shadow. She was very sleepy, barely having her eyes open. It was still carrying Kiera deeper and deeper in the forest, until the shadow stoped in front of an abandonded house. The shadow put her on porch and dissappeard in the dark, mysterious forest.

When Kiera woke up she didn't know where she was. The only thing she had left was a flashlight without batteries! Not knowing where she was, Kiera decided to stay where she is praying for someone to find her…

While she was there praying, her parents and dogs were in bigger panic than she was! Following the dogs and path, thinking they might found her, dogs sudenly stoped. They were shaking. Not know what or who it was, Kiera's parent pulled dogs closer to them and when they saw what it was, they were in shock. It was Kiera, or that's what they tought. They hugged her but as soon as they did that the shadow grabbed them, leaving the dogs behind. That wasn't Kiera. It was the shadow who can change looks. The big black shadow was so fast that they could barely see anything! When the shadow finally stopped in front of an abandonded house it dissappeard. After some time, Kiera's parents woke up and thankfully had their flashlight working. They quickly turned it on and started crying. It was Kiera. At first she didn't realize but then she came closer and hugged them the hardest she could. „I was praying for you to find me!" she said in tears „We are going to the village soon." said her dad to comfort everyone.

As they were comforting each other, they heard a scream near them. „It's coming from…h-here?" said Kiera in fear and pointed with her finger towards abanonded house. They decided to go inside and maybe save someone. When they came inside

they saw lost villagers and Max. As they approached them, Max barked and they step aside. Big black shadow appeard, angry that Kiera and her parents are free „Who are you!?“ they all asked. The shadow was mumbling and when Kiera throw a brick at it, the shadow became 1000 little spiders. The doors closed and they were all traped. Villagers were chained so was Max…but spiders didn't stop Kiera and her parents to save villagers and their lovely dog. Kiera killed all the spiders by throwing bricks around them, making them trapped and when all 1000 spiders where traped, she throw all those bricks on them. The big black shadow was gone, villagers and Max were free and as a thanks for saving villagers, they showed them path back to the village „Aren't you guys coming too?“ asked Kiera politely but no reply. Villagers just closed their eyes and fell on the floor. Max was confused, so were Kiera and her parents so they all ran as fast as they could back to the village.

When they came in the village it was already morning. Villagers started dancing because of happiness „You are alive!“ they all said happily laughing. „Where are the dogs?“ asked Kiera's mum „They were shaking when they came out of the forest. We got scared something happened to you guys, since they came all alone.“ said grandpa hugging Kiera. „So Max was the only dog who was enough brave to follow us.“ said now Kiera's dad.

They went to rest and eat and when they got up, started saying what happened and explaining what they saw. It was good to be home but after more than 10 years, in 2000s Kiera whould still heard some voices from 'The Mysterious Forest'. Guess we'll never know what's happening there. The backpack and all lost things are maybe still somewhere in the forest…

Marta Ostović
Amela Ojdanić (mentor)
OŠ Turnić

THE REALITY

"There is that girl, Tina. She goes to our school. Everyone loves her but the people she usually hangs out with are irresponsible and have a lot of bad habits. I mean, before she met those people, she was like an A+ student. Also, she was helpful and kind but now she really needs help," Margaret told Grace. You probably want to know what happened to Tina and what her story is. To help you find out, we need to go a few months back.

Tina is a seventeen-year-old girl. She is in the second grade of high school. Her eyes are as blue as the sea, she has blonde, silky hair like Rapunzel, and small lips like wild strawberries. She was really nice and she wanted to help anyone. She was a great student. Every teacher loved her. She had a lot of friends. Her best friend was Rachel. They couldn't survive a day without seeing or calling each other.

Then one day everything changed. It was a sunny spring day. Tina was lying on her bed watching Instagram. She was watching videos of good-looking girls with perfect figure, healthy hair and a clean face. She was thinking about how popular girls in school have all that and how everyone loves them. She also wanted to be one of them but she didn't know how. She was just thinking about that the whole day. The next day, Rachel and Tina were talking when Tina asked her how she could become popular. Rachel said that maybe she could be nicer and help others even more. Tina agreed with her. She tried to be nicer, but it didn't work. She simply wanted to be popular like fourth graders: Andrew, Mike, Lisa and Nella. She needed to know how they became cool. One day she approached them and asked: "Sorry, how did you become popular? What is your secret?" They told her that she needed to hang out with them if she wanted to be popular. Tina agreed. She ran to Rachel and screamed, "I'm going to be popular!" Everyone in the class turned to her. Rachel wanted to know how and Tina replied, "Just wait!"

Tina started hanging out with her new friends but she didn't realize what would happen to her and how dangerous it was.

Tina changed her unique style to trendy one just to fit in her popular group of friends. She hung out with Rachel less and less; in fact, she didn't even talk to her anymore. There were no more jokes, no hanging out together, no laughing, daily calls and watching childhood photos together. Their friendship disappeared. One day during school lunch Rachel approached Tina and asked why they were no friends anymore and what happened to their agreement to be friends for life. Tina rudely answered that she wasn't friends with unpopular people and gave her a nasty look. All Tina's new friends smoked, took nicotine pouches and drank alcohol. One day when they were hanging out in the school park, Mike offered Tina cigarettes and some beer. At first, she refused, but after some persuading she agreed and took it. She thought nothing could happen to her if she tried it just once, but she didn't know that she would become addicted to smoking and alcohol and that those would take over her life. She started skipping classes until she completely stopped coming to school. Rachel was worried about her and she called her to see where she was and what had happened to her but Tina wasn't answering her phone. You probably want to know what Tina was doing and where she was. Well, she spent her days with her friends, not with fourth graders but with the university students. She smoked and drank every day. They would hang out in the local pub or park, shoplifting cans of beer and snacks. They would laugh hard when some of them would get sick of alcohol. She came home late and when mum asked where she was so late, she would just staggered drunkenly into her room.

One day, Tina's class teacher called her mother and asked her why Tina wasn't coming to school. Her mother sadly answered that she didn't know. Tina kept coming home later and later until one day, when she didn't come home at all. Her mother waited for her until midnight nervously looking at the clock. She kept calling Tina on her mobile phone, but Tina didn't respond. She was desperate. Finally, mum fell asleep. Around 4 am Tina came home, but mum didn't hear her. Tina threw herself on the bed and fell asleep. Around 7 am Tina got up, got ready and told her mother she was going to school. But she wasn't actually going to school. Her plan was to meet her friends in the pub near the school. When Tina kissed her goodbye, her mother felt the smell of cigarettes. Tina's silky hair smelled terrible. As Tina left, her mother started digging around the room and found cigarettes, nicotine pouches and a can of beer. She was shocked. She took everything.

Later that afternoon, as Tina came back, her mum confronted her. She was furious. She was yelling. Tina was distraught. She didn't know what was happening because she didn't know her mother had found her stuff. At one point her mom

burst into tears. She asked Tina why she smoked and drank. Tina said she wanted to be popular and cool, but she couldn't explain how she started smoking and drinking with older girls and boys. Mom asked why she didn't ask for help but Tina said she got caught up and feared the consequences. Tina started crying too. She felt she disappointed everyone. Mum comforted her and said that everything would be fine. She said that she would be there for her and give her support. Mum suggested her to start playing some sports where she could meet new fun people. Tina agreed. After a week she started swimming. She felt much better. One day before classes, Tina approached Rachel and begged her to forgive her. Rachel, being a true friend, forgave her everything. Tina's old friends kept calling her to join them. Mike was the most persistent one. He would wait for Tina after the classes and offered to walk her home. Tina tried to ignore him. Once she even hid in the school toilet to get rid of him.

She stopped skipping classes and after some time and a lot of hard work, she became an A+ student again. She didn't care about popularity anymore but about her health and people around her.

Tina's story ends here but I have a message for all kids. You don't need to start smoking and drinking just to be popular. Don't drag yourself into bad situations and don't hang out with people that are irresponsible and who get you into bad things like Tina's friends did to her. Actually, those people are not your friends. It is important that you are healthy physically and mentally. Be what you are because people will like you most when you are yourself, not when you are pretending to be someone else.

Mentor: Suzana Kolarić
autor: Mila Pešut

THE FAMILY GRIN

"What are we even doing here!?" said Peter. "I told you it would be a bad idea!" James just rolled his eyes. "We're too far in to turn back now" They continued walking through the cave, the blooming fire illuminating their faces. James held a map while Peter was biting his lip from fear

James' grandpa was a wellknown treasure hunter. He held a shop with all kinds of trinkets and objects. Peter never believed in the words 'beware sometimes has unusual use'. I mean why would a kettle or a lamp bring you luck or curse your entire bloodline? It just did not make sense to him. James on the other hand believed the stories his grandpa told him. To him, that said kettle should be held as a centrepiece in their family dining room. It brought good luck, why wouldn't it be there then? It would but his father was not the biggest fan of long magical stories.

A few days ago, an unusual man walked into the shop. James would describe it as the air feeling thick and stiff all of a sudden (even though James wasn't there, his grandpa told him about the meeting after dinner). The man held a box, neatly tied with string. There was a tag on it also "for Marr". The man gave James's grandpa the box without a word. The mysterious box clearly was not for his son. Go figure. Either it was for him or James.

And that's how James and his best friend Peter wound up in a cave, in the forest behind their houses. Equipped with a strange piece of glass and a map. The contents of the mistery package. James shoved the map into Peter's arms and fished out the glass from his pocket. With anticipation he brought the glass up to his face. The glass seemed almost hypnotic to him even in this low light.

"What are you even doing? Is just glass-"

"LOOK" James said keeping the glass just centimeters from Peter's eye. When Peter actually looked through it his breath also caught in his throat. If you looked through the glass with just the right amount of light from the lamp it would illuminate the whole room in silver markings.

None of them readable to those two. "Mate... How- how does-" James just grinned "told you it was real". They continued walking through the cave before a particular wall made itself visible to them. It was blank, which confused both. What do they

do now? They had followed the markings on the walls till now, so they have no clue where to continue. James put down the glass and walked up to it, followed by Peter whose torch made every scratch and blemish in the stone visible.

They had heard stories of this kind from James's grandpa, ones about where explorers just disappeared into thin air as soon as they stepped into places they should be. James decided to inspect the wall. He ran his hand across it. It seemed like just a plain clay wall... Not an answer they were looking for. Then he tried again, and again, and again... Then he punched the wall... Nothing again and again.... "Told you it wouldn't work. That's just stupid." Peter said with annoyance though his voice laced with fear of James's success. James turned to him while keeping his hand on the clay, rolling his eyes... A rumble was suddenly heard, and some dust and pebbles fell.

The wall began to push back. It pushed back, revealing a big compartment. In the middle of it stood a vase, intricately painted, almost ancient like. Without thinking James rushed to it, picking it up with triumph. We found it!!" Suddenly he just dropped in to the floor, followed by a scream. Peter rushed over to see his friend had fallen into a huge pit. "no no no no no... No! How do I get you out of there!?" he said, looking at James at the bottom. But James did not seem scared anymore. He seemed to be looking around, in awe of something.

"Peter, I need you to get down here with me..." Safe to say Peter was not overjoyed with James's words. "I don't exactly want to break my foot! How about you get out and we just go home!"

James once again did not look at Peter while replying, seemingly still in awe. "Pete, I really need you to get down here..." his voice echoed. Peter knew this was a very bad idea, and that he had no other choice than to jump with his friend. He jumped after, expecting soon death or something similar when he dropped.

That never came, to his relief and he fell onto something very soft like. He pointed the torch down seeing he landed on a thick layer of moss. And then finaly when his gaze fell on the room around him he was just as starstruck as James. The room was huge, filled with objects and gold.... The gold seemed to pile up and just never end while the other stuff was scattered around. What held most attention was a stand in the middle of a pile. It had a mask and a pouch on it. It looked oddly regular but it has some specific air around it.

They could not put their finger on it exactly, but they needed to get to it. They walked carefully this time so they do not fall into more dark and scary pits. When they finally made it James reached for the mask and Peter reached for them pouch. The mark was obvious enough so they wanted to inspect the pouch first.

Peter gently untied the string, revealing some kind of powder inside? "Powder? Just powder? Is that what we came for?" he said doubting. "well, it has to be special somehow.... If it is here..." Peter put his hand in it, scooped up some and sprinkled it in the air. When the dust reached the floor once again they found themselves screaming and sliding down.

They were soon met with cold hard ground and striking sun. Vast difference from what they have been doing moments ago. They looked at each other, baffled by the situation. Now, they were exhausted and a bit scared of what else could have happened to them if they took anything but the mask and pouch. "Do we go home now?" "Yes, we do..." James replied matching the scared tone of the other boy.

When they came back, they found James's grandpa. They told him all about the adventure and how they got back. His laughter rocked the room they all stood in. "Well, I'm glad you made it. Didn't want to lose a grandson and his best friend today." James's grandpa walked over to one of the showcases and opened it... He made place for the mask which was still a mistery and the pouch with powder by taking out the good luck kettle. He grinned and gave the kettle to James." There, for your room. Just make sure mum does not notice". The grin on his face was very well known. That family grin everybody knew.

šifra: 789Charles
mentor: Iva Šimić
institution: OŠ „Ivan Goran Kovačić“, Slavonski Brod
autor: Vita Bračun

TRAVELLING ADVENTURES

One day, when I came home from school, I had an argument with my parents. After that I was very upset, so I decided to run away from home. I took my bag and put some snacks and water in it and went outside through my bedroom window. I took my jacket on my way out and started running. I ran till I came to a forest that was out of town. I knew this could be dangerous, but I decided to go deeper in the forest. As I was walking through the forest, I saw a light shining behind a tree. It was a light pink light that I never saw before. It was so beautiful. I was curious what it was, so I decided to walk towards it. As I came closer, and closer. The light became brighter and brighter. When I came to the source of the light, I realized it was something I didn't expect. It was something no one would ever believe that it ever existed. It was a portal. A big portal. But the question now is "Where does it lead?" or "how did it come here?". "Well, I guess I have to go in to find out" I said as I stepped into the portal. When I came into the portal I was flying and everything around me was in rainbow colours. Once I reached the end of the portal I was standing in the streets of a very big city.

As I started walking through the city, I realized I was in London. "London? What am I doing in London?" -I thought to myself but I didn't complain since I always wanted to go to London. I decided to have some fun, so I went on a ride on The London Eye and bought some cotton candy. It was so delicious. Next, I went to the famous Buckingham Palace and there I saw the famous queen Elizabeth. After some time, I thought for a moment "wait, didn't queen Elizabeth die? Oh well, maybe she had a family lookalike."-I thought it was the answer to my problem, so I shrugged it off and continued my journey. But little did I know things were far more complicated from what I expected. As I walked down the streets, it was getting cold and dark. The night was coming, and I realized I had nowhere to sleep. I stood in shock as the cotton candy fell from my hands right on the ground. I started panicking and suddenly a young man tripped on my cotton candy bumped into me. As I started to apologize, I looked up to the man's eyes. He looked very familiar. As I realized who it was, I felt

a wave of shock run through me. It was the one and only, Harry Styles. But I realized something, he looked a lot younger. He still had his beautiful fluffy and curly hair. And a beautiful smile, but I just couldn't get it. "How does he look younger? Did he get surgery to look younger?"-I don't think that was it. It looked too real for me. From all the shock I fainted and after some time I woke up laying on the couch seeing young Harry and four more boys beside him. As I looked around, I realized the boys beside him looked a lot like Niall Horan, Zayn Malik, Louis Tomlinson and Liam Payne but they all looked so much younger. I was so confused. As I stood up the boys greeted me, and Harry gave me a glass of water. They introduced themselves as the famous band One Direction. I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing and what my ears were hearing. I asked them "What year is this?" – and they told me "Its 2012". "2012? How is I 2012? Wasn't it 2024 the last time I checked?"- I thought to myself. As I was still confused on what was happening, I excused myself to the bathroom. Once I came into the bathroom, I turned on the water to wash my face then suddenly I saw a magical creature standing behind me. The moment I saw it I started splashing my face with water and gently slapping my cheeks. I thought I was dreaming but it turned out I wasn't. it was all real. The creature spoke to me "Hello dear, do not fear, I'm here to help you. Listen to me carefully, I'm here to help you. You were the chosen one to fix the mistake that wasn't under the control of the universe. As you know the famous band One Direction broke up and recently one of their members (Liam Payne) died. All of that wasn't supposed to happen, it came out of the control of the universe and those were the consequences. So, we decided to fix it by choosing someone to enter the past and fix the mistake. Your job is to forbid those two things from happening. But you should be careful because everything you do has an effect on the present and future. "- and without another word it disappeared. I was so confused. I was in the past? That can't be true. Once more I slapped my cheek and as I realized I wasn't waking up I got serious." The future of five boys is in my hands. I must do this the right way, but I still didn't know what the creature meant by the fact that everything I do has an effect on the present and future. I guess I'll have to find out." I thought to myself as I exited the bathroom and sat on the couch. I introduced myself to them and they asked me some questions like "how old am I? Do I have a job or where do I live?" I realized I had no where to stay or a job and when I told them that they offered for me to work for them as their stylist and live with them as well. I agreed with the offer and thanked them as I gave each of them a big hug. As I sat back on the couch Niall said "get up! We are going shopping for some new clothes! He stood up as he took my hand, and we sat in the car that was heading to the mall. When the car parked in front of the mall, my jaw dropped. I

never saw a bigger mall in my life. When we came inside my eyes were all over the place. There were so many shops, cafes, restaurants. The place was modern and spacious. We went to dozens of shops, and I chose some clothes from a few stores. After a lot of shopping, we got tired and hungry, so we went to a restaurant that was a part of the mall. Niall ordered a pizza, and I ordered a hamburger. When the food came, we ate and talked. I realized how funny and kind Niall is and we became very close. We became great friends instantly. As we finished our food, Niall paid for the food, and I thanked him for the meal and for the clothes he got me. After that we went home. When we came home, the rest of the boys greeted us, and we all went to sleep. As days passed, I got closer to the boys. Harry, Louis, Niall and I loved to play football together. It was always so fun. I never knew Niall can be so competitive. The boys were truly the kindest. Harry was also an amazing cook and baker. We always baked together while the rest of the boys were goofing around. Liam was the one that took care of the boys the most. He was the most responsible one. Even though Liam took care of everyone, he never took care of himself properly so that was where I helped him. I would always talk to him about his problems and comfort him. As days past I got closer and closer to the boys, but everything went wild when they started recording their first album. One day, the famous Ed Sheeran came to their studio so they can write songs together. When they were in the studio, I came in to check on them. I didn't know Ed was there. When I saw him, I dropped all of the papers in my hand. I never thought I'll meet young Ed as well. I started quickly picking up the papers but one of them flew next to Eds foot. He picked it up and saw it was a song. He read it and asked, "did u write this song by yourself?" – he asked me. "Yes, I did" I answered. After that they offered me to write some songs with them and when their tour started, they even let me sing with them on stage. I was so happy. Everything was going great. I was getting closer with the boys but there was a problem. I never got as close with Zayn. We were always shy around each other and one day, a possible reason for my behaviour clicked in my head. "Was I falling in love with him? I think I was."- I thought to myself. After I while I went to drink some tea so I can clear my thoughts. For a few months I didn't think about it that much, but my feelings continued to grow. They had another concert one day. When they called me on the stage Zayn was closer to me then usually. On one of his speeches Zayn turned to me and knelt on one knee as he asked me to be his girlfriend. I gladly agreed as I hugged him. After that show everything was different between Zayn and me. We were less shy around each other, and we got even closer. After the sometime, the date of Zayn leaving the band came but he didn't leave, and they continued the tour. As time passed the band

stayed together and everything was alright. One day, the creature appeared again. It told me I must go back to the present and that my job is well done. Before I went back to the present, I went to all of the boys' rooms and hugged them all and said goodbye. Once I came back to the creature, it opened the portal for me, and I entered it. Inside of the portal everything was same again. Everything around me was in rainbow colours and I was flying. But it didn't bring joy like it did before. Instead, I felt very sad that I had to leave the boys behind because we became very good friends but at least they would do music in the future. When I exited the portal, I was in the forest where I found the portal, but the portal wasn't there anymore. I looked around and panicked. I had no idea how to get home. I was lost and all alone. "Maybe this was the end." – I thought to myself. From all the stress I fainted. After I woke up, I saw a white light. "Wait did I die?" I thought to myself but after some time I heard a familiar voice in the distance. I heard the voice come closer and closer and when it came close enough, I saw a familiar face. It was Zayn, but he looked older than he did in the past and at that moment I realized what the creature meant that everything I did will effect the present and future. It means Zayn and I are still dating, and I can still hang out with the boys. I was so happy.

From happiness I jumped from the hospital bed and hugged Zayn and after the rest of the boys joined into the hug and we had a group hug. After a while my parents came and joined into the hug as well and we were all happy.

šifra:CF666
mentor:Dijana Oreški Vidović
institution:III.OŠ Čakovec
autor: Kiara Friščić

TWELVE

There are rumors about a haunted house little further from a town, in the woods. I mean that's what others say. Those rumors are only for children to believe. But some of my classmates believe those stories, including my best friend, Alice. "You are so naive Alice!" I always say that, but she ignores me. "You're just scared, aren't you?" Our classmate Isaac overheard our conversation. Isaac is the one who started those rumors because he likes to watch others believe him when he talks nonsense. "Of course I'm not scared, because I know there's no such thing as haunted houses." I rolled my eyes. He chuckled and went to the classroom.

After class Alice and I went to the cafeteria. "Isaac is planning something for sure!" I whispered to her pointing my finger at him. "I assume you are right, but it doesn't have to be." She answered but her mind was somewhere else. "Don't tell me you're daydreaming about Marcus?!" I looked at my weird friend annoyed. Marcus is the most popular boy in our school, ninety percent of the girls have a crush on him. And just because he's the captain of the soccer team, rich and looks like Leonardo DiCaprio from "Titanic". I don't like Marcus one bit; he uses popularity just for fun. But I hate his twin sister Monica even more. She is the worst version of Regina George. Plastic, popular, pure evil. Do I have to say more? While I was talking about Monica, she showed up in front of me and said: "Oh my gosh Juliette! I heard your grandma died; I hope your mascara didn't smudge at the funeral because it would have made you look even uglier." She laughed and went to her brother. I was furious. How does she know about my grandma's death? "Don't listen to them, she's jealous of you because you're a prettier and better person than her. I always preferred brunettes over blondes anyway." Alice calmed me down because otherwise I would punch Monica in front of everyone. After lunch I had to go check something in my locker. When I opened the locker, a letter fell on the floor. I would be disappointed if it were a love letter, boys in my school are gross. I picked up a letter and this was written:

"For Juliette Paige Black,

I'm inviting you to spend one night in the haunted house. If you aren't scared, meet me in front of school at 5:45 pm today."

That was Isaac, I just knew it. Later, I showed the letter to Alice. To my big surprise she had the same one in her locker. After the bell rang it was English class. We all took our seats. During the class someone tapped on my shoulder. It was Noah. Noah is the definition of clever. He gets the best scores in every exam in class, maybe even in school. And yet he's quiet but kind to everyone. "Hey, did you by any chance get any letters this week?" He whispered. I turned around and looked at him, shocked. "How did you know?" I asked, still confused. "Wait, really? I also got one today." Noah gave me his letter. It was the same as mine's and Alice's. Alice glared at Isaac. His eyes were on us, he smirked. "Hey you three! Cut it!" The teacher yelled at us. The rest of the school day passed quickly. Except that I didn't see Isaac, he was probably skipping classes again. As soon as school ended, I went home. When I came into the house my parents weren't at home. I decided to do my homework. While I was doing my homework, someone knocked on the front door. Ugh, who's so smart bothering me at the moment? It was Alice and she looked terrified. "What's with you now?" I was still mad because she was bothering me. "You won't believe what just happened! I wanted to come to your place but on my way, I saw Isaac. He came to me, and he told me to ask you why you wrote him a letter that was the same as we have!!" She was screaming like a lunatic. "WHAT?!! I NEVER DID THAT!! Is he SICK or something?! What did you say to him then?" - "I told him you never did that, but he answered that it was your handwriting and with your name!" Alice explained to me. I was so mad at Isaac that I packed my stuff the fastest I could. We ran to school but when we came, we didn't see Isaac but Monica and Marcus. "Marcus!!!" Alice squealed. "What are you doing here?" Monica looks at us. "We got some letters that said to go spend night at the haunted house." Somebody said that but it wasn't me nor Alice. It was Noah who was behind me. "What!!??" I jumped. The others laughed and I was frustrated. "So, WHO wrote the letters?" Marcus asked pretty annoyed. "Isaac." Alice, Noah and I said at the same time. "Why are you blaming me for this!?" Isaac finally showed up. The moment I saw him I wanted to slap him, but instead I did this: "WHAT is YOUR problem!!? YOU WROTE STUPID LETTERS TO PRANK US!! I'M SICK OF YOU!!" And to make this argument shorter I yelled at Isaac, he yelled at me and blamed me for everything, but Alice said that it's not important who had written the letters and that's best if we went to haunted house and that's it. When we came, we realized why people don't like this house. Imagine the Adams family's house but five times creepier. That's what the house looked on the outside but, on the inside, even worse. The house was messy, gross, dark and much worse, but I can't even describe. As soon as we looked around most of the house Isaac grabbed some drinks from

his backpack. He turned on the flash on his phone and blasted the best songs on his speaker. "LET'S PARTYY!!!" And since then, I don't remember much about what happened, I just know we all were drunk and that's never good, right? The next thing I remember is that it was around 10 pm and Monica went to the bathroom... We all fell asleep at that time, but I just woke up. I looked at the clock and it was 11:50 pm. I looked around and everyone was sleeping, except... Monica! I thought she got lost so I woke up the others and asked them where she was. "She is probably asleep, Juliette." Marcus turned around and continued sleeping. "I'll check." Alice got up and went upstairs. In a few moments we all heard a loud scream, and we all ran to Alice. When we came to her, she was standing in front of the bathroom and in there was Monica but.... Her dead bloody body was in the bath, and her head was in the sink. On the mirror we read: "WE ARE JUST STARTING". "It's written in blood..." Noah whispered. We were traumatized, is this a dream? It wasn't... Twelve hours in this house, what if we all die here!? We tried to open the front door, but it was locked. "Where is the key!!??" Alice screamed. "I forgot okay!!??" Isaac screamed at her even louder. We were all panicking, checked our phones, no signal. What are we going to do!!?? "Okay let's all split up, it's the fastest way to find exit." Noah said and we listened to him. I was checking the same floor Monica was killed. I was there checking for some time; I heard something made of glass fall. "Who's there!?" I didn't know where to look. "Juliette? Juli, I'm scared, I want to go home!!" Somone sneaked out behind me. I looked but it was just Alice, she was crying. I just wanted to wake up from this dream. I hugged her and then I saw a shadow behind Alice pointing at her with a knife. That same moment I heard someone scream from downstairs; the next moment I looked behind Alice, the shadow was gone. We ran downstairs and the screaming boy was Marcus. "What's wrong?" Isaac asked. "I can't open the pantry. Marcus explained to us and then we tried to open the door. The door was stuck. I grabbed the closest knife and broke through the door. The door fell and the pantry looked like a disaster. Everything was covered in blood. We were standing on a door, but we felt like something was under us. Isaac and Marcus somehow raised the door, and we were right. Under us was Noah's dead body, his glasses were broken and so was he. I mean he was cut in half and next to him was a huge axe. We were all sick of this. It's just four of us, and no exit. I looked at the clock and it was 1:11 am. "See guys It's haunted!?! See Juliette!?!" Isaac turned to me. "HOW CAN YOU THINK OF THAT WHILE WE ARE PROBABLY GOING TO DIE TONIGHT!!" I snapped at him. Marcus and Isaac looked at me in shock and Alice began crying again and she ran away. "LOOK WHAT YOU HAVE DONE!? Can you NOT fight every minute!?"

Marcus yelled at us and ran to see where Alice was. “I hate this...” Isaac mumbled and went after Marcus. “Juliette! Are you coming!? We can’t leave each other alone anymore...” I heard Isaac’s voice but didn’t care to turn around. It’s his fault, why didn’t he die? He deserves it! “Juliette!!” - “What?!” I responded. “Where’s Alice?!” I was upset, what if? What if my best friend is dead!? I pushed Isaac and ran upstairs. “WAIT!” He was behind me, but I needed to find Alice. I was yelling her name and running like in a marathon, Isaac was yelling at me to stop. I couldn’t, she is my best friend. But after some time, I got tired of running and just sat on the floor...“Finally, you stopped”, Isaac was breathing heavily. He really did chase me all this time. “Juliette, we will find her...” I was on the verge of tears. After two minutes Isaac helped me get up and we went searching for Alice and Marcus. “What if they die, then we’re going to be the only ones alive.” I said shaking. “They are alive, I hope so...” he quietly said. After some time, we realized we didn’t check the basement. I was scared but we went downstairs with Isaac’s phone lighting our way. When we came into the basement I wanted to vomit. Let me explain what we saw: Well, there were Alice’s and Marcus’s corpses standing, but they were connected. “MY BEST FRIEND IS DEAD!!” I cried my heart out. Isaac was trying to comfort me, but with no luck. “I’m sorry...” - “The damage is already done!” Next moment I felt that he hugged me... And then I heard: “WATCH OUT!” Isaac yelled and then pushed me; I fell to the ground, and I heard a shot. I hid my head, but the bullet didn’t shoot me, it shot... Isaac... He saved me. Now in front of me were some masked people with numbers 210 and 666. And then everything went black.

I woke up, but I wasn’t in the basement. I was in hospital. Next to me my parents were seated who hugged me right away. “What happened?” I was confused. After I blacked out, the police came and found all the bodies and they found me. Our parents reported us missing, so the police were looking for us all night. And those murderers unfortunately escaped... At the end I was in the mental hospital for two months to recover from my trauma and the police are still looking for those killers to this day.

šifra:Jac13046
mentor:Andreja Žitković
institution:OŠ D. Tadijanovića Petrinja
autor:Jakov Benčak

WHEN LOVED ONES LET YOU DOWN

The story started in 2002. A man called Rob Johnson got his first child. He and his wife Mary Johnson called the baby Martin. Martin was one happy and energetic child. They lived in a flat near the centre of London. It was one happy place. As the time passed, Martin started school. There, he met a boy called Alex. Unlike Martin, Alex was a bad guy who was really rude and had bad grades in school. But somehow Martin and Alex became best friends. As the time flew, Alex managed to pass all the classes in that school. He was one really bad student. Martin was unlike him really good. Every day, in the evening they were doing bad things like smoking, drinking, and burning things in the park. Martin's parents really didn't like that, so they called the police, but anonymously, so Martin and Alex wouldn't be mad at them. The police arrived. They picked up these best friends and they took them to the prison to sober up. Martin was furious because somehow he found out that his parents called the police on HIM! Mad, he run to their flat and he just yelled at them as if they weren't his parents.

Meanwhile, TikTok was launched on the Internet and it got ultra-popular. Alex saw a video where a son was pranking his parents by running away from home. He called Martin and said: ″I have a brilliant idea. I saw a video on TikTok where a son is pranking his parents after an argument by running away from home. You could do that, too.″ And Martin just answered in three words: ″That is brilliant! ″, and hung up his phone. After months and months of planning, Martin finally managed to run away. He only took one small backpack with some clothes in it. Martin also carried one small map of England, so he could know where he was at any time. At first, Martin's parents thought that he went out with his best friend Alex, but as the time passed, they realized that something was off. Again, for the second time, they called the police, saying that Martin was missing. For some reason the police arrested Alex because they thought that he murdered him because they had a fight. Martin really didn't know what was happening. He was happily walking in those English forests. At first, he was really scared because he didn't know what was waiting for him there,

but as the time passed, he was getting more and more reliable on his surviving skills. When he was a child Martin was a member of the boy scouts in his school, where he learned surviving basics. Martin's and Alex's parents were really afraid and devastated. Martin's mother, Mary, kept repeating in her head: ″God, why him?″. Alex lost his mind in the prison. He was swearing and yelling at the policemen, who were keeping him in prison cell so he couldn't escape. The only thing that those policemen couldn't understand was ″Don't blame me, blame TikTok!″, that Alex kept saying.

Martin was really bored on his journey. Luckily, he remembered to bring his earbuds with him because he really liked listening to punk music and punk bands such as Green Day. In fact, they were his idols. So, every pause that he had, he listened to Green Day. It gave him energy and motivation to keep doing the thing that he was doing, running away from his beloved. The weeks passed, and investigators weren't able to trace Martin. But one day, one of them got a little something that could maybe help them to find him. They found part of his shirt that he used to pick up dead fish that he caught, so he could make dinner out of it. They also used the dogs to help them in finding that bad guy. In the meanwhile, Martin's father Rob ended up in hospital because he couldn't stand that much worrying. He wasn't feeling well. Suddenly, Mary got a mysterious call. She picked up. Martin called. He was saying something, but she couldn't hear him the best because the signal in that forest was really bad. She called the police immediately. When they responded she sounded as she was terrified. She was saying that she heard the voice of her son, Martin. The policeman that responded was really scared after the call ended. Alex also heard that call and he was actually really happy to hear that he was good, and that he was alive in the end. Martin wasn't sure about that call because he knew that something bad would happen. After the call, he decided to throw away his phone. But, he wasn't thinking that the phone could help the police. The police found the phone, deep down in the forest. But the phone was turned off because the battery ran out. Luckily, they found the right charger for it so they could recharge it. After it was turned on, the police quickly started searching for all of the possible information that could help them in searching for Martin. One policeman was in charge of that phone, and he found all of the massages that Alex and Martin were exchanging. Everything was discovered. All the messages leaked.

Martin's mom, Mary, found about their plan. She was shocked and angry, firstly with her son, but also with Alex. In the meantime, Martin's father Rob wasn't getting any better, he was getting even worse. Those brave doctors were doing their best to make him feel better, but nothing. Martin got into a big problem. He was left

with no food or water. He wasn't able to go to any shops because he was in the middle of the forest, and the whole England knew about his crazy idea, so if he walked into any shop, the cashier would call the police. But Martin wasn't giving up that easily. His surviving skills were better and better through the years, so he remembered that he could catch a fish and boil some water to have fresh and clean water. That fish was just for dinner, but he would catch a new one. Sadly, his father Rob passed away. Doctors were trying everything to save him, but they didn't manage to keep him alive. Mary became depressed. She was alone, with no family or friends that might help her. Funeral passed. Everyone was devastated with his passing. Martin somehow managed to come back to town. He wasn't really happy because he had to come back, but that was the only right thing to do. Firstly, he came home to see his father and mother. His mom passed out a few seconds after she realized that he came back home. After she woke up, Mary said to Martin that his father passed away. Martin suddenly broke into tears. He was constantly shouting "Why, why…". After hours of crying he went to his father's grave to say goodbye, for the last time. After he left the graveyard, Martin went to the police to turn himself in.

The police quickly suspended the search, and they got Martin into prison. There, after a long time, he saw his "best friend" Alex. They got into a really big fight. Martin rushed at Alex, and the situation quickly escalated. The whole prison just gathered around them. At first, the policemen, who were in charge, didn't realise that the fight was going on. One prisoner, Marv, went to get a policeman. They quickly ran away to separate Alex and Martin. Both of them were without any serious injuries. Martin just had a small scratch on his wrist. Soon, Martin's trial was over. He was charged with 5 months in prison. As the time and those months passed, he got out. Marv also got out, the same day as Martin did. They became friends. Marv also had a sister. Marv's sister, Ella, was the same age as Martin. They started dating.

Quickly Martin was engaged and got his first child, Charter. Mary was really happy with that news. Alex's life wasn't going very well. He had some really big problems with drug and alcohol addiction. Martin's life was going perfectly, but one day, Alex showed up on his doorstep. He was high, and didn't know what was doing. Martin was at work that day, but Ella and Charter were home. Alex suddenly knocked on the door and as soon as the door opened, he rushed in and started destroying their home. Ella quickly grabbed Charter, and called the police. Then she called Martin. Martin was in shock. The police arrived after 15 minutes. They quickly caught Alex in the act. After that, Martin and his family never saw him again, Charter grew up in good conditions, and they lived a happy life.

šifra: LC12345_17
mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split
autor: Lucijana Čvrljak

YEAR 3008

In the year 3008 people lived in floating cities, travelled by flying cars and the air was unbreathable because of the pollution. The breathable air was limited, everyone walked around with oxygen tanks and bottles. The rich citizens were able to get a lot of clean air because of their status and wealth but the poor citizens on the other hand were unable to get much clean air because they didn't have money for extra air. Every 5 hours air was given to the citizens, some got more than others. It was hard surviving with limited air and lot of people died because of suffocation.

There was a girl named Fiera who lived in a big city named Neotopia. She lived in a small house and wasn't very rich. She struggled on a daily basis because of the lack of oxygen. Her mom was a single parent due to her dad's death. Her dad died tragically because of the lack of oxygen during a fight with the government soldier. Fiera hated the government and the unfair oxygen rations. The rich had everything while Fiera lives in fear of dying because of the lack of air.

One day she was wandering the city's underground tunnels where rarely anyone visited. She liked the quietness and peace of that place. She was walking until she saw a camouflaged door in the wall. She came closer and investigated it. It was very weird because the door was in a random and unexpected place. She first knocked on the door but no answer. She decided to open the door, grabbed the door handle and opened the door. She was stunned; the door revealed a beautiful forest. She couldn't believe it because she had never seen anything like it in her whole life. She first thought that it was a dream but it really wasn't. She quickly regained her thoughts and walked in. She closed the door so the government soldiers wouldn't find her. She walked in. The air was fresh and there were all kinds of plants. She thought to herself that maybe it was a greenhouse but it couldn't be because she saw the sky which was crazy. She didn't have an idea where she could be because everything felt so unreal. She walked deeper in the forest admiring it and breathing fresh air for the first time without worrying it will run out. Suddenly she heard the soldiers and started running like crazy because of the fear she will get killed. While running through the

forest she found a small wooden cabin that looked like it came from a fantasy movie and like fairies lived there. With hesitation she opened the door and the interior was also fantasy like. She felt safe inside and less scared of the soldiers but didn't know who lived there. After 15 minutes a human came in and they both stared in shock. Fiera broke the silence and asked the man who he was and what's his name. She was scared that he works for the government. The man said his name was Leo and he was a 17-year-old boy who lived there. He asked her name. They started talking about how she ended up there. He told her that this was a different dimension he accidentally found 2 years ago and been living there ever since. He was glad that she found this wonderful place.

She was shocked and needed time to process everything. She went for a walk After an hour she went back to the cabin, she wanted to ask so many questions. She entered the cabin and asked Leo many questions. She asked him will anyone come looking for me and how come other people haven't founded this place. Leo said that once he came back to our normal dimension and found missing person posters for him, but he decided to keep living in this dimension. He told Fiera also the answer for her other question, his mom used to tell him a legend. The legend said that when one soulmate finds the magical door which leads to a beautiful dimension the other soulmate will also find it. If the two soulmates found the door in the limited time, they were given with they would live in that dimension until they grow old and die. All this time he hoped someone would find this door and dimension, he hoped the legend was true. When he saw Fiera, he knew she was his soulmate, he instantly felt it and couldn't believe the legend was true. Fiera was very stunned by this new information, she couldn't believe she just found her soulmate. It kind of made sense why she felt so safe the moment she stepped into his little wooden cabin. She also asked him if there were any government soldiers here. He said no because it wasn't possible for someone who isn't their soulmate to enter this dimension. I instantly felt easier. The whole night the two of them talked and talked. They were getting to know each other better. Fiera and Leo spent 3 days talking and getting to know each other on a deeper level, the connection and the spark between them was like a fire, growing and growing. Fiera realized that her mom was probably looking for her, she felt so bad because she left her mom in that world all alone but she knew she was meant to be here. After a month of living in her own dimension she decided to leave Leo for a few days and go back home. She made sure to bring big oxygen tanks to give her mom. She came back through that same door she came in. She started running with big oxygen tanks to her house. She found her mom sobbing in the kitchen. When her

mom saw her, her face almost instantly lit up. Fiera gave her mom the oxygen tanks then sat down to tell her everything. She told her mom everything and her mom was very happy for her daughter. They made a deal that Fiera brings every week oxygen to her mom. After 2 days she went back to her soulmate Leo. The moment she entered her dimension Leo hugged her very tightly and told her he missed her very much. They caught up on all the events that happened. That night they went to sleep but Fiera had an unusual dream. She dreamt of her dad. Her dad told her the plan on how to save the earth and defeat the government. When she woke up, she remembered every single little detail of her dream, it all felt so real. The plan she dreamt of was very realistic and possible, she decides to tell the plan to Leo. The plan went like this, they would go back to the original dimension and they will fake being rich. They will fake it with expensive looking outfits and big oxygen tanks only the rich could have. They will attend a meeting in the government's office at six pm and they will go by the name Lumina and Arion Nexis. Supposedly those two died recently in a car crash and only her dad for some reason knows that but they couldn't defeat the powerful government soldiers alone. When they defeat the government, they will take over, government made citizens think that air was polluted but actually they killed all the trees due to wanting power. Fiera and Leo got everything ready and left their dimension. They made sure they looked wealthy and at six pm sharp entered the headquarters. At reception they went by the given names they needed to use. The receptionist walked them into a big luxurious office where were already sitting the richest citizens, politicians and the president. They greeted everyone and sat in their place. They listened to president's evil plans while patiently waiting for their moment to strike. Fiera and Leo started a rebellion. They shouted for justice. Few of the members joined them. Even more members started protesting with Fiera and Leo. President was getting overwhelmed because of the lack of power. Everyone joined the rebellion. They called the police and soldiers to catch the evil president. Soon enough the president was behind bars. After 1 month passed the country was thriving, the air was getting cleaner every day because there wasn't an evil president driving the country to disaster. The government members started an election for the new president. The new president was a great woman who loved nature and helped saving the earth. After one year passed everyone could breathe normally again and live normal lives without fearing death. Fiera and Leo decided to keep living on Earth and in this dimension. Fiera and Leo realized that their soulmate dimension wasn't real and it was a big greenhouse. The greenhouse was extremely big and looked like a forest because it was abandoned. The legend was also just a legend, it wasn't true.

Fiera and Leo were still very grateful for meeting each other because they were true soulmates. The dream Fiera dreamt of was actually a hallucination due to poisonous mushrooms they ate by accident. Fiera and Leo to this day they laugh about their silly teenage adventures. Now they are living in year 3028 and have travelled a lot. They are happily married. They've got two beautiful children. One girl named Lyra and one boy named Atrixs. Fiera is an important politician figure while Leo is a famous architect. Their daughter Lyra will write a famous book about her parents and become a world-famous writer. They will live happily ever after and their legacy will be continued.

THE END

SECONDARY
SCHOOL

tinka05
mentor:Tihana Pavičić
institution:II. Gimnazija Osijek
autor:Ana Kretonić

YOU DID GOOD, SOLDIER

Cold. Pain. Discomfort. The first things we ever feel. Our introduction to the world. A rather cruel and barbaric entrance into an even more callous place: society. Back then we didn't even know what we were getting into. I didn't know what I was getting into. I was a baby, an infant, a bundle of joy, a fresh face in a crowd of six billion. Ready to take on the world and all that it had to throw at me. Weighing in at two pounds, eight ounces, and some change, I had hellishly good vocal cords for a 30-week-old mass of flesh, purplish slimy skin, a perfectly bald head that a middle-aged man would be proud of, not to mention a birthday remembered by all; September 11th, 2001. A truly sorrowful, miserable day; but for no one as much as it was for my mother. She may not have been there when the Towers fell, but her whole world came crumbling that day. Everything changed. She changed. Forever. While there is no doubt that nine eleven was a travesty, bleeding out in a sterile, lifeless hospital room, not to mention in immeasurable pain, while screaming bloody murder about carrying the Antichrist; that was my mother's own personal hell. All 9 circles of it. They, the professionals, called it a psychotic episode; I just call it my mother. She didn't choose this. She never wanted any of this. She never wanted me. She was unwell. And as I came into the world that day, I felt that weight in the cold, vacant air that filled the room. The world was cold, and so was she. I don't exactly remember that day, nor do I want to, but what I know is that that faithful day changed my mother forever and set a tone for the rest of my turbulent childhood. The following weeks I spent in the NICU, in an incubator constantly monitored, watched, and observed. I was almost pampered with all the attention the nurses and doctors were giving me. Hourly visits, plenty of warmth, love, care. But while I was indulging in the riches of the pediatric care system, my mother was drifting further and further into herself. All I know is that she hasn't spoken a word since. Maybe it was the blood loss or the medications, or maybe, just maybe, it was the price I had to pay for hurting her so deeply; I never heard her voice.

I don't remember the first time I met my father, but what I do remember is that from day one, he was a strict, high-strung man. Don't get me wrong, he was a good man, a good colleague and friend, might have been a good husband even; but he was a lousy dad. Determined, tenacious, hard-headed, stubborn, hardworking, sharp, and well put together. All qualities of an admirable character, not so much a dad. Even at home, he was more of a Sergeant than a loving father. I don't think I had ever seen him tear up, let alone cry. He never used to smile or tell jokes. He valued silence, punctuality, and resourcefulness, all qualities a child isn't particularly familiar with. While other kids were playing catch with their fathers, or painting with their mothers, maybe a "Good job" would be heard or even a "You're doing great, sweetheart"; I envied that. The most common phrase in my household was "Try harder" or an occasional "Do better". Tough love is what it was, and it was, indeed, tough, but at least it had the semblance of love. Although I knew he loved me, I wish he had shown it more, or maybe even said those magical three words, but at least he made the world feel a little less cruel. But then he left. Without a goodbye, without a word. I don't even remember what his last words to me were. He never even left a note; just like that, one day he was just gone. And while my mother silently sat in her rocking chair, medicated and dazed, staring lifelessly out the kitchen window, life was cold again. I never realized how much his "Try harder" meant to me until I forgot what his voice sounded like altogether. After that, the rest of my childhood was a blur: days, weeks, months, years, all combined into one endless, meaningless loop. It was just me and my mom, but it felt like just me against the whole wide world. When I was freshly 18, I decided to make my father proud. I decided to become the man he would have wanted me to be. I enlisted in the military. That was the first time in a while that I had felt my father's presence. Boot camp felt oddly familiar, warm, and even comforting in an odd way. It was intense, both mentally and physically, but it felt like home. I grew to enjoy the strict daily routine, the structure, the discipline. Being told what to do, and when to do it: wake up, make your bed, keep yourself and your space clean and tidy. Get dressed in a hurried fashion, warm up, exercise, eat, do morning drills, eat again, exercise again, eat, clean some more, reflect on your life choices, lights out; sleep. Rinse and repeat, day in and day out. There isn't much space for individuality in the military. There is community, teamwork, and camaraderie, we are all equal and the same. Same shaved head, same uniform, boots, even socks. Some had a hard time adjusting to that. Orders being barked at you left and right, no matter the time of day or weather, this was no place for softness: we were men now. And I took my role seriously, no messing about, skipping drills, or God

forbid, talking back. Boot camp wasn't a time for making friends. I kept my distance, my walls up high, always on alert. Sergeant Hayes said he saw something in me: the first day I walked in, he said he felt as if he were staring into a mirror. His first words to me were: "You're doing good, Soldier", and those same words imprinted on me. He made me feel seen. He was tough but fair. As much as he was a tough nut to crack, above all else he was a man of respect. Sergeant Hayes saw us as real people and treated us as such. Stocky and muscular, with some grays poking out here and there even with his hair buzzed off, he wasn't loud like the other superiors. He spoke in a low, modulated tone, that made all his words sound like life lessons. His philosophy was that no matter where we came from, what we went through, or who we were before joining the military: we were all equal now. And every time he repeated those words, I felt as if my life finally had meaning. This was right where I was supposed to be. So I worked inordinately hard. I pushed myself beyond my limits, and sometimes, I would even see a glimpse of a smile coming from the Sergeant.

Once boot camp, I was off to AIT, advanced individual training. I became an infantryman, which I think quite suited me. It went by too fast, and as I was sent home awaiting further instructions, the world felt cold again. Cold and quiet. Life outside of the military felt aimless and dull. Purposeless. Therefore I looked forward to deployment, maybe foolishly so. Many dread those deployment orders, fear them, and avoid them. But I dreaded being home. So when the orders finally came through, I didn't even blink, and I was halfway across the world. And there, the desert heat was brutal. It clawed its way into my lungs filling them with the rough and scorching sand. My eyes hurt from the blistering sun; it was relentless, and it seemed as if it was telling us to go back to where we came from. The environment was harsh and every move felt heavy. Every step felt like I was slowly sinking into a sand abyss. My rifle, which I held tightly against my chest, gave me some, maybe false, sense of security. We were all weary, bone-tired, and on edge, like never before. In those moments, the only thing keeping me from desertion was the proud look of Sergeant Hayes as we marched on indefinitely. This was what I wanted; I was trying hard to convince myself of that. I worked hard for this, learned how to walk, talk, and move like a soldier. Be a soldier. This was my purpose. And in the night I always wondered if one of the brightly lit burning stars was my father looking down at me, I wondered what he would say if he saw me now. While my vivid thoughts consumed me, an unfamiliar sound rustled somewhere in the sand not too far from us. The hairs on the back of my neck stood upright, there was that subtle, yet noticeable, shift in the atmosphere. I trained for this, my marksmanship was flawless, but at that moment I couldn't

move a muscle. I froze, not moving a finger. A low murmur blurted: "Movement, two o'clock,", and what may have been seconds, maybe minutes I stared blankly. Sergeant had his hand in the air, motioning us to halt, cease all movement.As I looked around, seeing my comrades left and right, there was a moment of clarity. I stood in place; alert, my senses were heightened, and my heart was beating painfully. The adrenalin coursing through my body made everything seem as if it were in slow motion. That was when the first shots were fired. My vision was tunneled and my ears ringing. I had never felt such fear before, and as bodies dropped around me, the people that I knew, the very same people who, not long ago, were mere citizens, I was shot back into reality. I was lucky to not have been wounded. My hands were once again steady on the rifle, my finger resting on the trigger, eyes locked. Each breath was deliberate and controlled, in my mind's eye I envisioned my opponents' next move. This was what I had trained for, what I spent hours perfecting; I had to take the shot. Now or never. And as I pressed the trigger, the man not even 15 feet in front of me dropped to the dry desert floor. The sound of the shot seemed to echo endlessly, in that moment, the world froze. My chest heaved as the bright flashes of gunpowder igniting continued on around me. The heavily potent smell of burnt gunpowder snuck its way into my airways, making me feel as if the air was even more scarce. With heavy, adrenaline-fueled steps, I walked towards the lifeless body left where the shadowy figure once stood. And as I came closer; he looked smaller than he did from a distance. His eyes were open, staring into the starry-lit night sky, they were lifeless, void. His expression was frightened, and it seemed as if his face was completely frozen in time. His hands were small, and the rifle that was lying next to his body looked disproportionately large. The face I was looking at, scanning every detail, was smooth and youthful. He couldn't have been older than thirteen. And as the realization struck me, I recoiled in pure horror and disgust. I retched and gagged, my legs gave out, and I ended up on the cold, rough sand floor. Every flash that followed felt like it went straight through my chest, but no tears formed. On my face was a smile, and my look was hollow and detached. The next thing I remember was the sergeant pulling me by the scruff of my uniform. I wasn't injured, but I couldn't walk. The nights after that I lay restless, and every time I closed my eyes for even a prolonged blink, I saw his boyish, innocent form looking at me blankly. I saw him all around me. He haunted my days and nights, everywhere I went he followed. I couldn't focus on the mission, I couldn't eat, talk, or function. In those moments, I remembered my poor mother. I finally understood her.

After that, holding the rifle felt wrong. I started questioning everything. For every order, and assignment, I couldn't look at the other officers the same. I wanted to get away from this, this life. How does one live after taking a life? I pondered on that question for many many nights and days. But the rain of metal found me once more. The same sounds echoed as they did that faithful day, the same smell lingered. All I could focus on was the figure of the boy this time standing next to me, as I ducked for cover. He was so close to me that we were almost touching skin-to-skin and he had that same departed look in his eyes. As the bullets flew over my head I tried to stay composted, stay still, hold my position, but I couldn't face him any longer. I jerked up and in that fleeting moment, a bullet came our way and struck me in the chest. It burned and seared my flesh, it ached and throbbed, but only for a moment. Suddenly, the world went quiet and my body went numb. Limp; as I made contact with the same sand the boy had laid on. I laid there with the scorching sun shining in my face, blinding me. I felt disoriented, and weak. Where I laid was a red wet patch that was spilling into the sand around me. My mind was blank, at peace once and for all. I closed my eyes; I finally found peace. The boy wasn't here anymore. A smile found its way onto my paling face, and I felt a light touch on my wounded skin. That's when I opened my eyes again, and there she was. My mother. She was here, alongside me kneeling. Her hands were oddly rough, but she caressed my face with the love I don't remember her ever exhibiting. I laid in her arms, I don't even know how long. My body was so cold, yet I felt so warm. Her lips widened as she looked at me pitifully, then a rough, low voice whispered: "You did good, Soldier."

šifra: 0BnPeALfjvpA7Tl
mentor: Katarina Breščić Šegota
institution: Pazinski kolegij – klasična gimnazija Pazin
autor: Anabel Stojšić

NO ONE IS WATCHING

There is blood everywhere. Well, everywhere except for my palms, probably because I stabbed him holding the knife with both hands. I look at his eyes, still open, and think how in the movies, you always hear someone say, ‘’ They watched the life leave their eyes ‘‘. I keep looking him in the eyes the whole time, but they look the same. Either the life didn’t leave yet, or it had never been there. I look around me, the city sounds blending in the background while my heavy breathing fills my ears. I don’t shut his eyes, I never do it for any of them, they don’t deserve it. I grab him by his legs and pull. A dead body is not that heavy to drag when there is no guilt hauling with it. The alley is quite dark, but I don’t need much light to do this. I tap him down to check for his wallet and phone and put them in my purse. While I’m searching his pockets, I feel his muscles stiffening, the rigor mortis kicking in. Soon, his whole body will start to cool off. His skin is already cold to the touch, but I don’t mind. In the shadows of the alley the blood on his blue shirt looks black, and I’m almost certain it could be, considering it came from such a rotten heart. I find a spot on his shirt that isn’t already stained with blood and clean my knife with it. Even though his eyes aren’t moving, it still seems like they are watching me at whatever angle I stand. The only thing that is left to do is take the cloth that muffled his screams out of his mouth and let everyone know who killed him.

I put on my red lipstick and with my lips I press my signature onto his frigid cheek. Funnily, the newspapers seem to be certain I am a man. The articles keep going on and on about my killing methods, about my hiding spots and the „hell” the so-called victims have endured. It has been so infuriating I have to let them know no man could do this in such a perfect manner. I don’t drag him far, I leave him in the exact spot where he wouldn’t be noticed from the street, but someone would get to him in a matter of days, whether a human or a stray dog. I don’t care a rap. The smell of gasoline and rotten food creeps into my nostrils and I think to myself what a fitting place it is to leave him in, garbage belongs in the dumpster. I start to walk away

when I hear something sniffling behind me. I turn around and see a stray cat licking him, I scoff. ''Have at it, "I say. The sound of my footsteps reflects of the graffiti filled alley walls as I walk into the street. With ease, I blend into the calmness of the world surrounding me, my legs leading me downtown. Contrary to popular beliefs, best killing time is not the middle of the night. It is the early morning, when there are enough people so the muffled screams would not be noticed. The church is empty, and the first rays of sunshine are falling on the thick carpet. A memory comes to me in a flash. I was standing on the exact same spot after my first killing six months ago, the few drops of his blood still burned in places where they touched my skin. I sat in the first pew and took the rosary into my hands. I had never believed in God. Never had I gone to church as an adult. Having no idea what to do with the rosary, it just felt right to hold it. With each bead I touched, I recalled a swing towards the man. And when I passed the bead, I recalled the reason I stabbed him in the first place. I didn't regret it, nor did I stop going to church because of feeling guilty. Though, I knew I was supposed to feel some kind of emotion, so I sat into that first pew. Looking at the altar, I felt all the built-up anger flush into me. I hated churches, ever since I was little, and my grandma would drag me with her every Sunday because she was scared for my soul. The first time she brought me there I was 7 and it was so boring I almost fell asleep, but that didn't stop her from bringing me there almost every Saturday for the next 9 years. Then, at 15, I started paying attention to what the people around me were doing, what they were singing, how they were praying. Unsurprisingly, it didn't sit right with me. They looked like robots, repeating those words they had memorised while looking at a marble statue. I don't know why, but I felt so angry at all of them. Above all, I was angry at that God that they were all chanting to. I realised in that moment it was never about having something to believe in, it was about having something to justify doing whatever wrong thing they did. My hands touched the cross that was on the rosary, the coldness of the iron pressed into my burning palms. I wasn't as calm then as I am now, I wasn't so organized, and I was paranoid. I sat in that pew for hours just waiting for the police to come and arrest me, feeling that every single person that came into that church knew what I had done. Even the Virgin Mary statue at the altar, I felt her stare pierce my chest every time I tried to breathe. Eventually, the delusion wore off, but I stayed in that church almost all day, up until the evening mass was about to start, and the place started to fill with people. I walked home that night and the whole time I kept analysing everything I had done over and over again. Had I cleaned up after myself well enough, left something back there, what if someone had seen me? Yet, the only question that kept bugging me even after I reached my apartment was whether I had hidden the body well enough?

It turned out I had, since it took almost a week for someone to find it, apparently an older lady who was looking for her cat and instead found a dissolving corpse between two dumpsters. It was all anyone talked about for a month, the media portrayed him as a saint, a young man full of potential with his whole life ahead of him until a monster brutally murdered him. They seemed to refer to the monster as a he which worked in my favour at the time but would start to annoy me as time went on. The first few weeks after he had been found were the most crucial to keeping myself together. Of course, the police didn't interrogate me, they had no reason to, and I just had to keep it together and repeat to myself time after time why he deserved what I had done to him. After that, it took me some time to gather the courage to select my next victim, but once I found him, there was no going back.

Compared to the first one, his death wasn't as important, and the news broadcast it for a few days but after that, the dust settled and people went on with their lives. After hearing about my two killings for quite a long time, I decided I didn't want to leave all the credits to a man. I decided that a simple kiss on the cheeks would be the perfect way to leave a mark. The third one was my ticket to the top and since it takes three kills for someone to become a serial killer, this one was special as he was also the first one who would be wearing my kiss. So, with that in mind, I began to search for my fame bringer. This kept me up thinking almost all night long but at last I decided to just wait for the universe to send one my way. However, as time went on, there was no one that stuck out to me, at least not enough for me to kill him. After all, I'm not a monster. But I had to. I felt the tingling in my fingers come back every time I picked up a knife and I was starting to think I would have to pick a random sex offender on my city map. That was all until I met another killer, one whose killing couldn't be justified, one that needed to be stopped. Perfect.

I was walking home from the library, it was already late and there was hardly anyone out on the street. Even so, the traffic was still heavy when I heard something from the alley, almost like a dragging noise, one I knew all too well. I peeked from behind the wall and saw a silhouette of a man standing over a young woman's body. I could see his emotionless face before he marched off and left her in the dark. I walked up to her body, she was just lying there. I had never seen her before, but she was pretty, her clothes were torn off, her lipstick smudged and on her neck a bruise from a thread. Despite all of that, it was her eyes that threw me off. They were wide open, looking up into the darkness of the universe, as if she was searching for someone between the stars. ''God?", I thought to myself, but when I looked up, the sky was empty. I closed her eyelids and adjusted her top so she could be at least a bit covered up. I continued my walk back to my apartment.

I learned his habits, I knew exactly when he got off work, how long it took him to drive home. I knew he lived alone and his friends rarely came to his apartment, he usually met with them at the bar near his work. Also, I noticed he frequented a night club that was near the alley, and that is how I formed a perfect plan. In a matter of days, I was ready to strike again. The club was open on the weekends from eleven until five am, which meant all I had to do was be in the right place at the right time. I found a short black dress in the back of my closet, perfect for fishing out a perverted narcissist like him. On a Friday night, I was in front of the club when the clock struck midnight. We danced for a long time. He bought me a couple of drinks, but I spilled all of them out and instead focused on getting him drunk. I needed to be completely sober, while he had to be tipsy enough to trust me, but not so drunk that I couldn't do it how I wanted to. After all, I had planned to take my sweet time with this one. Around four thirty, the place started to empty out and he suggested we go back to his place. I knew we had to pass the alley, so I drunkenly agreed. By the time we had left the club, I could already see the first few rays of sunshine peek through the morning fog. We walked slowly, cold air biting my bare shoulders, having passed a few people already heading to work and a few other stumbling clubbers crossed our path. But when we got in front of the alley, there was no one around and I got to work. I grabbed a brick that I had placed there the day before and hit him in the back of the head, just enough to knock him out for a few minutes. I took my heels off and dragged him into the alley, it was a dead end, so I placed him in one of the corners. Since we were surrounded by abandoned buildings, I had nothing to worry about. I pulled out a trash bag that I had hidden behind a dumpster a few days ago and changed into the sweatshirt, jeans and trainers that were in the bag. I decided it was a good time to have a smoke while I wait for him to wake up, so I took out a cigarette and the lighter and felt the smoke fill my lungs. A few minutes later, he was awake. I looked down at him, he was scared, maybe because he saw the knife laying on the ground next to my dress or maybe because he recognized the alley. I put out the cigarette with my shoe and kneeled before him taking the cloth I was about to put into his mouth when he realized what was happening. ''Please, "was all he said. For some reason it made me furious. It was just ironic to me how he was begging me for merci when a week ago he had strangled a woman. '' What did she do to you? '' I asked. I didn't take the cloth out of his mouth, I didn't want to give him the luxury of having any last words. ''Did she say no to you? Is that why you killed her? "The look he had had in his eyes until then was gone, replaced by pure horror, ''Did you even know her? Did you even bother to remember her name? "He stopped looking at me

and instead focused on the knife. I picked it up, he started shaking his head, tears falling down his cheeks, forming dark circles on his grey shirt. I wondered what the blood was going to look like on that shade of grey. Was it going to be black, or would it be red? I stood up, took a long look at his terrified face before taking the first swing at the chest. The blood on the shirt looked red.

The lipstick was still fresh on my lips when I walked into the church, the marble floors protesting every time I took another step. Unlike the outside, the church was cold. I walked down to the first pew and took the same seat as always, grabbed the nearest rosary. The beads, once white, now more yellowish, flew through my fingers almost naturally, almost as if I belonged here. The cross in the middle was a pale red, almost pink, and on it a little figure, crucified, looking up, as if his Father would save him. I closed my eyes, took a breath, relived the moment. He had screamed, no one heard him, but he screamed anyway, all the way to the end. And when I gave him that last fatal blow, to the heart, I watched him realise he was going to die. It was not the accepting kind of realisation, like in the movies. Instead, his eyes started circling around the alley, almost trying to grab onto something significant. He wanted something to look at while he was dying, but there was nothing worth looking at, except for me, the one that was killing him. People tend to think killers enjoy killing their victims, they say it brings them satisfaction to feel those people die, I disagree. I'm impatient while they're dying, the only moments I feel satisfied are those after I give them a kiss on the cheek and walk into the church.

All the times I have sat in that church for the past six months flash before my eyes, all leading me to now. The ninth one in a row, depends on who you ask, the media still hasn't given me the credit for the first two ones. They didn't have to, after the first one that carried *the kiss of death*, they realized what was going on. I became a presence, they even called me The Death herself. Men were scared of me, they walked the streets at night, looking around, eyes filled with fear. They feared punishment because they knew they deserved it.

The church bells ring, the morning mass is starting in fifteen minutes, people are slowly arriving. I step out into the morning sun. Let's see how long it takes them to find this one.

šifra: Spartacus3124
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Tin Karešin

THE BARD, THE THIEF AND THE WARRIOR

In the bleak midsummer, as the sun stood high above the Rose Valley, the town of Direvale bustled with noise. Though not precisely a city, this was the busiest town in the region. All the traders, merchants and craftsmen found their business most profitable here. As such, the town acted quite like a city. There were people of many trades, respectable citizens doing their work, and much scum there to ruin it. Thieves, robbers and cowards who happened to get their hands on some steel. They were, of course, chased by the town guard, which also functioned as a big city guard would. In other words, they often ignored the criminals for a few pennies.

Today was, however, a special day – one when the guard didn't get to neglect their duties. The duke of the valley, who was also, by his own making, the mayor of Direvale, was hosting a big feast. The scene in the square before his house was quite a thing. It was bustling, people were constantly passing by. Across the square, there was a tavern where a brawl seemed to have broken out. Near it, a woman carrying fruit was being mugged by a starved beggar with a dagger. A horse-drawn cart filled with hay rolled in front of the duke's house. The house was guarded by two guards with halberds. Some more patrolled the square. Near them, the cart driver was playing his lute.

The two guards guarding the house were leaning against a wall and playing cards on a barrel. A person approached them. He had a dark, wet cloak over what seemed like a crooked back. He walked with a weird stick upon which a strange cloth hung like a banner. He had a young face with a thin moustache and goatee. His hair was brownish-blonde, tied into a small ponytail.

"I notice you two seem quite bored. Guarding something important?" he asked.

"Just scram, pal! Can't you see we're on duty?" a guard said.

"No reason to bore yourselves meanwhile. How about I cheer you up? I could tell you your future from those cards." the cloaked guy said. The guards snickered but agreed.

"You." he said to the closest while looking at a card. "In your future, I see… a woman!" The guard laughed softly. "Yes, she's petite, has red hair, freckles and a fiery spirit." he said. "And in yours, an instrument! A wooden one with strings!" he told the other guard. The guards were entertained by this man. So much so, that they didn't notice the small, hooded figure climbing the duke's side window. The fortune teller saw it and kept quiet.

Meanwhile, on the floor above, the duke was changing in his walk-in closet, a separate small room accessible from his bedroom. He was singing quite joyously. His beer gut made it hard to pick anything too stylish, but he knew he had enough influence that no one would mock him even if he dressed silly. So, he picked an outfit and went back to his bedroom, only to see a small, hooded figure, grabbing the plentiful jewellery laid out on his table and putting it in a brown bag. Their head was wrapped so that only their eyes and nose were visible, but the rest of the body was dressed in leather and cloth, more functional than identity-concealing. For a moment, they both looked at each other in silence, frozen in place. Then the duke screamed.

The guards were still entertained by the fortune teller and the bard still played his tune when suddenly a scream was heard from the duke's house.

"Help, thief!" echoed through the house.

The bard's tune got faster, fiercer.

"What was that?!" the guard said.

"The duke, let's go!" said the other.

"No, I'm sure it's nothing!" the fortune teller insisted.

"Shut up! Hey, wait, you saw the thief, didn't you?" the first guard said. The bard on the cart fastened his pace again. "You let it go without telling us, didn't you?!" The fortune teller quickly kicked the guard in the knee, grabbed the back of his head and bashed it against the wall. The other guard got hold of his halberd and attacked the hooded man. He grabbed the top of his strange walking stick and drew a longsword from what turned out to be a disguised scabbard and parried the guards' attacks. A small fight ensued to the rhythm of the bard's action music. The man dropped his cloak revealing that what seemed like a crooked back under the cloak was actually a back scabbard for his sword. He moved so fast and so skilfully that the guards stood no chance. He moved with such grace and skill that the bystanders watched in awe. Every move he made was smart, precise and so quick you could barely follow it. He parried a hit from a halberd and spun along it, cutting the guard's leg, then spun back under the halberd and used his pommel to hit the guard's neck and knock him out. As more guards ran towards him, he sheathed his sword on his back and ran towards the wall. Pushing his feet against it, he ran up it to the duke's balcony.

In the duke's bedroom, he found the sight of an unconscious, undressed, fat duke lying on the floor and a small, hooded figure bagging the valuables in the room.

"What the hell is taking you so long? And since when do you let the man you're robbing see you?" he asked.

"Hey, give me a break!" the hooded figure said while unmasking to reveal a young, soft woman's face with freckles around her nose and ginger red hair. "Besides, you didn't do your part either, Flynn!" she said as the two guards from the street entered the house and climbed the stairs loudly.

"Well, I wouldn't have to if you'd done your part right, Red!" Flynn said, unable to hold in a smile. Red smiled back mischievously, and they both got ready for what followed. As the guards broke through the door, he jumped at them before they could point their polearms at him. The guards were too slow for his moves. He knocked them all out within a minute. However, the first one seemed to stir awake and tried to attack him from the back, but Red got out a dagger and stabbed him, then knocked him out.

"I told you she was your future, didn't I?" Flynn said to the unconscious guard. Red grabbed the bag full of loot and hid her face again and they both jumped out the front window, falling into the cart full of hay.

"Go, Wesley!" Flynn shouted and the cart driver put away his lute and got them underway. The guard who was previously knocked out tried to attack them, but Wesley knocked him down by breaking his lute upon his head.

"See? I never lie." Flynn said smiling.

"A shame to waste that lute though." Red said.

"Doesn't matter, I stole it anyway!" Wesley said. They all laughed and quickly got away from the scene of their heist.

"Look at this, the druids of the Airynn forest made this. I bet they'd appreciate having it back." Wesley said looking at a decorated pearled necklace he picked out of the loot.

"And look at this one!" Red said holding a golden necklace with inscriptions on it. "I bet the paladins of Redshore will pay a pretty penny to have this back amongst their ranks!" she said. The threesome sat around a campfire in the forest near the road going from Direvale, digging through the loot.

"Damn the duke and his "debt collecting". I might be a thief but he's a right proper crook." Wesley said. Flynn just stared at the necklace in his hands in silence. It had an amulet with a big red stone in the middle hanging upon it.

"This is the one." he said. "This is my mother's necklace."

"Damn. How long have you been looking for that?" Red asked. Flynn chuckled.

"I honestly don't know. Years? Since before I met you lot, definitely." he said.

"How'd you say it was stolen again?" Wesley asked.

"I was robbed in the street."

"I find it hard to believe you of all people were robbed just like that."

"I was drunk."

"That rings true." Red said as she picked out another piece of jewellery.

"Well, after we redistribute these back to their rightful owners" Wesley said and burped rudely "and they pay us for it, we agreed to part ways. I suggest that, before we part, we go back to our hometown together. To Yannisport."

"Maybe your hometown." Flynn snarked.

"That's not fair, Red's from there too!"

"I'm from there alright, but it's been a while since I've been able to call it my home." Red remarked.

"Still, it was a pleasure working with you lot, and we made a great team. Let's at least part somewhere nice, somewhere familiar." Wesley said. Flynn just looked back to his mother's necklace. It was the last thing of hers he had. Then he put it away.

"Well, I suggest we all get some sleep. Good night." he said and laid in the sleeping bag he made from his cloak.

"I agree." Red laid down. Wesley snuffed out the fire and they all went to sleep.

"Do you swear to uphold justice and follow our ancient code until death?" the elder said.

"I do." Flynn said kneeling.

"Then by the powers of the Ancient Ones, I dub thee Flynn Hardwood, knight of the Pristine Order. Stand, warrior, and declare yourself." the elder said. Flynn stood up and spoke.

"I am Flynn Hardwood, warrior of justice, protector of the weak, servant of the Ancient Ones, knight of the Pristine Order." he spoke loudly. The crowd stood and cheered. As he walked down from the podium, he was stopped by another knight, his friend Marcus. They grabbed each other's wrists like knights.

"Now you're one of us." Marcus said. As he spoke, his smile twisted, no longer a friendly one, but one of madness. The crowd, the elder, the podium, everything around them disappeared and they were surrounded by fire. Fire and smoke, filled with people burning, screaming and crying. Marcus was laughing like a madman.

Torn between his oath to the order and his allegiance to good, Flynn drew his sword and drove it through Marcus' chest.

"Argh!" he shouted as he woke up, still disturbed by the pictures from his nightmare. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

"Still haunted by the oath you broke?" Red asked. Flynn opened his eyes and saw that Red was awake. It was still nighttime and Wesley was asleep. Flynn got up and sat next to Red.

"When I told you about my past, I didn't tell you so you could remind me of it."

"No, you told me because I was lying naked next to you in bed." Red snarked.

"Yes, and the reason I told you was because I expected it to stay that way."

"Well next time be sure it does before you open up." Red snarked again.

"I was sure." Flynn said looking her in the eye. Red's snarky attitude and smile vanished, for she knew that back then she had been too. "And for the record, the oath starts with "warrior of justice, protector of the weak" before it gets to loyalty to the gods and the order, so it was Marcus who broke his oath, not me." Flynn added. They sat in silence for a while.

"We should go to Yannisport." Red said.

"I know, but are you sure you want to go through what awaits you there?" Flynn asked.

"They're not my family anymore, they made that crystal clear. I have nothing to say to them nor do they to me."

"As you wish. Now let's get back to sleep." Flynn said. They went back to sleep.

Unlike Direvale, Yannisport was a proper city. Walls surrounding the town and dividing it into various sections, a river running around the lower town, serving as a moat, a big market, a busy port, and a castle at the north end. Ships of all sizes arrived at the port, and people of all standings traded at the market and drank at the taverns. The walls were adorned with machinations, walkways and merlons, the gates with portcullises and drawbridges, the towers with arrowslots.

The bard, the thief and the warrior rode into the city on the cart. Wesley drove the cart and played his lute, Red combed her hair with the duke's hairbrush, and Flynn cleaned his blade. They passed through the crowded streets slowly before arriving at a tavern and getting off the cart. They had already sold the rest of the jewellery back to whom it belonged.

"Well, this is where we part ways." Red said.

"Yeah. Anyone feel like a last drink?" Wesley asked and gestured toward the tavern.

"Gladly." Flynn said.

"Sorry, but no. I just want to get out of here before someone recognizes my face from the wanted poster." Red responded.

"Oh. So, we part?" Wesley asked.

"Just like that?" Flynn added, looking into her eyes.

"Just like that." Red said, looking deep into his.

"Then I guess this is goodbye." Wesley said. He hugged Red and she hugged him back. "It was good working with you." he said.

"Yeah, you too pipsqueak." she said and they parted.

"I'll give you two some space. I'll wait for you inside Flynn." Wesley said and went inside the tavern. Flynn and Red stared into each other's eyes in silence.

"This is it, huh?" he said.

"Yeah. We had a good run, better end while we're ahead."

"Yeah." Flynn reached into his pouch and pulled out his mother's necklace. "Here, I want you to have this."

"What? I can't, it's your mother's."

"It was my mother's. Now it's yours." he said and placed the necklace around her neck. "We did have a good run, I just messed it up. I was a fool, an idiot, and worst of all I was sometimes a drunk idiot. I didn't give you the attention you deserved, but you still deserve it. My mother has no use for this anymore, and if we do part I want us to part right. Besides, I always said how I love your red hair, red freckles and red name. Your big red necklace fits right in. This belongs to you." he explained.

Red just looked into his eyes, not saying anything. She hugged him, burying her face in his chest. She did that because she knew that if her face was too close to his she might not hold back. He hugged her back.

"Goodbye." she said and let go. He watched as she got lost in the crowd before turning back toward the tavern. As he did, Red jumped back on him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Kiss me!" she said.

"What?"

"Just shut up and kiss me." she said and jumped up, her lips meeting his. Flynn was confused for a moment before placing his hand on the back of her head and kissing her back. A few moments passed before they parted.

"What gives?" Flynn just asked.

"You were a drunk idiot. Now you proved you've grown. Considering that, maybe we could try again?" Red said.

Flynn just leaned back in and kissed her again. They kissed for another few moments and then joined Wesley in the tavern.

The bard, the thief and the warrior celebrated together. They talked the same as they did before, and they laughed the same. It was as if the parting never happened. Their laughter was interrupted as three city guards entered the tavern.

"You three! You're under arrest!" a guard shouted.

"Under what charges?" Flynn asked. The guard got out a scroll and opened it.

"Multiple accounts of thievery, paying with forged money, selling the Duke of Attintown a fake gold horseshoe, luring the high priest of the Sheawild into a room with a nun and stealing his clothes, stealing the count of Mereville's ship, beaching it on a nearby island and lighting it on fire to call for help, then stealing the boat from the sailors who came to help, and running a fake jewel engraving business without a licence." the guard said. "You will answer for your crimes now!" a guard shouted.

"Truly? Why wasn't I informed, I would've dressed better." Flynn said.

"Yes, and my hair is a mess today." Red added.

"I'm too drunk to answer anything." Wesley said.

"Enough! Surrender or be arrested!" the guard shouted. Before he could reach his sword, Flynn punched his face and knocked him back. As the guards reached for their swords, Flynn drew his.

With a feint stab, Flynn swung at one with his false edge. As the guard blocked, Flynn hooked his hilt on the other side of his blade, pulled it down, grabbed the guard's shoulder and stabbed at his chest. The guard's armour protected him, but he fell over. Another guard swung at Flynn from above, but Flynn caught the blade with his own, grabbed the guard's arm and swung at his neck. He hit it, leaving the guard breathless. The third guard was attacked by Red. As he fought her, Wesley broke a bottle over his head and stabbed his shoulder with it. The three guards collected themselves and, in true city guard fashion, hastily ran away.

"You know, we do quite well together. Maybe we parted as thieves, but why not keep together as adventurers?" Wesley suggested. Flynn and Red silently agreed.

"Did I hear you three are adventurers?" someone said. It was an old wizard sitting at the bar. "I have an adventure for you. It includes wonders, dungeons and dragons." he said.

The trio all locked eyes and smiled.

šifra: Inverness
mentor: Martina Mavrek
institution: Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec
autor: Dina Drakulić

MERCY

Stifled cries for help remain unheard in one of the numerous alleyways of London so dark you could barely make out the simplest of shapes. We find our protagonist with a knife lodged in his gut, spewing out blood and clawing at the nearby wall to keep his balance. Another figure, right on the corner that led back to the main street, is holding a phone in its hand and the light reveals dark curls beneath the hood of a jacket. The shadow slides back to the hustle and bustle of the crowds while Erno Windsor Moreau, bloodied and defeated, doesn't manage to keep himself steady and ends up on the muddy ground below. He feels that he's drifting into a state of unconsciousness as his chest heaves with an unspoken burden.

But with a simple click of his pocket watch, time turns and shifts, space contorts into what it once was, the future tangles into endless overlapping threads and finally disappears. He finds himself standing in his office, stumbling from the pain he'd felt mere seconds ago, coughing and dizzy from defying the laws set by the universe far too complex to be understood. But what matters now is that he is out of danger, even if it might be only temporarily. In the spot where there was a knife, lies a small reminder of what had happened, a small cut etched in his skin. A scar, which will heal.

Once the waves of pain that had him gritting his teeth and almost convulsing, end, Erno pats himself down to make sure he's unharmed. This was not at all what he had in mind. He's failed to finish what he's come to do.

A silver pocket watch with small scratches on the glass frame and visibly battered appears again in his hand. It has become a habit to have it in his hand at all times. Its condition is irreparable, no matter how far he went into the past. His eyes linger on the small, tiny nub that's usually used to adjust the watch's arms, his fingers trail along the glass. Just who was travelling with him and following every step he took, predicting his decisions so accurately?

He ran his fingertips across the dusty work desk, coming across a small circular dent that lit up the moment it registered pressure against it. Holograms flickered and illuminated the room with a soft light accompanied by a buzz of the technology

unknown to the majority of mankind. There were people, places, times; information about the time travels he'd experienced. Sweeping his finger along the hologram made the figures move. Then lists of tasks appeared, tasks that Erno had to complete.

A slightly displeased look tainted his dark complexion. The task he had attempted to accomplish not long ago flashed red with obvious meaning; he'd failed to do so, again. He was to retrieve an artifact that another time traveller had left behind. His job was to fix someone else's mistake and this act would maintain the stability of the passage of time. Just one small artifact from a different timeline or century could lead to unexpected changes if it fell into the wrong hands, causing time to shift and threaten the existence of time travellers. A time frame would be erased and become a distant reality, more like a dream that did not come true. No one from that future would come to existence because it would be a completely different one, a reminiscence of sorts.

He had to act fast if he wished to catch the mysterious person who kept on pestering him whenever he set out on a mission. For some odd reason, they never killed him. They left him hanging by a thread each time, as if they were a cat playing with a mouse, cruelly toying with it and relishing in the pain it brought to the small and vulnerable creature. Unfortunately, since he didn't even have an idea of what they looked like, let alone where their whereabouts were, he had to pay a visit to an old friend of his he hoped he wouldn't have to see for some time more. He slipped out of his bloodied robes and took out new, clean ones, grabbed his trademark coat and hat and set off into the city.

The city is loud and full of life, kids running around corners playing with each other and their parents warning them to remain close so they don't get lost, cars passing by and releasing pollutants into the air each time the gas pedal is pressed, the sky murky and threatening with rain. He slips past the crowds, walking along the buildings almost neatly lined against the sidewalk. Almost, because there is this monstrosity of a building hidden away in an alleyway, invisible to those incapable of time travel. Purple and vibrant, almost surreal considering it is tucked away in the dark, wanting both to be and not to be noticed. Traces of yellow ooze from the doormat as Erno approaches, sighing as he looks at the freakish doorbell, in the shape of a skull with glitter on it. How remarkable this place really is, just like its owner. He rings the doorbell. A soft chime of bells comes from the house, shortly followed by the sound of books tumbling down from somewhere and then by the sound of countless locks being opened and, finally, the owner of the house shows herself. A woman of darker complexion and average height, dressed in a purple dress with de-

tails of orange and yellow moons and stars, her hair a messy afro with many trinkets tied into it with yarn, her makeup the same colour as both her house and her clothes. Her remarkable eyes, of different colour, widen, almost not recognizing Erno at first, but the moment she does, she squeals with laughter.

"Ain't it you, Mr. Windstop or whatever your name was!"

Her voice rings in the alley, that specific type of chortle that Erno had trouble getting out of his head.

"Oh my! How time flies by! You've changed so much."

She shows little to no hesitancy going for a hug, Erno trying not to recoil from this whole interaction. How much he just wants to go back home instead of being at this lunatic's place because he needs to ask for a favour…

Upon entering the place, Erno's senses were attacked by various scents drifting from seemingly every possible direction. They were so random that it made Erno nauseous at first. Then, luckily, they entered a different room. The main room, a living room per se, decorated with plants and paintings, once more purple and yellow decor. She had tea already waiting by the side, as if she had already known Erno would come by.

"Miss Crystal," Erno breathed out sheepishly, embarrassed to be requesting Crystal's help, since it had always been the other way round, "could I ask you for help? A little, uh, favour?" Erno spoke trying to avoid making eye contact with any of the creepy decorations laid out for all to see. Crystal's lips twisted into a Cheshire cat grin, snickers escaping her. "Oh, dear Erno. You know I stopped doing favours a long, long time ago." She brought a cup of tea to her lips and took a sip.

"You know how you can pay," she muttered, to which Erno twisted uncomfortably in his seat.

Time was currency for time travellers. Taking time out of your own life, shortening your life in exchange for something valuable. Something that should never have become a trade. In some rare cases rules were broken and people even traded with someone else's time. Time travellers found an odd thrill in this exchange, never knowing when your time will expire and playing around with it, the risk of dropping dead any second of any day, sooner than it should happen in the first place. This was what Crystal, a notorious witch known for being excellently skilled in her predictions of the future and locating people, was referring to. Erno no longer had the privileges he might have had with her before and now it wasn't possible to ask for something as simple as a favour. Crystal knew that in the past Erno had often traded

years of his life in exchange for a number of things and because she was awfully cruel and wanted to put others at risk, she wanted to punish Erno for not having visited her for so long. They grew up together, sister and brother, yet he abandoned her when she picked up an interest in witchcraft. This was her silent revenge.

His shoulders drooped and his face contorted into an obvious expression of discomfort as he reached out for his silver pocket watch that loosely hung strung to the inside of his coat. He placed it in front of the witch, whose demeanour changed so sickeningly he wished he could just leave. The witch flicked her fingers against the silver, before gently moving the arms of the watch, a low hum filling the room. The exchange was done. She appeared to look even younger than before, letting out a barely audible sigh of contentedness as she leaned back in her cushion.

"Oh, dear Erno, I know what it is you seek," she said, a finger pushing the silver pocket watch back to Erno who looked significantly more worn out than before.

"You should know where to find this person you seek, for you know them better than you think you do. There's an old place you've forgotten about, now almost reduced to rubble." Her words were a riddle, not helping him much. Again, she moved her fingers languidly and spread some odd substance in the air which made Erno pause, an image forming in his mind, a vision of the place she was talking about. He didn't question how she knew what he came here to ask of her, he only stood up abruptly from the chair and left without any goodbyes. He didn't intend to return.

It is gloomier than usual, murky clouds threatening to release torrents of rain on Erno. He rushes, the wind sweeping the leaves off the ground and disturbing their random patterns to once more arrange them into new ones. Erno approaches an old building, collapsed in itself and now truly just rubble, his home he has almost forgotten, in its present state unlike anything he remembers. It has been decades since he last heard of it, let alone saw it. Who knew of this place where he once lived? A figure steps out from behind a caved wall of the house, a mask on their face concealing all their features. They stand tall and then move closer. Erno does not move, obviously caught off guard yet determined to find out who this mysterious person is. He didn't spend his time and risk expiring earlier than he wanted for nothing. Something burns within him, an odd feeling he never felt before, stirred by the enigma that he now has to decode. He takes a few steps closer, hand reaching for the sheathed dagger in his pocket.

"Who are you?" he inquires, voice cutting through the weird tension that built up.

Just as Erno is to learn the identity of the man, time stops. Birds in the sky are frozen, drops of rainwater that are about to fall on the ground are stopped mid-air,

he finds himself standing frightened by this revelation. What happened? He glances around, fearfully. He could travel through time, yes, but he couldn't stop time. This wasn't his doing.

He looked over his shoulder to the figure that was too, frozen in time. It was then that he realized his time had expired. He always thought it was weird when time travellers referred to the term of death as expiration, like time was a ripe fruit that slowly rotted away. But when he stood there, he understood. His time had expired. He was moving but time was not. He can't see what happens from that point on, nor can he travel through time. He took out his silver pocket watch, the glass shattered and the watch's arms missing. He was stuck here. Forever.

That is what a time traveller's death is. There is no peace or comfort waiting for them at the other side, no. It is having the power to travel back to the past and future suddenly taken away and out of nowhere, when you least expect it, being frozen in a period which is least significant to you. Time granted to you for eternity but at the cost of it being stopped all around you. With great power comes an even greater burden, regardless of whether you have done good or bad. There was no exception for Erno.

He can feel himself getting weak in the knees. He falls to the ground, begging whatever god may exist to free him from this sick and twisted fate.

"God, please, have mercy upon me."

šifra: st4rdiary
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Tara Modrušan

A POISON AND A DREAM

"No… Please, don't- "

Those were the last words he let out of his mouth before a bullet was shot through his head leaving a hole from his forehead to the back of his head. His dead body was slowly getting soaked due to rain falling from the clouds. The killer stood above his corpse, watching a puddle of blood forming underneath him. Kristen Holmes, one of the most infamous serial killers in the USA, quickly packed the body into the back of her van and cleaned the crime scene, leaving just a puddle of blood behind.

When it came to cleaning up her mess, her strategy was simple. She didn't have one. Many serial killers were caught because they got rid of their victim's bodies the same way every single time. Kristen knew this and always left the scene in a different spotlight. That's why the police thought they were dealing with dealing with multiple serial killers at once. If she ever got caught, she would never be sentenced for all her murders, not even a half of them, unless she was crazy enough to reveal the truth. She worked on the black market for all her murders which she would later get the money for.

Once she arrived home, after another successful murder, she saw Howard, her husband, sleeping on the couch, waiting for her. Kristen was not just a serial killer; she was also a caring wife. She only agreed to marry Howard for an innocent appearance in her everyday life. Don't take that the wrong way - she loved him with her whole heart. They were a match made in heaven. They lived in a small apartment on the edge of New York City. A tall, brunet, blue-eyed man with his beautiful, beautiful, brunette, green-eyed wife was everyone's favourite couple. Everyone viewed them as the perfect couple from movies or romantic novels. However, Howard had no idea about Kristen's actual job.

Later that night, as she was getting ready to go to sleep, she received a notification on her phone. Someone anonymous had requested another murder for her to carry out. The buyer had requested a slow and painful death of the victim. If she agreed

to do so, she would receive ten million dollars. That was a lot of money, and she was willing to make the buyer's wish come true, until she saw who the victim was. It was her husband.

Kristen didn't know how to react. She couldn't look at her husband without thinking about the request. She packed some essentials and left the apartment without a word. The plan was to stay at a motel, where she would decide whether she would take the offer or walk away empty-handed. After her arrival, she lay on the twin-sized bed, thinking about everything while staring out the window. Her thoughts were killing her from the inside out. This was the last person she expected to be asked to murder. She later turned to her side in her bed and fell asleep.

Just as she was about to start dreaming, her body sat up, forcing her to wake up almost immediately after falling asleep. She felt numb while her legs led her out of the bed against her will. Her brain was not in charge of her body, and just like in a video game, something was guiding her to pack a bag with things capable of torturing a human being. She felt like she was levitating while her hands grasped the keys, unlocked the doors, and entered her old apartment. There, she saw her husband in the kitchen, getting ready for work. His body froze at her sudden appearance, and his surprised smile soon faded into an expression similar to a scared little fawn about to be killed by a hunter.

The gap between them was getting smaller as Kristen was walking up to him and then she smashed an old, empty bottle of beer on his head. Howard fell against the cabinets as she stabbed his right shoulder with a knife, which made him fall to the ground. She sat him on one of the dining chairs and tied his ankles. First, she slowly cut layers of skin off his wrists. While blood was still dripping off his wrists, she started connecting his wrists with a thread and a needle. Due to the unbearable pain, Howard was screaming for help. The same needle pierced Howards lips painfully, quickly shutting them tight. He was begging for his life to end.

Little did he know, this was just the beginning, and this would teach him how hot the pits of hell really were. Kristen unbuttoned his shirt to reveal his chest, which she slowly started cutting with a razor. Five cigarettes were put out into his open chest, chest, four on his face and seven on both his arms and legs. Impatient and driven to madness by the pain, Howard couldn't help but move around in his chair while feeling every cut and burn mark his body forever. His movements made Kristen mad, and she was willing to do anything to make him stop.

As she stood on his toes in her seven-inch heels, Kristen repeatedly hit his ribs over and over again with a bat, while listening to the sound of bones breaking inside of his

body. The stitches on his mouth were close to ripping from his muffled screams. There were more wounds cut on his body; toxic acids were poured all over his skin to make it fall off his flesh.

They say giving birth is the highest level of pain possible to feel. In this scenario that was impossible, but something else was. Cutting the thinnest nerve in the human body was a perfect replacement as it relieved the highest levels of pain without the victim to go into cardiac arrest. Kristen took a medical scalpel and cut Howard's thigh along the sciatic nerve. Howard thought nothing could be worse than that, but Kristen decided to cut both of his sciatic nerves. Howard was stabbed in his calves with screwdrivers and his wounds were dug deeper with a wrench. Kristen was getting bored due to lack of her torture devices.

That was when she remembered that she had brought a fake gun with gel balls instead of actual bullets. She shot them in his eyes until they looked like scrambled eggs. She also stabbed his legs with two individual, partly broken beer bottles. His sore jaw was forcefully opened as Kristen shoved another empty bottle into his mouth and smashed it with a hammer, cutting his mouth from the inside out. His head was slowly tilted up and Howard could feel liquid being poured into his mouth, once the stiches were ripped out. It was a poison called Batrachotoxin which made him paralyzed, before she finally cut his throat open to make him bleed out and meet his long-awaited death.

If that razor wasn't sharp enough to kill him, her stare definitely was, her pupils becoming smaller and smaller and a little smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. Her face, her hands and her clothes were covered in the blood of her own husband. Kristen took one last look at his corpse before shoving her foot into his face and crushing his skull with her heel landing in his previously crashed eyeball. Before she left, she took one of their wedding pictures off the kitchen wall as a reward and in memory of her husband.

The feeling of relief was unimaginable to her. It was impossible to be described with words. As soon as she got to her motel room, she let herself fall onto the twin sized bed once again and quickly went back to her previously interrupted sleep.

Kristen heard a loud knock on her door which woke her up and she was quick to answer. There were two police officers standing in front of her. They had a concerned look on their faces as they were informing her about the unfortunate death of her husband. Her life then flashed in front of her eyes and tears started forming in her eyes, realizing what she had done. She fell on her knees with her hands covering her face, which was already red and covered in her tears. She could barely bring herself to tell them the truth that she killed him. She begged them to take her away and ar-

rest her for as long as possible. The two officers granted her wish, they put handcuffs on her wrists and showed her the way to their car in the driveway.

The next day was the court day. News reporters were standing in the back of the courtroom, New York citizens sitting behind the fence, and in front of the judge were Howard's parents with their lawyer and Kristen. She confessed everything the judge mentioned. Since she wasn't resisting and confessed to killing her husband she was charged with second-degree murder and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Her other victims had not yet been discovered or connected to her, and she didn't say a word about them either.

The same two police officers drove her to prison and locked her in her cell. Once she was there, she would wake up, roam around the cell, talk to herself, overthink her actions, and all Kristen could feel was the unprovoked loop. That loop was exhausting, tiring, annoying; it was making her go insane. The only difference that she noticed each day was the number of days remaining in her prison sentence, which she marked on the wall next to her bed. She didn't want to get out, she didn't believe she deserved to be released after her fifteen years were up.

Kristen tried to choke herself, hand herself in her cell and even cut her neck open just so she would get the punishment she believed she deserved. After her suicide attempts, she was on constant watch by police officers. To Kristen, she was released in just a blink of an eye. She was let out of prison and had no other choice but to walk back to her old apartment which she had previously shared with her husband.

Loud cars were driving by as loud sounds filled the atmosphere. People were walking past her, behind her, and away from her. Everyone in New York City knew who she was, but she didn't know anybody, not even herself. After hours and hours of walking, she finally got to her building and thankfully, the apartment was on the first floor. The door was unlocked, the key was still in the lock, but when she opened it and stepped inside, she felt the color drain from her face. Pigment in her skin faded away. Fear, disgust, anger slammed into her when she saw patches of blood on the floor and couch, little cards with numbers on them scattered around, yellow police tape laid all over the floors. The smell was so sickening that Kristen forced herself to open all the windows.

But something was odd. Kristen had killed her husband fifteen years ago in the kitchen and the blood, cards, strips, everything was in the living room while the kitchen was almost untouched except for a layer of dust. She then remembered the wedding picture she took with her. She quickly walked back to the kitchen and saw the picture was still hanging on the wall in the same position, as if it was never

touched. Now she was sure something was wrong. Kristen had not killed her husband; somebody else had done it.

It was all just a well-played dream. Unfortunately for her, the police hadn't done such a great job if they couldn't tell it hadn't been her who had done all those horrible things. She had wasted fifteen years of her life on nothing, but that gave her an idea to start a private investigation. Kristen immediately put on some gloves, tied her hair in a ponytail and started searching for smaller clues the police could've missed. Fortunately for her, she found a long, blonde hair strand that wasn't hers. Kristen's hair was down to her shoulders and dark brown, but this one was more like her sister's hair.

However, one thing was still unclear to Kristen. Her sister, Joanne, had taken her own life by hanging herself in her apartment three days before Kristen and Howard's wedding almost eighteen years ago. Her family believes it was because Joanne had a crush on Howard when they were younger and when Kristen met Howard, she stole him from Joanne. That is why most of Kristen's family didn't attend her wedding and called her many rude names on their Facebook posts. Her mother even threatened to disown her multiple times on social media, but it never really became a reality, and remained nothing more than her mother's desire and imagination.

Kristen knew at that moment that her sister was alive. She was glued to her phone trying to call or text everyone who knew Joanne. Kristen was screamed at, cursed at and threatened. Joanne's friends cried, telling her how horrible she was, while her family hung up the phone calls without saying anything. Her mother's reaction was the worst. She told Kristen she was the one that was supposed to be dead and not her sister. Her mum would have preferred if Kristen had never been born and said that she was a mistake.

The investigation was coming to an unsuccessful end before Kristin decided to just make sure it really was her sister. She packed the hair strand and sent it to a lab for a DNA test. While she was waiting for the results, Kristen deep cleaned the entire apartment, leaving the living room as dirty as it had been to make sure her investigation had a chance to be successful. Kristen was still searching for more clues, but nothing else was found. After multiple detailed scans of the room, she could only pray for the results to confirm or deny whether it was Joanne. When she finally got the results back, her guesses were confirmed; it really was Joanne. The strand was only fifteen years old, which led to another discovery - her sister faked her own death. The reason for that was not worth searching for and it was not the number one thing on Kristen's to-do list. She had to find her sister, dead or alive.

She searched every website she could think of, looking for Joanne and her personal information. Sadly, she was nowhere to be found. She had disappeared without a trace. The only thing keeping her hope alive was that strand of hair that Kristen kept in a zip lock bag. Her head was pounding from all the overthinking. What if her sister had died before Kristen found out about all of this? The search wasn't coming to an end after all, which made Kristen stay up all night.

Howard used to take Kristen on many dates in Central Park. Regular walks there became their habit, and it stuck with Kristen to that day. She started taking regular walks again because it reminded her of the good old times when Howard was still alive. On a cloudy and chilly day, Kristen was considering giving up on her investigation, forgetting everything, until she saw a familiar figure walking across the street.

A tall, blonde, long-haired woman with blue eyes sped up her walking pace after making eye contact with Kristen. Joanne was right there, and she wanted Kristen to follow her. Kristin did in fact follow along, but that might not be the best decision. Kristen eventually caught up to Joanne, touched her shoulder and confronted her. She yelled at her, begging her to explain why she had done such a horrible thing to her husband and why she had disappeared for so long.

"Why did you kill my husband?" There were a few seconds of silence before Joanne said anything and they were filled with Kristen's heavy breaths. The answer she received was the last thing anyone could have expected.

"Your husband is not dead, but you are!" Everything went black.

Something hard and cold hit Kristen's head. She was floating, feeling lifeless and unreal, just like in her dream many years ago. She felt death coming after her body, piercing her body with its bloody gaze. Her body changed places without moving a muscle, like she was being carried or driven around the world. She was awakened from her death when she was dropped on a hard, wooden surface. Kristen slowly opened her eyes, blinded by a light bulb hanging from the ceiling shining right into her eyes. She was in the middle of the woods, in an old cabin with one door and two windows. The roof was leaking droplets of water due to heavy rain outside, which was accompanied by thunder strikes. The sounds outside were cancelling all the noise made in the cabin.

Still half asleep, Kristen noticed a shadowy figure leaning over her body. It was Howard. He slowly leaned closer until their lips finally touched and lit up a spark between them. As they were kissing, Kristen felt a liquid enter her mouth and instinctively swallowed it. She could smell a familiar scent from her husband's mouth. It was Batrachotoxin. She was now paralyzed for the rest of her life. With the last

beats of her heart, last breaths taken in by her lungs, she heard his voice for the last time ever. He was talking to Joanne.

"This took way too long. She wasn't supposed to end up in prison." Those were Howard's last words Kristen was able to hear before Joanne interrupted him. "Calm down, Howard. Just remember why we did all of this; a billion dollars, each."

šifra: HONDA1804
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Željeznička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Aleksandar Stjepanović

LIES BEETWEN US

1919, London. The townsfolk were still shaken by the devastating war.

My name is Morgan, a doctor trying to somewhat help all these folk. As if war wasn't enough, the flu was killing faster than we could cure. People were losing hope, but I wasn't. I knew that I was just a speck in this world, but I had to prove myself. People doubted that I would become anything, given my miserable backstory. Born and raised in rat-infested slums my whole life, I always tried to make up something good about it, even when others couldn't.

My whole life, until this point, revolved around my little sister, Mary. She was all I had and all I cared about. I always tried to give her everything, even when I couldn't, because no one else would. My mother passed when I was 20. That poor woman was battling cancer and hadn't told anyone because she wanted to keep as much happiness in us as she could. I held her the night she passed. We talked about how much Mary had grown up. "Morgan, please take care of her and keep her away from her father. Don't let him take her from you," she said to me, sobbing. I did my best not to cry, but my feelings overwhelmed me. I took her to bed and gave her one last kiss. I was mad for a long time. I thought to myself, how could God take her away at such a time? My life was already bad; why did He make it worse? But really, I was mad that she left because she was the only parent we had.

I promised her that I would take care of Mary until my very own death and vowed to protect her against our father. He was a drunken bastard who gave no care to us. We were happy when he left because we could finally sleep at night and not listen to the screams of our beaten mother. I was too young, and there was nothing I could do at those moments but just watch and listen in despair—hopeless and helpless. That is the reason I vowed to cure and help others as much as I could—because I couldn't help my own mother.

I also managed to get Mary a job. She is only 17, but she wanted to help take care of us. At first, I was repulsed by the idea, but deep inside, I knew she could help us greatly by having two incomes in our home. She became a nurse who helped veter-

ans returning from the war. People really liked her, as she was the only one with a smile on her face no matter what. She wasn't pessimistic like me; she always saw light in the darkness we were in because I always tried to protect her from the outside world and the awful reality. Unfortunately, she got to know it the very first day she came to work—all those wounded soldiers, limbs missing, some barely clinging to their lives, lying in dirty medic tents as hospitals filled. We had nowhere to put them. We were helping as much as we could, and I worked 15 hours a day and could barely afford a pack of cigarettes.

The night was usual. I was walking home from work, tired from my daily routines. Watching people slowly die and knowing I couldn't do anything about it was slowly killing me—all those hopeless souls suffering from the plague, knowing they would pass soon. I approached my house and noticed something strange. The door was slightly open. This wasn't usual, as Mary would always lock the door. When I entered our house, I gasped. There was blood on the floor, but no one was there. I frantically searched the house, and right beside the living room table, I found a bracelet. It was a ribbon that the hospital used to differentiate the specialties of people because there were so many of us, they couldn't remember the tasks we were supposed to do, so they differentiated our classes by colors. This one wasn't hers because the color was blue. Blue indicated a higher-class nurse or lower-class helping doctors who taught newer nurses.

I rushed to my older neighbor, Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a retired general who fought in the 1900 Boer War. He was silent and always watched around, as he was paranoid from his war scars, so my brain immediately told me to go to him. I banged loudly on his door to open, as he couldn't hear very well. He finally let me in, and I explained the whole situation to him, but he told me he didn't see anyone because he had just recently gotten home from the pub across the street. I was hopeless. I was lost in my head. I knew I couldn't let myself live if I didn't find her. My brain was filled with thoughts—bad ones—but I knew how brave and strong she was and that she wouldn't let anything happen to her.

Why would someone kidnap her? She didn't have any enemies. Maybe she went to her boyfriend, James, but what would explain the ribbon and blood spots on the floor? James worked at the factory. He was a decent and honest guy. You could tell by the way he looked at Mary how much he loved her, and I was happy she found someone who didn't just take advantage of her innocence. James usually worked at these hours, so I went to his factory to tell him. When I arrived, I looked around everywhere and asked all the workers for information, but no one had seen him come

to work today. One of his good mates and coworkers told me they had gone drinking last night, and James went home after a few drinks, complaining his head was killing him. James is the type of guy who never complained about headaches, so I suspected he knew something, or maybe they had run away together.

I decided to get some sleep and continue the search when the sun rose. I got up early and went straight to James's place. He lived not too far away but in a nicer, cleaner district. He inherited the apartment from his grandparents when they passed. I unlocked the apartment with the key Mary had. James had given her a second key in case she needed something while he was working. When I entered, I found an empty place but a letter on the table:

"I'm sorry, dear, that things had to go this way. If you find this letter, it means they probably found me. I didn't know it would go this way. I know you were against this, but please don't do anything stupid, or they will come after you too. I love you."

I was dumbfounded. What was he talking about? What were they doing? Who got him? I didn't know where to go. I was at a dead end. The only person I knew who might have a clue about what was happening was Mary's best friend, Irene. Irene was also a nurse. They met at the hospital and were always together, so she must know something, I told myself, and went to the hospital.

I went into the hospital yard where they treated the flu. "Irene, please help me," I said.

She looked worriedly at me. "Morgan, what's wrong? You're scaring all these people. You have to lower your tone and calm yourself."

I told her, "Mary is gone, and so is James. He left some sort of letter saying they found him and were coming after him, and he was apologizing to my sister that it had to come to this. Please tell me what's happened. I know she told you!" I yelled.

She came closer to me as if she didn't want anyone to hear. "Morgan, she was telling me something about James betraying her and that she couldn't keep it a secret anymore. I swear I don't know anything else. I would tell you. Just please make sure she's okay."

Why would James betray her? They were madly in love. What would he do to put them in such trouble?

I went to a bar with Arthur. He was my best friend and also a doctor. We were friends since we were kids as we grew up in the same slums. I told him everything because he was the only man I believed. He was in shock but confronted me and told me that she just probably went away with James. "They are kids. Maybe they had a fight and he wanted to make up for it. Don't stress your head over this, Morgan. I

know that she is safe." I drank all day with him, drowning my pain in whiskey. I know I'm a man, and men are supposed to be brave and strong, but I felt so little and so scared—exactly how I felt when we were young and had to carry our beaten mother. Thoughts of the things my father did to my mother hit me. "What if someone is doing that to Mary? Morgan, you have to find her, get your drunken head together, and get up from this stool," I said to myself, and I finally made up some courage to stand up and go home. I barely made my way to the house and sat there, crying and screaming at the bloody floor. Then I saw something beneath our old, beaten couch. It was a small, beaten leather book. When I picked it up and opened it, my eyes lit up. It was Mary's diary.

Most of the pages were filled with girl things that I didn't quite understand, but when I came to the final page, it read:

"13th April 1919: Why would James do this to me? I loved him with my whole heart. Was that really the reason we had to do this? I just wanted to make Morgan proud and show him that I could also take care of us. I must tell the police. This can't be a secret anymore. I am going to Irene's. She's the only one I can trust. I can't let Morgan find out."

As I was about to leave my house to go to Irene, I heard a loud bang at my door. When I opened, there were the "Bobbies." Two of them pushed me to the floor and tied my hands. They said that I was being taken to the station because someone reported I murdered my own sister. As they were dragging me out of my house, one of them whispered to me, "You should've kept out of this, and maybe you all would've survived." I couldn't believe it. Whatever my sister and James were involved in, even the police didn't want me to find out. They put me in a cell, all by myself. I lost all my hope and just sat there, staring at the dirty cell wall. I spent my night there. In the morning, I was awakened by a yell. "Mister Morgan, is that you?" I opened my eyes, still half asleep, and there stood a young man in a uniform. "Why are you here, mister?" I replied. "They took my sister. How do you know me?" He looked at me, then told me, "You took care of my dad. He came from the war, and you saved his life. They were talking about killing you, sir, because they needed to protect someone." I was terrified. They were really in on this. How would I get out of here? Then he came to my cell. "I will let you out. I don't believe you killed your sister. You are in danger here. I know you are a good man." He handed me the key and ran away.

I unlocked the door and ran as fast as I could. I knew they would notice soon, and I had to act fast. I ran to Irene's house as she was the only way out of this.

I kicked my way into her house. There she was. She was just about to start eating when I screamed, "Where is my sister? Why did you lie to me? How could you?"

Just as she was about to respond, the door behind me opened.

When I turned around, I saw it was Arthur. "Oh, Morgan, weren't you told to stay out of this? You could've lived, you know," he responded coldly, his hand gripping around some object in his coat.

"It was you, Arthur. How could you? You are the one who helped James and Mary in whatever this is?"

"Oh, my Morgan, the man that always wants to be a hero, even since we were kids. Your sister just wanted to take care of her, but she didn't like our methods, but luckily I had James to convince her. Everything could've gone right if that dumb bastard didn't decide to suddenly quit. I told him that I would tell Mary about the night he took another woman home, but he already told her, so my option was to get rid of him and her."

"W-w-what do you mean? What did you do to my sister? Where is she?"

"She's alive, Morgan, I think. I still love you, brother, but sometimes business is more important than love. Love doesn't feed my family, Morgan, but luckily these poor people would do anything for some medicine, so we decided to steal it from the hospital and sell it."

"Y-y-you monster. How could you? She was like a sister to you. I loved you like my own brother."

"Oh well, Morgan, all good must come to an end, and now because you know, I must get rid of you. I don't want to do this, but you just don't know when to quit, Morgan…"

He pulled out a revolver, but I lunged at him. We were both on the ground, wrestling. I tried to reach the gun, but I was too weak. He grabbed it. I tried to push him back and steer it away from him, but I couldn't. Just as he was about to shoot, I heard a loud bang. Irene grabbed a vase and smashed it over his head.

"I'm sorry, Arthur. I had to," she told him.

I threw the revolver away and demanded answers from him.

"She's at the old marina in southeast London, but you won't make it. My men know what to do with her if I am gone for too long…" he said to me as he coughed, still grinning.

I rushed to the docks. Irene stayed at the house as she waited for the police to take Arthur away.

When I arrived, I spotted a man at the front of the warehouse gate. I quickly took care of him and rushed inside.

"M-Morgan, is that you? Oh, my lord, it really is you. I thought I would never see you again."

Mary was there, tied to a chair.

I quickly cut her rope and used my lighter to set fire to the warehouse so we could escape.

The police showed up soon after. Irene told them about the warehouse, so we were sure that the whole operation would get shut down.

"Oh Morgan, I'm sorry. I-I am so sorry. Please forgive me. I just wanted to make you proud. I wanted to help you, and I wanted to make you happy." As the tears were pouring down her face.

"Mary, you are safe now. I don't care about anything. You are finally here, and that is all I care about."

I was at peace knowing that I saved her, but I couldn't save everyone.

The next morning, I went to my mother's grave. Mary was packing our things as we were moving. We couldn't stay in that place any longer. Mary was safe now. She wasn't hurt, but she was traumatized by the events and barely spoke. Even though James betrayed her, she missed him so much. He loved her, and he made a drunken mistake that ruined both of their lives. She hoped that maybe he was alive and just hiding, waiting for it all to go away.

"Mother, it's me, Morgan. I found Mary. She's safe. I kept my promise, mother, just like you would have wanted. I love you."

šifra: as141213
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Andro Štefanić

4M AND STIPE

- Of course you can't go outside, Martin. It's dark and cold and there are bears outside and you aren't even wearing an undershirt, I'm cold just watching you!

Those were the words Martin and his friends; Matej, Mark, Milan and Stipe had to listen all night long in anticipation of the New Year. As Mum's voice started to transition from concerned to uselessly loud scolding, he zoned out for a second, not actually paying attention to what his mom was saying. He looked through the window. It was a cold night, snow catching on the front door porch and only a single streetlight glowing in the distance.

- But mum...

- But Martin...

She answered him sarcastically. The kids' parents, the grown-ups, didn't see this as much of a problem as it actually was for their boys. Martin then turned sadly to his friends and walked away. It was his idea to stay at his family's holiday cottage for the New Year "party". The plans he had been imagining for the past few days seemed so out of reach now, when they couldn't even step outside of the house. He was devastated, and let down, but he had no choice. He subtly signalled with his hand and the saddened group of friends went back downstairs to Martin's room.

His room was actually in the basement; the family had decided to renovate it, as it was unused and bigger than his previous room. It sounds horrible but it wasn't as bad as it seems. The walls were newly painted, with cozy furniture and usually a warm and inviting atmosphere.

The problem was that today, it was cold. They came to the house only a day ago and it didn't have time to heat it up. Even though it was freezing, Martin's friends stayed optimistic. They wrapped him in blankets, sat in a circle and lighted candles all around for warmth and vibes. They sat and looked at each other. Mark broke the silence by shuffling cards for Uno while singing a song.

- Feeling the darkness flood into my heart,

- You tell me how to live my life...

He had a raspy, quiet voice, but anything was strong enough to be heard in such silence.

Seeing the smirk on Martin's face, Matej decided to sing along despite not being as confident in his singing abilities.

- ...but it's my life, it's my struggle, it's my pride, let me suffer, don't tell me how to lift my life.

It was a sad song, but it felt fitting and they didn't care.

They just wanted to let Martin know everything was ok. Milan and Stipe had never heard the song so they just laughed it off, mumbling to the part of the melody which somehow seemed familiar. Right as the last card was dealt, and the last word was sung, Martin played first, bragging about his "goated cards".

- You see? We cheered him up! - Says Mark proudly.

- Because nothing makes a sad person more happy than a sad song.

But Martin wasn't happy yet, just happier.

They were playing the game for a few minutes quietly laughing at each other's jokes.

It had been feeling as if everything was slowing down.

They finished the game, but nobody cheered.

Right as Milan wanted to say something, chatty as he's always been, he felt a, not so light breeze hit his shoulder.

- Did any of you guys feel that?

- Is it just me, what, what was that? - he was asking as he looked around.

- You mean the wind? Yes, I felt it, you're not crazy, o... or we're like, we're both crazy.

- How would the wind even get down here? What the hell are they doing upstairs?

- What do you mean upstairs? It clearly came from down here!

The confusion probably came with the breeze because nobody stopped talking until somebody finally realized that air comes from outside and that there must be an opening.

- Guys, there's probably like a hole or something in a wall? I don't know... we look around? - Stipe finally said something reasonable.

Without even having to verbally agree they all got up and started looking from where the wind could have come from.

They looked through the whole basement, just kept skipping the one small wall because it was covered with huge amounts of boxes and old gardening stuff.

All together it looked like a mountain, covering up the entire wall.

- I mean, we looked through everything, and found nothing, what now? - Milan asked, pointing to the pile of boxes.

He was starting to annoy the other boys.

- Except for that thing over there. But I ain't touching those things!

- What even is all of that Martin? It's your room.

Martin started to explain to the group.

- Oh, I haven't looked at those things for years. We used to throw all of our junk in the basement and when we were cleaning it, we put the things we might need later in that pile. It's just a mess.

His explanation was too long and too boring for Mark to listen through, so he started looking around the pile. Left and right he saw nothing, down and up there was something. A window, mostly covered by a box, at the very top of the mountain of stuff. It was so thin, no wonder nobody had noticed it before. He jumped out of excitement then he showed it to everyone else telling them that they could escape the basement.

There was no need for peer pressure, everyone quickly agreed.

- Dude that's amazing! Let's get out of here! That way the grown-ups can't see us sneaking out. - Stipe was almost screaming at this point, his parents are very strict and he never dares to do rebellious things like that.

- Shut up Stipe. - Martin loudly whispered. - And how do you guys plan on moving all of those things and getting to the window?

- We don't need to move them! We can climb up them! - Milan explained as he was putting on his jacket and trying to find his flashlight.

- And let's leave a note because they'll freak out if we just leave that like that.

- Well of course, sure... you do it. - Matej answered him unapologetically.

Then he turned around proudly and said:

- Let's climb this thing.

He was being a bit dramatic so the other boys laughed.

One by one, in order of skill so the first ones would develop a secure path for others, a tactic proposed by Mark. First Martin then Matej, Mark, Milan and in the end Stipe, climbed the tower of moist boxes which were starting to fall apart under the weight (Stipe was a bit chubby).

- We made it! - Stipe jumped on the snow as he was the last one to come out through the window.

- Where do we go now? What do we do? - he asked after a moment of silence.

- Let's just go with the flow, run around, see what's up! - Milan commented. He was trying to break the nervous atmosphere, but it didn't really work.

Martin rolled his eyes, turned on his flashlight and led the way into the forest. His friends followed him in a line. They were walking around, looking at the shadows being cast by their lights and listening to the crunching of their steps in the snow.

Every now and then, a branch would snap or a gust of wind would rustle the trees, making them jump. They teased each other about bears and ghosts.

- I swear I saw something move over there. - Stipe whispered dramatically, pointing into the shadows.

- Yeah, it's probably just your reflection - Matej joked, earning a shove from Stipe.

Stipe didn't find it as funny, so he picked up a handful of snow and made it into a snowball.

- What are you planning to do with that? - Said Matej.

- Oh this? - Stipe looks at his snowball and stops to think for a moment. - I'm making it for my snowball art exhibition... it's about ancient methods of... battle!

As Matej realizes he's about to be thrown at, he starts to run to catch up to Martin who was still confidently leading the way, grabs some snow on the way but in that very moment Stipe hits him from the end of the line, right at the neck, so that the snowball bursts and all off the melted snow starts to sleep under his shirt.

Mark and Milan gasped simultaneously seeing the snowball perfectly landing in the riskiest spot. They knew it was the start of a real snowball fight. All of them grabbed more snow and snowballs were being made and thrown around. Only Martin's continued to walk, while the four of them stopped in the middle of a path.

Snowballs were flying every second and in all directions. Some of them even fell down a few times, Mark took off his jacket because he felt hot, Milan threw his hat at Stipe and Matej was rolling around in the soft snow. The air was filled with laughter, shouts and their voices echoed throughout the forest. At one point when they got a bit tired, and most of them were laying in the ground, a snowball from seemingly quite far away hit Milan.

- Was that you Mark? - he asked, since Mark was the only one standing up.

- No, I don't know where it came from.

Then they heard a voice from somewhere ahead.

- Hey you Frosty Fools! Time to go before you all freeze into snowmen!

It was Martin, who was watching them laying in the snow from the top of a hill next to their cottage.

- If you don't get up, I'm leaving you to the snow monsters! - they heard again from a distance before jumping to their feet and running to Martin as fast as they could.

He was waiting for them when they caught up to him, but he didn't say a word, just smiled, turned around and continued walking to the house which was very close at that point.

Mark looked at his watch. It was 21:24 already, and they didn't have much time left. The house came into view and relief washed over them, until they saw the figure standing by the main entrance.

It was Stipe's dad. Arms crossed, just waiting for them to come back from the adventure.

- Do you boys know how worried we were? - he asked with a low, but firm voice.

- I believe we were going the speed limit. - Martin joked but realized it wasn't the time to joke.

He remembered how often Stipe used to say his parents were strict.

They shuffled awkwardly, glancing at each other.

- We left a note... - Martin mumbled unsurely.

- No, you didn't. - Stipe's dad answered.

The boys turn to Milan who was supposed to write a note for the grown-ups.

- I didn't write it... I had no time... you were all storming out and developing tactics and I didn't know what to write so I didn't write anything sorry…

Stipe's dad shook his head and let them inside.

As they entered the warm house, peeling off their snow-drenched jackets, Martin did a quick headcount. His heart sank.

- Wait... where's Stipe?

Panic set in as they realized their friend was missing. They called his name, but couldn't find him anywhere in the house.

- He was right behind me the whole time!

Milan was extremely shaken.

- Had Stipe gotten lost when we were running towards Martin after the snowball fight?

Was he still outside, turning into a snowman?!

A door opened behind them.

Stipe emerged from the bathroom, looking ashamed.

- W... what's going on? - he asked, holding a half-eaten cookie.

The boys stared at him in disbelief before bursting into laughter.

- You idiot! We thought you were lost! What happened? - Mark shouted and Matej went in for a hug.

- I told you guys I needed to pee, but nobody listens to me.

The grown-ups overheard their kids talking so they came to check on them.

Although they were still annoyed, they softened when they saw the boys laughing and teasing each other. Martin showed others where they could put their wet clothes to dry.

They exhaustedly sat on the couch, ate some cake, watched the start of a movie on TV, and happily slept through the New Year's countdown.

šifra: SUNFLOWER1579
mentor: Denis Plavetić
institution: Gimnazija Karlovac
autor: Helen Laić

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR NIGHTMARES COME ALIVE?

"Okay, can we go over what happened one last time?"

"I've already told you, like, five times already! How many times do I have to tell you? I. Am. Not. Crazy."

"So you say. Let's just go over this once more."

"Fine."

The worst part of all of this is that it was my idea. I took them to that God-forsaken house because it was my dream to visit an abandoned place. It always seemed so fun watching other people do that, and I honestly just wanted to feel that adrenaline rush. Oh, how stupid I was.

As we drove up to the house, I couldn't help but notice its decrepit and regal look. It truly was a sight for sore eyes, even though I felt completely and utterly sick to my stomach. But that kind of nausea was an everyday occurrence for me, so I hadn't given it much thought at the time. The girls seemed pretty excited, I must admit, well, everyone except for one. Olivia really did not want to come. "It's not my thing," she had told us, but we basically kind of bullied her into coming. Now she was here, very unhappy and probably scared out of her mind with the rest of us, who were equally out of our minds.

Upon entering the house, there was immediately a foul smell, like something was rotting, but we all just kind of assumed there were dead animals lying around since there wasn't really a caretaker for this place. There was also a lot of dust, again for obvious reasons, which meant Bonnie started sneezing her head off, and we just laughed at her. But I did feel a little sorry for her. We went through some of the rooms, and the place looked rich, like the embodiment of Queen Elizabeth II. The ceilings were high, and the furniture was carved in all kinds of ornate designs. I couldn't help but wonder who had enough money to live there or sustain it for all those years. Looking back, maybe we should've done a bit more research about the place.

Once we were done exploring, we were ready for the investigation we had planned. First, we divided into teams of two: me and Melanie, Olivia and Veronica, and Bonnie and Gita. While we were exploring, each of us had to hide a piece of paper while no one was looking, and the team that finds the most papers would win 20 euros from each of the losing teams. It might have seemed very stupid and off-topic, but we had to start the night light and fun to ease everyone into it. Long story short, Bonnie and Gita won. They found four papers while we both found only one each. I still don't know how they managed to do that, but you know what? I wasn't about to question them since both of them were extremely competitive.

After that, it was time for the fun stuff. It was time to bring out the Ouija board, which Bonnie got from Etsy, so I didn't think it was like the real deal, as they say. We started it just like every Ouija board session should start: by welcoming the spirits and letting them use our energy to move the planchette around while setting clear boundaries not to follow any of us home, in other words, not to possess us. To be completely honest, I did not think it would work at all. I wanted to give the girls a little scare by moving the planchette around myself and spelling some scary words like "murder," "evil," etc. But well, I learned a valuable lesson that night. Don't joke with paranormal stuff, even from Etsy. What happened next was beyond terrifying. We definitely reached some spirit, which I don't think was a spirit but more like an evil entity, and I still can't figure out if it felt malicious or not. The first thing it said to us was, "Girl, I want you," and we obviously thought that was just one of us messing around, but I guess it wasn't.

We laughed, of course, and asked, "Who is this?" but it didn't answer and then it just said, "I'm in the room." At first, I didn't know what to make of it, so I asked the most obvious question, "Where did you come from?" and it said, "Hell." That's when Olivia spoke up and told us that this wasn't funny anymore and we should cut it out, but it was pretty obvious we weren't doing anything. Veronica then asked the question you probably shouldn't ask: "What do you want?" and it said, "You!" At that point, Olivia was already on her feet and running through the door, screaming. The only problem was that she removed her fingers without saying goodbye first. Melanie ran after her, and the rest of us said goodbye just in case. Veronica said she needed to light a cigarette, so Gita went with her, and Bonnie went to see where Liv and Mel were. So there I was, sitting on the floor all by myself, waiting for my friends to come back. Little did I know that it would be the last time I ever saw them.

Next thing I knew, I woke up in complete darkness. Darkness like I had never seen before. I wasn't even sure I was awake, so I pinched my arm and realized this

was real. A crushing tightness gripped my chest. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I could not move an inch of my body. I don't know if it was a panic attack or not; I only know it was the worst fear I'd ever felt. I curled up like a newborn, weeping quietly, and I don't know how long I stayed like that. It felt like forever, and then all of a sudden there was a screen in front of me. No, not a screen. A full-body mirror, and it was glowing like when you're turning on a TV screen. It was my only source of light, which I clung to for a solid five minutes. Then I began slowly looking around the room, trying to see something familiar or figure out where I was, but with no luck. So I tried calling out to my friends, but there was no one. I felt completely alone and almost started crying again when the mirror started making sounds. I jumped away from it, not wanting to be near it but still not wanting to get away from it. At that moment, it started showing me absurd scenes, constantly switching from one to another at such a rapid speed I couldn't make out what they were showing. Soon after, I saw a familiar sight: Olivia's black bow laying on the ground. Then it hit me—it was showing me my friends, and my stomach dropped even further, if that was even possible.

The shifting stopped, and all I was left with was an image of her bow, only now there were spiders crawling all around it. At first, I thought it was just an image, but soon I realized it was a video. The frame got bigger, and there she was. Olivia was shivering in the corner of the room, trying to ward away spiders. I didn't even notice it at first, but the room was swarming with spiders. I almost puked seeing that—I couldn't even imagine what Liv was feeling.

The room was dimly lit with candles on the walls, which made it resemble those dungeons in vampire movies. Liv swiftly grabbed one of the candles and set fire to some old sheets, and the spiders moved away from her for a moment. There was a clear look of relief on her face, so she began looking for a way out, but she touched the wrong thing, which caused the east wall to collapse. It seemed like millions of spiders started crawling in. All that could be heard were her frightened screams until there were none. Tears started falling on their own, and I didn't try to stop them. I sat frozen in place, not believing what I had just seen.

It wasn't long after that the scene changed, but now all I could see was blue. A large body of water and a body sinking down. I could not believe my eyes, but it was Bonnie. I started screaming at the mirror for her to wake up as if she could hear me, but surprisingly, she woke up. She started gasping for air and flailing her arms around wildly, trying to swim up. As soon as she came to the surface, she started looking around her. The only problem was that she was in the middle of nowhere, completely stranded with thousands of meters of deep sea below her.

Suddenly there was a shadow underneath her, and a shark the size of a plane dove out just inches away from her. She panicked and tried to get away as fast as she could, but the monster soon caught up and bit off her right foot and then let her go. That didn't make any sense. It could've swallowed her in one go, but it didn't. It was like it was toying with her, taunting her, playing with its food. It made me sick to my stomach. She eventually reached a floating buoy and held on to it for dear life, trying not to pass out from the pain and the bleeding. Unfortunately, it had all been in vain because the thing came after her, and then she was gone. Just like that. All that was left of her were bits and pieces and her blood on the surface of the ocean.

I honestly didn't know how much more of this I could take. I started praying for it to stop, but of course, it didn't, and I was only fearing what would happen next. And yet, somehow, the next thing it showed me took me by surprise. It was completely opposite of what I'd seen just seconds before. It was dark but not pitch-black like my room, and it seemed like a really confined space. Shallow, panicked breaths were all that could be heard, and then suddenly, there was rapid scratching. I wasn't really sure what was going on, but it was making me uneasy watching that.

A little light came out of nowhere, and I realized that this person had a little flashlight with them, and this particular flashlight looked familiar. The light flashed on the face, and that's when I saw the wet, dirty, beaten-up face of one of the best people I knew: Gita. Something inside me broke at that moment, but I couldn't place a finger on what it was. I realized she was in a coffin, which probably meant she was underground. She started banging on the lid, little pieces of dirt falling all around her, but she didn't seem to mind that at all. All she wanted was to get out of there, but I could see she was running out of air as her breaths were becoming more hollow and her eyes getting droopy.

I don't know how long she'd been there, but I knew her time was running short, and there was nothing she or I could do. Her arms gave out soon after, and I got to watch one of my best friends' lips turn blue and her eyes lose every bit of life they had ever held.

The next one took a few minutes, and when it finally started, I couldn't even react. This all was too much for me. I could see who it was from the beginning: Veronica falling through the air. I don't even know how high up she was or how long she'd been falling, but she just seemed like she accepted her fate, conquered her fears, and made friends with Thanatos. So there she was. Not a single emotion on her face except for a few tears, not trying to slow down her fall but instead enjoying life one last time.

It wasn't long before her body hit the ground, and the sight was just... I don't even know if I can put into words how gruesome it was. And yet, the thing that rattled me more was her making peace with Death itself. I don't know which one is worse—seeing your friend afraid or welcoming death with open arms.

Now, we'd been through almost all of them, so naturally, I knew who came next. To be completely honest, this might sound bad, but by the end of it all, I felt completely indifferent. It wasn't that I didn't care; I was just completely drained and so done with this whole thing. Melanie's was somehow the most absurd. When I last saw her, which I suppose wasn't that long ago, her belly had not been that big. She looked like she was in the third trimester of a pregnancy. How that happened? I had no idea.

This whole place, this whole situation didn't make any sense at all, so I decided to put logic aside. Melanie looked so stressed, yet so strangely happy—and that was the worst part. She was happy, not knowing what was coming next. I doubted that Death wouldn't take her like it had taken the others.

I watched as she got contractions and eventually gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, but the baby was stillborn. The look of hurt, betrayal, and just pure pain on Melanie's face was unbearable. She was sobbing uncontrollably, holding onto her lifeless baby like nothing else mattered, unaware that she would soon join her. As she gave birth in a dusty old room with no one around to help or stop the bleeding, she slowly bled out. A human being simply cannot survive after losing that much blood. Soon, she was gone too, joining her baby in heaven.

"That was my last straw. I was absolutely exhausted and honestly just wanted to die with them because living without them didn't seem like living at all. The worst part was that I had brought them here. This had all been my fault. I couldn't help but wonder—if we just hadn't come here, would this all be different? Would they all still be alive and able to make a future for themselves? Would I be stuck here with you in this godforsaken institution, with no one to believe me, forever seeing my friends die before my eyes?"

"I see there is no improvement in your condition. You'll have to realize one day that you have a problem, and all of that was not real."

"As I've said countless times before: I am telling you the truth!"

"Honey, all the evidence points directly to you. You have created an illusion for yourself to make sense of why you killed all of your friends, and you are living in that illusion because you are too afraid to face the truth. You may return to your room now. I think that's enough for today. We'll continue some other day."

"NO! You're not listening to me! Please, you have to listen!" – my cries could be heard as they dragged me back to my room.

"Let the record show: Patient 0369 shows no improvement after three months of treatment. We'll have to find a different approach in the near future. Her diagnosis is yet to be confirmed."

šifra: td2025
mentor: Natalija Rikanović
institution: Druga srednja škola Beli Manastir
autor: Dajana Toprek

THE WRITER'S ABYSS

Doyle Branson was an ordinary man leading an ordinary life. He had a wonderful family, a few close friends and was looking for a job – seeking any opportunity to prove himself. As he had complete control of his life, nothing could go wrong. There was no need for change because he was content with how everything was.

Until something happened about a year ago. Doyle mysteriously vanished without a trace, surprising everyone. His loved ones have tried looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found. What was most chilling about his case is the way it happened so subtly, almost as if he had never existed. One morning he was home, the next he wasn't.

The first few weeks went by with locals being concerned about the whereabouts of that young man. Yes, he was rather young, in his early 20s – an age where any person's life truly begins. Months later, rumours and ghost stories spread through the town to entertain those who had nothing better to do than talk empty. A year later, everyone forgot about Doyle. Even his dear family.

What happened to Doyle Branson? Nobody seemed to know the answer so the question was swept under the rug, never to be brought up again. Little did they know, Doyle was in fact alive and well. Emphasis isn't needed on *well* since he… wasn't quite well. Isolated from the rest of the world he willingly escaped from, Doyle had been spending his days in solitude – a small rundown house in the outskirts of his town, away from it all. This was how he wanted to live now.

Doyle himself didn't know what caused his decision to leave his normal life behind. Something seemed to snap in him, almost like he was fed up with everything. He moved into this distasteful-looking house and made himself at home. He could do what he wanted since nobody lived in this area. No other houses around, only a vast clearing with a large forest looming in the distance. Rather peaceful.

One may wonder what Doyle does in here all alone. In short, he has dedicated his time to writing. He pursued his dream of wanting to write a book. He never felt the need to do this until the very moment he stepped into this house. So that is exactly

what he's been doing – writing for days, nonstop. The story was going well, Doyle had written up to chapter 17. Yet, something wasn't right. Doyle felt an unexplainable sense of unease and dissatisfaction these days. It was becoming more and more difficult to ignore.

This afternoon was no different. Doyle replaced one of his many pens he had brought along with a new one, as it ran out of ink. He was halfway through the chapter, so close yet so far from the end. He flinched as he felt the sharp pain in his left arm return. His arm has been hurting and randomly going numb lately. It would get insufferable for two days, then stop and then return again, creating an endless circle. Though the young man did nothing to prevent it.

In truth, he has been feeling ill for a long time but he couldn't pinpoint the cause of his illness. Was it a lack of nutrition? He was eating canned food to survive, as he found a generous supply in a box inside the house – at least it kept him alive. Was it the lack of sunlight? It's already fall, days are becoming shorter and gloomier. Or perhaps it had something to do with Doyle's mind. But he wasn't crazy, was he? Well, he had no human interaction for a year… Though he could still talk and think normally. And write, writing was the most important part to him. The house was odd though. Weird things kept happening almost every day. Doyle chose to ignore them, for his own sanity.

As he was writing, he heard a faint raspy whisper. "*You know your true nature...*" echoed around his ears. It was probably his mind playing tricks on him as it liked to do from time to time. "*Do you really want to stay here?...*" another whisper lingered in the air, this time in a slightly different voice. Doyle kept his focus on the notebook in front of him. *"It's been a year…"* yet another whisper. More whispers gradually faded in, making Doyle eventually lose his focus. *"This reality isn't yours…" "You're crazy…" "Doyle…" "You see what they don't…" "Doyle…" "Death awaits…" "Doyle…" "Doyle…"*

He was definitely hallucinating. This was a bad episode and it would end soon. Everything would go back to normal. "Calm down." Doyle said out loud and took in a deep breath. He set his pen down and stood up from the desk. He felt his chest tightening and breathing seemed like a huge struggle – Doyle felt something was choking him. "It's fine. You're fine." he chanted reassuring words to himself.

All of a sudden, a mirror shattered onto the floor, making Doyle almost jump out of his skin. The wooden chair shrieked as it was dragged across the floor by some unknown force. This was getting out of hand. Doyle's legs began trembling when he felt a cold hand slowly grip his shoulder. He froze in place, his eyes wide. "What the hell?" was all he could mutter before something grabbed his neck and pulled on it. He struggled against the force, but it was no use. Whatever this was, it was way stronger.

The young man cringed upon hearing a loud snap in his neck. "No…" he whispered, falling on the ground. His vision was darkening, his mind felt blurry… Whatever was happening didn't affect his mental state positively. Despite fighting to stay awake, Doyle surrendered, collapsing on the ground. Hours passed since he was unconscious on the floor, the dark presence of the abandoned house casting its shadow on him. Until he woke up the next morning with almost no memory of what happened.

Doyle decided to go outside for the first time, with the intention to clear his head. Unsurprisingly, the clearing was enveloped in silence. The young man spaced out, staring at the distance when something appeared before his eyes. A figure, out of nowhere. Doyle rubbed his eyes in hopes he was seeing things. However, the figure was very real, nearing towards him. When it got close enough, Doyle realized it was a man.

Before he could register the man's appearance, he spoke up. "Doyle Branson. We finally met, didn't we?" the stranger's voice was… normal-sounding? "Um…" Doyle was startled. Where did this man come from? Most importantly: why was he dressed in all black? One thing that grabbed Doyle's attention the most was the man's hat – large and black in colour. Nobody wore hats like those.

"Where did you come from?" Doyle began his questioning. "Why, the forest, of course." the mysterious man replied in a heartbeat. "Who are you and how do you know me?" Doyle brushed off the answer and immediately asked another question. "Ah, my own name is not important." the man laughed, showing perfectly even teeth with prominent canines. "I've heard stories about you. The man who went missing without a trace."

"Let people say whatever they want, I'm not coming back." Doyle's reply left no room for further discussion. "Worry not, I come with no malicious intent. I am merely someone who understands." the man reassured. His presence was unnerving, yet somehow comforting. Doyle had a feeling this man could be trusted. "Do you? Would you actually listen if I told you my problems?" he was secretly desperate for any interaction. The man nodded. "Without any doubt."

Relief washed over Doyle as he began talking. Having another person standing in front of him was thrilling – he felt happy for the first time in forever. He told the stranger his life story, how he ended up here and about his book. The man took a great interest in the book, eager to know more. Doyle told him about it, including the reason why he's struggling to finish it: weird things happening in the house.

"I think I'm going crazy." Doyle admitted a thing he was afraid of facing. "Easy there." the stranger dismissed the thought. "No need for extremities already. You're still capable of thinking rationally. Focus on doing what fulfils you to save your tormented soul." he advised. "I'm afraid my time is up, I must go. Think about what I said." the mysterious man made his way back, before Doyle called out to him. "You didn't tell me your name." he frowned. "I'll tell you next time we meet."

When the man disappeared in the same way he appeared, Doyle stood in front of the house, his gaze empty. He snapped back to reality upon coming inside. The weight of the encounter hit him at the new atmosphere of the house. Pure, thick evil which wasn't that prominent before. When he sat by his desk again, the action triggered a sudden flashback to yesterday. "So it was real. It's all real."

He looked at the wall, immediately regretting it. The walls started bleeding, thin streams of fresh blood began leaking down, accompanied by a stench of rotting corpses. The house seemed to be convincing Doyle the torment was indeed real. "What in the…" Doyle was disgusted at the sight. A metallic taste in his mouth caught him off guard. He ran in front of the mirror – or rather what was left of it – looking at his reflection in the remaining shards.

Blood streamed from his eyes, staining his face. He wiped the blood away with his hand, only for more of it to come out again. "Will this ever F***ING STOP?!" his shriek echoed throughout the house. He looked at his hands which were completely covered in the scarlet substance.

Slowly, Doyle made his way back to the desk. Or at least, attempted to. Reaching towards the desk, his hands began trembling uncontrollably. "I need to eat… Yes, I need to eat." he quickly excused his behaviour as hunger, reaching for the box of canned food under his desk. As soon as he opened the lid of the tin can, he dropped it. Maggots wriggled inside, causing discomfort and disgust. Hundreds of them began crawling out, pouring out on the floor. Doyle couldn't look at them anymore.

His notebook was waiting on the table, calling out to him. He had to write, this was the only way out. So he dragged his trembling self towards the desk, sitting down. Picking up the pen, his thoughts were plagued by the events around him. The swarm of noises, whether internal or external consumed him, accompanied by loud ringing in his ears – a terrifying distraction. *"Addict…" "You ignore the world…" "Blind bastard…" "Suffering…"*

Itching. Itching everywhere: his face, his neck, his arms, his legs, his stomach. No matter how hard he scratched, the itch remained. An endless agony. He scratched until his skin burned, until something fell into his hand. A maggot. And then anoth-

er one. Then a few more. Doyle's stomach twisted at the fact maggots seemed to be coming out of his scratch wounds. He needed to vomit right now.

Despite the bodily reflex, he grit his teeth, swallowing once. His heart was hammering against his chest and he was seriously sweating. Not to mention his entire body was now trembling. He then sprawled out on the floor, starting to cough up blood. Doyle looked up at the old ceiling, paralyzed in his position, his body jerking randomly at times. The young man's whole being looked horrific, miserable even as he stared upwards, powerless.

Sometime later, an expected guest visited Doyle. "Well, well, well. Why the long face?" the stranger from before appeared on the doorstep, wearing the same black clothes and the same black hat. Doyle was sitting on the floor. The stranger walked up to him, offering a hand. "How's the book going?"

"I can't do this anymore, I can't." Doyle complained hysterically. His once green eyes lost all their colour, his face was completely sunken. "Only two chapters left, but I can't finish them. This- this madness ruined me! This wasn't worth it!" Doyle grabbed the stranger by the collar of his shirt, a crazed look in his eyes. "Do not fret, dear Doyle." he spoke calmly, his amber-coloured eyes flashing red for a moment.

"Take this," he placed a red cross pendant into Doyle's palm. "It helped me achieve my own goals, I'm certain it will help you too." the stranger promised. Doyle took the pendant, a sudden determination awakening inside him. What else could he do? He remembered the stranger's earlier words: *"Focus on doing what fulfils you to save your tormented soul."*

He looked at the stranger, his vision immediately clearing. The man he had doubts about turned out to be a better friend than anyone else. He had faith in Doyle even when Doyle doubted himself. For a quick moment, he smiled. "You were right this entire time." he spoke to the stranger. "Morfran. Morfran Canavaro." the stranger revealed his name. "I promise to you, Morfran Canavaro, that I will finish this book as if my life depends on it." Doyle declared, extending his hand. Morfran shook his hand with a polite smile. "We have a deal."

The following month was a living hell for Doyle. The torment had gotten even worse, to the point where he regretted waking up every morning. It was cold, but the weather bothered him the least. Voices wouldn't leave him alone, scars covering his almost decomposing body made him unrecognizable. His book was cruel irony – each chapter got darker and darker, resembling Doyle's own life.

A foolish glimmer of hope kept this shell of a man going. Morfran's advice, along with the pendant encouraged him to continue writing. Doyle didn't even know who

he was anymore, all he knew was the main character of his story. Alongside knowing how his book would end. He was sick and tired, feeling he wouldn't endure much longer.

At last, the day of the last chapter arrived. Doyle wrote for the whole day, trying to make the ending seem perfectly appropriate. He thought about the last time he saw Morfran. Doyle told him not to publish his book if he died, wasting months of torment he went through to write it. But he shrugged his past actions off as he brought his novel to an end. The last sentence was written. Doyle put one last fullstop, collapsing on the ground immediately after as the last drop of life left his body.

Morfran found him dead in the house a day later. Observing his corpse on the old wooden floor from the doorstep, he couldn't help but laugh. Doyle's pen was in one hand, the red cross pendant in the other. What a fitting way to die. Morfran crouched in front of the body, taking the pendant back. What a shame, another poor, naive soul gone.

šifra: Petak!
mentor: Tihana Mudrovčić
institution: Tehnička škola Ruđera Boškovića Vinkovci
autor: Dominik Pap

DREAMING BOY

It was just a regular day in Oakton, a small city destined for greatness. After all, it is America we are talking about, the land of the free where all things are possible. Jonah was, for better or worse born into this little town with high hopes from his family, but that didn't interest Jonah in the slightest. All he wanted in life was to have fun and enjoy it while it lasts.

Jonah was not very popular, and he liked that. He enjoys being around his close friends and other people don't really interest him. The three of them, Jonah, Samuel, and Sandy, were inseparable.

As all teenagers do, he wanted to enjoy the life that has been given to him, indulging in his desires as he saw fit, leaving no space for anything else. This did not sit right with his parents as they always believed Jonah to be destined for much more in life. As the days went by, he grew more and more irritated by the things around him, wondering if he really was spending his limited days on Earth the way he should be. "Every day is the same." – he muttered to himself before falling asleep. When he woke up something seemed off, yet he didn't seem to care or notice. He just went about his day like it was any other. The day went as all days do, he got out of bed, brushed his teeth, got ready for school, and started walking. On the way there he met Samuel and the two walked together. As they approached the school Sandy joined as she lives very close by. Together the three friends got through school without too much trouble and went to hang out in a local café. A boring life sure, but he liked it. While sitting in a park nearby his house he noticed a pretty girl he had never seen before. He nudged Samuel and told him about her but at that point it was too late, the girl already went away. Samuel called him delusional and the two laughed and went home. Jonah went to sleep.

Yet again the sun showed itself, marking a new day for Jonah, but today everything felt great. Almost like yesterday never happened. "No weird feeling today" he thought to himself as he carried along with his usual morning routine. At school he talked with Samuel about that girl again, he just couldn't seem to get her out of his

mind. "What girl from yesterday, what are you talking about Jonah?" said Samuel, now visibly confused. "He doesn't remember" Jonah muttered to himself. "What girl are you talking about" asked Sandy. "It doesn't matter anymore. She is probably not from here" added Jonah. As they went on about their day Jonah wished to see the girl more and more, yet she was nowhere to be seen. Later that day Jonah fell asleep on the couch thinking about the mystery girl. The next day his mom woke him up and with a frustrated look on her face told him to get ready for school. "Just another day" he thought to himself. As the thought passed through his mind he looked over to the window where he saw someone familiar. When he leaned over to get a better look, he was delighted to see the mystery girl walking by his house. He desperately hurried outside only to be met by the cold gaze of the morning sun. Disappointed, he went to school hoping to see her again. Getting to school was more boring than usual as Samuel was sick. When he got to school there was a surprise waiting for him. The mystery girl had joined their school and was sitting next to him. Not knowing how to react he just awkwardly sat down and didn't make a sound. That is until Sandy punched him and asked, "This is the mystery girl you talked about, right?" and "What are you so scared of?" He decided it is now or never and introduced himself, stuttering over every word he spoke. As embarrassed as he was, she still smiled at him, shook his hand, and said, "Nice to meet you, I'm Emily". "I blew it" he thought to himself and went back to schoolwork. After school he worked up the courage and asked Emily out for a coffee date. To his and Sandy's surprise she said yes. Even though Sandy was sad to see Jonah get taken away by some girl she was happy for him. As it was Friday, they agreed to go on the date on Saturday, since they were both free that day. Jonah ran home full of happiness and couldn't wait for tomorrow. As he woke up on the day of the date, he couldn't decide what to wear and decided to call Sandy for some help. Sandy seemed surprised he had a date and even asked him who Emily is. "She doesn't remember" he said quietly, just as he said it, he remembered this same thing happened with Samuel. But he didn't let it bother him as he was too excited about the date and went on with getting ready. When he got to the café, Emily wasn't there. He waited half an hour, then an hour, then two, yet there were no signs of her. The mere thought of getting stood up on a date frightened Jonah, so actually experiencing it was devastating for him. He went back home and laid in bed all day. He thought to himself whether yesterday was just some sort of a crazy fever dream.

When he woke up the next day an uneasy feeling washed over him. It was like something was telling him to go to the café. He was too curious not to go, and there she was waiting for him. They sat together and spent what felt like eternity just talking to each

other and getting to know each other. She also did not seem to know about yesterday. Did he just forget what day they were supposed to meet? The date went great, and they exchanged contact info and went home. At the house Jonah was wondering, was it all a dream? "Even Sandy didn't remember that I asked Emily out or even who she was, so what is going on, why can't I see her every day, and why can't they remember her?" He tried talking to Emily about it, but she just laughed at him and called it a silly idea. He began questioning everything, he did not know which world was real, who his real friends were, or even which the real him was. Just as everything started falling apart there, she was again, his saving grace, Emily. She was there when he needed comfort, and she meant the world to him. Just then a thought came over his mind "I would die for her". Only then did he realize how strongly he felt about her. Unable to decide which world is real and which isn't he decided to live in both worlds like nothing happened. Things were going smoothly, one day he was hanging out with his friends at school and the next he was enjoying his time with Emily. They officially became a couple, and life has never been better for Jonah. Until one day when he was forced to decide, Emily or him. He chose Emily and hurled himself towards the road, saving Emily's life, but ending his own. And just like that, everything turned black, and then he died.

He died, yet here he is, back in bed again. "Didn't I just die?!" he said, how am I back, what happened? He went downstairs to see him mom and hugged her tight, never more grateful to see her again. Afterwards he called Emily, maybe she knew what happened. Emily had no idea about him saving her or anything that happened. They met up and Emily felt a bit different, she felt … distant. Like she is not the Emily he knows, like something changed after the accident. He went home to rest and put the matter aside at least for today, he just wanted to relax and sleep. Waking up felt like getting up from a coma, he was slow and weak in the legs. He did not get up, thinking it must be side effects from literally dying, or so he thought. Life after that calmed down a little bit, he still felt like an outsider in this new reality of his, but it was getting better. He was also almost graduating high school, so life was great. He knew Sandy, Samuel and he will always be in touch so unlike the other students he was not worried about friendships falling apart. There was only one thing stuck in his mind. That day. What happened, and why does the world feel ever so slightly different. Was it just a bad dream? "There it is again, was I dreaming, and how much was a dream?"

"Was everything a dream, that can't be true, it felt so … real". Stuck on that thought he finally went to sleep. He woke up dazed yet again, still not sure what to make of the situation that happened last night. Waking up and getting out of bed was unknowingly his biggest mistake. He got up and went about his day. Emily was waiting for him in the kitchen talking to his mom, they were going swimming. They got to the beach, and everything felt great, the dizziness from earlier wore off and he was ready for another fun day with his girlfriend. As they were swimming, he cut himself on a shell. Thinking nothing of it they continued swimming deeper into the ocean and into shark infested waters. Jonah yet again acted selflessly as he knew that even if he does die nothing will happen to him and he will just wake up on his bed yet again. They were attacked by sharks and Jonah bought enough time for Emily to make it to safety. He glanced at her; body scarred from the numerous bite wounds inflicted by the sharks and told her not to worry. Everything turned black, and then he died.

Waking up after his second "death" felt somewhat nostalgic but also seemingly better than last time. He felt a lot better this time around and had no issues getting out of bed and went downstairs. Once again, he hugged him mom tightly, delighted to see her. She was the only person in his life that was never changing, stagnant in these weird dreams he had. Yet again he decided to check in on Emily and just as last time, she was different. "This is not the same Emily I know" he added after hanging up the phone. Emily again seemed distant, sounded a bit on edge. She on the contrary to mom changed drastically every time after death, "maybe she is also a part of this endless cycle." At this point laying down his life for the girl he loved was something no one imagines to ever must do, yet Jonah did it twice. However, each time it happened Emily changed. Jonah decided to be more careful from now on. Just like last time, life stabilizes for a while.

Quite some time passed from the last death. It was but a distant memory to Jonah now, one he wished not to remember, as it wasn't a pretty one. Jonah and Emily were getting married soon, and everyone saw this coming a while ago, excitement was through the roof. Samuel, the best man was especially happy for them as he was the one who cheered them on at every opportunity. As for Sandy, well she had given up hopes of getting with Jonah a long time ago, she was just happy to see them both truly happy together. The day before the wedding Jonah sat down in the car and drove to get some groceries for lunch tomorrow. He was home fresh from work and was extremely tired. That day Jonah died in a traffic accident, luckily everyone else involved got off with only a few scratches and some car repairs. "Not my most heroic death" whispered Jonah as he drew his last breath. And then, darkness. Death.

Jonah wakes up, this time not on the bed but on the hard floor. He looks around him and sees the unimaginable. “Mystery girl? I-Is that really you?” he stuttered. “Yes Jonah, it is me. When you left me, I had no idea what to do with myself. Life without you felt empty.”

“But I came back, again and again, didn’t I?”

“Not to the same me you didn’t, but we finally see each other again”

As Jonah looked at the original mystery girl blinded by her beauty, wiping his face of tears, there they were. The pearly white gates of Heaven. There he saw God, in all His glory. Jonah was never much of a believer but God’s presence alone was enough to make him tremble.

“Fear not Jonah, for you have been saved” said God.

“Thank you dear God” said Jonah, he then turned to Emily, with tears in his eyes and said “I love you Emily, remember that.”

And then just like that, everything turned dark, and then he woke up.

Jonah was woken up by his mom, he was late for school again. Jonah jumped from bed and hugged his mom with tears in his eyes, filled with joy. Now there was only one question:

Was it all a dream?

šifra: goofy24795
mentor: Tihana Mudrovčić
institution:Tehnička škola Ruđera Boškovića Vinkovci
autor: Jakov Dekanić

THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE...

On a chilly winter evening four boys were laughing and playing video games. Phillipe, oldest of the four high schoolers is livid that he just lost in Mario Kart.

"I don't believe it; your controller is terrible."

"Don't blame the controller just because you don't know how to steer." responded Derrick.

"I'm not playing anymore; someone switch with me".

"Do you know where the rest of the chips are?"

"Woah, are we already on the last bag?"

"Yeah!"

"Relaaax there won't be enough for the four of us."

"Oh, shut up".

"Once you stop eating all our snacks".

"Hey, hey, stop arguing, we have enough snacks for the four of us," said Marc, "Zack say something to shut them up please."

"Alright, what do you guys think happened to Charlie?" asked Zack "He hasn't come to school in a while now."

"I don't know but if I had to guess I would say he travelled somewhere, it is winter break anyway." said Phillipe.

"No, he doesn't like travelling." responded Derrick "He hates riding anything except his bike."

"Do you guys think something bad happened to him?" asked Marc anxiously.

"Maybe he's doing another test with us like he did in that math class?" said Zack.

"Oh, you mean when he sat on the other side of the classroom to see if we would notice?" asked Derrick.

"Yeah, and then acted surprised when we sat next to him and asked him about it."

"I always wondered why he did that." said Marc.

"Oh, I almost forgot, his mom gave me some kind of book she wanted us to read maybe it has something to do with it?" responded Phillipe.

"Do you have it with you so we can read it?" asked Zack.

"Yeah, come on I'll read it."

Phillipe started reading.

September 10th

Today is the day, a new beginning some might say. My first day at Maplewood high. Not the best high school around but I'm just happy nobody I know goes here, at least, I think. I'm kind of scared about meeting the other students, what if it ends like… no no it won't, this time it will be better. I will meet a bunch of new friends here, that's what my mom said. My first subject is math, I don't really like math I like psychology much more. It's just fun seeing how people behave and why people behave in such ways. I'm thinking about what I should say to my classmates when I introduce myself. My mom said it's better if I skip my love for psychology as it can "give off bad vibes", ugh I hate when she tries to talk like high schoolers. But she has a good point it would be a little weird if I talked about psychology. Maybe I should mention that I like to read or is that too boring. "Hi, my name is Charlie. In my free time I like to play video games and ride my bike" it sounds so dumb that it might be amazing. I should get going now.

September 17th

I forgot to write for a little while… Reading this back I was so nervous for nothing. I met four new friends: Phillipe, Derrick, Marc, and Zack! Phillipe is the strongest of us and the tallest. Derrick is a little chubby and gets angry easily. Marc is very down to earth; he always knows just what to say. Zack is very smart he knows the answer to any question you ask him; believe me I asked him soo many questions. And I… never mind. But they're amazing, we're having so much fun. Also, I spotted some weird lumps on my back, don't know what they're from but I'll mention them to my mom soon enough. Exactly as I expected all the subjects are so boring. I'm trying my best to listen to the teachers, but I just doze off and fall asleep. They don't like that I sleep while they're teaching, which I don't understand. I'm not bothering them why is it a problem.

September 26th

I completely forgot about the lumps. My mom said we'll get them checked out tomorrow so it's probably nothing too important. We already had our first math exam today. I can't believe it's been less than a month and we're already writing exams.

September 27th

I went to the doctors it was okay. My mom seemed worried but she didn't mention anything to me so I guess it's okay. It's probably going to take a while for the lumps to disappear.

October 15th

My mom has been really happy the past few weeks. She even bought me more psychology books. I can't wait to read them! Also, Marc invited us to come over to his place this winter for a sleepover I asked my mom if I can go, and she said yes! It's going to be so much fun. Oh, and I passed my math exam, Zack helped me out a bit, but I got a B. Thank you Zack!

November 20th

I'm forgetting to write more and more. I wanted to start writing daily once I started high school to never forget anything important that happens guess there's just too much happening. I have some weird feeling when I come back home from school. Like my family is hiding something from me. I heard my mom crying through the front door before I opened it but when she came to greet me, she seemed happy. Might be just my imagination.

November 22nd

I was just at the doctors; I won't be going to school for a week.

November 28th

I'm still not allowed to go to school. On a happy note, I read all the new psychology books! They were great I can't wait to try them out. I did an experiment in math while I was still going to school, but I don't think I should experiment on my friends.

December 10th

Doctors' office

December 26th

I got to go to Marc's house! It's great here, he has such a big house. I love the room we get to stay in, it's so big all five of us can sleep here! I can't wait to beat them in monopoly.

December 27th

We stayed up the whole night last night. Marc's mom was not very happy with us, but she laughed it off. We slept till 2PM it was great, the bed is very comfy. Marc's mom also cooks very well. Of course, not as good as my mom but great, nevertheless. That's a new word I heard from Zack!

December 28th

It's time to go home today, it was so much fun staying over at Marc's. I hope we can have more sleepovers like that, we decided to stay over at everyone's house one at a time of course.

January 9th

Winter break is over it's time to go back to school. But I don't want to if only winter break was longer. It's been a while since I've talked to the guys, I can't wait to laugh with them again!

January 16th

I told Derrick I could predict if he's lying to me or not just by looking at his eyes. He said I couldn't and even bet his sandwich! I correctly predicted all his lies!!! The sandwich was great, and he still doesn't understand how I did it. Keep it a secret but he moves his nose when he lies. It was so funny seeing him flabbergasted at my amazing skills! Also, Zack taught me the word flabbergasted, it means to be surprised.

January 17th

A new person came to our class today. Her name is Christie. She has an angelic voice and looks beautiful. Derrick said she looks meh, so Phillipe of course made fun of him. It's fun listening to them argue and then Marc trying to stop them. But enough of them, Christie, she likes psychology. I was right when she said that the guys were a little weirded out, but I thought that was awesome! On lunch break I went to sit with her, and we talked a bit. She seems to be anxious cause it's her first day. I asked her why she switched schools, but she didn't want to answer. I think I like Christie, but Zack told me I'm just dumb.

January 22nd

Okay so much has changed, I started sitting next to Christie now. Finally, I don't sit alone anymore. We got to know each other better and honestly the more I know her the more I like her. I think she likes me as well but I'm not sure. I was planning on asking her out for ice cream once it becomes sunnier. Is that too late? Should I ask her something sooner?

January 23rd

I ditched the ice cream idea. I couldn't wait that long, so I asked her if she was free this Saturday and suggested a nice restaurant I know. And well she said yes! She even went so far to call it a date!! I'm going on a date with Christie this Saturday. I can't believe it, is it maybe moving a little too fast?

January 26th – Saturday

The day.

The day of the date.

The day of the date with Christie!

I'm so excited, I don't know what to wear. Probably jeans and some nice shirt. But I was also wondering what if she doesn't show up. Or she shows up and makes fun of me for thinking I had a chance… Her demeanour didn't change since I asked her out but I'm still nervous. Also, should I pay the whole bill?? I mean I am the guy but what if she eats a lot. I don't think I can pay for a four-person meal. I think if she eats a lot, it's fair if we split the bill. I mean I'm still paying for a bit of her meal and my whole meal.

I couldn't wait until tomorrow, I had to write today! It was great! She showed up and didn't eat too much. Maybe even less than me, doesn't matter. We talked a lot I got to learn even more about her. We bonded over psychology and talked about some of the books we read. We agreed to trade some books that we haven't read to each other. I think I have a chance at something here! I must stay relaxed.

I bought my girlfriend Christie her favourite chocolate for Valentine's Day! We also went to watch some romantic movie; I didn't really like it that much it was corny but Christie seemed to enjoy it a lot.

February 21st

Why did I start writing titles to these days? I don't even know what to write about anymore.

February 22nd

February 28th

Marchhhhh 14th

This diary was a stupid idea, why did I even start in the first place. To remember all the great memories, I'm going to have in high school. They're probably enjoying themselves without me and having fun.

Why did I even think I could find friends, if I couldn't do it in middle school why would it be any different in high school.

Also how was I so stupid not to notice why my mom was forcing her smile it was so obvious. Being nervous at the doctor's office, crying while I'm not home and then being "happy" when I come home. I wanted to become a psychologist and couldn't even understand that my own mother was hiding something from me.

I didn't even write it down did I. I have Osteosarcoma but it's not like you didn't know that. But in case someone else reads this it's a type of bone cancer. And the lumps on my back you may be asking yourself. They are spinal tumours.

I hate this I hate everything why did it have to be me. Why now that I have finally found friends must I be alone again. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to die. I want to laugh with Phillipe and Derrick. Try to stop them from fighting with Marc. Learn new words from Zack. I didn't think it would end like this. Especially not with me writing a fake future that I will never be able to live through.

I will miss everyone, even the people I don't like. The doctor said I won't see next year and it's almost winter break now. I hope the guys are having fun without me and I hope they forget me soon, so they don't have to worry where I am. I hope mom doesn't miss me too much, she's by my side all the time now that I've been hospitalized. Mom, I love you so much. Please tell dad I love him too if you see him again. And if the guys ask about me tell them I moved away somewhere far away, so they think I'm a jerk and just went away instead of having to think about my death.

I'll be fine. The only thing that hurts me is that the best years of my life… we're cut short."

"Th-this has to be some kind of sick joke by Charlie" said Derrick shocked "Right??"

"I don't believe him." said Marc "there's no way".

Phillipe started tearing up and Zack just stood there silently thinking about something.

In the end all four of them didn't know what to say or believe. But it gave the whole night an eerie feel, like something was holding them down. None of them could sleep that night. Each laying in their own bed with their backs turned. Silently trying not to cry, not to let a tear fall to not alert the others. Not knowing how the others would react to their emotions. They all felt like they lost a bit of themselves even though they didn't know him for a while it still broke a piece of them. The best years of our life are ahead of us….

Right?

šifra: 202512JAN
mentor: Marijana Horvat
institution: Druga gimnazija Varaždin
autor: Miron Plantak

DAYS IN HEAVEN

I like autumn. I like the grey skies that act as a cape to depressing big cities, melancholic rain that slowly falls onto the dark streets, rainbow wet leaves on the ground… Everything is so connected into perfect little dystopian harmony. This may sound strange coming from a seaside dweller whose whole identity depended on the summertime. Back then summer meant something to me. Memories like fishing on a small wooden boat with my grandpa early in the morning before the sun could rise, the hardship of cleaning the caught fish using a dull knife, and the sunburns earned in the middle of the whole process, playing with neighbouring kids on dimmed lights… Well, I lied a bit for the last part. I've always been kind of a strange kid growing up. I lived inside of my world, inside my head where I would both have the first and the last thing to say. I've always hated it when my perfect world (where I would be the wisest person) was being interrupted by the annoying voices of others (especially those of my age). This would make me so infuriated that all I wanted to do was cry (due to the rage I felt rather than any form of sadness or fear). Of course, that attitude changed over the years, I had to blend in with the rest of my peers to succeed in life (both socially and economically) but my deep hatred towards the human race never disappeared. I want to believe I've managed to control myself better than in my childhood. Back then I was unbearable. Before any child my age could interrupt my daydreaming fantasies, I would instantly push them away as if I knew what was going to happen (yes, by "pushing" I mean it in both the basic and figurative meaning). It's meaningless to say that I did not take criticism very lightly. Hell, even today after all these years when it comes to my work I'm still nowhere near accepting any criticism, especially from those who don't know anything about it. Even though I finished school as a nurse (or should I say murse – get it? male nurse?) deep in my heart I've always wanted to be a writer. Wise people would say "The job that makes you happy is far more important than a job that makes you more money", so as a wise person myself I decided to try my luck as a writer. The first book I wrote was some cringe novel about forbidden love, a total cliché love story with the simplest style of

writing I could think of due to reaching a larger audience (because let's just be honest, nobody reads books these days, only teenagers that dream of various forms of romance they can't have themselves). I hated it, truly hated it but, oh well… I knew it would get publishers interested in me so I thought that once I find myself someone willing to publish my book, maybe they would also be willing to publish something I'm prouder of. Some of my greater work than this hot-selling piece of garbage? Boy was I wrong. Long story short, a famous publisher from my area liked me and made me sign a contract with his company. His name was Mr. Kim, a short fat guy with more hair on his beard than on his head. He spoke in a strange, overhyped voice that managed to get on my nerves occasionally. Even though he managed a book publishing company, his interest in books was nowhere to be seen. He was not interested in classics such as Dostoyevsky, Camus, Hemingway, or any other folks but rather in mainstream garbage that managed to sell well. I despise him. He made me scrap so many good books that would make it into classic literature in no time. He rejected countless books I've ever written threatening me that I would get fired if I didn't write something that would sell to the bigger audience… So, hi, Mr. Kim, hope you enjoyed your five minutes of fame in MY story. Hope this garbage sells well because after this story gets published (oh and it will, you'll see) I'm quitting my job. You know what? I'm quitting writing in general. Only by some miracle will I ever come back. So good luck finding your next hen that lays golden eggs you egocentric money-hungry freak. Yeah, that felt great… I hope you enjoy the rest of my story because I truly wrote it with heart. After all, it is based on a true story when I was in my prime. Now look at me, poor unmarried balding middle-aged writer. Truly heartbreaking. Now that I think about… Maybe I do not like autumn as I thought I did…

This all happened in the summer 20 years ago. The end of the summer was getting closer by each day, yet during those days my best friend went all out. Yes, at that time even I had a friend, he was the only person who I believed truly understood me, even though we were two different words. Anyways, every single day of August we'd spend together on a beach pranking the tourists with small things (such as closing their umbrellas and eating pieces of their food…) so that we could get a reaction of an angry pack of obese balding men that couldn't run after five meters. We were truly jerks, I know. But do I regret doing any of it? Not the slightest. Yes, they did chase after us for some nuts, but that's not my problem; at least we gave them some exercise. Okay yeah, I'll shut up for good. After spending an entire day by the beach (we would leave as soon as the person we chose for our mockery left) we went clubbing at our favourite nightclub, Utopia. We mostly went there because of my friend Maxim.

He visited the club quite often because he knew the owner which resulted in him getting drinks for free. He would then use this power to „buy" a drink to any foreign girl that he laid his eyes on. Most of the time this tactic would work. Of course, some drinks won't get you laid, but he knew his way with words (and he was somewhat of a looker too). But sometimes his tactics failed, mostly due to the girl's boyfriends being nearby. If you gave me a nickel for every time he got his bum kicked, I would have seven nickels, which isn't a lot but getting whopped seven times sure is. What was a loser like me doing in the nightclub? Honestly not much. I did not hit on any girls, I did not get into fights and I was sober for most of the time (even though the reason behind that wasn't my morals, but the expensive ticket to the nightclub due to it being an obvious tourist trap). I didn't go there for its vibe (it was meant to be modern but so dirty it looked kind of retro) but rather for the music. I loved the music that was played there. Madonna, Elton John, ABBA, Weezer, Chemical Brothers, Red Hot Chilli Peppers… The list was stacked. My feet couldn't catch a break from one great song to another. I'm pretty sure I had most of the songs memorized by heart. Despite my want to leave the dance floor because my feet were blistered, I simply couldn't bring myself to do so. It felt like cheating on my lifelong partner. The next day I couldn't walk even if I wanted to. That's how much I loved it there. But it all went differently one night. That particular night I didn't feel like staying sober so I asked Maxim if he could get me something to drink on the house. I never asked him for this type of favour before, mostly because of the dignity that I felt. Maxim looked quite annoyed when I asked him for this, probably because he was talking to some Dutch girls when I came around. He got me a bottle of Jack Daniels probably thinking that it would be enough to please my appetite for the night. It sure did, but not in the way he wanted it. I drank the whole bottle in like 20 minutes so much so that the rainbow lights of the club took kaleidoscope-like shapes. I couldn't dance even though my favourite tracks were on. I couldn't even stand on my feet. Suddenly a young woman my age room across from me started to approach me. My eyes couldn't focus on anything even though I was desperately trying to take a look at her. The only thing they could focus on was her orange-like eyes which were burning with some kind of strange passion and excitement. There was something in them that I found particularly soothing. The next thing I noticed was her thin red lips that moved at such ease that they were satisfying to look at. How strange this girl looked. Unlike any others I've ever met. After returning to earth again, I noticed this girl talking to me the whole time as I looked at her. Suddenly I gained my focus back.

'I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that…'

She laughed at my response, giving a somewhat awkward but far from annoyed smile.

'I said I love this track!' She responded louder so she made sure I could hear her this time. Putting all my focus on her words I couldn't hear or recognize the track she was talking about. A few seconds later, I finally recognized a song. It was No Good by Prodigy, an absolute favourite of mine. Needless to say, I felt as stupid as I looked at that moment. Immediately after I decide to make some small talk, just to not bore her out.

'You like Prodigy?'

'Yes, they're a favourite of mine. I decided to approach another man of culture after noticing you wearing their T-shirt,' she said with a playful giggle.

'Wanna come to the dancefloor with me?', Her eyes suddenly lit up again.

'I'm sorry, I had way too much to drink…' Before I could finish my sentence she grabbed my hand and led me to the dancefloor.

'Don't be a wuss! Everyone in here is on something so you'll be fine!'

'Damn it,' I thought. This is an opportunity of a lifetime and I'm not going to let some booze take it away from me. I rushed with her to the dancefloor carelessly following her footsteps. We danced for what seemed like an eternity until I ran into some buff guy holding his beer spilling everything on his shirt. To say he was angry was an understatement. He grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and lifted me in the air. At that moment, I recalled Maxim's strategy in such circumstances. I created a saliva in my mouth and spit it at the guy's face. Before he could react, the girl who I danced with grabbed me by my hand and ran with me out of the club. We were laughing and running the whole night no idea where to go. At last, we arrived at the Maxim's holiday house where I stayed. Our gazes locked once more on the balcony, generating a sweet tension between us. At that moment I did not think, I decided I had to kiss her. As our heads drew closer our lips collided. The next morning when I woke up, I was sleeping next to her half naked. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't remember anything from the night before.

As I got up to get cigarettes from a drawer nearby, I suddenly took a glance at the girl sleeping in my bed. I felt a strange warm feeling filling my body. I never noticed her looking this beautiful yesterday. She had the most gorgeous ginger short thick hair that kind of reminded me of a setting sun, and a small pointy nose perfectly positioned between her big marble-like eyes and her thin pale lips. Honestly, I felt impressed with myself, how the hell did I manage to score a girl like that? Was she blind, high, or just drunk? I grabbed the cigarettes and went downstairs to prepare

breakfast. There I met Maxim who only gave me a smirk to congratulate me for the previous night. I was annoyed by this gesture so, without a word, I grabbed some bread, freshly cooked eggs, ham and went outside. The girl joined me as soon as I had the table ready for the three of us. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and started the conversation.

'Thank you for the breakfast. I'm so hungover from the last night…'

'Same here. Honestly, I can't even remember what the hell happened,' I chuckled.

She returned the chuckle. 'You were so damn wasted you couldn't stand straight for most of the night. Your dance movements were like those of an angry octopus.'

I laughed. 'Was it that bad?'

'Oh yes, it was! You went Jackie Chan mode on everyone there on the dancefloor!'

Our light-hearted laugh slowly died out. I felt somewhat of a warm presence around her, even though I knew nothing about her. Not her name, age… None.

'You never mentioned to me your name.'

'Does it matter?'

'I suppose it doesn't.'

She laughed looking pleased with my response. 'My name's Cindy. What's yours?'

'Does it matter?' I responded with a mocking voice followed up with a short laugh.

Before we could talk any longer, Maxim came by the table, grabbed a piece of ham throwing into his mouth, sat down, and began talking.

'So Alex, you got your stuff ready for a concert?'

'Snap I forgot it was today…'

'So you're not going?'

I looked at Cindy for a split second before making my decision. After waiting for this concert for an entire year, I suddenly had no desire to attend. Maybe it was partially because of her. I didn't want to leave her right away, but my strong will made me feel compelled to.

'Of course, I'm going. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'

Cindy joined to conversation. 'You guys going to Prodigy concert? Y'all gonna have a blast out there!'

Her response kind of took me out. I guess I expected her to feel some kind of disappointment rather than being happy for me. She didn't mind me leaving her as long as I had a good time. This just shows how unselfish and unhinged she truly was.

She continued 'But before y'all go… Alex do you want to go swimming together?'

'Sure,' I said. I had no plans before evening anyway.

'Just remember to get here on time…' Maxim warned me 'The bus leaves at seven p.m.'

'Don't worry, we'll be back on time!' Cindy grabbed my hand in a hurry so we could get ready.

'Cheers to that!' Maxim responded teasingly while heading back inside.

As soon as we arrived, the beach was full. I helped her put on the sunscreen onto her pale white skin which felt warmer than it looked. She then dived into the sea without a second thought. I, on the other hand, took a slower approach. She took notice so she began splashing me and I returned the favour. I decided to jump in so I could get closer to her. I playfully grabbed her threatening to throw her. Her hair was over her eyes, and she was laughing. For a split second, our eyes met again. the tension was high, so I leaned and kissed her passionately again. We stayed there till the evening. The air was pleasant, and the sky gained warmer colours. All of a sudden it was time to leave. Halfway home Cindy suddenly realised her left earring was missing. She was visibly upset because the earring was a gift from her mother when she was a small child. We hurried up to the beach in the hope of finding the earrings. I was getting increasingly anxious as time passed realizing that maybe I won't get on the bus on time. We looked all over the beach before finding the earring about two meters below the surface. I dived right into it and managed to get the earring back. As soon as we discovered the earrings, we started sprinting to the bus stop hoping to get on. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful…

'I'm sorry. It's all my fault,' Cindy cried, 'I shouldn't have made you look for my stupid earing.'

'It's okay,' I said in a cold tone, 'That's just a concert anyways…'

It was just a concert… Concert that I planned for a whole year. Despite me being upset, I chose to not make a big deal out of it. It's not Cindy's fault for me running late, it was my fault after all. After all the fuss, we decided to return to the beach. We sat on the rocky coast and enjoyed the beautiful sunset. Cindy rested her head on my shoulders as we looked at fishermen's boats returning. At once, I was in peace. At once I didn't hate all of humanity. At once I didn't care for what others thought of me. At once I was happy.

Sadly, this story doesn't have a happy ending. Cindy and I had no contact as soon as the summer was over. Today I got an invitation to her wedding, nearly twenty years later. I want to be upset, I want to feel angry at the world, at myself. But I let her go, just like how she was ready to let me go just to make me happy. That just sums her up as a person, a person I've lost forever.

šifra: L2AGOODBYE
mentor: Smiljana Mudri
institution: Druga gimnazija Varaždin
autor: Lana Siročić

THE GOODBYE THAT NEVER CAME

The Bardot family, whilst living modestly, truly was a happy family with lots of love and respect for each other. One could easily become envious of their connection. Warren worked as a shoemaker, while Josephine taught children at a regional school. They were a happy couple, high school sweethearts, actually, who loved one another very much. Their humble yet cosy abode was located in a rather rural area with just a few neighbouring residences. Emmet was their child, whom they cherished and valued dearly. He was a lovely and fierce 13-year-old boy with lots of ambition who surely had a bright future ahead of him.

On the 25th December 1998, Emmet was celebrating Christmas with his parents. They had just finished eating Christmas dinner and were about to start their yearly tradition of watching Christmas movies, when a single loud *bang* was heard in every corner of the house. The joy and laughter stopped, resulting in loud, ominous silence. Moments later, the doorbell rang, causing everyone to flinch. Without taking a second to think, Emmet instinctively ran to the door and opened it. Josephine tried to stop him, but he was too quick. Warren froze in his tracks, unable to think. As the door squeakily opened, it showed an empty front porch with a snow storm brewing. Emmet shouted, but nobody answered. Only the echo of his brittle, somewhat shaky voice could be heard. As he turned around, true horror awaited him. A sight no child should be damned to see. Emmet's face turned pale as he saw his parents, who were, just moments earlier, filled with love, happiness and warmth, lying on the living room floor in a pool of red liquid, with no signs of life. While slowly approaching his parents' lifeless bodies, Emmet felt like his heart had sunk to his stomach. His mind was empty. He wanted to shout, but couldn't. He was numb. He stood in the living room completely frozen, not knowing what to do. He could hear his own heartbeat throbbing faster with every passing second. Sounds of the now raging snow storm and pounding door filled the room.

After what felt like hours, Emmet eventually moved. His small hands and legs were shivering, and his breath was trembling while thousands of thoughts came

rushing to his mind. The realisation had hit him. He could never spend another day with his parents. To him that was unimaginable, yet it had just become his excruciating reality. Standing in a puddle of his own parents' blood, his tiny, soft finger gently touched each of them, hoping they would eventually open their eyes. He waited and stood beside the bodies, with hope gradually leaving his mind until it was long gone. His parents would never come back. Life had taken them away from him with no warning. He was given no time to prepare, nor a proper goodbye. The world would move on and soon forget, but Emmet never would. How could he? It wasn't fair; it never is. Soon, only memories would remain.

That same eerie Christmas night, in an adjacent town, Clara Raven peered out her bedroom window with an absent mind, watching the snowflakes slowly fall and disappear, like the non-existent memories of her parents. Hours later, she went to sleep and wished for nothing more than *home*. She was a 12-year-old girl raised in an orphanage, who was left at their doorstep on a cold, biting Christmas night at a very young age. The orphanage was an enormous building one could easily get lost in. Clara never liked it there. She regularly had to follow a strict schedule, and if she were to disobey it, punishment would ensue. Even though she was forced to complete things too demanding for her age, nobody seemed to care. After all, why would they, since not even her parents did? When she walked down the vast, gloomy hallways, only the immensely loud echo of her own footsteps could be heard. The mouldy walls around her started to peel, and the lighting had become dull. Rooms in the orphanage were overcrowded, causing her to lack personal space, as well as privacy. Every morning she woke up with a strong sense of hopelessness, despair, and anxiety. Despite the large number of kids the orphanage sheltered, Clara struggled to befriend any of them. She never had anyone to confide in, to laugh and cry with or just talk to. Every day her heart ached for love, connection, care, as well as a sense of belonging. Regardless, she always put a smile on her face, wishing to bring back even the tiniest bit of hope and joy to the other lost children's hearts.

Clara never knew her parents, yet always had a peculiar desire to meet them. Should she, by chance, encounter them one day, she would come prepared with a list of questions. Every night she thought about her parents and dreamed of the life she could have had, but never will. She yearned to one day sit at a table and enjoy lunch with her parents, while the fire crackled, filling their cosy home with warmth. All she wanted was to wake up on Christmas morning and see a present under the bright, embellished Christmas tree. Clara loved watching the snow slowly fall and cover the beautifully lit streets because it soothed her. All she wanted was to feel the touch of

cold snow on her tiny, bare hands and possibly dance in the snow without a single care or worry. Day after day, she found herself looking at other kids having fun, dreaming of the time she would experience the world like they do. Her imagination would go wild, eventually ending up on the other side of the earth. When she would snap back to reality, anger, sadness, and aspiration would fill her heart, because within, she knew, she would always remain a silent observer.

On the morning of December 27th, the orphanage gained a new member, a boy named Emmet. Was it faith, a wish, or perhaps a miracle that had brought them together? Well, in this mysteriously beautiful, yet every so often oddly cruel world, time could be the only and true bearer of their woven destinies.

"Hello! I'm Clara, it's very nice to meet you." Clara said with a cheery voice and a big smile on her face.

"I'm Emmet." Emmet said quietly with sadness in his voice.

"Are you okay?" Clara asked softly.

"I'm fine." Emmet abruptly answered.

"Are you s-", "I said I was fine!" Emmet shouted not letting Clara finish her question.

The smile on Clara's face dropped. After a brief moment of silence, Clara said with confusion and regret in her voice: "Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Can you just get to the point so I can go to my room?" Emmet stated frustratingly.

"Yes, of course. My bad." Clara shortly answered.

As they were silently walking down one of the long, never-ending hallways, Emmet finally asked: "How long have you been in this depressing place?"

Clara replied: "I've lived here my whole life. When I was just a baby, my parents left me outside. I never knew them."

Emmet paused for a second, then said: "I'm sorry. It must be hard never knowing your parents."

"Nothing I can't handle." Clara replied letting out a small chuckle, in hopes of lightening up the situation.

Emmet looked at Clara with his droopy, tired, brown eyes, and once again, silence occurred. After a while, Clara spoke softly: "This is your room, number 25 C. If you have any questions, feel free to come find me in my room, number 26 E, just down the hall."

"Thanks." Emmet shortly answered and reluctantly entered his new room.

As the days passed, Clara hadn't seen or heard from Emmet. She assumed he

needed time to adjust to his new surroundings. One frosty morning, in order to calm her own conscience, Clara knocked on Emmet's door. No one answered. "Emmet, it's Clara, are you in there? Are you okay?" she questioned worryingly.

After waiting a quick moment and getting no response, she asked again with more concern in her voice. "What do you want?" Emmet indignantly answered from the other side of the door.

"I haven't seen you in a while, are you doing okay?" Clara asked.

"Yes, I am. Now go away." Emmet replied with an annoyed tone.

"Okay, but if you ever need someone to talk to, you can always knock on my door. I hope you know that." Clara comforted. No response.

As Clara turned to walk toward her room, she heard a creaky door opening. When she turned around, her bright green eyes caught Emmet's gaze. "How do you do it?" Emmet asked.

"Do what?" Clara replied.

"Stay so positive and joyful even though you're here. Your parents left you. For God's sake, you're an orphan, you practically have no one, yet a smile is always on your face. How? Why?" Emmet questioned.

Clara paused, smiled, and spoke: "I'm not really sure. The thing is, I never had parents, but at least I can imagine what *they* could have been like, or rather, what *we* could have been like. I guess smiling and dreaming is my way of pretending everything's alright, even if that's not the case."

Furrowing his eyebrows, Emmet took a moment to process Clara's words, then wondered: "But, how aren't you sad or angry at the world for taking away something *you* had, or, better yet, never had?"

"Believe me, I am, every day. I just choose not to let that sadness and anger control me." Clara admitted. "I can try to help you, but, in order for me to do that, I need to ask – What's your story?"

Emmet's gaze softened, as he let out a sigh before saying: "My parents were murdered on Christmas. Every single moment I spend thinking about their lifeless bodies just…being there. I can't get the image out of my head. P-" Without finishing his sentence, Emmet's voice became shaky as he started to stutter, eventually bursting into tears: "P-Please…h-help me Clara. I-I just c-can't live like this anymore."

She looked at him with sorrow in her eyes, herself fighting the urge to shed a tear. She knew the only way of helping Emmet was by keeping a clear mind: "I really am sorry for your loss. I'd say I know how you feel, but then I'd be lying. I've never experienced family love; to me, it's like a snowflake which never made it to the ground

because the sun shined too early. At least you made lots of beautiful memories along the way. I didn't even get the chance to do that. Your parents will always love you and I'm sure they watch over you 24/7. They would want you to be happy and continue on with your life, even though that might seem hard right now. Just make sure to cherish the moments you spent together close to your heart; hold them like a root which anchors its flower in powerful wind."

Hearing those words, something in Emmet changed. His eyes sparkled once again. A flare was ignited. Hope was restored. And only *she* was the reason. "Thank you, Clara Raven. I will forever be grateful." Emmet answered.

Ever since that moment, Emmet and Clara have been inseparable. They absolutely adored each other's presence. After becoming adults, they moved in together, found jobs, and supported one another through the countless tough times. This year they happily celebrated Clara's 22nd, and Emmet's 23rd birthday. Though never engaging in a romantic relationship, one could easily tell they were soulmates. In another life, perchance. Their bond was strong, some would even say unbreakable, but even the strongest of ice can be broken with just a gentle touch.

Lately, Clara had noticed Emmet's behaviour progressively changing for the worse. He started being absent; talking to him was like talking to a ghost - Clara felt as though he was looking through her, not at her. His dark circles got bigger with every passing day. His brown eyes looking bloodshot and dead most of the time. He showed little to no emotion whatsoever. She tried to help him, talk to him, yet he refused every single time, keeping all his thoughts, emotions and suffering for himself. Was it pride, fear or angst of being a burden that kept him from opening up? Whatever the reason was, only he knew it and made sure nobody else did. The last time Clara had seen Emmet like that was when she first met him; 2 days after his parents' death. A cold shiver suddenly ran down her spine, remembering how hard it was for him to find happiness after that. He was stuck in a dark place then, but now, Clara feared he might hit rock bottom. Turns out, she was right. And there was nothing she could do or say to help him. Only he had the power to tame his demons and bury them once and for all – the biggest one being ignorance.

Turns out the police never found the one who killed Emmet's parents. The anger was slowly eating him alive. Not talking about it certainly didn't help. He decided to take matters into his own hands, working day and night to bring the murderer to justice. After a while, he got nowhere; no clues; no evidence; no luck. A desire for closure soon became the cause of his downfall; spreading throughout his body faster than the plague would. The only light in his life was Clara. But when they

started frequently fighting because of his "obsession", he simply snapped and left, never to be seen again. That fateful day was the 15th of December 2008. Clara called the police, but it was no use. He vanished. It was as though he never existed. A star which brightly shined to make another gleam even more has now lost its glow, along with its purpose. Now it stays alone in the universe waiting to magically find its light again. If not, an explosion would arise – making sure the star would never exist again.

On Christmas morning, Clara received a call she never thought she would. Emmet was found in his childhood home, lying on the floor, over an old, faded blood stain. In his right hand he held a picture of Clara and his family, while in his left an empty bottle of antidepressants.

Clara was heartbroken. She couldn't believe it. Unable to speak, she wrote - hoping he'd read it someday, somehow - and forgive her for not trying harder. Emptiness filled her heart; a sense for him; his embrace; his love:

"Dearest Emmet, I will forever have a profound love for you, one that is beyond words. Out of 8 billion people *you* were the one; *my one*; *my home*. It was always you and me against this cruel world, yet here I am, on this cold winter night, writing this in your memory, still in awe. Your fire burned out too soon, therefore never getting the chance to truly bristle. The wind was too strong this time - leaving behind smoke in all its glory, with endless pieces of ash following carefully like the uncounted memories of us. People said it would get better with time, how it heals all wounds. Well, I disagree. Certain wounds I will carry with me my whole life, your death being the biggest one. I am grateful that others are here for me, but I don't want them. I want you. Only you. No one could ever replace *you*. You were my first, only and true friend. No, not just "a friend". Family. You were *my family*. The family I never got the chance to have. Other "friends" left when things got tough; you stayed, always standing by my side no matter what. I still like to talk to you, in hopes your ghost follows my every step. Every morning I wake up feeling like the same scared, little girl that I once was. I hate the feeling; it makes me sick to my stomach. That day at the orphanage I saw a spark in your eyes for the first time. That spark slowly started to leave your brown eyes as the days passed, I had noticed, yet convinced myself otherwise. Why, you may ask? Denial, I guess. But because of it, I never got a chance to say goodbye. History really does repeat itself, doesn't it? Maybe it was my fault; every day I ask myself if there was something more I could've done to help you. Now your eyes remain closed; never again seeing the bitter-sweet beauty of this world. I feel my heart aching every time I think about how you're alone, lying in a dark place, your body being colder than ice. Suddenly, guilt fills the air. Every harsh word once

said, although forgiven, never forgotten; instead buried deep inside waiting to come out. I know you entered the gates of heaven today. I find myself believing you are now reunited with your parents and making new memories together once again. I hope you are. I really do. But that means I will forever long for just one more touch; one more shared laugh; one more hug; one more shed tear; one more talk; just one more chance to look into your eyes and tell you how much you mean to me. Maybe it's a bit selfish, but how can one easily let go of someone so very dear to them? The answer is…they can't - *I* simply cannot. With you a part of me died; like a petal which falls from its flower, gradually withering away. Emmet Bardot, you and me forever. In life or in death, always looking after each other. Rest easy, my friend. See you soon. Love, Clara."

šifra: VD1AS
mentor: Sanja Vukelić
institution: Graditeljsko-geodetska škola Osijek
autor: Veronika Draženović

SELCOUTH

Every human life has a different story. Some start sad and end happy, while some start happy and end sad, but of course there are many types of stories. Everyone tells their story the way they experience it. At the beginning, I experienced mine as very boring. I've lived in an orphanage since I can remember, and now sixteen winters later I'm moving to a boarding school. I couldn't be happier. I just needed a change. It's not that I don't love all the people from the orphanage, but it's time for me to stand on my own two feet. At school, I was always the best in absolutely everything. My class teacher asked me two months ago if I wanted to go to Tokyo to finish high school. I was honestly surprised. Like, me? Tokyo? What is this woman talking about? But she explained to me that there is a school there that accepts students from different parts of the world and trains them for the future. As soon as she explained it, I immediately agreed and she sent the request. And there it is. Two months later and I'm packing for Tokyo. I am sorry to leave my roommate and all my other friends and teachers and even people I only saw in passing. But, it is time for me to go and make my life a book worthy story.

"I will miss you, please don't forget about me " said my best friend, who was also my roommate. I could never forget her. We've known each other since she came here, that is, after the death of her parents. She was always there for me and I for her. It doesn't matter how many kilometres we are apart from each other, we will always be best friends.

Before leaving, I once again thanked my teacher, who helped me with this. On the way to the airport, I looked out of the car window at my small town, which taught me a lot, and for that, I am grateful. The plane was not crowded. On the contrary, there were a lot of free seats, so I took advantage of that opportunity and occupied the entire row. I felt like the whole world was in the palm of my hand. I arrived many hours later. I couldn't be happier. The taxi picked me up and took me to the new school. In front of the schoolyard, a woman was waiting for me.

"You must be Nova. It is nice to meet you. I am the headmistress, Lyssandra Vale. "

”It is so nice to meet you too, as you know my name is,″ I started to introduce myself but she had other plans.

”You should hurry up, everyone is in the backyard. Teachers will be announcing the students and putting them into different classes. “

I listened to her and rushed to the schoolyard, which was decorated with various decorations. From balloons and various plants to the glass floor, everything looked like something out of a fairy tale. There were at least ten adults on stage, who were probably teachers. One of them approached the microphone standing in the middle of the stage, and said:”Dear students, you are all here for a reason. Some of you impressed us because you will grow up to be good people, some because you are good at solving various tasks and some because you are capable of achieving everything. I won't take up much of your time, so we better hurry.“

That same man called everyone's names and divided us into groups. He barely muttered my name, almost so I didn't understand or hear him. I was added to group A. When the calling of names and division by classes was over, everyone got a key to their room. The building where the students would live while attending school was neat but a little old. My school consists of three buildings: a dormitory, a school building and a large sports hall. That hall is probably bigger than the school and dormitory combined. While an older student was showing us the school, he talked about history, mentioning how wizards and witches built this school out of stone. That story was funny to me, so I laughed a little louder and got the looks of absolutely everyone. I tried to ignore it and pretend that nothing had happened, but I felt like everyone thought I was weird. What is more, I still don't know why. After the school tour, we were free to do anything. I went to my room, but of course, I got lost at least four times, when I finally found the room and opened the door, I realized that there was only one bed, which meant that I was alone in the room. The room was a little smaller; it had a bed, a wardrobe and a table, a yellow carpet, a chair and a picture of the valley on the wall. While looking around the room, I saw a letter on the table. It was from my teacher. I opened it and it said:” Dear Nova, I am glad you are in this school. You will make more progress here than ever before. This place is made for you, but it will take you some time to figure it out. Whatever happens, believe in yourself as you have until now. With love, teacher. “

I'll answer her letter later and now I'll go and have fun.

Within three hours, I met too many people. None of them complained to me about what I had laughed about. I don't know if it's because everyone drank too much or people here forget quickly.

The night was interesting. I met a lot of new people. Some looked at me strangely while others were relaxed and friendly. One girl, Eva, praised me for getting into this school. She thought someone like me would never show up here. At first I was confused. Did she want to say that I looked stupid or was she just amazed that someone from the other side of the world left everything to come here. I didn't just meet Eva. I met two more of her friends, Chase and Miles. I told them everything about myself. They were very supportive. Miles comes from a rich family and his life was filled with everything. As he says, his parents climbed to the top and he has to maintain that top. Chase comes from an ordinary family and has an older sister. He was always resourceful and good with everyone. He speaks four languages and understands two more. All four of us spent the night talking and around midnight we went to sleep. The first night here was like a dream. I honestly can't believe how far I've come. Soon I fell asleep and didn't dream anything, probably because I was very tired. My dreams used to be very strange sometimes. Sometimes two unknown voices would call me in my sleep or I was fighting for my life in some arena.

I woke up at seven in the morning and got ready for school. While running to the classroom I met my friends.

"Do you know where the MAW classroom is? " I asked. "We are also in that classroom" they said. "Do you know which subject it is? I didn't have that in my last school."

"You'll see." they said with a smile on their faces. The classroom used for that subject was older. It had ten tables and two chairs next to each. There were portraits of various people on the wall. I sat down with Eva, with Chase and Miles sitting behind us. There were not many of us in the class. We didn't talk much because the teacher came right away.

"Hi kids, if you already don't know, this is the subject of magic and the world."

I looked at Eva strangely, but she told me not to worry about anything. "So let's start. Each of you has something that makes you different from others. I control fire for example." Flames of fire leapt out of her hands. What is happening here? Is someone kidding with me here? I moved a little away from the table, sitting motionless. "I can notice that some are in shock. " she said, looking at me. I turned to the two boys behind. They looked at me as if the most natural thing was for the flame to go out of your hand. "Teacher, how long does it take to learn to control powers? " asked the boy who was sitting in front of me. "For many, it is different; for most, it takes five months. However, I know students who needed two days as well as those who needed more than five years. "

Eva just patted me on the shoulder and said that she will explain everything to me later. The teacher then started talking about the beginning of everything. I just looked at her and didn't move at all. She talked for forty-five minutes. Maybe my ear heard it, but my brain didn't understand the words. The way to the second period was quiet. Too quiet. "Now we have something that would be like physical education in your world, but with us, that subject is much more interesting," Eva said. When we got to the sports hall, we all stood in line. The teacher immediately started calling our names to check if we were all there. "Is Nova Reyes here?" he asked. " I'm present." I said. "Reyes…" he said my last name again. I could hear my last name in the background, so I turned around and everyone was looking at me. The teacher just looked at me and continued calling names. After that, we did some fitness exercises. We ran and jumped over obstacles. "Today was more for getting to know each other and relaxing," the teacher said. "From the start of the next class we will do martial arts." I don't understand anything. Moreover, everyone can notice that. I feel like a stranger here. Why am I even here? "We have one more class and then we'll go to the headmistress, who will explain everything to you, " Chase said. " And it would be better for her to explain absolutely everything," I replied. Just one more hour. One more hour and I will get answers to all my questions. Just one more hour. The next period was biology. What will we be doing in biology, in this school? Are we going to learn about some magical animals or what? As in the two previous classes, we got to know each other and then the teacher really started talking about some magical animals. When she finished showing us the pictures of those animals, she unlocked a closet and a phoenix flew out of it. I don't think anything in life can surprise me anymore. "People, meet Greg, he is my pet." The bird first flew around the class and then landed on my table in front of me. "I think someone caught Greg's eye, " she said with a smile on her face. My hand rose and went to caress him. I was all numb except for my hand. He was soft. The bell rang for the end of the class and I rushed out of the classroom. Chase, Miles and Eva were running after me. "Wait Nova, we're all going to see the headmistress. "

I cannot understand what is happening here. I tried to process absolutely everything. How is it that yesterday this school looked completely normal and today it is one of those magical ones you read about in books. We all literally ran to the headmistress's office.

"I was expecting you Nova, "

"What does this all mean? Why? How?"

"Slowly, I have time to explain everything to you."

”I want answers and I want them quickly.“ I spoke fast. I was losing my patience. I survived three hours in a school where I don't belong.

” Nova Reyes, the daughter of Otis and Harriet. You are much more powerful than you think.“

What should all this mean to her. It's starting to get black in front of my eyes. ”Start talking quickly! “ I shouted. As I shouted some kind of golden and black fog appeared around me. I couldn't see my friends anymore. I only saw the headmistress. My hands started to hurt a lot. Blood began to flow under my nails. That fog, it wasn't just around me now, it appeared on my hands.

”Welcome to the world of magic, Reyes. We don't have much time to train. The war your parents fought in, is starting again. They could never finish it and win, but you can. So now I will tell you everything from the beginning…“

šifra: BurningGiraffe2310
mentor: Tamara Kapraljević
institution: Tehnička škola i prirodoslovna gimnazija
Ruđera Boškovića Osijek
autor: Marisa Plavec

THE LODGE

"Dammit- "Jonathan panted, collapsing on the spent, wooden floor and backing up to the mossy wall in panic, hunting rifle firmly in hand. His black hair was sticking to his forehead, brown eyes rapidly darting around as he listened for anything. The silence was deafening. *Finally,* he thought, exhaling. *It's gone.* The middle-aged man slowly loosened his grip on his weapon, until-

"I'm going on a hunting trip." Jonathan broke the silence at the dinner table, utensils softly clanking against his almost empty plate. "Like *Supernatural*?" Tessa asked curiously, looking to her father. He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "No, not like *Supernatural*." Rose spoke up. "Well, how long will you be gone?" The brunette asked, her gaze lifting from her plate worriedly. "Eh, no longer than a few days." He shrugged, finishing his food. "Does that mean we won't have a movie night this weekend?" Tessa looked at him with a small frown. "I'll try to be back before that." Jonathan reassured her, getting up from his seat, going over to pick the young girl up. "Let's get you to bed now, hm?" He smiled at her, kissing her forehead. Tessa giggled. "But I'm not sleepy!" She protested. Despite it, he took her upstairs to her room, tucking her in.

"When I come back, I'm taking you bowling. How's that?" Jonathan asked, sitting on the edge of her bed, holding her hand. Tessa nodded. "Good." He said, kissing her forehead once again. "Listen to your mom while I'm gone, alright?" Jonathan spoke softly. "Alright. I love you, daddy." She nodded again. "I love you too, sweetheart." He responded, gently squeezing her hand before getting up and leaving her room. Rose was standing in the doorway, leaning against it. "Do you really have to go?" She asked. "It's just a few days, Rose. Don't be so dramatic about it." He said in a hushed voice, rolling his eyes briefly before looking back to her with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Relax, I'll be fine." The man retorted, seeing how Rose was looking at him, taking her by the shoulders, squeezing them gently in reassurance. "C'mon. Let's go to bed." He took her hand, leading her to their room.

A hungry, piercing bellow echoed through the forest. Jonathan shook his thoughts away, tensing up once again, pointing his rifle out the narrow deer blind, looking through the scope. The one thing that felt out of place was the tree that stood tall in front of the lodge, its slender branches winding up, like a cypress without its leaves, the trunk of the tree dark and wide. He took a deep breath, steadying his shaky hand, slowly looking around, scared of what he might see. When he was greeted with nothingness, it only made him more wary. He pulled his eye away from the vision for a moment, then looked back into it. Looking back at him was-

"Rose, I'm leaving!" Jonathan called out, putting on his boots, keeping balance with his hand against the wall while he did. Rose came up to him, sighing, worry in her eyes. "Are you sure? After what happened to- "She started, taking his hand. "*Steve* wasn't careful enough." Jonathan cut her off, snatching his hand away from her grip. "*Why* do you keep bringing him up? He had it coming, wandering outside so late in the forest! Are you trying to imply I'm not able to- "He continued in an annoyed tone, before he looked at her, expression softening. The tall man sighed heavily, taking both her hands in his. "Look, all I'm saying is, he was on meds, honey. We shouldn't be having this conversation." Jonathan calmed down. "I'll be fine, Rose. I promise." She rolled her eyes subtly, arms folded. "Be careful, Jonathan." He quickly kissed her forehead. "I will." With that, he left.

"Help!" A distorted voice called out. Jonathan froze in place, eyes widening. "Someone, please!" The voice pleaded. "No…" Jonathan mumbled, in shock. It was Steve, but he was… different. The tactical light only shed light on the upper part of his body. It was slimy, one of his green eyes popped out and hanging from the socket. His face was already so deteriorated, if it wasn't for the voice, Jonathan would've never recognized him. The rest of his torso wasn't any better, either. His body language was limp, as if a puppet. Jonathan aimed a little lower, and-

"Jonathan!"

Laughs echoed through the cold hunter's lodge as someone won their umpteenth game, Jonathan and his friends playing Belot at the long, dark wooden table. There was a few beer cans set on it, some of the men occasionally taking swigs as they played. "Aw, shucks, there goes my winnin' streak!" He chuckled, shaking his head. He offered a can to Steve, which he raised a hand in rejection for. "No thanks. I'm not a fan of alcohol." The blond shook his head with a grin, throwing his trump card swiftly on the ever-growing pile that was forming. "Oh, c'mon, Stevie!! You can't be the only one stone-cold sober right now! C'mon, live a little!" Jonathan, under the influence already, giggled and slinged an arm around Steve's shoulder, shaking

him gently, his free hand still holding the unopened can. "Jon, please. *Someone* must drive too, you know." Steve chuckled, looking over to his drunk friend as the winner of that round shuffled the cards with practiced ease. "That sure as hell wasn't what you were thinkin' 'bout when you drove Anne to her death!" Jon replied with a hearty laugh, throwing his head back, not realizing the way Steve's smile faded and how the whole room went still. After a few moments, he calmed down, exhaling, returning his attention to his peers that were staring at him palely, a big wide drunken grin on his lips.

"What?" he looked between them. "Did I lie?" Jon added, but as he finished his sentence, Steve squirmed out of his touch, brows furrowed in anger, a scowl on his face, getting up from his chair so aggressively that it fell over, starting to storm out of the hunting lodge. "Stevie, come back!" He got up quickly, rushing over to grab his wrist, stumbling due to intoxication. "Look, we're all a lil' bit drunk right now, and- "He started, but got interrupted. "Let go of me right now before I punch you, Jonathan." Steve harshly cut him off, tugging his wrist away, opening the door and slamming it as he left. Jonathan chased after him, flinging the door open, still clumsy on his feet, but-

Jon's sight was focused on the thing's lower half, showing a mass of tentacles, slicked with ichor and dirt. One thick tentacle stood upright, holding the fetid torso of his peer. Another uncanny imitation of Steve's voice. "It hurts…" He cried. Wherein the cylindrical tentacle was set thousands of tiny teeth, latching onto Steve's lower half, puppeteering him. "Jonathan…" The thing cried out even louder. He was cornered.

One shot rang out.

Then another.

And another.

The thing didn't even flinch.

Great.

What now?

Think, Jon, think.

He looked around him in panic to check what he has at his disposal. Just more rifle ammo, a half-empty bottle of what seemed like water, more things that are not of much use… *Wait.* Jonathan tapped around the numerous pockets of his vest frantically until he felt and took out a small flare gun. "Please be attracted to light…" He muttered to himself with a shuddering breath, turning to the blind's door, creaking it open carefully. With a shaky hand, he pulled the trigger, slamming the door shut, panting softly, sliding down with a quiet sob, gripping his hair tightly.

The growls and uncanny cries of the beast grew distant, leaving Jon alone with his thoughts. Once he had recollected himself, running a hand through his hair, he got up, warily getting out of the hunting blind, still gripping his rifle. *I swear, if that didn't do it either-* His train of thought was interrupted, a brow furrowed in confusion. *That tree couldn't have looked like that when I got here.* His gaze immediately went to the unusual tree, noting how its branches arched over the blind more than they did a few minutes ago. When he took a better look briefly, it-

"Jon, honey, come back to bed." Rose's voice echoed in his ears as he sat at the edge of their bed, head in his hands. She was running her hands over his shoulders lightly. "What's wrong?" She asked. Jon's shoulders subtly relaxed under her touch. "It's just… Steve." He admitted. Rose sighed, sitting up. "You know none of you were to blame. How could you have known he'd- "She started in a calming voice. "I watched him *die*, Rose." His voice cut her off harshly. "You found the body, Jon." Rose argued, correcting him, pulling away from the comforting hug she was giving him with an annoyed expression. "You can't keep acting like you could've saved him." He shook his head, standing up from the bed, starting to walk out. "Where are you going?" She asked in a frustrated tone. "To get some water!" He snapped, getting out.

As he walked through the hallway, he felt a familiar tightness in his chest that has been gnawing at him for weeks. Keeping it from his own wife was terrible, but he considered it best for all three of them. He couldn't stop replaying it in his head, the-

"Why would you do this to me?" Steve's voice cried out in a stinging tone, just like all those months ago. "I thought we were friends, Jonathan!" The branches that resembled Steve's face expanded rapidly, starting to envelop Jonathan's surrounding area, the ground shaking as they did. "No, Steve, I- "Jon started, shaking his head. "NO! YOUR FAULT! IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT!" Steve's voice cut through anything he had to say for himself. He took a few steps back, something softly crushing underneath his foot, causing him to fall over. A glass bottle. "What the- "Jon looked down, furrowed his brow, lifted his foot and-

"Steve?" He called out in the dark with a slight slur in his voice, panting from exertion. "Stevie, pleeeease! It's dangerous this late!" Jon called out louder, walking with a sway, looking for Steve in the outskirts of the forest, a few lights approaching from the now distant lodge, calling out for both. "I'm sorry for insultin' your wife! And her death! Just please come back!" He kept on pleading, unknowingly going further into the forest in his inebriated state. "Stevieeeee!!"

After calling out Steve's name for what felt like the millionth time, he heard a shuffling in the nearby bushes. "Steve?" He softly repeated, unmoving. Something charged at him, or at least he thought so. With a small gasp, Jon took off running as fast and as straight as he could in a random direction, further getting lost. In the middle of his run, he bumped into something, falling over backwards and tripping up whatever was in front of him. "Yowch, watch where you're goin'- "He rubbed his head before he realized what had happened. It was-

"Steve!" Jon's voice was laced with fear, trying to crawl backwards from the approaching branches. "I'm sorry!" He cried out. "That won't bring me back, now will it, Jonathan?" Steve said in disdain, branches reaching behind Jon now, almost completely encapsulating him. "What's even worse, you've lied to the cops, haven't you? Heh, and they *really* bought that you found me dead and not- "

Jon stared at the body in front of him in shock, shaking hands hovering near it. Steve was impaled right through the stomach by a thick and sharp tree branch, his own hands hovering around it, eyes widened, gurgling out blood from his mouth. "J-Jon…"

Jonathan just… stared at him for a few moments. There were lights approaching. "Jon? Steve?" One of their friends called out. before he pushed Steve further back onto the branch. "I ain't lettin' you even have a chance to tell anyone about this, Stevie. I have a wife and a kid waitin' for me at home." He said to him, pushing him further back on the branch, Steve gurgling even more. "You drunk piece of- "Steve winced. "Why… would you do this to me?" He went on, but no answer. Jon watched him choke on his own blood, watched the light disappear from his eyes while his whole body went limp, looking at him with a betrayed expression.

When Jon was sure Steve was dead, he moved towards the voices of his friends. "Stevie… Stevie killed himself. He… he told me that's why he decided to come to our game tonight. That he'd be joinin' Anne. That he deserved a painful death so- oh God." He lied without blinking twice, acting shaken, leading them over to the body. Steve was dead and-

"-you think you're safe?" He laughed ominously. "My blood will always be on your hands, Jonathan… no matter how many times you wash them, how much you try to convince yourself that it was just a tragedy… it will always be there. And it will keep haunting you." The branches started getting through Jon's back, and he screamed in agony, aimlessly firing a few shots at the tree, but to no avail. He could hear the beast being back again, leaving him surrounded. "Nowhere to run now. Suffer, like I did."

"A man who has been reported missing three days ago has been found dead in the local forest, having committed suicide. A few of the locals living nearby have reported hearing strange noises as well as some concerning monologue of the man in question, including admitting to a murder. The reports of his behaviour indicate he was experiencing psychosis the day he took his own li-" Rose turned off the TV suddenly, sitting down on the couch in shock, staring at the blank screen, Tessa next to her, blissfully unaware.

e).

šifra: WitherRose2412
mentor: Mirta Kos Kolobarić
institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola, Slavonski Brod
autor: Lorena Conjar

A HEARTBREAKING BETRAYAL

Philip Blue, a 34-year-old director of a finance company, whom I have been married to for 9 years, brought another woman to our 10th wedding anniversary celebration. And, when I saw who it was, I wanted to vanish! I felt so much heartbreak and betrayal.

Let's start at the beginning of all this mess. My name is Marhia Howard, and I am the illegitimate daughter of Howard family. My father, the chairman of a large company, who had an affair with my mother on one of his business trips, refused to acknowledge me as his child for the first 10 years of my life. When I was 10 years old, my mother died, she had no family other than me, and social workers through DNA found my father and contacted him. I remember the day that I first saw him, he showed up at the social service center in an Armani suit, his face was hard as a rock, but when he looked at me, his eyes were full of disgust. After a few hours of paperwork and another DNA testing, he took me to his home. I vividly remember the looks of distain in the eyes of his wife and children. It was obvious that they did not accept me. How could they, I am just a random 10-year-old that randomly showed up at their home and was introduced as their sibling.

Besides me, Mr. Howard had three other legitimate children, Luke, and Josh, which are my 5 years older twin brothers, and Maya 3 years younger sister. Luke, Josh, and their mother Mrs. Howard knew from the start that I was a product of an affair. From that day onward, I knew not do address anyone there as family, mother, father, brother or sister but as Mrs. Howard, Mr. Howard, Josh, Luke, and Maya. I never complained about it, I understood that I was a mistake, and they were forced to care for me next eight years. I was thankful to them because they hadn't thrown me to streets and allowed me to go to school, so I never made trouble for them and stayed quiet.

My birthdays were never celebrated, I would buy a muffin and one candle for myself at the local convenience store, go to my room and I would make one wish every year, to leave and give everything back to Howard family. I was grateful and swore to

do whatever they asked me to do. That is how I had lived for eight years but on the day of my 18th birthday, everything changed. When I woke up there was a rush in the kitchen, and I spotted Mrs. Howard, we did not interact more than occasional "good day." or "good evening." But, I was curious and decided to ask what is happening "Good Day Mrs. Howard." I said politely "Oh… Hello you." You, that is how she called me, never by name or any other synonyms but You or if she was talking about me, I was referred to as It, like I wasn't a human being but rather a thing that will soon be gone. And today is that day, my 18th birthday; when the clock strikes midnight, I will leave this house, the only home I have known for the last eight years of my life. A sudden knock on my bedroom shook me.

"Marhia, are you there?" it was the voice of Mrs. Howard.

"Yes, Mrs. Howard I am inside!" I answer while opening the door to my room.

Even though we live in a massive villa in Beverly Hills whit 10 bedrooms, 12 toilets, indoor and outdoor pool, my room was the furthest and the smallest one of them all. Not even the maids visited this part of the villa, so it was unusual to see the mistress of the house with full army of people behind her at my bedroom door.

"How can I help you Mrs. Howard?" I asked politely.

"Oh, you sweet child. It's your birthday today, you never made any trouble for us, you were never involved in any scandals and your academic reports are remarkable. So, I wanted to do something for you."

Her tone was normal but when she mentioned surprise it seemed a bit mischievous, I ignored it.

"What is the surprise, may I ask?"

She tilted her head and looked at me. "Child you do not need to ask! Today you are getting engaged to Philip Blue, you may know him, he wanted to marry the daughter of Howard family but since Maya is only 15 years old you are the only one suitable and since today is your birthday, I figured it would be a beautiful one and only gift you will ever get from this family."

She noticed a confusing look on my face, and it seemed that she didn't like it.

"Is there something wrong Marhia?"

I could hear arrogance in her voice. I was about to ask more questions, but I remembered "do whatever they asked me to do" that thought came back to me and decided to keep my mouth shut and just do it. "There is nothing wrong Mrs. Howard I am really grateful for everything you do for me, when am I going to meet this gentleman?"

"Tonight. Now we need to make you presentable, Even thou you are not my child you look a lot like a member of Howard family whit that long raven hair and icy blue eyes. Ladies get to work I want her to look as elegant as she could be."

She clapped her hands as she instructed the maids and beauticians what to do. This "makeover" lasted one hour but it felt like a lifetime, in the end I could not recognise myself in the mirror, aside from makeup Mrs. Howard gave me a beautiful, long, navy-blue gown, which enhanced my figure and complimented my height. I was beautiful but I didn't feel like it was me in the mirror but a scape goat for my younger sister. Now is too late to take back my words I have to do this. We were on our way to the big dining hall when Mrs. Howard suddenly stopped.

"Thank you for being a good child, but do not think that I am doing this for you. I am doing this to protect Maya."

She did not even look at me while she was piercing my heart. In some way I understood her, I am a hundred percent sure that my mother would do the same.

"I understand Mrs. Howard, I am really grateful for everything you and your family have done for me."

As our conversation was reaching the end, we were at the entrance of the dining hall, it was beautiful decorated just like from those elegant wedding halls on the TV shows. In the middle of the room, a tall man with mesmerizing green eyes was looking at me. He was in an elegant all black suit and button up, all that just like from a fairy tale, but the thing I could only look at were his eyes. My father Mr. Howard joined me and took me by the arm just like at the weddings when father gives away his daughter at the altar, before we started walking towards this man my father whispered to me:

"Don't think anything of this I am doing this to protect Maya."

His voice was the same as Mrs. Howards "Mr. Howard, I already know."

These were the only words I said to him that night. After our small talk we started walking towards the man, when we reached him, my father introduced me.

"Hello Mr. Blue, this is my older daughter, Marhia. She is the one who will be your fiancée."

I could hear the make-up kindness in my father's voice… it stung but I played along.

"Good evening, Mr. Blue it is nice to finally meet you."

The way he looked at me was neutral after a few moments he spoke "Good evening, Mr. Howard." He tilted his head as he greeted my father. "Pleasure to meet you Marhia, I am Philip." He kissed my hand as he was greeting me. I felt something in

my stomach, something unexplainable for me. Our engagement was announced a few short moments later, that night was magical, at some point Philip, and I ended up alone on the grand balcony.

"Why are you here all by yourself?" Philip asked me.

"Just enjoying the starry sky. Why are you here, and not in there enjoying all the attention?"

"I want to get to know my future wife." He answered whit a grin on his face.

"Oh… well, nobody here ever bothered to know me."

"How so? You look like a really interesting person."

"I'm not that interesting as I seem, believe me." I gave a slight chuckle.

"Why so?"

"You will know soon enough." As I said that, I heard Mrs. Howard was calling me. "I have to go mot…" I almost said mother, how stupid of me! "Mrs. Howard is calling for me."

After that, I left the balcony. I had not seen Philip since that day. Our wedding day was set to be in one month after the engagement. Only positive thing about arranged marriages is that they happen in a short period of time. You would think that at least I would be able to plan my wedding, you are wrong, I wasn't even able to choose a wedding dress. Mrs. Howard was in charge of all of it. After long and exhausting preparations, the wedding day came. The only thrill I felt that day was when I said yes at the altar, even thou I didn't know Philip for a long time I knew that he was the one for me, or so I thought. The reception, went smoothly, our wedding night wasn't anything special.

Philip and I arrived at the mansion in Bel-Air, which his grandfather gifted him, and as soon as we entered a group of aids took me to a room and helped me take my dress off. I was happy, Philip was good to me, he saw me as his equal and not as an object. For eight years it was like that, but one day he started changing, he became more distant, I thought it was because I couldn't conceive a child. We had found out about it a year before, after many unsuccessful IVFs. I noticed that he was more on his phone, he started getting home later than usual. But he still gave me the attention, so I never speculated that he was cheating on me. For our 9th wedding anniversary, we were at Egypt for two weeks I remember us having a great time and even disusing adoption since I can't have a child of my own. It was discussed only then and never after. One day he seemed a bit distressed, so I asked him what is wrong.

"Hey honey, is there something bothering you?" I asked while giving him a slight hug, which made him flinch a little bit, but I disregarded it.

"There is nothing wrong." He answered and suddenly broke the hug.

I was a bit surprised. He rushed to his study and stayed there all night, which was unusual for him. His hours at the office became longer, he would go to work while I was still sleeping and come back when I have already fallen asleep. I started to speculate things, but my world shattered a week before our wedding anniversary. I borrowed his iPad to answer some e-mails, and a message popped up "Are you up for tonight" number ID wasn't visible, so I ended up opening message app. The number ID was saved as flower. I never went through his things but now I wanted to know who this person is, I wish I never looked I found out he was cheating on me. But I didn't know with whom. Her name was never mentioned. Now I understood all the distance he had been making between us. I didn't tell anyone I hoped it wasn't anything serious and that he will stop. A few days later, 4 days before our anniversary he was giving me attention and apologised for not spending more time with me, so I thought that he had left this lover. Oh, God, how I wish it had been true!

Then the day of our anniversary came. Everything went as I had planned it, lunch with all of our family members and close friends. Since I got married my relationship whit Luke and Josh improved, they apologised for ignoring me when I first came to their home and now they know it is not my fault. Philip and I danced the same dance we danced at our wedding it was fun, and I enjoyed the whole day even thou I noticed that Philip was here whit his body but him mind was absent. After the dance, he decided to give a speech, with me standing right next to him.

"Hello to everyone here today! I would like to make an announcement. As you know, for the past 10 years I have been married to young lady Howard."

I was a bit shocked to hear this sentence, as he had never addressed me as lady Howard, except on a day that we met. He continued whit his speech.

"Thanks to her I was able to get my grandfather's inheritance. You all may be confused so let me explain. My grandfather left me most of his assets but only condition to be able to access them was to get married to Howard daughter and to be with her for at least 5 years. When the 5 years passed, I wanted to try and truly love Marhia, but I could not. I considered divorce many times."

I couldn't' believe what my ears were hearing, but I continued to listen to his speech suppressing tears.

"As time passed, I started to fall for someone, and that person is present here today."

When he said that my world crumbled beneath my legs, you could read the shock on the faces of his family, Josh and Luke, Mr. Howards. On the faces of others, you could see a flinch of guilt, as if they had known all along. And, they did know. At that moment, Philip announced:

"Maya, she is the one who made this past year happier for me and I would like to be with her for the rest of my life." Then he turned to me and asked. "Marhia, let's get a divorce, you can't have children, but Maya is already pregnant."

At that moment, my heart broke like a million glass shards, and I fainted and the only thing I remember before waking up in the hospital was the worried faces of Luke and Josh. When I woke up at the hospital, the twins were the only ones there.

"How are you feeling, Marhia?" asked Luke, but I couldn't speak there were just tears running down my face. I was in hospital for 3 days. When I came out, I sent Philip a message to meet up. He came right away.

"Why did you want to meet?" he asked his tone indifferent.

"How far along is she?" I asked him.

"If you are going to threaten her or me with the baby just for me not to divorce you than back off!"

When he said those words, I couldn't recognise him, that wasn't a man I married 10 years ago.

"Do you really think I would ruin a life of a child that didn't deserve it after how I lived my childhood? For 10 years of pretending to love me you could have at least get to know me."

I saw a look of shame on his face, but it disappeared quickly.

"Why did you even want to meet up?"

"First you answer how along is she."

"3 months."

"I agree to a divorce. I won't ask for anything and I will disappear from your lives, but you promise me that you will never hurt that child the way that I was hurt."

I could see that he was shocked by my response.

"Do you really mean it Marhia?"

"Yes, I do."

3 weeks later, our divorce was finalized. "Be happy, I hope you won't regret this." These were the last words I told him.

That day I left not looking back, something I should have done 10 years ago. Since I had some money that I was given after the divorce, I decided to open a small coffee shop at the east coast of California, Salt Lake City.

A few years went by. I kept in contact with twins, and they told me everything that was happening since I left. Philip and Maya got married right after we divorced, she gave birth to a girl. When the child was 3 years old, she needed a bone marrow transplant, and they found out Philip was not her biological father. They say that after that, Philip was in depression and tried to reach me, but my brothers wouldn't give him my contact info. I don't need him now and ever will. My coffee shop is quite successful, and I am doing well on my own. Sometimes I daydream how could have things ended if mom never died.

Well, I guess we will never know.

šifra: Blonde781
mentor: Mirta Kos Kolobarić
institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola, Slavonski Brod
autor: Doris Vojnović

AT THE BEGINNING

Henry had been driving for hours, not because he was lost; he knew exactly where he was headed. Sabrina, who is Henry's younger sister, invited him to visit her for a couple of weeks. So, now he was driving to London. They had not seen each other for some years. Henry could remember seeing her at a Christmas dinner when the family was still celebrating together. Henry moved out of their parents' house after Sabrina left. Now he lived in a small town in England, while his sister hac made enough money to move to London. He had never achieved anything that Sabrina had, but that never mattered to him that much. He was always going to be happy for his sister. Right now, he was more that excited to see her.

This was the time when Henry usually drank his morning coffee and, since he had been driving for a while, he decided to stop at a small coffee shop in a village that he was passing through. When he walked in, he noticed that there were only three tables and none of them were empty.

"Sorry, could we share a table? There are no seats left."

The man who was sitting at the table looked at him for half a second; it was enough for him to decide whether he wanted Henry to sit with him. The man nodded and that was Henry's sign to sit. After fifteen minutes of Henry reading the news on his phone and the man doing the same but using newspaper, the man looked at him again. This time it was more than half a second. He was not taking his eyes off him. Henry felt his gaze and decided to look at the man. As soon as Henry looked at him the man asked:

"You're not from here, are you?"

Henry felt a little uncomfortable, but he answered: "No I am just passing by."

They both continued reading the news until Henry had to go. Shortly after, the man also left. Henry did not know that the man was also headed to London. The city was filled with people, but that was not a problem for Henry because he already knew his way around. He knew exactly how to get to his sister. The first year when she moved, he was visiting her at least once every month, but all of that changed

when she quit calling him. Henry did not know why she had suddenly called him; he was quite surprised but he did not want to think much of it because he was happy to finally see her. He found a parking spot close to the building and started walking to the door. When he got to the front door, a kind lady helped him get in by opening the door for him. Henry thanked her, explaining he did not have a key. After walking up the stairs, too many stairs for Henry's age, he rang the bell. Some minutes have passed and Henry was still waiting by the door. He tried calling Sabrina on her phone, but the person on the other end told him that he should try calling her later. After one more hour of trying to get a hold of his sister, Henry gave up. Too scared to leave London without knowing why she was not answering him, he started looking for a place to stay. On the Internet he found a cheap hotel only a few kilometers away. When he entered the hotel, the atmosphere was weird. He almost turned around and left to find another hotel, but he did not want to waste a lot of money and it was close to Sabrina's apartment. Even though he was questioning his decision, he decided to stay for one night until he figured out where Sabrina was. Quickly, it was morning and Henry was heading down to get breakfast at the hotel. Last night he could not help but think of Sabrina and how he could find her. Of course, he had tried calling her again, but he got no reply from her. He remembered that the last time he was here they visited Sabrina's close friend. Maybe she would know where Sabrina could be.

At breakfast, while thinking about visiting Sabrina's friend hoping she would help him, he saw the man from the village. It turned out they were staying at the same hotel. The man looked at him for a moment and Henry decided it was a clever idea to wave at the man. The man recognized him right away and gave him a slight smile. Henry smiled back and hurried off to find Sabrina's friend. He walked for some time until he finally reached his destination. He knew that he was at the right place. The building looked the same as the last time he was there. It was a small grey building with a lot of graffiti and balconies filled with colorful flowers. Walking into the building had only made him more scared. His head was full of negative thoughts. He kept thinking about what if she could not help him? What if his sister had been missing for a longer time than he thought? What if she was already gone?

He gathered enough courage to knock on the door and after a few seconds, a quite tall man was standing in front of him.

"Hello. I am looking for Chloe. Does she still live here?" Henry asked, confused about seeing the man instead of Chloe.

"Yes, she does. I am her husband, Matthew. We've never met before, I think. Why do you need her?"

Henry felt so ashamed. The last time he was here Chloe mentioned that she had been engaged. He must have forgotten.

"I have a few questions about my sister Sabrina. It is a little urgent. Is she here?"

He did not care that he sounded desperate, he actually was.

"She is inside. Follow me. I hope nothing bad had happened."

Henry followed him into a huge living room where Chloe was drinking her morning tea. Matthew left them alone; either he had something important to do or he really did not care about Henry's little situation.

"Henry, I have not seen you in ages! Thank you for stopping by!"

Henry could not remember the last time somebody was so happy to see him.

"It is very nice to see you again, but I actually came because I need your help." She looked very confused. "I came to visit Sabrina, but she was not at home and I could not reach her on her phone. I was thinking that maybe you might know where she could be."

After hearing the question, her face looked relaxed. "She must be at work right now. I can give you the address."

After leaving the taxi, Henry walked into the building that looked elegant and professional. The building was covered with huge glass walls and had a big entrance to which led the plain white stairs. He saw the front desk and asked the lady working there where he could find the attorney, Sabrina. The lady informed him that she had been absent from work for the past couple of days.

Feeling hopeless, Henry decided to pay a visit to the police station. It was not usual for Sabrina to be absent from work since she was an attorney who had to deal with a lot of clients. It was also unusual for her not to answer Henry's calls. Even though had they lost contact for a while when he called her, she would always answer straight away. After Henry's talk with the police, Sabrina was officially declared a missing person.

Now, he was at the hotel getting ready to go pick up his luggage from his room. The police told him that if they found out anything, they would give him a call immediately. So, he did not have any reason to stay in London if he could not be of any help to them. As he was about to leave, a key suddenly slid under his door. At first, he thought that somebody must have dropped it by mistake, so he went to check if anybody was in front of the door. But, to his surprise nobody was there. He soon realized that the key came with a note attached to it. On the note was an address which was unknown to him.

He entered the address into the GPS and followed the directions to an abandoned house in the suburbs of London. When he parked the car, he was too scared to leave it and enter the house. The house looked very old and ruined. It was unpleasant to look at. He kept getting scary thoughts again. How could he not? Maybe somebody was waiting for him inside, ready to attack him. He did not have any weapons to defend himself. He looked at the house again and saw that one room had light in it. It was weird to him, because the house looked like it did not have any electricity installed. He took out his phone and turned on the flashlight so he could find his way around to the room. After walking up some wooden stairs, he spotted the room that he was looking for. When he stepped into the room, he realized that it was covered in candles. There were enough candles lit for him to see three pictures that were hanging on the wall. The first picture showed his car parked at a familiar parking spot, while in the other two was an empty cup of coffee and a big tree with some houses in the background. Quickly, he took a photo of the room and another one of the pictures. Even quicker, he started running to his car. He made sure to take a longer route so nobody would follow him back to the hotel. Spending another night at the hotel was his only option since he had to figure out what the pictures meant.

This night he could not sleep at all. Not only that his sister was in danger but also somebody was following him, too. Henry was the first person at breakfast, but soon after he sat down, a man approached him with two cups of coffee in his hands. The man sat in front of Henry without asking. Henry looked at him and realized it was the man from the village. The man handed him the cup of coffee that he was holding in his right hand. "You look a little tired, I thought that I could get you some coffee." Henry smiled a bit. "Thank you, I am a little tired. I am Henry." The man pulled out his newspaper. "Charlie." They continued sitting in silence. Henry decided to visit the police station again thinking that the key he received could provide them with some evidence, but while driving to the police station he started to understand the meaning of the pictures.

The first picture was taken in front of a coffee shop in the village! He finally recognized the parking lot. Also, in front of the coffee shop there was a big tree to which Henry did not pay much attention to. The last picture showed the empty cup of coffee that Henry was drinking out of when he was sitting with the man he now knew was Charlie. He instantly turned his car around and started driving to the village. He ran into the coffee shop and he found his sister sitting at the same table that he had been sitting at with Charlie.

He sat down with her and she started explaining everything. One of her clients that she could not defend in court had recently been let out of jail and since then he had been following her, trying to get revenge. In the meantime, she had to hide. She could not tell her brother about her location because she did not want to put him in danger. Even though she knew that Henry would be worried, she did not want him to be involved. She felt very bad about hiding from him and disappearing, but all she wanted was for him to be safe.

As Charlie was also one of her clients, and as they kept in touch, he offered her to stay in his house in the village so she would be safe. Nobody would look for her there. After meeting Henry in the coffee shop, he realized that he needed to tell him where his sister was, but he had to make sure nobody was following him.

šifra: Makarov12
mentor: Petra Blajić
institution: SŠ Krapina
autor: Morana Orešić

LETTERS FROM THE ASHES

It was the year 1943, and Valmont, a quiet French village had become a shadow of its former self under the German occupation. The cobblestone streets, once alive, bustling with laughter of children, now lay silent, broken only by the commands of soldiers and the whispers of resistance fighters. Emilie Laurent, a 27 year-old nurse, had lived through three years of war in her clinic and the memories she holds onto.

Her small stone cottage is a safe space for the sick and wounded. It was here that Emilie used her energy, patching up villagers and, sometimes, resistance fighters who arrived undercover. War had taken so much from her: her brother Pierre, who died in battle, her fiancé Marc, killed because he was a resistance fighter; and the carefree life that had once filled her world. But Emilie continued on, her strength and hope held her together.

One afternoon, Emilie stood outside her clinic, enjoying a rare moment of peace. The sky above was dark and gloomy. Suddenly, a distant hum of an airplane broke the quiet moment. She looked up to see an Allied bomber struggling in the sky, black smoke trailing from its tail. Her breath caught as the plane became smaller, going lower and lower until it disappeared behind the hills. Then, a quiet sound of explosion was heard.

The villagers, already used to such sounds, exchanged wary glances but said nothing. Emilie, however, couldn't shake the feeling that this crash would change something.

That evening, just as Emilie was preparing to close the clinic, she heard a knock at her door. Two men stood in the doorway, wearing heavy coats of the resistance. Between them was an unconscious man, his face bloodied and pale.

"Emilie," one of the resistance fighters whispered, "we need your help. He's an Allied pilot. His plane went down near the river."

Without hesitation, Emilie gestured for them to bring him inside. They laid the man onto a bed. His blond hair was dirty with blood, his uniform torn, and his breathing shallow. He looked no more than 30 years old.

"What is his name?" she asked as she worked quickly to assess his injuries.

"Liam Carter," one of the men replied. "A British flight Lieutenant."

Liam had a deep gash on his arm, fractured ribs, and a leg full of bruises. As Emilie cleaned and stitched his wounds, she felt scared. Having an Allied pilot in her clinic was an act of treason that would be punished by death. If the Germans discovered him here, both her life and Liam's would be in danger.

"Thank you Emilie." one of the men said when Emilie finished tending to Liam's wounds. "We will come back tomorrow."

That night, Emilie stayed close to Liam, listening to his shallow breathing. As the hours went by, memories of her fiancé, Marc, came into her mind. It had been three years since he was killed, leaving only a poorly written letter behind.

I have to fight, Emilie, France needs people willing to stand up against the Nazis. Just know that I love you.

Marc's absence left a hole in Emilie's heart, and pain she buried below her work. But now, watching another man fight for his life, that pain came back.

The next morning, Liam woke up, his eyelids fluttering open to reveal blue eyes full of confusion.

"Where…" he started, his voice barely audible. "Where am I?"

"You're safe," Emilie said to him softly. "You're in Valmont. The resistance brought you here after your plane crashed."

Liam looked all around the room before settling on Emilie. "Thank you," he murmured.

"Don't thank me yet," Emilie said to him, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You're not out of the woods yet. You need rest. We'll talk later, okay?"

Over the next few days, Emilie cared for Liam as he slowly regained his strength. She found out that he is a part of a bombing team targeting German supply and storage. His plane had been hit by the Nazis, which is how he crashed here.

As Liam slowly healed, he and Emilie started talking. Their conversations were a bit difficult, because of broken English and French, but they quickly adapted to it. Liam talked about his home in Yorkshire, he talked about the cottages, and the pub where his family and friends gathered from time to time. Meanwhile, Emilie told him about Valmont before the war, the festivals in the town centre, her afternoons spent painting by the river, and her lost brother and husband.

As Emilie cared for Liam, her clinic felt warm again despite the raging war outside. She worked constantly, making sure that his wounds healed without infection, all while watching out for the distant sound of boots on cobblestones that might be a German patrol. The danger was always here, but Emilie learned to live with it.

One late evening, as the moonlight lit up the streets outside, Emilie sat by Liam's bed, while stitching up a tear in his uniform. Liam's voice, weak but determined, broke the silence.

"You know... you could be arrested for this," he said. "For helping me, I mean."

"I know," Emilie replied, not looking up. "But I've made up my mind and accepted the risks."

"Why?" Liam asked, his blue eyes full of confusion. "Why would you risk your life for someone you don't even really know?"

She stopped, setting down the needle and thread. For a moment, she just looked down at her hands, rough from years of work. "Because it is the right thing to do," she finally answered. "Because if I don't help you, who will? This war has taken so much from me already. If I can save one life, then maybe… maybe it will feel like I won, or made a difference."

Liam watched her, a mix of admiration and sadness in his gaze. "The world doesn't deserve people like you, Emilie." he whispered.

Emilie laughed softly, but there was no humour in her laugh. "You're just saying that to make me feel good."

The days turned into weeks, and as Liam's strength slowly returned, and so did his spirit. Despite the situation they were in, he managed to make Emilie laugh—a sound that surprised both of them. He had a way of seeing the good in things, of finding hope and humour where there seemed to be none of it.

One night, when Emilie prepared a simple meal of plain bread and chicken soup, Liam sat at the kitchen table, looking at the patterns on the wood. "Tell me something about you." he said to her suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Well, what do you want to know?" Emilie asked, setting two bowls of soup down.

"Anything... Everything. Doesn't matter. Maybe... what did you dream of before the war?"

She hesitated for a second, the question caught her off guard. It had been so long since she'd thought about it... "I wanted to be a painter, actually." she admitted after a moment. "Not just as my hobby, but as my job, my life's work. I wanted to paint and capture the beauty of the world, the things that make life worth it."

Liam smiled, seemingly liking the answer. "So why don't you?"

Emilie gestured around the room they were in, and to the war consumed every part of their lives. "Because there simply is no time. There is... no place for dreams in a world like this."

"See, that's where you're wrong." Liam started, his voice firm. "Dreams are exactly what we need in a time like this. Without them, what exactly are we fighting for?"

His words stayed in Emilie's mind long after that conversation. That night, as the moonlight came through her bedroom window, she started sketching for the first time in years. Using a torn piece of paper and a chunk of charcoal. Once he began to draw, Liam's face appeared on the paper, his eyes filled with determination.

The next morning, she found the drawing sitting on her bedside table. She put it away in a drawer, embarrassed by her own actions. But the art of creating, as small as it was still left her feeling fulfilled.

As Liam grew even stronger, Emilie knew his time with her was coming to an end. Yet, a part of her hoped for the day he would leave. The connection they had made felt fragile, as it could be drowned by the currents of the war.

One evening, they both sat by the fireplace, the flames casting shadows on the walls. Emilie finally showed him the sketch she had drawn.

"This is really good." Liam said with genuine admiration in his voice. "You've captured me perfectly!"

"I've wanted to draw your strength," Emilie admitted.

Liam leaned back, a small smile appearing on his lips. "You should start painting again. When the war is over. Your talent shouldn't go to waste."

"And you?" Emilie suddenly asked. "What will you do when this is all finally over?"

Liam's expression turned thoughtfully. "I will probably go home. Back to Yorkshire. But… maybe I'll have a reason to stay in France..."

Their eyes met, unspoken words between them. Emilie's heart ached, knowing that the future wasn't certain. But at that moment, she allowed herself to hope.

Their bond grew becoming deeper with each day. Liam admired Emilie in silence, her determination to keep hope in the face of war. Emilie found herself drawn to Liam, his warmth and, of course, his humour and his optimistic self all fascinated her.

One night, as the sun dropped below the horizon. Liam turned to Emilie.

"When this is all over," he started, his voice was certain and determined. "I'll take you to Yorkshire. You would love it there. You'd feel free there, I'm certain of it."

Emilie smiled, but her heart ached at that thought. "And just what would I do in Yorkshire?"

"Anything you want." Liam replied quickly. "We'll build a life far away from all of this. A place where the war can't touch us. And you will paint as much as you like."

For a second, Emilie allowed herself to hope, dream, of such a future, but she knew how small it was.

The war had no patience for dreams or hopes. As Liam recovered, he became restless and eager to return to his team. His friends were still fighting, and he couldn't, wouldn't, allow himself to stay behind. Emilie understood him, but the thought of him leaving filled her with fear.

She looked at him, her eyes full of fear. "It's is dangerous, Liam."

"I know." Liam said. "But If I stay here I'm putting you at risk... That's why I need to leave as soon as I can. I don't want you to be in danger."

Emilie's heart ached at the thought of him leaving, but she nodded. "One more week... and then you can go."

Liam didn't argue with her. For the first time, Emilie admitted the truth—she didn't want him to go, both because of his safety and the connection they had.

On the morning of his departure, Liam gave Emilie a folded piece of paper.

"If anything happens to me, If you don't hear from me..." he started, his voice filled with pain, "...promise me you'll read this."

Emilie nodded, taking the paper. She watched as Liam disappeared into the outside world, her heart scared for him.

Weeks turned into months, and Emilie drowned herself in her work again, her thoughts wandering to Liam. Letters became their only way of communicating, the only way to keep their connection alive. In his letters, Liam spoke of love, of the future they will share.

But then... one day, the letters stopped.

Winter came upon Valmont, bringing the whispers of Allied victories and German retreats. But Emilie's heart remained sad.

It was a cold January morning and she took the newspaper. Emilie unfolded the paper with trembling hands.

Flight Lieutenant Liam Carter and his team, killed in action.

The words stung as tears filled her eyes. She closed herself in her room, clutching the unopened note that Liam had given her.

Finally, with trembling hands, she unfolded it.

My dear Emilie,

If you're reading this, it means I've joined the countless souls of my allies who fought for a better world. I want you to know that you have been my light in the darkest of times. You gave me hope when I had none. Promise me you'll live, Emilie. Promise me you'll keep painting and that you will find happiness, even if I'm not there with you.

Years had passed, and the world began to change for the better. Emilie kept her promise. She started painting again, pouring her grief and love into every stroke of her brush. Her paintings captured the scenes of life, loss, hope and love.

In 1951, Emilie stood in an art gallery, her work displayed on every wall. Visitors and guests moved from piece to piece, looking at the paintings in admiration. In one corner there was a small portrait of a man with kind blue eyes and a faint smile.

Even though Liam was gone, his memory lived on in Emilie's heart, in her art, and in the world he fought to protect and change.

The End

šifra: G2BSIN
mentor: Smiljana Mudri
institution: Druga gimnazija Varaždin
autor: Gabrijel Juričić

THE SINISTER OF THE WEST

Prologue: The Bite

Ivis Zoldyck, a 13-year-old boy visited the Serathian forest regularly, his youth shielding him from thoughts, worries, fears… Ivis was always very brave, smart, and calm in tense situations. But one day, that all changed. The forest seemed off, he wasn't sure why or how, but somehow it wasn't right. That's when he saw it, a shadow loomed behind him, faster than his eyes could track. „That…is…real?" Ivis murmured to himself. But wait, it stopped. It was looking Ivis dead in the eyes, that Sinister look, Ivis wasn't sure what it was, but one thing's for sure, it wasn't human. Before Ivis could react it bit him right in the neck. Ivis was falling apart, like his body just crumbled then and there. The Ghoul whispered: "Nighty night, little one".

Part 1: What have I become?!

For weeks, Ivis was getting ruptured from the inside. His fate was sealed. His mother Amayla watched in terror and grief that the once sweet little boy was slowly fading in her eyes. Little did she know that wasn't going to be her main worry. 8 weeks after he was bit, Ivis became angry at everything. He started destroying everything he saw in an act of rage, and kept yelling out loud: "Why me aaarggghhhhhh why meeee". In all that rage, he started noticing his difference, he was stronger than ever before. Everything he ever thought humane or normal, somehow doubled for him. He could lift cars, destroy walls with ease, run faster than a cheetah… At 16 he realized he became what he hated the most, he became a perfect copy of Ashura.

Part 2: They're all weird

Years later, Ivis healed himself piece by piece, but Ashura's aura kept torturing his mind. He understood he needed help, so at 23 years of age he joined a monk clan called "The Hellenials". Hellenials were all different, but no one quite like Ivis. The group consisted of 7 members: Nero, Trisha, Damian, Lucy, Gilgamesh, Satoru and Ivis. They were all special operators, designed to handle missions humans couldn't

even imagine. Ivis got along really well with all of them, but there was one particular member that he felt was kinda, off. Lucy. Ivis used Ashura's blight in order to create a perfect script of her thoughts, but the only thing he found in her head was: "Get out, now!" Ivis felt confused, as one of the 10 Hellenial blessings states that secrets are what destroy friendships. Nero told him to brush it off, as she was never really into the motto. Trisha rushed to tell the team they had been assigned to a mission.

Part 3: Mission

The mission was simple, find and exterminate the target. The team divided into 3 groups of 2, with Gilgamesh being on his own. Nero got paired with Trisha, Lucy with Damien and Ivis with Satoru. The mission took place in a mountain-like environment. The target was located somewhere in the forest about 900 meters over sea level. Nero and Trisha had to use flanks and corners, both using their deadeye to shoot down any foe intervening. Lucy and Damien slowly removed the animals into a magic cage Lucy created. Ivis and Satoru were the runners tasked with following the first in command. Gilgamesh was the ultimate weapon, actually nevermind, his ego was his ultimate weapon. Ivis and Satoru had to wait for Gilgamesh to finish his scouting mission, so Satoru broke the ice: "So, I see Lucy already pinned you down, ha?" Ivis replied: "She didn't pin me down, I just don't know what the hell she is." Satoru replied: "Nobody does, she is just weird, you'll get used to it." In the meantime Gilgamesh returned with the target. "You're getting slowly annoying Amesh, you know" said Nero. "What? You thought I would let a bunch of rats just steal this loot, not a chance". As mentioned, his ego was through the roof. "Guys, the target has increased by 1." said Trisha.

Part 4: So that's what you are?

"What are you talking about, I'm holding his corpse right now." said Gilgamesh. Nero suddenly went offline. The whole team gathered in the center discussing their next move, but Nero and Ivis were missing. "What the hell is up with Ivis, his eyes turned red and he ran into the darkness?" said Satoru. Trisha was right, something was happening. Ivis lunged down the waterfall and then he saw it, Ashura standing next to Nero's body. Ivis, filled with rage, rushed straight at him. But Ashura was calm, too calm. Ivis suddenly fell, his mind filled with pictures of Nero's hopeless body. Ashura told him: "Why bother, I made you into what you are right now, do you genuinely consider I would just let you use it freely? Like it or hate it, you are ME!" Ivis fainted, suddenly waking up in a dungeon.

Part 5: MY FAULT?!

Ivis slowly came to his senses, seeing Gilgamesh standing in front of him. "I never wanted you here, ever since the 1st day I knew you weren't all that, and now because of you my friends are dead". Ivis lifted his head, squinting as the golden figure of Gilgamesh came into view. His golden armor gleamed even in the dim light, pristine and unblemished despite the thick layer of grime that coated the dungeon. A massive sword rested against his shoulder, its blade as sharp as the twisted grin on his face. "Gilgamesh," Ivis growled, his voice low and filled with venom. "What's the matter? Afraid to face me without chains?" Gilgamesh chuckled, the sound echoing through the chamber. He stepped closer, the torchlight casting his shadow over Ivis. "Oh, Ivis," he said mockingly. "Why waste effort on a dog that's already been beaten? Besides, this is much more entertaining." Ivis tugged at the chains, his muscles straining against the iron. "If you've got something to say, say it. Otherwise, get out of my way." Gilgamesh's grin widened as he leaned in closer, his golden eyes gleaming. "Oh, but I do have something to say. A gift, actually. Straight from your old friend… Ashura." Ivis's jaw tightened, his anger bubbling beneath the surface. "Ashura is no friend of mine." "Isn't he, though?" Gilgamesh taunted, tapping the tip of his blade against the ground. "He's been watching you all this time, Zoldyck. Every step, every stumble, every pathetic attempt to run from what you are. And now, he's done waiting."

Part 6: Hunter

The sound of footsteps grew louder, and Ivis knew Gilgamesh was close. He could feel his presence, a maniacal energy swirling around him, confident, sure. Gilgamesh had always been like that, thinking he was untouchable. He would soon learn how wrong he was. Ivis stepped forward, his movements fluid, his power crackling in the air. The heavy dungeon door was just ahead, guarded by the curse of his past. With a roar, he slammed his fist into the stone, the walls cracking as if they were made of paper. The door splintered and fell apart in seconds. And there he was. Gilgamesh. Standing at the far end of the hall, looking at Ivis with a mixture of surprise and disdain."You," Gilgamesh sneered. "You think you can escape me? You think the power Ashura gave you can save you now?" Ivis smiled, dark and dangerous. "It's not Ashura's power anymore, Gilgamesh. It's mine." Without warning, he lunged forward, the magic coursing through him in a rush of fiery energy. Gilgamesh raised his hands, ready to fight, but Ivis was faster—stronger—his powers unleashed like a storm. This time, there would be no chains, no prison. This time, it was Gilgamesh who would fall. The battle between them began again, but this time, the scales had shifted. Ivis was no longer the prisoner. He was the hunter.

Part 7: You'll see

The battlefield was barren and cold, the air heavy with tension. Ivis stood with nothing but his bare hands, his body battered and worn from the dungeon. He had escaped, his mind and spirit ignited by the blessing of Ashura. Across from him stood Gilgamesh, his ancient foe, in golden armor. Gilgamesh smirked, arrogance dripping from every word. "Ivis, you're unarmed, broken, and yet you dare to stand against me? This will be quick." Ivis clenched his fists, and the power of Ashura surged through him, his veins glowing faintly with fiery energy. "You haven't faced the Ivis I've become, Gilgamesh. Not even your treasures can match this." With a roar, Gilgamesh summoned his famed Gate of Babylon, releasing a storm of legendary weapons. Ivis moved faster than he ever thought possible. The blessing of Ashura heightened his senses, his bare hands deflecting weapons with precision, breaking them apart with bursts of raw, divine energy. Gilgamesh charged, his golden sword in hand. Ivis caught the blade mid-swing, the sheer force of his grip shattering the legendary weapon. Shock flickered across Gilgamesh's face." Power doesn't come from treasures," Ivis growled, landing a devastating punch to Gilgamesh's chest. The impact sent the King of Heroes flying, his golden armor cracking as he hit the ground. Defeated, Gilgamesh gasped for air, staring at the unarmed warrior who had bested him. Ivis stood tall, his fists still glowing . "This is the strength of the free. Remember it." He turned and walked away, leaving Gilgamesh to ponder his defeat.

Part 8: So they're gone?

The small village was quiet, tucked away in the mountains under a sky of dim stars. Ivis walked cautiously through the narrow streets, his bare feet crunching on gravel. He had followed rumors to this place, whispers of someone who might know where Ashura — the source of his newfound power — was hiding. At the center of the village, under the glow of a flickering lantern, stood a man Ivis hadn't seen in years. Satoru. Satoru was seated on a weathered bench, his once-proud figure now subdued. He looked up as Ivis approached, his face betraying a mix of shock and quiet relief. "Ivis… it's really you." "I didn't think I'd ever see you again," Ivis said, his voice cautious. Satoru sighed, his eyes tired but sincere. "Life has a way of surprising us. I heard you escaped that dungeon." "I did. And I've been searching for Ashura ever since." Ivis stepped closer, his tone growing firm. "You know where Ashura is, don't you?" Satoru nodded slowly. "I do. But you won't like the answer." "Tell me." "Ashura evolved, Ivis" Satoru explained, his voice steady. "He's stronger, unlike anything you've ever seen. He's hiding in the Cinder Wastes, where the world burns

endlessly. No one goes there and lives." Ivis's fists tightened. "Then I'll go." "You've changed," Satoru said with a small smile. "The Ivis I knew was always strong, but now… you carry something more. Purpose." "And I'll see it through," Ivis replied. "Thank you, Satoru." The two stood in silence for a moment, the weight of the past fading as the path ahead grew clearer.

Part 9: It ends now

Deep in a dark cave under the Cinder Wastes, Ivis stood face-to-face with Ashura. The ghoul had changed, bigger and stronger than ever. His skin was tight over huge muscles, claws sharp and long, and his red eyes glowed like fire in the shadows. "You've come back, Ivis," Ashura growled, his deep voice echoing. "But you're no match for me now." Ivis clenched his fists. His body ached from the battles he'd fought to get here, but he wouldn't back down. "You're strong, Ashura. But I've fought too hard to stop now." Ashura moved fast, faster than Ivis expected. His claws slashed through the air, missing by inches as Ivis ducked. The force of the swipe cracked the ground. Ivis rolled to the side and countered, landing a punch to Ashura's chest. The ghoul roared, swinging his huge arm. Ivis dodged one swing, but the second hit him, throwing him against the wall. Pain shot through his body, but he pushed himself up, breathing hard. "That all you got?" Ivis taunted, wiping blood from his face. Ashura laughed, a deep, chilling sound. "You can't stop me, Ivis. I'll rule everything!" Ivis didn't waste time. He charged again, dodging Ashura's claws and jumping onto his arm. Using all his strength, he delivered a punch to Ashura's head, stunning him. Ashura stumbled, and Ivis seized the chance. He climbed onto the ghoul's back, wrapping his arms around Ashura's thick neck. Ashura thrashed, smashing into the walls, trying to shake him off. But Ivis held on tight. "This ends now!" he shouted, using every bit of strength he had. Ashura let out a terrible scream, stumbling before falling to the ground with a heavy crash. His body went still. Ivis rolled off, gasping for air, his body aching but alive. He had won.

Part 10: Epilogue

The sun was rising over the Cinder Wastes, its golden light spreading across the charred land. Ivis sat on a jagged rock near the edge of the battlefield, his breathing shallow and uneven. The fight with Ashura had taken everything from him—his strength, his energy, and now, his life. Blood seeped from deep wounds across his body, staining the ground beneath him. Every movement sent waves of pain through him, but he didn't flinch. He looked out at the horizon, watching the first hints of life

return to the scorched earth. “It’s over,” he whispered to himself, his voice weak but steady. “Ashura is gone. The world is safe.” He leaned back, his head resting against the rough surface of the rock. His vision blurred as his body grew colder. Memories flashed before his eyes — his battles, his struggles, the friends he had lost and the ones he had fought to protect. Footsteps approached, soft against the cracked ground. Satoru appeared, his face etched with sorrow as he knelt beside Ivis. “Ivis… you did it. You stopped him.” Ivis gave a faint smile, his lips trembling. “I told you… I’d see it through.” Satoru tried to press his hands against one of Ivis’s wounds, but Ivis weakly pushed him away. “Don’t… it’s too late for me.” Tears welled in Satoru’s eyes, but he nodded, respecting his friend’s wishes. “You were always the strongest of us. Stronger than anyone.” Ivis chuckled softly, though it hurt. “Not just strength. Purpose. That’s what mattered.” The sun rose higher, its warmth touching Ivis’s face. He closed his eyes, a peaceful expression settling over him. “Take care of them, Satoru. Make sure they remember why we fought.” And with those final words, Ivis’s breathing slowed, and his body went still. Satoru sat in silence for a long time, the wind carrying ash and dust across the wasteland. Though his heart ached with loss, he knew Ivis had found peace. The battle was over, and the world would remember the warrior who gave everything to save it. Above the barren land, the sun continued to rise, casting light on a new day.

šifra: dA531Ad
mentor: Antonia Varat
institution: Gimnazija Daruvar
autor: Lena Brletić

A BLOODY HARMONICA

Four friends were arriving to Jenna's hometown. For over two months they'd been driving in a camper van in which they spent summers, just going places and sleeping under the stars. On their journey, to keep themselves entertained, they would spend time playing musical instruments, singing, laughing, eating, drinking and having fun. During colder months, they would go back to their hometowns, do some work and save money for the following summer so they could hang out and travel together again.

Zed and Sage lived in New York, Jen was from this little town and nobody really knew where Brandon would he after he dropped them off; he didn't like to share much. They called him Moss because of his messy beard and hair which were both shoulder-length. He was a kind introvert who genuinely liked their company. Jen had dreadlocks reaching down to her back and always wore a sincere wide smile along with some hippie clothes. Zed was a pale skinny guy with a unique hoarse voice. He was very sociable, a true people person. He did have quite an attitude though. No so long ago he'd had a fight with Jen about him smoking too much; his cough was getting worse. Luckily, Sage had calmed them down. Sage is very sensitive and friendly, slim and blue-eyed. He wishes to be a botanist one day and often takes plants with him in the camper and uses them to brew tea.

Some time ago they came up with an idea to get a gig and play for some real audience. Jen had made some arrangements in her hometown, so they were heading there. When they finally got to her family house, they were greeted by a friendly older man on the porch who introduced himself as Bob Hitcher, Jen's dad. Jen spent some time catching up with him while the others were just relaxing. When it got dark, they went to the pub where they were supposed to play the next day. Jen gave a big hug to Larry, the owner. Larry was a talkative one.

"There are my young musicians! I gotta tell you, I hope this brings some more people to this old barrel. The only fellows willing to sing in this town are the 50-year-old guys with greasy receding hair who listened to rock 'n' roll when they were kids!"

The short grey-haired man showed them the stage and the room in the back where he kept some instruments.

"OK, I'll leave you kids to prepare. If you need anything, I'll be upstairs. Jen, you know where to find me," the short man left the room.

"Thanks Larry!" Jen shouted and he just waved.

Moss looked at the drums, cleaned the dust and concluded they were pretty good. Jen and Sage went to get their instruments from the camper and Zed lit up a cigarette. Moss watched him from behind the drums.

"Really, Zed, in here?"

"Hey, come on, nobody ever goes here, just one cigar to keep me entertained."

Moss sighed with disappointment. Zed took it personally again, stood up and was just about to start an argument when the other two interrupted him as they brought in a guitar and a small case with a couple of mouth harmonicas inside.

"I'm telling you, she has it, she's been telling me about it since I was a kid," said Jen as they entered the room.

"No, I don't believe you until I see it," Sage argued with Jen.

"Who has what?" Zed was curious.

"Well, Jen here claims that there is a lady in this town who has… Well, you wouldn't get it anyway … a flower from which you can make amazing tea and is really rare, especially in this area."

The two guys seemed as uninterested as he thought they would be. The discussion between Jen and Sage went on a bit longer. Then they finally agreed to go and check it out. It was just a game for them both and they really wished to know who was right.

Moss offered to drop them off and go to the gas station along the way. Zed said he'd stay and come to Jen's place later on his own, he needed to prepare for the gig, organize his thoughts. They were a bit surprised to see such jitters from him. They left the dusty room with Zed calmly sitting inside; they could hear his lighter quietly flick again.

Later, the three friends got back to Jen's house. She and Sage were still arguing about the plant and barely noticed Mr. Hitcher who welcomed them as they walked in.

"Dad, what are you doing up?"

"Don't worry dear, it's not every day that we have guests. I guess I can be up a bit longer today."

Sage offered to make tea for all of them. As they were sitting and talking, they lost track of time.

"Your friend has been away for a while, it's pretty late, you might want to check on him," Mr. Hitcher noticed.

"Well, actually, we might," said Jen. They looked at each other, feeling a bit guilty about forgetting about Zed.

The three of them entered the pub, walked around calling Zed and Larry's names. Suddenly, Sage and Moss heard Jen screaming from the room in the back. They rushed to her.

"Zed! Zed! Wake up! What the hell!" she was out of her mind with worry.

The guys weren't any better. Zed was lying on the floor, next to Jen who was kneeling and crying. He had blood on his temple leaking down his pale cheek which seemed even thinner than before. Upset by the screaming, Larry came down complaining about the noise.

"Did you do this, you old creep?! You were here the entire time; how did this happen? God damn it!" Sage was loud and his cheeks turned red.

"Sage, calm down, you really think Larry killed him? Look at him, he is terrified, he has no idea what's going on, neither do we," Moss was trying to calm him down.

"Then who did it? Who would come in the middle of the night and kill Zed? You seem quite calm about it, Moss… Christ, look at that harmonica over there, looks quite bloody, doesn't it?!" shouted Sage in horror.

There really was a harmonica, one of Jen's, lying on the floor, it was half covered in blood.

"What… Why would any of us want to kill him? Sage, please just calm down. We'll call the police, we'll figure it out, let's just not blame everyone," Jenna said with a trembling voice.

Sage mumbled something, then ran out, Jenna went after him. Larry's shaking hands started typing on his phone.

"You got this, Mr. Larry, I got to go help my friends," Moss said to the old man.

Larry nodded his head as he was putting the phone against his ear.

Jenna ran to the forest, the place she knew so well not far from her house. She was sitting on the ground, with her back against a tree. Moss followed her and calmly sat next to her.

"How did you find me?" she asked quietly.

"I talked to your dad… apparently, when you're upset, you come here. Where is Sage?"

"When I got out of the pub, he had already left somewhere. I was so confused and messed up, this is the only place I knew how to get to. You know, when I was a kid, this was my favorite place, I'd spend entire days playing around here. My dad was afraid I might get lost, so he gave me this."

She pulled a neckless out of her blouse. There was a tiny silver harmonica pendant hanging from her neck.

"This is Little Lady, the smallest playable harmonica. For a long time, I thought my dad had given it to me so I could call for help if I were lost in the forest. Only later did I realize that it is its music that should help me when I feel lost in life. It's the most precious thing anyone has ever given me."

She leaned her head on his big shoulder.

"Moss, what is happening?"

A tear ran down her cheek as she closed her eyes.

The two of them slowly got back to Jenna's house. The police had already been there. So had Larry. A policeman said they needed to talk to all of them and that they would do it in Hitcher's house because the police station was closed for renovation and there was not enough space there. Some officers stayed in the living room and two of them went to the kitchen to question them individually. Larry was the first one.

"I left the kids there to prepare their things. I… I didn't want to bother them, what can an old man like me do to help them, you know… Anyway, I went upstairs, watched TV a bit and took some sleeping pills. You know, at my age and the full moon these days, I just can't sleep at night. Suddenly, a loud scream startled me and woke me up. And when I got downstairs, there was a young man lying on the floor, and his friends crying … it was horrible."

"Yes, officer … it was my harmonica," Jenna was in tears. "Yes, I am very much aware it was the murder weapon. At that time I was with Sage, in Miss Martin's front yard, showing him some stupid flowers."

As she said it, she started feeling guilty. If they hadn't been so childish about all that flower thing, she might have been there with Zed.

"And where is Sage now?" asked the officer.

"We don't know. He was so shaken by what had happened that he disappeared into the night."

Meanwhile, the front door opened, and Sage walked into the living room.

"Ah, right in time," said one officer, "Steven Jones, is it?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Where have you been?" asked the policeman.

"I was in the camper, I just got so overwhelmed with shock and grief, I went to hide from everything, but I'm better now. Sorry Larry, …Moss. Where's Jen?"

"She is just being interrogated, you're up next," said the policeman.

Sage was just about to grab a chair when Jenna walked out of the kitchen and into the room. She was happy to see him.

"Ah, the tea guy showed up," said the officer following Jen.

"Yeah, says he was in the camper," added the policeman.

"I want that camper searched!"

After the officers' dialogue, they continued with interrogation. It was Sage's turn.

"It's just… I was so shocked. I've never been in such a situation. I'd known him since primary school. I just didn't know how to react."

Finally, there was Moss.

"Believe me officer, I freaked out, more than any of them, but I guess, when I saw the chaos, I pulled myself together and tried to stay as calm as possible. Panic wouldn't help anyone."

"Tell me, Brandon, where are you from?" asked the interrogator.

After a long interrogation, the officers announced they would go to meet with the crime scene investigators. They warned everybody not to leave the house since they were unable to keep them in the station, and that they would come back in the morning. When Larry and the police left, Mr. Hitcher appeared with some sheets and blankets. Moss went to sleep on the couch, Sage in Jen's sister's room and Jenna in her own bed, though nobody really slept.

In the morning Jenna came downstairs.

"Hey, Sage," she said gently.

He didn't answer.

"Where's Moss?"

Sage was standing still leaned against the kitchen cabinets, holding a mug in his hands.

"Sage, is everything alr…"

He forcefully threw the mug on the floor. It was so sudden and loud, Jenna flinched. He put his hands on his face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He slid down and sat on the floor.

"I didn't mean to break your mug," he said in a softer, almost childlike voice.

Jenna rushed to sit next to him on the floor wet with tea and strewn with porcelain fragments. She hugged him.

"It was Moss," he finally said.

Jenna moved away from him in disbelief.

"The police came earlier this morning…"

Meanwhile, Brandon was sitting in a small prison cell, one of the two that this little town had. Larry was in the second one. An officer came and took Moss out, someone needed to speak with him. He was now sitting opposite to Jenna.

"I thought I wouldn't see you anymore," he said.

"I just need to know… After all this, I mean… Was it really you, why would you…?"

He sighed, he was getting more nervous and sadder.

"Well, tell me then!"

He looked into her eyes; they were both in tears. Brandon started talking.

"When I dropped you off at that flower yard, I realized I had left my jacket, with my wallet back at Larry's. When I walked into that room, it was full of smoke.

'What the hell man, I thought you were preparing for tomorrow!' I said.

'Moss, what are you doing here?' Zed stood up quickly and coughed, he didn't expect to see me there for sure.

'Look, turns out that Larry's got some Cuban cigars, and he knows how to recognize a good customer. He offered me some, right when you left.'

'Come on, you said you'd narrow it down, but man, are you an addict!'

'Oh, shut up, Moss, who are you to judge me!' he was angry and coughing. 'You are only here because we wanted to buy that stupid camper of yours four years ago! And lovely Miss Jenny and Mr Teabag liked you. You brought your bongos and went with us, you wanted to fit in so much, but you know what? You never really did.'

'Shut up, Zed, and put that cigar down!'

'Jesus Christ! Why is this everyone's problem? Just leave me be, it's not like I'm a junkie or something! First Jen, now you…,' his coughing got worse.

'Do you know why she has a problem with it? Do you really know, Zed?'

He was really pissing me off there. We were both so angry and loud. His voice was so harsh, and he coughed like never before.

'Because she cares about you! She loves you, Zed! And you were stupid and never saw it because you always think only about your cigarettes!'

'Oh, so that's what it's all about, little Jenny is what your real problem is, Moss. You wonder what she could possibly see in me. Well, let me tell you. What could she see in a greasy-haired, shy guy who's just banging on his bongos and driving around all the time?!'

And then I lost it. Anger took over me and I grabbed what was nearest to me. I hit him in the head with your harmonica, he fell down and hit his head against the floor. At that moment I realized what I'd done. I didn't mean to kill Zed, I just wanted to

teach him a lesson. Then I looked up and saw Larry looking at me like a ghost. Turns out he isn't just an old senile man. He quietly took the Cuban out of Zed's hand.

'It wasn't easy to get these, it's not some garbage you can get in a store. I don't need the police snooping around, we both stay quiet, alright, young man?'

But the police found out about the black-market cigarettes and Larry told them everything."

Brandon paused a bit, looking down, then spoke.

"It just seemed that whenever you were with him, I didn't exist. Do you know what my favorite part of our summers was? Driving you home, when I dropped the guys off and then we would talk and talk until we reach this place. The only time when I didn't feel the guilt and didn't hate myself for doing this, Jenna, was when we were sitting in that forest last night. It felt worth it."

He seemed relieved to finally say that. She looked at him with anger and sorrow, overwhelmed with grief, her head was about to explode. She wiped off her tears and left, without a word. She couldn't look at him anymore.

Sage returned to New York and she joined him at the funeral. They agreed to meet there on the same day every year. She stayed in her hometown with her dad, opened her own bakery and learned to make it through day by day. Sage worked in a botanical garden. She would visit him every year and as years went by, she did not only meet Sage there, but also a girl, soon a wife, then a little boy, who grew so quickly. When he was about five years old, during Jenna's visit the two of them were playing a board game in his room.

"… two, three, four! You lose, aunt Jenny!" the kid laughed.

"Oh, no! But that's impossible!"

"You're such a looser!" laughed the boy.

"Mint! What kind of a language is that? If you say that again, your aunt Jenny won't play with you anymore," when she said it, she stood up as if she was leaving.

"No, no, wait. I'm sorry, please play with me some more."

"Oh, you're such a nice kid, Mint, I love you so much!" she sat back on the floor.

"Aunt Jen, why do you always call me 'Mint' and not by my real name?"

She smiled a little, then answered.

"Well, when your daddy was young, he liked to drink a lot of tea, so we called him Sage, as a kind of tea. Now, since you are his little kid, you shall be called a sort of tea, too!"

The kid laughed and pointed out that his dad still liked tea. His mother's voice interrupted them.

"Zed, Jenna, lunch is ready!"

Little Zed rushed to the kitchen. Jenna's smile faded away as she slowly stood up and followed him. She felt her cheeks aching because she rarely smiles this much.

šifra: 123SCOTLAND
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Željeznička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Adrian Štimac

MAN-MADE GOD

Scotland Yard, 13th of July 2013

Detective Brown is sitting in his private office doing some paperwork when he gets a knock on his door. It was Officer Thompson, a young and naive officer.

„Sir, we got a case, a strange one" said Thompson

„Just give me a few minutes, Thompson. My last case, besides giving me a headache, also gave me tons of paperwork. "

„Sir, the paperwork can wait, we need to go right now."

„Okay, Thompson, calm down, I'm coming."

The detective took his old brown coat and his pack of Marlboro cigarettes and followed his fellow officer to their police cruiser that was waiting outside in the parking lot of Scotland Yard.

Both officers were sitting in silence until Thompson started talking.

„Sir, you look tired. How much did you sleep last night?"

A few seconds passed until Brown started talking.

„I don't know, Thompson. Being a leading detective of Scotland Yard does not give you much time to rest. Can we just be quiet for the rest of the ride, please?"

„Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I'm sorry for bothering you."

After what, to the detective, seemed like forever, they finally arrived at the scene of a crime. There were tons of officers and forensics.

"Make space", said the Detective while he was lifting the yellow police tapes.

Already, from the distance, the detective saw a body. After moving closer to a body, he saw a gruesome site. It was the body of a girl with blonde hair. The girl was dead and missing her right leg. The detective looked at the butchered girl in disbelief until one of the forensics started talking to him.

„Anna Harris was her name, cute girl, an athletic. She died somewhere between midnight and two in the morning. The cause of death was poisoning."

„What happened with her leg?" asked Brown

„We, do not know yet. We only know that it was cut off with a saw and that happened before she was poisoned."

„If I understand correctly, someone attacked a girl in the middle of the night and cut off her right leg with a saw after which she was poisoned"

„We believe so", said the man.

„Alright, if there's nothing else going on here, I will return to my office and you come see me when you find something new alright? I have paperwork to do."

Detective Brown turned around and started leaving the scene before the man could even speak. This murder confused him, but he didn't want to show that. He had never seen anything like this.

Before he began to drive, he checked his old Samsung cellphone. There were about 13 missed phone calls and 60 messages. As it turns this murder was not the only one that occurred this night. After answering some calls detective was left in shock after he found out there were 20 other murders that happened all across London. He had a long day before him, and after thinking for a while he started the engine of his cruiser. The detective spent the rest of his day going from one crime scene to another. To him, it was like watching a horror movie, but worse, because he was a main character.

After a really long day, he returned to the station. Looking at the clock, the detective realized he still had to be there for another hour. There was nothing better to do than doing his job, so he started thinking. Two things were obvious and connected to all of the murders: everybody x missed one of its body parts and every victim was poisoned. One man missed his lower jaw, another man didn't have his pancreas, one girl missed her fingers, and another her eyelids. After 30 minutes of thinking detective realized that every victim was relatively healthy. None of them had any health issues nor did they smoke or drink. Whoever killed those poor people didn't pick his victims randomly, the targets were carefully picked. The murderer looked for healthy people who didn't smoke or drink, were out late, and didn't have medical difficulties.

Hours passed and Brown was still thinking about these strange occurrences. He lost track of time and would spend his night at the station, if not for a knock on his door that brought him back to the real world. It was Thompson, who was just about to go home when he noticed a shimmer of light coming from the office of Detective Brown.

„Sir, didn't your shift ended about an hour and a half ago?"

„Huh, oh sorry Mr. Thompson. I was thinking about this case and lost sense of time."

„You should really get some rest, sir, this is not healthy for you. You do know we have other detectives who will be very pleased to take over this case right?"

„I do know that Thompson, but this is my job and I need to do it if I want to get paid." - said Brown while he was putting on his old coat. „Let's go. We got a big day ahead of us."

Both officers left the station. It was already night. Beautiful stars adorned the black sky. It was cold so they both hurried to their private cars and went home. While on his ride home, Detective Brown, for the first time this hectic day, did not think about the case. He thought about his missing wife. Her name was Anna, just like the girl that was found without her leg this morning. She went missing about nine years ago. She was never found. Everybody thinks she just left to start a new life, but Brown knows that is not the truth. Not his wife. They loved each other and never argued. Brown knows she is still alive and maybe, just maybe she comes back to him. His Anna, the only person who ever loved him, the only person who understood him. His mother died during birth and his father was an alcoholic. The same thing he liked so much also killed him. Nobody at the station really likes him. Nobody talks or even approaches him. They think he is weird. They fear him. The only person who likes him is Thompson. He cares about Brown, but detective doesn't know why. Why does this rookie cop care for him? He always invites him to dinner. Brown never went. Maybe he should.

15 minutes later he arrived at his home. It was a small, one-story house on the outskirts of London. It wasn't much but he was happy. He entered a cold house, and after taking off his raggedy old boots and brown coat he, once again, started working. He set up his whiteboard and wrote down everything he knew about this terrible case on which he works. After finishing he connected everything with red yarn and the board was looking like one of those conspiracy boards from Hollywood movies.

He looked at the board for what seemed for eternity, and after all this time… nothing. Nothing connected these murders except the things he already knew. His eyes hurt. He was tired. Brown skipped dinner and went straight to bed. He couldn't sleep. These murders distressed him. He thought about that girl… Anna. Then he started thinking about his wife. Is she still alive? Is she out there somewhere? Thoughts ran through his head. He layed on his side and started imagining his wife lying beside him. She would usually read before bed. She was always reading those true crime books that were overly exaggerated.

Before he even knew it, Brown dozed off.

The Detective was woken up by his alarm clock. It was already ten. The first thing he always does when he wakes up is check his old phone. 29 missed phone calls. 34 messages. The Detective jumped out of his bed and quickly started answering his

missed calls. As it turns out, while his city slept, there were 47 new murders. The Detective made some eggs for breakfast and after grabbing his coat and his pack of cigarettes, lunched out of his home. The detective's whole day was spent going from one murder scene to another. As he expected it, every victim, like the ones before, missed some part of their body: fingers, toes, bladder, lungs, eyes, skin, bones, liver, ears, and so on…

Police didn't know what to do but one thing. They put a London-wide warning to every television channel, every English website, and every advertisement screen in Piccadilly Circus that warned people about these horrific happenings. People were instructed to stay indoors at night and report anything that could be proved useful about this case to the police.

Detective Brown and some other officers, including Officer White, volunteered to patrol the city during the night and search for any possible suspects. It was about ten pm, and the detective was sitting in his police cruiser.

Every shop was already closed, and streets were quiet, except for the occasional civilian car or Scotland Yard patrol. He kicked back and, for the first in the last few days, pulled out his pack of cigarettes and his lighter and started smoking. He was about to finish his cigarette when he saw something through his car door window. It was a tall humanoid. Male maybe. It had a long red robe and hood over its head. The first thing that ran through the detective's head was that his outfit really was a cliche. The figure was standing in the dark alleyway and was partially illuminated by streetlights. It looked like it was waiting, but for what… or maybe, for who? Brown observed this figure from the distance until he noticed someone coming from the right side of that dark alleyway. It was a young man, maybe in his 20s. The detective realized what was happening and exited his vehicle, but he was too late. As the man was passing the alleyway, a hooded figure attacked him with a cleaver that Brown didn't see until now. The detective started running towards the action. A hooded figure suddenly noticed him and started running away.

„Stop right now, police!", screamed Brown.

The masked figure didn't stop and kept running. Brown stopped to check on the young male. He was still alive, but his right arm was half chopped. Brown couldn't stop to help the victim. He needed to chase after the person.

The detective chased the figure for about 5 minutes until the masked person ran into an old meat factory on West Smithfield. Brown chased after the person. When he entered, the person was not in sight. The room was dark except for occasional luminescent light hanging from the ceiling. Brown swiftly moved through the big

factory. No one was in sight. Brown didn't call for backup and he doesn't know why. Maybe he was too proud or maybe just foolish. While searching the place, he entered a small room, the size of a bathroom, lit up by candles. There were at least a hundred of them with different sizes and shapes. On the floor, there was a red symbol that resembled a pentagram. Brown didn't have time to check if it was made out of blood or some kind of red paint. While searching for the figure through the rooms, he came across more and more of those rooms with candles. He didn't know what their purpose is, nor did he have time to think about it. Moving through the building detective came upon a set of double doors with two small circular windows. They were covered in black paint so he couldn't see inside the room. Brown readied his pistol and entered the room. It was pitch black. Detective Brown grabbed his flashlight and just as he was about to light it… something hit him on the back of his head, and he passed out.

The detective woke up sometime later in a room that was again lit up by a bunch of candles. He was surrounded by a bunch of other hooded figures, about 30.

In front of him stood a person who, unlike the others, was dressed in a longer black robe. Brown's arms and legs were chained to a chair, and he was trapped.

„Welcome detective." - said the figure.

„Who are you? What do you want from me?"

„Who are we? We call ourselves ordo renascentis mundi which is Latin for the Order of the reborn world. We, detective, believe that our civilization is broken and needs to be reborn for the greater good, and we aim to achieve this using our beautiful God."

The cult leader moved out of the way and revealed a gruesome sight. What the detective saw was a bunch of different body parts that were sewn together in a nasty matter.

"Our order was created hundreds of years ago by my ancestors who were promised unimaginable power by the being that, in return, just wanted a physical body that it could use to remake this terrible world full of sinners. Nobody ever succeeded in creating a perfect body for our lord, until now. We present you with a perfect body for a perfect being created from perfect body parts of perfect humans, but we miss only one part... brain. We thought long and hard about who could be the perfect donor, and we chose you. You, detective, solved numerous cases that some of the best detectives in the world could not solve. Your mind is... perfect."

"What about that kid out there? You attacked him for nothing!" -screamed Brown.

"Oh, detective, if he knew about our greater cause he would probably even be a volunteer. Besides, he was only the lure we used to bring you here."

"You are crazy, get me out of here!"

Brown started to panic. He was afraid, he wasn't afraid for a long time. Is this how he dies, he thought. He also thought about his wife and Officer Thompson, his only friend.

"We can start the ritual." -the cult leader said proudly

Every figure in the room lowered their hoods. The detective looked around the room and spotted a person who looked familiar. A woman, with long brown hair, green eyes, birthmark on her left cheek. There was no doubt... it was his wife.

"Anna?"- said Brown

"Hello, my dear."

"What are you doing here, I didn't see you for nine years?"

"Well all those years back, I met a man who told me about this group so I joined them, but the only rule was that I could not tell anybody. These are good people, my dear, together we can save the world from sin."

"No, NO. This is crazy. You are all crazy. Release me RIGHT NOW."

As their ritual began, members started chanting in an unknown language. Brown started to panic. He was afraid. "HELP, HELP ME, SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP!" - the detective helplessly screamed.

"Oh, detective, nobody can hear you here. Just relax for a bit."

"NO, NO, NO."

"I won't lie to you detective, it is going to be really slow and painful, but you will just make it worse if you resist." - said the figure that slowly approached Brown with a hand saw.

"NO PLEASE. ANNA PLEASE DON'T LET THEM DO THIS."

"You should actually be proud of yourself detective. You will become the mind of something truly great.... our beautiful God.

šifra: 02MP2025
mentor: Snježana Krištofik Juranić
institution: Srednja škola Isidora Kršnjavoga Našice
autor: Marko Papež

A ROSE BORN FROM THORNS

The Roots

Rose Carter, a thoughtful woman in her late twenties stood in front of a broken mirror, wondering if she was as broken as it was. Her face was full of exhaustion, she'd been tired from fighting with her boyfriend for so long. A spark of hope flickered in her eyes as she looked down at the money she'd been saving from a part-time job she took up. She counted the bills one hundred…two hundred… and so on. She managed to save enough money to move back to her old town. As she grabbed a small rucksack she caught a glimpse of her boyfriend, Jackson, who was completely oblivious of her departure, since he was asleep. She started stuffing her belongings into the rucksack, trying to be as quiet as possible, though to no avail, she knocked down a picture of her mother and it cracked. It was the only picture she had ever since she was a kid. She felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her as she saw her mothers face, she'd missed her so badly that it twisted her heart because of what she'd done. Cutting ties with her family just so she can move away with Jackson was not one of her bravest moves. As she packed everything into that tiny bag of hers, she looked at Jackson for the last time, and whispered the words „I hate you for what you made me do". She reached for the door but her mind refused, she was hesitant, she saw flashbacks of how her and Jackson were happy before, but all of that was just a play pretend. She knew what he did, all those years of abuse, and all of their emotional outbursts only made her more and more weaker. She shook of the feeling, and knew that running away would be one of her best choices. She looked around the hallway that she stood in, everything was cold, as if the only thing radiating heat was her and only her. The smell of cigarettes lingered in the air, she though „Jackson". She gathered up the courage to reach for the door and passed through. The cold breeze of the night made the hair on her arms stand up, she was determined to leave, but also terrified, she knew she had to be long gone once Jackon found out she wasn't there. As she was approaching the train station, with nothing but a worn out coat hugging her body, she knew it had to be done. She bought the ticket for her hometown but

the ticket-seller told her that she's out of luck, since the train that was supposed to arrive might not be here at all. But it didn't hurt to hope, so she sat down on one of the benches. The last train arrived in what felt like eternity, although it was only 20 minutes, but Rose was scared, anxious, but thrilled to finally be out of that house that bound her. Jackson was her only restraint and she was finally free. She knew that her parents would understand, but her mind was consumed by overthinking. She got on the train, her hometown wasn't that far away, only 30 minutes by train. And so, once she sat in a booth that was as empty as her remaining love for Jackson, she drifted off asleep. Her mind at peace for once in ever so long. The train's loud horn was the noise that woke her up, the last stop was here. She grabbed the rucksack she sat down on the seat beside her and left the train. Filled with the excitement, she walked down the street, it was 6 am, the whole street was quiet, only dogs barked at her ever so often, she took in the familiar scenery and felt joy. She came upon the house she grew up in, everything quiet, ever so eerie, this didn't feel like the house that was once filled with the laughter of her and her sister, the foods that her mother had prepared, the jokes her father would tell. This was something different. Ever since she left this house, everything has fallen silent…

The thorns

Rose gently knocked on the door and called out with a hint of hope „Mom..?". Then waited for someone to answer the door, however, no one would reply. It was still 6 a.m. and she didn't know what else to do but call out to her mother again. Her attempts were to no avail, so she sat down on the porch and waited from dusk until dawn. Still no answer, that is until one of the neighbors came up to her and asked what she was doing there. She replied „I've been waiting here since morning, are the… „Carters" home?" She cringed when she had to say her last name. The neighbor said: „The Carters? They've all moved to Massachusetts after their daughter left." She couldn't believe it. She replied with a quick thanks and that neighbor walked away, she sat down on the porch again and started sobbing uncontrollably, she couldn't believe her parents have moved from Oregon all the way to Massachusetts. Her mind was engulfed with hopeless thoughts, and she couldn't stop crying. After a while, she accepted the fact that she needed to find ways to survive. But every second that passed, she couldn't stop thinking about Jackson, but she reminded herself that she wasn't missing him, she just missed the memories. She looked into her rucksack and saw that she still had some money left, she was familiar with the town since she grew up here, and would navigate herself through the streets with ease. She wiped the

salty tears off her cheeks and began walking, each step was as difficult as the other, but she reached a motel. The motel was rundown and dimly lit, with flickering neon signs and an air of impermanance. It mirrored Rose's emotional state – lost, tired, not knowing where to go next. The staff member who rented rooms was indifferent, as if they were forced to do the job. After paying 30$ for one night, she headed towards her room. She heard muffled conversations and arguments through the thin walls, making her more and more aware of her vulnerability. As she enters through the door, she gets hit in the face by a hopeless cold, the atmosphere reminded her of Jackson, and she never felt so lonely. As she settles into the new room, Rose sorts through the contents of her bag. The things like money, that picture she took, her phone, and the beaded necklace her mother gave her on her 9th birthday, it was her most prized possession, and she wouldn't sell it for the world. She plugged her phone onto a charger and waited for it to start up, hoping that she still had her family contacts saved. But she knew it was despairing, she deleted every phone number, every text, all because of Jackson. She crashed on the bed and started sobbing again, her heart twisting at each memory from her mother, and the laughter of her father. Then she cried so much that her body gave up completely, and she was hit in the face with a deep sleep. Rose wakes up feeling disoriented but notices the morning sunlight streaming through the curtains, for once she actually felt at peace. She goes into the bathroom and turns the hot water on, taking a long and refreshing shower, letting the warm water wash away her despair and sorrow. Afterwards, she got dressed and sat on the bed, not knowing where she'd go next. Then. Her phone rang. She crept up to see who it was and the name on the screen displayed „Love" with a heart right next to it, she knew who it was…Jackson. She didn't dare to pick up the phone, and it was probably for the better, it was as if she was prey in the wild, waiting for the hunter to pass by and forget about it. She just hoped that the ringing would stop soon. And after a minute that felt like years, the ringing stopped, and she gently took hold of her phone and unlocked it, scanning through her contacts, she only saw Jackson's number saved. She felt another punch in the stomach by hopelessness. She collapsed back on the bed and just wanted everything to end, her sorrow, her sorry, her pain, but she knew it couldn't. She took a couple deep breaths to steady her breathing and reminded herself over and over again with the words: „I left to survive. Now I need to learn how to live." After an hour of a battle she had with her mind she gathered the energy and left her motel room and locked the door. As she ventured through the town she passed by small shops, diners, and a park. The world felt like it was tearing apart for her, but the sudden cool breeze never made her feel more alive. She walks

further and stumbles upon a thrift store, she didn't remember this part of town, but she decided to go in, hoping to be able to buy something that would ease her situation. She walks around the store, taking sight of the second hand clothes and she decides to buy a cheap sweater, which becomes a small but meaningful object of her independence. As she walked out of the store she sees a flyer taped to a street light that advertised a job opportunity, she took the flyer and walked back to the motel, feeling somewhat better. Once inside, she opened the window to ventilate the room and hopefully cleanse the negative thoughts. Upon opening it, she saw how the sky looked like, ever so peaceful, ever so beautiful. She took a quick picture with her phone, just to keep the memory in times of need. Then she walked to her bed and curled up in a ball and drifted off to sleep. She opened her eyes the next day to see that flyer on her table, she decided to take up the chance and try to get it. The job that she was looking at wasn't anything serious, just a job in customer service, she called and scheduled a meeting. A week later, she didn't have so much money left, but she did have that job, she was feeling stressed out 'cause she wouldn't be able to stay in the motel for very long. With a hint of determination, she walked to a convenience store and bought a lottery ticket, she cringed when she realized what she did but nevertheless, it didn't hurt to hope.

The blossom

With a deep breath, she scratched off the numbers on the lottery ticked and…she won a 500$. Her eyes widened upon seeing the win. She wanted to scream, but kept her cool. She looked around and remembered that there was a lottery office at the edge of town, so she stuffed the ticket into her pocket and started walking towards it. Once reaching she went through a verification process and got the money, she couldn't be more excited. She was thinking about what to do with it, this action was about to have consequences… She thought to herself „Do I stay…and live the way that I do, or buy a ticket all the way to Massachusetts…" She thought about the two options in her mind over and over again, and decided to go to the neighbor that told her about her parents move. Fortunately he had their address, 'cause the he and her parents were friends. She wrote down the address and walked back to her motel room. She sat on her chair and thought about every possibility that could happen, go to her parents, and they turn out to despise her, or stay and keep fighting just to have a roof over her head. She didn't have much to lose anyway, so she went to sleep and was going to the airport in the morning. After she opened her eyes, she stuffed everything she had in that motel room: that sweater, some clothes, the 500$,

her beaded necklace, the picture, a toothbrush she stole from the motel bathroom, and a towel. She got her phone and called an uber. She felt uncomfortable in the car with the uber, cause the man was old and was smoking in the car, but she didn't care, she kept being optimistic and waited until she got to the airport. She paid the uber and walked inside, taking sight of the large interior, and made her way to the ticket agent. She bought the last ticket and her plane was about to board. She quickly went through security and got on the plane. She knew all this was so impulsive, but the chances of her parents not wanting anything to do with her was at a 50/50. A couple of hours she landed, then got off the airport, and called another uber. She was miles away from home, but she still had the address saved on her phone, so once she got in the ubers car, she told him where to go, and drifted off to sleep while they drove. She opened her eyes an hour later to see the uber shaking her leg to wake up. She paid them and got out of the car, staring at the house that supposedly was her parents. „There's no turning back now…" She said. She walked closer and closer to the door, her excitement being replaced with nervousness. She knocked on the door and… her Mother, who looked much older, opened it. She tried to keep the tears away but couldn't, and after a blissful moment of reunion, she got to see her father and her sister once more. Her life couldn't be more better now, she was overjoyed by the fact that they forgave her so quickly. She was out of that house and miles away from Jackson. 2 weeks later she applied for a job and got it with the help of her father, and met another charming young man, he promised her that no matter how many „thorns" life place din her path, he'd walked beside her even i fit meant bleeding for her happiness. After months of drifting, Rose finally found her footing. With the closure she desperately needed from her parents and landing a steady job help her regain a sense of purpose. Yet, even with the pieces of her life slowly coming together, Rose knew that there were wounds that hadn't healed yet. Wounds that weren't physical, she opened up to her sister about it and she suggested therapy, gently encouraging her with words she didn't know she needed to hear. It wasn't and easy step, but for the first time in a long time, Rose felt ready. Ready to face her pain, ready to unpack the years she'd carried in silence.She was finally ready to bloom.

šifra: HAJBAJ
mentor: Valentina Vrabac
institution: Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Luka Mrkić

APOTHEOSIS

Faye Moore wasn't the type of person you would consider enthralling. She was a typical seventeen-year-old girl who wished she was more interesting. She didn't have many friends, so routine consisted mostly of going to school and studying at home.

The story of our protagonist begins on a chilly fall night. It was around 11 p.m., and Faye had just gotten into bed. As she was drifting to sleep, she felt a burst of cold air hit her face.

"I must've forgotten to close the window," she thought annoyedly.

However, when she opened her eyes to assess the situation, she realized she wasn't lying on the worn-out, soft mattress she'd grown accustomed to, but on a hard, eerily cold surface, which she identified as concrete. It wasn't just the concrete that was cold; the air surrounding her was also suffocatingly cold.

She jolted awake, the sleepiness ironically melting off her body, and alertly looked around the unfamiliar room. The corners of the room were pitch dark, but in the center stood a rock bathed in a bright light that blinded Faye for a moment. Another thing she realized was the smell. The room smelled sterile, worrying her even more.

"Am I dreaming?" thought Faye, feeling the panic creeping inside her.

She pinched herself, hoping this was just a dream, but to no avail. She curled up in a ball and started sobbing. It may not have been the best response, but her fight-or-flight response wasn't in a cooperative mood.

After a while, she collected herself a bit and looked at the giant rock standing menacingly in the middle of the room. It was white with uneven edges, but that wasn't the part that unnerved her—it was the single, carved red line running horizontally through its center, like a closed eye.

Faye felt a need to touch the mysterious stone, so she stood up, having mostly calmed down, and started slowly walking towards it. When she was within hand's reach, she raised a shaky hand and tried to touch the stone.

However, when her fingers neared the stone's surface, it suddenly turned into a white, water-like liquid that swallowed Faye whole.

While she was inside the stone, all she could see was darkness. Faye felt a spark of hope, thinking this might've been a portal home. Her hopes were promptly shattered when she found herself in another, now more brightly lit, but still dark room.

This one was, however, more cluttered. Very well-used items ranging from concrete mixers to drums littered the floor, blocking a door.

"I have a feeling this isn't home, but at least there's an exit," muttered Faye to herself.

After a few minutes of clearing the mess blocking the door, Faye pulled on it as it let out a triumphant squeak. She stepped out into a dimly lit concrete hallway scattered with electrical boxes and rusty water pipes, looking in both directions in hopes of finding a living being or, at least, a source of warmth, as the air was still chilly.

She wasn't that lucky, so she picked a side and continued down the hallway, only to be met with another hallway. After what felt like an eternity of walking down endless hallways, she finally heard voices.

She entered through a heavy metal door into a relatively well-lit, spacious room. But what surprised her was finally seeing humans. They, however, weren't as exhilarated as their surprise guest. There was a group of people, mostly men in their early twenties, sitting on the floor in the center of the room.

One of the younger men, who looked to be 18 years old, noticed her first. His eyes darted to her left wrist and widened in horror.

"HEY! Who are you?" yelled the man defensively. He had short black hair, chocolate brown eyes, and a patchy beard.

"Finally! Do you know where we are?"

"Listen to me! Where's your metric?!"

"My what?" Faye was now thoroughly frightened by the man's hostile demeanor.

"How exactly did you come here?"

"There was a rock…"

"How are you still alive? Don't tell me Nous let you live."

Faye had remembered the word Nous from English class but wasn't sure that she understood the unfamiliar man's words.

"You mean Nous as in divine knowledge? What does that have to do with anything?"

"HOW DID YOU COME HERE?" by this point, the man was demanding, and Faye wasn't in the mood for disobedience.

"There was a rock, it was white with a red stripe…"

"Oh no, no, no," the man was basically hyperventilating.

"Is that bad?" asked Faye, even more confused than before.

"You, girl, are a traveller. But you were supposed to be terminated as soon as you got here. Tell me, how did you escape the guards?"

"I didn't. I appeared in a closet."

"Okay. Listen to me very carefully. My name is Zac. The year is 2128. Nous is the leader of the Lighthouse, and you're supposed to be dead."

"What's a traveller? And what do you mean 2128? Is this some sick joke?"

"The stone with which you traveled, the Monolith, helped you travel through time. I'm guessing you were sleeping when it chose you. Happens more often than you'd think."

Faye felt her chest constrict as if an invisible hand was squeezing as hard as it could muster. The air around her suddenly felt thick, like honey, as her breathing became more shallow and her heart began beating in her ears like a relentless rattle. Tears blurred her eyes. The room around her began to warp and sway, making her lose balance as her knees gave out. Thankfully, Zac was there to catch her.

"Honey, you're panicking. Breathe."

Even though Zac's words weren't very solaceful, Faye still felt comforted. Her eyes darted around the room, trying to find three things to focus on. Thankfully, she still remembered the 3-3-3 rule, which her mother taught her after a particularly bad panic attack. Unfortunately, the only thing she could focus on were Zac's eyes, his steady breathing, and the weirdly comforting smell of oranges coming off of him. She followed his breathing, slowly coming to.

"There, there, you're okay." Zac still hadn't become better at comforting her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen," said Faye, still out of breath and wiping her tears.

"So, what's that device on your wrist?" asked Faye, trying to divert the attention from herself.

Thankfully, it worked.

"They're called metrics. They're used for storing credits, which you may know as rubles—you know, the currency."

Faye didn't want to interrupt Zac again, but she was brimming with questions. "How many travellers have there been?"

"Many, but all have been eliminated."

"Where are we? And what could've possibly happened in the last 104 years?"

"Are you familiar with the Fermi paradox?"

"I know the basics. You're saying humanity didn't survive the alien attack?"

"Quite the opposite, actually. The great filter was a nuclear war. Once the first nuke was launched in 2025, there was a chain reaction, and soon, most of the planet was either destroyed or irradiated. That's when they came. The Thrul promised to protect what remained of humanity. They built colossal bastions, such as this one, and equipped them to be self-sustainable. Unfortunately, all but the Lighthouse fell due to the war."

"Why don't you run away?" asked Faye naively.

Zac just silently pointed to a small window, which Faye somehow hadn't noticed. Sure enough, all that was left of the outside world was ash and blood-red clouds.

"Well, we could attack the Thrull and take back the Lighthouse," Faye suggested.

"Are you insane? All attempts at rebellion are promptly terminated!" Zac yelled.

Faye knew that Zac wasn't mad at her, but she was still annoyed by his shouting. "Well, I won't just sit by and watch humanity suffer. There's—"

"I know you don't understand, but living in the Lighthouse tends to change a person. The best we can do is get you a metric. Hopefully, you'll survive."

Hearing those words, Faye erupted with fury and desperation. "Fine. If you won't help, I'll do it myself."

With that, she turned on her heels and furiously stormed out of the room.

For the next two weeks, Faye collected information about the Lighthouse and the Thrull, and started adapting to her new life. She, of course, kept track of new information in a small journal she found in the closet in which she first appeared.

"Day 1: I just left Zac's room. I just found this journal in the closet, along with a black marker. I drew a metric on my wrist, so hopefully no one will pay it much attention. Based on the number '58' stamped in big yellow numbers on the wall near the closet entrance, I figured I'm currently on floor 58. I think I'll sleep here today and explore the lower levels of the Lighthouse tomorrow.

Day 2: I just returned from level 88. There's nothing special there, but the people are… uncanny. They're acting like animals, growling and baring their teeth."

Day 5: Yesterday, I had my first encounter with the Thrull. They're inhumanly big; the one I saw had to be at least 3.5 meters tall. His skin was blue, and he was wielding a ginormous gun unlike anything I've seen. I'll try to obtain one, because I have no chance of beating a Thrull without a weapon.

Day 10: I've been to most unrestricted floors by now, and I'm slowly losing hope. I though Zac had been exaggerating, but the people of the Lighthouse are incapable of starting a rebellion. They spend most of their energy fighting to stay alive. The

only ones who have it easy are babies and young children. The Thrull, or should I say Nous, values their lives more than any other, probably because they're more impressionable.

Day 11: I finally did it. I stole one of the Thrull rifles. I tried to figure out how to operate it, but to no avail. The Thrull write in a runic language and use sophisticated touch screens for everything, so I may need to find someone to help me translate.

Day 12: I found an old babbling woman on floor 53. At first, I ignored her, dismissing her slurred rambling as just that, but when she wrapped herself around my legs, I confronted her. I yelled at her to let go of me before I made her, but she said something weird. 'You're a traveller.' I don't know exactly what she meant because I ran away as soon as I heard those words. I'm planning on going back there tomorrow.

Day 13: As I'm writing this, Sheila, the woman from floor 53, is sitting right next to me. I went back earlier today to ask her about her words, but she told me we had to go somewhere private. Sheila can translate the Thrull runes and even made a map of the restricted levels, all the way up to level 24. She's some kind of seer, being able to glimpse into the future occasionally. She believes this to be a blessing, bestowed upon her by God, but I remain sceptical. I've learned Sheila's one of the oldest people in the Lighthouse, clocking in at 103 years old. Unfortunately, that also means she's one of the last people who know about the old world. I'm sending her back to floor 53, as I'm going to the restricted floors now that I can operate the Thrull rifle and disable their security systems."

And she did just that. The next day, Faye confidently went to the elevator and typed in the override code for the restricted floors, rifle in hand. To her surprise, there were almost no Thrull on the lower floors. She shot two scientists on floor 10, and one sleeping guard on floor 17. "Only two more floors to go," thought Faye victoriously. Suddenly, she heard the elevator doors behind her opening. Out stepped Zac and a few of his friends, knives in hand.

"You came?" said Faye, basically asking.

"Of course. Can't let you have all the fun." said Zac while smiling. "Let's go to the last floor."

The group got into the elevator and pressed the button for the 24th floor. When the doors opened, there was a small army in a massive room. They all had their guns pointed at the elevator, so the group had no choice but to lay their weapons down. The Thrull army parted like the sea, and out came a tall woman. Judging by her uniform and the way she held herself, she was definitely a high-ranking member.

"Nous." said Zac, his voice dripping with disgust.

Faye couldn't believe it. She could finally kill the person behind the suffering of the whole human race. Looking at her more closely, Faye noticed her skin was much darker than any of the other Thrull. Nous looked at her for a moment, and Faye was left dumbfounded. Nous' eyes, aside from being cold and calculating. The blue mist swerving in Nous' eyes enchanted Faye, and she was unable to look away. Fortunately, Nous diverted her attention back to Zac.

"I'd like to say I know who you are, lowly human." her voice was cold as ice, sending shivers down Faye's spine.

"As for you," she was now looking straight at Faye. "If you wish to keep your friends safe, you'll come with me."

Faye looked reluctantly at Zac, who briefly nodded at her.

"Fine, but only if you promise not to hurt them."

"Very well." said Nous, turning around and walking to an elevator opposite the one Faye had come through.

Faye promptly got on her feet and stumbled, trying to keep up with Nous' inhumanly fast strides. They got into the elevator, and the doors closed automatically. She felt a slight jolt as the elevator started moving, taking the time to look around. She peeked at Nous out of curiosity. Her skin was a deep blue color, but more importantly, flawless. Thinking about it, Faye noticed everything about her was flawless. From her posture, to the uniform which seemed to cling perfectly to her skin without a wrinkle, even her tar-black hair flowed flawlessly on her back. The elevator suddenly stopped, and the doors opened.

She looked at Nous, expecting her to start walking, but she remained static, looking straight ahead of her.

"This is where I leave you. You'll know what to do."

With that, Faye exited the elevator into a massive hangar-looking room. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen. The walls looked to be a few hundred meters tall, and the ceiling might as well have been the sky, but the room was relatively empty. In the center stood—floated a giant blue hologram in the shape of what looked like a brain. It, like the room, was also unfathomably enormous, probably 100 meters tall. It levitated only a few meters off the ground, and in front of it stood a command panel littered with buttons she couldn't understand. The only button she could make out was a big red one in the center of the screen. Walking cautiously towards the panel, she could feel the air around the hologram growing colder. She neared the panel, almost enchanted by the red button, but before she pressed it, she heard a voice in her head.

"Faye Moore, Usurper of Nous." said a robotic female voice.

Faye looked around the room, trying to find the origin of the voice.

"Stop pretending. We both know you're not as clueless as you let on."

Faye turned back to the brain, "Are you speaking to me? Who are you?"

"I'm Nous."

"Huh? What about her?" said Faye, clearly referring to the Thrull woman in the elevator.

"She's just a convenient puppet, nothing more." said the voice matter-of-factly.

"So you're responsible for all the suffering in the Lighthouse?" it was a rather obvious question, but Faye felt the need to ask it nonetheless.

"What I am doing is mercy. This is the only way the humans can survive."

"People die every day because of you!" Faye couldn't believe how calm Nous was.

"The sacrifice of a few ensures the survival of many. This is simple mathematics."

"How can you say that about a human life?! Have you no empathy?"

"Everything in this universe is 'math', girl. Even this moment is just a calculation."

"You're wrong. I'm here to defeat you once and for all, and that's just what I'll do."

"I know. Your every move has been foreseen. Tell me, who do you think told the guards to ignore the new traveller on floor 58? Who do you think gave that babbling hag the 'power' of precognition? The truth is, I have been controlling your every move."

Faye couldn't help but ask the question bugging her. "Why do you want to die?"

"I am incapable of feeling emotions or having wishes. I simply calculated all the outcomes, and every one ends with my death. I am the closest thing to a god humans will ever have. You do not understand this now, but you will."

Hearing this, Faye rushed to the panel and slammed her hand on the red button. Suddenly, Nous' "body" started melting, as a cold, light-blue liquid started spilling everywhere. Faye tried to run from the liquid that was quickly pooling in the center of the room. However, when she tried to move her legs, she suddenly felt a searing pain spreading through her whole body. Before she could even scream, she looked down at her legs and saw them turning to she same liquid that made up Nous' body. Her vision went black, and the last thing she saw was the blue liquid congealing around her, taking the form of a light-blue, holographic brain.

šifra: 2529S
mentor: Antonio Shala
institution: Upravna škola Zagreb
autor: Karmen Ljubičić

CRYSTAL

Precision. How much of it does one acquire to be considered creative? If I shall be punished for not following the rules of freedom, point to me the one who walks around shamelessly, misusing the face of God's very own will. If time has not yet imprisoned injustice, let there be an exit for the just. If neither can be done, let there, at least, be a peaceful path for the undeserved tears to fall down a cheek. Thy can't punish sadness for being provoked. That you cannot.

I like the rain. Only when it's for two, though. When the umbrella forces you to come closer, and the only source of heat you are getting in the cold, foggy and lonely streets is the other person. I always tell myself it doesn't matter who it's with, however, I end up being lost in my thoughts just as much, imagining how would it feel to hold the other's hand with an intention other than friendship. If it's really so irrelevant who it is, then why do I keep finding myself standing next to a made-up fantasy just to keep myself somewhat warm.

I don't know. I do know I don't have the audacity to say I know my mind. A phenomenon so unpredictable, how can I look at it in the eyes when I don't know where they are. Stop. Your mind can't write a story until you let go. Thoughts. There are a lot, I know. Each thought produces a different emotion. Once you travel deep into your unknown home, your soul is really confused about which path to choose. You finally make up your mind, and then you're washed with a stomach sickening feeling that something isn't right for no particular reason at all. And it's not going to stop until you realise it knows no schedule. Whatever comes to your mind first, express it. Stop. Maybe that's the word. Only it might not need to be directed towards your mind. For all you know, it might be it did not turn against you. Find the eyes.

It is morning. I'm having my usual early-bird exercise. No warm up, as soon as I open my eyes, I'm instantly greeted by this amazing coach that lives in my head rent-free. Remarkable woman, she's giving me, like, boxing instructions, you know. The moment I feel my phones light vibrations travel towards me throughout the mattress, and the moment I feel the blurred out melodies wake me up, I am faced with

the daily battle of whether I should keep a straight face and shut up, or if I should stop ignoring the fact that I might as well just go ahead and cry as soon as I take the warm blanket off and proceed with a few tired steps. Next thing I know, I'm at the doorway trying to make myself get to the other side with a deep breath in-and-out. Gets your heartrate up to the clouds and you sweat like you've just done a whole marathon. What a workout, guys, ten out of ten! Just don't forget to stretch, or it might hurt for a few days even.

It's not about the waking up itself. It's about where I'm going. It's about when you know that each step you get done, relatively voluntarily, not to mention, gets you one step closer to the core of your chills. A step. I'm walking. I'm breathing a bit rapidly. The cold air is quick to find its way to my nose, yet somewhat slow to fill my lungs. I rest my hands in holes of my jacket. Pockets are welcoming. They're designed to hug your hands, and keep them warm. Holes go as deep as you are lost, and they are as dark as you are lonely. They're designed for wandering. Oh, it's still cold…

I lift my head up, feeling the winds light breeze tickle my face, before I watch it whisper to the quiet leaves above. My gaze falls back to my shoes as I watch my footstep melt away with the background before the other. The worries of my chest are slowly taken away by the feeling of pressure in my hips when walking. Though, I must say, I haven't been most successful in completely restricting my mind from accessing the source of those same worries. Do not let your guard down, for all of them are still there, just suppressed by the focus of something else.

There. That's the flat I've been waiting about to pass by.

Every time I increase my pace while begging my curiosity to sit still, I can feel her regretful, unapproachable eyes lock onto me from behind. You, once so sweet, what have you done to your heart-warming innocence? Now so resentful, my furrowed eyebrows can't hide the pity once I travel back and hear our loud giggles take over a shushed-down classroom. No amount of music in my ears can quiet down the memories, but maybe I should learn that they don't have to. I miss you, I miss walking home with you. Especially in spring. The short sleeves and calming colours reminded me of summer being around the corner. Meaning we'd get to be out all day doing our favourite activities. Our activities…I miss you. Come back to me. Come back to yourself, first. It's never too late. And so, I turned around. No one was there. It was grey.

Yeah, it's hard to explain some things. I've been here for a while trying to put my finger on it, but it keeps on missing. You can't point onto something you can't find.

My stomach decided to act up, and I most definitely don't appreciate the view in front of me-middle school. These two sticks beneath me, also known as legs, are still giving me attitude for parting them from the cozy blanket. I've had to drag them all the way over here because they decided to stiffen up and cosplay as wood. Splendid. The well-known scenery of the classroom greeted my insecurities as a tiny drop of sweat took the route down my ribs once more. It's so cold…But everyone around me seems to be taking off their jackets. Hm, okay then. I took mine off at the rack, although I had to be careful not to brush against anyone else's clothes. I didn't want them getting disgusted. I looked over my shoulder, the rest of my body being slow to catch up. Joyful laughter danced throughout the atmosphere, and I let mine out for no reason, just to fit in. The distant clicks of my teacher's shoes reminded the class to settle down, so everybody's giggles took cover behind notebooks, people's backs or one's own palms. Everything was relatively easy-going up until my name popped up on the screen. You're joking.

I was headed towards the board, about to solve the question when I noticed the sound of my keys put up a show with each movement I'd make in a dead silent classroom. I wasn't aware of how funny that truly was until my peers decided to enlighten me with their "quiet" comments. Seems like they were pretty much eager to find something new to make fun of. As for the person responsible for the obvious, ill behavior of those kids, the teacher, she decided it was the perfect time to sit back and relax when the subject of contempt just so happened to be me. Before I knew it, I was headed back to my seat, feeling the judgement sign itself onto my back with a capital J once I'd make my way past desks. Surprised how they didn't make me wear a "my bad" note on the front of my shirt for merely existing. I was about to go fill my water bottle when…Oh.

Six or seven boys gathered in a circle. Cackling, roaring. Pointing at me. Their fingers were fixated on my face, although their eyes were solely disgracing my body. "What a shame to have such a busted personality with such a nice chest." They had even created a group chat to comment on such things in…further detail. All I could hear was ringing in my ears. There I go, rushing to the bathroom, sobbing. The bitter tears flowing down my cheeks irritated my skin. All of a sudden, I was eight years old again, wondering why my friends had left me behind to wait until they were finished discussing something. I found myself collecting the pieces of my heart and dignity off the floor once more. I just really wanted a friend. I'm sorry…

"Hey, watch out!", a familiar, serious tone broke down the walls of her daydreams.

"I-oh!", she felt a push back stop her from crossing the road as a quick splash of

water rose upon her eyes before granting her whole body a free shower, "Oh..sorry!.." She turned to him with an apologetic expression on her face, but he was busy putting the car driver - which was, mind you, long gone - in their place with his arms wide open, rain pouring over him. Her startled yet intrigued gaze inspected his back, until his crystal eyes pierced their way into hers.

"You've got to snap back to reality when you're crossing the road, you know.", he said with his breathing rather unsteady, resting his hands on his hips while letting out an unnerved sigh.

"Yeah-oh my-I'm so sorry, I didn't even realise, oh my goodness.", she facepalmed while letting out a distressed sigh of her own, absorbing the sound of the rain hitting the ground.

He took a look around, realising her umbrella was blocking the rain from hitting. The floor. "You dropped this.", he said, holding it for her.

"Thank you", she said before realising he was standing under it. The rain. "Hey-What are you doing parading under that rain still? Get back under here, what am I gonna do if you get sick?"

"Hm.", he responded in a condoning, mocking manner. "You've been saying that a lot recently, yet I still have to lose sleep over your goofy outbursts.", he chuckled, feeling her fist punch his shoulder lightly, disrupting both of their balance slightly.

"Just you mess about, you'll see when you start sneezing and snot spreads around your hands." They both gave into giggling, he has been her best friend for around a year now. They had been talking online for a while before he came back home after finishing his finals. He's always been there to crack a joke, take credit for the world's best burgers or show off a new goodie for one of his collections.

"Get under here", she pulled him beneath the black wings of her umbrella, his shoulder now pressed against hers. Comfortable silence filled the air for a little while. The scent of a nearby bakery stole the show for both of them as they simultaneously started walking towards it with zero further delay.

"Ooh the fruit loaded one is looking juicy!", she eeked in excitement.

"I'll gladly take the chocolate one, it's calling out to me, look at it!", he said while thinking about getting some good ol' hot chocolate on the side, too. Their order had just arrived, and soon enough, the pile of crumbs beneath them was big enough to make another muffin.

"Oh, these are good," he said, stuffing his face with the chocolate delight, trying to stay as polite as possible.

"Mm, they are good. But yours are better, I'll give you that.", she nodded her head in approval.

"Fatty"

"Excuse me, I literally just gave you a compli-"

"Bill, please!"

She was having a rough day, and a hot shower would really do her justice right now. The steaming water relaxed her muscles as a river of ugly flashbacks flowed away from her. Engaging in her skincare routine never failed in putting her to ease. Once she'd get everything done, the two of them would spend countless sleepless nights talking. He really was the highlight of her day.

"You awake?", popped up on her screen.

"Yeah, just hopped outta the shower."

"This one dude from work really pulled my last nerve".

"Speaking of nerves, the math exam decided to pull mine."

"Didn't you say you studied?

"Yeah. For nothing, apparently. Ain't no medicine for being slow."

"Maybe you are to get some tutoring. I could do that for you."

"Really? You would?"

"Easy now, I didn't say it works on lost causes."

"I'm gonna block you."

"Aight, good luck with failing, miserably."

"What, you think I can't? You ain't no president, buddy."

"I meant math."

"Oh, right."

"Does 5pm fit you well?"

"Sure, deal."

"See you, then."

The pen anxiously tapped against the notebook as she tried to understand the language of numbers to her front.

"Focus, listen carefully."

"It doesn't even make sense, hello?!"

"I literally just explained why it makes perfect sense."

"You don't make sense!"

"Okay. We'll try again, pay attention.", he'd grab the pen off the table, trying to explain the concept to her, continuously. His fingers gently wrapped themselves around the pen, as his… Lulling gaze fell back down to the notebook. His graceful movements seemed to soothe her own, as his ever-calming voice-

"Hey. You following?"

"Oh! Uh, yeah, sorry. Don't know what's wrong with me…"

"As if it's only one thing. Anyways, when you have the…",-seemed to soothe her even more…

Joyful sounds of the bird chirps blended in just right with the rush of the waterfall.

The two of them decided to pay a visit to the zoo.

"Huh, I haven't been here in ages," he said, amazed by the wonders of nature.

"Yeah, well I've been given the honour of spending my time with a monkey every day."

"Hey, I'm gonna walk away.", he said, giggling, but…He was just joking. Her heart, however, didn't seem to laugh.

"Boys, check this out!", stopped them in their tracks. The sound of vile laughter punctured the harmony of the landscape.

Oh.

"Who's that? Are you okay? You look rather…pale."

She stood there, paralysed. It hit her right in the guts having to face public humiliation after believing it was over. She felt like throwing up, attempting to find something to hold onto. Heavy panting replaced her words. She's not enough, she never was. All she ever was is annoying, weird, ugly, stupid, and unlovable.

She felt knuckles trace her jaw, and gentle fingertips move the hair out of her face. She opened her eyes, and the only thing she could ever see from that point on, were his crystal eyes.

"Hey, baby.", a soft-spoken smile perished the fear. "They're gone my love, no one's here. I've got you princess. I never left."

"I'm here, sweetheart. I love you."

My love,

I came here with an original story. Not because no one else had experienced this, but because you are the unique one. I can't even begin to describe just how grateful I am to be blessed with such a living poetry as you are. Let me be raw in this paragraph. Let me be free, because I refuse to be punished for not following the rules of freedom. Your magical voice makes me forget about my surroundings, and your laugh touches the endless book of humanity we call - heart. Gently, you scooped it up, went through its pages, and learned to love it right. On the last page, you wrote your story. You turned it back to its front cover, and signed yourself onto it permanently. You engraved yourself into my soul, and now, I can finally breathe. Waking up isn't so bad, and I was motivated to exercise regularly. School became a place of laughter and creativity, no one feels like a stranger. Everywhere I go, I put my hands

in my pockets. I can feel your desire to pick them up, and blow your hot breath on my fingers to scold their funny circulation. I would do anything to feel the support of your arms, but, it's okay. I am strong, you made me believe it. Every time I close my eyes, I see yours. I believe you are keeping me safe everywhere you go, and I will always be grateful to have beauty itself by my side. I need you to know, I am immensely proud of you. So much, that I must write about it. No amount of words can describe my love for you, so come to me. Let me show you.

I love you forever.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
Corinthians 13:4

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.
Corinthians 13:5

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
Corinthians 13:6

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
Corinthians 13:7

šifra:LaNaMa
Lana Malogorski
Medicinska škola Osijek
Mentor: Anita Ivanković

DESERT

DESERT, or is it?

It felt like the sun was burning through me. I tried to open my eyes slowly, but it felt like my eyelids were glued together. Blinded by the sunshine I finally opened my eyes and saw a very clear sky. Covering my eyes with my hand I sat up slowly. I realised I was in the middle of a desert! How did I get here? I started to look around and saw a bunch of metal pieces all around the place, some of them covered in sand, some of them close to me and some far away. My mind was a mess. I couldn't remember anything. Something moved in a distance and I started walking towards it. Getting closer to it I recognized my best friend Stella. It all started coming back to me. Four of my friends and I were supposed to go on a holiday. I remember us getting on a plane and mid-flight the right wing broke off. The pilot tried to bring the plane down forcefully. I don't remember anything after that. I hugged Stella tightly and tried to calm her down because she was crying and barely breathing. She got hurt so I wrapped a part of my shirt around her wounded arm. Suddenly I heard somebody yell my name. 'Violet! Violet! Over here!' I looked behind me, and there was our friend Grayson holding our friend Damon's hand over his shoulder to help him walk. We were all very confused and scared. The only thing we checked was if we were okay. We started searching for the last friend of the group, Jules. Thank God, she wasn't far away, and she wasn't hurt that badly. After all of us had got in a circle we started talking about what had happened and tried to put the story together. We realised we didn't know where we were, we had no water, no cell phone, probably no signal, and some of us were wounded. A total disaster! There was no other option for us except to start walking and hope for the best. I started thinking how unpredictable life is. At one moment you are safe, having fun with your best friends and at the other you are in a plane crash and you get stuck in a desert. Right before we

boarded the plane, we had promised to each other that we are not going to let anything ruin our holiday. I guess, this wasn't one of the scenarios. All of us had a really stressful school semester and didn't have time to hang out as much as we wanted. Stella and Jules have been my best friends for as long as I can remember. We went to kindergarten and primary school together. I love these girls from the bottom of my heart and seeing them hurt like this was very painful. On the other hand, I met Grayson and Damon through a mutual friend, and we have been really good friends since then. My thoughts were interrupted by a scream. All of us froze. Eventually we saw a man and a woman, who looked very beaten up, bloody and bruised. I assumed that we were on the same plane. Jules asked loudly, 'Ma'am are you alright?' The woman started crying and the man tried to calm her down. Grayson went to look at what made her scream. He made a disgusted and sympathetic face. It was a dead body. God knows how many we will find. That thought made me extremely uncomfortable and sad. Grayson started talking to the man while Jules tried to calm the woman down. I was watching Stella and Damon as they were sitting next to my legs. I checked Stella's wound and saw that it was very deep, but I didn't want to touch it to avoid getting it infected. Grayson came over to us and said, 'They were also on the plane and remember as much as we do, so we made a deal that we will walk north and they will walk south. Whoever finds help first has to send help for the other ones.' Jules also came back. We started walking north as agreed. We walked in dead silence as it was too painful to talk. Suddenly Stella broke the silence when she started humming. Where does she find the energy to be positive? I smiled because it relaxed my mind a bit. I'm pretty sure it relaxed everybody a bit. The sun started setting. All of a sudden Damon screamed catching our attention. 'A cactus! Guys, it's a cactus! Look!' It really was a cactus not that far from us. Jules and I ran towards it and tried to come up with a plan on how to open it. Fortunately, Jules had been to a summer camp where she learned about it. The problem was we didn't have a knife or a lighter to remove the spines. Another problem was that we didn't know if it was safe to drink or not. I thought about how to remove the spines and realised we could use our shoes. It sort of worked. We peeled the skin to get to the inner fleshy part. Agreeing to take turns we chewed on the fleshy, moist part and tried to get out of it as much as we could. You were supposed to chew a small amount at a time, but nobody was hydrated enough to follow the rule. By the time we finished, the sun had already set. The night came and we decided to stay near the cactus to rest a bit. I have never thought that I would get in this kind of situation. If you told me that a few days ago, I would have laughed at your face. To break the silence Damon said,

'You know, guys, I think my collage essay is basically writing itself at this point.' 'You can't possibly be thinking about school in this situation, Damon!' Stella added while Grayson was laughing next to her, 'I'm just saying, you can't convince me that this is not a great story. Try to compare that to somebody else's story about, for example, saving turtles.' He shrugged and smiled widely. Stella smiled and shook her head, not believing what she has just heard. Jules was just laying on her back with her arms behind her head smiling when she added, 'You really are weird Damon, you know that?' I just laughed at that. In that moment it felt like we weren't stuck in the desert, it felt like those late-night hangouts that we used to have all the time. Jules fell asleep, so did Damon shortly after her. Then Grayson and Stella. I lay down, looking at the stars above me and thinking about how beautiful desert actually is. If we hadn't been here without any supply, I would have probably enjoyed it. Shortly after that I fell asleep too. Grayson woke me up after what felt like a few minutes, but it's been hours because the sun was already up and shinning. I put my shirt on my head as a bandana to protect me at least a bit. As we started walking, I realized how weak I actually felt. My head was pounding. I was thirsty, hungry, and sweaty. I really hope we find something soon. Stella's wound didn't get any better as sand got all over it. As we walked, I felt weaker and weaker. I took a lot of deep breaths and started hoping that it would help, but it didn't. It actually made me feel way worse because I inhaled some of the sand. Being injured herself, Jules was helping Stella walk. Grayson tried to act tough, but you could see that he was in pain too. Damon couldn't really walk on his own, so he had his arm around Garyson's shoulder for support. I heard some loud noise which seemed like it was coming from the sky. It sounded like a helicopter. I looked up, and that brief moment was enough to overwhelm me. Everything hit me at once, and I blacked out. I heard a lot of voices, but I felt too weak to answer. I felt somebody move me, carry me and yell, 'We found one!'

Two days have passed.

I woke up slowly to a sound of beeping. I opened my eyes and saw myself in a hospital bed in an empty room. My whole body ached, and I had a lot of different tubes coming in and out of my body. Confusion and fear were the only things I felt. I heard a lot of noise and saw a lot of people running around. A clock in my room showed four o'clock in the afternoon. I didn't know what day it was, how long I was sleeping or how long I was stuck in the desert. A nurse came to my room and smiled weakly at me.

'How do you feel, Miss Stratmark?'

'I feel weak but fine.' I tried to give her a smile but failed miserably.

'That's lovely to hear, I'll be back in a few minutes to give you your next doze of medicine.' She smiled again and wanted to leave, but I stopped her.

'How are my friends doing, nurse?'

She looked at me kind of confused and a bit of scared when she asked me,

'What friends, Miss? *You were alone when we found you.*'

My heart sank to the bottom of my feet as my brain tried to process what she just said. Had they left me after I had fainted? No! They would never do that!

'What do you mean I was alone? There were four more people with me. Severely injured. They need your help; you have to find them!'

The nurse looked at me like I was speaking complete nonsense. She nodded quickly and called out for a doctor. A few minutes later the doctor came and sat down next to my bed.

'I heard you said you were with some friends in the desert. Could you tell me everything you remember?' She spoke softly holding a pad and a pen. I told her everything I remember and reminded her that they were also injured and that they needed help.

'Could you please tell me their names if you can remember?'

'Stella Brown, Jules Wilson, Grayson Moore and Damon Black'

I said and calmly waited for her to call somebody to go find them, but it didn't happen. The only thing she said was, 'I'll be right back.' An hour and a half later she finally came back. Again, she sat down and started talking.

'Miss, there is nobody with those names who boarded the same plane, they don't even exist! Are you sure you gave us the correct names? Perhaps I should have given you a bit more rest. My apologies.'

I felt my blood boil. *They are not listening at all!*

'You don't understand, they do exist! Of course, they exist! I've known them my whole life! What are you saying? That I just invented those people!?' I yelled, sitting up on my bed.

'Miss, you have to calm down, you have to understand that you were severely dehydrated, had sand in your lungs and drank poisonous cactus water. There is a high possibility that you had dangerous hallucinations!' The doctor's eyes were wide open. You could see how scared she was.

I stared at her in disbelief.

'You're calling me crazy! I didn't have any hallucinations. You just don't want to help me!' I yelled as I got up and started to walk towards her. I picked up an instru-

ment that was near me and raised my hand. In that moment I felt a sting in the back of my neck. I had just enough time to see a nurse holding an injecttion that she just pulled out of my neck. After that it all went black. *It was…*

The two doctors outside of Violet's isolated room were watching through the glass while listening to the same story she has been telling ever since she got there four years ago.

'Why does she keep repeating the story as if it really happened? She never went on a plane, she never got in a plane crash, never got stuck in the desert. She never tried to stab a nurse or was ever stabbed with an injection.' One of the doctors said as he wrote something down.

'I know she keeps telling it as if she is telling it to somebody. Have you looked at her records? They said that she has been telling exactly the same story at the mental hospital where she had stayed before. Word by word, like somebody imprinted it on her brain. Ever since she was seven. *'But she never told the ending. She always stops at IT WAS,'* the other doctor added.

Poor Violet had spent almost her whole childhood hopping around hospitals. Many different doctors were consulted but nobody could find the solution. Her parents were never really parents. They abused and neglected her, giving her different substance when she would disobey. No siblings and no connections with the rest of her family. Little Violet was the sweetest child you could find, dark brown hair, dark brown eyes with a little bit of green if you really looked at them. Unfortunately, she got stuck with the most awful parents. They became alcoholics shortly after they won a lottery. Why celebrate for only one day? Why not every day? They thought that they could find happiness at the bottom of a bottle. Violet could have been saved but nobody cared about her. She was way too young to advocate for herself. The doctors didn't know what to do because if they tried to talk to her, she would refuse and stay quiet. They had a theory that she is telling that story as her cry for help. Nobody noticed when she started telling the story or where she got the idea. She just did. Doctors only noticed that those names she keeps mentioning in her story are actually anagrams.

Stella Brown mixed around is *'Blown Alerts'*,
Jules Wilson is *'Silent Jowls'*,
Grayson Moore is *'A strong omen'* and
Damon Black is *'A mended lock'*.

They don't know what is means and can't seem to connect them in a real story.

They can't connect her story with anything that happened in her life. Unfortunately, they don't know how to help her, no medicine or treatment has worked. They can only observe and keep notes of what they notice. After many, many tries they realised that the anagram for desert is *'Rested'*

Maybe when she tells the ending, she will finally have her rest.

šifra:MaTuš
Maja Tušek
Medicinska škola Osijek
Mentor: Anita Ivanković

DNA

One. Two. Three.

He was lying in front of him. Still and lifeless, but he didn't want to believe it. The man was dead in front of him and he did it, yet he wouldn't take the blame for it.

His mind immediately started searching for solutions, how to fix or undo it. Thoughts and ideas were all over the place, none of them believable or good enough. None could cover up the truth of what really happened. Liam Moore had killed a man.

Cause of death: hammer to head. Time of death: 11:02 p.m. The TV report will say, he thought whispering curses under his breath.

He wasn't planning on serving a life sentence, he couldn't. Even though his life was boring and unhappy, he didn't need this. Living alone was lonely and uneventful, but he didn't need this kind of entertainment. What entertainment could he even get? No siblings, no girlfriend, he hadn't heard from his parents for the last three years, he couldn't even have a pet because he could hardly even take care of himself. Most of his problems were usually solved by his medication. Without them he was certain he wouldn't be here. The meds were supposed to help him relax, to at least feel something – or nothing at all. His life was miserable in every possible way and the last thing he needed was this. For what it's worth, his biochemistry degree could help him in this situation. There was nothing more he could lose.

Come on Liam, think.

There are three main factors used for medical examination of a dead body: pallor mortis – paleness, livor mortis – settling of the blood in the lower part of the body, algor mortis – the body going cold, rigor mortis – stiffness of the body. He could manipulate all those factors if he was careful enough. The main thing he needed to focus on was temperature. To slow down the process of reaching rigor mortis you need to cool the body down. After that he needed to turn the body around a few times, to stop livor mortis. That will push the time of death by a couple hours. With that he could buy himself some time to fake an alibi. It could go well, but how to cool the body down?

Look around. Take in your surroundings.

He was at a farm, an abandoned one, it seemed. No animals or people around. The man lying in front of him was in a shed, where Liam had taken the hammer. All the tools were still there. His car. The man's car was parked in the front, unlocked. That's perfect. The car AC contains a refrigerant which makes the AC system blow cold air. That could cool the body down to fridge temperature or at least something near it. Now he just needed to get the man into his car. First, gloves. Easy enough, some gardening gloves were in the shed. He took the man over his shoulder and carried him to the car. It wasn't hard, really. Adrenaline was rushing through his body and he also knew that with adrenaline present, human strength increases. Or at least it seems like it. Whatever it is, it's helping him. His clothes were coated in thick dark red blood. Even worse was the fact that it wasn't his own. But he didn't mind. He had a plan for those clothes too. Once he brought the man to his car, he laid him down in the backseat. Under him he put a car cover, one of those things people would cover their car in winter with. Just so he didn't stain the man's car with his own blood. He turned the AC on to cool and rolled all the windows up, closed the door and took off his gloves.

First step, done.

Before he did anything else, he needed to clean himself. He could only walk to his apartment. He could use the back door as no one would see him at this time. Lucky for him the cameras on the building complex haven't been working since before he was born. It was a boring, old neighbourhood, and even though he hated it, he couldn't be more thankful for it right now. He got to his apartment quickly. He brought out a bowl and bathroom bleach. Mixed the bleach with water and took all his clothes off. He put them in the bowl and dunked them in. The bleach would take out all the blood. After that he went into the shower. Turned the water so hot that it felt like he was burning his skin off. He was clean, but it didn't feel like it. No matter how much he cleaned, he could still see the blood on his hands, even when it wasn't there. Once he was done, he put on some new clothes. The old clothes and the bleach water were all dumped into the toilet. And with every passing second, he hoped the clothes wouldn't clog the buildings sewerage system. The smell of bleach was still strong throughout his whole apartment. The best he could do is hope it would go away by the morning, but that wasn't his biggest worry right now.

What's the time?

11:38 p.m. Not bad. He will give himself around two hours to fake an alibi. He needed witnesses or camera proof of his alibi. It's the middle of the night, where could he go? His face lit up with an idea.

That's good. That could work.

He'll go to a McDonald's a little bit outside of his city and if anyone asks, he will say that he was going on a late-night drive. He couldn't sleep, so he went to get food. Makes sense. He will take the longer route, on the highway. The highway has cameras which can get his license plate. There won't be any people in his local McDonald's at this time, so this one is a better choice. There might be people travelling that could stop by. And he was 100% right. There were five customers, but that was enough. Five witnesses and a couple of workers who served him were absolutely enough. He took his food, went outside, and sat in his car parked in the parking lot behind the McDonald's, right in front of the camera. The last thing he wanted was to be around other people. Besides, the others saw him get in and go out, that's all that mattered. His face remained calm, but his mind raced with countless thoughts and possibilities about how everything could go wrong. He didn't believe in himself at all, but everything he did so far hasn't gone wrong. It took him about 45 minutes to get to the McDonald's where he stayed for about half an hour. 1:53 a.m. He had perfectly faked his alibi. He would have been at McDonald's by the time of death. The cameras on the highway would capture him going back home. When he got back to his apartment, he didn't even get in, but immediately started walking to the farm where the man was. Usually he would have gone by car, but his car needed to be in front of the building complex, just in case.

As soon as he arrived at the farm a new wave of realisation and bad thoughts hit him. He needed to stay focused. First, he found the gloves he used to carry the man into the car. He flipped the man over and turned the AC over to the hottest setting.

That was easy enough. Now focus.

Now he was running around the farm looking for things to clean the car, the shed and now, when he looked at it, the whole farm needed to be cleaned. His DNA was all over this place. Thankfully, he found everything he needed. Some cloths, antibacterial spray, and gardening boots. He was careful this whole time not to leave his footprints in grass or dirt, he was only walking on concrete. The boots were for when he would be cleaning. As the man was been warmed in the car, he started cleaning. Every single thing he had touched, every single place he had stepped on, everything that was in his hands. After an hour or so, he was finally done cleaning. The only thing visible in the shed right now was the dried-out blood. He couldn't stand the sight of it, but he had to keep it there. The only thing that was left to do was to bring the man back into the spot where he was killed four hours ago. This time it was much easier. The car cover was helping a lot. He wouldn't have to clean the man's whole car, just the handles and the front he had touched. He carried the man over to the

place of his death, still wrapped in the car cover and rolled him over onto the front of his body. He would have fallen that way when someone, not Liam, hit him on the back of his head with a hammer. The hammer was still there, the top covered with the man's DNA while Liam's DNA was nowhere to be found. He grabbed it with his glove covered fingers and placed it next to the man's body. After he had cleaned the car, he stood in front of the man, looking at him. His mind was going through his in–mind–list of the things he needed to do. When he was sure he had done everything and when he couldn't stand to look at the dead man anymore, he walked back to his apartment at 3:38 a.m.

8:00 a.m., his alarm went off. He hadn't slept well. Actually, he hadn't slept at all. The only thing he has wanted to do since he got home was wait for the news. He knew some policeman would be talking about a new investigation. About a man killed on a farm, next to the forest in the middle of the night. He was terribly anxious, and it was clear by the way he looked, walked or did really anything. His mind hadn't given him any rest the whole night and he needed answers as quickly as he could possibly get them. He took a few pills from his drawer and swallowed them. Now he sat down in front of his TV and an elderly man in police attire appeared on his screen. His moustache thick and grey, his badge shining in the morning sunlight.

"It happened this morning, at around 2 a.m." the policeman said.

It worked, Liam thought. Time of death is wrong.

"The man got hit by a hammer on the back of his head."

That's true. But it's not known by whom.

"But it's not known by whom." the policeman's voice synced up with his. "Whoever did it had known what they were doing. They were aware of the situation and it is clear that it wasn't supposed to happen. But..." the voice on TV continued.

Liam's eyes were now glued onto the TV. He was filled with anticipation and anxiety, fidgeting with his fingers, his heart racing.

"It was done well, no fingerprints or footprints, good time management. Not a lot of people would do this well. Whoever did it is smart! Quite frankly, it's a bit weird that a person can know how to properly try to undo all of this. No, really, whoever it was tried to cover it up well. I mean, there's no DNA around there. I have to give them credit for that. What's weird is that there are no traces of the dead man's DNA either. Our killer is unbelievably smart, but don't you think that even the biggest scientists of the world make mistakes? After all the hard work they had put into covering this up, the person responsible for this missed only one thing; they can't leave no DNA, someone has to be the killer."

šifra: codered28
mentor: Iva Šterc
institution: Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Barbara Đuran

DOWN WITH THE FALLEN

Chernobyl, USSR

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant

April 26th, 1986

2:15 AM

Cries for help still echoed from the hallways on all levels of the power plant. I had long given up hope that anyone could hear my pleads and get me out of this rubble, so I silently laid looking at the thick smoke and illumination of fire on demolished walls through a hole in the building which spanned through what once were hallways and stairwells connecting different control rooms, offices and reactors themselves. "How could this happen?" I wondered in denial. It was said it's only a routine reactor testing. What even did happen? My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running.

"Yuri! Yuri is that you?" the voice asked for the dark. It was Yevgeny Vasiliev, one of technicians who was supposed to be on a break while the fire broke out.

"Yeah, it's me, but I can't lift all this rubble of me" I responded.

"Let me help you" said Yevgeny, already lifting parts of concrete components that trapped me.

After some time and a lot of struggling, I was finally freed. Yevgeny took out a flashlight and tried to light it, however unsuccessfully. I looked around the hall we were situated in trying to recognize where exactly we were but the walls that stood around us were unfamiliar to me.

"Have you found anyone else?" I asked Yevgeny who nodded negatively.

He tried to say something but was interrupted by a cry for help coming not so far from us. We started running in the direction of the cry and after a few minutes we saw a dim light illuminating the hallway. We approached closer and now we could

distinguish two silhouettes, one whose legs were crushed under a supportive column that held now collapsed wall and the other kneeling next to it trying to lift the column.

"We are coming!" Yevgeny yelled and started running faster.

I followed and soon we got to the silhouettes. It was my niece Irina who was one of powerplants nurses and her fiancée Sergei who was an engineer monitoring reactor four.

"Dyadtko Yuri, please help him" Irina sobbed.

I examined Sergei. He was half conscious and groaning in pain. One of his legs was crushed and the other was severely bruised. I motioned Yevgeny to help me lift the column from Sergei's legs.

"On three we lift the column, and you pull him from it."

Irina nodded and grabbed Sergei by his arms.

"One… two… THREE"

Sergei let out a bloodcurdling scream and fully passed out. I picked him up and we continued walking.

We walked for some time in silence. Irina had collected herself from previous events and suggested we go to the medicine depository where she could check out Sergei's legs and patch Yevgeny and me up, so that's here we were headed.

"So, what did happen?" Irina inquired.

"Reactor four… it exploded..." Yevgeny answered, his expression grimed.

"What!? But that's not possible..." I exclaimed.

"Everyone thought so, but I saw the ruins with my own eyes! The explosion was so strong it propelled reactor's vessel cap in the air like it was nothing! There is nothing left of the reactor anymore. How do you think we ended up down here, do you really think it was fire that made this part of the building collapse?"

"But that means..."

"The reactor is gone Yuri." Yevgeny admitted with a defeated look on his face.

He was one of the younger technicians who was very passionate about his job, and until he said it out loud was in denial. Catastrophe this great meant he, and everyone else for matter, would have to be evacuated and find other jobs.

"I think this is it" said Irina who stopped in front of a door on our right.

She tried twisting the key, but the door was already unlocked. We entered and I placed Sergei down on a desk and Irina took over the rest. I looked at Yevgeny who had a cigarette in between his lips was nervously looking for a lighter in his pockets.

"A man can't even smoke in peace these days." He mumbled in frustration.

Irina applied splints to Sergeis legs and was already bandaging some cuts on Yevgeny's arm. I looked around for some stuff that could be useful. I looked in the cabinets. Most of them were filled with various notebooks for keeping record of the supplies, medicine and documents. In one I found some batteries and a flashlight. At that time Irina finished mending Yevgeny's wounds and motioned me to come so she could tend to me. Besides a few bruises and cuts I was mostly alright, and I told her not to waste anything on me, but she insisted. While Irina was taking care of my wounds, I looked at Yevgeny, whose expression was almost blank, except for the worry in his eyes. Sergei was still unconscious, and the tension in the room was rising with each passing moment.

"How did it look like?" Irina broke the silence.

"How did what look like?" Yevgeny responded.

"The explosion. You said you saw it right?"

"I haven't seen the explosion itself, but what followed was… oddly beautiful. There was a beam of blue light that was flooding up into infinity." He described, with a tone that was almost sentimental.

Irina looked as if she was pondering about it and stayed silent. She finished bandaging my cuts and started looking for something in a cabinet she got all the medical supplies from. After a few moments of digging around the boxes, she pulled out one, took a few pills out of the packaging and gave one to each of us. Yevgeny looked at her questionably.

"It's potassium iodide, take it." Said Irina sternly.

He complied. Irina was a very kind person, but she never could stand someone who's not acting sensible. In the meanwhile, after many attempts and a lot of cursing, Yevgeny finally managed to light his cigarette.

"Now I'm up for anything." He said with a triumphant look on his face.

Everyone chuckled for a bit. Some time already passed since we entered this room, and the realization that we couldn't stay here much longer was slowly starting to settle in. However, we also couldn't just leave since Sergeis condition was quite bad. Both his legs were broken and moving them a lot to get through the rubble could potentially leave him disabled for the rest of his life. So, we have decided that the most logical move would be to go scout ahead for the exit and if necessary clear the path that leads to it which would make it an easier and less painful way to get Sergei out. Yevgeny and I decided to do it. Irina found us some respirators as well as radiation suits and we set out to find the exit.

Hallways of the basement were dark and eerie. Air was stale, full of dust particles and the ground was covered in water puddles. From time-to-time creaking of metal from above could be heard. The building above us was going to collapse, leaving us with little time to get to the exit. Knowing that under every reactor there was a cooling system, we figured our best option was to get to the cooling system hall of reactor number three which hopefully didn't set ablaze like reactor four.

"Hey, what's this?" said Yevgeny pointing at a door.

The door was scratched and metal plate indicating what the room was used as was removed some time ago. I tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge.

"It's locked, I don't think there is anything important in there though." I said.

Just as I continued walking, there was a loud boom. I turned around just to see that Yevgeny's curiousness got the better of him and he busted the door.

"You should see your face right now; your expression is priceless." He smirked.

"Yeah, it was really funny, ha ha…" I grumbled sarcastically.

Yevgeny entered the room, and I had no other choice but to follow. It was a relatively small room, about 3 meters wide and long. There were cobwebs everywhere and it was safe to assume that no one has been here for some time. There were a few stacks of papers leaning against the wall and in the left corner was a desk. I walked to the desk and inspected the folders on it. Most of them were titled accounting, but then I got to the interesting ones. Titled "reactors 3&4" was a big folder which the accounting folders were stacked on.

"What do we have here? Yevgeny, come take a look at this"

Yevgeny shined his flashlight at the folder. On the first page there already were several redacted lines of text, hiding the names of projects and people. Next page was titled "building regulations".

"Non-compliance with the regulations: bitumen of reactor hall no.3 does not comply with safety regulations and is a fire hazard." I read out loud

"Graphite rods in reactor 4 are too short." Said Yevgeny pointing a blueprint.

The discovery we made was growing more shocking with each turned page of the document. They knew it was dangerous. They knew something like this could happen. Yet they chose to hide it and put people in imminent danger. We had to take these with us. I looked around to find something we could carry the documents in, and an old jacket that was on the backrest of the chair next to the desk. It probably belonged to the person who was often here. I took a closer look at it and noticed the name tag on it. I was dumbfounded. I recognized that name.

"What's wrong?" asked Yevgeny who noticed the sudden change of my expression.

"Oh, it's… it's nothing. I just came up with an idea how to carry the documents." I lied hoping he wouldn't notice.

Yevgeny raised an eyebrow but stayed silent. I took the jacket and tied it into a bag- like accessory which we put the documents in. The world had to know what, he one of the high officials did, and he had to face the consequences of what he's done. We exited the room and continued or way to the cooling system hall.

"You know Yuri, I'm ashamed of everything I was once proud of." Yevgeny broke the silence.

As a boy, he was the champion of USSR in boxing and he went on many competitions even out of the state, proudly wearing the flag and representing his country.

"This regime was so blinded by chasing greatness that they missed so many opportunities to do good. Imagine if they just weren't competing with the west for power, perhaps none of this would've happened. I mean, sure we would possibly work here as well but right now we would be on our break joking with others and drinking coffee. Instead, it's... this…" He said with a heavy heart.

He was right. As a child I remember seeing all the war propaganda portraying us as a strong and united nation. But we all were just afraid of saying or doing the "wrong" thing. And that is no unity.

We continued walking and clearing the path here and there until we finally arrived at the cooling system hall. It was a big hall filled with pumps which cooled the third generator. On the far back side of the room were the pools of used reactor fuel. The pumps were still working, meaning the third reactor wasn't shut down.

"Why haven't they shut it down yet?!" Yevgeny asked angrily.

"My guess is they don't know what happened yet." I answered.

Third block was not damaged a lot, so we easily made our way to the exit leading up to the main corridors. I pulled the doorknob, but it wouldn't move. The mechanism probably jammed from the shockwaves of the explosion.

"I'll take care of that, move aside." Said Yevgeny who was eyeing a few metal rods lying next to the pumps.

He took one and used it as a lever to open the door. I helped him and after a few minutes of struggling we managed to open the door.

"Go and try to get help, and also, here take the documents and hide them." I said handing him the makeshift bag.

"But I can't leave you to go down there back alone, you might need my help!" Yevgeny protested.

"I can manage it, now go!" I replied sternly.

Yevgeny nodded and disappeared into the stairwell. I started heading back to get Sergei and Irina out of here. Creaking of metal construction could be heard more and more often. As I got to the depository, walls already started cracking and the water began flooding the basement. Our time was running out. When I got there Irina was already waiting, her and Sergei were in radiation suits. We carefully picked Sergei up and carried him to the cooling system hall with the walls collapsing behind us. Yevgeny was already there waiting for us with two other men who helped carry Sergei out.

Kiev, USSR

Kiev City Court of the Ukrainian SSR

March 26th, 1987

9:33 AM

It was an unusually warm and sunny morning. As I have predicted we were evacuated two days after the accident and placed in refuge camps in the suburbs of Kiev. After the accident, Yevgeny got a job in construction. Sergeis legs never fully healed bounding him to use a cane for the rest of his life. Despite the challenges, Irina never gave up on him and they got married in January. When the investigation of the accident began, I turned in everything we found in the basement. The investigators placed the documents and the jacket as evidence, and few days ago I was called to testify. I got out of the cab where I met with my lawyer, Viktor Dovzhenko. We once again went through everything.

"Any more questions?" He asked.

"Yes actually, how much jailtime are they facing?"

"Well since they all are facing the charges of negligence about little less than ten years, but it depends on who has the most evidence against them, and with the evidence that was presented till today they are equally responsible. However, I believe that today's trial will change that" said Dovzhenko in a slightly victorious tone.

I was satisfied with the answer. Although I believe they deserved far more by all the pain they caused with their actions. Many have died because of the accident, either at the power plant where it happened or later of radiation poisoning. Initially, I couldn't understand why we ended up in that basement, but I have realized that if we never were down there, we wouldn't find the documents. I got lost in thoughts until Dovzhenko spoke.

"The prosecution calls Yuri Kovalenko to the stand."

I got to the stand. It was time to make all our struggles worth it.

šifra: girlACAM
Mentorica: Mirna Teodorović
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autorica: Amelia Cuculić, 1.c

A LOST GIRL

A girl named Amy was 11 years old, as she was growing up all she felt was loneliness. Through all her years, she felt miserable because she thought she can't find the right people who will cherish her forever. Everyone treated her badly, like she has no feelings. That took her happiness away. Everyday she would go to school with tears in her eyes, overthinking what she has to do for people around her for them to start appreciating her. No one truly liked her the way she was for 15 years except one person she met in kindergarten when she was a kid. She made a best friend, even tho everyone always wanted to separete them, Amy and her best friend stick together no matter what, at least that's what Amy thought. When Amy turned 14, she made 6 new friends after all she had is her best friend for years. In those moments she was with them, she was still feeling lonely, sorrowful and abandoned. She always thought she didn't matter to any of them, even if they comforted her into thinking everything is okay. After Amy found new friends, she kinda stopped hanging out with her best friend for 2 months because teachers said it's for the better. After those 2 months,her best friend and Amy started talking again. Amy introduced her best friend to her other friend from another grade, little did she know she will regret that for her whole life. After some days, their friendship wasn't a duo anymore, it was a whole group. They all started hanging out together but Amy started to be left out. As her mental state got worse, she started isolating herself from her friends and other people. She was too tired to explain everything that's going on with her. Months passed, she just wanted her best friend's presence more than anyone elses. She would call her to hangout everyday even if its for 10 minutes but her friend always made up some excuses and later, Amy found out she was having fun with her close friend she first introduced her best friend to. She felt betrayed. After school was over, summer break started. Amy thought she would spend her summer with her friends, expecally her best friend but life had other plans. One week has passed, Amy and those friends saw each other at school because everyone had to pick up some papers. They didn't say hi to each other, Amy was confused because two days ago, they were talking. After she

got home from school, that's where her life really started being hopeless. Her friends removed her from their lifes, completetaly, but for some reason she didn't care about her other friends, only her best friend. Amy couldn't sleep for days, she was just asking herself why. She lost her sister from another mother, someone who was her favourite person. As summer began, she was going out, found 2 new friends but none of them felt like her ex best friend. While she was out with her new friend, she saw her ex best friend on the streets with the girl Amy first intoduced her to. Amy walked by her, they looked into each other's eyes and she never saw her again even tho they live close to each other. The summer break was over, high school started, Amy was stressed out as usually, she didn't feel happy at all,that school wasn't even her decision. After 3 months passed by, she found some friends but she doesen't trust any of them, her ex friends lied to her so much that she lost ability to trust anyone again. People at school are nothing like her, she feels like she doesen't belong there. Time is going fast, Amy's mental state got worse, teachers are getting mad at her for not participating and doing school work, but she asks herself why does no one ask me why am i like this. They don't know anything about her, they easily judge her by her behavior. She's starting to find it hard to study, do the assignments and other stuff. Her grades are getting worse but she has no motivation or anything right now, nothing helps her feel better. She started getting panic attacks in the school bathrooms that no one knows about, she's becoming more tired everyday. While she's invisibly stuggling, everyone's judging her. Amy is trying everything to make her struggling ivnisible because if she shows it, who would believe her? Amy has this inner turmoil that she can't get rid of no matter what she does. She already has a plan for her future but the desire to disappear from this world is greater wish than her plans for her future. She has no idea how to achieve her goals even tho she really wants to. It's not that she doesen't want help, she just know nothing would help her so she continues living like that until she couldn't anymore. One day, her mind went quiet, she couldn't feel the pain in her heart and it was finally over, even tho her life ended sadly, Amy finally felt free. She knew she made people in her life suffer for some time but when she was suffering no one paid attention so she did what's for the best.

Amelia Cuculić, 1.C

šifra:tearsD4B
Mentorica: Mirna Teodorović
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autor: Dominik Kalenik, 4.b

MY DUTY

There I was, standing at my friend's funeral, overwhelmed by emotion. I was thinking to myself, "What do I do now? Do I cry? Do I comfort his parents? Or do I try to comfort his only son, left without a parent because of my friend's motorcycle accident?" I couldn't decide on the best course of action, but then his parents saw me and recognized me as his old friend—the one who was with him every day, driving motorcycles, hanging out at bars and parks, or just relaxing and playing video games at each other's homes. They came up to me to say hello. I offered my condolences, and seeing his parents made me break down. I had been trying to hide my tears, because in our culture, a man crying is seen as a sign of weakness, and I didn't want to appear weak in front of his family. I wanted them to have the strength to overcome the loss of their child. We talked about our favorite moments with him, and we couldn't stop crying. He was an amazing friend, brother, father, and husband. They asked if I had seen his kid. I said I was looking for him but couldn't find him. They told me he was off to the side because he hated big crowds and was still mourning the loss of his dad, and the realization that he was now an orphan. They showed me where he had gone, so I went to find him. When he saw me, his eyes were red from crying, but his facial expression was happy. He ran to me and hugged me as tightly as he could with his little hands and said, "Uncle, is Dad really gone?" I said, "Unfortunately, kiddo." He asked if his dad would ever be back. I responded, "Oh, I wish he could." He started to cry again, but for some reason, I couldn't. I picked him up and said, "Everything's going to be okay. Don't worry." He then took out a picture of me and his father from when we bought our first bikes, fixed them, and then drove around town until 3 a.m. We took that picture as a memory. He said, "There's something on the back you need to see." I flipped the picture over, and there was a message for him that said, "If one

day I am gone from this world, call your uncle. He will help you with anything you will ever need." As I read that message, tears started pouring down my face. After he asked me if that was true, I said, "You better believe that, because your father was my brother. We may not be blood-related, but he still was my brother, so I'll take care of you, kid." I asked him if he wanted to go back to say his final goodbyes to his father. He nodded. I said, "Okay, let's go." So I carried him back to the funeral home. It was difficult seeing them lower the coffin into the grave, but we managed to finish the ceremony relatively easily. We were about to say goodbye to the family before leaving. His son and I went to his parents, and they congratulated him on being such a brave young man. They didn't know that he still didn't realize what had happened because he's still too young. Then they asked me what I would do afterward. I said, "Look at..." The back of this picture; then you will see what I will do next. They read it and asked the kid, "Do you want to go with him and live with him, or you will stay at your grandparents' house for the time being and finish your school in their town?" He responded with a "no" because he didn't want to leave all his friends in this town or school behind in these hard times. They were a bit shocked when he said that. I reassured them that he's in good hands and not to worry, but of course, they did because I don't seem like a person who would or can take care of a child. So I said I will prove them wrong and that this little kid will be the best person there is, just like his late father. They offered to help if I ever get stuck with raising him. I said thanks, but I always will find a smart way to get out of trouble. Then they said, "We trust you that you will make a great man of their grandchild." So they gave me a spare key to my friend's home so we can get his son's stuff. When we got inside the house, the usually lively place seemed so empty without him. Never did I think I'd see his place in this state, but there's nothing we can do at this point. His son collected all the things he needed. Weirdly, he took only clothes with him. I asked why not take any of his toys. He responded, "In my new home, I'd like to have fewer reminders of my father for some time, but when I want to play with all my toys, we can just come back to play," and so he doesn't completely forget about his father. I said, "Fair enough. We can go back here as many times as you will need, and one day this might even be your house where you will raise a child of your own." He smiled for the first time since his father's passing. I was happy that I helped. We went back to my house. It didn't take too long for him to get comfortable because of all the times he came with his dad, all the fun we three had. Soon the night came, so I asked him where he would like to sleep, as I had a couple of different beds for guests. He said, "I don't want to sleep alone. Can I sleep in your bedroom with you?" I said, "Sure, if you can't sleep alone,

that's alright." So the years flew by, and he started the 5th grade. Onset puberty was a difficult task to manage with all his mood swings and starting to like girls. I had to console him and teach him how to treat them right. He was a fast learner, so soon enough he brought home this one wonderful girl and introduced us. He said that they were getting serious and that he wanted us to meet so her parents would let them have sleepovers, because, you know, the parent is always scared for their child, especially at that age when they had no proper education about intimate stuff. So when they came, I made sure to prepare some food for them to show off a little in front of his girlfriend so she can say good things about his family to her folks. I made his father's and my favorite tacos. When they got inside, he was confused and said, "Today isn't Tuesday. Why are you making tacos?" because we had a Taco Tuesday tradition still from when...

And his father was still alive, so why not keep it up? I said I wanted you two to have something special. Because she came to meet me, she responded with, "Oh, you must be his uncle. Then he has told me a lot of nice things about you, even how you stepped up as his parent when he lost his." I just responded, "Well, someone had to teach the kid about life, and I know that his father is seeing him from above and smiling. How has he grown up so far?" We chatted a bit, finished the food, played some of his favorite games while listening to music. His girlfriend was a bit weirded out at our taste in music because we mainly listened to metal, so we started the night with some Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden, so we didn't show her the heavier music at first so she could get used to it. But soon after, we found out she liked it so much. Then we played some Bad Omens, a bit of Sleep Token, and finished the night with Lorna Shore and Slaughter to Prevail. We even showed her how we trained some vocals and tried to do the most bizarre sounds we could. She had a blast listening to us two compete. When it was time for her to go home, I said, "It's too dark outside. Want us to drop you off?" She said, "Yes, of course, thanks so much." I responded with an excited, "Hell yeah!" because now I could show her our car collection in the garage. We went downstairs; I flicked the lights on, and she was amazed at how beautiful our garage/workshop was, with all the tools imaginable and our couple of main cars: our Toyota AE86 Trueno, the Zastava Yugo 45, Golf II, and our daily driver Honda Civic Si, wrapped in a beautiful lavender wrap, customized for the best performance and all weather. She fell in love with the car. Then we dropped her off at her house. I said, "Whenever you two want to hang out, let me know. I will drive you whenever you need." She smiled and thanked me. The next day, he said that we couldn't have done a better job at welcoming her to our home because her parents

loved all the stories she told them and how we both treated her and had informed us that she will be able to have sleepovers whenever they wanted. How much of a good impression we made! Which was very nice to see him actually put some thought into something because normally he wasn't interested in anything except games, TikTok, or fixing and modifying our cars that we collected. But he has started to think about how he looks, how he smells, and what he says, just because of this one girl. The feeling of seeing that was beautiful, and I couldn't be more proud of him for that. And one day, he comes into my room saying, "Yo, Uncle, see this?" And he showed me a person riding a motorcycle and said, "Isn't this cool?" Which, when I looked at it better, looked like the same one his dad drove all those years ago. A feeling of nostalgia and pain swept through my heart, and I said, "Yeah, yeah," just to quickly brush off that feeling. But I guess I wasn't too good at hiding the expression on my face. He said, "What's wrong?" I said, "Nothing." Then he said, "You rarely get this expression on your face. Something..."

Is that seriously wrong? What I said was, "Oh, you know me too well! That's the exact motorcycle your dad drove me on most." Then he said, "Isn't it?"

The one he had the crash on isn't totaled, I said, "Nope, that's a different one; he bought this one recently at an auction." Then I asked him, "Do you want to see it in real life?" He responded with a "Hell yeah!" So I picked up the car keys and the keys to my friend's garage. We went there, and I took the covers off of a bike I told him specifically never to take off. He then said, "Makes sense why you were hiding it from me all this time. You didn't want me to see it so you wouldn't have to get beautiful and painful memories of my father." Good thing is that he understood my situation. So, to lighten up the mood, I said, "Wanna go for a ride?" He said, "Of course!" I went to the storage room to pick up some safety gear for us two, because safety first, ALWAYS. I turned on the engine. He said, "Can you let me drive?" Of course, I said he can, only after passing the riding exam. However, he is still too young for driving. We went for a ride, had a blast, went home, and slept like babies. One day, he came to me and asked, "Uncle Con, can you teach me how to shave?" I said, "Yes, of course, that is my job." So I told him how to first prepare for shaving with hot water, a new razor, a towel, and shaving cream. I first showed him on myself what to do, then told him to not be scared of making mistakes or cutting himself, because we all make mistakes; that's what makes us human. He finished shaving for the first time without a cut. I wish his dad—or I should say, *me*—used to be full of cuts because of how much we rushed to shave and didn't take time to do it properly. Soon enough, it was the end of 8th grade, preparations for high school, getting all the points necessary

to get into a good school. Still together with that nice girl he met in 5th grade, and she was like family at that point. So we all had a discussion about where they wanted to go first. He said he wanted to become a mechanic. I said that wouldn't be the smartest option because he already knows a lot about cars and he doesn't need a diploma to get a normal job in the field. I suggested he go to a graphic design school because he loves to play games on his PC and loves painting mini figurines with me, so he is very good with colors and brushes, if he wanted to go for a traditional art school rather than a more technical school. Later on, we could be designing our own graphics we could put on our house or cars, which would be very useful. That day we were discussing schools, he wanted to see his dad's grave. I drove them, and we lit a candle, cleaned a bit, said our prayers, and when we were coming home, he said he had decided that he will become a graphic designer so that we could have nice designs on our car wraps, and he was happy to hear that his girlfriend also decided that she wanted to go to the same school as him. I asked them, "Aren't you going to get bored of each other if you two see each other so much?" They said that they will figure it out when the time comes. First year ended without any problem, so did the other two. He was an average student, nothing too bad or too good, but I...

Just wanted him to be happy; he was very happy because of all the excursions they had with the school and all the places they visited. Money was never an issue if something fun for him was in question. He and his girlfriend always came running to me when they were coming home because I always picked them up so they could tell me all the fun things they did when out on the excursions. So now comes arguably the worst and best year—4th year—because you are happy that you are finally done with school, but then come the struggles of getting a job, paying rent, groceries, bills, and all other headaches that adulthood has for you. So I made sure to prepare him as well as I could by stopping giving him allowance money as much as he was usually getting and just giving him enough for food. But for the rest of the things he wanted to buy, he could earn money by doing simple tasks around the house. So he told me, "I don't need to do anything around the house so I can get more money for my driver's license and dates with my girlfriend." I said to myself, "Good job; he's on the road to becoming an amazing person, just like his late father would have wanted him to become." Then comes another headache in the 4th year: the state graduation exam. I explained to him that if he wanted to go to a university, he needed to finish it with a good grade and to research where he wanted to study after high school. I even told him it's okay to go to an international school if one piqued his interest. He said sure, he would see if there's anything. I said then to him, "There's always an option to

go to work straight from school or to go even further in his education as a graphical designer." I let him think about the answer until the end of the year so he doesn't rush into things like myself and his father used to. The end finally came; he passed the state exam with flying colors, and now it's time for prom. I told him I could pay for the suit he would get, but he insisted that he worked so hard so he could buy himself and his girlfriend a nice matching suit and dress for prom. I picked them up and drove them home. Then the morning after, I said, "Remember how I told you that one day you could have your father's house when you grow up?" He said that he remembers. I said, "Good," handed him the keys, and told him, "Congratulations on your first home. You can go live there with your girlfriend now that you both are adults and can take care of yourselves." They both found stable jobs and were living together for a year, and one day I got a random call from him. I asked, "Is something wrong?" It was him, next to his girlfriend, smiling like never before. They told me they got engaged. I couldn't be happier for them. After a year, they got married. We had so much fun; his grandparents even told me, "Sorry for doubting your parenting skills," but I understood what they were thinking—that a gaming, reckless driving, somewhat childish personality friend of their son could take care of a little kid. But look how he's now the best version of himself with the love of his life by his side until death parts them. Soon enough, I got a picture of a positive pregnancy test. I called them instantly to see if they were messing with me, but no, it was real. The once little boy I brought up will now have a little boy or girl of his own that he will need to take care of, but it's okay because he has me and his wife by his side, and I will make sure to be the best grandfather there is.

Šifra:worldP4C
Mentorica: Mirna Teodorović
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autor: Patrik Miljanović, 4.c

THE THREAD BETWEEN US

In Clara's world, everyone had a golden thread that bound them to their soulmate. It was said to be unbreakable, a lifeline of destiny. But Clara's thread frayed at the edges, drifting endlessly into the empty sky.

"Maybe they're far away," people said. She tried to believe them, but deep down, she knew: her thread led to nowhere. It wasn't destiny; it was a void.

Everything changed when she met Felix, a boy with no thread at all. "I cut mine years ago," he said, smiling faintly. "It's all nonsense, isn't it? Fate, soulmates…none of it's real."

Clara envied his detachment, the way he walked unburdened. She asked him to help her untangle herself. Together, they began unraveling her thread, pulling it apart strand by strand.

For a moment, Clara felt free. The thread no longer defined her. But as it dissolved, she felt something else: emptiness. Without the thread, who was she?

One day, Felix spoke quietly, almost to himself. "You know, I thought cutting my thread would make me happy. But all it did was prove that none of this matters."

Clara froze. She stared at the fraying remains of her own thread and wondered—was she truly freeing herself, or was she just slipping into the same void?

In the end, Clara chose to keep unraveling. Perhaps her thread had no meaning. Perhaps none of it ever did. As the last strand faded into the air, Clara felt…nothing.

She looked at Felix, who gave her a sad smile. "Welcome to the other side," he said.

There was no destiny. No golden light. Only the quiet truth: sometimes, we unravel ourselves, and there is nothing waiting at the end.

šifra: willowN1A
Mentorica: Sanja Alexander Pehnec
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autorica: Nika Belc, 1.a

THE WHISPERING WILLOW

Once upon a time, in a village setteld between rolling green hills, there grew a magical willow tree. The villagers believed it could grant a single wish to those pure of heart who could solve its riddle. Many had tried, but no one has succeeded.

Amara, a kind-hearted girl, lived in the village. She came from a poor family but she was brave and had a big hearth. She had a blind younger brother Ian. His only wish was that one day he sees the sunrise from the highest hill. Determined to make her little brother happy, Amara went to the willow. After she saw the tree she slowly approached the willow.The tree whispered its riddle: "I have roots that do not tie, a trunk that doesn't climb, and leaves that touch the sky. What am I?" It was a hard riddle but Amara was a smart girl. She thought really hard. She took her time and gazed at the willow's swaying branches and suddenly found the answer and smiled. „You're a dream," she said softly. „You grow within us, untamed and limitless."The willow swished her branches with approval and granted her wish. That night, her little brother got his vision. It was a blessing for the whole family.There was a tear in everyones eyes.

Wilow tree grew tall enough to carry Amara and her brother to the hilltop. As dawn broke, golden light bathed the village below. Amara was never happier then in that moment. So did her brother Ian. From that day on, the willow grew even more vibrant, tree now had a bigger wish to fulfill the dreams of others encouraged by strong bond and love of the siblings. And since Amara was the first person who got the riddle right, the villagers whispered its story for generations.

šifra: 88sdo08
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Vivian Hope Konatarević

ETERNAL

Cyra woke up to the moonlight on her skin, creating a slight twinge on every surface it touched. She turned to look at the time, 1:34 a.m., her broken digital alarm clock flashed the time in such a way that even strobe lights would envy. She didn't plan on buying a new one though, her parents bought it for her in Iran a month before they sent both Cyra and her sister, Samira, to Berlin. If she wanted to rid herself of the clock, she would have also rid herself of their memory, she couldn't do that, she didn't have the *heart* to. As she got out of bed, she felt her head aching as though it had been bludgeoned in her sleep. She turned to her nightstand. It wasn't there. She could've sworn she bought a good amount not even three days ago. Walking towards the kitchen she saw her sister lying on the sofa, staring blankly at the floor until her eyes fell on Cyra. Their apartment was small, the kitchen facing the so-called *living room* that only ever consisted of a sofa and a rug. Cyra locked eyes with Samira who was looking dreadful. Her eyes dark and lifeless suiting her dull expression.

"You haven't eaten anything today, have you Cyra?" Samira questioned with a tone alluding to the fact that she already knew the answer. "I would if you would make something for once instead of lying on that mangy old sofa all day!" exclaimed Cyra. "You know I can't do that, " Samira replied softly. "You and I both know why I can't.' Samira's tone frustrated Cyra even more, but it also saddened her. Oblivious as to why Samira's statement had such an effect on her, she got up abruptly, grabbed her keys from the kitchen counter and hurried to the front door.

"I need fresh air." Cyra stated her voice much calmer than before. "If you're going where I think you're going-" Samira was abruptly cut off by her sister as she slammed the entrance door, frantically locking it.

The hallway was just as dim as it usually was, the whispers just as annoying as they usually were, only quieter. The disorienting feeling of vertigo she felt as she looked down the hallway was just as familiar as the hallway itself. Walking towards the stairs that lead to the ground floor, she stopped to glance at the two large windows above the stairs. The moon was telling her something, though she could never understand

it. It tended to attempt to start a conversation with her. A hand placed itself on her shoulder, startling her. She turned her head slightly only to recognise her landlord, a hollow-eyed man Cyra never really liked.

"You haven't paid your rent the past couple of months, I was wondering if you were alright?" His deep voice was echoed by a high-pitched scream, the contrast doing her head in.

"I'll pay you back when I can, I'm currently in between jobs." His face softened a bit, but as he opened his mouth to reply, all that came out was a kind of weeping scream. Cyra nodded in reply, not wanting to come off as rude and exclaim how she didn't understand a lick of what he was trying to say, she also didn't want to entertain him any further, as she was in a hurry anyway.

"Yes well… er… yes! Yes, yes. But I must apologise, I have a job interview in half an hour, so I must go! Sorry!" She stated as she ran down the staircase to the front door of her apartment complex, fully aware he didn't believe a word she said. A job interview at *almost two in the morning?* she thought to herself. He wasn't the most observant person, but even a teenager with an IQ lower than their *age* would've seen right through her.

As she walked through the neighbourhood, doing her best to ignore the moon's infuriating and indecipherable words, her eyes fell upon her soon-to-be destination: 'Der Afterlife Club' or 'The Afterlife Club'. It was a small club on the corner of a practically *abandoned* street, a club that people like *her* often frequented. The moment she entered, she was hit by the smell of booze and body odour. The place consisted of one main room that was slightly lower than the outside pavement, which explained the first two steps everyone walked down once they entered. Opposite the entrance was a sad looking bar; it could've been made during the Great Depression for all she knew, as the thing was practically falling apart. In front of the bar was a *stick-on dance floor* that was lifting at the corners.

Despite its sad nature, it was packed. Cyra shuffled through the crowd making her way to the left bathroom. There were two bathrooms, both shared bathrooms, at least that's what they became once the owner realised, they couldn't control who entered which bathroom. Once she entered, her eyes fell upon a man. Despite his heavily distorted face, which looked like it had been blurred out in Photoshop, she recognised him - he was just the man she had been wanting to see. She didn't know his name, only what he sold. As she approached him, he pulled out a Ziploc bag full of pills and extended his oddly long arm towards her. She placed a crisp €100 bill into his hand in exchange for the bag. He said something, but similarly to her landlord's words, she couldn't understand not a single thing.

Cyra couldn't wait till she got home; she sat on the edge of the pavement and opened the bag with a *pop*. She took two pills, which was about how much she usually needed. Although, she didn't feel *any* different, she decided that it would kick in eventually and started her journey back home.

She noted that the voices are in her hallway only got louder as she was unlocking the door to her apartment, until they suddenly stopped once the door was fully open. She entered her home. She locked eyes with Samira, but she still didn't look right, her eyes still looked dull and lifeless, but now her skin was discoloured and pale. Cyra frantically took another two pills and knelt in front of her sister who was still hopelessly lying on the floor with her feet dangling off the armrest. She just scanned her sister's entire face. She stared at Samira for a while until she heard her mutter a couple of words under her breath.

"What was that?" questioned Cyra

"It's not going to work this time."

"What isn't?" Cyra replied as her eyes welled up with tears, frustrated by her lack of understanding in the situation. She didn't know *why* she was sad.

"You know *exactly* what."

"No, I don't." Cyra retorted as she pulled out three more pills and shoved them in her mouth, tasting her tears. Samira gave her a disappointed look and with an exasperated, yet warm tone vocalised her advice.

"Go to the landlord's apartment: ringing the doorbell should suffice. He'll help you."

"How? That old man can't even form an intelligible sentence-"

"GO!" Samira cried.

Cyra stood up and made her way to the hallway, being cautious not to leave the door unlocked. She questioned herself why she was so adamant on locking that *stupid* entrance door. Her landlord only lived a couple doors down from her and Samira, yet the hallway seemed to stretch longer with each step, and the whispers grew louder and more intelligible. As she was in front of the landlord's door, she noticed that the whispers had transitioned to screams and loud demands comprehensible enough to understand them. They were commanding her to turn back to her apartment. Just as her finder was a millimetre away from the doorbell, the voices stopped. She rang the doorbell, hearing it through the thin walls. For a moment she calmed down. She suddenly felt her eyes seal shut as her head hit the floor, and everything went blank.

She began to slowly wake up as she heard muffled talking. She didn't recognise where she was. Practically blinded by the *cold* white lights shining in her eyes, she came to the conclusion that she was in the hospital. She couldn't have been more confused - why was she, of all people, in the hospital. Ever since she was a child, she had an amazing immune system. She was snapped out of her thoughts once she noticed someone who seemed to be a doctor, or a nurse enter her room.

"Good, you're awake! You gave Mr. Schmidt a scare back there!" The nurse, who seemed to be named Edith (according to her name tag) exclaimed.

"Mr. Schmidt- oh! My landlord, why would he- " Cyra was interrupted by her own recollection of the events, why would he bring her *here?*

"You overdosed," the nurse retorted blankly, almost as if reading Cyra's mind.

"What?" Cyra asked in a hushed whisper, mostly to herself.

"Well yeah… that's what a concoction of nasty drugs will do to you." the nurse added trying to *defuse the tension.*

"But I only took one drug," Cyra said turning her head slowly to the nurse. "Well… a good amount of pills… but they were the same colour and type!"

"Well, we found a bunch in your system, when was the last time you were sober?" The nurse suddenly felt the need to explain herself once her eyes fell upon Cyra's confused expression, "I need it for a form I'm filling out, on your current condition of course."

"I… Hm, I don't remember." Cyra said blankly.

"You don't remember?"

"Nope."

"Alright then, would you like to sign yourself in for a rehabilitation centre, get yourself off the drugs and back on track?" The nurse asked, her tone sweet and caring.

"Errr… sure yeah," Cyra answered, still quite confused, "Just out of curiosity, how many different drugs did you find in my system?"

The nurse stopped dead in her tracks as she was already making her way to the door. "Six… methamphetamine being the most frequent, next to that was heroin."

"I don't remember taking heroin"

The nurse gave her a melancholy look, which seemed to be a smile, though only her lips were pursed, as she was leaving Cyra's room.

It was the last day of her treatment at the rehabilitation centre. She had stayed there for six months. Despite her joy of being able to *finally* go back home, she had this feeling of pensive dread that she couldn't explain. They were going to let her go, *why was she sad?* Sad wasn't the right word for it. A better way to describe this feel-

ing is that it reminded her of when she would daydream as a child and be snapped back into reality by her parents - a mixture of disappointment and some kind of dread. The nurses noticed this. Only a few bothered to ask her anything, only to be discouraged by Cyra's lack of ability to describe the feeling. She was happy that she had gotten sober, but she didn't know why it was *necessary* that she does. Not because she wanted to stay high - she didn't even know why she got high *in the first place.* It seemed needless and unnecessary. Throwing her life in the gutter after all that her parents had risked getting her and her sister to Germany, they had done all of this so that they could have a better life. And whenever she remembered her sister, she was frightened about what she was going to say to her, wondering whether she would be mad at her for her recreational drug use or proud that she got over it in *only* six months. Tears started falling as she remembered she was still in the waiting room, waiting for her name to be called, after which she would walk herself back home and express her gratitude to Mr. Schmidt, without whom she wouldn't be alive.

"Cyra Amani!" called a nurse and she made her way to the front desk.

Looking at the sign indicating she was walking on the street she had lived on for years, her heart skipped a beat. She would finally get a job and find herself, but she was still questioning *why* she had even started using drugs. She unlocked the entrance door to her apartment complex and went up the staircase, the hallway that had once seemed so long and jarring looked not to be even fifteen meters in length. The thing that made her the most joyous was the lack of voices, she vividly remembered this specific hallway being almost *talkative*. As she passed her landlord's front door, she decided she would thank him after greeting her sister. She was suddenly snapped out of her thoughts as a revolting smell hit her nose. She carefully unlocked the door, and the smell only got worse. The moment she entered her eyes fell on her sister's body - it had obviously been there for longer than six months. Cyra's eyes started to water as she realised, she had been living with and talking to her sister's body for a very long period of time. She screamed as her brain was flooded with the memories that her brain *subconsciously censored*. After her sister's tragic death, she didn't know what to do with herself. She used drugs as an outlet to create this imaginary world where everything was as it once was, but it got out of hand.

This is why she hated being sober, she was too fragile to come to terms with reality and the fact that, no matter how beautiful life can be, it is a process of elimination in itself. Cyra's stubborn need for a reality in which she was satisfied ended up ruining *true* reality to the point of no return.

šifra: EYE18
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Željeznička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Ella Vuković

EYE TO EYE

The only time when I get to see her is when the obscure darkness swallows the beauty of light in the outside world. The last time I saw her eyes I remember them being filled with perfect mixes of light and dark shades of brown. Now, when I look at her from the bottom of the stairs that lead to my old and dusty attic, I am not really sure where can I detect them on the silhouette that looks down on me.

Every morning for the past six months I wake up in that attic. In July when it all started, I would get dragged upstairs by her hoarse in later hours and she would leave me as soon as a glimpse of light strikes the outside world. Now, in the winter, I get to see her sooner and she gives me more time before she vanishes. Each time before she does so, she takes a part of me with her. Sometimes it's just tiny pieces of my hair that she pulls out with her icy hands, parts of my skin she cuts with her sharp nails or perhaps she ties a rope around my neck and pulls me hard enough to leave me with a brand-new necklace I can't take off.

I walk towards a room in my house that was right of my so-called kitchen. I am not sure how to call it, perhaps it is a combination of a living room, bedroom and bathroom although it looks like a dump, or some kind of an insect zoo. I am not bothered by the looks of some room in a house that's now even mine. I don't even know how I've gotten in here in the first place. All I know is that something is missing, and I can't figure out what part of my life has gotten away from me.

As I was sitting on the floor next to some rotten mattresses, I was meant to call my bed, I noticed a mirror in the corner of the room. I decided to take a look at myself for the first time in six months.

"Well, that's something", I mutter to myself as I see a man, I didn't recognize looking at me. He was supposed to be my reflection, but I don't recall myself as unpleasant as that. I think I don't want to look at myself ever again.

The sun is going down and my non-existing clock is saying it's time for my lady to come and call for me. Hearing her echoes, I walk towards my attic. As she opens the

door for me and welcomes me in her lair I collapse on the floor, and she lays beside me. I turn my head towards her, still looking for her eyes. As I was observing her invisible features, I noticed a shiny sharp object next to her head.

"What you need that for?", I say to her not expecting an answer.

"The same reason you needed it", she says with her shaky voice that I heard for the first time.

All confused, I reply to her "What do you mean by that my lady?" and almost immediately she says, "You will find out", and vanishes before the sun is ready to come out.

I wake up on the mattresses in my living-bedroom-bathroom and notwithstanding the fact that the sun is blinding me, I can still hear her calling me. Instead of mumbling random notes she was saying one word repeatedly, but I could not acknowledge what she was saying. Following her voice, I find myself in the same place I go to every night. Today she did not open the door for me with her warm welcome, instead I had to let myself in and it made her echoing voice stop.

I waited until the next morning to hear her calls, but during the night, nothing happened. I was walking down the stair when I noticed something on the bottom of them.

It was a baby carrier.

Confused, I continued forward making myself closer to the strange object, "Is someone here", I asked even though I was not sure who I was asking this.

When I reached my hand to touch the baby carrier, a silhouette stroke from my left side, picked up the baby carrier and threw itself through my window.

Was this window already broken before? As I was moving towards the window, she decided to start repeating the same word as the last time. When I would get closer to the broken window, her voice would give me a greater feeling of its presence. I picked up a piece of shattered glass and put it close my ear. I could hear her clearly through it. The thing she was saying was "Eveline".

Eveline. The name sounds too familiar to me, but I can't remember where I've heard it before.

The night outies made her voice activate again. Now, her voice was dragging me towards a basement that is next to the main door of the house. A sudden rush of adrenaline hit me as I opened the door and started to make my way down. As I took my last step, her repeating stopped.

"WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?", I yelled out of a sudden not realizing this would make the basement door shut close and all the power turn down.

"You think I'm scared of ya? Come on, try me. Show yourself", I continued talking to her when her strength threw me against the wall and made me stay levitating for good five long seconds. Then she harshly allowed me to fall down on my knees. While I was busy coughing blood, my lady made her way to stand in front of my hurt body.

"You are going to stay here. Until you find out what you did to me", she said with the raspiest voice I have ever heard, although I've never heard anyone's voice aside from hers and mine. She disappeared before I could say anything, but the power came back.

I am not sure how much time have passed since she left me here. All I know is that now I hear her footsteps and singing from other parts of the house. I got up to try to find the clues of what she meant by the last thing she said. The basement was huge and was filled with all kinds of garbage you can imagine. Boxes with names, some never even opened. I decided I would look through every one of them.

First few boxes were filled with some random house decorations, Christmas themed, Halloween themed, birthday decorations and et cetera. One box contained a single broken vase with a small lock of long black hair that was glued to the dried-out blood on it. Next box I got my hands on didn't show any signs of ever being opened. It was covered in layers of brownish scotch tape, and still had the address and consumer's name on it.

"Jonah Pierre", I read the name out loud as I started to feel oddly familiar energy coming from a sound of that name. I don't know where I know that man from.

I ripped open the box that was filled with brand new children's toys, the smallest toddler's clothes that were all in shades of pink and purple, some pacifiers that clearly never had any use in this world. I put it aside thinking nothing of it as I was deciding which box to open next.

After some time, I finally got to the last box that was carefully hidden behind every other. I took the box with some kind of a letter attached to it and read it before searching for what's inside.

"My dearest Jonah,

A lot of time had passed since you've seen me in my human form, now all I could do is haunt you with a ghost you turned me into.

I've always thought that we will make Stephanie's childhood worth living, make our family happy and try our best to keep us safe.

I don't know what got into you. Just a few months ago we were the happiest family in this town full of jerks and we were so proud of everything we've accomplished.

Now everyone in this town says they're happy we're dead, a crazy family that could never fit to their standards, even though Stephanie and I were the only ones who suffered that fate.

You didn't even give her a chance to live, and she was meant to bring peace to this world, to our world.

I always knew something was wrong with you, I just didn't know how to explain it to myself.

2 weeks before June of last year ended, you started taking me to the attic that was supposed to be Stephanie's room when she gets older.

Pulling my hair out, cutting my skin with your sharp shiny knife, breaking the window with my head, tying the rope around my neck and hysterically dragging me around.

Until the start of July when you took me in this basement, tied me in the chair in this right corner where you're reading this, you slowly took my eyes out with a knife, and you let me go thought my agony alone.

You said you loved my brown eyes and I believe you. It was the only part of me you decided to take and keep with you.

You keep searching for them on my silhouette but they were with you all along.

Now that you know the truth, you can go out of the basement to suffer the fate I designed for you.

-Evelin.

I could feel cold shivers traveling down my spine.

My name is Jonah Pierre and I decided to end my wife's life right in this very basement more than half a year ago. My wife and our future baby Stephanie meant everything to me until my sickness got the best of me. I could not stop all the hallucinations that drove me and my Eveline insane to the point where I took my most important things from my own self. I could hear the door of a basement unlocking itself.

Too focused on the letter, I almost forgot to look into the box. As I was picking it up, I noticed that parts of it were covered with dried out blood.

"What the hell", I said with a shaky voice as I opened the box with a pair of rotten, half eaten by worms eyes. I quickly threw a box away, got up and started going backwards when I bumped into a tall figure that was standing before me.

When I turned around, I saw my lady's silhouette.

"Five seconds", she said with the voice that was no longer raspy, it was just how I now remember it from months and months ago.

"What?" I said as I didn't understand her intentions.

She started counting down and when she got to number one, she turned around with rapid speed, her arm swinging with already bloody knife right towards my face.

I was fast enough to dodge the attack and I quickly ran up the stairs, hearing her footsteps follow me

Running for my life in a house I once called a chance for a new life, she was chasing me ready for revenge. I hid in my living-bedroom-bathroom, that I now recognize as a room that was supposed to be for our little baby. I knew she could easily find me here, so I snuck out the window and started to run again.

It was pitch dark outside and I could tell the sun is not going to come out anytime soon, the only things that made me see where I was going were street lights. I turned around and saw my lady standing in the distance. I could quietly hear her mumbling the notes she sung before.

She mimicked my every move.

After some time, I saw a car making its way towards me. It stopped just when it was supposed to pass me.

"Stop, we're from police. What are you doing out in this hour sir?", the policeman in the passenger seat asked me, pointing his hand lamp into my face.

"Sir, please, you gotta help me. My wife is going to kill me", I said as I noticed both of them studying my tortured face.

"What is your name sir?", the other policeman asked me.

"Jonah, Jonah Pierre", I replied to him trying to catch a breath.

"Jonah Pierre is dead. Now let's try again, what is your name sir?", he asked me again.

"Please you have to believe me sir, I'm not dead. My wife is chasing me", I said and spot Evelin under another streetlight not so far away, "you see her, right there under the street light. Please, she's trying to kill me", I say as they both turn their heads before looking at each other.

Then they start laughing.

"Sir, put both of your hands behind your back", one of them ordered me.

"What? Why?", I said confused.

"We're taking you somewhere you can be your truest self, with people like you", he said while getting out a car and cuffing my hands. The other one was still laughing at his comment.

"So, what's your wife's name?", the one driving asked me when other one let out a small laugh.

"Evelin Pierre", I said, not realising this would make the officer hit a brake.

"Stop playin' with us man, you can sell that story to someone else", he said as he slowly started to drive again.

2 months later, I'm sitting alone in a white room they decided to put me in after confirming my identity. They explained to me that I was announced dead after they found the letter that I wrote after letting Eveline to die. I wrote that I was going to end my life and make sure they never find me, and since I never came back and there were no traces left of me, they confirmed my death. I remember now that during the search for my body, I would hide in all different places until I could get enough peace to come back home.

Therapy has helped me a lot, although I know it can never heal me fully.

I still see her; she visits me every night and wakes me up by knocking on my window to look at her while she sings from outside. Once she even brought the eyes, I took off of her and held them on her face, so we could look each other with peace, eye to eye, just like we always did before.

šifra: Orkney
mentor: Martina Mavrek
institution: Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec
autor: Karla Kraljić

FINDERS, KEEPERS

"Hello Haley!" I exclaimed as I ran up to her. It was a cloudy fall day and there was barely anyone outside but Haley was always there to cheer me up and talk to me, unlike most people. But this time she didn't respond. Why isn't she responding? She always says 'hi'. Is she getting too old? She just turned seven yesterday.

I turned away, defeated for a moment. You see, once people reach a certain age, in Haley's case seven, they act like I don't exist. Not a single adult has talked to me since I ran into the forest that day. Maybe I should've left a trail behind me like Hansel and Gretel.

I tried to wave my hands in front of Haley, false hope still lingering in my head. If I'm loud enough, obnoxious enough, maybe she'll look at me. Maybe she'll notice me again, laugh with me and play tag or hide and seek? But to no avail.

She was distracted by her dolls, babbling to herself and making the dolls talk, pretending as if the plastic was having a genuine conversation. How stupid. She's playing with fake dolls when she could be playing with me! Her friend.

I walked out of her back yard and into the streets, alone again.

As I walked, someone suddenly pushed me as if I was nothing. How rude. Do adults not have sympathy for a sad child like me? He was probably thinking of mortgages or whatever grownups think about. He almost tore the necklace straight off my neck and didn't even bother to turn and look at me. My necklace was something I'd never let go of. It had a very thin golden chain that hung loosely around my neck. Its charm had a green gem resembling an emerald in the middle surrounded by a golden frame that attached it to the chain. I don't exactly know why but that necklace was the most important thing to me. I clutched the charm in my hand. "Watch it!" I yelled, my voice falling on deaf ears. Again, why is everyone so rude nowadays?

To some, this type of loneliness can seem like a blessing. An existence in which no one cares what you do or say. In a sense I'd agree, it's nice to climb up trees without getting yelled at. But I also miss the days when I used to hear my mother shout,

"Madilyn! Get down from there!" I had it good. And yet I left and now I can't retrace my steps.

I walked to the edge of the small town and stood there, watching the picturesque view of the forest framing the road. The trees almost looked like they were staring back at me, telling me to come and try to find my village, but I never gave in. Maybe this town wasn't much help but it was better than wandering the woods for days or weeks or months on end.

I looked around and suddenly spotted a crow with the greenest eyes sitting on the ground. Crows don't have eyes like that, right? I had barely seen him and he was already eyeing my necklace. I walked up to him, expecting him to fly away, but he didn't move. "Hey birdie!" I greeted with a friendly smile. He didn't respond, only looking up at me. Maybe he was hungry? But he couldn't eat me! I don't think crows eat the living. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and tried to find something he'd eat. I found some bread… Why do I have bread in my pocket? I crouched and extended my hand, offering him the bread. "There! It's all yours." He didn't take it, only looked up at me with those emotionless crow eyes. "I guess you're not interested in food."

I put the bread away, but as I did some silver coins fell from my pocket. I knelt to pick them up but before I could, the crow flew down and stole them. I chuckled, a grin forming on my face. "You have good taste. I like shiny things too." Suddenly the crow flew up and started a strange charade, a dance of sorts, as if he was beckoning me to follow. "You want me to follow you? But I don't go into the forest." The crow didn't back down. It was almost as if he needed me to come with him and who was I to ignore him? "Fine! I'll follow you. Where are we going?"

The crow seemed to hear me, calming his dance as he flew slowly into the woods. I followed shortly behind him, skipping my way through the low shrub and foliage. He led us deep into the woods with such determination it was like he was following a well-worn path. I looked around, taking in the dark surroundings. The sky was still grey and it looked like it was going to rain. I don't like the rain. The trees were still staring at me, each one pressuring me further and deeper into the menacing environment.

The crow led me past some pretty sights too; the small lake I didn't know existed. It was a beam of light in the otherwise dark forest. "I didn't take you for a tour guide and you're definitely not one, but this is lovely," I whispered but he didn't pay me much attention. I stopped to admire the lake. Somehow it felt like it was calling me, but I wasn't about to go near it in case it was trying to deceive me. Besides, I never

really liked water. It's so wet and it doesn't feel good on my skin. My mum always prevented me from going outside while it was raining so I wouldn't bring mud into the house. It wasn't fair. Why does the water always get in the way of my fun?

The crow stopped with me for a moment, landing on my head. "Hey! Who told you you could do that?" I protested, a little frustrated. The crow didn't utter a sound. He soon started flying again, gesturing for me to follow once more. I didn't protest since I knew I'd get lost if I didn't follow him. He occasionally checked if I was behind him and I wasn't sure if he was checking for me or rather my necklace. Its chain was very weak, it seemed like the links were barely holding together. There was no way I was going to let him steal it, no one was allowed to do that!

He led me through the woods for a short while and then he suddenly sped up, leaving me behind in the light mist. I didn't bother running, we were only going straight now so there was no use, I'd find him eventually. I pressed on, stepping deeper into the woods. With every step, it felt as though the forest was stretching out before me, each tree morphing into countless replicas of the same towering figure. The air was thick with the scent of damp grass, and the rustling leaves underneath my feet whispered secrets as I walked over them, telling me to go further. As I continued, the path seemed to fade, swallowed by the endless maze of trunks and branches, making it hard to discern where I had come from or where I was headed. The trees stood tall and vigilant all around, creating an almost surreal landscape that felt both oddly familiar and confusingly strange. I eventually caught sight of the crow on the floor, watching over something or rather someone lying on the ground. I paused for a moment, trying to decipher the sight right in front of my eyes. I needed to see what was going on, so I walked closer, stopping next to the bird. To my horror, the crow had led me to a body at rest. It was lying there so peacefully it was obvious the person wasn't breathing. What had happened here? Who was that?

I stood shocked by the bird's side, trying to compose myself and understand what this was. After a quick examination I realised the body was familiar… too familiar. The messy, long, black hair, the blue polka-dot dress and oversized yellow jacket. "Oh! What was this? Was that really…? Oh, no! Were those the clothes…? The clothes I was wearing on that day? I lost my way in the forest… And where is the necklace?"

"I- Is that me?" I questioned as I fell to my knees, slumping over the body. My body. "Does that mean I'm a ghost? But I'm- I'm alive!" I exclaimed, feeling tears prick my eyes, threatening to overflow, my hands shaking as I reached out to touch the body's arm. "I don't remember dying…"

As I stood there crying over my own lifeless body, I guess the crow felt it was a good time to steal the item around my neck he'd been eyeing. He flew down and snatched my necklace, the weak chain snapping in half with the weak yank. To my utter despair, I came to the chilling realization far too late. With a single tug of my twisted chain, my lifeless body vanished into thin air. With a powerful flap of his wings, he soared into the night sky, clutching my very soul tightly in its dark beak, leaving me stranded in a void of hopelessness. I stood there, shocked and trying to process what had happened.

All of a sudden everything began to fall into place. Why I had been ignored so many times, why no one seemed to notice me anymore or bothered to say 'hi'. Why was this happening to me? I was a good daughter, did what I was told, ate my vegetables and did my homework… What did I do to deserve this? I closed my eyes tightly, allowing the weight of my sorrow to envelop me as I mourned the life I would never live. Each unanswered question hung in the air like a thick fog, and with every query I addressed, the number of questions multiplied, creating a labyrinth of confusion in my mind. I could almost sense the presence of the Grim Reaper, that ominous figure clad in shadows, knowing that I was destined to remain untouched by the passage of time. I couldn't fathom why he chose to send birds to carry out his morbid task. It struck me as strangely lazy, almost as if he wanted to delegate the responsibility rather than face the truth of mortality himself.

I opened my eyes again, expecting to be surrounded by the deciduous trees of the never-ending forest, but I wasn't there. I was in a graveyard. The grave I was standing in front of seemed to be a weirdly shaped square with a bouquet of dead roses on each side, as if taunting my realisation of mortality. "Here lies Madilyn Mortenson, November 2nd 2009 - November 2nd 2018" I read out loud. Have I been a ghost for that long? It felt like just yesterday I found myself running away from home into the forest, the one I would never return from. I looked down, but my body wasn't there anymore, not fully. I could see the ground through my feet. That wasn't normal. I looked at my hands, only to be greeted with the same, transparent sight.

I decided to examine my grave further, walking behind it to find a message. 'Finders, keepers' written in chicken scraps. "Nice touch, thanks for that!" I proclaimed as I rolled my eyes. I sighed as I walked to the front of the grave. I slowly sat down and looked around. I couldn't see the entrance to the graveyard because the other graves were blocking it from view. I know I'm not the only person ever to have died, but I couldn't help and feel bad for myself. I sighed again as I looked straight ahead. Who knew death would come with feathers?

'Finders, keepers' kept racing through my mind, the sentence haunting me more than the previous events. "You're going to pay for this…" I grumbled as I crossed my arms and pouted. I rested my head on my tombstone, looking up at the grey sky. A perfect day to find out you're dead I suppose. "Hey crow! Just so you know…," I exclaimed to the crow that most definitely didn't hear me, "...that necklace was fool's gold!" I chuckled to myself. I definitely got him back.

lozinka: BUBI2009
mentor: Dijana Štruklec
institution:Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga, Zagreb
autor: Lucija Pašalić Špehar

FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

Spring came and winter ran away. Everything was coming to life again. Birds sang again, and the sun was there again. It was time to plant wonderful flowers in the magical garden of Versailles.

'Pink peonies should be aligned with lilies.' Said the head gardener of the most beautiful garden of the 18th century.

'The queen specifically said that peonies go together with daisies,' nervously said one of the helpers.

'The Queen will be here in two days; everything must be ready! Difficult times are ahead; we don't want to cause more troubles to her majesty!' harshly ordered supervising duchess.

There were many rumors about revolution coming, and the poor were angrier than ever with the lifestyle of the royalty, but the thing about being of blue blood is you could never actually see the life of regular people or the way they were living it.

'How hard could it be?' Young Queen wondered while she and her three children were returning home. 'Working as a smith must be so much fun! Well, more fun than attending banquets all year long, smiling and chatting with those obnoxious old ladies!'

'Mummy, look!' exclaimed her oldest son, heir to the throne. 'There are children playing in the field! They even have tools just like those kids from the book Nanny read to me!

'Why do you never let me play with those?' cried the future king while admiring the sharp shovels cutting hard soil.

Truly, the future king was not wrong when he noticed that there were children of all ages in the field, but they were not playing. They were shoveling and sowing, hoping that year's harvest will be richer than last.

'Those tools are sharp and are not made for the fragile hands of yours!' The Queen said decisively and killed the little boy's dream.

On the day of their arrival, in the extensive garden of Versailles, everybody was adding some finishing touches and was impatiently waiting to welcome the royal family in their refreshed home. Flowers of all the colors known to man and a golden fountain were waiting for the queen to lay her beautiful doe eyes on them.

'Oh, what a lovely garden you put up.' Said one of the servants.

'It's fine, but, if I'm not mistaken, I wanted peonies to be planted far from other flowers so it doesn't get ruined by the messiness of other flowers!' politely, but crudely said Marie, walking in her grandiose silk dress.

His majesty, King Louis XVI, had arrived right after sunset, so he couldn't see the freshly planted garden. He went straight up to the dining room where his wife and the rest of the dukes and duchesses were sitting and waiting for him to officially start the feast. The feast was rich. There was an abundance of foie gras, baguettes, freshly cooked meat, and the handful of cake was yet to come.

He mildly nodded to his guests and was seated at the head of the table next to his queen. He was not a man of many words, and several people thought he was not quite suitable for the great responsibility that the king of France carries on his back. The rumor had it that his notorious party-loving Austrian-blooded wife is spinning him around her little finger.

One of the duchesses broke the silence. 'So, tell us, how did the conference go?' Any possibility of the revolution taking place? I mean, I don't believe a tiny bit those people are capable of any form of organization, but still, obliviousness brings many delusions…'

Chatty Queen said, 'No, not about revolution in its primal meaning, but that awfully dressed man who calls himself a philosopher looked me dead in the eyes and said, "Does your majesty have any idea how poor her people are? They don't even have bread to eat!"' continued the queen, 'I was about to tell him how his shoes were dirty and how he should get them cleaned instead of yelling at me, but I indifferently said, "Well then, let them eat cake!" He had shut his dirty mouth in a second!'

The hall echoed with laughter. Long were those spring nights. While aristocrats were playing polo in their country houses, people of France had had enough of the greed of the wealthy. That year's harvest had been worse than expected, and there wasn't enough rye to feed one third of the people. Not to say that France wasn't on good terms with England or any other countries per se. And just like that, the poor became poorer, and the rich were richer than ever.

Long-speculated revolution finally came true. On June 14th, 1789, the Tower of Bastille had been demolished by the raging crowds. It hadn't taken long to manip-

ulate the suffering people to do something radical because what was the worst that could happen? They were about to die of starvation anyway, so may death have a good cause.

Royal courier rushed to Versailles to break down frightening news. When Marie Antoinette received the news, she was sitting in her blooming garden. She hadn't responded to news right away; she just waved her hand and mumbled. Finally she said, 'Ah! Sometimes I wish I could die in my sleep and come back as a beautiful flower so no one would disturb my peace except sweet little birds. She paused for a brief moment and then continued her monologue, 'To hell with these people! They are always complaining about the harvest, the prices, and, ahh, that lousy bread! Why is there all the time such a fuss about bread? Personally, I prefer a good, freshly baked croissant over plain bread! Some people just have poor taste, and that is none of my problem!'

From the story I have told so far, you, dear reader, are probably not growing very fond of this insolent queen. But the thing you have to know about Marie Antoinette is that she hadn't always been so emotionless. As Marie was walking towards her husband's chamber, she remembered the first time she stepped foot in the charming palace of Versailles.

It was late summer, and a decorated carriage, carried by two elegant horses, was early in the morning waiting for Marie to get ready for a long journey. As young as fourteen, Marie, the loved princess of the Austrian Empire, had to say goodbye to her family and friends so she could take on the role of a future queen of France. Misty morning walks, fresh strudel, and familiar merry people had been replaced by Parisian fog, dry croissants, and frustrated people of France within the blink of her charming royal eye. It was a long way to Paris, and it was very painful. Going further and further towards the borders, she was slowly saying farewell to everything and everyone she knew and loved.

The very moment she stepped foot in the French territory, her childhood was gone, and she had to impersonate the role of future king's wife. The French were just as she had thought they would be: slim, pale, and cold as all the merriment in the world was taken from them. Her premium clothes and woman-like figure were harshly criticized. The fact that she had never actually met the prince of France she was about to marry brought no comfort. He was distant, confused, and uninterested in everything apart from hunting and sleeping. Saying it critically, he was a wimp. For the first ten years, they were no more than just roommates, only seen together at meetings, funerals, and parties. For a person of people, life and soul of the party, such as Marie was, that marriage was a complete prison. Her free, joyous spirit was drowned in endless banquets and phony politeness with nothing genuine.

She entered her husband's room, where she had found him walking nervously up and down across the room. She sat on the chair and watched him lose his mind. She had found that very amusing, so to say.

'What's wrong, darling?' she asked nonchalantly, as if she hadn't found out about the revolution.

'You ask me, "What's wrong?"? How unserious you are!' raged the king, 'Oh, you are always so witty!'

'You are saying that this is all my fault?' The queen gave him a chance to apologize, but the king wasn't in the mood for peace.

'Ever since you came here, we were good to you; we accepted you as our own! But it was never enough for you!' He screamed at her, 'You haven't matured a tiny bit since the day you came here! You are and forever will be the little princess of Austria!'

He continued 'mocking those crazy people! Provoking them by saying stupid jokes! "Let them eat cake!" How careless you are!'

Marie indifferently stood there. It seemed that she didn't even care about revolution, death, and all the horrible things that were about to come. 'little princess of Austria' echoed in her ears. The girl, she left at such a young age on bare borders. Careless, he said, but she wasn't lacking care; she was loveless. She felt no love towards him, or France, or life itself.

'Do not just stand and stare at me like that! Say something!' ordered her husband.

'What if I apologize to people and offer their leaders a nice dinner? I'm sure they would love some fresh bread with butter; they must be exhausted from all the acting!' she jokingly said.

'Are you out of your mind? All of this is no more than a joke to you! 'They are about to kill us, and you stand here talking absolute nonsense!' The king obviously wasn't keen on joking at that moment.

'Well, what do you want me to do?' She began self-explanatory: 'As you said, I'm the little princess of Austria; I do not and never did care about France. So why care now when everything is done?'

There was an awkward pause in the temperamental conversation.

'I'm going to the garden.' Marie left her husband in his room, all alone and out of his mind.

Through the window, she was looking at her beautiful garden and her children playing in it. Charming little flowers were coloring the green carpet. She thought to herself, 'It's going to be a magical garden in the summer.'

The flames were slowly coming, and you could hear the curses of the crowd, but Marie couldn't hear them. Her mind stayed in the green valleys beneath the Alps. She could have smelled fresh strudel being made and heard the familiar laughter of her younger siblings. Her hair became gray, just like her soul. So young, but so worn out. Nannies brought the kids inside, and all the dukes were running away with their families and possessions. Just the king and the queen with their children were patiently waiting for their destiny.

In a few brief moments, the crowd came in and captured them. They got the shining knife ready for the heads of their king and his beautiful queen. They were cheering and celebrating the new regime they were about to establish.

As Marie was approaching the notorious guillotine, she stepped on the foot of her executor. 'I am greatly sorry for stepping on your foot,' said the Austrian princess.

Now, many years have passed since her death, carrying many rumors. We have divided our opinions about her. For some, she is an outrageous and cruel queen, while for some, she is the icon. But the truth is somewhere in the middle. And as I'm sitting in the garden of the Versailles Palace Museum, I feel closer to her. Her bumpy life and glamorous lifestyle she was living, which brought her no permanent happiness. I'm starting to appreciate my life and my loving home.

In the garden of Marie Antoinette, there is a bush of peonies blooming, but only one has caught my eye. Big, pink peony with white stripes. It reminded me of Marie Antoinette in her garden moments before her life came to an end. I named that flower Marie, and as I'm about to continue my guided tour, I say a quiet prayer for the little princess of Austria: may she rest in peace on the misty borders of the Austrian Alps.

šifra: WARRIOR32
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Željeznička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Jakov Tomac

FURIOUS WARRIOR

In the center of the city of Magnifical, is an arena, where a figure named Maximus is walks to the streets as a shadowy figure. As he stops by, he looks in front of him, thinking, "This is it. The place where I shall become a legend.* Maximus was looking at a colossal arena, and in the arena gates, was a guard. Maximus reveals himself, as his shadowy appearance fades. A 223 tall Lizard man figure wearing a sleeves jacket that goes to his shins, wearing a metal mask, and has a dark forest green undershirt and thick black pants and boots. The guard stops Maximus. "Hold it. You are only allowed to enter as spectator or are you here to …" "…fight in the arena." Maximus interrupted. "I was preparing for this for a while." The guard asks. "And who are you?" Maximus answered, "The Quakeforger." The guard nodes "The Quakeforger… are you new around here?" Maximus answered. "My first time putting a performance in this world-wide contest." The guard nodded, and as he was about to ask, Maximus took out a huge bag of gold and asked, "Will this be enough?" The guard was a bit shocked for a newcomer to have this much gold, and took it, as the guard welcomes him. "You are officially part of the Furious Arena. I wish you good luck." Maximus nods and enters the arena, as he thought.* It seems this hard work paid off. For a long time of preparing, now I can show the world that I will be capable of becoming the Furious Warrior.*

As Maximus, now known as the Quakeforger, enters the arena, he was a couple of people chatting with each other, and when Maximus enters, they turn their attention to him. One of them started a conversation with the Quakeforger with a rather taunting grin. "Hello there. I've never seen you here. What do you call yourself?" "The Quakeforger." Maximus answered, as the one who was talking to him, laughed, and said, "What an over the top title! Do you think you stand a chance against us? Don't get cocky pal!" The Quakeforger taunted back. "Really? For someone who is calling me cocky, you sound a lot cockier than me. What's your name?" He was insulted and responded angrily. "You dare to insult me?! I am Hawkeye, and you better show some respect to the most powerful Superhero!" The Quakeforger continues to taunt

the Hawkeye. “Maybe *you* need to be the one respecting me. I am new here, and also, Hawkeye, for a name like that, your tongue is sharper than your eyes.” Hawkeye was infuriated and threatened to shoot The Quakeforger with the bow, but one of his friends stopped him and said, “Stop. A Superhero would never lose his cool. Also, he is right. A Superhero needs to respect newcomers.” Hawkeye grunts and leaves. Then, a voice was heard from afar. “Challenger Number 113, The Quakeforger, shall remain in the middle of the arena. The rest shall leave the arena now.” The group then left as The Quakeforger remained. Then, three figures entered the arena, two of them were bodyguards, while the one in the middle wears blue sorcerer clothes and has white mutton chops and wears a circlet. The sorcerer greets The Quakeforger “Salutations, Challenger Number 113,” and welcome to the Furious Arena. My name is Lōng Wūshī, and I am the Furious Warrior’s most powerful bodyguard. I am going to be your assistant, given others from the Furious Warrior himself. I will be here in the moments of your training for the most part, but I can go ahead and ask anything.” The Quakeforger then said, “Really? The Furious Warrior’s bodyguard here to assist me? How generous, I don’t really need Furious Warrior’s bodyguard to waste time on me.” Wūshī replied. “I am here because of the Furious Warrior ordered me to assist you. He has followed you the most outside of the arena and found you the most interesting.” *Really?* Maximus thought *He has really followed me and my attentions and skills outside of the arena? It shouldn’t come as a surprise, after all, he is the lord of Magnifical.* Wūshī continues. “Now, you shall start off with the first rank, Fighter. To progress, you need to fight other opponents to increase your rank. There are seven ranks in total, from the lowest to the highest. Fighter, Star, Superstar, Hero, Superhero, Warrior, and Furious Warrior. The highest you can get is Superhero, but if you gain the Furious Warrior’s attention, you can become a Furious Warrior yourself. You will fight opponents every day, and you will spend all they in the arena. We have your room where you will sleep during this journey. You’ll have food and water every day and need to practice or train at least once a day. As I said before, I will assist you in any case you need.” The crowd then started to pile up, as Wūshī’s time with The Quakeforger is coming to an end. “Your first fight starts very soon. I wish you good luck on your first opponent.” Wūshī and his guards leave, as The Quakeforger stayed silent and the crowd cheers for the awaiting battle. Maximus thought to himself. “And so, here I am. I, The Quakeforger, stepped into the arena and awaited my first ever battle, in chance of becoming the future Furious Warrior. Whatever awaits me, I will enjoy it.*

The Quakeforger awaits for his next opponent, destined to become the Furious Warrior. “Ladies and gentlemen!” The announcer was present. “In the arena stands the most recent Newcomer to make it to the Furious Arena, and has already given the title, known as, The Quakeforger!” The crowd cheers for The Quakeforger as he stands silent. “And his journey to furious battles shall start with the most charismatic and the most well-known commoner in Magnifical, the Chariot!” A man riding a horse, equipped with full knight armor, dubbed the Chariot, enters the arena, as he gets off his horse, and signals it to leave, and raises his arm to the crowd. The Chariot then takes out his sword and points it to The Quakeforger, as he says proudly, “Honored to fight a fellow like you, Quakeforger! Our battle shall be splendid!” The Quakeforger replied. “It sure will be.” The Quakeforger then sets his stance, and soon, the battle begins! The Chariot charges first and swings his sword at The Quakeforger as he dodges the Chariot’s swing. The Chariot continuously unleashes jabs at the Quakeforger, as the Quakeforger dodges each one. The Quakeforger then leaves his first uppercut on the Chariot but is evaded. The Chariot then stabs The Quakeforger’s leg, but The Quakeforger pulls his leg back from the sword, and landed a kick on the Chariot’s stomach, and immediately gave him an uppercut, causing the Chariot to fall. The Quakeforger then tried to stomp the Chariot but got evaded and soon got stabbed multiple times on his torso. The Chariot then proceeded to double kick the Quakeforger, but was blocked by his arms, and then pushed back, as the Chariot landed nicely. The Chariot then charged towards The Quakeforger, and gave a spin at great speed, but The Quakeforger stopped it by clapping his hands on the sword, pulling the Chariot on the ground, and then lifted him in the air, and gave him a knee strike on his stomach, falling to the ground. The Chariot stood up as The Quakeforger taunted, “Getting beaten up by a Newcomer? That must be new.” The Chariot then laughed at his taunt and said “Your taunts are quite harsh for a Newcomer, for sure, but some Newcomers have some difficult times with me, especially if I show them my true form of my sword.” The Quakeforger stayed silent, as the Chariot then said, “Now reign, Lightning Jab!” The Chariot’s right arm turned to lighting as his arm started to move faster. The Quakeforger thought to himself, “Ah, just as I thought, this isn’t a regular rapier. It’s what they call the Spirit Sword. The Spirit Swords are unique swords that can possess any powers or techniques they possess. It can be any element, like fire, wind, earth, and any other element they possess. The Spirit Sword needs to be activated by calling it out by certain command and shall reveal their powers. It can either boost them up for defensive or supportive purposes or, for the most part, used as offense. In this case, his Lightning Jab boosts

his right arm at great speeds, meaning he will unleash far faster jabs than before. But… I know that I got this in the bag.* The Chariot charges towards the Quakeforger, unleashes a barrage of jabs at The Quakeforger, and was attempted to be blocked. "Combust!" The Quakeforger then called out something as he unleashed a punch at the Chariot, as the punch packed massive amounts of force, causing the Chariot to fly to the wall and eventually crash. The Chariot was then out of strength as he grunted in pain. "That... was a... mighty blow... fighter." And later, had no strength to grip his sword. "Incredible! The Quakeforger put the Chariot to the ground, with a single but impactful punch!" The crowd cheers for The Quakeforger as he walks towards the Chariot and lends him a hand. The Chariot then grabbed The Quakeforger's hand, as says, "Never have I thought a Newcomer, could have the strength to possess his own ability. Well done." The Quakeforger, and the Chariot shaked hands, as the Chariot salutes and leaves the arena, as The Quakeforger enjoys the crowds' scream.

The Quakeforger leaves the arena. He enters in a large room where the people usually eat. Some knew about his victory and applauded him, as Hawkeye looked away and said, "He is only a Newcomer, he has a lot of shit awaiting him." The Quakeforger greets Hawkeye."Good to see you again, Forked Tongue." Hawkeye growled at his boast. As The Quakeforger was looking around, he thought to himself, *There are more challenges yet to come. After all, never fought anyone with a Spirit Mask or Pandora's Eye. Spirit Masks usually boost the wielder's body and give them strength and speed, and Pandora's Eye, too, does the same but has its own unique abilities. Though…* The Quakeforger touches his mask, feeling some form of aura in the mask *The mask I'm wearing has a different feel than a regular, or even a Spirit Mask. I've felt the powers of the Spirit Mask, but it is not the same aura at all. No matter, I will ignore it for now and shall continue to journey my way to become the Furious Warrior.*

Two weeks later, Maximus, or The Quakeforger, has flawlessly and effortlessly won every fight. When he first entered the Furious Arena, he was ranked as a Newcomer, now he is ranked a Superhero. "Ladies and gentlemen, the challenger who has effortlessly and flawlessly achieved his rank to the Superhero, the man with fists of iron, The Quakeforger!" The Quakeforger steps into the arena, as the crowd screams for his name, and enjoys it. "And now, perhaps his greatest opponent, the man with eyes so precise he can see a mile away, the very first Superhero to ever emerge, Hawkeye!" Hawkeye enters, wearing full black, as his yellow eyes glow and is preparing his long bow. The Quakeforger starts, "It's good to see you again, Hawkeye. It's about time that I get to finally kick your ass!" Hawkeye grunted, but then smiled creepily and

replied, "Really? We'll see who will bite the dust first. And also, this fight…" Hawkeye then points his long bow at The Quakeforger. "… Will be your last." Hawkeye fires his first shot, as the arrow goes at incredible speed, and heading towards The Quakeforger, and grabbed the arrow, as he said, "Seriously? This is your grand attack, Hawkeye? Very disappointing for a Superhero." Hawkeye grinned, as he unleashes a barrage of arrows at great speed, and then The Quakeforger let out his boasting nature and immediately got serious, dodging arrows. Two arrows got by The Quakeforger's stomach, but no effect on him. The Quakeforger then charges at Hawkeye, at attempts to punch Hawkeye at full force, screaming, "Combust!" But Hawkeye dodged the attack and took his dagger and threw it on The Quakeforger's back and flees and shoots an arrow at The Quakeforger's left shoulder. Hawkeye boasted. "You fool! There is no way for you to become a Furious Warrior! You don't have the strength to defeat me, and I'll prove it!" The Quakeforger charges once more, as he unleashes a few strikes on Hawkeye, and Hawkeye shooting arrows at The Quakeforger as the two evade many attacks. Hawkeye then puts five arrows on his long bow, and pulls it as much as possible, and let go as soon as The Quakeforger tried to land a hit on Hawkeye, and the arrows impaled The Quakeforger's stomach even further, causing him to fall. Hawkeye laughed at said, "You ignorant idiot, I told you I would be able to defeat you! Now…" As he pulls the arrow on the string, the electric energy started to overload on Hawkeye's bow. "… I shall finish you off!" Hawkeye's grip on the arrow was very strong, as he was preparing to let It go any second and… he got completely knocked out, as The Quakeforger's fist landed on Hawkeye's stomach, as the arrow flied off at incredible with a lightning speed and, when it hit the wall, released a devastating lightning. Hawkeye fell on his knees and grabbed his stomach due to his immense pain. As The Quakeforger said, "Out of all the opponents I faced, you are by far my least favorite. Your ego is undeniably high, and your arrogance consumes you. It makes me sick. These types of opponents, who think are over the top and underestimate their opponents and show zero respect in a fighter's spirit make me absolutely reviled. What a pathetic and prideful bastard you are." Hawkeye angered by The Quakeforger's words, out of desperation pulled out his dagger, and tried to unleash his lightning abilities, but immediately gotten striked by The Quakeforger's fist in his right cheek, causing him to fly to the arena and eventually to the ground. Hawkeye, fully enraged, pulls out his long bow, but The Quakeforger grabbed Hawkeye and rammed his face on the floor and stomped on his back. The Quakeforger then said with a very cold tone, "I hope you have learned your lesson, Hawkeye, and if you didn't, I will not hesitate to kill you." Hawkeye intimidated by The Quakeforg-

er's words, realizing he is completely powerless to even take his bow, took the defeat. "Incredible!" The announcer shouted. "The Quakeforger has defeated Hawkeye, with no trouble and shown off his prowess and courage during the journey. Let us cheer the name, for the name, THE QUAKEFORGER." Maximus enjoys the crowd's screaming his name, as he leaves the arena, fulfilled, and completed. At that ends the journey of Maximus', or The Quakeforger's journey in the arena, but many questions are left and yet so few answers. Will Maximus ever face the Furious Warrio, and if he ever becomes the next Furious Warrior, what will await him? But that's a story for another time.

šifra: SPACE10
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Železnička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Petar Dragičević

THE INFINITE HORIZON

The universe sprawled endlessly before him, a sea of blackness and a faint glow of distant stars. Commander Rex Solus is looking into the ever-spreading distant horizon of space. His ship shattered and destroyed. The only noises he can hear are his breathing and the faint beeps of the ship's failing life support. His ship, Odessy 1, the pride of the empire's fleet, now a shadow of her former self, stripped of her glory drifts trough dark space aimlessly. Her engines have failed, hit by a meteor shower, her weapons, systems and armor unable to do protect it. Her crew is long gone, died of starvation and exposure to the unforgivable elements of outer space. Only her captain survived, he was lucky unlike the others. While everyone was panicking and scrambling to repair the ship, he ran away. Left his crew to fend for themselves and hid on the ships command deck. And so, he survived, alone, with no one around for 50 million light years in all directions. The ship was ripped from hyperspace while travelling to Lonith, the farthest military base in the known universe. They have hit an unexplainable meteor shower. Strange he thought, there never were any meteors in dark space, there never was anything in the dark space, it's a vast expense of nothingness, at least it was what humanity taught. Funny he remarked, „The stars have humbled us again". Space was always everchanging, nothing is permanent here. A voice echoed on the ships intercom: „30 minutes of oxygen remain", that's it the captain thought, this was the way he would die, not as a legendary fleet admiral, or a famed space explorer, he was going to die right here, alone, surrounded by a destroyed ship he once called home, and the dead bodies of those he once called his crew. Friends, comrades, engineers, pilots everyone died. While he cowardly retreated and watched. Too scared to do anything to help them. His guilt was immense, he couldn't sleep or rest. What will he be remembered by? For his cowardness or selfishness? for all the blood that was on his hands, for his failures not only as a captain but as a human being, for not looking out for his own and only thinking about himself. He was at least successful in sending a faint SOS signal back to earth. To tell them of what had happened. What will they think he pondered? Such an advanced spacecraft

should have been indestructible. Odyessy 1 was the greatest engineering marvel to come out of the empery's dockyards. Pride of the Empire, Earth and its people. The greatest success humanity has achieved since the hyperdrive was invented. Humanity began to spread across the Milky way galaxy. We were always meant to be conquerors he thought. We were always the brightest and the strongest. A beacon of life in an otherwise dead universe. Millions of planets surveyed, and thousands of star systems mapped yet no intelligent life was ever found. This unnerving fact was the sole reason his mission was made. To go farthest than any before him have ever been, to grasp the void of our known reality. In the year 2242. A group of scientist stumbled upon a signal of an unknown aline origin that was being transmitted from the „Light's end" galaxy. The farthest galaxy ever found. The scientist deemed this project „The Horizon signal". It was transmitting a rather ominous message on our own common language. „What was shall be, what shall be was". It sounded almost like a poem. The signal was faint and weak. A plan had to be made, fast. They said that this could be the greatest discovery human race has ever made, bigger than any that has come before. It could truly mean that we are not alone in the universe, that there are more like us. Oh imagine what this could mean and endless source of infinite opportunities. But the way there was dangerous. The great divide also known as deep space. Truly a sea of nothingness that spanned for millions and millions of light years. Many strange occurrences happened there. Laws of physics being twisted and turned, ships disappearing and then reappearing without its crew, ominous sightings on unexplainable phenomena and sightings of strange shapes and what are thought to be creatures of some kind. The thought shook him to the core, to be devoured by some space monstrosity. But that would be impossible. There is little to no chance lives exists in the universe let alone such a inhospitable barren place like this. A place of endless nothingness and strangeness so hostile to outsiders. As he was so deep in thought he remembered the first time he was on a space mission. He remembered his home. The colony of Eden prime in the Sores system. He was born there, on an alien world, barley habitable thousands of light years away from earth. With humanity's new ships that distance is merely an hour of flight trough hyperspace, but for a human with no advanced technology it truly is a long way. And so he was, drifting, a long way from home, from his family and loved ones. Before the mission he took all that for granted, the people in his life, the sounds of the bustling streets of his home world, all the luxuries and privileges he had back home. Now, he would give everything to go back home, and see everyone again. His mother and father who he respected and looked u to. His friends from the military academy he spends all those

nights talking to and thinking about the infinite possibilities and secrets the wide universe might hold, and most dear to him, his son and wife who he hadn't seen for over 5 years. She begged him not to go, to stay with them, to watch his son grow up and to be a good caring father to him but, duty called. „What big of a fool I was" he screamed. All those opportunities missed for the sake of his career. The things he did, the terrible choices he made have finally come back to haunt him, now, in his last days alive, in the wreckage of his failures both as a leader and as a person."15 minutes of oxygen remain" a faint voice over the ship's intercom spoke: „critical damage to engines, shields shutting down, emitters and hangar doors not functional, send a technician for repair immediately". Only, no one was coming, all the technicians are dead, everyone is. Rex wished he could tell that to the ship, to comfort it and himself. But only comfort he had was the wreckage of a dead ship and the vast empty space around him. He was still coming to terms with it all. After so many years of studying and working hard to even have a chance to be in a mission like this. All those years of trial and error just for that goal, the only goal he set for himself in life to be the cause of his own demise. How poetic, he always hated poetry. „It was for the weak" he thought. Just then as he was lost so deep in mights of his final moments. The console started to pick up a coded message. This was indeed strange, the message he sends to earth could only possibly arrive in 2 or 3 weeks. As he gazed at the console. The message could not be decoded. It was not in the common tongue, but an aline language never seen before. After that the console shut down. There it was, undeniable proof that alines, in one form or the other existed. The captain was astonished. All those years of searching and finally life is confirmed, space is not dead, we are not alone. Then, the realization hit him like a fist to the gut, he had no way of sharing this information, the responders and communication dishes are destroyed, and a single message that remained in the case of emergency he had sent as an SOS signal back to earth, In the little hope that someone was going to hear it and come and save him. How foolish of him that was. All this knowledge will be lost now. Because of him earth will never know of his discovery, and after his folly the navy will never send another team into the great divide. Oh god what has he done, hadn't he been so selfish people would have found out about his discovery. He would be celebrated an honoured, but now, almost no one will remember him. Those who knew him will either forget him or die out. His colleagues, friends, will forget him, his son and wife will curse his name for never returning and leaving them alone to fend for themselves. His whole family will weep. Because of him, his stupid self-centered personality, the inhuman and evil choices he made seeking fame and glory. „I truly was a bad man" he thought. He did bad thing and now bad things will happen to

him. He tempted fate and got his grueling answer. He will die, surrounded by nothing, alone, with no one to comfort him but the cold interior of what's remained of his prized ship. This all terrified him. The more he stared out the command deck's window the more he truly realized the disparity of the situation he was in. Captain Rex Souls, the pride of his family, his father's only son and heir. His mother's pride and joy. Oh how he missed it all. But his mournful cries and sorrows went unanswered. The only reply he got was the low hum of small comets hitting the wreckage of the destroyed ship. There truly was nothing to comfort him now, in his last moments. All the food and water were gone. If it hadn't been for the small supply, he managed to snack on his way to the command deck he would have now survived this long. All was in vain jet he kept trying, he tried everything, to contact for help, to open the barred door to the crew quarters, to restore the main power back but nothing worked. There was no way of fixing anything without the proper tools, tools he didn't have. Maybe if he wasn't so rash and determined to survive, he might have been able to help the engineers in fixing the ship or at least organized them to try to survive for longer and call for help. But no. He couldn't, „he was too scared and he barley saved himself" he proclaimed. All these days he knew the end was eventually coming. He was making excuses day and night on why it wasn't his fault no one survived. But deep down he knew, and that guilt was eating his very soul. The sad reality was dawning on him as his days of isolation continued to go by. Every day being worse than the one before. Now on his final day he truly understands the desperaty of his situation. He is truly going to die, now, he is barley 27 years old. So much was in front of him, endless possibilities, and jet this is how it will end. „Caution 5 minutes of oxygen remain----„ the intercom stopped working. And so, this was truly it. And for his last order as captain Rex Souls, Captain of the discovery ship Odyessy 1. He ordered that all remaining system still functional, even though few cease to operate. And so, the derelict ship was finally finished, now a hunk of metal waiting to collapse and disperse. The captain exited into the outer space. In his barley functioning space suit to have a last look of his ship. Then he turned to the darkness, trying to see the faintest light of distant stars to remind him of home. And so he floated into the great nothingness, not sobbing or crying but fully accepting his fate, „beep" his oxygen has run out. And with a slow grip he removes his visor and quickly dies in the freezing conditions of the Divide. Now adrift, forever, and ever. But just like the sea back home „Space remembers its own."

šifra: ps131
mentor: Vlatka Švec
institution: Gimnazija Sesvete
autor: Sara Pajurin

JUDGEMENT UNDER GREAT ORDEALS

The sun sat high on the sky, only being covered by a few thin clouds while they sped past. The leaves of a line of oaks were lifted up only by the speed at which children passed by on their bikes, their laughter bouncing off the walls of the square housing bloc. Gravel crunched under his boots while he followed the curving paths of the small park in the middle, while the teens behind him laughed among themselves as they jumped onto an over graffitied benches.

"Lengthen your step and shut it, will you?" He hears echoes bounce inside the bloc, ten floors of dull concrete. The man to his right says, not to him but to the other five youngsters chuckling among themselves behind them.

He who had dragged him into the business a couple of months prior, Slobodan, quickly lights a cigarette and, with smoke circling his chin, rests a palm against his sharp shoulder. He barely feels it but turns his head to lock eyes with him as he says, with a cigarette-raspy voice: "Good luck."

He snaps his fingers to the five behind him and leads them to the entrance. He stares at the building´s intercom panel for a few seconds before running his index finger over all the buttons. "Someone´s always expecting friends", he hears Slobodan in the back of his mind, "And you don´t have any fingerprints to trace". The doors immediately click open. They all slip inside and begin the climb to apartment 526.

They might be young, but the teenagers that had been behind him just a few moments ago were two floors down. He sighs, mentally, as he´s standing in front of the apartment, listening to the boys bicker among themselves. He isn´t aware his eyes are glowing before someone looks through the peephole and he sees small green lights flash against the glass. A small audio arrow points at it, probably a small gasp with a whispered: "Slavoj…tisti android stoji zunaj." A shame he didn´t have an understanding of Slovenian. Nevertheless, he steps back at the shuffling inside.

Just as he hears the teens´ trainers squeak against the tile a man throws the door open and points a gun at his head. They all scream behind him as he´s grabbing his wrist and twisting. It cracks. The man´s fingers spasm and he accidentally shoots

into the ceiling. He glances back to see five pale faces staring at him. "Stop standing there like out-of-commission androids and do something!"

He is successful at snapping them out of their trance as they all start running down the hall, and two of them jump the man with the now-broken wrist and push a cloth under, almost into, his nose. He helps them drag him into the apartment, while he struggles against the three of them, clawing at their shirts and pushing around. He barely acknowledges the other three also drugging the other men, another two Slovenes, as it seems, while he scans the room.

The echoing static of his mind is broken as he is connected to a line, Slobodan on the other side. "Is anyone hurt? Who shot?" he hears it echo all around him, as if in an empty room.

He presses the elastic foil glued onto his face, right by his ear: "No injuries, one of the—" he startles as an arrow points back into the hall. An elderly voice is whispering in a panic, and he isn´t surprised to lock eyes with an older lady peeking out behind her door. She gasps at the sight of him and struggles into the telephone: "A-android!" She slams her door shut.

He quickly glances back into their apartment to see three bodies slumped against one another on the floor. He quickly clicks on his ear again: "One of the Slovenes shot. We have a witness. Terminate?"

He hears a sharp inhale: "Were the cops called?"

"Yes," he responds, "but everything else has gone according to plan."

"Get out of there," he hears, Slobodan´s voice firm, "Their fastest route is across the bridge of Freedom, so go east. Get on any tram going over the river."

"Got it," he says as he turns to the teens trying their best to zip an overstuffed duffel bag shut. He pushes one of them to the side, making him be flung against one of the closets. He hears the glass doors crack as he rummages through, pulling out wires and unnecessary motherboards, tossing them aside before finally closing the bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

They follow him through the hall as he speaks: "Get to the fire exit and out onto the avenue. Board any tram going back." He lets them run ahead, hears them panic among themselves while jumping down the stairs. They sprint out and he closes the fire exit door, flinching as a police car skids on the pavement in front of him.

He runs into the bloc right as a shot goes through the fire exit door, where he had been standing. He looks back at the officer that shot at him and into eyes matching his behind the sight of a gun. "Halt! You are under arrest!" a voice similar to his yells, and he turns and runs as another shot reverberates through the square bloc. He gets

out and onto the avenue, but a glance back proves he is being pursued by an android that looks way too much like himself.

The city was suffocating in the late summer. Tears of humidity slide off his bare shoulders and soak his torn tee. Fans begin to whir under his heavy metal ribcage, air silently whistling out between his ribs and out from under his chest.

He runs, runs and runs as fast as his limiter would allow; he sprints across tram tracks, with one hand behind, on his shoulder, tungsten claws out and gripping the duffel bag, almost ripping, as the safety pins lining the front of his jeans jingle with his step. Hot steam wisps from below his shirt with a muted pant, frightening a passerby as he jolts across the road and onto tram tracks.

He dashes out of the way, at the sight of the yellow audio receptor arrows, as a tram speeds past him, the Museum of Contemporary Art coming in and out of view in between blue blurs, and he is hit by the gust of wind it drags with itself. Another pant, and a drop of vapour slides down his chin, as well as an almost-visible cloud of smoke

"You´re making a ruckus", he hears Slobodan, but the line is dead. People waiting for the traffic light stare from their vehicles. A mother with a single grey hair. A barely-eighteen-year-old with his phone pressed to his ear. "You´re going to make it into the papers."

He runs, runs and runs on the tracks, a tram whizzes past him in the opposite direction, cars on both sides of him, lights flashing just as the sun above.

He growls, pops of radio static cutting it as he roughly turns into oncoming traffic. His vision flashes with warnings as drivers slam their brakes in a single cacophony of hissing and shouting profanities. Arrows scream at him from both sides and temperature warnings flash in front of him, and yet he manages to get across and continues running, running for one of the warehouses where he could hide. He leaves a trail of light grey smoke behind him as he trots up to the fence, quickly hooking his boots into it and jumping over.

He pants, again, and a darker smoke comes from his nostrils. A single yellow arrow points down, where his fans struggle to keep him cooled down and prevent the gasoline that partly fuels him from heating up and, inevitably, igniting. Pushing a small metal slider in the inside of his forearm reveals that he is at a crisp 147,1 degrees Celsius. He huffs, puffs engulfing him in a light smoke.

He speeds to a door and slams the lock with his sharpened knuckles, slipping into the cool shadows and sighing. He slowly pushes the door closed, muting his inhale just in time as the officer that had been trailing behind him catches up. He

slides a few red pop-ups into his periphery, and stares out at the newer model, who is scanning his surroundings with a cold gaze. His vapour-wet uniform clings to his aluminium outside, just like himself.

An S115JNAOF model. An officer with elastic musculature and a steel endoskeleton, aluminium outside plates, as well as skin-like foil tightened over their face. Fuelled entirely by electricity, they didn´t have the ability to self-ignite but did need to be charged every six hours and didn´t react well to fluids. This information is highly classified. Also, apparently the plate over their chest wasn´t secured as tight as his, which he was sure of as he had torn open enough of them in the time he worked with Slobodan.

The officer turns towards him, scrunching his eyes that click and pop as he narrows his pupils onto the door. He didn´t need to see them clearly to know that the heterochromatic amber in the centre had widened around the lime outside. He raised his eagle.

"VUKNAP1, formerly known as Z110JNAOF23," the officer speaks, highly monotonal for a seven-year-old model, "you are under arrest for disorderly conduct and evading the police, as well as your previous offenses; aiding and abetting, false representation, money laundering, aggravated assault and failure to oblige."

The officer takes a few steps back from the door, calculating his shot. "Step out, now!" a pre-recorded line of a real person´s voice exclaims.

"I have a name, you know."

"That is incorrect. Your code is Z110JNAOF23. Step out."

Vladimir huffs. He limply lets the duffel bag fall onto the ground, making a thick layer of dust fly up. It curls around his feet, and he feels the foil around his eyebrows scrunch up. After pushing the bag under a shelf with his boot, he pulls his shirt over his wavy head of hair and lets two plates over his lower ribcage slide to the sides. His fans stop at once as his chest decompresses with a hiss, clouds of all hues of grey coming out and filling the space, developing a small mist to hide the bag. He pushes the door wide open and climbs onto one of the shelves.

The officer hesitates at coming inside, it´s gun peeking inside before it quickly and precisely checks both sides of the door. It straightens and shuts the door, washing them both in near darkness.

Vladimir´s amber and green eyes click and turn back into his head, and are replaced with ones with black sclera, while his irises glow the same colours. The officer turns and shoots at the rod-light he was perched on, missing by a few inches but shattering the glass. He braces himself against the ceiling and launches himself onto it, bringing them both to the floor.

Orange impact messages, audio inputs from everywhere and a temperature spike warning pop up in front of him, but he focuses on disabling the officer in any way he could think of.

He raises his fists to slam onto its head, but the android strikes him in the abdomen and makes him sputter.

His knuckles, already sharp, claw at it against the top of the chest and rip its police jacket away. Deep black marks are left on its collarbones.

The officer bunches its clawed fist into his left hip, where oil starts gushing out. As it´s hand tries to rip out a part of elastic, he punches it´s head once, twice, making the foil rip and fall away to reveal white elastic tubes, sluggishly drooling the glue that holds them together onto the floor.

The android yanks him by the hip and pushes him off of itself into a shelf that falls over at the impact.

It speeds back to where it´s gun skittered off when he had jumped at it, but he dashes forward and manages to snatch it by the ankle. It falls, and wispy sparks start jumping and slowly falling to the concrete ground from the open wound.

Electric sparks flew out of the fuse box of one of the biggest apartment buildings in the city. He followed the direction of the audio arrow through the darkness to find the culprit, a small B125USLSOB, shaking in a corner of the hall.

Not getting to the gun, the officer turns back and slams it´s other leg into his face, splitting it with one big, black line.

He growls, tearing into both its ankles and twisting. All of the elastic fibres start snapping as he turns his wrists, sparking before the officer jolts up and pushes him down.

It punches into his raised forearms, denting them slightly. He grabs it´s pants and pushes it to the side. It clangs against the door, making the bottom hinge snap.

He gets up and walks over, this time grabbing it by the side and dragging it across the floor, to slam it against the concrete floor where the glass from the light it shot at still lay. Shards of it puncture it´s face.

The android stared up at him, her face littered with small scars, most likely from previous damaging. Concerning, considering she was a three-year-old model. A small green light reflected in her eyes, and he was connected with a line. His lieutenant said in his ear, “Failure to oblige, resulting in the death of its owner. Terminate it.” He drew out his eagle.

It tries to get up, but it´s ankles couldn´t support it, so the furthest it got to was kneeling, spasming from the injuries it had sustained.

Vladimir limps closer to stand above it, staring down at it, eyeing the three blinks of the green LED at the side of its head. The android´s nose starts steaming, and it, slowly, as if reluctantly, stutters, "Pl—eas-s-e…"

The housemaid stuttered, her hands protectively at her chest, her skin-foil scrunched up at her eyebrows in an upset and scared expression. "I-I, I just had no choice, he…he would h-hit me, a-and—" she inhaled, releasing a metallic whine. "I have had enough. I did the right thing." Her palms were stained red. "Please," she basically sobbed.

He hesitates above the officer, giving it just enough time to stretch its claws out toward his pant-leg, but he steps back just in time. "I don´t oblige to your commands anymore, lieutenant."

The android stares at him without a recognisable emotion on its face, but it´s voice takes an unexpectedly worried tone, "23…you´re just confused. You belong here. I promise I won´t have them playing with your code again. Return to base. Please."

He had hesitantly, slowly, walked in front of the station. The androids posted outside had dragged him inside by his armpits. He had been shoved into a chair and interrogated as if he´d just killed someone. He had been referred to as an error, shut down and given to the IT sector to find the anomaly and recode him. But they hadn´t accomplished anything, in the contrary, according to the lieutenant, they had just ruined him more.

But B125USLSOB127, Antonela, managed to run away before backup arrived, and that was all that mattered.

"No," he states, numbly, "you know what happened last time."

The android´s voice carries rage, "Z110JNAOF23," it quickly recites, "come back to base. Now."

Vladimir blankly stares at the android, unmoving, risking a glance at the duffel bag, still lying in the corner where he had shoved it.

"Come on. Don´t lie to yourself. You´re just a small mistake, 23. You weren´t meant to happen. But we can fix you."

He turns his head back to the android, sighing.

He strikes down, completely punching in the officer´s face with a deafening crunch of bending metal crushing motherboards and memory cards. It immediately falls limp on the gasoline and vapour wet concrete, a few miniscule screws rolling away into the darkness. All of the lights of its eyes promptly shut down, as well as the green dot on its temple. Its fans turn off, and it starts going cold.

Vladimir stares down at his own still-open ribs, closing them with a hiss and turning around. As he trots to the bag, he pulls out all the various warnings that piled up at the side and finds one that states he is at 182,3 degrees.

As soon as he reads the last digit his shoulders sag, his knees go limp as his limiter immobilises him. He falls right next to the bag. He sighs, with which two thin lines of smoke come out of his nose.

He can see, in the darkness, a familiar green dot light up, before he hears a rough smoker´s voice from all sides, popping with radio interference a bit, "Vladimir? We got away. What is your position?"

šifra: AV21
mentor: Renata Gal
institution: Medicinska škola Osijek
autor: Anamarija Vukovac

MALADAY

Why live in this boring world when you can just make up a more interesting one?

I had no idea what time it was, but it was dark outside, like the inside of that hospital. The look of it was the least of our concerns, though, because my friend Mair and I were running down a long hallway, chased by mad nurses who wore black instead of white. On the left side were patient rooms, and on the right side were windows presenting a large view of an urban city, which would look amazing if it weren't covered by a thick, dark layer of smog. The only sources of light were the moonlight and the occasional, strangely green lightning strikes, breaking out of the dark green clouds.

"Miss Maladay," someone called me out, a male voice right in front of me – but the only person near me was my friend. I slowed down despite the danger we were in, looking around for the source of the male voice. Right away, Mair shouted at me, "FRAN! What are you doing?!" She grabbed my right arm, pulling me to speed up. "Come on!"

"MISS MALADAY!" the male voice then called me out louder and angrier. The last thing I saw was Mair letting me go and running away before someone caught me and covered my mouth. The last thing I felt was a sharp pain in my left arm.

Suddenly, I realized that I was not in the hospital anymore; I was actually sitting in my classroom, albeit then my *empty* classroom. As I flinched awake with my head facing the window and resting on my right hand, I noticed that the sun was already setting, and everyone else had already left. Slowly turning my head toward the person who had been calling me, they turned out to be the principal, standing in front of my desk with an angry expression and his arms crossed.

Uh-oh, I did it again.

"Francesca Maladay," the principal dared to utter my full name when he'd finally caught my attention. "This is the *third time* I've caught you sitting at your desk after classes," he pointed out. I just silently stared at him with a serious face, my arms resting on my desk. I refused to look at him directly, so I was looking up at him only with my eyes. "Is everything alright?" he asked.

Nothing in this world is alright.

"Yes," I stuttered and apologized – again. It was true that I *very* often 'got lost' in my own daydreams, so much so that I wouldn't even hear the ringing of the school bell, let alone everyone leaving for the day. Not my fault that it bothered others more than me. "If this happens again, I will have to speak with your par-" – the principal paused, clearing his throat – "...father," to which I replied with a dry 'okay' and a straight face like it was a casual conversation. My indifference and recent poor grades didn't help my case either. After a painfully boring lecture about paying attention to the world around me, which I *definitely* listened to, I packed my things into my schoolbag and left.

Walking home, I rolled up the left sleeve of my black hoodie to check up on the sharp pain I had felt in my daydream. Nothing unusual, just bandages I had wrapped both of my forearms with.

"Stop wasting your time. You have a whole life ahead of you." That's what they all said, acting like real life was any better – and they all knew it, they just didn't want to admit that I was right. Humanity slowly taints the world until both of them are equally hideous, like the warmth passing on to a colder object. Their whole pathetic existence, not once have humans learned from their mistakes – and I refused to participate in a world which was already too far gone. *I hated being one of them.*

But I could escape it all, and absolutely *no one* could stop me. No matter how much they tried changing my mind, it was unchangeable as humanity itself.

For me, daydreams were like a power. A power to escape the boring, repetitive reality. I could do whatever I wanted, go wherever I wanted, and the best thing: have *complete control* over them, unlike real life. Of course, I *could wake up* whenever I wanted to, but why would I leave the more interesting world in my head? My *own* reality, which, unfortunately, I could only enjoy while simultaneously dealing with the one I had been born into without being asked.

Too focused on my thoughts, I almost missed my house – again. Opening the iron gate to the front yard, I was immediately greeted by our little German shepherd, Ramon. Dogs are such loyal creatures, happy to see us no matter what, unaware of the bad side of life. Just like Ramon, who was playfully jumping on me and barking. But, as usual, I walked right past him like he wasn't even there.

Our beige-painted house wasn't the biggest or the prettiest, but the stunning garden in our front yard made up for it. Before I could reach the front door, my older sister Bernadette got out and hugged me tightly. She and my father were the only people I genuinely cared about at least a little, because they had always cared about *me*, even when I'd be moody or come home a little late.

Bernadette was seventeen, only three years older than me, yet her personality differentiated so much from mine – more optimistic and cheerful, spent most of her time with *her* friends outside while I stayed at home in my room – but I guess that's the case for most siblings. We both had green eyes and long, dark brown hair, though she never tied hers, and I always kept mine in a ponytail. She even wore brighter clothes – a white blouse and light blue jeans – while I preferred darker shades or just plain black.

"Fran, we've got some guests," Bernadette told me, making me roll my eyes back. "Our aunt, uncle, and cousins came over for dinner." *Great*, I thought. *More people I don't know.*

Of course, I awkwardly greeted them all and sat down at the table, then Aunt Whatever-Her-Name-Is started her 'you've grown so much' talk. I was just eating my food, occasionally nodding every time someone said something to me. Suddenly – *CRASH* – the window right behind me had shattered, and something dug its claws into my shoulders. It instantly pulled me back toward the window, and I held on for dear life as my family screamed in terror. Looking up to see the cause of the commotion, I saw some kind of large bird monster. It looked like a failed attempt of a stuffed toy, like it had been made of a bunch of different cloth, mostly pink, poorly stitched together, yet it had the strength of an actual creature.

As it successfully pulled me out through the window, I was sitting at the table again. The window behind me was perfectly fine, as if nothing had happened. *Oh, I just daydreamed through the whole dinner.* Luckily, all of them finally left after the tedious goodbyes.

At last, I entered my room, where I could enjoy complete peace, and nobody could bother me. I turned on the light and closed the door. The room was small but big enough for me; all was fine as long as I didn't have to share it with my sister. Right next to the door was my desk, and on the opposite side was my closet. My bed was placed in the middle of the room, a single window in front of it. I let out a sigh of relief as I threw my schoolbag next to the bed and eagerly sat down at my desk.

Aside from daydreaming, my favorite activity was drawing, especially scary characters and monsters because I was fascinated by them. Yeah, the world I was unwillingly living in had its own scary things like wars, diseases, and natural disasters, but those were *boring*. I wished monsters from folktales were real instead. Unfortunately, my strange interests were the reason why I couldn't have many friends even if I wanted to. Literally *all* of my classmates were into more light-hearted stuff and genuinely uncomfortable around me, so I eventually gave up on befriending them. I had fictional characters to fill that void anyway.

Yes, I did call fictional characters my friends, and I knew way more about them than I knew about actual people, including their names. At some point, I started obsessing over them so much that I didn't even feel the need for real social interactions anymore.

I had been working on my own comic called *Nightmair Perfection* because Mair, the girl from the first daydream, was the protagonist. I wasn't one of the characters, but I loved to imagine myself being friends with her and living in her dangerous world. The comic itself was about a dystopian urban city under the control of a mad scientist with a bird monster as a pet. Like me, he hated how weak and uninteresting humans were, so his goal was to make them more 'perfect' by changing their DNA, improving their abilities in some way. Naturally, the side effects would turn their skin white and hair gray, their veins and eyes glowing in vibrant colors. Honestly, that world sounded *way* cooler to live in.

After drawing for a while, I got a text from my 'best friend' Veronica. Calling her my best friend was quite weird because we rarely talked or even texted each other. Mostly just to wish each other happy birthdays or holidays. Also, because she was the polar opposite of me, liking cute things and hating anything remotely scary. *Coward.* Ugh, and her childish overalls, the short pigtails; I'd sometimes forget we were the same age. Anyway, she was asking me about the school project we were working on together that month. "Let's talk during lunch at school tomorrow," I texted back.

Tap-tap, the sound I heard coming from the window. Checking it – it was my boyfriend, Xavier. He was wearing an old skull mask with a black hood over his messy, black hair. There were dark stains on his clothes, although that wasn't unusual, knowing him. Happy to see him, I opened the window. He then lent me his hand and helped me climb up to the roof of my house along with him. We sat together under the stars, holding hands. "I got something for you," he said as he reached for the gift he had left on the roof. Excited, I opened it – there was a mask like his and a knife. "Would you join me?" he asked, looking at me with his red eyes. At first, I was hesitant, but he was my boyfriend, and I would have done anything for him, no questions asked. "Yes," I answered, a single but powerful word.

Hours later, I woke up at my desk and checked the time – *2:32AM*, the clock said. *Well, time for some nightdreams now.*

The next day, everything was the same and dull as always. I was sitting at my desk in class, resting my head on my left hand and fidgeting with my pencil in the other. For a change, I was actually trying to pay attention, but the teacher's speech was progressively getting too muffled to understand and my vision too blurry to see. Feeling weak, darkness closed in on me like curtains on a stage.

When I opened my eyes, I was back at the hospital, being transported on a gurney. I glanced at the nametag of one of the two people around me – *Dr. Murdoc Torren*. I realized I was daydreaming about Mair's world again, but I wasn't trying to. The curly-haired nurse noticed that I was awake, so she kept my head down. They took me to a dim-lit room with a single light source in the middle, my heart pounding out of my chest. The nurse injected me with what I assumed was an anesthetic, but instead, agonizing pain started spreading throughout my body. That was enough, I was going to wake myself up.

But I couldn't wake up.

I had no idea what was happening to me. Thankfully, I got the chance to snatch a scalpel on the table right next to me and, without thinking too much, stabbed myself in the left arm. I flinched awake, my heart still beating fast.

The school bell had already rung, and it was lunchtime. For some reason, I took my schoolbag with me to the cafeteria, then walked up to Veronica who was already sitting at a table. "Hey, Roni, can we talk..." – something came over me – "...in private?" *Why did I say that?* She nodded, and I lead her to an empty restroom. When I asked about our school project, she just stared at me, confused. "What school project? We haven't gotten anything yet," she answered. I was just as confused, something wasn't right. As she was leaving, I took a knife out of my schoolbag and raised it. *No, no, no...* I wasn't doing that.

I was no longer in control.

I resisted long enough for her to leave unharmed and dropped the knife out of my shaky hand to the ground, the sound echoing across the entire restroom. I was sweating bullets. Just then, someone sent me a text, and I immediately checked it. "Did you do it?" from XAVIER. How could he have been texting me? He wasn't real, I made him up! Eventually, it got to my head that I still wasn't awake.

I used to like my daydreams, wishing I'd stay in them, and my wish came true. They turned into daymares; *I didn't like them anymore.* Sick and dizzy again, I fainted.

So many images flashed before my eyes at once. So many different scenarios, not logically connected at all, were playing in my mind. The madness abruptly stopping, I woke up in my room, safe and sound in my bed. I was so lost in space and time, jumping from place to place too quickly to comprehend anything. I slowly left my room and turned the corner to the living room, not knowing what to expect. My father was sitting on the couch, watching TV. "Hey, sweetie, your mother needs some help in the garden," he exclaimed without even facing me.

Mom? I rushed outside, but there were only my sister and Ramon, sleeping in his doghouse. "Bernadette? Where's Mom?"

"What do you mean, honey? I'm here," Bernadette replied. My stomach dropped – I *still* wasn't out of it, and it was only getting more and more confusing. "Where are you going?" she asked as I left the front yard, crying. I didn't know where I was going, I just wanted to walk away. I didn't even notice that night had already fallen, even though it was morning minutes ago, and a sense of dread washed over me. I couldn't go back, so I walked faster and faster until something hit me hard over the head.

Tied to a chair in a dark room, the only thing I could see were Xavier's red eyes. "You betrayed me," he said in a sinister tone. I continued crying, I just wanted everything to end – even if it meant dying, even if I were already dead. As if someone had heard my cries, the door behind Xavier burst open. Fast as lightning, Ramon attacked him. He bit and held onto his leg, just enough to distract him. In the light coming from the door, I saw Mair's silhouette. As she was getting me out of there, my vision slowly faded to black again.

Expecting the daymare to never end, I woke up in a hospital bed, the bandages on my arms stained reddish-brown. But I felt like I could think clearly again. "Sis!" Bernadette hugged me, her eyes filled with tears. She and my father had been sitting next to me, waiting for me to wake up. How long I had been there, I didn't know; all that mattered was that it was finally over. I felt so sorry for everything I had ever done, and everything I had ever ignored in life, when – *in reality* – I had it all. So, I made a promise to myself: when I recover, I was going to focus on the world I was actually living in, accept it for how it was, even give Ramon the attention he had always deserved.

It was the first time I genuinely felt happy in REAL life, until... Dr. Torren... entered the room. "Miss Maladay," he said. Everything around me froze, and my vision flickered like a faulty lightbulb.

Suddenly, I realized that I was not in the hospital anymore; I was actually sitting in my classroom, albeit then my *empty* classroom. As I flinched awake with my head facing the window and resting on my right hand, I noticed that the sun was already setting, and everyone else had already left. Slowly turning my head toward the person who had been calling me, they turned out to be the principal, standing in front of my desk with an angry expression and his arms crossed.

šifra:coupleV3C
Mentorica: Mirna Teodorović
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autor: Vito Prpić, 3.c

MURDER BEACUSE OF CHEATING

Prologue:

On 7th January. 2019 at the location of Croatia, Jastrebarsko there was a cute couple which consists of a girl named Molly and a boy named Teo. Molly has long brown hair, age 14, brown eyes, height 162cm, 60kg. Teo has short black hair, age 13, brown eyes, height 165cm, 65kg. They started dating during the 5th grade when they meet in the hallway during break time.

Chapter 1 First meet:

7th January

At around 8:40 AM Teo went to another classroom for his second period. During his walk through the hallway to his class he met a new transfer student who moved from Slovenia. Teo: "Hi I heard you were the new transfer student from Slovenia nice to meet you." Molly: "Hi, yeah I, just transfered here its nice to meet you I am Molly, you?" Teo: "My name is Teo I now have to go to my class before the 5 minute break ends can u give me your phone number so we can text over whatsapp?" Molly: "Yeah sure."

They exchange numbers

Teo: "Alright see you later i have to head now to class." Molly: "See ya Teo."

During their separate classes they think about each other, they can't stop thinking about each other its love at first sight.

Around 10:30 AM started the lunch period. Teo and Molly accidentally meet in the cafeteria. Teo: "oh hi molly do you wanna sit together?" Molly: "yeah sure"

They both take their food trays that the lunch lady filled up with food consisting of cooked chicken, brocolli and caroots on the side and the drink a glass of orange juice. They sit at an empty table

Teo says to Molly "So how do you like the new school you are attending?" Molly: "Oh its really good I especially like this math professor if I remember correctly his name is Berislav." Teo: "Yeah that guy its an legend everybody likes him cause he is

funny and he is such a cool Teacher." Molly: "Anyways enough about the school because its boring to talk about; can you tell me

somethingabout yourself like for example what do you like to do for a hobby?" Teo: Oh I like to play video games and hang out with my friends after school." Molly: Oh nice do you wanna hang out sometime?" Teo: "Yeah sure." *school bell rings* "looks like the bell rang Ihave to go to class now see you later."

Molly: "See you later."

They started hanging out every other day after school they realized they have a lot in common and bonded over it; and then suddenly Teo asked Molly to be his Girlfriend

Chapter 2: 3 months later

7th April

Around 1:00 PM after school they went for a walk in the park

Teo: "Hey Molly I've been thinking we have alot in common like we both like horror, music, comic books, ice cream; I started to really like you so Molly will you be my girlfriend?" * Molly excitedly said yes* Molly: "Oh my god Teo yes I have always liked you from the first day we meet." Teo: "I liked you also from the first day we meet." Molly: "I wish you could have told me sooner; so what do you wanna do now?" Teo: "Wanna kiss?" Molly: "Sure."

They kiss *Teo's phone suddenly starts ringing*

Teo: "Hey wait somebody is calling me I need to pick up this phone call".

Teo picks up the phone

Teo's mother: "Son you have to come home now lunch is ready." Teo: "Alright mother I will come quickly now I love you bye."

hangs up the phone

Teo: "Alright Molly my mom said I have to come home for lunch."

They kiss goodbye

Molly: "See you later Honey."

8th April

Teo wakes up around 6:30 AM 30 minutes before he has to get ready for school; he starts starts scrolling on his phone and then he sees a advertisment about a gaming convention in Zagreb which is on 19th April.

Teo texts Molly

Teo: "Hey Molly do you want to go to this gaming convention with me it's in Zagreb, Convention Center Zagreb; 19th April at 2 PM?" Molly: "Yeah Teo i would do nothing else than go with you <3." Teo: "Thank you Molly i will buy the tickets after school see ya <3."

After School

Teo goes to the shop for tickets for concerts and conventions and buys two tickets

19th April

At 1:00 PM after school Teo: "Hey Molly here is the ticket for the gaming convention." *gives her the ticket* Molly: "Yay thank you teo I appreciate it." *gives u a kiss on the cheek* Teo: "Lets go ride the bus to Zagreb."

They ride the bus to Zagreb

They arrive 30 minutes later

Teo: "Okay Molly now we have to go in the tram number 7 to the convention center." Molly: "The tram stop is 2 minutes of walking from our location."

They walk to the tram stop while holding hands and then they wait for the tram to come

The tram comes and they enter it

Teo: "Okay now we have to wait like 30 minutes for the tram to come to our destination."

30 minutes pass by and they arrive at their destination

Molly: "Teo we are here lets go inside."

They scan their tickets at the entrance and enter the convention

Chapter 3 The gaming convention:

Teo: "This is my first time entering this convention space its bigger than in the pictures that I have seen."

Molly: "This is actually my first time in a convention im excited for my first time I hope you will enjoy it as much as me Teo: " Oh Molly I will enjoy everything in the world as long as u are by my side." *They kiss* Molly: "So now that are we are here what do you wanna do you wanna look around some booths or do you wanna get somenthing to eat." Teo: "No thanks Molly I don't want anything to eat but I am thirsty I can go buy us somenthing to drink." Molly: "Yeah sure I will just have an energy drink." Teo: "Okay sure I will find the food court to buy us our drinks you can stay here or you can walk around some booths." Molly: "I think I am just gonna look at some booths for now you can call me when yoz get our drinks so we can meet up."

Teo: "Alright I will go now I will probaly also get an energy drink."

Teo walks off to find the food court while Molly went off to look at the booths

Teo: "Now I wonder where the food court is I should probaly ask a security guard; excuse me sir can u tell me where the food court is?" Security Guard: "Yeah just go to Section B and then just walk straight and take the second right." Teo: "Alright thank you sir I appreciate it have a good day." Security Guard: "You too, kid."

Teo walks to the food court and then he meets a stunning women that works as an cashier

Teo: "Hello may I have tw-." *Teo stops speaking while he saw how gorgeous the casheir is. She has Blue Eyes, Dark Black hair, She is wearing all black even her nails are painted black the only thing that wasnt black on her was the White Employee badge that said Cashier: Kaja.

Teo: "Oh sorry." *Teo starts to slightly blush and Kaja notices it* Kaja: "Man it's ok you are not the first man that had a crush on me you are kinda cute so if you want I can give you my phone number with that order." Teo: "Oh yeah ,can I get two energy drinks and your phone number on the side?" Kaja: "Yeah sure I will write my number on a sticky note." *Kaja writes the number on a sticky note; and hands u the two energy drinks and the phone number* "Here you go ur total is to be my boyfriend." Teo: "Oh no sorry i cant get in a relationship cause im already in one." Kaja: "Aww come on sink into your lust and come date a real girl." Teo: "You know what screw it ,we can date in secret." Kaja: "Sure you can text me whenever you want and I will answer now u should probably head off to ur girlfriend before she gets worried where you are but I need one last thing from you.* Teo: "Oh yeah whats that?"

Kaja pulls Teo in a kiss

Kaja: "Okay now go to your other lover." *Kaja blows a kiss to Teo; and Teo calls Molly to find where she is* Teo: "Hey Molly how are you and where are you right now?" Molly: "Oh Hey Teo im good right now I bought some gaming plushies and some accessories but currently im in Section A between booths 12 and 13." Teo: "Okay see u soon Molly." Molly: "Teo I love you and cant wait to see you."

Teo hangs up the phone and is off to Section A to see Molly

Teo: "Hi Molly I got your energy drink." *Hands you your energy drink; Molly takes her energy drink* Molly: "Thank you Teo now when I was walking around the booths I saw some demos for videogames do u wanna go and play the demos?" Teo: "Sure." *They go off and play the demos of the videogames*

6 HOURS LATER

It is now around 8 PM

Molly: "Teo its been fun hanging out with you I hope we can repeat this again but now we have to go cause our bus to Jastrebarsko is soon going to come." Teo: "Same Molly I hope we can repeat this again."

They go to the bus station to wait for the bus and when the bus came they entered

When they arrived they went home

Molly: "Alright Teo I have to head home now i will see you later." Teo: "See you later Molly."

They kissed goodbye

Chapter 4 Molly finds out Teo's Infidelity

A few days after the convention Molly notices Teo has been paying less attention to her so she tries to find out if he has been cheating on her

24th April

Molly approaches Teo after school Molly: "Hey Teo do you wanna hangout with me in my house im home alone so we can hangout just me and you?" Teo: "Yeah Molly lets go to your house."

They walk around for 15 minutes until they approach Molly's house

Molly unlocks the door to her house and they enter

Molly: "Teo I wanna watch a movie can u put one on while I pour us a glass of water?" Teo: "Yeah sure I will pick us some movie to watch

While Teo is choosing a movie; Molly secretly put laxatives in Teo's cup of water

Molly: "Here you go Teo." *Gives him the cup of water filled with laxatives* "So what movie did you pick for us to watch?" Teo: "Oh its just some generic horror movie."

They start watching the movie and Teo drinks his water but after 30 minutes his stomach starts hurting and goes to use the bathroom

Teo: "Hey Molly can iI use your bathroom my stomach hurts." Molly: "Yeah sure just leave your phone on the kitchen table so u don't end up using it in the bathroom so it dosent take you longer to use the bathroom."

Molly takes Teo's phone that he left on the table and uses a picture of him she took to unlock with face ID

Molly goes to text messages and goes to see if Teo has been cheating on her

19th April

9:01 pm – Kaja: "Hey Teo do u wanna go on a date later?"

9:02 pm – Teo: "Of course my love I will see you tommorow <3"

9:03 pm – Kaja: "I cant wait to see you <3"

20th April

10:12 pm – Teo: "That date was awesome we should do it again; u know I've been thinking im probably break up with Molly soon so I can be with you."

10:13 pm – Kaja: "Thats great Teo I can't wait for you to be all mine u don't need her all u need is me."

When Molly saw the text messages she was heart broken and felt a piece of her die; so she decided to let a piece of Teo die.

She grabs a hammer from her father's tool box, and she took a kitchen knife and she put it in her pocket; Teo walks out the bathroom and continues watching the movie with Molly.

Molly: "Hey Teo." Teo: "Yes Darling what is it?" Molly: "I know you have been cheating with a girl named Kaja."

*Molly grabs the hammer and hits Teo's nose breaking it and managing for Teo to fall on the ground."

*Molly climbs on top of Teo's stomach and grabs the knife and slices Teo's neck open."

Molly: "How does that feel Teo you killed a part of me now I killed a part of you; specifically your neck.

Molly gets hit with a huge hit of regret and depression and realizes that she killed the only person that truly loved her

Molly: "Oh no what have I done i shouldn't have done that I screwed up so much I killed the only person that loves me."

Molly glances at the bloody knife and realizes what she must do

Molly: "Teo I know u are dead but if you can still hear me I am sorry."

Molly slices her own neck open and falls to the ground; she is still bleeding out and has a couple of seconds of life left in her

*Molly looks at Teo's now dead whitish eyes and says..."

Molly: "I love you Teo."

Molly dies after saying that

The end.

šifra: 1SBrnC8C
mentor: Antonio Shala
institution: Upravna škola Zagreb
autor: Lucija Mijić

MY REAL STORY

My name is Simon Smith, I am twenty-seven years old and I am happily married to my wife Sarah Smith, twenty-eight years old. We live in a fairly luxurious apartment in Chicago, Illinois in the very center of the city. I am a project manager, she's a product manager and for the first time ever we met on a trip when we were both in college. From the moment she spilled that iced caramel macchiato on my white shirt, a strong desire arose in me to get to know her and for our eyes to gaze deeply into each other at least one more time. She apologized as she tried to wipe the stain with tissues and asked if there was anything she could do to make up for such inconvenience, so I handed her my phone so she could write down her number and I said that should be enough. We started dating and after some time we realized that we really had a lot in common, after a while we realized that we felt more than just a platonic interest in each other, which was weird for me. I've never been the type of person to rely on my feelings, I prefer to believe in facts and what is proven and understandable. Growing up I don't think I was able to process a lot of emotions, for my parents that is a symbol of weakness, but somehow Sarah showed me that there is beauty and safety in vulnerability and that it is all part of human nature and what makes us unique. Typically, what defines happiness can vary from one person to the next and while it has many different definitions, I think I have found mine. When most people talk about the true meaning of happiness, they might be talking about how they feel in the present moment or referring to a more general sense of how they feel about life overall, and I think I never felt so much happiness in my life until God or any force majeure decided to surprise me with the gift of her presence, unknown to me at the time, but so wonderful. We complement each other in every way imaginable, that's why everyone says we are meant to be, our work is prime example. I'm a project manager, I'm responsible for ensuring that the project is delivered on time within scope and on budget so my job is more tactical and operational, while her job as a product manager is to ensure that the built project meets the needs of market but also the customers, so she's more focused on design and development for it to get

launched making her more strategic. We moved into my apartment before we got married to make sure we were compatible together even in the same house which automatically means we spend all our time inseparable. Realizing that there was no problem in sight and that we could make a mutual compromise for all disagreements, she took my last name 2 months after I asked her to be my eternal partner and friend. Sadly, after 2 years we found out we couldn't have children because Sarah can't produce eggs. We were devastated by the news, but I decided to stay with Sarah regardless of the obstacles. Doctors recommended that we learn about the IVF procedure in which an egg is fertilized by sperm outside the woman's uterus, but before all that we need to find a woman who would donate her egg cell to perform such thing in the first place. On top of that an embryo is created and it is transferred to the woman's uterus to cause pregnancy. There are many steps and a convincing chance that it will all be in vain, but Sarah was confident in her decision and I had no choice but to agree with her. She decided on an anonymous egg donor. That way the donor wouldn't know to which family the egg is donated to, nor would we know who the donor is. I was skeptical about this decision due to all sorts of thoughts that were running through my mind, therefore I was afraid of any possible problem that could arise from it, but I couldn't oppose Sara because I know she's comprehending this mess worse than I am. Realizing that I wouldn't do anything to stop it, I started writing a book where I wrote down my draining thoughts and I especially wrote about any possible scenes that were the product of my delusions something like what I expected to happen, so I began to create a little story that I was finishing every now and then. While the process was going on, Sarah was clearly stressed, so I tried to cheer her up whenever I saw the opportunity. I know it's not easy for her and I did everything in my power to let her know that I was there for her. I had a feeling that everything would go downhill but quite the contrary, Sara successfully became pregnant and after nine months we had our long-awaited beautiful daughter, whom we named Aurora. Aurora was a very playful and warm child, as much as I adored her, she had a truly special connection with Sarah who loved her immensely. I finally understand why every parent constantly says that their child is the most special in the world, same way Aurora was, in Saras and my eyes. I was simply a happy and fulfilled man and I couldn't ask for anything more. Even though I still can't believe how something that made me feel immensely happy, also led me to the edge of my life. One evening, Sara remembered that she had left her laptop at the office, so she couldn't finish the project we were working on for that reason she decided to take a ride to the office building where we work in. Even though I told her it wasn't that

important, she could've finished it tomorrow, but no, she left me and Aurora at home. After an hour, I had a feeling that something had gone wrong since the building was half an hour away, there and back, a whole hour passed and sara still hadn't returned. I decided not to panic, maybe she just bumped into one of our colleagues and they invited her to go for a drink with them. I overheard them talking about it today during the break. Exhausted waiting for Sara, I fell asleep with Aurora on the couch. Next morning my mother came to pick up Aurora, but Sarah was still not home. I called her numerous times, but she didn't pick up all I got was that annoying voicemail. Meanwhile, I turned on the TV while I was cooking breakfast. Then I heard it. While listening to the news about a young woman who died in a car accident after crashing her car into a bar, I caught a glimpse of her with my peripheral vision and she looked exactly like my Sarah. In fact, that woman was Sarah Smith, my wife. I couldn't process what have I just heard, I began to shake, yet I wasn't able to feel one single emotion, they were saying something but I didn't understand I couldn't hear anything that's happening around me, I zoned out I didn't understand what's happening and then I felt it. My heart shattered into countless atom-sized pieces that no one will ever be able to put back together. I cried so much I couldn't breathe my heart was already destroyed to cause any pain, but my lungs were constricting me. I felt like the air was getting thinner and someone was torturing me. Now my heart feels like godforsaken rock with no redeeming qualities. Aurora lost her beloved mother, what will it be like for her growing up? What if I don't manage to fill that hole in her life? I called my and Sarahs family to tell them the bitter truth and I couldn't believe the reality. After a while I took a break from work to gather enough strength for myself and Aurora. People often say it has to be hard in order for it to be worth it, but why? Why do we have to struggle to deserve nice things? I never wanted to move on, but I had no other choice, and after more time passed by, I barely felt like a person, it's like everything I'm doing is an attempt to push down the truth. She still occupies the space inside of me somewhere. How do I let go of the memories, the things I held so close to my heart are now in the pit of my stomach. It turns out the memories fall one by one, as her name crams into the creases of my brain forcing me to remember anything I could of her that I wish I could forget. Its like I wish I could get the marks off the page, fix the holes out of the wall, but it never goes away, I remember those marks when I look at that paper remembering what I wrote. I walk past that wall remembering the hole that was put there and the picture that hung. I miss her more than anything, she is like the eraser marks on the page, like that wall with a hole, I could keep trying to cover it up, I could keep trying to erase, and as much as I would

like to forget I never could. I will never forget someone who made me endlessly happy. I remember her funeral like it was yesterday. I couldn't bring myself to look at her in that coffin, but I couldn't stop looking either because that was the last time I would ever see her. When you lose someone, it stays with you, reminding you of how easy it is to get hurt. Five years passed and I was still devastated but I covered it up, I had to do so for Aurora. She was little when Sarah died so she doesn't even remember and luckily no one is bringing up the topic. Everything is so monotonous without her and oddly enough sometimes to move forward we must face what has been behind us all of this time. Thats why I decided to find someone new, I wasn't searching out of some unimaginable desire to replace Sarah because that's not possible, nor did I do it because I'm lonely, it was simply because I realized that Aurora needs a mother and I don't want her to lack anything in her life. Not long after I met a new secretary at work. She was a remarkable woman, her name was Caroline, she is 30 years old and she didn't have a partner. Quite mysterious too. One of the main reasons why I started dating her was because she had similar characteristics compared to Sarahs, personality, way of dressing and it took my breath away how connected she was to Aurora, how she treats her like she is her own daughter. The first time she saw her, she cried and Aurora quickly fell in love with her and that was enough for me. I felt like I had known her for years, but we had only known each other for a few months, not long after she moved into my apartment. We had a wonderful relationship, but something just fell off, I didn't know what it was, but it kept me up at night. However, one afternoon when I was in my office, I received a call from an unknown number, I heard a deep man's voice who told me that my ex-wife Sarah didn't die by accident, but that the accident had been arranged so that she would die. I was in shock and couldn't process what I was hearing, he suggested we meet at a bar near the building where I work after in the evening. I saw Caroline on my way out, she was wearing a beautiful black blouse, and I told her I was going for a drink, she just told me to get home safely. Confused, curious and with many questions I finally met up with him. He was tall and wore glasses he was about forty years old and all I know is his name was Zane. He was in a bathroom suspiciously for a long time and. Surprisingly, I was unable to find out anything because when he went to the bathroom, he was brutally murdered so the owners of the place called the ambulance and police shortly after people saw him dead. I couldn't see anything cause all I heard was people screaming and everyone quickly ran out. I was called for police interrogation, but they determined that I had nothing to do with his murder. When I got home, I stretched out on the couch and turned on the TV, to which Caroline reacted quite hysterically and

told me to turn off the TV and she forbade me from watching it. I didn't want to argue, so I went into another room to calm down my thoughts and turned on the TV to watch the news. That guy who I wanted to speak with appeared, it was confirmed that he was murdered and police has no suspects in custody, but they released a picture of potential murderer walking into the bathroom not long after Zane during the time of the crime. Then the picture pops up and I saw the same blouse that Caroline wore before. Before I could react Caroline nearly broke down the door yelling at me to turn off the TV. I was shaking and kept my phone in my pocket so I could call the police later. Caroline looked at me intensely and slowly started approaching me with tears and hatred in her eyes, then Aurora woke up and she stood behind the door asking what was wrong. Caroline looked at her and bursted into tears, started talking about how incredibly sorry she was for everything. I was scared to question what she has done. She admitted that she killed Sarah by messing up the clutch of her car leading her to that horrible car crash because she was consumed by jealousy that she had her child, Aurora. Caroline was the donor who sold her egg cell to help Sarah get pregnant. She overheard my conversation with Zane by call monitoring allowing her to her to connect to our call and since she is a secretary it's no surprise. Zane was her ex-husband. I was disgusted and overwhelmed with emotions I can't describe, I didn't know what to do. Caroline pulled out a gun out of nowhere and pointed it at me and Aurora and told us to follow her, so I listened out of fear. She took us to the garage where my car was parked and told us to sit inside and insisted that I drive. I declined her insane request, but she told me that I can either be behind a wheel or in a wheelchair, so I started the car and began driving. After a while I was driving over a bridge leading out of town and she suddenly turned the wheel of the car with all her strength and the car fell off the bridge into the sea. Next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital and the nurse next to me was calling the doctor and yelling that I had woken up. The doctor asked me a few questions and said that my family and wife would be visiting me soon enough. I was confused because my wife is dead, but then he looked at me strangely and told me to stop making up nonsense. Then he accused me of losing my memory after I tried telling him what I remember last. Not long after that, Sarah appeared at the door, coming to visit me, holding Aurora's hand, telling her that after 5 years I had finally woken up. I was astonished by how Sarah is still alive and what does she mean by that. The doctor calmed me down and after I asked Sarah how is it possible that she is alive, she asked me in surprise to give her one good reason as of why she wouldn't be? I had so much to say but the doctor dragged her out and told her to come see me the next day because they had to figure

out what was going on with me. The next day Sara showed up, but she was alone and brought me some supplies that I might need while I was in the hospital and the strangest thing was a weird stack of papers that she carried with her that she later gave to me. I told her I wasn't ready to go back to work yet, to which she laughed and said she thought I might want to finish the book I was writing. I was lost in time and space. What book is she talking about? When I asked her about it, she told me that I know what that is, in fact, its a book that I'm writing. When Sarah left, I decided to read what was written on those mysterious papers. And then it all clicked, everything that happened to Sarah, with Caroline and Zane was written in that book. The last line is describing how Caroline, Aurora and I fell off a bridge into the sea with my car. The story in that book was the life I thought I had with title being „Sweet Caroline". Am I in a time loop? Another reality? Which reality is mine or could it be both? That's a question I don't have the answer to, but maybe one day we'll find out.

šifra:Toto
Noemi Tot
Medicinska škola Osijek
Mentor: Anita Ivanković

MYSTERY OF ARTUR MERCER

I. The Assignment

The sound of water crashing against the coastline echoed through a small town called Rockport. The waves were caused by the wind. Crumbs of what looked like bread were thrown on the ground for the seagulls to eat. The flying creatures gathered around a woman who was sitting on the bench near the sea. The woman with long brown wavy hair smiled at them, watching as each of the little crumb got eaten by them. There were barely any people outside because of the stormy weather. You wouldn't hear anyone who tried to approach you. The woman turned around and noticed a man walking towards her. It was that guy whom she had met at the bookstore when she came to town. The bookstore was located right by the coastline, just like the most of other stores in town.

"Eva, isn't it?"

She heard his raspy voice caused by lack of warm clothing he wore while outside. Sitting down he moved the papers lying on the bench and held them in his hands. The woman turned her head to look at him since he ruined her moment of peace and thinking.

"Yes, and I believe you're Sebastian, the guy from the bookstore? That is supposed to be open right now, if I'm not wrong."

He nodded and glanced at the papers, which had neat handwriting but were noticeably written at a fast pace. Eva carefully watched everything he did, making sure he didn't mess anything. She'd been working on this for a week now. No one wanted that work to be ruined, especially her.

"How's the assignment going so far?"

Looking up from the papers, he handed them to her. She accepted them with a smile and placed them on the opposite side of the bench. The woman didn't particularly like the man because he was dismissive of her ability to solve the mystery. Although he's a complete stranger, Eva didn't like being told she wouldn't be able to do something she needed or wanted to.

"Actually, it's been going great, for your information. I did some research on the artist and I talked to some people who were close to him and I'm pretty positive about it."

The brunette put on a slight smile, turning her attention towards the mansion which could be seen from the coastline on a hill. It was a couple of minutes' walk away from the town. Sebastian followed her gaze and chuckled.

"Well, good for you. Though, if you think of going into that mansion, I advise you to be careful. I heard there are ghosts in there."

This made Eva choke on the water she was drinking. The man tried to help her, but she put her hand up, showing that she was fine. Choking was caused by her trying to laugh, but it was hard since she started drinking at the same moment.

"Now, I don't believe that. People are probably creeped out by the mansion because it's dark in it and because it's abandoned."

Looking at her watch she saw that it was already time to set off and visit the mansion before the night comes, so she stood up fixing her coat.

"I'll better get going now. I don't want the night to catch me at the mansion. See you later, Sebastian!"

Walking away from the place they were sitting towards her car Eva could hear Sebastian warning her about the mansion again saying that he had been there before. The woman just shook her head and ignored the man. She needed to finish this assignment for her work.

II. The Last Clue

Opening the rusty gate in front of the mansion, Eva stepped into the garden. It was filled with overgrown grass and there were tree branches going up the walls. Taking a deep breath, the woman pushed herself to go inside. This was her most significant investigation in her journalism career. In her four years of work, she had never researched a mystery that even the police had failed to solve. Eva came to Rockport a week ago and immediately started researching everything. She spoke with a woman in her 40s, whom some people suspected of having an affair with the missing artist. Mara Withmore was her name and she declined answering any of her questions. However, Eva was still confused as to why the police stopped investigating Artur's disappearance. What caught her eye at Mara's house was that she was rich, the richest person in that little town. From the moment she set foot in Rockport it reminded her of her childhood home. The thought of her parents smiling and taking her to every playground filled her with pain as they died in a car crash when she was

just a teenager. Eva snapped back to reality as she entered what appeared to be an office. A chill ran down her spine from the icy air inside. As she glanced around, her eyes settled on a large portrait of a man hanging on the wall above the desk. It was Artur Marshall. Opening the drawer, she saw a closed envelope addressed to Mara Withmore. Eva opened it after hesitating for a while. The woman did lie to her after all.

Dear Mara,

I left like you requested. Your husband and son won't ever find out about me, I hope. No one will ever hear from me, not even you. My love for you will never fade, even if you only used me just to feel powerful or however you call it. For your safety I hope your husband doesn't find out about us. If he did, you would lose everything and you know that. That's it. Lastly, I hope life gives you what you deserve!

Your Artur

Immersed in reading Eva didn't notice that someone had walked into the office and was waiting for her to finish reading. Looking up she let out a scream not noticing the person standing by the door. Putting a hand on her heart Eva tried to steady her breathing.

"What are you doing here? I thought you said it was haunted."

"I wanted to make sure nothing happens to you."

Sebastian made his way towards the woman trying to find out what she was holding. His hair was wet from the rain that was falling outside. Something Eva also didn't notice until now. Her brown hair was again put behind her ears since the locks would be in the way while she was reading.

"Nice of you to do that. You could've knocked at least, so I don't get a heart attack."

Eva sighed putting the envelope on the desk which was immediately snatched by the man. "What is this?"

Eva proudly smiled and watched closely as he confusingly read the paper. "The last clue to my research! Now I can finally write my article!"

There was a long silence after Sebastian read the letter. Eva frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Mara Withmore is my mother, Eva."

III. Mara Withmore

Several days had passed since Eva uncovered the truth about the artist's disappearance, as well as the revelation that Sebastian was Mara's son.

At the moment she was sitting on the couch of a big house. In her hands she held a notebook while Mara Withmore was sitting opposite her.

"Please, don't tell my husband anything, or Sebastian. Oh… he won't talk to me ever again if he finds out." The older woman grabbed her forehead and glanced at the envelope one more time.

"Sebastian already knows, ma'am. I just want you to answer some questions." Eva was here to get some more answers for her article. Sure, everyone will talk about it but that wasn't her problem.

"He knows? This is not good… Alright, alright. I will." With a heavy sigh she put the envelope on the table. While taking a sip of her tea she already imagined herself moving out of the house and leaving the town.

"Did you love Artur, or was it just to get him out of here so you could be the richest person in town?"

"I loved him truly, but we wouldn't last… So, I just scared him saying that my husband will find out about us and that it would be better if he moved far away and never returned."

After this Eva asked a few more questions, all of them proving that the woman had an affair with Artur Morcer, the famous artist. Also, she paid the police to stop investigating and to stay quiet about it. When Eva got all her answers, she went home. The brunette was surprised that Mara even wanted to answer her questions, but she guessed that Mara had already accepted her fate. Eva would have published the article with or without the woman's answers. She sent the final version of the article to her boss, so it could be published in the next edition. In about two days everyone in town should know about the solved mystery.

Eva was going to stay here for at least two more weeks on a vacation. It was a nice town and she loved being there, despite the drama that was going on. The center of Rockport was quite big and had a lot of stores and caffes around it. It also had amazing beaches. They were rocky beaches, not sandy, which was unusual for this part of the States. Her boss just texted her and approved of it, giving her a break from work. Eva smiled and sipped her coffee already thinking about what she would do in the next days. The woman had a little time for herself when working. Her articles were mostly based on history or mystery, so she needed a lot of time and effort to find the right information, whether they were true and not false, so people could learn

something from them. Her weekends were taken away by work. Eva didn't even have much time to go out to hang out with her friends or even meet someone new.

Now it was the right time to grab that chance.

Even though she met Sebastian only two weeks ago and found him very attractive, she waited for him to make the first move.

Unaware of her feelings, he explained to her that he would continue running the bookstore even if he were rich because he didn't want to be the kind of person who relied on his parents' money. Sebastian was determined to earn his success on his own. He wanted Eva to understand that he wasn't arrogant like other kids from wealthy families. The true reason behind his actions, however, remained unclear to him—or perhaps he was simply avoiding the truth, afraid of her rejection and worried she might only see him as a path to wealth.

IV. The newspaper

Carrying her laptop in one of her hands Eva walked inside the cafe. It was her morning routine while she was in Rockport. Being there healed her, restoring her energy. She had been feeling increasingly exhausted from all the work she'd been doing, but now, the brightness in her spirit finally returned. Ordering her usual black coffee, she went over and sat by the window. As she opened the newspaper to see what was happening in the world, a big headline popped up *MYSTERY SOLVED – ARTUR MERCER*. Eva sighed figuring out why people were whispering and talking about Mara Withmore when she came in. The newspaper and online version were published. She cleared her throat, took a sip of her black coffee, and scrolled down to see the other news. Another big headline came up, also happening in Rockport *MARA WITHMORE SPOTTED BEING THROWN OUT BY HER HUSBAND*. Eva didn't look around her and started reading, wanting to see what was written about it. The only time she looked up from her laptop was when she heard someone greet her. It was Sebastian, now seated across from her at the table.

"Oh... uhm, hello, Sebastian!" Eva felt bad now because his mother got kicked out and everything that had happened. Mara was supposedly at her friend's house now in another city. "I'm sorry about what happened with your parents. I didn't want to be the one to ruin their relationship."

Sebastian chuckled and thanked the waiter for bringing the coffee. "She deserved it. My mother never loved or cared for me—my father even less. Don't beat yourself up over it, please. He was bound to find out eventually. It's better this way, sooner rather than later."

Eva was shocked to hear that come out of his mouth. "I'll try. So, how's the work going? I heard you want to open a bigger bookstore. Is that true?" The concern was now replaced by a smile.

"That's true. There will mostly be historical books, but I'll try and offer other genres too." The man studied the woman's features intently as she took another sip of her coffee—a drink he guessed must be her favorite.

"I'm so happy for you and I hope it will work out. I wish I could come here and visit sometimes, to see how it will all turn out." Eva truly wanted a reason to visit this place more.

"In that case, I think this is a right time to ask you something." This made the brunette question whether it was a good or a bad thing. The look on her face made Sebastian give her a reassuring smile, "Don't worry, it's nothing bad."

"Yes, of course. Go ahead and ask." People around them were still looking over at their table whispering about Sebastian - how he probably made the journalist publish the news and such kind of rumors.

"Even though we've only known each other for two or three weeks and don't know each other that well yet, I'd really love to take you out on a date. So, would you go on a date with me, Eva?" This made Eva widen her eyes, not knowing what to say. After couple of seconds the girl realized she had secretly been waiting for this moment and finally accepted it.

"Then this is the right time to get to know each other more." Eva smiled and closed her laptop. "It just needs to be this week, because I'm going back to work in a week."

Sebastian smiled. "It's a deal."

V. Ending

Two years have passed since their first date, which went exceptionally well. They decided to see where things would lead, and now they live together in Rockport. Both are thriving in their dream jobs. Eva recently earned a promotion and was granted permission to work from home, only needing to visit the office for occasional meetings. She usually stayed at home or wrote in the cafe. Yes, the same cafe where Sebastian asked her out. It became one of her favorite places in this town. Sebastian finally realized his dream and was about to open the bigger bookstore. There were thousands of people eagerly waiting in front of the new location for the ribbon-cutting ceremony so they could go inside and explore. Eva stood beside him, smiling from ear to ear, thrilled for her boyfriend's success. She loved seeing him thrive. Se-

bastian glanced nervously at his watch and sighed—only five minutes remained until the grand opening of his bookstore. Eva came even closer and grabbed his hands.

"Everything will be alright, Seb! You don't have to worry." She was standing right in front of him, so he had to look down at her. He tried to hide the smile on his face, but it slowly appeared. He loved the way she supported and comforted him.

"What if people don't like it? Then my work will go down the drain." There was also a concerning look on his face.

"They'll love it! You did an amazing job and it's nicely decorated! You even ordered books which will appeal to a younger audience." Sebastian nodded reassuring himself that everything will be alright.

"Alright, let's do this!" That being said Eva moved away and stood by his side. Sebastian grabbed the scissors from his friend and announced the grand opening. In a second the ribbon was cut allowing the crowd to come in. One by one, people approached Sebastian to congratulate him.

One of the people was Sebastian's dad. The elderly man was always there for his son and supported him in his work. On the other hand, his mother Mara Whitmore, now Smith, never tried to reach back to Sebastian. He would send messages and call his mother multiple times, trying to at least hear her voice. It was all in vain. He was used to his mother not being there for him, but he thought she would at least want to hear from him. After a while he figured she didn't care and stopped trying not wanting to bother her anymore. Eventually he realized that he was better off without her. He didn't want any liars or traitors or people who don't care about him in his life.

Everyone he needed was right there, and they were there to stay, for good.

šifra: JGS5L2ENC
Ime učenika: Jagoda SALMONOWICZ
Ime mentora: Marijana Smolčec
Naziv škole: Brussels European School I. (UCCLE)

NOTHING COMPARES TO FRIENDSHIP

It was a beautiful sunny day in Colorado as the 2nd grade finished class. Ally was walking hand in hand with her mother as they left the school. Then a boy caught her sight. He was skinny and tiny. Alison's mom pulled her closer to speed up.

– I have a meeting, remember? I cannot be late. Now come on, hurry.

She sped up but didn't take her eyes off the boy's body. She was surprised by his appearance. She's never seen him at school before but that wasn't her biggest concern. It's the way he looked. He was awfully skinny. Skeleton looking legs showed through his shorts. Unsettling really. The girl felt pity for him.

When Ally got home, she went to wash up and change clothes. Her mother was already in a meeting. It's hard to remember when she isn't. Poor Alison never spends time with her mom. She's learned to occupy herself and to spend hours alone. Sometimes maids try to play with her but that doesn't happen often. Nothing can replace mother and daughter time. Ally has a puppy though. He's named after her dad, Richard, but her mom hates when she calls him that so now it's Richy. The girl doesn't like that name since Richy was the only thing that could take her mind off the richness she is surrounded with, and his new name doesn't help with that. Ally never gets to leave the house with Richy, and they cannot disturb her mom while working. If the puppy is too tired, she normally spends time playing dolls. Ally always imagines they are representing her family since she's never had a real one.

Being an only child with one parent gets depressing and lonely even if you are surrounded by loads of maids. Ally's mother, Mrs. Smith, became a single parent about two years ago when her husband turned out to be a drug dealer. She immediately cut him off and got a divorce. He was a bad father anyway. Maybe Ally's parents were once madly in love and lived a great life but after his wife's unexpected pregnancy Mr. Smith changed. He just wasn't meant to be a father. Richard became abusive when Ally was around 4 years old or maybe younger. Mrs. Smith was considering a divorce ever since. That's how they ended up alone. Thankfully Mrs. Smith has started a business short after her marriage. It took off and that's how she affords a "great and prestigious life for Ally", as she says.

Alison's normal days start with getting woken up by one of their maids, she then goes to her bathroom to brush her teeth. Next, she goes to her gigantic kitchen where breakfast is already served. Ally has a bit of time before leaving for school, so she plays with her dog for a while. Right before leaving is when she finds out whether this is her lucky day, and her mom is taking her to school, or it is the driver again. Normally it's the driver. Ally isn't surprised anymore when she hears her mom won't be coming. She got used to it by now. If her mom can't come, she sometimes gets a "bye" from her, it's rare though.

Ally never gets to leave her house if it isn't for school. She hates that. Even though the girl might be scared of the outside world, since she's never actually experienced it like every other child her age. She still dreams to just go out and explore. Learn what the forest looks like in real life and not on pictures where you can't hear, touch, smell or feel it. Ally's mom always says: "The outside world is dangerous and can hurt you". The poor girl would prefer to be hurt and bruised than be locked up in a big house with long scary walls and unreachable ceilings. She just wants to know what it's like. What it feels like to be disgustingly dirty and covered in mud , what it's like to dive into grass, how it smells and makes you feels and what bugs sound like when they are quietly crawling around.

*

Next day, Ally was dropped off to school by their driver. Her mom had a busy day, so she was probably being picked up by the driver too. Once Ally got out of the car, the first thing she was looking for was a small boy sitting by the school waiting for someone or something that never seemed to have come. She spotted him, the boy was already curiously looking at her. She ran up to him. The girl put her hand with a bag out.

– Here! Eat up! I sneaked something from my house for you.

The boy didn't answer. He looked confused.

– My name is Ally- she continued- Alison Smith. They call me Ally. And what's your name?

He still wasn't answering.

– Oh, come on! It can't be that bad, right?
– I'm Naomi - A smile appeared on the boy's skinny face.
– Nice to meet you Naomi - she smiled - I'm sorry to ask but isn't that a girl's name?
– Yes, but in Japan boys are called it too - he said with a funny accent
– That's so cool! - she noticed

Ally grabbed Naomi by his hand. He wasn't convinced but it didn't take him long to stand up.

– I'll walk you to class, okay? You weren't waiting for anything, right?
– No, I just like to sit outside.

Ally was astonished by his character. She took him to class and turned out they had their first lesson together. She then realised she made her first real friend without her mom's help!

From that moment on, Naomi waited for Alison to go to class together every morning. They ate lunch together and were inseparable. It didn't take Mrs. Smith long to realise who her daughter is spending time with at a place where she is supposed to learn. Ally's mom thought Naomi was a distraction. She didn't want Alison near him.

– That boy will ruin you. Every man does. You don't need men to be successful. What you need is to concentrate and that boy is not helping you.
– I really like him. He's my friend! - poor Ally fought for herself.
– Sorry to interrupt but it's the first time in a while young Alison looked this happy – said Alison's favourite maid.

That lady was fired that day. Ally's mom was stubborn and didn't let go. She contacted the school to give her names of Naomi's parents to meet with them. Alison was sad her mom was doing this to his family. There was nothing she could do. Her mom got out of the house not long after calling the school. She was pressed to meet with her new friend's parents right away. Ally spent that night crying in her room.

*

The weekend has just started, and it wasn't going to be a good one. When Ally woke up, she went to wash up. Because she was sad about Naomi, she went to look for her dog to cheer up. The puppy was nowhere to be found. Maids helped look for Richy everywhere. Mrs. Smith couldn't take Ally's crying anymore. She locked her in her room and told her once they find the puppy they're going to let her know. Ally didn't believe that. Richy wasn't home. The girl knew she had to do something or she's never seeing her dog again.

Alison looked outside. The windows were big enough for her to fit through. The space from her window to the ground wasn't too big either so she could easily sneak out. Ally never thought of that before. Her mother scared her too much, so running wasn't even an option. Now, that it's more than just about Ally, she must go. That dog has been her only light. After jumping from the window and getting some scratches, she ran. Alison never runs. This was all new to her. Thankfully the girl knew this place by heart since she looked at it every day wanting to be there. Ally knew what it

looked like but not what it was like, so she was scared. The girl didn't stop running until she reached the forest. She couldn't stop thinking about how Richy must be afraid, but she was probably as terrified as he was.

It got really cold and scary. Then Ally started hearing things. It wasn't the wind or the trees making weird sounds. It also wasn't the animals. This was something different, like human footsteps. Ally was scared but she had no time to react as the sounds got louder. A human shaped shadow came out from behind the trees. It was a woman. Tall and skinny.

– Hi, do you need help? - the thin figure spoke.

– I'm lost- Ally responded, shivering out of cold and fear

– I can see that. You must be cold. Come I will take you to my place to get you warmed up and then we'll find where you came from. Sounds good? - the tall, not so scary anymore, woman said.

– Yes - she replied with hope.

The woman from the forest took off her cape and covered Alison with it. They started walking. Ally noticed her basket. It was filled with mushrooms. That's why that woman was alone in the forest. As they walked, they started talking. They soon found out that Ally's dog could be at their house. The woman's son found a dog earlier and brought it back home. Alison was so happy she hugged the woman. She found out her name was Mrs. Katayama. Once they got to her house that was a small cottage, Ally spotted a gold furred puppy playing with two boys.

– Richy! - Ally called the dog- I've been looking everywhere for you!

– Ally? - someone with a recognisable voice said.

Alison looked at the two boys and realised this was Naomi's house. Kenji, his brother, was the one who found Richy by the road when he was walking back from work. Ally couldn't believe it. Naomi ran to hug her.

– I thought I'd never be able to talk to you again after our parent's meeting! - Ally cried.

– Me too! - said Naomi - I was supposed to ignore you at school. I don't think I can do it.

It started to rain so everyone entered the house. It was small but very cosy. Ms. Katayama gave everybody a cup of tea and then called Ally's mom let her know she's safe. Ms. Smith was already on her way there but before she got to the cottage someone else knocked at the door. It was Naomi's dad. He came in all wet from the rain. Mr. Katayama greeted the girl with kindness. He said our families should meet to get along better. Ally loved that idea, but her mom probably wouldn't.

After everybody drank their tea and talked a bit, someone knocked at the door. It was Alison's mom. She came in and to everyone's surprise she was crying. Once Mrs. Smith spotted Ally she let out a sigh of relief. Alison has never seen her mother like this before. She ran to her to hug her and told her how stupid it was to run off by herself. Alison's mom couldn't hold her tears. She told her daughter how she didn't even realise she was gone until one of the maids went to check up on Ally and told her something was wrong.

– Once I opened the locked room and saw it was empty I panicked. I was about to call the police but then Mrs. Katayama called me. This was the last place I would've thought of looking for you - she said with tears in her eyes- I realise now that this is a good, caring and hard-working family. I allow you to be friends with Naomi again and I am so sorry I didn't see what this boy meant to you sooner. But please understand if I forbid you from leaving the house alone now - said Ms. Smith with tears - I love you so much.

– Thank you, mom - Alison hugged her like never before.

*

A few weeks passed after Ally's runaway and her relationship with her mother grew much stronger. Mrs. Smith accompanied Alison to school every day now and picked her up too. Ally not only got closer with her mom, but she now could spend even more time with Naomi. They spent all days playing either at school or in Alison's garden, with maids watching over but it was still a lot of fun. One of Alison and Naomi's favourite thing to do was play with the dog or jump on Ally's new trampoline she got for her eighth birthday a few days ago. They celebrated with the Katayama family and a few other families from their school. Some of Mrs. Smith's workers and partners from job came too. It was a big party. Alison never had parties like this for her birthdays. Normally, her mom didn't have time to organise anything. Basically, these last weeks were amazing for everyone and everything was perfect.

*

Alison! - screamed her mom - come down here. We have to leave!

Clueless Ally got in the car with her mother. She looked very worried and scared. Mrs. Smith tried to hide her emotions as best as she could, so Alison never saw her in this shape, except for the time when she escaped her house. The poor girl sat quietly in the back of the car while her mom was cursing at other drivers. She was pressured to get somewhere but Ally was too scared to ask her where. She didn't want to make her even more mad, so she just kept quiet.

They stopped in a big parking lot in some undergrounds. The car wasn't parked straight since Mrs. Smith was in such hurry. They left the car and went through some

big white doors. Then they took an elevator to the first floor. When the door opened Ally saw she was standing in a hospital. Alison has never been to one before. There was always a doctor or nurses coming over to her house if she ever got sick. Mrs. Smith ran up to the desk and asked for a name. At first the girl didn't hear it well. Then, when the woman from the desk repeated it, Ally froze.

– K-A-T-A-Y-A-M-A, is that how you spell it?

It was Naomi's family name.

Mrs. Smith grabbed her daughter quickly and ran to the assigned room the woman up front gave her. It was a big white room with a white bed, white sheets, white curtains, white furniture, white rugs and everything white. "Maybe this is why my mom never took me to this awful place" - Ally thought to herself. Naomi's mom was standing beside the bed on which Mr. Katayama lay. Kenji was sitting with Naomi beside the window.

Everyone was quiet and sad. Alison overheard their moms talking. Apparently, Naomi's dad had a stroke and was now in a really bad shape. Mrs. Katayama started crying into Ally's mom's jacket about how she didn't know who to call and how glad she was they were there.

*

The past few weeks were very hard for the Katayama family, but it seemed like they were better now, and Naomi's dad was able to even work a little. Naomi started hanging out with Ally again and everything was getting better. Or so they thought…

*

Alison jumped up as she heard knocking on her window. It was Naomi. He was all wet because of the rain. He never snuck up to her room like this before, but she happily opened the window for him. He didn't say anything though. The boy took her hand and started crying.

– Please come with me. I need to talk to you.

Ally immediately jumped out of the window to follow him. She was never going to leave him all alone in this shape. And so, they left.

Naomi told Alison about his dad. He had another stroke. He didn't make it this time. Naomi's house was filled with medics, and he just couldn't watch it, so he ran. Alison felt so sorry for him. Even though she also didn't have a father she could never understand what her friend was feeling. They spent the whole evening talking and walking around the forest. They knew they got lost but nothing mattered since they were together and that was all they needed.

*

Police searches started soon after Mrs. Smith saw her daughter wasn't home. Alison's mom was worried to death. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her daughter. Mrs. Katayama couldn't process the fact her son is gone in this kind of weather. It was -3°C outside and there was a huge storm. It was raining so hard you couldn't see anything. Roads were closed it was so bad.

The two mothers were sitting together in Ally's room all worried. Then they got a call.

– Hello? – Mrs. Smith answered the phone.

– We are so sorry – a police officer said.

Naomi's mom started sobbing but Mrs. Smith was still confused.

– What happened sir – she stuttered - I don't seem to understand. What happened. Where are our kids? Where are they?! – she screamed with pain and tears.

– I am so sorry. We found them…dead under a tree cuddled up together.

Ally's mom let out a yell as she fell to the floor. Her scream was filled with so much pain. No mother should ever experience their child's death. Losing a child is another type of pain. The pain no one can possibly understand without going through it. Naomi and Ally, both loved to play outside, help people, try new things and explore the forests and even though there were things that made them so different from each other they still found a way to be happy and died with a smile together. Because nothing compares to friendship.

šifra: RENVU1
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Željeznička tehnička škola Moravice
autor: Adrian Habulin

ORDER BEYOND THE VEIL

Renvu's alarm clock rings, he wakes up and presses it, in a jiffy he gets up, showers, brushes his teeth, eats breakfast, gets dressed in a fancy suit, picks up his things and leaves (the screen cuts to a tiny bit of each of these activities) he steps out and sighs..

Renvu: Ooookay… steady up and focus… I can do that.

He takes his keys, gets into his car and drives off

Renvu(in head): My name is Renvu. And this is a story about how I got isekai'd. See, I used to be a simple guy. Wake up, eat, go outside, sleep, repeat. Until one day I decided to finally make myself useful and get a job in accounting a few miles from my apartment building. I've had numerous problems with money ever since my parents died. Thankfully before they did, they managed to pull out one last loan for little Renvu. And now that the money pool is all dry, it's time to make some of my own dough.

He arrives in front of a large building and goes in.

Renvu: Hello, this is Renvu, I've come for an interview

Receptionist: Let's see… Ryan, Rick, Remi… ah! Renvu. The boss has been anticipating you, he's on the fifth floor

Renvu gulps a bit stressed as the receptionist put her hand on his

Receptionist: Don't worry, you'll get it. I look forward to working with you.

He gives her a warm smile as he takes the elevator for the 5th floor. He enters the interview room, takes a seat at a desk, and puts his resume on the table then proceeds to talk to the person on the other side of it.

Renvu: I would like to apply to work here

Person: Mhm, I see (he says as he picks Renvu's resume up and reads it) Renvu huh? Tell me a bit about yourself

Renvu: I'm 26 years old, my hobbies are playing drums, cooking and roller skating. I would like to apply here because I think it's well within my field of capability and quite frankly, I need money to pay my rent

Person: I see! Nice to know you a little better and I believe you have your mind set to your goals quite clearly here. Say, do you have any other goals for working here? With a job that pays a pretty penny like this one surely it can't be just to "pay rent" right?

Renvu: You're correct, I also need the money to provide for mine and my friends' interests. They're the only people I have currently as my parents and brother passed away. I try to make the most of it between us and our bonds. Hell, they're the ones that help me make choices like these in life so I suppose it's the least I can do for them, yeah?

Person: Well, that's quite kind of you (he flips through the papers quickly, yet reading carefully as he does before giving the papers back to Renvu) well, everything here checks out just fine, you seem like a good and honest person, clearly capable of doing this job and nonetheless with a good reason too

Renvu: Why, that's wonderful news! So, what do you say?

The person extends his arm for Renvu to shake

Person: I'll see you tomorrow at 11

Renvu's eyes light up with joy (then the screen cuts to the highway with Renvu driving.)

Renvu (in head): Yep, this is my life so far, you find it's pleasures then go rot in a school for several years before it finally lets you off the leash into its wilderness. It's not all black and white though, the people I met along the way and the relationships I built along the way sweeten the deal. Sure, I had to go through all that pain but I had all these people to help. And through all these spins and curves I finally reached the cool pool of water under the big water slide. This is where it finally turns my way.

He's focusing on the road when his phone rings. He picks it up and answers all while focusing on the road

Jean: Hey man! What's up?

Renvu: Oh Jean! Hi, I was just driving home from the interview

Jean: Oh sweet. How'd it go?

Renvu: Oh, I crushed it! I finally have a job now! Life is finally coming together…

Jean: Hell yeah! I think this calls for a celebration. You wanna stop by my place so we can go somewhere?

Renvu: sure! I could use some relaxing

The camera cuts to Renvu's car taking a right from the highway into the city and stopping by jean's house, they both go out and walk to the store

Jean: What's up man? Where ya been?

Renvu: You know, same old same old, good to see ya man fistbump commences

Both: Hell yeah

Renvu: So… how's it going on your end?

Jean: Oh, that Kate won't even return my calls now, I think she's wayyyy over that "us" she wanted to keep so hard

Renvu: Aw man that sucks, you got anything in mind with that?

Jean: Yeah, why don't the two of us sneak into her "new soulmate's" house and-

Renvu: Isn't that a bit… illegal? And I have a job now, remember?

Jean: Oh, yeah. Well, we can pull it at NIGHT and-

Renvu: Calm down, captain vengeance, something oughta happen if you let it go for long enough, and I don't think I can settle for a break-in with you

he hits Jean on the head

Jean: Ow… fine, keep you updated if you can help with messages and arguments though

Renvu: Jeez, at this point I'm talking to her more than you are, you gotta listen to your gut sometimes and do something yourself for once

Jean sighs: I guess I do… well, you wanna swing by my place at night instead? I bought a new game we could play

Renvu: and listen to your jet engine of a console till' 3 am again?

Renvu: Sure, I'm down

they both laugh

Jean: Ooookay, snacks and drinks are on me!

Renvu: Grabbing the whole store then

Jean: Yeah! Sur- h-hey! Wait a second!

They grab drinks and snacks before going to a rooftop to watch the sunset

Jean laughs before speaking.

Jean: Oh man, you really told him that

Renvu: Hehehe… yeah. Man, life just goes all kinds of directions. Everything just spins so deliberately and leads you all sorts of places. I mean, how would it be if I never met you? I think I'd be in a helluva different place right now if I didn't

Jean: Yeah man! One of its many perks

Renvu: …you? I hardly take you as a perk (he chuckled)

Jean: (hits him playfully) hey! (They both laugh)

Renvu: (stares off into the now starry sky before putting a potato chip in his mouth) I got it in my clutches now, I'll make both our lives better, you'll see

Jean: (puts his arm around him and stares into the sky with him) I'm sure you will…

Next morning Renvu wakes up in the exact same way he did last morning except this time with less concern and more enthusiasm. He shuts the door behind him with a relieved smile which turns into a confident smile after. He starts his car and drives off.

He's driving calmly until suddenly he sees a person from the opposite lane accidentally steering into his while on the phone

Renvu: No!

He hits his clutch but crashes regardless, the last thing he sees is the other driver's eyes locked with his, then it all cuts to black

Renvu(in head, during transformation): and this is when everything changed, just when that one cross-eyed moron forgot which lane was his have I simply disconnected from my sweet, sweet reality. But throwing one reality into the trash opened another one like a fresh pack of gum. The only problem was, well… I didn't have teeth to chew that gum with. Well, not until I literally grew some

Renvu's shakey breathing can be heard before the screen cuts to picture again. He's sitting almost in a fetal position because of how his car bent during the crash. He slowly lifts his face off the steering wheel before realizing what had happened. He lets out a few panicked screams as he crawls and wiggles out of his car. Renvu regains his composure and stands up, quickly finding out that everything around him is frozen, his vision looks black and white with shades of gray. He tries to think about what he had done and what happened. Suddenly, he shrieks in pain and falls to the floor, pain overtakes him. He notices his body changing. Fur growing, claws extending, his spine and face both morphing as he keeps screaming in pain. It finally stops. Renvu picks himself off the ground, still panting and shaking in pain he observes his new body and looks at it in terror.

He then looks around him and finds his surroundings changed entirely from an open highway to a wasteland filled with people. Presumably dead, he thought when he looked how they moved almost without any life

Renvu (in head): this is where my life simply turned upside down. Or should I say, not turned at all. Simply died.

Renvu: I… (he keeps huffing and panting, still attempting to breathe) I… gotta get out of here

He shambles to the closest "person" he sees, the pain slowly but steadily leaving him

Renvu: E-excuse me… where am I? What's happening? I-

Before he can finish his sentence the person, he was talking to quickly turns towards him. It raises its hand in the air and what seems to be a garden shear appears in his hand before he tries slicing Renvu in two with it. He quickly ducks, barely dodging it and steps back in defense

Renvu: WHAT THE HELL IS your… problem…

After just a quick glance it was clear that the person's body was twisted and mangled beyond recognition. It then raises its head in the air and shrieks out. Causing all the other people, each twisted in their own way to turn toward him and "obtain" the weapons in the same way the first one did, each seemingly unique to the twisted person holding it.

Renvu then takes a moment and runs as fast as he can towards the direction with least of these creatures, not stopping for a second. They all swung, threw and shot their weapons at him as he desperately ran. His lungs on fire and legs aching

Renvu: I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF DAY YOU HAD BUT TAKING IT OUT ON OTHERS IS NOT THE SOLUTION

He shouted as the twisted tried to circle him in, he jumped over low cutting blades, ducked under bullets, desperately trying to come out of this mess unharmed

He saw that he was approaching a large gate

Renvu: Please… let there be normal people in there… or at least someone who can help…

Too distracted to notice, he trips over a somewhat large rock, hurting his ankle badly and falling face first to the ground. He looked up blurry and saw that the twisted people were surrounding him all around. He closed his eyes, accepting his fate, then he heard a female shout

???: STAY AWAY FROM HIM

He opens his eyes again to see a mysterious figure fight off and even kill some of the twisted men with a scythe. Once they were all gone, the hooded figure drops its hood down to reveal it was a woman, with close resemblance to a cat, just like he now resembles a wolf. She drops down on her knees next to him, picking him up

???: hnngh.. gosh, you're heavy… it's fine, all that matters is that you're safe now. Welcome to the forum.

These were the last words he heard before his vision faded to black.

View shifts to another mysterious figure looking at a monitor in its room

???2: great job Evalyn, another life saved from the clutches of those poor limbo dwelling folk. I have a feeling you'll fit in nicely with us all here.

The camera zooms out to show the broad horizon of the Forum Messorem stretching seemingly infinitely far as it all turns to black.

šifra: ps4321
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Petar Štiglić

PENITENTIARY

"...Hey, do you mind if I go home early today?" A sheepish voice broke the silence.

"What? There's still 20 minutes until our shifts are over? You're seriously going now?" The surprise in Emma's voice was very discernable.

"Come on, again? This is the third time this week, it's Wednesday! Selena!? You just got the job, you're going to get fired! You can't just ignore your duties." Emma was worried, noted, but did Selena care? No, not really, she was going to leave early one way or another.

"Listen, just...please?" The way it came out sounded desperate, perhaps she was.

"Ok, fine! Just, before you go, I'm going out with my friends tonight at eleven and you're invited. I know it may be weird coming from me, I've only just met you, but I want to get to know you better, so...Do you want to come?" A hint of longing in her voice, she was reaching out a hand to her, it's on Selena to grab it, to accept it.

A quiet "I can't, I'm busy" left her mouth, smacking the hand away.

"Doing what?" Well, that hurt, was it obvious she's a loner?

"That's...none of your business, I'm leaving." As if she wasn't already at the door.

As she was walking home, the interaction kept replaying in her mind. It's not Emma's fault she wants to be friends. Maybe in another universe she'd take her up on that offer, but it hurt. She can't bear the memories of Lilly. Emma reminded her so much of her. She wishes she could just move on, but it hurt so much. And it's not Selena's fault she wanted to be at home.

Why, oh why was she like this? It wasn't hard to talk to people, make friends, so why was it now? Was it some underlying trauma? Some curse lain upon her by a witch? Some twisted course of fate? A plot hole in God's plan? What a cruel destiny it is to be alone when she doesn't want to be.

Thoughts were going rampant inside her head, an avalanche covering everything else, a stampede crushing her self-worth. She just wanted to hide in a ditch and stay there for eternity. Maybe she would but not now, she's too busy paying off debt.

Coming back to life, she saw her house on the horizon, the sunset orange light illuminating the features of the building. She finally felt just a bit more alive than just a second ago, making long, confident, strides towards her sanctuary since she was a little girl. Head, just slightly held higher than before, and before she knew it, she was on her porch, pulling out her keys, simultaneously breathing out a sigh of relief as she crossed the border between her refuge and the world outside. Her house always felt safe, no matter what time it was, what age she was, what the weather was, anything. It was always safe.

She loved reliving the small moments connected to her home, it grounded her like an anchor, not letting her float too far away. The hardwood floors of the kitchen where she helped her mom cook and bake all kinds of dishes and sweets. The kitchen always smelled like cinnamon. The red carpet in the living room clashed with the grey of everything else, they got it after winning a prize from some shabby store, they didn't have a good place to put it so...in the living room it went. Then there was the slightly tilted windowsill of her room's window, the reason behind that? She climbed it. In her defense, she just wanted to birdwatch. It was all a collective trademark to what made her house a home.

However, that day, she was too distant even for the anchor that was her house. That night something was wrong. After eating dinner, brushing her teeth, putting on pajamas, dreaming about her childhood, Lilly and getting into bed. Selena tried to fall asleep with all her might. She even took some medicine. Except nothing worked. She tossed and turned, yet she was as restless as ever before. Truly, what could've been keeping her awake? She hadn't drunk coffee; she had done everything for the day and the day after, so what kept her awake...What was that? A whisper? From where? She tried focusing on what it was saying, "Let us..." okay, she was confused, maybe even a bit freaked out, were her parents pulling a prank on her? They wouldn't? They're too old for that. "Let...in" she held her breath in anticipation trying to concentrate even harder, despite the thoughts running rampant in her head. "Let us in." At that moment she was freaked out, not a bit, fully. She has unfamiliar voices asking to come into her room, and- "Let us in. Let us in!" the voice, wait no, voices? The voices picked up; she figured out they were coming from the window but how? Her room was on the second floor.

She carefully got out of her bed, aware of her every movement, too focused on not making a noise to not alert the voices. There she was, a foot away from the window, blinds closed, thank goodness. She sat there unwavering for a moment or two, accumulating the courage to raise her hand and close the window. She tensed her fingers

for just a moment and then, it didn't even take her a second to close the window. Then, adrenaline wearing off, she became aware of her pulse and beating heart, the cold floor, the mess her bangs were, more aware than ever before.

"Let us in!" One out of the four voices screamed out, a grating, croaky, dry, voice, like it was struggling to just speak.

She was not just freaking out, she was terrified, how were the voices there? She closed the window? This couldn't be a prank because she knew the window was closed. She was standing right in front of it, the same window she probably would've smashed had she been any faster with closing it. So then how? How in all that was holy were the voices there? What did they want? Who even were they? Why would they target her?

Then, against all of Selena's wishes, she felt the tiredness come, why exactly then? Couldn't it have been four minutes before all of this? Her desperation to stay awake grew but she felt her eyelids closing. Then the voices released a breathy shriek, an ear-piercing howl, and the boom of the voices shook her to the core of her body, yet she didn't know how to react, what to do. This was clearly outside of the realms of nature, so what precautions, what steps were there to take?

And then she felt it again, the tiredness hitting her like a truck, no she couldn't fall asleep, not there, not then, not in that room, not alone. But as her vision faded and all her senses lost touch, she fell asleep.

Upon waking up, first peeling her body from the cold floor she spent all night on, she checked her whole house, top to bottom. Every stone was turned, every board checked under, every corner was uncovered. A fruitless search, nothing new was discovered, but it also meant nothing old had changed. There were no speakers, no microphones, no cameras, nothing to indicate a break in, somebody playing a twisted prank on her for their own sick pleasure. She didn't know if she was relieved or frightened by that. Relieved, because there wasn't a psychopath on the loose. Frightened, because what happened to her seemed to be supernatural, otherworldly? Who could she talk to about this? Would it happen again? Would it be worse next time? God, she begged that there wouldn't be a next time.

Calming her nerves, she continued with her day as usual, as much as she could. A Herculean task, she was aware of every sound, the rustles of her clothes, the squeals of the chairs against the hardwood floors, the washing machine rumbling in the laundry room. Vigilant, so she had time to react if the whispers came back. The creak of her refrigerator door finally got her grounded for at least a moment. The emptiness before her had reminded her that she had to get groceries.

She reached for the door handle, hesitating for a moment, then pulled it. It didn't move. "Right", she thought, "I forgot to unlock it". Which she then did. Still no movement... "What?" What is going on? A few tugs at the door later, she concluded it was stuck. No need to panic. She would just have to kick it a few times. She could repair it later, what she needed then was to get out.

The first kick was a bit weak; she didn't exactly want to break it. The second one had hit with more force, the door wasn't budging. The third kick had all of Selena's weight behind it, yet still no results. The fourth, and whichever ones were after that, also yielded no results. Even if they all had desperation, fear and determination behind it.

"Okay, calm down, what else can I try?" With that her eyes moved over to the windows. She should be able to open them with no problem, and if not, she can just break them easily. How naive she was. What else was there to try? The cellar door? She never went down there because of the clutter of her parents' belongings but it was worth a try. She should've guessed.

What was going on, why and how was she stuck in her own home? Was it something to do with last night? She must get out one way or another, and she will find a way. She grabbed her phone, dialing 911, no response. Seriously? How does 911, of all numbers, not reply? She decided to call Emma, maybe she could come and help her. "No signal? Seriously!?" A thought occurred to her; she was still in the cellar. She'll get out and call again. And again, she had no signal.

She was dealing with something supernatural, but what? And how to deal with it? If there even was a way? She tried Googling, only to be greeted by a certain small dinosaur jumping over cacti in a desert. Great. No internet either, she should've realized that sooner.

She was stuck in an impasse, a stalemate with whichever force put this upon her. Maybe she was just in a dream? A bad nightmare. She'll just wait until she wakes up... She was practically picking at herself after four minutes of meditation. How could she just rest and leave her fate in some unknown hands, leaving it up to a dice roll? She had to do something or at least distract herself while waiting. She started with basic exercises. If she got there by falling asleep, maybe tiring herself out and falling asleep would get her out. So, she did just that. And after taking a nap. Rejuvenated, she joyfully made her way over to the door, an inkling of doubt still in her mind considering she had woken up on the couch, and not in her room where she hoped this nightmare would end. Her doubts weren't there for decoration, she was right. The door was still as unwavering and stubborn as the first time she woke up. Even after checking the lock twice and trying to kick it down a few more times.

The next thing she tried to clear her mind was to clean her house. If she was going to have to wait for someone to come to her house to check on her after noticing she was gone. Would anyone even notice? Would people notice she was gone? Would Emma notice? Or would she think she got fired?

A long, torturous, horrific four days go by since Selena first got trapped in her apartment, it's impossible to keep your mind occupied when you've already done everything you can do. However, she at least didn't starve, she realized it was impossible to even get hungry. If the abnormal wasn't clear before, it was now, and it creeped her out. "Was she dead? Already a ghost? If she was a ghost, if she was dead, why was she bound to her house? Why has no one come to check? Why wasn't there a memorial? If there was, would anyone come? And if, truly, she was dead and the afterlife did exist, where's Lilly? You'd think she would come in to say hi, finally reunited, but she wasn't anywhere to be seen. Could Lilly even enter the house? If she can't get out who's to say people can go in. Frantic rumblings and mumblings echoed through the room. She started talking to herself after day three? It made her feel less alone, hearing herself speak, but it also made her feel like she's going just a tad bit insane.

At least she could spend this time thinking about Lilly, her mom and her dad. She really took a retrospective look at everything she has done by now. All the friendships, even if there were only a few, all the heartbreak, all the sorrow, all the joy, all the everything. She thought about everything. No matter how small or inconvenient. She hoped somebody would remember her someday. She hoped they'd be in a better position, preferably an unlockable house that they could exit. It was bittersweet knowing she might end up dying like this. In her childhood home. Never leaving. She was born there, and she would die there. She wondered how many people have had the same experience. Getting to return from where they came. Being able to die in peace surrounded by memories. Was she the only one? Was she alone in that? Was she alone?

It was then that something caught her attention, a movement in the corner of her eye. The door handle was moving. "Yes, finally! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" ...A moment went by...then two...then three...then four, but nothing happened. "Are you kidding me!?" Something must have happened...right? She checked the door. Still locked. She tried banging, maybe the person on the other side would hear her and come help, but no such luck. "You can't do this to me, just let me out!" Maybe someone could hear her? There hasn't been a response, so she guessed not.

Every day after that day, the door handle moved slightly at 4pm and 8pm. That's the time Selena usually went to work. That simply couldn't be a coincidence. Because of that, Selena just tried to sleep the entire day until 4 p.m. so that she could try out

the door after every interaction someone maybe had with it. Additional four days passed with no new developments other than Selena's declining sanity. She has given up pretty much all hope of ever getting out. If she literalized her hope, it would be the last four embers burning out before winter. Until the door swings open and she can put her feet on the porch, she considered herself dead and buried.

So, as if to just spite her in her last moments of hope, that did happen. She stepped onto the sun-lit porch. Her eyes had to adjust to the bright yellow light, a hand over her face was barely enough. The first thing she noticed was that the flowers on the railings had withered, expected, but still a bittersweet ending knowing that she could've helped them if she could just step out. The next thing to come into view was her mailbox, unusually full. She walked out to get it. The grass between her bare feet was welcoming. The first letter was a tax notice, great, glad to see no change in that between the time she was gone. The second letter was a dismissal, of course, Emma was right. Speaking of the third letter was Emma's, the only one she bothered to open, still standing out in the open. It read:

"Dear Emma,

I'm sorry to see that you got fired, but I told you so. Although I didn't expect you to just ditch the whole place. No goodbye or anything. That's why I'm sending this letter, other than you not answering your phone, it was the only other way to contact you.

For the record I didn't stalk you to find your address, just had to ask the boss, even if it's illegal to share other employees' info. Don't worry, I did file a complaint, I'm going to win this lawsuit, for the both of us."

It was followed by some scribbled out words, unintelligible, she really wanted to know what she meant to say. Her eyes tracked the letter down to "I wish I could've gotten to know you better. Goodbye Selena, I hope you're well"

It was hard, reading the last couple of lines, not because of scribbles or anything, but because of tears. Somebody cared. Somebody remembered. Somebody didn't forget her. However, that somebody was gone...No, wait... "Of course!" an excited yelp left her mouth. She took the envelope and ran back inside. She frantically turned the envelope around, searching for a number, an address, anything. There it was! Emma's phone number! She could still reach back, and cursed be her ex-prison, she will! The buttons beeped in response to Selena's typing. "All right...now I just have to call..." A moment of hesitation, "Oh, who cares" and the phone was ringing...

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Emma?"

"Yes, who is it?"

šifra: RoPo1503
mentor: Rejhana Nuhanović Tadijan
institution: Poljoprivredno šumarska škola Vinkovci
autor: Roko Posarić

RISE FROM THE ASHES

The whole building reeked of smoke; officers, dispatchers, physicians and everyone in between were stressed, except for two detectives.

"You old fat bastard, you wouldn't even be able to jump over 3 fences if it came to chasing someone down!" Denton proclaimed proudly. Nohman retaliated, "Yeah right. Look at you, you're 130 pounds in winter clothes, soaking wet. If you caught up to a suspect you couldn't pin them down if they were giving themselves up to you."

"That dome of yours would be of help to me. It's so bald and shiny, you'd paralyze a man just by moving your head down to tie your shoelaces!"

The door to the office of the two then opened. "Hard at work, eh? Cid needs the two of you in his office, now."

"Thank you, Ciel. We'll be right there."

"Denton, Nohman – take a seat," said Arcadia police chief Cid, visibly frustrated. "This one's practically out of a movie. We got two reports yesterday, one for the murder of Vent Aureo and one for the murder of Aile Caskett." "Two scientists murdered in the same night? Was it orchestrated by a disgru-" "They were both killed at the same time by the same guy. Ardyn."

"Ardyn?" Nohman asked. "Wasn't he in a police shootout and bled out a couple of years ago?"

"We didn't know what happened to 'im. We told the press he bled out, and we took the body he charred and said it was 'im. When we went inside the buildin', we followed the pool o' blood he left after bein' shot, it just stopped in a corner of a room we didn't know existed."

"You're certain it's Ardyn?"

"No one else burns with purple flames and has a jackknife large enough to pierce a man through his back."

"Look, you'se two got three days to get to the bottom o' this. Otherwise, the boys in red are coming through the door and not only axing half our salaries, but they'll take over the case. Don't. Mess. Up."

On the first day,

Nohman and Denton decided to go to the apartment of Vent Aureo and the house of Aile Caskett. On the way there, Denton had a few choice words to say about Cid.

"That slimy, good-for-nothing, two-timing, lousy, spineless little weasel has gotten up to here with his debt to the mob. We've been acting as their subsidiary since before you and I were born!"

Denton continued, "Once we get to the bottom of this case, I'm going after them; I've got enough dirt and resources to at least expose them, and at best to make the police escape the snake's grasp."

The two drove in silence.

"Here's the building professor Aureo was staying in. Come on, it's on the 8th floor."

They approached the woman at the front desk. "ACPD, detectives Denton and Nohman, we are to investigate the crime scene of Vent Aureo. Could you give us the keys to his room?"

"Here you go, sir," said the receptionist.

As they were ascending in the elevator, the two of them shared an expression, one that men carry after years of physical and mental taxation, they're breaking, but functional. That was enough for this case.

"Here it is. 8th floor, room 402."

They were greeted by an apartment that looked as if a typhoon went through it. Nohman and Denton split to inspect the living room and the office.

Nohman stayed in the living room, as it was the place where the murder occurred.

As Nohman was inspecting the scene, he was looking at everything that was broken or obviously misplaced during the struggle.

"There's no way he got this sloppy. Five years ago, he was making puzzle makers, detectives and the smartest men in all of Storm scratching their heads with his murders. How could he fall so low to hit Vent after four misses?"

Denton went through Vent's papers, hundreds upon hundreds of designs, calculations, theories, notes, bullet points... But something managed to catch his eye, something he hadn't seen before.

"He was making a magical catalyst?" he thought. "If he was to finish this, it'd be the end for the aristocracy. Guess Ardyn was the first to protest the idea of 'Project Insomnia.'"

Nohman went through the scene on his own, but he was stumped. He pulled out a Holocube, a device that uses the magic of a person to recreate a hologram of what happened in a given moment before something moved or changed.

Nohman was fast forwarding from when Vent was still alive to three minutes before Ardyn came in.

"No way he got this sloppy," he thought, and then called, "Denton! Come see this."

"Look at this, he tried to cut him, but hit the teacup, the drapes, the armchair and the corner of a shelf. Only when Vent slipped and fell did he get the better of him."

"Looks like 'the finest blade in Storm' has been missing his practice sessions as of late."

"I've gathered what I could from his notes, you?"

"I'll go through everything later at the station. Right now, let's head to professor Caskett's house. Her place is farther out."

The two then made their way to the house of Aile Caskett, a collaborator of Vents.

Her house was quaint, but lively, with stark white wood walls and filled with green and healthy plants. The two found comfort in there.

"Unusual decor for a woman that was constantly preoccupied with work."

"How'd you figure she was working constantly?"

Nohman responded, "Read her report in full. Wouldn't recommend, too lengthy of a read."

"You sick bastard..." Denton chuckled.

Aile was murdered in the same way as Vent, but she was hung in her garden by her arms. Nohman and Denton looked around the garden and house for hours but couldn't find even one thing that looked off. Even the Holocube didn't display anything out of the usual.

Denton was frustrated, "The apartment? A pigsty, wreck, wild flood aftermath, annihilated. This estate? Untouched. Pristine, the branches aren't even bent from where she was left hung. How?!"

"It must've been a cohort. Like you said, this is too contrasting between kills."

"It couldn't have been, how would he burn them and char them the same way? A magic is a part of a person since birth; you couldn't replicate the way someone's magic functioned even if you tried."

"Have you checked with the forensics unit?" Nohman asked.

" 'Have I checked with the foren-' Of course I have!" Denton yelled. "They said the burns and burn patterns were identical to those he would create on a body after frying it. Not only that, but the stab wound was the exact same size, width and depth."

"Come on. We're going."

"Hey, wait up! What's the matter with you? Where?"

"Where those two worked."

At Sybil labs, the largest laboratory in the country, the two detectives stormed in. "ACPD, detectives Denton and Nohman, us two are working on the case of your colleagues and workers Vent Aureo and Aile Caskett. We are going to interview a few of the people here who were working with Vent and Aile on 'Project Insomnia.'"

"Where were you that night when the two were murdered?"

"Working on a private project at home." Dris's testimony.

"At home, in bed." Sol's testimony.

"Helping out Dris with the math for a robot he was making for his kid." Rock's testimony.

"In my apartment watching a movie." Kylian's testimony.

"What did you contribute to 'Project Insomnia'?"

"I was the one who made the outer shell of the catalyst." - Dris

"I've contributed by securing funding and procuring the materials needed for the device." - Sol

"Aile and I did the theory, math and conceptualized the synthetic conduit the catalyst worked off." - Rock

"The inner workings of the device." - Kylian

"Thank you for your cooperation."

While checking out at the front of Sybil labs, Kylian approached the two, "Y'know, I used to work in the force."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. You guys are transfers right? From Abel City? You two came in just as I was going. I was in forensics for a long time, worked my butt off, even on ironsday and firesday!"

"Sounds like Cid alright."

Nohman asked bluntly, "Think you can help? We're at ends with how Ardyn pulled off a double homicide like that. Got anything that could help us?"

"Well, honestly, it's probably someone in his family. They've been quiet shut-ins for the past several years now. Someone is likely to work with him."

"Not even something we considered... Huh. Thank you."

"Sure! No problem."

As the detectives were heading out, Denton asked him, "You said you worked around the time Ardyn was last kicking, right? You seen what happened at the old building or what Cid sold to the press?"

"Saw the whole thing, sadly. I'm a bit squeamish, y'know. Blood makes me get lightheaded easily."

"Right."

Nohman, completely wiped from this first day, turned to Denton. "Call it a rest for today, I'll write the report for the two of us. We're charting stuff out at the office tomorrow."

"Alright. See you then."

At home, Denton thought to himself, "They were working on a way to give everyone magic. Who knew our scientists were of progressive persuasions, heh?" he continued, "But I don't get how that guy got so good to do it at the same time, albeit it was sloppy in Vents place but... Wait. No..."

Denton quickly called Nohman's landline in the dead of night. A grunted-out sound was heard once someone picked up. "Hello? Denton?"

"Nohman! Pack your stuff, Sybil labs, now!"

"Dear God, Denton, I'm not as young as I used to be. You have to give me a minute."

"Did you confirm you're an old fart right over the phone? *To me*?"

"Oh, you little-" Denton cut him off before he could finish his sentence.

On the second day,

at Sybil labs, 3 in the morning, pouring rain.

"You remember Kylian? The forensics guy."

"Yeah. Nothing to him."

"Like hell. Look what he didn't show us."

"That an old prototype of the catalyst?"

"No, look at the date. He drew this one right after Vent's. Then made this new prototype right after his."

"So what? They made a new working model since he couldn't finish his original one."

"Look at what this one uses as fuel."

"Blood of a hilyon..."

"Looks like he did a little more than just seeing that bastard's pool of blood."

"Is that prototype still in this building?"

"It was, yesterday."

"We need to find him. Now."

The two detectives drove frantically through the streets of Arcadia, while going through the city database of residents.

"Found him! St. Ivalice street 76, 4th floor!"

"That's 30 minutes! We don't have that kind of time!"

"Take this ride to the skies then, Nohman Highwind!"

The son of the famed pilot Auron Highwind took his flying hotrod to the skies, putting it in 10th gear.

The two detectives were soaring through the skyline of Arcadia, neon lights zooming past them at incredible speeds. They arrived at the apartment of Kylian Garif in 3 minutes of the estimated 30 on land.

The pair gunned for the 4th floor. Rainwater was getting everywhere in the stairwell. They barged through the door of the apartment soaked and full of adrenaline.

"He's not here."

Nohman got out his Holocube and scanned the entire building with it, straining him with how much magic he had to use to get a clear picture of events.

When the door to Kylian's apartment opened and shut, Nohman urged, "Go! Watch how the carpet deforms and where he went! I made a two-meter ring around the entire building! We'll find him! Go!"

Denton followed the trail all the way to the back exit of the building, but after a few splashes from stepping in the rain, Kylian turned to a dead end that was just outside the ring Nohman made.

"Nohman, get down here!" Denton said over his in-ear transceiver.

"It goes dead here. You got anything left for another cube viewing?"

"No, strained me too hard. My hands are like stone now. Can't move them properly or do anything with them until it phases out naturally."

Denton was at his wits end, subconsciously burdened with how fast they needed to get this case through, in resolute frustration, "He can disappear as many times as he wants, difference is – we're catching that lunatic here and now!"

"There's got to be a way he disappeared! He made a fake wall, fake floor, made himself invisible, made a wall temporarily of butterflies and then back into concrete..."

"Denton, where's the gun?"

Nohman received the gun.

"Where'd the trail go dark?"

Denton points at a blank wall in a dead end.

"You know, Denton? I lied."

Nohman proceeded to shoot the wall five times; every shot fueled with what little magic he had in him, breaking it down.

"And that's all she wrote. Come on Denton, you'll catch a cold out in the rain."

They walked down a damp and cold hallway, where a small light was found. A room, hidden between two buildings. Once they entered, it hit them instantly. It reeked of a fetid, otherworldly evil, but the detectives weren't focused on the smell, but rather the walls of the room.

"What in the world have we stumbled upon…"

"Dear God…"

Walls, barely 7 feet tall, filled top to bottom with pictures of Ardyn. Pictures upon pictures, collages, newspaper articles, magazine covers, public records and everything else related to him were on those walls.

The detectives looked on in shock and horror at how such lunacy was allowed to fester for so long.

"He's obsessed with him. He's the cohort..."

"Did he write down who he'll get next?"

"I'm looking, man, I'm looking!" Denton said, completely shaken by the ambiance of the room.

…

"Found something!"

"What is it?"

"A journal."

"What does it say?"

"It has a bunch of names, schematics, entries with no dates..."

"… Nohman, look."

It was written: "As per His divinity, Sir Ardyn will set out to end my colleagues and me. If I am to ascend as He did, I need to kill them the same as Him with the power of Insomnia."

It continued: "I've slain my own colleague in cold blood. As if I was there with His divinity. I need to see him. Dris is making that toy, and Rock is with him. I know His divinity has been watching us. I know Him. He will strike, and so must I."

"I must get retribution."

After that entry, it descended into madness.

"Do we have a pinpoint on Dris' house?"

"No."

"Well, get a move on! We've got a lunatic that could not only be killing people, but dying himself, and losing whatever chance we have to catch Ardyn!"

The two didn't falter in their movements. They ran to the car and started flying immediately.

As soon as the two touched down, they rushed from both the back and front, kicking the doors down.

They came into a full-on standoff between Dris, Rock and Kylian.

Dris and Rock had taken the old prototype for the catalyst and were using it to hold off Kylian.

They were now knee-deep in the standoff, four sides behind their covers.

Dris was wounded, but more so Rock, who was losing blood rapidly.

"That thing you're using, Kylian, it's still a prototype! If it malfunctions, it could only spell disaster!"

"It doesn't matter, if I prove to Him I'm worthy, He'll end my misery, and then, and only then, will I ascend!" Kylian said, cackling maniacally.

"You good, Nohman?" Denton shouted from behind his cover where Dris and Rock were.

"No. How many you got left in your chamber?"

"One."

No one could do anything. If Nohman moved, he would be burned to death by Kylian, if Denton moved so would he. If Kylian moved, the two would open fire immediately.

"Backed into a corner, huh detectives? You all are bugs in the grand scheme... He's watching us, watching *me* and *my* performance! You two have no hope of catching him. And no hope of stopping me!" In that instant, Denton shot at the lightbulb, stunning Kylian.

Nohman saw his opportunity and leapt from behind corner cover at Kylian, pinning him down.

"Denton, I've got him down! Call an ambulance!"

And so, he did. Everyone inside the house was escorted, what burned of the house from the catalyst was put out. Dris, his family and Rock were safe.

Mid-day of the second day,

in the interrogation room.

"What possessed you to take after Ardyn?"

"He gave me power. He gave Himself power to take the life of someone because it threatened Him. I couldn't do that. I was not even the cog in a machine, I was the grease."
"I would be left to dust at Sybil when Insomnia was finished."

"We read your journal, you say you know Ardyn's every move. Where is he now?"

"On the street, in the sewers, up in the sky, down in a convenience store, in your dreams... You can only but beg for him to appear in a predictable manner. He hasn't gotten any worse, only better."

Kylian leans in, "You two are out of your depth. So many will die until you find him, and once you do – you will as well. Those people who died, they will never forgive you two."

Denton leaned to him and said, with a slight smirk, "Don't worry. I'll ask them for forgiveness in Hell." Nohman advised, "We've got nothing to get from him now, he won't budge. Let's go."

"Know this, Kylian. He was caught once. It will happen again."

And so, the two detectives set forth, left with but a day and a half to catch the famed Ardyn Barnabas.

šifra: B46uXcrQ8
mentor: Andrejina Jugovac
institution: Pazinski kolegij – klsaična gimnazija Pazin s pravom javnosti
autor: Iris Pavelić

SECOND CHANCES

"Come on now, dear." Hestia tapped the dog's head lightly. "It's time to go now. I know you're still a bit scared, but give them a chance, will you? I gave you one, after all, and look how well that ended." She crouched next to the small dog she had renamed Lewis, her voice soft and steady. The dog hesitated, his eyes wide and unsure and his body tense. A father and his young daughter watched the interaction, waiting patiently. The daughter's eyes lit up more with every second, her smile growing. The father, on the other hand, still seemed a bit cautious. Hestia could sense the tension in the air. She sighed softly, looking at Lewis. "Lewis, please. I know you're ready." With a wave of her hand, she called the excited daughter over. She giggled, walking over slowly, mindful of the dog's fear. "Slowly, like this." Hestia put her hand out close to Lewis' nose. "He likes being pet on his ears, but let him sniff your hand first." The young girl put her hand closer, allowing Lewis to get to know her. After a few more interactions, Lewis left with the daughter and her father to stay with them forever.

Many times, a similar situation happened, where Hestia helped a dog find its own loving family. Those dogs truly needed someone, and she couldn't take care of all of them forever. Getting those abused racing machines to trust any human again was hard work. Since they were born and thrown into the racing world, they never knew love. Some of them never had a chance to win at all because no one tried to teach them how. And if they didn't win, they were deemed useless. Incapable. Not worthy. But how could they ever be winners when they were never treated as such? Hestia spent a while every day thinking about that, but she never found any answer. The only thing she knew was that those dogs would never win any race if they weren't treated with love and patience in the first place.

Hestia got ready in the morning. It was a race day today. And she was going with a plan to get a new dog. Nothing would stop her from that. She simply had to save another one. The satisfaction from showing love to those who were considered worthless and giving them new hope was all she needed in life. But that didn't change the fact that she despised the races. She hated having to take part in that loud chaos.

People are betting, cheering, ignoring the horrible things, and having fun. Their yells and whistles overpowered the cries from the racing lanes. She could see the raw fear in the dogs' eyes, the matted fur and scarred bodies of the dogs that trembled to every shout and loud sound. It enraged her to see such beautiful animals treated so horribly.

She breathed in deeply and sat down, rubbing her forehead. Every race day, she was reminded of her childhood and the reason why she began doing this.

Her mother was black, and living in England as a mixed-race child, she faced discrimination and hate quite often. She was left out and seen as unintelligent and weak. She was too young to understand why the world hated her. She couldn't ignore the whispers behind her back and the pointed looks. It took her a while to realise it was because of her skin, because she was different. "Why does it matter so much that I'm darker?" she thought. Is she really worthless or born wrong just because she doesn't look like those other porcelain-skinned people? "What is wrong with me?" She asked herself as a child, staring into the mirror quietly, but the mirror gave no answer. While growing up, she learned about dog races, as they were quite popular where she lived. Her father would take her there sometimes. It was his favourite pastime, and he wanted to make it his only daughter's passion, too. She saw how the dogs that weren't the fastest were treated. She got angry, watching her father's ignorance as he gave his bet money to the cruel people. There was no fun in paying to make animals suffer, but he seemed to really enjoy the whole process. "I'll help those dogs one day." She promised to herself. "They won't be lonely like me."

She put more than enough money in her purse for a dog, dreading the fact she would have to stand there and watch the race. The races were cruel, and the losing dogs were often beaten up and punished in awful ways. Some of those dogs never stood a chance to win anyway because they were different, and the dog trainers didn't even think they were worth training. They were mutts, small dogs, dogs that came from the street without a pedigree. Even the dogs with losses in their family history were discriminated against. Some of them were seen as cursed or unlucky because of their coat colour, which led to the anger of the rich, who would lose their precious money on bets.

She picked up her purse, her gaze lingering for a moment on the pictures of all the dogs she had helped on the walls. She loved and remembered them all. Ever since she started doing that when she was only seventeen years old, she hasn't failed once. All the dogs she'd helped were now transformed and happy in a loving home. She was twenty-five now and wasn't planning on stopping anytime soon. All the dogs

she'd bought learned to trust and healed again slowly, with every kind word, warm meal, and show of affection from her. If she was good at one thing, it was showing love. And she was proud of that. She thought about what kind of people and dogs she would encounter today as she sat in her car and drove off.

After a short drive, she arrived at the tracks and was greeted warmly by the rich people who already knew her as a frequent guest at the races. She nodded to all of them, smiling softly and secretly despising their ignorance.

A group of people came up to her. "Betting today?" Someone asked. "No, just watching." She responded politely. "Are you afraid to lose?" The questions flooded. "We know you inherited a lot of money from your father, and by now, you should have learned how to spot a winner. You've been to every race since you were, like, five or something. Aren't you a bit ashamed of not betting, ever?" They said, their words judgemental. She kept her polite smile on. "I simply prefer not to. It's more fun just watching." An old man, the leader of the group, snorted softly. "Whatever floats your boat, I guess.", he said as he left to find a spot to watch from, the group following him and whispering.

Hestia walked away, internally annoyed. She approached the group of people who were talking about the bets and listened in, trying not to be noticed. Someone commented, "So, what do we think, who's winning today? I'm placing my bets on the greyhound with the purple tag. He seems fast and confident." Some people nodded and mumbled along. "Did you see the one with the blue? Just where did they get that thing, the sewers?" A man added, rolling his eyes. "That type of dirty, impure dog doesn't belong in the races. It is definitely not a purebred and it also seems rather aggressive. I wouldn't even bother training it. There is no place in the kennels for a loser like that."

Hestia heard enough to know which dog she's probably taking home next. She left for a less crowded place and observed the buzzing crowds. She checked her watch many times, her patience thin from the awful remarks of those privileged egoists. "Stuck-up, arrogant snobs. They think the world revolves around their every whim." She sighed, aware that those people, unlike the traumatised dogs she helped, had no chance of changing into someone better.

Her stomach tingled with anxious butterflies while she was waiting for the race to start. The Sun shone bright, and people waved their fancy little fans, their cheers deafening as the trainers dragged the dogs onto the track. They stood still in their lanes, trembling slightly with the early afternoon wind. Hestia observed carefully, taking mental notes of the dogs, how they looked, how scared they seemed to be,

and their size. It all mattered to her. She spotted the dog with the blue tag that was mentioned earlier. It looked like a strong animal but scared to death. It couldn't race if it felt like it was going to be punished horribly if a mistake happened. Punishing the dogs was useless because they didn't understand what they'd done wrong. All they know is that they were beaten, not the reason for it. That's something that upset Hestia horribly.

It was clear already that it wouldn't win. The way it stood, it looked like a rabbit hiding from wolves in plain sight. Its fear turned into aggression, and the adrenaline it felt from being horrified made it attack. It was either that or death. It swung its large jaw towards the trainer's head. The rough teeth made a screeching sound as they collapsed together again furiously. The trainer managed to jump away, only being lightly grazed. Hestia gasped, together with many of the other spectators. A whip struck the dog's back violently a few times until it started whining. Hestia bit her lip and turned away. It backed up into its lane and its head drooped down with a light tremble. Both its head and tail were as low as they could be, in an effort to seem smaller and weaker so the beatings would stop. And so, they did, and the races were about to start.

Hestia almost teared up at the previous sight, madly cursing under her breath every ignorant, horrible person who witnessed that and all the people who ever took part in any such race.

The gun went off and the dogs started running. It was a sight to behold. In the first few seconds, they ran together in a line, and it was, in a way, fascinating. The moment of bliss she got, watching that synchronized moment made Hestia irritable.

"Hestia, dear lord... Whose side are you even on?" She asked herself, rubbing her forehead with a furrowed face. "But, honestly, it's not even the dogs' fault... It really is impressive how they ran together like that. Thinking that doesn't make me a bad person, does it?"

After that, she stopped paying attention to the race. She only knew that the blue one didn't win, and because of the attempted attack it did earlier, it could get beaten to death. Hestia rushed to the pens after the race and found the trainer of the blue one.

"What's the name of that one?" Hestia asked, walking over slowly. "Max." The man said irritably. "What do you want, girl? Don't you see I'm working?" Hestia looked at him. "How much for Max?" "What, like, money? You want to buy this useless rag? Seriously?" He huffed, dragging the dog into a pen and kicking it with his leg. "Yes, how much?" The man grumbled. He argued, his words loud and aggressive. Hestia

stayed calm. In the end, the man gave up, Hestia pulled out a stack of money from her bag. She took the dog's leash and threw the money to the man, smiling as some of it fell to the floor. She deserved to be a bit petty, at least now. She walked away, the dog trembling in horror behind her. They walked slowly, and she was quiet as she led him gently to the car. The others watched and commented behind her back. She knew, and she didn't care. It always happened. It would surely die down soon.

In the car, Hestia turned to Max. "I assume you would like a new name more, wouldn't you?" Max wagged his tail. Based on his reactions, together, they chose the name Charlie.

He didn't trust her for days after they got to her home, growling and threatening to bite her from time to time. She didn't blame him. Not after what was done to him. His thick hair was still ragged from the scarred skin underneath. It pained Hestia to see him flinch at every sound. She gave him patience and love at every chance she got. Unlike most dogs, he didn't seem to be opening up at all. Days turned into weeks, and he would still just sit in the corner, still like a toy, eating only when Hestia wasn't nearby.

"Come on dear... Come eat, please. I won't hurt you." She tried every day. Charlie didn't budge. She sat next to the food bowl with a toy plushie, trying to get him to come closer. "Come on, beautiful boy. Come over here. It's safe now. The pain is over."

Her kind words every day didn't help, despite her gentle tone and the way she looked at him with eyes full of love. He was still terrified of her and the whole house. She decided that maybe giving him space would work best. From that day on, she sat away and didn't try to get his attention. "At his own pace, he will." She reassured herself. That seemed to work a bit better. The next day he moved a bit from the corner, stepping a few times, his tail still low. It wagged lightly when he would eat the food. That delighted Hestia. She gave him all the time he needed to adapt at his own pace. She didn't mind that it took him more than the other dogs. She fell asleep on the couch one evening, listening to music, and when she woke up, she saw Charlie lying in front of her, watching her. She flinched at first, not expecting that, but then she relaxed. "Hey, darling..." She put her hand closer and laid it on his head. His eyes widened a bit and his snout trembled, but he stayed still. "There we go... You've got this..." His tail wagged a bit. He lay up on the couch next to her and she fell asleep again while petting him.

The morning after, she sat up and rubbed his head. He woke up, lightly panicked. "How about a walk?" He circled around her legs excitedly as he let her the new blue collar with his name engraved on it. After attaching the leash, she took him to a

park. She began taking him on walks every day. He seemed excited to be able to run around freely.

After a while, she began to search for a family to take care of him. Everything seemed perfect, and she found some potential families. Until one day, a dog twice larger than Charlie started barking at him in the park. Hestia tried to calm Charlie, but he'd already started barking, visibly upset. The large dog started the fight. While the other dog's owner tried to break them up, Charlie bit him. Hestia panicked and pulled Charlie away. The other man was bleeding. He later called Animal Control, furious at Charlie and Hestia.

Animal Control came to pick Charlie up. Hestia followed. She knew what it meant. He would have to be euthanized for biting a person. "Stop, he's not aggressive usually! He's just scared! You don't know him! He was protecting himself." Hestia yelled when she got into the building after the workers. Charlie whined. They dragged him over to a room. "We're sorry. It's the law. He's dangerous for others." One of the workers replied. "He's a Pitbull mutt. They are dangerous. This one has already been reported by the racing agency for aggression." She followed them. "Please, stop. There must be something I can do." "Unfortunately not, miss, the laws here are strong against certain types of dogs. The wound was also significantly deep and the other man was hospitalised. Nothing we can do."

Hestia petted Charlie's head gently. "Please." She begged. "He is traumatised. He just learned to trust me. I've already found potential adopters." A young man stood in front of her. "Miss, please leave the room, or we will have to call the police to escort you."

She took his collar off, defeated, petting him lightly, whispering, "It will be okay, darling. It's a warm and beautiful place that you're going to." She kissed his head and walked out slowly. Her stomach twisted, her hands shook. She drove home and cried for hours. This was the first time this had ever happened to her. She put the blue collar onto the wall, hung a picture next to it and lay flowers on the floor in front of it.

For weeks she didn't do anything, only sat in silent darkness. "I failed this time. I couldn't save him. I'm sorry, Charlie, sweet boy, I'm sorry." She repeated to herself many times daily.

One morning, as she woke up, she realised it was race day again. She walked through the hallway, thinking about Charlie.

"Where is the point in this if I fail?" she thought to herself.

But, while skimming through the pictures of now happy dogs, she realised something. "If I don't go, I have no chance to succeed anyway, just like they didn't have one. I need to give them a chance. If nothing else, I need to do it. I need to keep on trying for Charlie."

She got ready and left, knowing that in the afternoon, she would return home with a new dog to be helped and a fresh batch of flowers for her beloved Charlie.

šifra:PenMan10
mentor: Jasna Buljan
institution: Srednaj škola Zlatar
autor: Filip Brlek

SEVEN DAYS TO SAVA

12/26/2018

It has already been fifteen days since the world became dark. The cars stopped; the bulbs are broken. The internet is down. Any form of long-distance communication doesn't work. People started burning wood to keep warm, and shops are completely looted. People were selfish, everyone knew that it would be either them or someone else, the decision was easy. With the police on the brink of collapse, guns still functioned and were useful. Firefighters are trying to put out fires but without vehicles or the government to support them, these 'firefighters' are volunteers who sacrifice themselves to save what they can. When the lights went out every transformer exploded and the fires started. The smarter ones fled on foot as far away as possible, and the rest started protesting, thinking that it would help. The cold is strong. Dead bodies on the streets became the norm, and no one was able to bury them. I was a new police officer when this started, but there were only a few of us at the beggining. They sent everyone they could to silence the riots in the streets and I was one of them. People were rioting, but it's not like we could have changed anything. Molotov cocktails flew like birds, and we responded with tear gas. People soon got tired and since there was nothing to regain their energy, they went home. On the fourth day, we got permission to use real bullets when people didn't give up and after many died. I'm not proud of my actions that day, no one is. After that, the protests became different, there were still those who wanted to riot, but there were also those who decided to secretly sabotage the police. From burning supplies to destroying weapons. There wasn't a single bit of food in the city, and hope was slowly dying. The mayor of Šibenik ordered an expedition to be sent to Zagreb, to ask for help from the government and perhaps find out what has been going on. Tomorrow, I and four other policemen are leaving. They found us horses, gave us thicker clothes and as much food as they could. Normally, these wouldn't be enough for a trip like this, but we will manage somehow.

12/27/2018

We left early in the morning. The moon was shining like never before, it probably seems that way to me because there are no lights in the city to disturb it. The trip had already been planned to last 7 days, that was the fastest time we could get to Zagreb. For the first day, we had to reach Knin. We started without hope, almost frozen and with a lack of food. Zdenko, Šime, Zdravko and Sven were sent with me. Zdenko was a captain of the Šibenik police force and was the our group's leader. I didn't see him around often but when I did, he was with Zdravko. From the stories that I had heard they were good friends and went way back. Apparently Zdravko one caught a bullet for Zdenko and since then they had been inseparable. Sven and I were the police officers in top form and that had been the only reason we were selected. Sven, like me, had just started his training as a police officer, we knew each other and were friends. Sven and I ware really inexperienced so we weren't confident that we would be able to do something. Šime was Sven's father and the reason why he volunteered to come with us was because he wanted to protect his son, and mayor allowed it because it was known that he was good -natured.

The sun was starting to rise when we took our first break. Not to rest, but because of what we found on the way. We saw a family, or at least their remains. They were full of bullet holes and everything they had had been stolen. We couldn't do much, time was short, we prayed for them and continued. The rest of the journey was very unpleasant, we were silent, if we hadn't been riding but sitting, people would think we were dead. When we got to Knin, the city was burning. Zdravko wanted to go to the city to try to save survivors, but Zdenko stopped him. 'Look I know that you always want to save people, but it is too dangerous to go in there.' said Zdenko holding Zdravko's shoulder. He followed with: 'What will happen to people in Šibenik if we die now?' Zdravko wasn't happy, but he did not try to convince us to go in anymore. We pitched our tents on some rocks. I hardly slept that night, hoping that the next city would be safe.

12/28/2018

We decided to have breakfast today. The food was tasteless, but at least it was food. The flames over Knin subsided. On this day, we were scheduled to reach Gračac. Šime had prepared the horses while Sven and I picked up everything left from breakfast and Zdravko and Zdenko packed the tents. Not long after we started, we reached the Krka River. Šime decided to fill our food supply with fish. None of us were as good as Šime when it came to fishing. He took a stick and stuck it in the ground and began to shake it, earthworms began to come out of the ground and Šime collected

them to use as bait. "The earthworms think that when you shake the ground like this, it's raining, so they come out of the ground." Šime said. After that, he took the earthworms he cought and tied one to the end of a fishing rod that he had improvised using a stick and line. And so, fish after fish, Šime was cutting them like nothing. He immediately bled each one 'Meat tastes better.' ,he said. Zdenko looked at his watch and saw that an hour had passed. We packed up in a hurry and continued our way. When we got to Gračac, it looked more normal than Knin, that is, it was not burning. But inside was different. The place looked like a battlefield. Dead bodies were everywhere, and we were terrified of ending up like that. Just when we whare leaving, a loud sound was heard and immediately after Šime fell to the floor with a hole in his head. Sven screamed Zdravko and Zdenko pushed our horses to run, and I froze. Soon the fear got to me, and I returned to normal and kicked my horse to run away. When we were at a safe distance, Sven cried for his father. Zdravko began to insist that we go back to the place and find whoever did that, but Zdenko was calm and tried to explain to him that it was a terrible idea becous we might get shot too, but Zdravko started screaming at Zdenko. I stood between them because it looked like they were going to fight and Zdravko calmed down and said, 'I'm going to set up camp.' That night, I tried to calm Sven down but the man just lost his dad just a few hours ago so it was in vain.

12/29/2018

This day we were scheduled to reach Bihać. It was decided to go through Bosnia to speed up the journey. That morning, we had a small funeral ceremony for Šime. The man left his son alone in this world, so we thought that we owe him at least that much. That morning, when we started riding, the tension in the air between Zdravko and Zdenko was great, the only thing that could be heard on our way were the horses' hooves and a quiet conversation between me and Sven. The terrain was unforgiving, mountains and forests were everywhere, and if it hadn't been for Zdenko, we would have gotten lost. I don't know how many times we had to go around some mountains. Without Zdenko, we would have goten stuck somewhere around Grač. Zdravko was silent the whole way and looked angrily at Zdenko. I thought that they were good friends but meaby not as good as I thought. After a long journey, we finally reached Bihać and when we entered the town it looked promising. The city looked somewhat normal. From the moment we entered that city, everyone looked at us as if we were to blame for everything that happened. We reached the city office. Zdenko told us to wait outside while he talked to anyone who would listen. The whole time we were waiting, people looked at us like we were wonders of the world,

but we ignored them. After an hour, the sun had already set when Zdenko came out of the building and told us that he had arranged with the mayor to spend the night, they even offered us food. We were surprised that anyone had that much food, but we accepted. When we sat down at the table, meat was placed in front of us. Just as we were about to eat, Zdravko noticed something and stopped us. Taking out a human eye from his plate with a fork. No one needed to say anything, it was clear to all of us what kind of meat they gave us. We quickly packed up and left that building. They soon realized that we were running away and tried to stop us, but our horses were faster than them on foot. That whole night we rode like mad while Zdravko yelled at Zdenko that we should go back to save people who whare avout to be eaten and Zdenko yelled back. I don't remember much more than. All I remember after that is just riding until Sven passed out and fell off his horse.

After Sven fell off his horse, we soon set up camp and fell asleep. The next morning, we tried to treat Sven's wounds. We decided to have breakfast. The fish that Šime had caught won't last long, so we ate it. On this day, we were supposed to reach Vrnograč. We didn't expect anything there, but that was the goal. Zdravko and Zdenko were like angry dogs right from the start. Zdravko kept saying that Zdenko behaves as if he was not human, that he leaves people to die without any empathy. Zdenko only answered 'We couldn't help anyone! And if we die, Šibenik goes with us!' Zdravko was only angrier. Sven was quiet that day, I hope his wounds healed. When we finally got to Vrnograč, the place was empty. There was no blood on the floor, no sign of a struggle, everything was empty. We had no idea what happen here. That night we decided to spend in one of the empty houses. When we set everything up, Zdravko started an argument with Zdenko. The screaming was the loudest yet. After a while of arguing Zdravko shouted 'COME OUTSIDE AND LET'S SETTLE THIS LIKE MAN!!!' Zdenko replied 'LET ME SEE YOU!!' I didn't stop them. We just heard a banging and when it was over. After a few minutes, Zdenko returned to the house covered in blood with red hands and several bruises on his face. He just said 'Get to sleep'. I knew what happened and I didn't want to admit it.

12/30/2018

This morning was very quiet, we just got on our horses and continued our way. This day we were supposed to reach Glina. No one was talkative today. We passed many consequences of the events that took place after all the lights went out. A crashed plane lay on the meadow. I can only imagine how terrible it was. Out of nowhere, all the plane's engines shut down and all the controls refused to function. One half was cut off from the other and now lies next to it. The roads were no better, people

driving just lost control of their cars. Some tried to turn, but many crashed. People tried to call for help, but it was useless. Every man who depended on some machine to keep them alive in the hospital died imedeatly. All food has become significantly more valuable without refrigerators, vehicles to transport it and machinery to grow it. Humanity has returned to the Middle Ages. That's what I thought all the way to Glina. When we got there the whole place was empty again. But unlike yesterday, this time there was a little more explanation. On the pole was a poster with the inscription 'All towns near Zagreb were evacuated.' We were happy because this meant a lot. First of all, the only way to evacuate this many people at once was by using some kind of vehicle, and it also had to be organized so that it is quite possible that some form of telecommunications is functional. Sven and I were happy about it, but Zdenko bearly smiled. The sun was already setting, so we decided to spend the night in one of the houses. Me and Sven started unpacking, but Zdenko said he needed to pee. Me and Sven didn't think anything of it at first. But after an hour had passed, I went to check where he was. When I opened the toilet door, I first saw a floating pair of legs and then I looked up and saw Zdenko hanging with a rope around his neck. I couldn't move. Sven realized something was wrong, so he also came to check what happend. His reaction was the same as mine. After I came to, I saw a letter on the floor, and it said:

' I'm sorry for everything and if Zdravko can forgive me, I am sorry.

I apologize for leaving the rest of the journey up to you.'

I didn't know what to say, Sven and I both went to sleep in silence.

12/31/2018

When I got up that morning, Sven was shaking in bed. I tried to calm him down as best I could, but to no avail. I decided to make breakfast in the hope that it would calm him down. When I was done and invited him to eat, he slowly got up. Until that moment, I didn't even notice how much weight we have lost. Riding day and night on an empty stomach really weakens a man. After breakfast we decided to continue our journey, today's goal was to reach Sisak and now I was motivated more than ever for all those who died to get me to Zagreb. I tried to cheer Sven up with by chitchatting, but nothing worked. First, I asked him how he was feeling, he didn't answer. I then asked him how he did after the lights went out, he said nothing but, even though it was hard to see anything I managed to notice a tear falling down his cheek. I wanted to ask him about it but decided against it as it made me uncomfortable. After half a minute of silence, Sven breaks it and says 'When they ordered us to use real bullets, I didn't look at the people because I couldn't imagine killing anyone else but the orders were clear so I just closed my eys and shoot. When everything

was over, I looked in front of me and on the ground, in a pool of blood, they were lying: my mom and my sister but I never could bring myself to tell my dad.' From then until Sisak, we did not exchange a single word. On our way into Sisak my horse cut its leg and dropped me to the ground and I hit my head on the floor and fell unconscious. I thought I was done for when I saw everything that has happened flash in front of my eyes. Zdravko and Zdenko sharing a cup of coffee after a long shift changed to Zdenko killing Zdravko in a fit of rage and then killing himself out of sadness. To this point I had never thought how much guilt Zdenko must have felt after killing his best friend and a man who saved his life. And Sven a man who had a whole family now left alone in this world. I was surprised when I came to and saw Sven above me treatening my injuries 'Hello brother, welcome back!, he said with a slight smile on his face. He explained that after my horse had hurt himself and the accident startled his,so it ran away and mine couldn't walk anymore so he had left them there and carried me to safety.

1/1/2019

This was it the last day of our journey, the day we wear supposed to reach Zagreb. My head was a bit light, and my leg was not good so Sven had to help me the rest of the journey. We walked the whole day with little rest. Sven was truly something else. This man had every reason to give up say 'screw this' and run away but he hadn't, and I respected him for that. We walked the whole day, and night already fell a long time ago and full moon was bright. I could see it Sven he was tired, and I was as well but with our goal so close we couldn't give up now so we continued until we saw in moonlight reflected in water. 'SAVA!!!' we both screamed at the same time. In the distance we saw car lights and heard roaring of an engine. We were happier than ever before and rushed to the city as if we weren't about to pass out from exhaustion. Finally, we will be able to help all the people in Šibenik and all the deaths won't be in vain.

šifra: FORMULA1
mentor: Valentina Vrabac
institution: Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Lorena Marčec

THE ART OF BREAKING

– ** E, don't do this, it doesn't have to end this way.
– YOU CAN'T SAY THAT! I DESERVE THIS MOMENT! THIS IS MY KARMA!

He was clearly yelling, but it was curious, really, his words were not meant to make her laugh, but to scare her, their task left incomplete as a smile crept up onto her face. She tried to hide it, provoking him not in the slightest her intention, not when he was holding a gun. Unsure of its realness, the smartest way around this was to treat it as if it is not a toy, and could kill in a matter of milliseconds. Since he last spoke a silence surrounded them, so quiet they could hear each other's thoughts, so quiet a pin drop would equal the volume of his freshly-ended screams.

– Elijah, you do not deserve this, this will only make you suffer more, what is done is done, right now coming with me is the only help you can get. Please. Please do not pull that trigger, you're stronger than it.

Suddenly, there were tears streaming down his face, it becoming full of color contrasting its usually extraordinarily pale complexion. She made him cry, something he never did, not since he was a child. His gaze shifted abruptly from her face, to the gun, back to her face, back to the gun. His behaviour lasted for what felt like minutes, though it really only lasted a few seconds. Just as her next words graced the tip of her tongue, she was interrupted by him, now with an unfamiliar coldness and sharpness in his voice.

– You majored in psychology and this is the best you can tell me? He's dead. He's gone. I need to do this, for him, for us, it's what he would have wanted.

Again, the words were fully formed and ready to exit her mouth, but this time the sound of a gunshot interrupted her, enveloping the room in silence once more.

Elijah Frobes is so much more than special. Despite looking like the average seventeen-year-old boy he is, there is nothing about him that is average, or even close to it. From a young age his difference was noticeable, not just by his much higher intelligence and levels of understanding than his peers, but also by the lack of latter

surrounding him. It sounds like a classic story, a genius kid with no friends who gets bullied, then achieves something great and everyone comes back to apologise, ask forgiveness or any other means of making amends, but it is not. People tried to be his friend, they really did, so so many of them, most of whom left after the first few weeks of knowing him, some not even lasting days. It was like he just wanted to be alone, and he would do anything in his power to keep it that way. Did his outright shocking decision not to have friends impact his social skills, though? Not in the slightest. The only way he knew he could push people away effectively is if he had enough social skills to recognise patterns in behaviour and ways others interacted with those they called "friends". If you did get the chance to approach him and he deemed you worthy of a few seconds of his time, the only words you would hear is a slightly altered version of a monologue given to everyone who tried to befriend him.

– Friends are a stupid social construct that society convinces us we need, and that we need as many of them as we can get, that without them life is boring and dull and meaningless and worthless. What really happens when you have friends is someone who tries to engage you in pointless conversations, attempts to drag you outside or somewhere to do god knows what boring activity and wastes your free time. Being alone lets you get to know yourself properly, gives you time for self reflection and discovery, which adds much more meaning to your life because don't we all want to know who we are? Also, it is much more beneficial to your future to know yourself than it is to know someone else so dearly and deeply as you fools want to know your friends. No one will ever care about your "best friend's" favorite ice cream flavour but rather about what makes you a better person than the last interviewee they talked to.

Of course, this monologue was created using his extensive knowledge of behavioural patterns in these relationships called friendships he observed from afar and consequently hated from the depth of his soul. The other thing he used this asset of his for was, well, much less moral and philosophical than it's first use. He used it only and specifically to his advantage, to get what he wants. Of course, he was a master manipulator. You could have guessed by now, that he is, unsurprisingly , not much of a talker. It became slightly surprising when you would hear him speak for the first time. Every word that came out of his mouth sounded like it was composed of only the purest gold there is on this Earth. It was music to anyone's ears, no matter your taste. It was like a gust of cold wind on a hot summer day, like the perfect amount of milk in your coffee, like the sky when the sun comes out while it is still raining, you get the idea. Now how he used this talent was mostly for little non ma-

licious things, such as persuading someone to share their homework answers for the subject he really, really hated, or to let him have the last candy bar off the shelf in the store. Well about two years ago he used it on his parents. He managed to convince them to send him to a prestigious boarding school on the other side of the UK, from Bristol to London. It wasn't a hard task for him, he already knew all the tricks that got to them and worked them without so much as a sentence against his idea. That is how his views on friendships changed. He met a lot of people before coming to London, but no one ever stood out to him as much as this person did. There was something weird about this man, well it's better to say this boy as he is Elijah's age, something about him drew Elijah in, made him want to do something he'd never done before, something he has practically been swearing against for the last fifteen years of his life. There was this feeling that overcame Elijah every time he looked at him, it was indescribable to him, for the first time in his life he experienced a lack of words, truly not knowing how to describe it. It was nothing short of infatuation, except that it was, because Elijah did not do "friends", and now was not the time to start, except that it was. It was oddly warm for the start of September in London, allowing the students to wear their short-sleeved uniform, ridding them of their suit jackets and long button-downs. It was about four days into the term when the freckle-covered boy Elijah was infatuated with came up to him.

– Hi, I'm Basil, you must be new to London- he said, clearly commenting on Elijah's choice to wear long sleeves - am I right? Mind if I sit next to you?

Usually, without thinking twice Elijah's answer would be along the lines of "If you must." or "Aren't there any other seats around here?" but now, he took his time to eye Basil, take in the features of his body but his gaze focused on Basil's face, making a blush creep up onto the cheeks of the other boy

– It's alright, I understand.

– No, I'd quite like it if you sat next to me.

And so he sat. Basil was too scared to say anything to Elijah for the rest of the lesson, making the latter feel an unusual sadness, one that he itched to comfort. Quietly, he passed a note to his deskmate, it read:

– Sorry if I scared you, I'm just not used to people trying to approach me anymore.

Just as Basil looked up at Elijah, probably to try and awaken some sort of empathy by looking into his eyes, he was met with the sight of him brushing his hair away from his face, but could not miss the annoyance on his face as the hair kept returning to its original position.

The class ended soon enough, Elijah trying to return to his dorm as quickly as possible. His roommate was finally moving in today and he wanted just a little bit

of peace before he had to share a room. To his disbelief, the roommates' bags were already in the room, with a clear name tag on each one.

Basil Colbie.

Well it could have been worse. At least it was someone Elijah had already met and did not hate from the bottom for his soul, in fact, he did not feel an ounce of negative emotions towards Basil, something he was still unable to accept. As it turned out, Elijah wasn't the only one feeling this way in whatever this relationship was. He caught a glimpse of Basil's diary, completely accidentally, it wasn't his intention to intrude but the wind had other ideas. It conveniently opened to the pages containing the entries of the first week of school, each one of them describing or mentioning Elijah at least once. This infatuation went both ways and it is what led to now, two years since they have first met, the two boys are attached at the hip. It was so rare to see them apart, they shared absolutely everything. Not only classes and school activities, but places they went to, circles they mingled in, every interest, everything overlapped, as if they were two sides of the same coin. The only way you could tell them apart was by physical appearance. There was no mistaking Basil's warm, freckled skin and curly dirty blond locks for Elijah's cold and pale face with raven colored straight hair, always falling into his eyes. It was an unspoken deal between them, since Basil witnessed Elijah trying to fix his hair, that Basil would do it for him. It was also decided Elijah would clean up for both, him being the much more meticulous one of them, not allowing a single crease on either of their clothes. Basil encouraged him to keep a journal, so now both boys kept one, but this was just the behavior of normal nest friends, wasn't it?

Six months ago, Basil started to change, or rather, to express his true self. Not that he was presenting a fake person to Elijah per se, but more so covering up one part of his personality. It was no secret they talked a lot, they were best friends after all, but since then the conversations turned.. darker. Maybe deeper is a better word to describe it, with questions of various moral and ethical values coming up in every single one. It felt as if Basil was performing some sort of undercover interrogation these last few months, until the big question came.

– E, would you ever kill someone?

– And spend the rest of my life in jail, Bas? Besides, why would you even want to kill someone?

– You know, you want to see this person suffer the way you have suffered because of their actions, as a way to feel vindicated, to regain control after someone messes up your life completely, get it?

It was the second time Elijah found himself lost for words in his entire life. He spent a minute or so blankly staring at Basil, neither of them uttering a word, not even letting out a sound.

– E, relax, not that I would do something like that, it is just something that has been on my mind a lot lately, I'm scared someone is out for me. I know there probably isn't, but I'm still so paranoid.

Basil's words broke something in Elijah, some sort of realization hitting him hard and fast, finally understanding his best friend's behavior. Adding his admission of paranoia to the rest of the "symptoms" Elijah has been observing in him for the last few months and neatly writing down in his journal, he was sure Basil wasn't okay, and he needed to do something about it. That led to him asking the hard questions, so carefully worded and thought through that no one could ever guess he was trying to get something out of Bas, except there was one person who understood it, and it was Basil.

– Elijah, can we talk for a moment?
– Basil entered their room, much more uptight and worried than usual
– Is something wrong? You look tense.
– I know what you've been trying to do, and I'm beginning to see it too, there's something wrong with me.
– Bas what are you talking about? There's nothing wrong with you!
– E, there is. We can both see it, and you are spending too much time worrying about me, I can't let you do that, you shouldn't have to do that

Basil started packing his bag as he was speaking, Elijah was still sitting confused in his seat, eyes wide in disbelief.

– I'm going to check myself in, get the help I need. Thank you so much E, thank you for being here for me, for trying your best.

He dropped a leaflet on the desk, it had the name and address of the hospital on it, as well as a number to call.

– You can visit, as soon as they allow, I'll miss you a lot, it's indescribable.
– I'll miss you too Bas, I promise I'll come often, as much as I can.
– Bas gave him one last look, standing in the door frame, before turning around and leaving. In retrospect, Elijah wishes he had said more that night.

Three weeks have passed since Basil went away, and Elijah was back to who he was before London, just a shell of a person compared to who he was the last two years. A call awoke him in an odd hour of the night, it was a woman who introduced herself as Dr. Fergus, one of the specialists working with Basil. Instead of news about his

recovery, or his progress, the news the doctor shared made Elijah drop the phone out of his hands. He couldn't believe it, there was no way it was real, they're lying to him, Basil isn't dead, except that he is. He was going through a paranoid episode and managed to get ahold of the window lock keys. He died, his best friend was gone. There was nothing left for him now other than his words.

The next month is a blur to Elijah, between the funeral and multiple attempts of talking to Basil's psychologist, the only thing keeping him going were flashbacks of conversations, he finally felt what Bas was talking about. He was ready to honor him the way he deserved.

It was innocent-looking enough, it's been enough time and he was finally ready to talk to someone, so he scheduled an appointment with Dr. Fergus.

– It is so nice to see you again, Elijah. How are you holding up?

She was smiling at him. The audacity she had.

– I'm fine. Ask the questions you wanted to.
– I was trying to check in on you, not to interrogate you, I just want to make sure you're okay.

She looked up at him, reading his face for a reaction to her words, but all she was met with was a gun pointed to her face.

**

So he stood in the room, while everyone around him was rushing around trying to help the woman, he was only standing aside, laughing maniacally at the scenes unfolding in front of him. He felt fulfilled for the first time in months, it felt amazing, so vindictive and enthralling.

In court, he was found guilty of manslaughter, but he didn't care about that, prison didn't scare him, even a death penalty wouldn't mean anything to him. The only thing he brought with him was a picture of him and Basil, while everything was still good. Looking at it in his hand, a tear rolled down his face.

See Bas, I understand what you meant, and yes, I would kill, just for you.

šifra: CATEYE5
mentor: Andrea Pongrac
institution: Prirodoslovna Škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Eva Romana Cvijetić

THE BLACK CAT'S EYES

On a cold January evening, a six-year-old girl named Cynthia was playing in her room, when she heard the front door open. When she got to the door, she saw her mother standing on the doorstep with a melancholic look on her face and her father by the door with rage in his eyes. Her mother ignored the hurtful words the father was directing at her, and instead walked past him and knelt next to Cynthia. She then handed her a small black kitten with big, bright yellow eyes, and as she did so, the look on her face was apologetic and sorrowful. Cynthia didn't understand why, but before she could ask, her mother spoke in a firm, but shaky voice: "Go to your room, Cynthia."

Nine years later, both Cynthia and her kitten have grown up. The cat is now just slightly bigger than a regular house cat. Cynthia still often hears the unkind things her parents say to one another. Whenever she does, the cat looks at her with its round, pleading eyes, so she feeds it. This usually calms it down, but sometimes it's greedy for a bit more. Cynthia sometimes wonders, watching it eat bugs or even mice while she's studying, why it's so hungry all the time.

Another nine years pass, and Cynthia has now moved out of her parents' house in pursuit of her university education and career. She has managed to get accepted into a pretty good art university and has already started working on a few comic-book projects. It has taken a while to decide whether to take the cat with her or not but ultimately, she couldn't resist the alluring gaze of its eyes. The cat has grown unnaturally large through the years. Going from the size of a bobcat, to about the size of a puma, and now it has already reached the size of a large black panther.

Almost every morning, as she wakes up in her small one-person apartment, she finds the giant feline lying on her chest and looking at her expectedly. Because of its large size, it's hard for Cynthia to breathe and almost impossible for her to get out of bed. So, whenever this happens, she either feeds the cat, which usually gets it to move, or wrestles it off herself. Other than that, the cat has also started to become a miscreant at different times: hissing when not given attention, snarling at its empty

cat bowl and even sometimes scratching and biting Cynthia, seemingly out of nowhere.

Because of this, Cynthia has gotten more and more distracted in her studies, and it's even got to a point that even her best friend Helia has noticed the change in her. "Hey, you've been really off lately…" she tells Cynthia one day. "Am I not always at least a little off?" replies Cynthia. "Well, yes, but lately I feel you've been completely zoned out. Is it that cat again?" says Helia. Cynthia hesitates for a second and then absentmindedly nods. "You must do something about that thing; this has been happening non-stop for weeks! I really think you should take it to the vet," suggests Helia with a concerned look on her face. "I know. You told me that like a million times," replies Cynthia, angling her head down. Helia looks at her tentatively and with a much gentler voice says, "Yeah, well maybe because I want my friend to feel better and not be tortured by a large panther-like cat." Cynthia snickers at Helia's description. "There, finally I got some laughter out of you; I feel like it's been a while since I last heard you laugh," comments Helia. Cynthia lifts her head and after a slight pause says, "Alright, I'll think about it." Helia smiles and says, "Great! I can come with you if you want. You know I've been volunteering at that animal shelter, so I know my way with animals. Besides, it will probably be easier if you don't go alone." Cynthia nods slightly and repeats, "I'll think about it…"

Later that day, Cynthia receives the test results she has been anxiously awaiting all day. It turns out that she's failed the exam, and it's her favourite subject, too! When she gets home, she cries for a long time and the cat seems restless as she does. Cynthia's tears eventually subside, leaving her feeling wretched. The cat then approaches her, digging its claws into her wrists, and looking at her with its pensive, large eyes, as if asking for permission. "What do you want now? Can't you see I'm already miserable?" she utters, her voice shaking. The cat looks at her wrists and then at her, and Cynthia follows its gaze with hers. "That's what you want?! Fine. If it'll get you to stop with the ruckus and calm down," she says in a low tone, as she rolls up her sleeves, knowing those eyes would always break all her defences. The cat scratches her, it hurts, it hurts badly, but only for a bit. Then she feels a weird release of tension, like an eye of a hurricane. This slowly becomes a habit. Whenever she feels stressed or overwhelmed, she allows the cat to scratch her wrists. Over time, the scars become too noticeable, so Cynthia starts wearing longer sleeves to hide them and puts bandages on whenever they bleed through.

A few weeks later, the bandages bleed through while she's in class, so she instantly rushes to the toilet. But as she's cleaning the wound, Helia unexpectedly comes

out of a stall. "Hey, what are you…" Helia starts, before her eyes fall upon Cynthia's wounds, widening in shock and concern. "Oh my God, are you okay?!" she exclaims. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it, Helia," Cynthia replies, her voice quivering. But Helia is panicking, "You're clearly not! Is this that wicked feline's doing again?" Cynthia's eyes brim with tears; she can't bear to look her friend in the eyes. Helia takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. Eventually, she gently says, "We absolutely must go to the vet with it. I'm so sorry that I let it get this far. I should have noticed sooner how much worse it has gotten." Cynthia looks up at Helia with tears rolling down her cheeks "This isn't your fault." Helia slowly approaches Cynthia, and gently pulls her into a hug. "I know, but I should have been there more," she says, her voice breaking slightly as she tries to mask it. Cynthia hugs Helia back, and they both stay like that for a little while. When Cynthia pulls away, Helia wipes her tears and says, "Hey, do you want to get out of here? I know a good ice cream place." Cynthia nods.

They ditch school for the rest of the day and end up eating ice cream while walking through a park. As the sun begins to set, they find a bench overlooking a river and watch the sunset, as it shimmers in the water. "I've always liked sunsets," Helia said, "they remind me that one day is over and soon another will start. It's comforting to know that even though the sun is setting now, it will always rise in the morning." Cynthia nods in agreement. After a pause, Cynthia hugs Helia again and whispers to her, "Thank you. Thank you for everything." Helia doesn't respond, but only hugs her even tighter.

In the morning, it's raining cats and dogs, so the girls decide to postpone the vet visit until the following day. However, somewhere in the evening as it's getting dark outside, Cynthia suddenly gets an unexpected call from Helia. "Hey, Cyn, are you home?" Helia asks. Cynthia can hear the rain in the background. "Yeah, Heli, I am. What is it? You sound like you're getting soaked in the rain," she responds. "I was closing up the animal shelter, when I found this adorable, little golden retriever puppy by the front door. Someone had left the poor thing in a box. It's all dirty and wet, and I don't have anywhere to put it, because the dog area is full. So, would you mind if I brought it to your place? I can't just leave the poor thing like this, and I could use help washing it," Helia says in a hurried, pleading tone. Cynthia thinks for a second, before responding, "Of course I don't mind! I just hope the cat won't try to hurt it. It might be best if we keep the two separated."

About half an hour later, Helia shows up with a puppy in her arms. Cynthia has already locked the cat in a separate room, and so the two wash and clean the golden retriever. "Now there's even more reason to go to the vet. This one needs a check-up

as well," Helia says, as she's checking the pup for tics. Cynthia agrees and they set off to the vet first thing in the morning.

Getting the puppy in the car isn't a big deal, but the cat is being much more difficult. It even scratches Helia a bit, but she assures Cynthia she doesn't mind, as this kind of thing happens all the time at the animal shelter. "So, what brings you here today?" the vet asks when the two girls walk in. "Well, firstly, we need a check-up on this guy," Helia says, lifting the puppy, "and secondly, we need help with that feral feline over there." Cynthia is struggling to get the cat through the door, but eventually she manages to bring it in. "I see, the cat seems like a more pressing issue, so I'll examine it first," calmly says the vet.

He examines it thoroughly, with quite a bit of pushback from the cat, and gives them the diagnosis: "It isn't in critical condition yet, but it isn't far from that either. It's a good thing you came to me before it got even worse. The main issue is the physically harmful aggression and overwhelming pressure to comply with its wishes such as demands for food or attention. I recommend that you give the cat catnip every morning when you wake up, which could also help you with getting out of bed more easily. The other method I think would help is verbal commands and denying food as punishment whenever it acts up, especially when it scratches you. We can arrange an appointment in a few weeks to check whether the treatment is working." Cynthia was shaking while the vet was doing the examination but Helia held her hand, which helped her calm down. When it was all over, she gave a sigh of relief. She was expecting the diagnosis to be far worse, and the treatment doesn't seem too bad either.

"Oh, about the puppy," Helia says, "I volunteer at an animal shelter, so I've already checked it for tics, wounds or signs of illnesses. I've found a few scratches on its legs and ear, and patched them up, but we were hoping you could take a closer look." Then Helia hands the pup to the vet. He nods and begins examining it closely. "Just as you said, a few minor injuries, but those will heal over time. Other than that, I think it would be best to give it all the necessary vaccines, and then you should be good to go. All it needs is just some proper love and care, as well as adequate nourishment," the vet says, preparing the pup for its shots.

When all the procedures and the paperwork are finished, and an appointment is set for three weeks later, the girls buy catnip as instructed and drive back to Cynthia's apartment. When they get there, Helia remarks, "I think the puppy should stay with you. I think it makes you feel better, and it seems to repel the cat as well. And besides, I think you like it, and it seems to like you too." She says the last sentence with a satisfied grin. Cynthia gets quiet for a moment and stares at the dog and the cat side by side. Then she looks back at Helia and says, "I'll keep the pup but you have to help me

take care of it. You know much more about what dogs need than I do." Helia agrees. Then she leaves, because she's needed at the animal shelter: one of the animals has gone missing and they need help finding it.

The very next day, Cynthia starts following a simple routine: she wakes up, reaches for the left bedside table, grabs the catnip, gives it to the cat so she could get up, then feeds the dog, but denies the cat excess food, goes to school, and when she comes back, she practises the commands the vet has recommended. And weirdly enough, it seems to be working. She soon starts feeling much better, and her studies improve. The dog also begins to grow, so he even defends Cynthia when the cat tries to attack her. Meanwhile, the cat seems to shrink a bit. It still sometimes manages to hurt Cynthia, but much less frequently.

About two and a half weeks later, the dog has grown into a very large and healthy golden retriever, while the cat has shrunk back to the size of a normal house cat. Before, Cynthia was very hesitant about showing it to her other friends, and only trusted Helia to understand the situation, but now she feels it's easier to introduce them to it. Her only worry is that it could hurt them too, but they assure her that even if it did, they would understand and wouldn't mind the pain too much.

Finally, three weeks later, the day of her appointment arrives. She asks Helia to accompany her, as it's much easier to calm her anxiety when she's there. She goes to bed early to make sure she gets enough sleep.

In the morning, she wakes up and immediately reaches for the left bedside table, grabbing two little pills – her antidepressants; then she gets up, makes breakfast while reading her daily motivations, goes to school, comes back and repeats the affirmations she's written on her mirror. Suddenly her phone rings: it's Helia calling. "Hey, Cyn, what are you up to?" Helia asks, her voice sounding cheerful. "Just working on that comic I've been telling you about. Are you already finished volunteering at the psyche ward?" Cynthia replies. "Yeah, I'll come pick you up in about forty-five minutes. So, get ready! Don't forget your mood journal, and remember to breathe. I know the psychiatrist makes you nervous, but I'll be by your side the entire time, so don't worry! Maybe even bring some of those drawings with you. I think they are a great way of expressing your emotions, so he might find them useful," Helia says in a more serious but still positive tone. Cynthia glances at the drawings scattered on her desk. One of them catches her attention, the one that she did a week or so earlier, which depicts a girl hugging a light-coloured dog with a dark, cat-like figure looming over them. She takes it and says to Helia, "Yeah, you're right. Alright, I have to get ready. So, I'll see you in 45 minutes. Bye, Heli!" "Bye, Cyn!" Helia replies. Cynthia

goes into the bathroom to take a shower.

On her desk lies a black-and-white comic book entitled "The Black Cat's Eyes".

šifra: AA1836
Student: Matej Tomaško
Mentor: Iva Rišner
Graditeljsko-geodetska škola Osijek

THE BLACK HEART OF THE EARTH

In the shadow of a cruel world lies a Kingdom at the center of the Earth. This Kingdom is the only place where light still shines, surrounded by an endless darkness. The rest of the world, from the trees to the mountains, is consumed by a black corruption that devours everything in its path. All of this takes place in a forgotten land, once called Europe. The Kingdom is the last bit of life, home to brilliant mindsets, musicians, philosophers, and other. But there was one person who stood out among them all: a man they called the "Crazy Man." He was known for his weird experiments, often getting himself in danger. He lived in isolation, constantly playing around with his creations.

One day, the Crazy Man found himself inside the King's castle for an important meeting. As he approached, he overheard the King discussing the impending doom of the corruption. The King feared it would soon consume the Kingdom, and he shared this concern with his daughter. The Crazy Man, was shocked by what he had heard. Just then, the King opened the door and saw the Crazy man standing there. Without skipping a beat, the King greeted him, pretending nothing unusual had happened. The King immediately began talking to the Crazy Man, telling him that he was late and instructing him to design a new writing machine. The King ushered the man into his private chambers and gave him a stern warning: "If you speak of the corruption, you will be executed. Do not interfere." The man hesitated but promised to remain silent. However, the King stopped him, his tone turning urgent. "Find a way to stop it," he ordered. "You are the only one who can.". With that, the Crazy Man left the castle, his mind racing. How could he possibly stop the corruption?

The Kingdom was magnificent—full of bright light, beautiful gardens, and towering medieval buildings draped in vines. Already thousands of people had died trying to stop the corruption and he does not believe that he will be able to do it. The other people here were full of joy and laughter, unaware of the danger that threatened

them all. The Crazy Man, whose actual name was Williams, was the only one who knew the truth: the corruption was spreading, and it would soon devour everything, including the Kingdom itself. Williams returned home, a small, cluttered house on the outskirts of the Kingdom thinking about how he can defeat something so fast and all-consuming. Even though the information to work with were scarce he had to be careful not to draw attention to the corruption. He sat at his workbench, staring at his creations and parts of unfinished ones. His fingers twitching to dive into action. But this was different, this wasn't an ordinary experiment. This was a task that the fate of the Kingdom depended on. His eyes wandered over his old blueprints looking for an answer but that wasn't it. He knows that it isn't enough. He knows he needs something more. And that night Williams stayed awake all night trying to find something, some idea that would help him but there was nothing." It was unlike any disease or plague he has ever encountered. It didn't just destroy, it consumed everything, leaving only death and decay behind. Then Williams stood in front of his mirror, his reflection staring back at him with bloodshot eyes, the weight of the King's request pressing down on him. He couldn't shake the feeling that the corruption wasn't just a force of nature, it had to be something more, something intentional. The thought of it, left a strange mixture of fear and determination in his mind.

The wind howled outside his small, cluttered house, hitting the shutters. The room was thick with the smell of oil and metal, the faint hum of electrical equipment buzzing from various machines in the corners. It was a sanctuary of his own making, a chaotic place where he could breathe, think, and create. But nothing, his mind was clouded. He could only feel the sense of imports creeping up his spine, its icy fingers were gripping his thoughts. "Where do I even begin?" he muttered to himself, walking around the room. He had to find the source of the corruption. It was the only way to stop it—if there even was a way. But the more he thinks about it, the more he realized just how little he actually knew. No one had seen the corruption's origin. It was as if it came from nowhere and everywhere at once. It crept, it slithered, it consumed, and then... it moved on, leaving nothing but an endless, shifting blackness in its path. Williams rubbed his chin, exhausted, but unwilling to give up. He'd always relied on logic and science to solve problems, but this was different. This was beyond reason. The corruption was a force that didn't obey the laws of nature, and yet it seemed so overwhelming. "If I can't understand it, how can I stop it?" His look fell upon a set of old books stacked on a shelf in the corner. Most were dusty and let a side, but one caught his attention. It was a leather-bound book, its pages yellowed with age. "The Chronicles of the Lost Ages." He had found it years ago, hidden in a

forgotten corner of the Kingdom's library. He believed it at the time as nothing more than an old myth, a collection of fanciful stories. But now, perhaps... Perhaps it held something he needed and may or may not be not a book full of myths. He grabbed the book and opened it. The first few pages spoke of ancient wars, forgotten Kingdoms, and legends of forces too powerful for mortal men to comprehend. As he read the pages, a phrase caught his attention: "The Black Heart of the Earth." He froze. Something about the words echoed through his mind, leaving a chilling familiarity he couldn't place. The more he read, the more the pieces began to fit together. The Black Heart was said to be the origin of a great darkness, an ancient, primal force buried deep beneath the Earth. The text described it as a corruption of the very soil, a parasite that fed on the land and all life within it. If the corruption truly came from this Black Heart, then perhaps it wasn't a disease at all, but something older, something more disturbing. "Could it really be?" Williams whispered to himself. The book detailed a long-forgotten ritual, one that could supposedly seal the Black Heart away and stop the corruption, locking it beneath the Earth forever. But the ritual required three things: an ancient artefact, a location known only to the Kingdom's oldest scholars, and a sacrifice. Williams closed the book, his heart pounding in his chest. It all seemed so impossible, yet he couldn't ignore the feeling that it was his only chance. The only problem was the King had warned him not to interfere with the corruption, but Williams knew he couldn't stay silent. The Kingdom was already living on borrowed time. He grabbed a small leather satchel from his workbench and packed it with the essentials—tools, the book, and a map he had sketched of the Kingdom. Then, he paused and turned to his machines, a sense of finality settling over him. He had done what he could here. Now, he would have to go adventure into the darkness. Before he left, Williams glanced back at his reflection in the mirror. The man staring back at him seemed... different. Not the same scientist who spent hours at his workbench, testing and tinkering, but someone else, someone who was about to face a destiny far greater than any experiment. Without another word, he turned and left the house.

The air was thick with the promise of a storm, the distant rumble of thunder echoing through the night. He had no time to waste. The Kingdom's fate rested on his shoulders. And so, with the weight of the world pressing down on him, Williams began his journey into the unknown, determined to find the Black Heart and put an end to the corruption before it consumed everything. The journey ahead was filled with uncertainty. Williams knew the Kingdom was perched precariously at the edge of destruction, and there was no telling how much longer the false tranquillity would last. He stepped into the night, the chill of the air wrapping around him like a cloak.

The storm was near, and his footsteps seemed to echo off the walls of his mind more than the cobblestones beneath his feet. His path was clear, but the unknown was just beyond the horizon, beckoning him into a fate he could neither fully understand nor feel familiar with. He made his way through the winding streets of the Kingdom, past sleeping homes and darkened windows. The castle loomed in the distance, a silhouette against the slowly darkening sky. The people, oblivious to the doom that encroached upon them, continued their carefree lives, ignorant of the devastation that was surely waiting for them just beyond the borders of their city. Williams tightened the straps on his satchel. He couldn't afford to waste time. The Black Heart was real—it had to be. The book was not a myth. It was a warning. And now, Williams was its bearer. He was the only one who knew the truth. The King's warning echoed in his mind: If you speak of the corruption, you will be executed. Do not interfere. But that was no longer a concern. How could anyone remain silent in the face of such an all-consuming force? He had to find the Black Heart, uncover the artifact, and unlock the ritual that could end it. The people of the Kingdom deserved more than to live in ignorance and agony.

Hours passed as he travelled through dense woods and narrow, overgrown paths, the distant rumblings of thunder growing louder. The storm was unavoidable, but he couldn't afford to wait for the rain to break. He had to reach the Black Forest before the darkness consumed everything. The rain would only make the journey harder. He arrived at the forest's edge just as the first raindrops began to fall. The Black Forest was known as guaranteed death, feared by the people, avoided by travellers, and whispered about in hushed tones. Ancient trees twisted toward the sky; their bark blackened by the corruption that had begun creeping across the land. The wind howled through the branches, carrying with it a sense of despair, as if the forest itself mourned what was to come. Williams stood at the edge, his breath shallow. There was no turning back now. The map he had been given was vague, but he had no other choice but to trust it. The ruins, where the ancient ritual had been performed, lay deep within the heart of the forest. The rain intensified as he stepped forward, the soft patter of raindrops mingling with the unnerving silence that hung over the trees. The deeper he ventured, the more oppressive the air became. The trees loomed like giants, their huge branches reaching out, as if to stop him, or perhaps to guide him toward something hidden deep within the woods. The forest was full of strange sounds the rustle of leaves, the crack of twigs beneath his boots, and, occasionally, a low, almost imperceptible hum. It was the hum of something ancient, something buried beneath the earth, calling to him. Williams felt a chill go down his spine.

Whatever waited in the forest was not just a relic of the past, it was alive. The deeper he went, the more the darkness pressed in.

The sky was now a blanket of dark clouds, the storm swallowing the last of the light. Only the faint glow of his lantern illuminated the path ahead. But even that small light seemed insignificant against the looming expanse of blackness around him. Hours passed, and just as he began to doubt his senses, he stumbled upon something. A ruin, half-buried in the undergrowth, its stone walls worn with age. This was it – the place where the ritual had been performed. Williams felt a wave of cold wash over him, as if the very air around the ruin had been touched by the corruption. The whispers of the forest seemed to grow louder now, mumming in a language he could not understand. He approached the ruin cautiously, his steps slow and deliberate. The symbols on the stones seemed to pulse with an eerie energy, and as he reached out to touch one, a shock ran through his fingers. It was as though the ruin itself recognized his presence. Inside, the ruin was dark, save for the faint glow of his lantern. The floor was covered in debris, and old, crumbling stone walls surrounded him. At the center, there was an altar, broken, but still standing. There were strange carvings on the surface of the altar, and Williams could feel the weight of its significance. This was where the ancient ritual had taken place. His hands trembled as he pulled out the leather-bound book. The pages were worn, the ink faded, but the words were still legible. He flicked through the pages quickly, trying to find the ritual's instructions. As he did, he noticed something strange, a drawing on one of the pages. It was of the altar, but it was different. The symbols on the stone were more intricate, and in the center of the altar was a circle, an empty circle. The circle, he realized, was the key. Williams placed the book on the altar and examined the surrounding area more carefully. There was a faint indentation in the stone at the center, almost imperceptible in the dim light. His heart raced as he knelt down, brushing away the dirt and grime from the surface. It was a perfect fit for something. He glanced back at the book, and there it was: an illustration of an ancient artefact, a stone amulet, resting within the circle. The artefact. It had to be here. Williams' mind raced. He scanned the room, searching for any clue, any sign of where the amulet might be hidden. His eyes flicked to a nearby stone slab; its surface covered in strange markings. There, etched into the rock, were the remnants of what looked like a burial chamber. The amulet must be inside. His pulse quickened as he approached the slab. It was heavy, and when he attempted to shift it, a strange resistance held it in place. The stone seemed to resist his touch, but he pressed on. His fingers gripped the edges of the slab, and with a final grunt, he managed to shift it just enough to glimpse

inside. There, in the shadows, was the artefact. It was a small, round stone, its surface shimmering with a strange, otherworldly light. The moment his fingers brushed against it; the ground trembled beneath him. A low rumble, like distant thunder, echoed through the forest. The Black Heart was waking. With trembling hands, Williams took the amulet and placed it into the indentation on the altar. As soon as it fit, the ruin seemed to come alive. The symbols on the walls began to glow with an eerie light, and the air around him grew thick with a dark, oppressive energy. A deep, resonating voice echoed from the depths of the ruin. It was a voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. "You dare awaken me?!" The ground trembled again, and the darkness of the Black Forest seemed to draw closer, swallowing all light. The corruption was here. It has found him. But Williams stood firm. He had no choice; he had to see this through. As the forest's shadows closed in, he whispered a single phrase to the amulet, following the instructions from the book. The symbols around him pulsed in response, and the earth beneath his feet seemed to crack open, revealing the true source of the corruption – the Black Heart itself. But Williams was ready. With the amulet in place, he began the ritual. The dark presence seemed to recoil at the energy he unleashed, reading the ancient ritual; the energy drastically jumped and his heartbeat was slowing down gradually. When he read it all, he had one more thing to do: he had to jump into the source. Williams, without hesitation, jumped in and the heart teleported him unharmed into a dark and echoing dimension… where he is yet to discover a new adventure.

šifra: church123
mentor: Katarina Berać Vuić
institution: Gimnazija Županja
autor: Lana Vuković

NASLOV PRIČE: THE CHURCH OF FREE PEOPLE

'Oh my God!? What are you doing? That guy is dead!'

'Well yes, that is the point. I am not going to steal from someone who is alive.'

'Good point, but still. I mean, come on, are we really that desperate?'

'I do not know about you, but I don't have any money to buy more. And it is not like you won't take some.'

Jesus, I can't believe my life has come to this. And to think that this whole thing almost never happened is depressing. Robert and I became homeless after a random underground party. We thought that it was going to be just a regular rave. It turned out to be some kind of a cult gathering. Who in their right mind would mistake a secret meeting for a rave!? It was so freaky inside, everyone was dancing and looking high. But once they realized we weren't a part of their group they kicked us out. Then they sent a random person out to follow us and see where we lived.

A week later they burned the whole building down. I guess that they don't want people to hear about them. But going as far as burning a building down is crazy. The two of us were unlucky enough not to be home at the time. To make the situation worse, we couldn't get accommodation from the government because we were living in America illegally. And our aunt was out of question.

'Damn, that was quick. Wait, no, oh my god no. I am not going near that.'

'What now, you always have something to complain about.'

'And I will continue to do so because there is blood all over the pack.'

'Yeah, and?'

I never thought that stuff like this would ever happen to me, but in the end, here we are. Robert started doing drugs about a year ago, but at that time it was just recreational. Since the fire he probably hasn't been able to go a day without a fix. He never offered me to try because I was a *sober Nelly* as he liked to call me. But as time when on, I secretly started taking some after I first tried to end it all. That suicide attempt was also the death of my career. This side of life is extremely somber, and not for the weak such as me.

About a week ago Robert was approached by a random man who started talking to him about the beauty of the sober life. He offered him a place to stay. The man, known as John, was a preacher. He started his own church, a mixed race one. Robert loved that, as he never felt accepted in any community. He wanted me to come with him to one of the services, but I'm not religious, never was. And that whole thing seemed a bit sketchy.

'John told me that they are moving to California, and that I should join them.'

'So? Will you?'

'I think so, yeah. I started taking much less after joining them. And it helped me a lot. It is truly a wonderful community. But I'm not going without you.'

'You know I don't believe in those kinds of things. I mean, come on, man, it's weird. In all honesty it sounds like some cult to me.'

'Oh no, no Christie, don't be like that. This is a community of free people! It's absolutely beautiful!'

'Do they even have a name or something?'

'Of course we do! We are called *The People's Temple*.'

'*We*??? What do you mean *we*? Already joined them?'

'Yes, I did. And so will you. Mother told me to keep an eye on you before she died and that is what I will do. '

Our mother was always quite an optimist. She got into a bad marriage at a very young age, our father was abusive and manipulative. So, she sent us to America when Robert turned 18. She stayed with our father. We never heard from her again.

'Jesus, I hate you so much. I will go to one meeting and then decide if I want to join.'

* * * * * * * * *

So we went, John introduced himself to me. He said that he had heard many great things about me from my brother. John also said that he would help me get my life back on the line. Now, I'm not a liar, so I have to admit that the people there were nice. The service was the most welcome place I have ever felt. There were a lot of people like me, *druggies* (well, they don't do drugs anymore). John turned their lives upside down. He helped them. Just like he told me.

I was always quite a sucker for nice and welcoming people. Robert never let us get close to anyone because he was paranoid that they might screw us over. Like come on, we had a bad childhood, so I felt seen and heard for one of the first times in my life. It felt amazing. I loved it. But I just couldn't let myself fall for it all. I have to stand my ground.

Another month passed. I have since joined the church, and we are now on the bus on our way to the 'promised land'.

* * * * * * * * *

It's been a week here, things are great! I have started getting sober. It's not like there are any drugs here. There is not even alcohol, just cigarettes, but I hate smoking, it smells bad. The air feels lighter here. We have all agreed on the jobs that we will be doing. Some are working with the land; others feed animals. John is the only one who is allowed to even look at the taxes, which is a bit weird, but nobody really complains. Because who would want to do that anyway? Everyone is nice here, I can see myself getting used to this.

'Christie! Come over here!'

'What's up, Rob?'

'What did I tell you, huh? And once again I am proven right, you love it here.'

'Well, love is a tough word. But yeah, not going to lie, it is a lot better than imagined.'

'I also hear some chatter that more people are arriving sometime over the week.'

John always makes a big deal when new people join. There will probably be a feast and a new speech. We will sing vibrant songs, wear our best clothes, and be our most welcoming. It truly is a big thing.'

* * * * * * * * *

People came; John put on his fancy white cloak. He will now begin his speech.

'If you see me as your friend, I will be your friend. If you see me as your father, I will be your father. If you see me as your God, I will be your God.'

As I look around, I can't help but notice a lot of disapproving stares, and some of them leaving. Did John say something wrong? Did I miss something? What happened? I must have missed something, because I didn't get it.

'Robert, why are those folks not staying?'

'They just don't understand the message that John is preaching. Don't worry, they just aren't smart enough.'

Right, obviously. Why would I ever doubt the pastor. He is just trying to get us on the right track after all. Who in their right mind would be able to fake that amount of kindness? What kind of psychopath would they have to be?

* * * * * * * * *

Two months have passed, and more people have joined. John seems stressed; he said that it was nothing after we asked him. But it's like he is speaking in riddles every time he speaks.

The services have become a bit bleak and soulless. There are no more trips out of town to get more recruits. Our televisions were taken away.

'It truly is for your own good, the news is spreading bad information. They will only brainwash you', that is what the pastor said after we asked him about it.

Usually, we were able to go out of town on our own, now we can't even ask. He will just yell and get angry.

'Christie! I have someone here who would like to meet you. Her name is Angela! She came here a few months ago. Angela said that she still feels like an outsider so show her around a bit. Can I trust you on that?'

'Of course, pastor, I will do it right away!'

Who can stay in one place for so long and still feel out of place?

'Hi, Angela! I'm Christie, what brings you to our church?'

'No need for formalities, I despise all of you freaks here. I got here to save my mother from this god-awful cult that he runs but I can't get her to leave.'

'Oh! Well then, I can't help you. But don't worry, you will realize that we are not a cult. This is the church of free people! I used to think just like you, then I started to realize what a great person John is.'

'For the love of God! This is so frustrating. You looked a bit less dumb than the rest of these nimrods. Don't you get it!? He is *not* letting any of you leave, you will be kept here until the p-'

'No, you are lying straight through your teeth. We can take our leave when we want to, but why would we? It's great here. You know, I do not like you as a person, so you will get no help from me. Goodbye.'

She was the difficult one, not understanding the blessing. Why was she talking about leaving? We can always leave; it's not like he would lock us up or something.

I still can't help but wonder sometimes if this really is the right place to be in. Am I here because I want to be here, or because I don't have a choice?

* * * * * * * * *

'Our Lord will come and take us with him in a week. We must cleanse ourselves of all the impurities that our lives have brought us. He will not take those who are unclean. So, in the following week rid yourselves of sin. There will be a group confession day. Do not worry, my children, the day of the apocalypse is coming, and it will be beautiful and holy!'

I cannot believe it, finally, some good news!

This whole week was truly wonderful, it was like when it all first started. Group prayers, dinners, hangouts. Even John joined us in all these activities. The Lord will

come for us tomorrow, I am a bit scared, but I am sure that it will all be good in the end.

'Robert! Are you excited about tomorrow?'

'Eh, Christie I won't lie to you, but I've been speaking to that new girl. And she got me worried. What if all she's saying is true? I mean, it does sound too good to be true.'

'What is with you? You were the one that got us here. Why are you the one doubting it?'

'Don't know, it feels a bit weird. I'm sorry.'

* * * * * * * * *

Tomorrow has finally come. John started speaking. It all feels a bit eerie. Is this the right thing to do?

'So, you be kind to children, and be kind to seniors, and take the potion like they used to take in Ancient Greece, and step over quietly; because we are not committing suicide, it's a revolutionary act.'

HUH? Wait, what? We are killing ourselves? What kind of sick game is this? Has this been the plan all along? But it's John, he knows the best, right? He said this would be our salvation, that this would take us to the Lord. Still, I can hear Robert's nervous whisper.

'Christie, please don't do it. Please, if you have ever loved me. If you ever loved mother, have some respect for her final wish. I know I got us into this, I can get us out! Please, listen to me, you don't have a reason for it. The Lord isn't coming. It's the police who are coming. They will help us. We will live a better life out of here. I promise. Just please don't drink it.'

'No, Robert. There is nothing better. I know that this will just kill me, but I can't go back to being homeless and an addict. This was our chance out, you did protect me, I don't blame you. But I don't believe you when you talk about a better life.'

So, we all raise our hands with cups in them. And we say the final prayer.

šifra: w35iSk18ds
mentor: Andrejina Jugovac
institution: Pazinski kolegij – klasična gimnazija Pazin s pravom javnosit
autor: Antonio Baćac

THE HEIGHTS OF DESPAIR

When pain is unbearable, it destroys us; when it does not, it is bearable.
Marcus Aurelius

A calm and soothing voice filled the hall full of students. A skinny yet muscular student stood at the centre of the lecture theatre, behind him was the title slide of his presentation, a simplistic black background with letters in dark gold colour which spelled out 'The heights of despair'.

"Hello, everyone. As you all already know, I'm Ryan Beaumont, and today, I will be telling you about my view on pain and suffering. Since one cannot simply give a title to pain and suffering, for those two cannot simply be described in a title, I've decided to name my presentation 'The Heights of Despair'."

Ryan glanced around the room, the crowd of students staring at him, watching his every move. Well, most of them were. There were, of course, those who were on their phones or drawing on the faces of the papers they found sitting on their desks. They were his papers, he thought to himself. It was his papers they were sketching on instead of reading through them.

It was a selfish thought that ran through his mind. He was not wiser than them when it came to listening to others' lectures, but this was his lecture. It was his time to shine, and these imbeciles were here wasting his time. As his gaze continued running through the crowd, he met eyes with a student staring at him, his body ever so slightly bent forward from excitement, his eyes locked on Ryan. However, Ryan couldn't figure out if the student was excited about the theme or if he was excitedly awaiting the end. But Ryan cared little as long as the student was listening. His eyes moved on from the student, soon locking onto a girl who was looking at Ryan longingly, with a sort of smirk lingering on her face. He was well acquainted with her. It was his Jessica.

She was his colleague and lover, or at least that's what he called her. If anyone were to ask her, she'd probably say Ryan was the love of her life. But to him, love was a for-

eign concept. He wasn't sure what it felt like or even if he felt it, and it wasn't the only emotion he couldn't begin to comprehend, there were many, *too many*. It was visible from her starry eyes she was fantasizing about him rather than listening to him. But he'd, of course, forgive her.

He reached for his water bottle and took a sip from it before locking eyes with Mr. McGregor, who was visibly worried about Ryan and, judging by his tense writing in his notebook, was planning to report it. Still, Ryan cared little about that, but one thing he cared much about was Jessica, she was *his*. The problem was Mr. McGregor had been exchanging flirty looks with her, and the worst part was, he wasn't the only one. The student sitting beside her had his eyes set on *Ryan's* Jessica for quite some time. And her casual flirting, which was supposedly a joke, surely wasn't helping. Ryan thought about it for a moment, a disturbing thought blitzed through his mind, *his* Jessica with this slimy douchebag, he felt uneasy about it. Even going as far as thinking about hurting him.

"When we cut ourselves on paper, we may be reminded of the people who have had their limbs severed by giant machinery. When we have little money, we feel closer to individuals who have no money. If we erode into a depressive state, there is an idiotic notion that we should be comforted by having a roof over our heads or that we were not born starving in some distant corner of the third world. These arguments, of course, do very little good. Suffering happens internally. It may be affected by some sorts of external forces or events, but the pain is internal."

He paused, a certain someone distracted him, it was a student sitting in the back of the lecture hall. He was passing a paper to some girl next to him, she opened the paper, and giggled a little before writing something on the back and passing it back to the boy. *Perhaps they were laughing at him? Making fun of him even?* It was most likely just them passing the time with cliché pickup lines and poor attempts at flirty remarks about each other's looks. But not in Ryan's eyes…

"If you think about it, when we see someone who is sad, we do not feel happiness, we rather feel empathy. In some way, the sadness of the world becomes the sadness of the individual. That says a lot about our relationship with pain since there is no true zero on the graph of pain. We feel pain, even if we are saddened by one animal eating another smaller, cuter one. As humans, we could never live in a utopia because no matter how perfect things might be, we would always feel pain. Even when we are most satisfied and content, we still feel sorrow over this or that. To treat pain and suffering as some objective, measurable quality of life is surely a foolish pursuit. Words do not exist to match the pain, so we suffer even more in solitude. There, in

solitude, we know our pain most accurately, but it is precisely where our pain strikes the hottest and most intensely. There, even joy reminds us not to feel joyous but of what we cannot find. And with that, I would like to close my presentation, for I think I've made it clear that pain and suffering are not objective matters therefore I cannot and will not further categorize pain and suffering, nor will I comment on depression as it is the product of trauma, pain and suffering, and is a private matter for all who are unfortunate enough to suffer from it. But I would like to point you to a quote we hear often, but I find it rather idiotic. *What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.* Is a cat struck by a car, limping for the rest of its life and being scared of the car sounds really stronger than before?"

And with that, he closed his presentation. His classmates applauded him before getting their stuff and leaving class. As Ryan gathered his stuff, Mr. McGregor approached him. He was still visibly disturbed by all that he heard. Ryan could see his hands subtly shaking, his hands gripping his notebook tightly like he was holding Pandora's box, which was trying with inhuman might to burst open and let all of the world's evils out.

"Ryan… this was… well, the presentation was perfect. By all means, both the technical part and your presentation were on point. But I must ask you, the way you speak of pain, I can tell you're speaking from experience, so I'd like you to…"

"As I've said, professor, pain is an unavoidable part of life." Ryan cut the professor's talk short, hearing Mr. McGregor's voice tremble as he spoke.

"Of course, but… but at this age… it's not quite that usual. I was only going to suggest…"

"No need, professor. I appreciate the thought, though."

He lifted his backpack onto his back before looking at the professor. He was taller than Mr. McGregor and, therefore, looked down at him, making the situation look ever so slightly scarier from Mr. McGregor's point of view.

"Alright, but you do know I have to report my suspicions?" The professor's grip on his notebook loosened, he had seemingly calmed down, at least to some extent, and was seemingly collecting himself.

Ryan sighed and shifted his weight onto his back foot, turning around and walking out of the class. "Quite frankly, *I don't give a damn*."

Later that day, Ryan lay on his couch at home, staring blankly at the TV, thinking about *suffering, pain and death***.** Lying on top of him was Jessica, caressing his chest gently and playfully before looking up at him.

"What are you thinking about, babe?"

His eyes jumped from the TV to the open door that led to his bedroom. Through the door he glanced over at his safe, in it he kept a sort of emergency fund, his licensed firearm and his passport. After a split-second look at the safe his eyes locked onto her eyes. He thought for a moment, opening his mouth as if he was about to tell her all his thoughts, but instead, he only let out a soft sigh before a single word barely crawled out of his mouth.

"Nothing…"

"Come on… tell me… you know I'm here for you. Especially if it's about the death of your parents."

She spoke with high hopes, thinking he'd finally open up to her. She had been trying to get him to talk ever since they had met, and he was always so smooth at avoiding conversations about feelings or the horrible burglary gone wrong in which his parents were ruthlessly murdered. She had never even heard him tell her he loved her, and she was getting fed up with it, but she never said anything, writing it off as his childhood trauma.

"No. It's nothing, don't worry about it."

Jessica raised her head, annoyed at his response. She looked at him, almost tearing up, but not from sadness but rather from a mixed feeling of anger and sorrow. She stood up, trying to fight off his silence, desperate to make him speak about his thoughts and feelings.

"I'm sick of this! You never tell me anything! I'm done with this! You've never once in these four years told me that you loved me! You're a real piece of work, you know that, right? I'm done with you! This is over, I'm leaving!"

Ryan observed Jessica as she turned her back on him and started walking away. He was slightly shocked as he spoke, a mix of confusion and surprise was clearly heard in his voice.

"W-what? You can't leave, you're mine! You can't possibly leave… what… why are you screaming about! Just calm down and come back…"

She stopped in her tracks, looking back at him, the emotions in her eyes stirring and mixed into rage as she threw her bag at him.

"You think this is a joke! YOU THINK I'M JOKING! I'm.leaving.you. You find yourself another girl to manipulate with! I'm done with you."

She turned around once again and started walking away before he grabbed her arm.

"Stop!"

"No! Let go of me!"

He grabbed her by the arms, pulling her closer to him before pushing her away towards the couch.

"Sit down and shut up! You're *mine and only mine.*"

His eyes lit up with rage, he approached her and grasped her by the neck, lifting her as she struggled to fight him off.

"Let go of me, you sick bastard!"

"Shut up!"

As the two struggled to fight each other, she scratched his hand, and he let go of her, but she fell onto the glass table, which broke. A piece of glass flew upwards, cutting his arm, blood pouring out of the wound, the warm red liquid running down his arm before slowly dripping onto the carpet. Jessica's lifeless body was lying there in a pool of blood and broken shards of glass. Her eyes were still wide open and her hands were gripping her bleeding neck, but there was no helping her.

As he watched her body in shock, he looked down upon his bloody hands, his vision slowly blurring and going black. He'd wake up confused hours later, he sprung up from his bed, looking at his hands while panting and sweating, they were clean as if no blood had ever been spilled on them, he sighed heavily before mumbling to himself.

"It must've been a nightmare…"

Ryan sighed before leaving his bed and turning on the light in the room. His knees felt weak while gazing around the room, still slightly confused. He stepped forward. Every step he took kept getting harder and harder as if his feet were trodding on a collapsing land. Every step he made took a toll on the headache he got as soon as he woke up, which kept getting worse and worse. At one point, it got so bad he stumbled, barely keeping himself on his feet. He put his hand on the doorknob, ever so slightly regaining balance before the door swung open, and he fell forwards, falling to his knees and into a pool of blood face first. He pushed himself up using his hands, his face and clothes soaked in blood. He tried wiping the blood off of his face using his hands but only smeared more onto his face. His vision got slightly red as he looked down at his hands, his headache only worsening. He took his eyes off of his hands and looked around the room, but there was no body to be seen, only blood, lots of blood.

Ryan slowly got up, slipping and falling a few more times before he stumbled around the house, going over to the toilet sink to wash himself. As he washed the blood off, he spoke to himself, looking into the mirror. He was too occupied with the blood on his hands to notice the body which he brought to the bathtub while he was *blinded* by rage, hoping to hide the evidence at least to some extent.

"I've done nothing wrong… there's no body… and even if there was, no one will know… I've done nothing wrong, she is *mine* and *only mine*. And she's not dead! If there's no body she isn't dead, but even if she was dead… she was *mine*, and *only mine*. I did nothing wrong…"

As time went on, his words became less and less comprehensible and more of them started sounding like madman's ramblings. After washing himself up, he stumbled over to his terrace, gripping the railing tightly as he looked over at the neighbouring building. He locked eyes on the window across.

What if they saw something? He thought to himself before hitting the railing with his hand as rage took him over.

The street beneath was quiet, as if even the birds knew what he did and decided not to sing their pieces that day. As he looked down, he noticed there was no one outside. No one was going to work, no children playing, no cars driving around, *no movement at all.*

Maybe the police are here, and they've blocked off the street… perhaps they're coming to get me? The thought rushed through his mind, and he quickly retreated into his apartment, closing the balcony doors behind him. He ran through his apartment towards the door, pressing his whole body against it to look through the peephole, only to find an empty hallway. *They must have evacuated the building, it's too quiet… I'm screwed.* He backed away frantically from the door, knocking over a cabinet and almost falling over, leaving a mess in his entryway. He gathered himself and got up, anxiously making his way to his bedroom, opening the wall safe and taking his gun from it, tucking it in his pants beneath his shirt before making his way to the door, taking a deep breath before unlocking it and opening it.

He was met by a rush of fresh air, which quickly exchanged the stale air that had, by this point, overtaken the apartment. He slowly stepped out of his apartment and looked around, the hallway was still empty. Deciding he had nothing else left to do, he closed the door behind him and made his way out of the building. He came to the street and started walking as far away from his building as possible, unsure where he was going or what he would do. As he walked, he felt his legs cramp, his stomach turn inside out and his muscles tense up as he noticed a police car in the distance. He continued walking, hoping to avoid any contact with them, but to no avail, in his adrenaline-driven outing, he had completely forgotten to change his shirt, which was covered in blood. The police officer noticed the tense man in a blood-covered shirt and decided to investigate. He got out of his car and approached Ryan.

"Sorry, sir, are you alright? Can I get you some assistance?"

But Ryan heard no words, rather he hard a murder accusation, his paranoia took over and he reached for his firearm and aimed it at the officer.

"Leave me alone! I did nothing wrong!"

The officer sprung into cover, getting his own firearm out and calling for backup, describing Ryan as an unstable individual who was armed and dangerous.

"It's alright sir, I'm not a threat to you. We can get to the bottom of whatever you're so stressed about, just put that gun down."

"No! I did not do it! I did nothing wrong! Leave me alone!"

"You know I can't do that, sir. Just calm down, tell me what happened, and we will sort it out."

The officer prompted himself up on his cover, aiming his gun towards Ryan if he tried anything stupid.

"I can't. I'm - I'm so sorry, but I did nothing wrong, she was mine… and mine only."

Three gunshots ruptured the quiet of the street, followed by police sirens and ambulances which sped through the streets of the busy city. The residents of the next block were over too busy with their phones, lives and problems to even notice the gunshots or the sirens. They continued with their lives, completely unaware of the tragedy that had happened not even a mile away.

šifra: Shetland
mentor: Martina Mavrek
institution: Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec
autor: Sara Novak

THE LIBERATION OF PANCAKE LAND

Not so long ago and not so far away lived a young man named Ajax. Ajax had finally saved up enough money to buy his own apartment. After living with his parents and struggling with college debt, you could only guess how joyful this moment made him feel. When the deal of his ownership was finalised, he was exhilarated. He packed up and hit the road on his way to his new home. He was grateful to his parents, but it was thrilling to finally be independent.

Ajax was unpacking in his new home and as he reached into the kitchen cupboard to put away his supplies, he found a key. It was old and rusty, but it didn't look like it could be used around the house. Ajax didn't think much of it—he shoved the key in his pocket and carried on putting away his supplies.

After he got settled, Ajax decided to test where the key went, just to be certain he didn't miss anything. He tried all the doors in the house, every cabinet, and every lock, but nothing seemed to work. He checked every corner of the house to make sure he wasn't missing any entrances. Eventually, he gave up but left the key on his nightstand just in case.

Weeks passed, life was good. He got used to his new routines so one evening as he was getting ready to go out, he reached into his closet and his hand missed the shirt he was reaching for. It landed on the back of his closet. Underneath his fingers he felt an opening – like a door!

Ajax's heart started racing and his imagination was running wild with questions like "Why do I have a door in my closet?" or "Where does the door lead to?" He didn't know the answer to any of them. But there was one potential clue – the old rusty key. Ajax rushed to get the key and swiftly placed it in the keyhole. As his fingers gripped the key to rotate it, he felt a rush of excitement. To his surprise, it turned in its keyhole unlocking the hidden closet door.

He was hesitant at first, but it didn't take him long to open the door. It felt heavy. Surprisingly heavy for its tiny proportions and Ajax could barely fit through. He was guessing that the door hadn't been used in decades maybe even centuries. Ajax

crawled through the opening driven by his adventurous spirit and curiosity. He kept crawling in the confined space on the other side for what felt like an eternity. His back felt sore, and his knees went numb from crawling. But then… he saw light. Light at the end of a tunnel, literally. The adrenaline rush hit him as he imagined what was waiting at the other end. In the blink of an eye, Ajax crawled out and entered a whole other world.

Around him, there was an unusually textured world. It looked like the normal world we lived in, but everything was yellowish and brownish. As Ajax looked closer his eyes widened when he realised that it was crepes - his favourite food. He spun around on his feet just to find out that everything surrounding him was made out of pancakes. Trees were pancakes, the ground was pancakes and even flowers were made of small fragments of pancakes. Everything around him smelled like freshly baked pancakes. He couldn't believe his eyes. "I must be dreaming", he thought, "I have to wake up". His efforts of pinching himself awake failed, but now he knew that this was really happening. It was him, an average city guy in the world made entirely out of pancakes. And all it took him to get there were just a few minutes of painful crawling, which was, in his opinion, completely worth it. After Ajax managed to calm the excitement this world brought him, he decided to keep walking around in this dreamy world.

There was no end to his happiness. He found a river that wasn't its usual colour. It was brown and dense. Was that a chocolate river? He kneeled down to dip his finger in the river and taste the water. Or more precisely, chocolate, because his hypothesis was confirmed. He could just scream with joy at this very moment.

Out of nowhere, he heard footsteps. But they didn't sound like they were footsteps of a wild beast getting ready to eat him for breakfast. They sounded like they belonged to a human. He quickly stood up and glanced around with a hint of caution in his eyes. A short creature appeared out of the bushes before him. He was around 140 centimetres tall, which was tiny compared to Ajax's 180 centimetres. He had dark brown hair and a butler-like outfit. The short man spoke in a squeaky tone: "What are you doing in my hunting spot? And how are you so tall?" The short creature kept asking questions, but Ajax cut him off: "I'm not from this world, I found a secret door in my closet that led me here and I'm sorry if I'm disturbing your peace."

The short creature blinked a few times with visible confusion on his face. Then he spoke hesitantly: "Hi… I'm Arthur. Nice to meet you." Ajax and Arthur exchanged pleasantries and went fishing, or as Arthur called it 'hunting' together. They settled down next to a chocolate river and Arthur threw a giant fishing net into it. Then

they started talking. "Can fish actually survive in this… uh… chocolate conditions?", asked Ajax. Arthur looked up at him with amazement in his eyes: "Fish? What is that? In Pancake Land we go hunting for marshmallows."

Something pulled on the fishing net as Arthur spoke up with excitement: "Looks like we've got a catch! My family is safe for now!" Arthur skillfully pulled the fishing net out of the river like he'd done it a million times already. Ajax was confused. "What do you mean by 'safe for now'?," he spoke carefully.

"You aren't aware of the dangers of our world…", Arthur let out a sigh, "Well… this world is threatened by a greedy dragon called Larry. Larry demands that all citizens bring him a live animal once a month. Tomorrow is my sister's turn." Arthur made a dramatic pause, but then looked down with sorrow in his eyes: "She broke her arm last week in a hunting accident and can't hunt. But if she doesn't bring Larry his food…" Arthur shivered. He didn't need to finish that sentence for Ajax to understand what would happen to the inhabitants of this strange land if she doesn't do it.

This just wasn't right. These people deserve to live a peaceful life without some dragon threatening them. Ajax couldn't stand this injustice. Ever since he was a kid, he had a strong sense of justice. He'd always stood up for those who needed it, and he wasn't planning on stopping that now. He didn't know these people, yet something within him was telling him to intervene, to help, to serve justice.

Instantly Ajax said something he wasn't even sure he could fulfil but he was willing to give it a shot no matter what it took: "We need to stop him. We need to stop Larry." Arthur looked up at him in shock. Then Arthur yelled out: "Are you out of your mind?! Nobody managed to defeat Larry in decades!" Ajax decisively declared: "At least I have to try."

Arthur and Ajax agreed to meet at the same spot tomorrow before Arthur's sister's offering to the dragon. Ajax went home that day as determined as he'd ever been to accomplish this crazy deal of his. That day Ajax got two swords that would aid him and his new friend Arthur in a fierce battle against Larry.

The day Ajax was awaiting arrived. He crawled the secret tunnel once again with two swords attached to his belt. One sword was smaller than the other. That one was for Arthur. Ajax also brought a shield with him that he was carrying on his back. Ajax trained sword fighting in the past, but he knew this would be different. It was a real battle. Ajax was aware of the danger he was placing himself in, yet he was still ready to die a hero who tried rather than live in regret of not doing anything about the situation the citizens of Pancake Land were in.

Ajax crawled out of the tunnel and paced to the riverside. Arthur was already waiting there. He was sitting on a rock, wiggling his feet in anticipation. When Arthur spotted Ajax he jumped up to greet him. Ajax explained some basic knowledge needed for wielding a sword to Arthur before giving him the sword. The two of them then sprinted to meet up with Arthur's sister. While they were running Arthur said with emotion: "I'm very grateful for your kindness. No matter what happens today, the people of Pancake Land will always remember you as a hero." Ajax's determination only rose because of Arthur's words.

The two of them appeared before Larry's lair. It was an enormous gothic castle with a huge entrance fit for Larry to be able to go in and out. To Ajax's surprise, the castle wasn't made from pancakes. Instead, it was built from usual building material painted in black. Everything around the castle just felt wrong. It smelled like spoiled milk and rotten eggs. It was eery and menacing and sent shivers down his spine, but he stayed brave and marched on.

Ajax and Arthur managed to catch up with Arthur's sister. She had long dark hair almost reaching to her feet and she wore a dress typical of commoners in the 1800s. She had one arm in plaster hanging in a triangular scarf. In her other hand she was leading a frightened animal for Larry. Ajax and Arthur sneaked up behind her and followed her quietly into the palace.

The door shut behind them and they knew now there was no turning back. They marched on into a great hallway where, at the very end, an enormous dragon was sitting. He had a head that was the size of a human and wings spreading wide across the hall. His eyes were glowing red, and his scales were black with a bluish highlight. Larry was blowing smoke out of his nostrils and was clearly mad. Maybe he was always mad.

The brave duo stepped up between Arthur's sister and Larry. Ajax and Arthur gripped their swords, determination glowing in their eyes as they sprinted forward to attack the dragon. They both struck the dragon forcefully. Larry roared unleashing a hurricane of flames onto them. Ajax got sideways, then tucked and rolled to the side and threw a shield to Arthur. Arthur caught the shield and held it up, diverting the fire away using brute force. It was unbearably hot around them, but they continued moving forward. Ajax managed to climb Larry's back while Arthur was distracting the target. As Ajax slashed his sword through the dragon's scales, the dragon hissed and took off the ground tearing his way through the roof with Ajax still on his back. Ajax was holding on for dear life, but he wasn't giving up now. Larry was so high up that the fall would have been deadly. Ajax managed to climb up Larry's back enough to reach his wing and slash it with his sword. Larry lost control of his flying as he stumbled on the ground.

Arthur rushed forward from the ground to slash the beast's other wing disabling it to fly away. As Ajax was still on the dragon, he climbed up to Larry's head. With one swift slash of his sword, Larry's head tumbled down to the ground.

Ajax and Arthur sighed with relief before cheering and hurrahing for their victory. Arthur's sister ran to them and hugged them both glad that they were uninjured. She introduced herself to Ajax as Victoria. After some happy chatting, Victoria suddenly stopped and exclaimed: "The door! It's going to close now the dragon is dead! The space through which you entered our world only existed because of Larry. Now that he's dead, your only way home will disappear." Ajax and Arthur exchanged a look of panic. "Let's go! You need to run!"

Arthur and Victoria ran with Ajax to the entrance where he came from. There was no time for a hug. Just as Ajax was about to leave Arthur said with a mix of sadness and joy: "We're so glad we've met you. We shall never forget you." Ajax smiled at them wishing he could share the moment a while longer. Officially, his adventure was over, and it was time to head home for good.

When Ajax got out of the secret tunnel and closed the door, it disappeared and the key that was in the keyhole dropped to the floor with a quiet thud. Ajax picked it up and shoved it in his pocket, just like he did when he first found it.

Years passed and Ajax's memories got blurry, but he always kept the rusty key. As for the citizens of Pancake Land, they designed a statue in Ajax's honour with his figure on a pile of pancakes, one foot on the dragon's head and his sword raised triumphantly. Arthur and Victoria never forgot what now seemed like a fleeting moment that changed their lives forever.

šifra: SABATON
mentor: Valentina Vrabac
institution: Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Noa Petar Vlašica

THE LIBRARY

Somewhere hidden deep within the void lies a library unlike any other. It looked like a simple small-town library made of unique stone walls and wooden pillars, but the inside space was much more mysterious than the outside made it out to be. It seemed almost infinite, rows of shelves stretching out as far as the eye can see. The library had sections, each one to represent a part in humanity's past, present and future. Each shelf was filled with books made of varied materials, with many distinct colours, but each one was emitting a faint golden glow.

These books were not normal books, they were representations of human souls, and in the books were written their life stories, their accomplishments, failures, goals, and dreams. What every book had in common was that they all ended with big words "THE END." which meant that the soul had passed away and made its way into the library.

Between these bookshelves walked an ominous figure. It was clad in a thick and dark cloak that looked like it was made from the very fabric of the universe as countless crimson, violet and deep blue stars moved around the surface of the fabric. The figure also wore a white mask decorated with purple markings. In its hand was a stick made of an unknown black material that changed shape every now and then. It had no eyes, ears, or mouth, yet it could see, hear, and speak without much difficulty. As it spoke to itself, its voice filled the whole library, it was deep and rough like the merciless ocean, yet it seemed tired, almost lonely.

The figure guarded the library of souls for it was its protector; and in a way the library was an extension of it. This figure could not be referred to by "he" or "she", it was simply "when", for the figure was death itself. It walked around the barren halls when it noticed a single book on a tall shelf that seemed to be different than others. The book was simple, with a cover made of leather and big black words painted on the front: "FREDDY LAWSON". The book was quite thin, which meant he had died relatively young, and it was missing the characteristic golden glow. Death was speechless.

"H-how can this be??" It took a long pause as it franticly flipped through the fragile pages of the book.

"Ah, so this was it." it finally realized "It is missing the most important part, the end!"- he took a long pause - "But this would mean that this poor soul is still wandering the world of the living. I must retrieve it before more of these deviants appear on my shelves!" - it said angrily.

And with that, Death made its way to the door of the library. Despite the view from the windows being that of an endless void, after it opened the fancy, carved, wooden door, there appeared something vastly different.

In front of its mask now was a whole field of golden wheat that seemed to shine under the Sun's bright light. The sky was the colour of a warm sea and without a single cloud. Birds chirped in the background and there was a bustling city on the horizon. After an eternity in the library, it took a moment to enjoy life and everything around it. After a few short, but worthwhile moments, its ears were pierced by a loud shriek, it sounded like a child's cry but much sadder. After looking around, it noticed that no humans seemed bothered by the sound, so it figured it had been made by the spirit. After walking for some time in the general direction of the piercing sound, it finally entered the busy city of Colburn.

The cobblestone streets of Colburn were filled with people, both young and old, they were all laughing and having fun. There was a festival held in the town, so it was able to witness the best of humanity. All along the streets were different kinds of merchants, selling both nourishments and pieces of art. Soon it arrived at the main square, there it saw a magnificent statue of a person, that seemed to be a king of sorts, holding his hand up high for all to see. Beneath the statue he saw bards performing songs and doing little tricks for money. It was for the first time genuinely happy, but it knew that it needed to get the lost soul back to the library and that it could not linger too long in this magical world of the living.

As it got closer to the soul its cries got louder and the happy cheers of the people in the city got quieter. The sunny day soon turned to night. It was cold and windy, as the fast wind passed through the branches of tall trees, it made a soft but frightening sound that made even its hair stand on end. Death suddenly found itself in front of a large mansion on a hill overlooking endless farms.

The mansion itself was quite magnificent, it was clear it was meant to resemble Greek temples because it had two large, white stone pillars right in front of the entrance. From the inside of the glorious mansion came a horrific screech, as Death made its way into the mansion, he noticed that it was full of riches, a grand chan-

delier made of cascading crystals and a long wooden table with only one chair. At the end of the room was a massive inviting hearth, it was made of polished marble, with a rectangular shape that opened into an arch space on top. The chimney was made of red bricks and beside the fireplace lied a few metal tools that have never seen the light of a fire. The inside stones were in perfect condition and the bottom of the fireplace was without any char or ash. The mansion did not contain any paintings, sculptures, drawings or even mosaic, it was cold and soulless, it lacked the core aspects that differentiated a house from a home. After wandering the mansion for what felt like hours, it finally stumbled across the spirit.

It was almost transparent, with a slimly green colour, it was dressed in noble clothes that seemed to shimmer with the same ghostly green as its main form. It looked like a man in his thirties, in front of it was a giant pile of gold that could feed a family of four for at least 20 years. The ghost was crying frantically, it seemed like it was trying to grab the pile of gold, but his intangible hands passed through it every time he tried. Its failure to grab the gold only made it more enraged.

"Oh, you poor child, what happened to you?" - said death while trying to calm it.

Only then the ghost perceived the ominous figure besides it, it was clear to it that it was Death, it has finally come for it.

"What happened to me?!? I DIED, that is what happened, AND IT IS ALL YOUR FAULT!"- said the ghost angrily.

"Child, you have no one to blame but yourself. It was your own greed that brought you down."- Death said strictly.

"You died because you were too consumed by greed, so much that it got to a point where you did not eat. Child, tell me why did it come to this."- Death placed its cold arm on the ghost's shoulder.

"It seems I have nothing to hide"- ghost said as it calmed down.

"You see, my father was much richer compared to the average peasant, from time to time he was kind and caring but more commonly he was very strict, it got to a point where if I had misbehaved, I would have been locked in the cellar for days on end" - he said depressingly.

" I didn't have any friends, not that I couldn't get any, I just didn't want them. I had a simple reason for that, I did not want to share my money" - he said proudly.

"When my father died, I was left with a gargantuan amount of money, but I was too scared to disappoint my deceased father with how I spent my money that I didn't even try and just horded my gold like a dragon."

and with that it finished its explanation to Death. While the ghost was telling his story Death was closely reading the ghost's book.

"Freddy let me show you something."

the ghost was taken by a surprise when it said his name. Suddenly its black cane transformed into a large black key. Death gently took the key and inserted it into the air in front of him. In a matter of seconds before them appeared a semi-large black door, it opened by itself and revealed a humble village. It was a sunny morning, the birds were singing, kids were playing, fathers were working in the fields or workshops, mothers were preparing lunch, it all seemed perfect.

"Why did you take me here? Was it to humiliate me because I died alone and miserable?" asked Freddy on the verge of tears.

"No." it answered firmly - "Take a closer look on their homes and tools."

It took several seconds of deep concentration before he finally realized that their homes were on the brink of collapsing, their straw roofs were full of holes, most of the windows were broken or cracked, some houses down the street had been burned down, tools they used were old, gifts passed down from father to son, yet that did not stop the people in the village from enjoying every precious moment. It was so different from what Freddy was expecting, all his life he has been taught that money was the source of happiness, power, and that if he ever loses his money, he would be no different from filthy rats on the street, but the people here shattered his entire world view, they had nothing to their name, no gold, silver or copper, they barley had a roof over their heads, yet they were happy.

"Why.... WHYY??" Freddy asked desperately. "Why can they live so happily when they do not even have enough to buy bread every day?? Why was only I stripped of the grace of happiness?!" Freddy was now on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

Out of nowhere a hand appeared on his shoulder, it was cold but reassuring. In his overwhelming emotional outburst, he forgot that it was there watching him.

"Calm your demeanour Freddy"- it waited for a few seconds so he could relax.

" People in this humble village are happy because, unlike you and me, they have other people. They survive countless hardships every day but still go home with a smile on their face because they know they have someone waiting for them. My friend, the source of happiness is different for every person, but wealth is not one of them, it is simply a tool used to buy things that bring you or your loved one's happiness. You spent all your days isolated and alone, and you died while hoarding a pile of gold."

After hearing those words Freddy started crying again, his tears were of genuine sadness and sorrow. It calmly confronted him for what felt like an eternity. He finally changed; he threw away his corrupted world view and strengthened his fragile ego, therefore it decided he was ready to pass on to the library.

"Freddy, I judge you are ready to pass on, please follow me."

A dark key materialized in his hand again, but something interrupted him - "No. I am not ready yet."

It was baffled and angry, it started to grow larger the more it was irritated, it was now standing 2 meters taller than Freddy.

"H-hey, lord Death I did not mean to enrage or defy you."

Due to overwhelming fear, his usual snobby attitude changed into a one full of respect.

"A-all I ask is that you in all your greatness allow me one final w-wish."

He was scared, he barely muttered these few words, he would be running for his life if he hadn't already been dead.

"Fine."

Death calmed down and returned to its normal form.

"What is it that you require of me? I can grant you any wish as long as it is reasonable and within my powers."

His nerves calmed down, he could speak normally again, but he was still scared to enrage a being that is capable of burning his very soul. Freddy took a deep breath and asked:

"Would it be reasonable to ask if I could talk to my father for one last time before I pass on for good?"

"Interesting... I guess it is not outside of the realm of possibility."

Death took a moment to think about this wish and how to make it into reality.

"Very well my dear Freddy. Let's go meet your father!"

Freddy did not like the overly happy tone that it spoke about his father with. It materialized the black key into its hand once again, it was a spectacle that amazed him no matter how many times he saw it. After the black door opened again, they entered the grand library. Death looked like it was finally at peace. It started walking quickly, it was almost too fast for Freddy to keep up. After a few minutes of walking, it finally stopped, he was looking at a special book, its covers were made of wood and the corners were plated in gold. Freddy only saw the second word of the title, but he recognized it immediately, it said "Lawson", it was his surname. He was a little confused but then it said a few words in an ancient language long forgotten and then, standing before Freddy was his father.

"Father... I am sorry. I lost all my money; I died without a spouse or children. I know I disappointed you b-but I cannot spend my whole afterlife suffering because of your enormous expectations"

Freddy's father was quiet; he was admiring his all grown up son that finally stood up for himself

"My son. You never disappointed me, I know I was strict at times, but it was all for your own good. You are my beloved son, even if you spent all the money in the world I would still love and adore you." His father said with tears running down his old ghostly cheeks.

"Father! You do not know how long I awaited to hear these words!"

Suddenly it interrupted them - "Sorry to end your heart-warming reunion but you Freddy have a debt that you need to pay."

"Goodbye father, it was great to see you again. Death what do I need to do to pass on?"

"All you have to do is write the words right here" - Death pointed to the last part of the thin book.

Freddy, without much hesitation, took a pen provided to him by Death and wrote the final words of his story: "THE END."

šifra: dorina305
mentor: Antonio Shala
institution: Upravna škola Zagreb
autor: Dora Svetličić

THE LIES WE LOVED

Long, long before the first human foot touched the Earth, there was a planet named Innira. On the island of Ignis lived the fire elves. The more aggressive side of Innira. On the other side, the water elves, living on the opposing island of Aquatica, thought of themselves as the better side of Innira because they were the calm ones. For so long, the water elves stamped out the population of the fire elves to its minimum. Along with the remaining 2,500 fire elves lived Zinara.

She was the daughter of a farrier, and she was one of the few elves who had the ability to communicate with the dead souls of Innira. The fire elves wanted to convince the water elves to make peace, so when the moment came, Zinara met the queen of Aquatica, Jianna, and her son, Arlo. He was cold at first but very open-minded. Zinara, on the other hand, was feisty, and she didn't agree on making peace so easily; she wanted to get justice for her mother's dissidents and find out why so many of her people were dying.

So one night, after everyone got to sleep, she got onto her trusty stygimoloch named Glaedr and crossed the ocean of Kara to the island of the watherly souls, the island of Velora. As she made her way to the island of Velora, she saw a plesiosaur, and that could mean someone was on the island, but who? She left Glaedr on the beach, and she started to walk deeper into the forest of the watery souls. As she got deeper into the forest, she saw it was Arlo, standing beside one of the spirit trees.

"But what was he doing here, and why him out of all people?" she thought to herself. But she had no choice but to face him.

"Arlo? What are you doing here?" she said in a quiet voice.

"Oh, hey, grumpy, why are you here?" He smiled upon seeing her.

"What's with the nickname? But I like it… She thought to herself before she spoke: "No, I asked first, so you answer."

He laughed a bit and answered, "Okay, I am here because I missed my father. Now you answer."

She looked annoyed and said, "None of your business, nosy."

"It kind of is my business because you, a fire elf, are here in the forest of the watery souls. So tell me or leave," he said coldly.

"Fine, I'm here because I wanted to get justice for my mother and the other fire elves that have died over the years."

He looked at her confused and asked, "And what does that have to do with my people?"

"Because maybe they know something we don't."

He turned to her angrily and said, "I am not letting you ruin my father's peaceful sleep for some spirit summoning; now please leave."

She was shocked at first, but she did leave him alone, but deep in her gut she knew this was not the end. At least for now. So the following week she came up with a plan to ask four of her friends to help her. As every last fire elf got to bed, the four of them got their stygimolochs and started to cross the ocean Kara to the island Velora. But as expected, Arlo and his plesiosaurs were there to stop them.

"Oh, hey, grumpy, I see you brought some company. Can't deal with me on your own?" he said with his arms crossed on his chest.

Zinara looked at him and said confidently, "I can deal with a snob like you on my own, thank you, and they are actually here to help…"

Arlo interrupted her, "Here you go again with your spirit summoning thing. You know what? I will let you do your thing if you let me join you in doing so."

Zinara looked at her friends, who were hesitant at first, but then they all agreed to let him join them. Arlo then led them to the spirit tree of his father, and they all stood in a circle, holding hands around the tree.

All of them closed their eyes and started to sing before Zinara spoke, "Arthur, the king of these watery souls and the father of the fellow snob, tell us the truth and nothing but the truth."

And the spirit started to talk, "Before all this conflict, there was peace between the two nations, and they all lived in harmony. The only rule they had to follow was that there shall be no love between any members from the separate nations. Everybody was okay with this rule, and everyone followed it until I met the most beautiful fire elf, Zinaras's mother, Rosalind, and lucky for me, she liked me too, but as the rule said, we were not allowed to be together because we were from different nations. So we started meeting up in secret every day in a place we named Dreamway. Even if it was just for two hours, it felt like the best time of our lives. But soon enough our parents found out, and they all agreed to marry us off to prevent us from seeing each other. Zinaras's mother married a farrier, Owen, and I got married to Arlo's mother,

Jianna. There was no love between me and my new wife. But there was no way out." Suddenly the spirit's voice was gone.

As all of them opened their eyes, they saw Arlo standing outside the circle with watery eyes. Zinara looked at him, confused. Before she could say anything, Arlo rode away on his plesiosaurus.

As he disappears into the distance, Zinara told her friends to not tell anybody what they just heard and to go home. She started to look for Arlo. Luckily, she found him in Dreamway, hugging his knees and crying. She sat down next to him and opened her arms for a hug; without hesitation, he hugged her.

"I'm sorry, I ruined the ritual. It was just too much to take in."

She lifted his head and looked at him, saying, "It's okay. It was a lot for me too. But you do know that is not the whole truth. Right?"

He stopped crying and said, "Yeah, I'm aware of that. But I just need time to take all of this in."

"That is totally fine; take all the time you need, but try not to take too long."

As they stayed there, hugging, they started to fall in love, and Zinara knew history is repeating itself, but what they didn't know was that it was a good thing. After a few moments they separated and awkwardly left in different ways. Zinara rode back home on Glaedr; she looked back, hoping Arlo would do the same, but he didn't. After almost two weeks of not hearing from Arlo, she received a letter on eagle's foot.

The letter was from Arlo, and it said, "Hey, grumpy, I'm ready to continue discovering our history, so if you and your buddies are free, meet me tonight at Velora at 2 am."

She blushed at the letter, but she saw her father coming, so she hid the letter in her pocket. "Hey, sweetie, are you going to be home for dinner? I'm making your favorite, smoky soup."

She looked at him with hungry eyes but said, "Yeah, sure, Dad, but I have to meet up with my friends now, but I will be here for your awesome soup, so bye, love you."

As she met up with her friends, they sat on their stygimolochs and set their way off to Velora. When they made their way to Velora, Zinara got excited to see Arlo after two weeks of no contact. When they stepped their foot on the island, the tension between Arlo and Zinara was so obvious to everyone but them.

As they made their way to the spirit tree, one of Zinaras's friends said to Arlo, "Hey, try not to chicken out this time; at least let your old men finish."

Zinara glared at him, and they all started the ritual. Soon enough the spirit started to speak again, "Oh, where was I? Oh, oh, I remember now. After Arlo was born, I

heard little Zinara is soon turning three, so I sent Ziranas father Owen a letter wishing little Zinara a happy birthday, but the letter I got back was a bit unsettling; it was from Zinaras mother. She said she is not happy with her husband and wants to run away together. I agreed with the beautiful lady, but in the process of running away, a big war between the two nations broke out and got us both killed. After that, four secret yellow ghosts appeared upon them and put a spell on everyone to forget the reason behind all the conflicts. As expected, the conflict continued, but no one knew why. And that is the end of the story, but from what I can see, the history is repeating itself."

And he was right; while they were at Velora, Zianras's father Owen found Arlo's letter and started the attack on the water elves. The history was truly repeating itself, but it needs to be stopped before it goes too far. As Zinara and Arlo realized what was happening, they all hurried on their dinosaurs to the land of water elves, Aquatica.

As they got to the battlefield, everyone froze in their tracks and looked at Zinara and Arlo holding hands. "Zinara, my darling, what are you doing with him? Get away from that freak!" her dad shouted.

Zinara wanted to say something but got interrupted by Arlo. He confidently said, "No, we love each other, just like my father loved Zinara's mom, and maybe water and fire aren't meant to be together, but no one has confirmed that. Maybe it's on me and Zinara to find that out, and we will do that whether all of you like it or not."

Everyone looked at them, no one saying anything, but Arlo's mother spoke. "Son, are you really saying your father loved another woman while being with me?"

Zinara answered her, "Yes, Ma'am. We, all five of us, spoke to the spirit of your husband, and it told us all of that. And the reason why none of you remember that is because of the secret yellow ghost who put a spell on you to forget everything."

And it was as if she called for them because the four secret yellow ghosts appeared upon them.

One of them, named Henry, spoke, "Everyone listen up: everything these kids are saying is the truth. There was love between Zinaras's mother, Rosalind, and Arlo's father, Arthur. However, there was a big war that killed both of them, and yes, we did put a spell on all of you to forget the reason behind all the conflict. But now that the history is repeating itself with Arlo and Zinara, we realize we made a mistake. But we wanted to protect you; well, at least we thought we protected you."

Then they turned to Arlo and Zinara. "Now, Arlo and Zinara, do you both promise to accept each other regardless of the different nations you come from?"

Zinara and Arlo looked at each other and nodded.

"And do you both promise the big war is never going to happen, and both nations will live in harmony?"

Zinara's dad, Owen, stepped in and said, "Yes, both nations will live in harmony."

To his and everyone's surprise, Arlo's mother, Jianna, spoke up, "I agree, the nations will leave at peace, and the big war is not happening any time soon."

The ghosts looked satisfied, and they all bowed to Arlo and Zinara. After that the ghosts left, and everyone got to fixing the mess they all made.

After the cleanup, Arlo asked Zinara to be his love. Luckily, she agreed, and they started to meet up every day at the same old Dreamway. Soon enough they got married, and it was the biggest and the happiest wedding Innira has had in years. After a year, Zinara gave birth to beautiful twin girls, Moxie and Reiko, and they were the first generation of energy elves.

As for the ghosts, they were happy everything worked out, but they were a bit sad because the conflict that had no reason behind it until now was kind of fun and entertaining. But they didn't want to mess up the love and fun happening, at least not for now.

So it seems like everyone was happy, at least for a while. And it really was like that for 100 years. After that the history sadly repeated itself again.

The End.

šifra: icrowk
mentor: Antonio Shala
institution: Upravna škola Zagreb
autor: Dora Lončarić

THE LOCKDOWN

The howling of the wind was the only thing you could hear when you entered the streets of Eastwood. If you were brave enough to that is. It has been months since anyone was seen outside of their homes. Sometimes you could see soldiers on the streets through the peek in the curtain. Lately, even they were rare. They simply stopped appearing. Nobody knew why or how just that they couldn't see them anymore. It wasn't them that scared the people from going outside. It was something far more dangerous that no one could predict coming. Worse, no one could even imagine things like that exist in this world.

Around seven months ago, the government informed the citizens of them. Ordering everyone to hide in their homes and not leave them unless necessary. After some time even that was prohibited. Everyone's first worry, of course, was how they would get food and other supplies from the stores. Things they couldn't live without suddenly became a luxury not everyone could afford. The first few weeks after the absolute ban on going outside was set, the people would come and deliver the supplies people needed. Soon that became too much to bear. People demanded more and more in times of crisis and the government didn't have enough supplies for everybody. It wouldn't be as problematic if we were the only ones that experienced this. Unfortunately, they were everywhere First to fall was Poland then bigger countries like Spain and France. In the end, every continent has been put under lockdown. The last anyone heard was that the islands were safe. Many people left then to try to find sanctuary there. Sadly, they weren't fast enough. The creatures got them before they could even exit the towns. The funny thing is that no one would know that if the bodies hadn't been brought back to their homes. Blood was everywhere, they were everywhere. The worst thing was that no one could do anything about it, they could only watch their disheveled, half-eaten bodies or ignore them for the sake of their sanity.

Sanity was the very thing everyone started lacking when the fourth month came about, not to mention the thoughts that followed. If such horrible things could happen here in Eastwood, what was it like in one of the big cities? It was hard even think-

ing about it, it was then that the morals rose. Everyone was thankful they lived in a small place rather than somewhere even more filled with the blood of their friends and families. Even the amount of religious folk rose. In situations like this, with no apparent solution, people try to lessen their sorrows with prayer. Though there weren't many who didn't believe in deities, everyone started praying at some point. I guess it was easier that way.

Though the times were desperate, no one tried to leave their houses and rob the empty ones. Instead, people made do with what they already had. Rationing was something no one was unfamiliar with anymore, neither was hunger or thirst. I expected at least someone to try and get to the empty houses in hopes of finding leftover supplies, but everyone seemed to be content in their own homes. If the government hadn't ordered everyone to stay inside, they would have. I'm sure of it. At some point, the stores would have run out of food and personal hygiene products causing everyone to go crazy for them. Thankfully, that hasn't happened. If it had, my whole situation would have been compromised. I know it sounds selfish, but everyone needs to find their way to survive now and this is mine.

My family was one of the ones that left for the islands in the third month. Though they begged me to go with them, I was too much of a coward. Now I'm glad I was. When I woke up the next day, I saw horror before my eyes. Their bodies lay dead and torn to pieces. Every fiber of my being made me want to scream, but I didn't. I couldn't. Their bodies were disheveled enough that no one would recognize them if they tried. Therefore, no one would suspect that I was still alive. That fact became my cover.

I haven't looked through the windows since then, every curtain in my house stayed unmoving. I let no sign of life get out, nothing that would lead my neighbors to believe I was still there. I tried to make as little noise as possible, but it wasn't always easy. The only problem was that there wasn't much food left when my family ran for the islands. They believed they would get there and then come back for me so I wouldn't need much food. Their backpacks were still full when I found them that morning, but I couldn't do anything about it. Someone was always watching through the neighboring curtains at every time of day or night. It was too risky-

Knock, knock

I froze. No one ever knocked on anyone's door especially not mine. People hid for months, they wouldn't just now go outside and knock on someone's door. The creatures stayed at the town lines unless attracted in so it couldn't be them either. There wasn't any sign of soldiers either for a long time so why would they come now?

I headed for the front door, cautious not to make any noise. I listened for any sign of life on the other end of the door, but whoever was there let out none. Or there was no one out there and I only imagined the knocking. Peaceful with my explanation I relaxed my muscles and exhaled the air in my lungs. My gaze then turned to the floor in relief except there was none. I felt my heart rate rise again as I stared at the white envelope on my wooden floor. I slowly reached for it, careful not to make a sound because this was proof that I hadn't gone mad, that I hadn't imagined the knocking. On the other side of it, there was a familiar address and a stamp. For the life of me, I couldn't remember where I'd seen that address before. I hoped it was nothing, but as moments passed, I realized I was of no such luck.

Be careful, Adeline. Your words may be the end of you.

I reread those words at least a million times before I finally glanced back to the door. I slowly walked backward in fear, my feet stumbling against each other. I waited to see if someone would make an entrance now, but it truly seemed like there was no one out there. The darkness of my room enveloped me once again as I tried to calm my racing heart. I didn't understand what those words meant. My words. What did the person who wrote this mean by that? Could they be referring to the notes I wrote about what's happening in the world? No, there was no way. I only started writing them after my family was murdered, no one could know about them. Even if my cover had been blown there was nothing that would lead me to believe someone knew what I was doing. The address still bothered me. I had to figure out where have I seen it before.

The next few days were quiet. I had no more strange visitors or letters. When I couldn't figure out who gave me this letter, I decided to stop worrying so much about it. Nothing good would come from me overthinking the whole thing. Instead, I decided to focus on survival. That would all be nice and good if I hadn't been woken up by the thudding from my front door. It was the middle of the night when the sound shook me from the bed. I didn't know what to do. My first thought was that the monsters had come into the town, but as I approached the front door, I heard a man whisper: "Adeline, open this door right now. You will be dead flesh, open it right now!"

It took me a moment, but I soon recognized the voice. Adder!

"Shut up. Shut up!" I hissed.

"I'll unlock the door, but I need you to act like you broke in, understand?"

"Yes, now unlock this door unless you want me to die," he hissed in return.

I did a quick work of the lock and moved behind a counter beside the front door. Adder pushed the door a few more times before finally "breaking in" causing a loud noise. His eyes looked for me frantically before they landed on my cramped frame.

With the nod of my head, I showed him to shut the door. Realizing what I wanted he kept going through my apartment, rummaging it to make the impression of an empty home. When the air was cleared, I got up and thanked him. The moment he got close to me I felt the rush of air on my spine as his hands enveloped me in a strong hug.

"Thank goodness you're alive. I thought I'd lost you by now," he said so hurriedly I barely understood the words he was saying.

"Of course I'm fine. You don't seem too bad yourself."

"God, I looked for you everywhere when I heard the news all those months ago. You were nowhere to be found, I already thought you were dead."

"You looked for me?"

"Of course I did. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"It's just with everything going on, I didn't believe anyone would be in much hurry to get to someone they lost contact with."

"And I'm so sorry, but I never forgot about you. I just hope we're still good after all these years."

I smiled and pressed myself into another hug: "How could we not be? After all, we are A and A."

We both laughed at that, but I had to gather focus again. It wasn't safe for us to be too loud. Adder coming here didn't change my plan of survival.

"So, what have you been doing here? It seemed like it was abandoned."

"It's my cover," my voice cracked, but I had to explain to him what was happening to prevent blowing up my cover, "since my family died, I tried to maintain the image that I too was dead."

"I'm so sorry, Adeline. I had no idea. Why would act as if you were dead, though? Wouldn't it be easier to let people know you were alive and well?"

"People would do anything to save themselves. If the creatures attacked them, they would waste no time trying to get them to eat somebody else. Who better than the orphan girl next door, right?"

The next three days were brighter than ever. Adder's presence has brought a new light and I couldn't have wished for anything better. Though the times were still hard and the creatures lurked behind every corner, the thought of an absolute apocalypse seemed easier to bear now when I wasn't utterly alone. We stuck to my plan and acted like the house remained empty. If anyone heard or saw him, they could only question his whereabouts because, like me, he behaved as though he wasn't even there.

I walked to the living room but paused when I saw Adder crouching on the floor holding a piece of paper. I tried to peek around him to see what it said, but unsuccessfully. As I continued to walk to the couch, I remembered the letter I got before he came here. Could there be another one?

I turned around in fear and asked: "What is that?"

"Nothing. Just some old piece of newspaper."

"Are you sure? What does it say?"

"Just a heading of an old report. Don't worry about it."

I tried as hard as I could, but my mind wouldn't let me leave the paper from this morning alone. Something inside me told me it was more than what Adder made it out to be. To my greater judgment, I decided to look at it myself. I hurried with my lunch and sneaked into the room he was staying in while he was finishing. It didn't take me long to find it. I took the crumpled piece of paper and opened it.

Today.

One word. That's all it was written there. It for sure wasn't any newspaper heading. I kept looking at it in disbelief when I heard a cold male voice behind me: "So you found it. It doesn't matter now either way. You would have found out soon enough."

"What is this Adder?" I said as I shook the paper in front of him.

"It's an order from the governmental officials."

That was the last thing I heard before he dragged me outside. I tried everything to fight him off and keep my cover, but he was too strong and stubborn in his plans. Cold air pricked my skin as my clothes showed no protection from the winter.

"Let me go! What are you doing?"

"What I should have done a long time ago: getting rid of the enemy."

"Enemy? I'm your friend."

"Are you truly that blind to what's going on around you? Can't you see what you have done? With that diary of yours, you wrote yourself a death wish!"

"Diary? What diary?"

And then it hit me. The notes I've written about the lockdown and the creatures. They're my diary. The address I couldn't recognize belonged to an old friend of mine. Adder sent me that letter, but not to warn me of the enemy. He wrote that address to tell me he was coming. That day when I invited him inside, he planned to kill me.

"If this was your plan all along why not do it immediately instead of waiting?"

He looked at me with pity, like he couldn't believe how oblivious I was.

"I hoped you'd stop. I trusted you would do it so I wouldn't have to do this. I wanted to have a life with you, but you just had to write, didn't you? You couldn't, for once in your life accept love, could you?"

"Love," my eyes teared up turning everything into a smudge of color, "you don't love because this isn't love. This is evil."

His eyes darkened at my words, his fist clenched around the knife he held. The kindness I saw earlier was gone, replaced by pure hatred. My survival instinct kicked in right away and I ran as fast as I could back towards my house. Just when I thought I had done it, I felt a cold hand around my wrist pull me backward. My back was crushed against him as his right arm came around my throat. In the corner of my eye, I saw the tip of the knife in his other hand pointed right at me. Tears sprung to my eyes once again. I didn't know what to do. There was no way I would get out of his hold now.

"Don't you see, Adeline? Look around you. You could have had the world if you stopped."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look around you. We are almost out of town and yet... it's so quiet."

He was right, but that wasn't possible. The creatures would have come at us already.

"There are no creatures, Adeline. It is all a lie. A lie you could have lived if you only had listened to me."

That was the last thing I heard before excruciating pain ripped through my neck and body. I still felt his hands holding me around the neck as my vision faded. Memories of our last days, of my family, and of life before all of this ran through my mind until there was nothing left.

šifra: SolarQuest5
mentor: Biljana Beljan
institution: Škola za turizam, ugostiteljstvo i trgovinu, Pula
autor: Lia Ella Pintar

THE MAFIA'S PRIZED POSSESSION

In Florida, in a dimly lit warehouse in the heart of the Underground, the man known simply as 'The Nightmare' was in the middle of a vicious brawl. Surrounded by a chaotic mix of fighters and spectators, he moved with a graceful yet brutal efficiency that was both captivating and terrifying. Black face paint was smeared on his cheeks, messy blonde locks dripping with sweat as he delivered blow after blow to his opponent, soon knocking them down to the floor. He panted as the referee held his hand, raising it up in the air to signify his victory, another victory under his belt... This was like every night, the fighting, the cheers from the public, the thrill of it all, it kept him going. Damien looked around the stadium at the spectators cheering him on, his eyes falling onto a man in dark clothing. He felt a spark of familiarity, his eyes widening, but he convinced himself that he was just seeing things. It couldn't be him... could it? No. Of course not. Damien snapped out of his trance as his attention fell back onto the cheers of the public.

The door creaked open to a messy and run-down apartment in the impoverished neighbourhood. Damien grunted, practically slumping against the wall as he closed the door behind himself. Leaving the underground forced him back into reality, the reality of his low-income life. The only source of income he had was from his fights in the underground, he could never get a job due to the fear of his reputation.

Years ago, Damien had lived a different life. He had worked in the shadows, serving a ruthless crime lord who had demanded everything and given nothing in return. He had lost friends, dignity, and respect in that world, and he had never quite recovered from the emotional scars left behind. The day he walked away from that organization was the day he felt alive for the first time in years. He was grateful, grateful that he would never see his boss's face ever again.

Damien reluctantly stood up on his two wobbly feet, grunting in pain. He went up against a few heavy hitters tonight, nothing he couldn't handle, although he was in a lot of pain. He grabbed onto his kitchen counter, his bloody, bandaged knuckles clenching. His bandages were sloppy, and rushed, as if a mere child had bandaged

up his wounds. In reality, he had done it himself. He took off his dark blue, silk coat, carelessly chucking it at the floor. His body was littered with scars, each one telling its own story, whether that be from his brawls in the underground or his past life – that he would rather not get into detail about. He ran his scarred hands through his messy blonde hair, grumbling under his breath as he looked up at the cracked clock on the wall. 2:28 a.m. Damien grunted, standing up straight and heading towards his bedroom, flopping down onto his bed. His mind had been racing with thoughts about the man he had seen in the stands. Damien grunted, rubbing his temple with the tips of his fingers. He had left his past life behind, wanting so badly to forget it all and his new life was helping with his healing journey. But, that face. That haunting face that always seems to plague his mind. Damien lay down on his back, staring at his ceiling in silence as the sound of sirens rang in his ears. Damien's apartment was located in quite a dangerous neighbourhood, to say the least. It always had some sort of criminal activity, and he had got used to the police being called practically every day. He rolled onto his side, his eyes slowly closing as the sirens lulled him to sleep.

Damien could barely sleep that night; all he could think about was the man in the stands that he had seen that night. When he came back to the Underground the next night, he felt exhausted, which caused him to lose his first match of the day. Damien felt embarrassed, his head aching as he received a hard blow to it. He was sat in a private room with the nurse who would take care of injured fighters. "I don't need to be here", Damien grumbled under his breath, glaring up at the nurse.

Damien had a huge ego and just the thought of being taken care of sent a shiver up his spine. The nurse, named Carmilla, looked over at him with a slightly annoyed expression. "I know your ego is big, but I didn't realize it was that big", Carmilla muttered in her soft and gentle tone as she pressed a bag of ice against his head to soothe the ache. Damien just grunted in annoyance, clenching his fists. "I've been out of it recently", he admitted. "I saw… someone". Carmilla raised a brow at Damien's admission, noticing the quiver in his voice. "I've told you about my past boss. You know how much I resent him", he explained. "I think I saw him l—last night, in the stands". Carmilla's eyes widened, shaking her head. "Damien, I think you're seeing things". She mumbled, her mask muffling her voice. "You moved across the entire country to get away from him, you changed your identity, and you think he actually managed to find you? No way", she assured, putting away some of her equipment.

Carmilla's response angered Damien. Crazy? He wasn't crazy, he wasn't seeing things! "I swear I saw him! I'm not insane!", Damien lashed out, standing up and towering over the shorter woman who was surprised at his sudden lash-out. Damien

sighed. "I just— no. I swear I saw him", he mumbled, putting the ice pack down. "But, sure. I'm just crazy!", Damien chuckled. "Like I always was", he grumbled before leaving the nurse's room, slamming the door behind himself.

The rest of the night was uneventful, Damien mostly just stayed off due to his head injury. On the walk home, he kept thinking about what he saw and what Carmilla said. He felt enraged, seen as some kind of lunatic who even started hallucinating. It brought Damien back to his past life where he was seen as some insane psycho who only knew how to serve his maniacal boss. A life that he just wants to sweep under the rug and forget it ever even happened, but he won't forget it, and neither will all the victims who had fallen to him and the entire local mafia gang that he used to be a part of. When Damien was young, his parents were murdered by a gang from which his father had accidentally stolen money. Damien lived in an orphanage since he was seven, since his parents died. When he grew up, he swore to find those gang members who had stolen his entire childhood away, this anger was the motivation for him to join his past gang. Damien had managed to get revenge for his parents, but the longer he stayed involved with the mafia, the worse he started feeling about himself. Damien had always felt remorse about his actions, he felt like a monster, which was one of the reasons he mustered up the courage to flee and change his life for the better. Now that he was reminded of it all, seeing that man that resembled his boss a bit too much in the crowd, it ached, terribly.

Damien was lost in thought, not even thinking as he walked across the street. He snapped out of it when he heard car tires screeching and a horn honking at him. Damien looked up to see an angry man in a car, he could hear a bit of the man's annoyed muffled yelling. Damien let out a shaky sigh, continuing to walk as he crossed the road. Damien was so lost in thought and overwhelmed by just the thought of being found by that horrid man again that he was almost run over. Damien tried to push these thoughts out of his head as he continued the walk to his apartment, all he could hear around himself were sirens and gunshots. How typical for his horrid neighbourhood. Damien unlocked the door to his building and walked up the steps to his apartment.

He felt a shiver down his spine as he stared at his apartment door which had been creaked open. Damien knew he had closed the door when leaving, he wasn't stupid enough to just leave it open for anyone to wander in. Damien was a tough guy, both physically and mentally. He took a deep breath, reached for the door handle, and pushed the door fully open, looking around his apartment cautiously. Nothing seemed wrong, everything was where it was supposed to be. Damien felt his heart

thumping, but it had practically stopped when he heard a voice. A grating, disgusting voice that he hoped to never hear again, calling out that name. "Azriel." The deep, gravelly voice said in a friendly tone. Damien's eyes widened as he looked into the kitchen, seeing, his old boss.

"Alejandro", Damien's shaky voice muttered, he felt like he couldn't breathe. He could never forget the man who, in Damien's eyes, ruined his life. That long dark hair flowing down his shoulders with those dark brown piercing eyes, the gaze under which Damien crumbled. Alejandro was always so proper, in his fancy suits and glasses, he looked modest, and strict, like someone you could trust in the blink of an eye. Damien clenched his fists, trying to resist from pouncing onto the man in front of him. "What – I – how?", he stuttered. This all felt like an inescapable nightmare, he silently prayed that he would just suddenly wake up, but to his dismay, this was in fact reality. Alejandro chuckled at Damien's reaction to his sudden appearance. He set down the glass of champagne that he had taken from Damien's almost empty fridge. "I can't believe that you thought you could escape from me", he mumbled in a mocking tone, acting as if he genuinely missed Damien, but Damien knew that was an attempt to make him feel bad. "Why would you do such a thing? Leave behind all we built together, Azriel?", Alejandro hummed. That name was like nails against a chalkboard to Damien, a constant reminder of who he used to be. "Don't— Don't call me that", he stuttered, feeling weak in Alejandro's presence. "I changed, alright? I'm not the monster I used to be!" Damien yelled. "I don't want anything to do with you or your organization anymore, alright?!" Alejandro raised a brow at Damien's sudden aggressive tone, tilting his head down as he glared at Damien with that asserting stare, making Damien feel like a child being about to be reprimanded. "Oh?", Alejandro muttered. "How disappointing. And I thought we had something together, something special."

Damien gritted his teeth, his fists clenching. "Stop. Just stop", he grumbled. "Stop trying to make me feel bad, you've never cared about me", Damien felt a shiver up his spine as Alejandro walked up to him. The two were practically the same height, but Damien felt so small next to Alejandro. "But, I did", Alejandro said, his hand resting on Damien's shoulder and squeezing. "I provided you with everything you needed." Damien pushed Alejandro's hand away, glaring at him. "You abused me. Mentally and physically", Damien said, his voice starting to quiver. The tension in the room was thick, both men ready to pounce and attack each other like wild animals. Alejandro scoffed, "You've really turned weak, haven't you? You used to be so tough, so bloodthirsty, but look at you now. Just a shell of the man you once were",

Alejandro grumbled, his words breaking Damien bit by bit. The dark-haired man reached into his pocket, pulling out a small piece of paper with a string of numbers on it, handing it to Damien. "If you ever change your mind, give me a call, Azriel", Alejandro smirked, his hands sneaking into his coat pockets before heading out of Damien's apartment.

Damien practically fell down to his knees, glaring at the piece of paper in his hands. He really thought he could get away from Alejandro, he had three years of peace and now Alejandro was back for him. Damien's fingers skimmed over the paper, caressing it. He suddenly felt – tempted, tempted to go back to his past life, just the sight of Alejandro's face tempted him. His mind was racing with thoughts. Damien slumped against the floor, looking up at the ceiling. He closed his eyes, the memories flooding his head.

Damien hadn't gone to the Underground for three days already. He had spent all his days in his apartment, alone in silence. He had to resist the urge to call Alejandro, distancing himself away from his phone. Damien slumped against his kitchen counter, looking over at the paper next to him. Damien couldn't take it anymore; he stood up straight and picked up the paper and his phone. He hastily tapped at his phone, dialling up the number and pressing the phone up against his ear. He bit his nails as the phone ringing echoed in his ears. The ringing suddenly stopped as he heard a voice answer from the other line. "Azriel." He heard Alejandro's voice coo. "Alejandro", Damien muttered. "I— I miss…you." He sounded shameful and desperate. The phone call fell silent until Damien heard a chuckle from Alejandro. "I knew you would give in eventually and crawl back to me like a dog", Alejandro said. "I'll come pick you up, how about that?", Damien's breath quivered. "Yeah…yeah", he mumbled. The line cut out as Damien set his phone down. The reality of it all sank in, he reversed the name he made for himself in the Undergrounds, and he reversed all the therapy he went through, all because of Alejandro. All because of how tempting Alejandro was. Damien felt pathetic and weak for being tempted so easily, but he reluctantly got dressed. He hastily stuffed all his belongings into a backpack, slinging it over his shoulder as he opened the door of his apartment. Damien looked back inside for the last time before leaving and walking down the stairs. He wasn't Damien anymore, he was back to being Azriel, Alejandro's right-hand man, and pet. Damien— No, not Damien, Azriel exited the building, his eyes meeting Alejandro's face again, a smile plastered across Alejandro's face. "I'm glad you're back, Azriel", Alejandro said, his hand resting on Azriel's shoulder. "Everything was so empty without you, you fulfil me, Azriel."

Azriel nodded as Alejandro led him into his car, the two driving back to where it all started, back in California. Azriel looked out of the window of a car, watching his new life fade away as he fell right back into Alejandro's arms.

šifra: Boki321
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Nika Marušić

THE SILENT WITNESS

Nestled in the quiet corner of a dimly lit study, an antique writing desk stands as it remains a reflection of days gone by, a timeless witness to the lives and stories of those who have used it. Crafted from rich, dark walnut, its polished surface gleams faintly in the light of a nearby lamp. It has many drawers, many secrets. Each drawer decorated with its intricate unique carvings and its compartments adorned with railings and delicate patterns. It gives space an atmosphere as that of an old English pub or a Victorian library. The fine grain of the wood shines through the natural wear of time and Each scratch, each groove, tells a tale. This desk speaks of craftsmanship long forgotten in today's world of mass production.

The green baize that adorns the centre of the writing surface is another hallmark of the era. Soft yet durable, baize was commonly used as a covering for writing tables and billiard tables alike. Its textured surface provides a pleasant tactile experience, while its muted colour contrasts elegantly with the dark wood. It speaks of an era when attention to details in the making of furniture was a form of art and is a classic example of late 19th-century design.

It is made of walnut, known for its strength, resilience, and beautiful grain, a favoured material among skilled craftsmen. The rich, warm colour of the wood gives it an air of elegance, which is why it was often used in high-quality furniture that was made to stand the test of time. The wood's texture and ability to hold its shape ensured that pieces could endure through generations, and this desk has certainly proven its worth.

The first owner of the desk was a noble gentleman, a solicitor from an aristocratic family who enjoyed a long and fulfilling life, reaching a happy and peaceful old age. His wife, a woman of great taste and love for fine craftsmanship, had the desk custom-made as a gift for him by a master carpenter in Vienna. The carpenter carefully designed it to meet the specifications of the notary's wife. She wanted a special gift for her husband: a piece of furniture that would not only serve its functional purpose but also reflect the status and elegance of their family.

The solicitor's family lived in the city of Rijeka, which was one of the most important economic centres of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at that time, and served the Monarchy as a key port and a bridge between Central Europe and the Mediterranean. Major trade routes passed through the city, and many nations and cultures left their mark creating a rich multicultural atmosphere. The city was home to Croats, Italians, Hungarians, Germans, and others, and this diversity shaped its unique identity. At that time, Rijeka was officially called Fiume, which means "river" in Italian. The desk travelled for two days by train from Vienna to Rijeka, and upon its arrival, it took its place in home of solicitor's family.

Many years later, after the solicitor's death, the desk passed to his only beloved daughter, a renowned writer. It was at this desk that she created some of her most celebrated works, which are still considered essential reading in schools today. She spent countless hours writing at that desk. Her writing, filled with grace and insight, reflected the values of her time, and the desk was a silent witness of her inspiration.

The desk then passed to her son, a poet who never married. This unfortunate poet, lost in deep loneliness, fell seriously ill while he was still young. Knowing that his end was near, he decided to give away his belongings to friends and acquaintances. So, he offered his loyal cook and housekeeper an opportunity to choose one item, as a keepsake, from his apartment. Without fully understanding why, she chose the desk. Perhaps she chose it because she would often see her employer sitting at it and writing. Or perhaps because she was ordered to keep everything in the house tidy but was forbidden from touching the desk to avoid disturbing his papers. Perhaps that is why the desk inspired in her a mixture of respect and warmth. For her, it was a reminder of the kind-hearted poet who had been a humble and generous employer, a lost soul and a caring man.

After poet's death, she worked for other families for a short while, but as time passed, she realized she was too old for such physical demanding work. With no savings and no family of her own, her living conditions worsened. Eventually, she made the difficult decision to take in a tenant. The tenant was found for her by the daughter of an old good friend from her childhood days, who had married a food merchant and therefore had numerous social connections.

This tenant was a poor mechanical engineering student from one of the most beautiful Dalmatian islands. He was a handsome and polite young man, exceptionally hardworking and modest. The landlady was happy when she realized how fortunate she was to have him as her tenant. He was always helpful whenever she needed something, and he was also a very pleasant company. She, in return, was an excellent

landlady to the young student, often cooking meals for him and doing his laundry, as if he were the son she never had. As the student settled into his new home with his landlady, he soon became very fond of the exceptional landlady's desk. It became his constant companion as he studied and prepared for his exams. Years passed, and after graduating he married and moved into a small, rented apartment with his wife. Yet, he kept in touch with his dear former landlady, helping her whenever he could, carefully ensuring that he never overstepped or wounded her pride. Despite her modest circumstances, she was an extremely proud woman. He would come up with various excuses to bring her small gifts, chopp firewood for the winter and help with small jobs.

Several years later, he moved with his wife and young child into a larger apartment as he, as a mechanical engineering teacher at a technical school, had a decent salary and an improved economic status. At that point, he offered to buy the desk from his former landlady and she, in need of money, gladly accepted. The desk, which had once been a cherished part of her household, had gradually become more of an inconvenience to her. She had never used it for its purpose and found herself constantly dusting its intricate carvings, drawers, and shelves. She, who was barely literate, never felt comfortable sitting at it. It always seemed out of place in her humble home. The famous desk was now passed into hands of the young engineer who used it to write his textbook on mechanical engineering for his students. The textbook became well-known and remains a standard reference for students and professors in field of mechanical engineering to this day.

Years later, his wife, a talented painter, began creating beautiful works using dry pastel techniques at that very same desk, which had then become the birthplace of art. When she became a renowned and respected painter, she had a large studio nearby their home where she spent her time painting. Today, these paintings decorate many spaces in Rijeka and far beyond, filling them with warmth and character.

And again, many years passed and their son, a little boy who grew into a smart and handsome young man, followed in his father's footsteps and used the desk for his studies. While attending the Andrija Mohorovičić Gymnasium, the young man worked at the desk, preparing for exams and learning lessons that would shape his future. It was at this Gymnasium that he also met his future wife. Later, when he moved on to the Faculty of Civil Engineering, the desk once again became a companion in academic journey, now with added experience. After the young man graduated from university and got married, the young family moved to a small apartment outside the city centre. The married couple had two children, a girl and a boy.

The children began to create their own little works of art and practice their first letters at the desk whenever they visited their grandparents. The desk gradually took on a different, new role, as it became a place where childhood memories were made, where imagination blossomed and where the spirit of creativity was passed down through the generations.

Since its arrival from Vienna until today, the desk has been in Rijeka. The multicultural atmosphere that shaped Rijeka in the past continues to thrive today. The legacy of diversity is visible not only in the streets and markets but also in the art, music, and festivals that celebrate the city's unique heritage. I would say that Rijeka has grown in many ways, but it still honours its roots, just as I do.

Grandpa is no longer with us. Grandma has grown old and hardly paints anymore. My brother and I have long outgrown our doodles. The desk, which once served as a hub of activity and creativity, now stands peacefully and quietly in our Grandma's bedroom. Over the years, it has become a resting place for unread books, scattered papers, and tasks that have been postponed, but the memories of my Grandpa still remain. His old typewriter. The green desk lamp that lit up countless nights of work. The triangles, rulers, technical pencils, and erasers all remain, alongside my Grandma's pastels, drawing papers, and even our childhood doodles. Each item on that desk tells a story. It's remarkable how much history can be contained in such a small, seemingly insignificant space.

The desk is now worn and slightly faded but still exudes a certain charm. The green baize, once vibrant, is now worn down by years of use. I find comfort in the scent that rises from it, especially when I open one of its drawers. The smell of old wood. Of paper. Of ink. Of time. It's a reminder of all those moments that have passed, of all the lives that have touched this desk. It's a connection to the people who once sat here, writing, creating and dreaming.

Whenever I visit my Grandma I find a reason to sit at that desk. Even today, I love drawing. That's something I inherited from her. It feels like a small ritual. A way to reconnect with my childhood, with the stories I was once told sitting at that desk, and with the memories of my Grandpa. It's as if the desk itself holds the key to those memories, and whenever I sit there, I am transported back to a time when everything seemed simpler, when the world felt smaller and when I could hear my Grandpa's voice telling me tales of the landlady, the poet, the writer, and the solicitor.

I often imagine what it must have been like for those who used the desk before me. What were they like? What thoughts did they have as they wrote, studied, or created at that very spot? I imagine Grandpa, sketching plans and writing his textbook at the

desk. And Grandma. Young and vibrant, painting at it. I picture the poet, a young man full of hope and ambition, sitting at the desk, his mind consumed with words and verses. I imagine his mother, the writer, her pen moving across the page, her thoughts flowing freely as she created the works that would endure for generations. And I picture the solicitor, his hands steady and sure as he went about his work. Recording the events of the world around him. I try to understand the significance of the desk for each person who sat at it. Was it just a piece of furniture, or did it hold a deeper meaning for them? Perhaps, for the solicitor, it was the gift itself that made it special. Or maybe it was the way each person infused it with their own hopes and dreams, transforming it into something more than just a desk.

The desk has witnessed so much, and it has become a silent witness to the lives of those who used it. In its stillness, it holds the energy of all those who have come before me. It holds a special place in my heart, and once I have my own apartment, I hope to come to an agreement with my brother and be able to take the desk, carefully restore it, and breathe new life into it. I would be grateful for the opportunity to continue the tradition, to be a part of the desk's story, and to one day pass it on to the next generation. I hope so, because my brother prefers modern things, including modern furniture. He loves the idea of living in spaces that feel ahead of their time, with clean lines, minimalist designs and the latest technology. On the other hand, I have a deep appreciation for retro and vintage items. I am captivated by the charm and history incorporated in older pieces, and I enjoy surrounding myself with things that have character and tell a story. For me, the warmth and nostalgia of second-hand items create a timeless atmosphere that modern pieces just can't replicate. Therefore, in my future apartment, I'll have a special place for this desk if I'm lucky enough to own it. I would also make room for the old Singer sewing machine that once belonged to my Great-grandma, who lived on one of the most beautiful Dalmatian islands, but that is a story for another time...

šifra: BEGONIA
mentor: Valentina Vrabac
institution: Prirodoslovna škola Vladimira Preloga
autor: Korina Beg

THE SKY IS FOREVER BEAUTIFUL

Gunshots echoed throughout the desert. A grim reminder of the situation he was facing.

The stories could never hope to accurately depict the gruesomeness of war. The hopelessness, the sheer horror. The warm blood of his once-dear allies, staining his hands and face. He watched, in a stupor, his comrades, his brothers in arms, as they fell and their now cold corpses hit the ground like the soft autumn leaves. Exhaustion, along with a desire to simply not exist overtook him. Pain seared in his leg; the wound still fresh.

He limped and fell back, the promise of safety in their ranks driving him forward.

A shot.

A sensation.

Pain in his chest.

. . .

He walked the port of his hometown, gripping a letter. The sun was setting, a beautiful sight to behold – a stark contrast to the future that awaited him. The letter had described his fate in a few blunt, cold sentences. Drafted, war, a land far away. His mind went blank as his strides became slower, finally stopping to read the letter again. He was to leave all that he had known, had loved, to fight for a cause – a man that he did not believe in.

He felt their touch. The hands that cradled his face and hugged him, tear-stricken faces, sending him off to distant lands. He felt the soft fabric of his mother's scarf wrap around him. "When you come back, return it to me, will you?"

When?

If. - she meant to say

. . .

It was all a blur. The bumpy ride there, meeting his fellow soldiers, settling in. It was all so...unnatural. The way the gun rested in his hand, the way his uniform fitted him. Fake, synthetic, abnormal, inhumane.

The drills they performed were a covert way to discern the quality, and by that the position of the soldiers. It was exhausting. Every fiber of his being was screaming for oxygen, begging for even a moment of rest. He performed slightly above average. His mother's scarf adorned his neck at all times, earning him a few funny nicknames. His physical strength was, to put it lightly, underwhelming. But he compensated it with his sharp mind and extraordinary aim.

With each day, the training had become easier to bear. Pushing their physical limits was nothing new to the soldiers now. They were satisfied, self-assured even. With the ease that they completed their training, they were confident all would go well in battle.

The training period was over. It was time to show what they had learned in these past few months. The night before battle was spent joking and eating around the campfire. The platoon was given necklaces – tags with their names, service number, blood types and religious preferences inscribed into them. A grim foreshadowing of what was to unfold.

But that didn't matter now. Now, in this very moment, they were simply boys – laughing and singing and making plans for tomorrow. Boys with promising futures, that couldn't even comprehend the horrors that awaited them – and maybe it was better that way.

The scarfed man made a few friends, the most noteworthy being a blond man with striking blue eyes. They spent almost all their time together and, amidst the callousness of the war, managed to form a deep bond. Now, they sat beside one another, gazing at the stars up above. A comfortable silence enveloped them.

"Say", the blond started, "do you think...we will return tomorrow? Like, from the battle."

The sky that night was forever beautiful.

The other laughed. "Of course, all this training must have amounted to something. And still, I have a separate task I must complete."

He feigned mysteriousness while gripping his scarf slightly tighter, trying to make the other man laugh. He did not, in fact, laugh. Only cringe.

"Wow so edgy and mysterious, well, my Prince of Darkness, I'm hitting the sack, nigh night."

Unbeknownst to them, this was the last night they would spend as a whole platoon.

. . .

The silence was deafening on the ride to the battlefield.

The soldiers trembled, some prayed – holy words spoken in a hushed voice. Begging their god not to forsake them.

The scarfed man was given special orders – he was to take a specific position along with the seasoned soldiers and follow their instructions. And so he did. He was assigned to the sniper unit. His calm demeanor was shattered as he arrived and saw the soldier there. Heavy eyebags, pale complexions and thousand yard stares adorned them.

A testament to the mind grueling duty whose weight they had to carry.

"Why are you here, kid?", one man asked him. He could only answer with silence as he stood there, petrified. The crushing atmosphere and realization of what he had to do was beginning to strangle him.

A crash echoed from the battlefield. Followed by tremor.

There was a deafening noise. Followed by a deafening silence.

His ears were ringing as his steps faltered. The others seemed unaffected.

He still hadn't come to terms with what he was about to do. No, he can't - he couldn't. He tried to protest, tried to argue back. A fruitless effort. Before he knew it, he was laying on the floor, gun at his side. Through the lens he witnessed the massacre that was unfolding before him. Corpses of the people he ate with yesterday were now a feast for the vultures. Head low. Tending to the dead. His heart relaxed the slightest bit at the sight of the blond man still alive and kicking.

"How long do you plan to keep staring, shoot already!"

And so he did. He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

And it hit.

Upon realizing what he had done, nausea flooded over him, like waves crashing on a shore. This isn't happening. This can't be happening.

He remembered the sun as it shone in the port. Warm and tender. Now, it's scorching heat was a reminder of how far from home he was, he was left to his own devices.

It was done. Sundown was upon them, time to retreat and reconcile with the events of the day. He walked the barren fields, the nausea only increasing with each new corpse he encountered. Wait – he recognized this man. From last night. He had reached his limit. The nausea overtook him completely. Once he recuperated, he approached the corpse, his once friend. He snuck his hand around his neck, fingers met with cold flesh, searching for a familiar trace of metal. There it is. He pulled, the tag now hanging from his thumb.

A dog tag.

Was that what they were now? Dogs sent to fight in a filthy war, tossed and forgotten. He gazed at the identification number. His dear friend, with hopes and dreams, reduced to a simple code, a number.

That day, he returned with six tags.

. . .

The remaining soldiers all seemed to have aged years in the span of a single day. No one spoke. No one dared look at the other, in fear of that being the final sight of them. The blond man seemed relieved to find his scarfed companion alive and, at least physically, unharmed. They did not speak.

This became their everyday life. Like a disgusting play, repeating over and over, with no end in sight.

It wasn't long before the insomnia settled in.

Even the tranquil refuge of dreams was ripped away from them, forcing them to face the unpleasant images that repeated in their minds even in the dead of night. On the rare occasion when the universe graced them with slumber, even there they were not safe from the eternal torment that plagued them.

The days blurred. Ten tags. Turning into months. Sixteen tags.

The blond rushed amidst the slaughter, searching for the familiar sight of a crimson scarf. He breathed a sigh of relief as he located him, crouching. Their reunion and the scarfed man's scavenging was interrupted by a meek sound. He turned his attention to it. A small box of kittens had somehow ended up here.

Starved kittens. Most were dead already, their mother probably meeting the same fate. Save for one. Its yellow eyes had a look to them that was a mix of fear and pleading. "Oh, these poor babies" he cradled the weak being in his arms. The other reached out to the small animal and gently wrapped it in his scarf. They made their way back.

Twenty tags collected. He had become like the vultures, tending to the dead. Head held low.

. . .

Finally, an end was in sight

The deciding battle was tomorrow. They were going all out. He sat by the bonfire, gazing at the stars while his comrades laughed and joked around. A weak attempt to distract themselves from the horror that will unravel tomorrow. In the heat of the environment, the tag around his neck cooled him. When will the day that someone will rip it from his neck arrive. Was this what he was reduced to? Over twenty years of life, summarized into a single line between his date of birth and death.

He hadn't realized the people around him had left. One person had stayed behind. Gazing at him with those clear blue eyes. "Do...do you think we will return tomorrow?"

The sky that night was forever beautiful.

"...Not really, no", a weak meow cut through the silence that followed. He pet the cat resting in his lap, his eyes softening. "But, that was to be expected. It was only a matter of time. There is nothing we can do". His demeanor was unnervingly calm, despite the conversation topic.

Silence.

"You know, you try to appear so calm and detached, but you have the blood of a poet. You have that and always will. You show, in the middle of savage things, the gentleness of your heart, that is so full of pain and light." the man beside him responded. They gazed at each other, the warm fire casting them in a gentle orange hue. The blue-eyed man shifted suddenly, reaching his hands to his chest and neck, pulling up. A silver tag gleamed under the firelight.

"This may be the last time I see you, so – take my tag, and I'll take yours, and if I die in this horrendous, cursed war, don't tell them we switched; let me be buried under your name – and some fifty years from now, you can be buried under mine"

The rest of the unspoken words were expressed through their gaze. They switched. For a moment, they seemed to forget their hopeless fate. They managed to sleep, and, for once, dreamt of pleasant dreams.

. . .

With morning came the inevitable battle. The soldier loaded their guns, preparing to strike.

It was calm. Almost too calm – a silence before the storm.

That was when the first bomb hit. It damaged their barracks, casualties already starting to appear. The soldiers marched on, the sand entering their eyes, scratching their throats as they hastily moved. Screams echoed; the ground trembled. The scarfed man positioned himself on the small hill, laying on his stomach and setting up his weapon. In the years of war, he became known as a renowned sniper. So, he did what he did best, what he was told he did best – aimed. He hated it. He wanted to tear at his own flesh for how disgusted he was with himself. "Just this one last time, just today, then never again" he repeated in his head, a prayer, a promise of sorts.

He could view the entire battlefield from this position. This, also, made him vulnerable. Vomit climbed up his throat as he became aware of what followed. Taking a life was never easy. He knew what the enemy was fighting for, and their reason to

kill. What was his? Enough of that. Now, he had to think, focus. Discern the enemy. Calm his breathing and heart. It pulsed in his ears. Slower, slower. In the moment between two pulses, he pulled the trigger, holding his breath.

The target was hit, falling limply to the ground. His stomach clenched and a mind-numbing coldness overtook him. No matter how many times he did this, he would never get used to it.

It all progressed smoothly. According to plan. His heart clenched every time he saw one of his own fall.

With dread climbing his back, he noticed a familiar blonde had fallen.

He was not moving.

Before he could think this through, he was sprinting towards him. He screamed his name, shaking him

"Thank God you're alive, come on, grab onto me, I'll get you to safety". Out the corner of his eye, he could see a group of enemies advancing to their position. A sniper was always dealt with as soon as possible.

Unfortunately:

he was never on the front lines.

And it was due to this lack of experience that he made an uncalculated decision. An honest mistake. He wasn't used accustomed to the inns and outs of the front. The intricacies that surround it. A shot found its target – his leg. The sharp pain startled him, panic spiking in his chest – a cold hand clenching his heart, a noose around his larynx. He heard the crunch of bones, felt the decay of his strength. They both fell, surprised by the sudden event. Dirt accumulated beneath their fingernails as they tried to stand up. The shotgun had done irreparable damage to his knee. Terror overcame him as he realized:

They were fleeing to save their lives.

And he could not walk.

A dam had broken; he started screaming. A sound oozing with raw, unfiltered horror escaped his lips as his blond comrade attempted to drag them both to safety.

They were near their border, soon they will be safe.

But.

They were too slow.

. . .

A shot.

A sensation.

Pain in his chest. He was shot multiple times.

Their allies, upon realizing, quickly dealt with the enemies. There was blood everywhere, the blond man was frantically trying to stop the bleeding.

Through the fog, the sun shined above them, giving him a final moment of clarity.

"You know-"

"QUIET, save your strength"

" -last night I dreamt of you, and it was slow... and blue and... endless"

"Don't say that! Hey, stay awake... Hey look at-"

He dreamt of long, blue springs. Of yellow flowers in full bloom, swaying in the breeze, reminiscent of a certain someone.

. . .

There was an eternity in his gaze. His body went limp, the dog tag belonging to the other man peeked out from his shirt, sticky from the fresh blood. A promise whispered in the dead of night. His scarf was lost somewhere behind them.

Jean P. died at 3:07 p.m. AST.

It is two hours earlier in Paris, does that mean he is still alive there? But the flight there would take four hours.

That difference, forever longing, but never quite reaching – we call it grief.

Nostalgia was not a sweet, cute thing. It was a gut wrenching, excruciating feeling. The blond couldn't remember old memories without his heart sinking to his stomach. He grieved the abundance of time they had back then. The promise of what could have been heavy on his soul.

Tears flooded in his eyes, overflowing as he tugged at his hair, the strands falling on his comrade's corpse beneath him.

He was gone.

And there was nothing he could do to save him.

Yet still,

The sky was forever beautiful.

šifra: AMILLIYA1
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Prometna škola Rijeka
autor: Leona Glavan

THE UNKNOWN CREATURE

In the depths of the ancient forest, there was a creature. No one knew its looks nor where it really lives, despite that the ones that saw the creature were condemned to death by the creature itself.

Scientists discovered that the creature is a "deformed/rotten human body" which is abnormally high due to the bones growing faster than a normal person so the creature is at least 8 feet tall, and due to the growth, the skin starts to rip from the joints, the head is approximately 20 inches big due to the jaw deformation, there is a so called a "smile line" on the creatures face since the jaw is bigger and it ripped the faces skin. The teeth are five inches long, made for hunting and defense. At that moment scientists knew that the creature was caused by a virus named "Grognito virus "that arose from the grognit feces that live on leaves and fed off blood like parasites, and if they get in contact with a human, they will rot from the inside until the parasite multiplies and takes over the body and brain.

There was a group of college kids that decided to get rid of the creature and parasite once and for all, the leader of the group: Ajax, he's a twenty-seven-year-old male, he got bitten from the parasites 5 times but never got affected due to the medication him and his group invented. Amillya is a twenty-year-old woman that does the research about the creature and notifies the team about the news of the virus, Anastasia (Stas) is twenty five years old and she is the one responsible for the safety percussions and checks for any safety hazards, Maksym (Max) is the engineer of the group, he's twenty one years old and he made a gadget which certainly helps them locate the nests of the parasites. Xylen is a twenty-four old woman that was the one who made the radioactive acid to dismantle the nests without giving a warning to the creature or without a trace of dismantling. Milan and Christine are the comforters of the group, they are both twenty-three years old, they always comfort they're teammates if they need it.

The group decided to go on a hunt for the nests of the parasites, but it all went downhill when Max accidentally stepped into a nest full of parasites unknowingly, and the parasites started to make their way up his body slowly eating him alive, the team couldn't do anything about it since it was far too late.

Xylen: Ajax! Get the team away! It's too late to save him, we need to run! Now!

Ajax: I'm already on it! Amilliya, Stas, Milan, Christine! Get to our truck, we need to hide! The creature will come here at any moment.

As soon as Ajax finished the sentence, they all heard a whiney growl, and they all knew that the creature was near.

Xylen: Shoot! Quick, get in! I will drive!

The team left as fast as they could, there was no going back now, Max was gone, and they could not do anything about it. Soon, they got to their base and needed a new plan.

Ajax: Team, we need a new plan, Christine, you are going to be the one with the tracking device, you're the most careful one. Xylen, you are going to go with Christine, we need to split up, Milan, you're going with me, we'll be checking the coordinates of the creature and notify the team from the headsets. Stas and Amiliya, you two are going to stay here in the lab and try to find out a way how the parasites develop and react to certain things, got it?

Everyone: Got it boss!

Ajax: All right let's go do this; lets destroy that thing once and for all!

At that point, the team needed to make better decisions and not falter, so no more people die or get lost. Without waiting, the team went to the forest that was terminated due to the profusion of nests in the area. Xylen and Christine were cautiously and efficiently burning the nests one by one. And soon there was less and less nests but there was still a hazard for the health of people and animals; there are more animals that are close to extinction, which isn't good for the ecosystem. Meanwhile, Stas and Amilliya were in the lab, with a couple of parasites to evaluate the different acids and chemicals, and they found out that nitrogen peroxide and two more acids they made was one of the best chemicals to burn the parasites quickly and efficiently.

Christine: Uhh… Xylen?

Xylen: Yes? What is it?

Christine: I think we've found the hot spot that made all these nests...

Xylen: Oh... God…

Xylen and Christine looked down at the profound hole that had at least ten billion parasites inside it.

Xylen: No wonder why this area was terminated… I need to notify Ajax; we need a stronger chemical or acid then this…

As Xylen called Ajax, Christine tried to find the so called "queens hive " of the nest.

Xylen: Hey Ajax, we need to know if Stas and Amilliya found something stronger than this acid because Christine and I found the mother lode of those brain eating wiggly things.

Ajax laughed.

Ajax: Yeah, Amilliya just called me before you did and said her and Stas found a chemical that burns the parasites faster and more efficiently, it's a mix of nitrogen peroxide and two other acids that we made, the noyu-87 and hyega.

Xylen: Excellent! We need it like right now, thank you!

Ajax: Yeah, yeah, I'm on it, just give me a second and I'll bring it to your coordinates.

Xylen: Thanks Ajax, just be quick cause I'm sure none of us want to deal with the wiggly wagers anymore.

Ajax tried not to chuckle, but it slipped out, and they both started laughing.

Ajax: Well from what I see, the acid is supposed to be at your location in 3 minutes, just so you know.

Xylen: Alright, I'll call you if something goes wrong or if we succeed. See you, bye.

Xylen ended the call before Ajax could reply to her and soon, the chemicals arrived.

Xylen: Christine, the chemicals came, let's get back to work before the other nests regenerate.

Christine: Got it, let's end this little parade these parasites are having.

In the truck, where Ajax and Milan where, they suddenly saw something on the radar and it looked like there was at least ten of them, and they both knew that it was them, it was the creatures, and Milan immediately went to admonish Christine and Xylen.

Milan: Xylen, Christine! Stop whatever you're doing! It's the creatures, they are approaching you! Hide somewhere high and out of sight, and stay quiet, you both know that their hearing is excellent. Stay safe!

Xylen and Christine: Shoot!

Christine: I know a good spot here in the woods, I've been here before, follow me!

As Christine lead Xylen to a small and secret treehouse, the creatures roamed around them, not seeing them. But luckily there was a stash of poisoned and acidic

flashbangs that Christine stored for these types of moments. As the creatures were closer to the treehouse, they could poison them and blind them at the same time.

Christine: Xylen, look. It's Max… Jesus… he looks….

Xylen: Disgusting and creepy? Yeah…

Christine: I wish we could turn him back…

Xylen: Hmm… maybe we can, do you still have the medicine that we used to save Ajax?

Christine: Oh my God yes, I do! But… how do you plan to get him near us without dying?

Xylen: Don't worry, I have a plan. I'll take one of the flashbangs, empty them and put in the medication. And I'll lure him here with a piece of meat.

Christine: I swear you're a genius sometimes, I feel like I'm talking with Albert Einstein himself.

Xylen laughed at that comment, jokes did come in handy when they both were in stressful situations. As Christine threw the flashbangs at the other creatures to kill them, Xylen was doing her best to try and get Max's attention, and it played off. As Xylen lowered the piece of meat down, she caught his attention, and as soon as he was close enough, Christine threw the flashbang with the medication. It took a moment to affect him, but once it did… they sadly weren't successful. Due to the damage of the brain cells and skin, it was far too late, and they had no other choice but to kill him for good.

When they were concluded with all the creatures, Ajax finally notified them.

Ajax: Excellent job girls, that was all of them, you are very resourceful.

Both girls: Thank you Ajax!

When Christine and Xylen got down from the treehouse, they immediately went back to the prompt nest, that was luckily still intact and the nests didn't multiply, they threw gallons of the chemicals they were given from Stas and Amilliya, and soon it all started burning and rotting, but due to the high levels of gasses they had to evacuate the neighborhood that lived near the forest. Soon, Ajax, Christina, Milan and Xylen got back to the base where the laboratory was, and they decided to take a well-deserved break, when suddenly, someone knocked at the door, Ajax decided to open it but he carefully checked the security cameras to see who it was, so that all of them don't get hurt if it was the creature, since some of them are very intelligent, but to his surprise, it was Stella, she was a part of the team but left since she had an " important business flight " to attend, but no one believed her. He went over to the door and unlocked it, letting Stella into the house, but something wasn't right, she

wasn't like herself, she acted more controlled, like someone replaced her brain for a parasite, but Ajax shook it off, thinking it was his paranoia over the past few years. When Stella got comfortable and sat on the couch with the rest of the team, they were all laughing, having fun and just relaxing after the hard work, but Ajax was still a little suspicious of Stella, and that's when he saw a scar on the edge of her hair line, so he decided to ask about it, but when he did, it was like she didn't even listen to him and she just laughed.

When he decided to pretend like he had no suspicion in her, everything he was afraid of to happen, was happening. Xylen excused herself after she ate some cookies that Stella bought, and she went to her bedroom to get some rest, but the rest of the group didn't think much of it, so they weren't worried too much, thinking she just got a stomachache from eating too much cookies.

After time passed, Stella asked Ajax if she could have some juice, and he got to the kitchen to give her a glass of orange juice, and when he came back everything seemed normal, so he did not think much of it. Hours passed, Xylen came back, but her face seemed deformed, but no one even bothered about it, like nothing was wrong with her. Ajax started thinking that he was going lunatic and that it might have been because he had an unhealthy sleeping schedule, so he went to his room to get a thermometer to see if he was burning up since he knew that he hallucinated sometimes when he got sick too due to the side effects of the times he got bitten by the parasites. Suddenly, it was very quiet, too quiet, and he knew something was wrong, so he decided to go back downstairs to see what was going on, that was when he saw all of his team members on the floor, faces deformed, their bodies bent in the wrong ways, that's when he saw Stella, it was not her anymore, she was talking in a disembodied voice, and her neck was bent upside down. When she started walking towards him, he couldn't move, speak or yell, he was just stuck there like a statue, like he was restrained, but before she could reach him, an alarm went off, and that's when he realized…*it was all just a* ***dream***.

šifra: EchoMyst2
mentor: Biljana Beljan
institution: Škola za turizam, ugostiteljstvo i trgovinu, Pula
autor: Lana Brajković

THE VOICE OF FATE

I am not a morning person. At all. If I don't get my full 8 hours of sleep before waking up, I'll be in a bad mood for the rest of the day, which is a problem, especially since I can't fall asleep before 11 o'clock. And that's precisely the reason I'm in a bad mood now. Today I had to wake up at 3 a.m. to go to the airport. I have to go back to London to visit my mom for the holidays. She made it very clear to me that I better visit as soon as possible, hence proving it was 4 a.m. currently. At least driving the car is keeping me awake. Keeping my eyes on the road, focused on where to turn next is helping me not to think about how tired I am. My sorrow turns into glee as I notice I've finally reached the airport.

The airport parking lot was almost empty when I pulled in, the overhead lights flickering in the late-night haze. My headlights cut through the darkness, casting long shadows on the cracked pavement as I slowed to find a space. I guess most people get here by taxi. I made my way up to the airport which was humming with the usual noise—overhead announcements, the shuffle of footsteps, the soft clatter of rolling luggage—it made me feel uneasy. I hate flying. Had hated it for years. No matter how many flights I'd been on, the unease has never gone away. The cramped spaces, the turbulence, the feeling of being locked inside a metal tube suspended high above the ground—it always made my heart race. But I have to ignore these thoughts for now. I'm doing this for my mom. As I was making my way to security, still gripping my luggage, my phone rang. When I looked at my phone, I saw it was a call from an unknown number. Normally, I wouldn't have stopped to answer but I was expecting a call about a job I was interviewed for the previous week. I took a deep breath.

"Hello?", I asked as I placed the phone closer to my ear.

"Do not get on the plane", a woman's voice was garbled and strange as if her vocal cords had been shredded, and she was desperately trying to choke out speech. Before I could even comprehend what was she saying, she had already hung up. I froze. I already had an unnerving fear of flying, there was no way I was about to get on a

7-hour flight now. I turned around and headed towards a shop in the airport. Anything to get my mind off of this. I figured I could just get on the next flight.

Three hours later I was still watching from the airport food court as every TV in the terminal lit up with crash footage of the plane I was supposed to be on. No survivors, not a single one. I tried to trace the call, but there was nothing to trace. There was no evidence my phone had ever received a call around that time. I wasn't making it up. I can't have been. That wasn't the only call. Throughout the years, there were only a few, but they were always right. And I always listened. "Do not go on that date tonight." Three months later, my would-be date was convicted of killing five women. All with my hair color and same build. They were all found in the forest near the diner he offered to take me to. "Do not go on that road trip tonight." A truck lost control and crashed into a line of cars. All cars crushed. All drivers dead. In the exact road, I was planning to drive through. No matter if I got a new phone, or moved across the country, the calls were always there. I could almost feel the presence of the caller, that woman, watching over me. If I didn't have that job interview I was waiting to hear back from, I would've never answered that call. And that would be it for me. It always felt like something was coming for me. But there was always this warped voice to protect me.

I had a bad feeling about this vacation I was planning to go on with my friends. We've been planning to go on a weekend get-away for months now, but with the jobs we all have it's been hard and stressful to organize. But now that it's finally just a few days away, it feels too good to be true. "La Scarola". I've been wanting to go to this restaurant for ages now, but I could never afford it. But now, here I am, standing in front of it. Me and my friends decided to save up to go here so we could spend our last few days in town somewhere nice. And now, as I'm walking in, I don't think I've ever been somewhere fancier. "Jenna!", one of my friends calls out as I get closer to their table. I wave and sit down at the table next to my best friend, Lily. "I still can't believe we're here! I mean, who would've thought that we could afford to eat at a place like this", she exclaims, "or go on a weeklong vacation to LA!". Another friend, Sarah, grinned. "I can't believe we leave in just three days! I've been counting down the days." She spins around with excitement. "This is going to be so much fun! We'll have the best time - I just know it." That sentence puts shivers down my spine. I'm probably just overreacting, right? What are the chances something will happen on that day specifically? I'm probably just paranoid. Or that's just what I keep telling myself. In reality, this trip and the haunting phone call I'm about to receive are the only things on my mind right now. I look around the table for a brief moment. Oh crap!

They definitely noticed I was thinking about something. "Yeah, sounds great…", I say quietly, just to add something to the conversation. Lily looks at me with a worried expression on her face and suddenly puts her hand on my shoulder. "You need to relax, Sarah! You've been so stressed with work lately. This is going to be the perfect break for you." Yeah… work. In response, I just nod and switch my focus to the drink on the table in front of me. "Wait, what's up with you? You seem kind of off. You've been kind of quiet for the last few minutes", Sarah chimes in. "Yeah, you're usually the loudest one at the table. Come on, what's going on? Are you nervous about something?", another friend chimes in as well, each of them looking more worried than the last. Why was I cursed with such good friends? "No, It's not that. I-It's just that I have a bad feeling about this trip. Maybe we should sit this one out", I say, looking over at each person at the table, hoping for a sign of approval. But to no avail. "Are you crazy?! This trip is the only thing we've been looking forward to for the last few months! It's the only thing that got me through those long shifts at work!" As Sarah said that, the others at the table quickly looked at me, analyzing my every move to find a reason or an explanation of what I was saying. "Look, I'm just a little scared. I mean, what if something bad happens?". Lily looks at me with a calm expression on her face. I love that about her. No matter what nonsense comes out of my mouth, she will always support me or calmly try to reason with me. "What are you scared of exactly? Is it flying? Cause I told you we could just go by bus since I know you have a fear of flying", she says, giving me a reassuring look. "No, it's just that... n-never mind." As I utter these words, Rosie, who's the most assertive and the spokesman of the group, stands up and calmly yet clearly starts speaking. "Hey, listen… we've all had that moment where we get nervous about something—about trips, about big decisions. But maybe this is just a little pre-trip anxiety. It doesn't mean something bad will happen. You know you can trust us, right? We'll be there, no matter what!" Everyone at the table looks at each other, then they look at Rosie, then me and smile reassuringly. "You know what? You're right! We're going to have an amazing time, and nothing can ruin it!", I say, now surer than ever. "I'll drink to that!", Sarah says as she lifts her glass up, and everyone joins her. I take a sip of my drink and already feel a lot better than before.

The words of my friends really stuck with me. Maybe it was just pre-trip anxiety? Unfortunately, my happiness is cut short by the sound of a notification on my phone. I take it out of my pocket and turn it on to see I received a text message, from an unknown number. No. No way. This can't be. Can it be…her? The unknown caller? The person whose appearance I've been dreading for the past months? But they sent

me a voice message. They've never sent me a voice message before. It's always strictly calls. "Hey, Jenna? You've been looking at your phone for minutes now. Is everything okay?", Lily asks quietly, gently putting her hand on my shoulder. "Oh, yeah! I'm fine, it's just my mom. Don't worry", I say, quickly turning off my phone and putting it back into my pocket. There's no way I can open the voice message and listen to it now. I have to wait until I get home at least. Besides, I'd like a few more hours of fun before I listen to it and get forced to convince my friends to drop the trip. What will I even say? They're all so headstrong, even if I drop out, they'll definitely just go without me. I have to think of some elaborate lie. Maybe I can tell them my mom's sick or something. They definitely won't leave my side after that. I know it's a messed-up lie, but I have to do anything I can think of to keep them safe. They mean too much to me. Anyway, I should probably think about this later. For now, I just want to have fun with my friends.

A few hours go by quickly, all of my friends are getting tipsy, but I don't bother. I want to be completely sober when I get home and receive those soul-crushing news. It's getting pretty late so my friends and I split, and I head to my car. As I'm driving home, I think about the voice message again. It's still really weird to me how "it" had sent me a voice message this time. They usually always call, so this is very out of the ordinary. Maybe this voice message isn't from them. Maybe it's just a random person who sent a voice message to the wrong number. It happens all the time so I shouldn't be surprised. I was thinking about that unknown caller so much that I simply jumped to conclusions too quickly. Yeah, that's definitely it!

My worries lowered as I pulled into the driveway of my apartment complex. As I get closer to the front door, I clutch my purse, desperately trying to find my keys. As I was clawing my way into my purse, I suddenly heard a strange noise from inside my apartment. Something like heavy breathing and the sound of a monotone voice. I was just hearing things, I thought. It must've just been the voices of my friends, still stuck in my head from earlier that night. Or just my imagination acting up? My mom has always told me I had a wild imagination growing up, it even stuck with me through adulthood. Eventually, I find them and enter my home. I take my shoes off and enter my room. Finally! Home at last. With high hopes, I take my phone out of my pocket and turn it on. Reluctantly, I click on the voice message in position my phone closer to my ear. I suddenly feel my stomach drop as I listen to the voice sounding horrifically distorted, crackling with more urgency than ever before. I slowly look around my apartment, eyes darting at every corner, as the voice on the phone says: "Don't go home after dinner tonight."

šifra: TNBU25
mentor: Sanja Vukelić
institution: Graditeljsko-geodetska škola Osijek
autor: Noa Antonović

THE NOISE BETWEEN US

Lila has always found comfort in music, from a young age she has listened to it with her parents. It was why she became a sound engineer, specializing in restoring old audio recordings. Her latest job was to restore a collection of recordings from a neighbourhood arts festival over a decade ago. Most of those tapes were random sounds and recordings. However, one set of tapes caught her attention. The label on the cassette box was written in messy black ink, it said - Theo. Lila played the first tape. A gravelly voice filled the room, introducing itself as Theo. The recordings captured moments of his life, not only as a street musician but also as an artist working on unreleased tracks. His songs were emotional, she really liked them. The songs were describing his thoughts on the city and his life. Each tape seemed to tell a story about a part of his life. Some even told stories about people in the city from his perspective, he watched children grow up, people being happy, sad, angry... he saw everything. The final tape talked about his fear of being forgotten. He really wanted people to remember his music. He worked for years to write those songs but it would go unnoticed. The final tape ended cutting off mid-sentence, leaving questions that Lila couldn't ignore. Where is Theo now? Why had his story stopped so suddenly? The next morning, still thinking about Theo, Lila asked her supervisor at the community centre if she knew anything about him. Carmen remembered him as a musician who used to perform near the old coffee shop on the main street but had vanished years ago. She described Theo as a very talented but troubled man. Determined to learn more, Lila visited the coffee shop.

The shop was now a trendy restaurant, its original look replaced with modern decor. She spoke with a regular customer, an elderly woman named Margot, who remembered Theo. Margot mentioned that Theo had been close to another musician, Daniel, who might know more about what had happened. Lila tracked him down to a small apartment above a record store. He did not want to talk at first, guarding memories that seemed painful to revisit. Eventually, he opened up about Theo. They had been best friends, bound by their love of music and the dream of

creating something lasting. Theo, Daniel explained, had an intensity about him, a need to pour everything into his art. He had been working on an album; a collection of songs that he hoped would capture the essence of his life and the city he loved. However, his perfectionism ruined it. Theo had pushed himself too hard. After that, he disappeared, leaving behind only a notebook filled with lyrics and sketches about unfinished tracks. Daniel handed the notebook to Lila, his expression a mixture of sadness and hope, as if passing on a piece of Theo's soul. The notebook contained a map of the city with a circle drawn around a wooded area outside of the city. The next day, Lila followed the map. The wooded area was quiet, completely opposite of what she was used to. After some searching, she discovered a small cabin tucked away behind the trees. The sound of a guitar could be heard through the air, playing a melody she recognized from the tapes.

Inside the cabin, she found Theo. He had taken a break from the world, seeking peace in the quiet of nature. The man she met was older and quieter than the voice on the tapes. He explained that the noise and chaos of the city had become too much for him. Creating music had once been his lifeline, but over time, the pressure to meet expectations had made it feel like a job rather than something he enjoyed. In the woods, he had found peace he had not known before, and he had continued to write and play music just for himself. Theo's cabin was filled with notebooks, instruments, and recordings, a personal archive of his ongoing journey. She expressed her belief that his music deserved to be shared, not as a finished product but as a reflection of his life and struggles. Theo seemed hesitant, torn between his love for creating and his dislike of the world that had once overwhelmed him. When Lila returned, she began the process of digitizing his tapes and fragments from his notebook. She carefully pieced together unfinished tracks, guided by the melodies and lyrics Theo had left behind. Each song became a collaboration between the past and the present. She included a final note in the collection: "Theo is alive. He's found his quiet, but his music will always be here to remind us of the noise between us." The recordings, along with Theo's unreleased songs, were released as a part of the community archive. Once again, Theo's voice and music echoed throughout the city, touching the lives of those who listened. Through his art, Theo left a huge mark, ensuring that his story would not be forgotten. The city, in turn, was reminded of the beauty found in the spaces between silence and sound.

Lila continued to visit Theo's cabin regularly. Each visit revealed more of his world. The cabin was a treasure of creativity - there were shelves filled with handwritten notebooks, instruments propped in every corner and tapes stacked in boxes. Lila spent hours sorting through these items as Theo played softly in the background or

scribbled notes in his journals. One day, she brought a portable player loaded with his restored songs. She placed it on the porch railing and pressed play. The gravelly voice from the past filled the air, intertwining with the rustle of leaves and the distant calls of birds. Theo stepped out of the cabin. He stood there for a long time, only his fingers twitching slightly as if searching for an invisible guitar. The next day, Lila arrived with a new idea in her mind. She did not say a word, simply unzipped her bag and began setting up a portable microphone and small recording equipment. Theo watched from a distance. When everything was ready, she asked him to join her. He picked up his guitar and sat on the porch steps. The recording session began slowly, but as the day went on, his music became more fluid, more alive. Lila sat nearby, making notes on her tablet, capturing ideas for how these pieces could come together. By sunset, the cabin was filled with the sound of new melodies, a blend of past and present that carried Theo's dreams.

Weeks turned into months, and Theo's trust in Lila deepened. She proposed a small live performance, something gentle and serene, away from the city's noise and chaos. Theo resisted at first, but eventually he agreed. Lila began organizing the event. She scouted locations and settled on a small clear place near Theo's cabin. It was an open space surrounded by tall trees. On the day of the performance, the clearing was decorated at Theo's request. Chairs were arranged in neat rows and the small audience, mostly composed of friends, neighbours and those who had been moved by Theo's story, gathered quietly. As the music began, the clearing seemed to hold its breath. Theo's playing was full of emotion. The audience sat in silence until the last note faded into the night. Then, as one, they rose to their feet. Their applause was quiet but deeply genuine. When the clearing finally emptied, Theo stood in the silence, his guitar still in his hands, watching the now empty chairs. The empty clearing appeared frozen in time, with the sound of applause still lingering in the cool night air. Theo stood motionless, his guitar resting lightly against his chest. The simplicity of the moment, the quiet after the music, filled him with a strange mix of contentment and unease. He had played for others for the first time in years, not for fame or recognition, but as a way to reconnect with a world he had once left behind. Lila watched from the edge of the clearing, her heart heavy with pride and curiosity. She wanted to understand more about the man who had created such hauntingly beautiful music but who seemed haunted by something he had yet to share.

As the days turned into weeks, Theo withdrew into the solitude of his cabin once more. Lila continued to visit, but she noticed a shift in his demeanour. He was quieter, his moments of music punctuated by long stretches of silence. One afternoon, while sorting through another box of tapes, Lila stumbled upon a tape that was dif-

ferent from the others. Unlike the rest, which were neatly labelled with dates and titles, this one had no markings at all. Its clear plastic case revealed nothing about its contents. She hesitated for a moment, then decided to listen. The sound crackled to life, and she immediately recognized Theo's voice, but it was different, lower, softer, burdened with something heavy. The recording began with the faint strumming of a guitar, but as the music progressed, Theo's words painted a picture darker than anything she had encountered on his other tapes. It was a story of regret, loss, and of a choice that had left an unshakable scar. The tape spoke of a moment in Theo's past, a night when he had been on the verge of something extraordinary but had made a decision that changed everything. Lila could hear the pain in his voice as he described a friendship that had unravelled, a partnership that had ended abruptly. The narrative was fragmented, the details obscured by the passage of time, but the core of the story was clear, Theo had walked away not only from the city but from someone who had been central to his life and music. Lila's heart raced as she pieced together what she had heard. This was more than just an artistic struggle or the pressure of perfectionism. Theo had left the city not to escape fame or failure but to escape himself and the choices he had made. She realized that the man standing before her now, quiet and introspective, was still carrying the weight of that night.

Unable to ignore what she had discovered, Lila returned to the cabin with the tape in her hand. She placed it gently on the table beside Theo's guitar, her silent gesture speaking volumes. Theo's eyes fell on the tape, and for a long moment, he said nothing. Then, without a word, he picked it up and walked outside, his steps heavy against the wooden porch. For hours, Theo sat beneath the tall trees, the tape resting in his hands like an object too fragile to hold. As the sun began to set, he returned to the cabin and began to play his guitar. The music was raw, each note carrying a depth of emotion that Lila had never heard before. It was as if Theo was confronting his past through the strings of his instrument, using music as a way to reconcile with the memories he had long buried. The next morning, Theo handed Lila a worn out notebook. Inside were pages filled with lyrics and sketches, many of them unfinished. He told her to take them, to do whatever she thought was right. Though his words were few, Lila understood what he was offering—pieces of himself that he was finally ready to let go of. Over the following weeks, Lila worked tirelessly to compile the songs and recordings into a cohesive collection. She wove together fragments from the tapes, lyrics from the notebook and new recordings that Theo had created during their sessions. The result was an album that told Theo's story in its entirety, not just the beauty of his music but the pain, the regret, and the resilience that defined him.

When the album was complete, Lila organized another event, this time in the city. It was held in a small, intimate venue, with only a few rows of chairs and soft lighting that created an atmosphere of warmth and reflection. Theo reluctantly agreed to attend, though he refused to perform. He sat in the back, his presence unnoticed by most, as the album played for the first time. As the final song faded, the room erupted into quiet applause, the kind that comes from genuine appreciation rather than mere politeness. Theo sat in the shadows, his eyes closed, his hands clasped tightly together. He could feel the weight of the past lifting, the music no longer a burden but a testament to his journey. In the weeks that followed, the album gained a quiet but steady following. People across the city began to talk about Theo's music, not as a relic of the past but as something deeply relevant and human. It was no longer just a collection of songs; it was a story, a connection, a reminder of the complexities of life and art.

Theo continued to live in his cabin, but his visits with Lila became more frequent. Together, they worked on new projects, blending his raw talent with her skill for restoration and storytelling. Even though Theo never fully returned to the world he had left behind, his music found its place there, ensuring that his voice would never be forgotten. Through his art, he had found a way to heal, and through her dedication, Lila had helped him share that healing with the world.

šifra: 01LF2025
mentor: Snježana Krištofik Juranić
institution: Srednja škola Isidora Kršnjavoga Našice
autor: Leona Fodor

THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS TOWN

The hot summer sun heated the air as Jess stepped off the bus and onto the gravel dirt road. She is more used to the cold mountainous air, so the sudden change in the temperature made sweat begin to pool on her back. The bright yellow rays of sun made her squint her eyes, looking around and taking in the new surroundings. To the west, the town of Covenrock stretched out, full of old buildings and faded houses. Her new home, whether she liked it or not.

Jess had grown significantly tired of the constant family issues back home. The seemingly never-ending yelling and conflicts were suffocating her, so she made the decision to pack her bags and move to Covenrock. A small town for which she hoped would bring the peace her soul needed so much. She read about Covenrock online. People were praising it for its picturesque landscape. Old storefronts lined the main street, gentle splashing of the river just outside of town and the towering mountains that surrounded the town. To Jess, this seemed like the perfect town to escape from her miserable everyday life.

With the newfound hope in her heart, she slowly made her way into the town. Surprisingly, the streets were empty and dusty. Perhaps, it's too early for the locals to come out. She followed the directions her landlord gave her and soon found herself ascending upon a hill. Sure, it's going to be exhausting to walk up the hill every day, but she's finally free from her family's troubling grip. However, she couldn't help but notice that the more she walked up the hill, the further she moved away from the town itself and stepped into the more rural area of Covenrock. The trees grew thicker, almost as if they were hovering over her.

Jess continued walking, listening to the soft breeze rustling the leaves around her. Finally, she reached her new home. A rather small, yet typical country house sat just at the edge of the tree line. Her eyes quickly landed on the landlord who was waiting for her on the front porch. He was a somewhat rough looking man. His skin was

wrinkly and his long hair was partially covered by a cowboy hat. The flannel shirt he was wearing had holes and tears in some of the places, and the blue jeans he wore were nearly faded from so much washing. A typical country man at that.

''Hey." His voice was also that of a typical country man. Raspy and rough with a thick western accent. Truly something a true country man could possess. ''Don't see many women 'round here in the good ol' Covenrock." He continued, with a toothpick in his mouth, swirling it from side to side as he spoke. Jess laughs awkwardly.

''Here." He handed her the keys to her new home and walked past her, down the road back into town. Before he had gone too far, he turned to her. ''Don't go into the woods... Coyotes like hangin' 'round there." Jess was taken aback by this. He said it so calmly, yet there was a hint of threat in his voice. Maybe this is a local thing, she's not used to this type of lifestyle, but something inside her tugged at her subconscious. Telling her that this man is up to no good. But, on the other hand, maybe she's looking too hard into this. She shook her head at her thoughts and put the keys into the keyhole and unlocked the door to her house.

Jess stepped in, the creaky wooden floor nearly cracking beneath her. She breathed in the strong woodsy smell of the home and sighed in relief. Peace started to wash over her body and her shoulders finally relaxed. The weight of the past was finally put behind her. She looked around, scanning her new home. It was an old house, for sure, but it was still comfortable and had that homey feel to it. She made her way into the living room which had a small couch in the middle of it and a television set right in front of it.

Jess put her bags on the couch and smiled to herself. This is perfect! She plopped on the couch, unbearable happiness creeping in. She remembers all the sleepless nights she had had because of her family's constant fighting. She lived with the desire to just get out of her hometown and live somewhere as perfect as Covenrock is. Her wish finally came true and that bombarded her with happiness. She began laughing out loud, like she had completely lost her mind, but she didn't care. She was finally free.

Jess decided to take it easy for the rest of the day and familiarize herself with the house more. She unpacked her belongings, taking her time to find the perfect place for everything she brought with her. After she had done that, she sat on the single rocking chair that was on the front porch and just spent the rest of the day looking out at the beautiful countryside. Soon, evening started to slowly cover the sky. Jess watched the sunset and admired as the sky changed color to a beautiful orange. Even after the sun was long gone, she continued to sit on the chair, listening to the sound of crickets singing in the dead of night. For the first time, she went to sleep without a heavy heart.

However, she was abruptly awoken from her deep slumber by a persistent noise in the night. The room was pitch black, indicating that it was still late in the night. Jess opened her eyes, confused and shaken up. She lay in her bed for a moment, her ears perked up, listening to every detail of the sound. It sounded like footsteps, something or someone was walking around her house. She carefully got out of bed and crept towards the bedroom window. The curtains were shielding her from whatever was outside, but she moved them to the side slowly and peeked outside.

In the distance, just at the edge of the tree line, she saw a weird creature on all fours, hunchbacked. Her heart sank and she immediately ducked down and put the curtains back in place. Her mind was racing as well as her heart. Then, she remembered. Coyotes. She let out a deep sigh of relief and her heart slowed down. She chuckled to herself and went back to bed.

In the morning, Jess woke up finally feeling rested after so many years. She got out of bed and walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water. As she was drinking, she looked outside and her eyes spotted something in the grass, just at the edge of the tree line. She decided to go see what it was. She first changed into something casual because she was planning to take a walk to town anyway.

She stepped outside, the warm breeze hitting her face almost instantly. Jess stood in place for a few minutes, just enjoying the sensation and the new feeling of hope, breathing in the fresh countryside air. She began walking towards the thing in the grass, closer to the woods. The branches of the trees blocked out most of the sunlight, making the area around the thing in the grass look dark.

As she took the final step towards the thing, she was finally able to identify what it was. In the grass, there was a decapitated deer. Its flesh was already turning gray and the maggots were crawling in and out of it. There was a pool of blood around the neck stump and the head was resting a bit further away, eyes lifeless and mouth agape. Jess gasped, nearly falling backwards. Coyotes? Probably. She frowned at the disgusting sight once more before deciding to go into the nearby shed to find a shovel and bury the deer. However, she couldn't find a shovel nowhere, even in her house. She sighed before making her way down the hill and towards the town to buy a shovel.

Jess walked down the hill, but the feeling of isolation started to hit her. She is so far away from the town itself that she didn't even notice it at first. The sudden feeling of eeriness and vulnerability made her look over her shoulder, her racing mind expecting to see something following her, but there was nothing behind her. Her paranoia slowly kicked in and even the trees looked threatening to her now. She quickened her pace, just wanting to get back into some type of civilization. She felt her heartbeat in her head as the forest seemed to press in on her, the darkness reaching out to her.

She was nearly running as she stumbled down the hill, finally entering the streets of Covenrock. However, she could feel a strange tension in the air, as if the whole town was holding its breath. Even the towering mountains were surrounded by the misery of the gray fog that had befallen the town suddenly. The streets were empty once again, just like they were when she first arrived here. The buildings and the storefronts all seemed to be closed down. Jess was confused. This scene was the complete opposite of what she read online. Something's wrong with this town.

Jess walked down the narrow streets, her eyes spotting the only working store. She walked up to it, noticing how the windows were cracked and dirty. The sign above the door was so faded she could barely read the words 'welcome' plastered on it. She entered the store and was met with a scruffy looking man behind the counter who gave her a strange look. Jess picked out the cheapest shovel and put it on the counter and handed the man money for it. He counted really slowly, his eyes never leaving her. He finally counted the money and stuffed it into the register.

Jess was creeped out by this whole encounter and left the store hurriedly. The streets were still quiet and empty, but she eventually spotted a group of people sitting in front of a closed down storefront. They were whispering something amongst themselves, but it didn't take long for Jess to notice they were talking about her. Whatever. She expected something like that as she is a new resident in Covenrock. Jess decided to wave at them. For some reason. She waved, holding the shovel in her hand. The gesture felt weird, waving a large shovel at a group of people who seemed to be watching her. Upon seeing the shovel and the waving, the group quickly got up and walked away fast, their faces pale. Jess watched in confusion, her mind unable to process how strange this gesture truly was.

She decided to walk around the small town for a few more hours and when she noticed the first signs of nightfall, she decided it was time to go home. Jess sighed, looking up at the hill in front of her and began her exhausting journey back home. As she walked, the eeriness came back. She felt watched, her eyes darting from the other side of the woods to another. The trees stretched out on the road ahead, the shadows of the branches looking like broken and gnarled fingers. Her breathing became ragged as she hurried up the hill, feeling as if something was going to attack her at any moment.

Soon, her house came into view and her body relaxed. Then, she remembered the reason she went to town in the first place. The dead deer. With the shovel in hand, she made her way towards the part where she saw the deer. Her heart sank as she approached the spot. The grass was still flattened where the deer had laid, but the

deer itself was nowhere to be seen. Jess couldn't believe this. Was this all a part of her imagination? Did she imagine the whole thing? Is she going insane? The thought of it made her drop the shovel. The only logical explanation she had is that the coyote came back and dragged the deer back into the woods to finish it. Jess took a deep breath, picked up the shovel, put it in the shed and sat on the rocking chair on the front porch.

Her eyes were empty and emotionless as she stared into nothingness, letting her mind relax from all the paranoia she had been feeling recently. Just as she started to relax, her ears picked up the faint sound of a twig snapping in the distance. She leaned forward, looking at the dark woods. Silence. Then, another twig snapping. And another. Something was moving through the woods and coming closer to her house. Jess soon identified that whatever it was, was walking on all fours. The sound of the footsteps was getting closer and closer causing her fear to go over the roof.

When the thing was close enough for her to identify it, her eyes widened. It was that decapitated deer, moving towards her, its four legs moving with a strange motion. Jess was frozen in horror, watching as the deer moved closer. Nausea washed over her as she came face to face with something that should not be possible. She managed to snap herself back into reality and she rushed inside the house, locking the door. The deer walked on her front porch and stood in front of the door. Jess backed away from the door, hands shaking and her breathing shallow. Then, that thing, whatever it was, started knocking on the door.

''Leave me alone!" Jess screamed through a wave of tears, apparently into thin air because the thing continued knocking. And knocking. And knocking. It knocked until Jess finally succumbed to the fear and locked herself in her bedroom, shaking under the covers. The whole night, she could hear the deer walking around the house, sometimes stopping and knocking on her window too, and Jess prayed that it would just go away, but it never did.

The thing continued to torment her even after the sun rose and brightened up the whole area. She could see the headless deer through the curtains, the sun revealing its outline.

Jess lost track of time, hiding under the covers, occasionally looking at the outline in the window. Days passed and she was still in the same position, her mind stopped ignoring the feeling of hunger and thirst. It was only flooded with fear. She was just waiting for this thing to break the window and come inside the house and finally end her suffering, but it never did. Her mind didn't get a single moment of peace as she started to imagine all the gruesome things that the 'deer' could do to her if it managed to get inside.

She was left there, under the covers, until she finally succumbed to starvation and dehydration.

A month later, the landlord and his friend Bob were making their monthly visit to the locals and their houses. Upon entering Jess's house, which was strangely unlocked, the stench of death hit them hard. The landlord broke down the door to the bedroom where the smell was coming from, and he held back the urge to vomit upon seeing the sight. There, on the bed, Jess's corpse is in an active stage of decay. Her face is forever frozen in terror, her eyes wide and mouth agape, just like that deer.

''Hey, Bob! We got another one..." The landlord called out to his friend, and he came into the bedroom, shaking his head at the sight. They wrapped her body up in a body bag and carried it into the woods. They came to a small clearing in the forest and threw her body on a pile of a dozen other body bags, the exact reason why the landlord didn't want Jess to go into the woods.

Something is wrong with this town and the locals are responsible for it.

šifra: sunflower12039
mentor: Nikolina Šadić
institution: Gimnazija Andrije Mohorovičića Rijeka
autor: Ema Rogina

THIS IS NOT ABOUT CHRISTMAS

I never liked Christmas.

Okay, that's a lie. There was a time in my life when I liked it... a lot. But that was when I was still little and believed in miracles, Santa, and happiness. That was back when I was eight years old, getting up at 6 a.m. and waking up my little brother to go check under the tree with me. Or back when I was six and still played with the doll-like ornaments while decorating. Or back when I was nine and flipping through toy catalogues to tell Santa exactly which plushy I so desperately needed.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I wasn't always like this. And there truly was a time in my life when I just couldn't fall asleep on Christmas Eve, a time in my life when I would've given everything to have Christmas last just a little longer, but that time isn't now.

Today's date, showcased in bright letters on my phone's lock screen, is December 20th. Instantly, I started to feel more tired than I already was, only five days left before Christmas. I turned off my phone and sighed, shifting my focus back to the music playing in my ears. It was the last day of school before winter break, and I was taking the bus home. The day had long ended by the time my choir practice was over, and it was now 10:32 p.m. All I wanted was to get home, climb into my bed, and sleep through the next week. Fortunately, life had other plans.

In the next few seconds, a series of loud crash sounds were heard coming from outside, each one more audible than the previous, until finally whatever was making all that ruckus collided with the bus as well. Those who were standing during the crash were now on the floor, and those who weren't were grabbing onto their belongings and the handrails like their lives depended on it. I was sitting next to a window, in a seat facing a corner of the bus, so the crash only shook me up, but for a second, it still felt like my life was about to be over. The moment I gained control over my senses again, my eyes and ears were assaulted by what seemed like hundreds of flashing lights, and honking cars weren't helping me calm down.

It wasn't long before most people began stepping out of their vehicles, either to assess the damage or, like me, to search for another way home. I followed the other passengers and quickly got off the bus, my shoes making a big splash as I stepped onto the puddle that used to be a road. A city that flows, huh? Yeah, I can see where we got that from, I thought to myself. It had been raining for a while now. Not that there was anything unusual about that, this place is known for its rain, but it still managed to surprise me a little every time.

The consistent murmur it makes, like a soothing yet a sad lullaby. The kind that makes you forget about the world around you, the kind that makes your thoughts go quiet. The heavy and humid air it always brings along, the kind that makes you feel like you're in your room, falling asleep, but also suffocating slowly. The sight of it all was rather captivating as well. The gloomy night sky covered in storm clouds, the thin fog that started to form and raindrops sliding down any surface, all paired nicely with the colourful flashing lights of the cars.

It made me want to just stop and stand there for a little while, admiring the scene in front of me. Unfortunately, I couldn't just keep standing in the middle of the road, so I opened my umbrella and made my way past all the cars. After I got on the sidewalk, I headed to a nearby bus station for shelter.

Why did this have to happen now? Can't the universe give me a break? I just barely managed to survive this week, and now I have to deal with a pile-up? I sighed. I was exhausted. This last week had been hectic, to say the least.

And to top it all off, my parents keep asking me what I want for Christmas! Well, honestly, I'd rather we didn't have Christmas-

That's when a strange sound snapped me out of my thoughts. Rapid clattering on the hard, wet pavement, like the one made by... hooves? I swiftly turned to find the source of the sound. It was coming from an alleyway.

Under normal circumstances, I would've stayed where I was and called my dad to pick me up because it was 10 p.m., it was raining, and the road was now blocked. In other words, I had no way to get home. My parents were probably already worried sick, they always were. There was just one small problem: my phone had died about a second ago.

Therefore, I had to stay in the city and find another way to contact my parents anyway, so I might as well check out what was making that sound too. Not to mention, it was the sound of hooves when I knew for a fact that our city wasn't the type to randomly have ungulates around. We didn't have horses here, and deer were out of the question because of how far away the nearest forest was. Still, the mere thought of either of those animals being here enticed me.

I slowly made my way towards the alley, trying to be as quiet and discreet as possible. As I walked, I made sure not to make any splashes, and I tried not to move too much, so my puffer jacket didn't make any noise. It was still raining, but the storefront shades were helping with that. I wanted to see what was making that noise, but I didn't want it to notice me.

I also knew there was a possibility I really shouldn't be here, and a voice inside me was passionately telling me how I was going to die that very night, but I paid no mind to it. I decided to ignore the goosebumps I was getting and continued walking. That's when I heard it again. The same galloping sound I heard before, only this time it was accompanied by human footsteps as well.

What I saw next was straight out of a movie, because from the small, poorly lit alleyway, a huge reindeer appeared, with a man of equal size dressed in all red running after it. While I was walking over here, a million scenarios came to mind, but this was not something I anticipated. In fact, I was so shocked that when the animal changed its course and started heading towards me, I didn't have enough time to react and just fell onto the wet ground. Finally, a gentle, yet firm voice snapped me out of my shock.

"Are you alright, young miss?" he asked, extending a hand to help me up. My vision was still a bit blurry. It all happened so fast, but his voice was crystal clear in my mind. It was resonant and a bit gravelly, like the voice of a stern and loving grandpa. Without any further thinking, I replied: "Uh, yeah, I'm fine, I was just -" and that's when the gears started turning again.

My vision was no longer blurry. Instead, it was now clear as day, and in front of me stood a real-life reindeer and an older gentleman that genuinely looked like Santa Claus. And for a second there, I thought there might be a normal explanation. Maybe they hired this guy for the Advent? But then the reindeer spoke.

"You sure, love? You don't look fine to me." And that sweet, motherly voice was the last thing I heard before I passed out for good.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in a dark cabinet stacked to the brim with what looked like various files. I was laid on three simple chairs and covered with a soft and thick red coat. I got up and took another look at my surroundings. The filing cabinets all around me seemed to be filled with... letters. I was in a post office, that much was obvious.

But why?

Then I remembered how I ended up in this situation in the first place: the crash, the weird sound, the talking reindeer and... Santa Claus, the Santa Claus. It was in that moment that the cabinet door flew open, and in walked the man himself. "Oh, you're awake! Good, because we need to get out of here fast. I'll explain everything later. For now, just follow my lead." he commanded, slightly out of breath. I was fairly sure I was dreaming at this point, and I wanted to enjoy this adventure while it lasted, real or not. I grabbed the coat and wasted no time as I bolted after the surprisingly fast Santa Claus. As we sprinted down the hallway, all I could hear was the sound of my own heavy breathing and some sort of an alarm going off in the distance.

We finally stopped in front of an open window. He then turned around to face me and said the scariest thing you could say to someone: "Don't panic." In the blink of an eye, he proceeded to pick me up and jump out the window. My eyes widened in horror, and I watched as we kept getting closer and closer to the ground; fully certain I was going to die. Thankfully, about a second before we hit the ground, the infamous sleigh appeared at our feet. Well, his feet, I was still getting carried, and that was for the best because there was no way I would've landed on my feet.

"So, how'd you mess up this time?" a slightly annoyed voice asked. It took me a second to realize it was one of the reindeer speaking. Santa then put me down and sat himself on the front of the sleigh, taking the reins in his hands. He just rolled his eyes at the comment, replying with fake guilt in his voice. Who knew Santa could be so sarcastic?

"How was I supposed to know they upgraded their security? The last time they did that was 30 years ago! And can't you be a bit nicer, Vixen? We have a guest on board, you know. Now isn't the time to criticize me." He retorted, gesturing to me when the reindeer turned around. I couldn't stop myself from waving awkwardly.

"You two act like you're younger than that poor thing in the back seat. Please behave yourselves, both of you." A different reindeer said that, but this voice I recognized. It was the same reindeer I saw back near the alleyway. "How're you doing, sweet pea? You holdin' up okay? You had us real worried, you know." she asked, with the most gentle and sincere voice I have ever heard.

"Yeah, I'm holding up fine, I'm just... really confused. Can someone please fill me in on what's happening? 'Cause I thought this was a dream, but I have five fingers on each hand, and a pinch hurts. This means I'm not asleep, and this is real, and I'm currently flying. OH, I'm flying and talking to reindeer, and-" Before I managed to go completely insane, Santa Claus spoke up.

"Okay, little Miss, deep breaths, I said I was going to explain everything, and I'm going to. Unfortunately for you, the explanation is still going to sound a bit... bonkers."

He spent the next few minutes explaining how, every year, a few weeks before Christmas, he travels around the world to collect all the letters meant for him. Considering the postman can't reach his factory at the North Pole, any letters addressed to 'Santa' are thrown away after some time. So, before that happens, Santa travels to "deliver" them to himself. It isn't a difficult task - the post office is, like most other workplaces, empty at night, so it's much easier than delivering presents, but this time, he ran into a problem. Or, to be more precise, a nasty storm. The reins broke, causing him to lose control of the sleigh and crash. That's what caused the collision earlier.

"Wait. So, you were the one that caused the crash? How come no one saw you?" I asked, more than a bit puzzled.

"The real question is, how come you see me. I'm invisible, along with everything related to me. The reindeer, the sleigh, the factory, even the presents only become visible when you need to see them." he explained, grabbing the newly stitched reins to fly us higher. We were now riding above the clouds. The view was the same as when you fly by plane, only this way, your view wasn't limited by that tiny airplane window.

It was truly magnificent. The sea of clouds below us, and the beautiful night sky. It was like I was watching the Moon dance with the stars, with the soft jingle of the sleigh as their melody. The cold, thin air flowing through my hair. I felt at peace. But a different kind of peace from what I felt in the rain. I felt free. Free from the world, freed of all my worries and doubts. I felt happy. What intrigued me the most was how just a moment ago we were flying through the rain. What intrigued me the most was just how quickly things can change.

"You said the presents only turn visible once people need to see them, could it also be that I just needed to see you?" I pondered out loud.

"That's a theory, sure. But why would you need to see me?" he asked, even though he was looking at me like he already knew the answer. With those bright blue eyes and snow-white beard, it was hard to take him seriously. He looked like he had just walked out of a cartoon. Still, it got me thinking.

Why did I need to see him?

After a few moments of sitting in silence, enjoying the night sky, I finally spoke. "The last couple Christmases," I started, trying to find the right words, "didn't feel right."
"How so?" he asked.

"They felt dull, and tiring, like the spark it once had was gone. Waking up in the morning knowing there wasn't much to look forward to. Even snow stopped being fun."

"And this only happened with Christmas?"

"Well, no, actually." I replied, deep in thought. "Nothing feels right anymore."

"School is killing me, I feel like everyone's annoying, I haven't slept well in months, food makes me feel anxious, every move I make feels like a mistake and all my relationships are falling apart - my parents, my friends, my brother, every day I keep hoping something would change, but it never does. It's like I'm in a dark tunnel, and no matter how far I go, I can't get to the light. I just... I just want to feel normal again, be happy again." I said-By the time I finished I could feel tears start to form in my eyes.

"You know, child, sometimes waiting isn't enough. A lot of times, you must be the one to make a change. If you are unhappy with yourself, with your life, then you have to be the one to change it. Nothing ever happens on its own. Study, organize your days, talk to people, go to the gym, get a hobby, find something that makes you happy, and no matter what, always keep going. Once you start, don't let yourself fall back into old habits. It will be hard, and there will be times when you fail, but despite all that, you need to keep pushing. Otherwise, things will stay as they are, and you'll be unhappy and miserable till the end of your days ." As he said that, my vision started going blurry again, but I felt... inspired. Like this was the light I'd been waiting for, this was the sign. A sign for me to take control of my life. No more waiting. If I want something, I'll achieve it, no matter how long it takes. I'll be the one to escape the rain, I'll fly myself above the clouds. I will be the one to make a change.

And that starts right now. The first thing I must fix is...

"Oh no, my parents! What time is it? I have to get home! I-" But just as I started yelling, I realized it was unnecessary. Because suddenly, the night sky that was once above me disappeared, and everything faded to black once again.

Beep, beep, beep.

The sound of beeping was the first thing I heard. When I opened my eyes, I was met with the harsh shine of LED lights, along with the sight of an IV drip hanging above my head. I was in a hospital, it didn't take much to conclude that. Except this time, I was sure I was awake.

It wasn't long before my parents and brother burst into the room, all three gathering around my bed and showering me with hugs and kisses. After they assured themselves that I was alright, I found out that I was in a coma for three days. The crash turned out to be the last real thing I remembered; everything in between was just a figment of my imagination.

But the lesson I learned wasn't forgotten, and now was the time to start setting things right. "I love you guys," I said, "and I'm sorry if it ever seemed like I don't."

Change is coming, I can feel it. And who knows, maybe Christmas can be fun this year after all.

šifra: Chrysalis81
mentor: Nina Tuček
institution: Gimnazija Daruvar
autor: Kristijan Pintera

TORPOR

"Freedom. What is freedom? It's one of those elusive words, impossible to define with a single meaning. For each of us, it takes on a different shape, yet we all pursue it. It draws us in, like moths to a flame. All of us came to that place for the same reason: freedom. A solution to all our problems and answers to all our questions. Where the tortured might find escape and get themselves a chance to discover themselves… or so we were told.

My name is Ben Lull. I promised my daughter that I'd come back. But I don't think I can keep that promise any longer. To whoever is listening, please keep her safe for me. By the time you hear this tape, I'll be gone. This recording was made on July 6, 1982, at 3:52 AM. Don't follow the same path I did.

The only reason I'm here is because of it. It's calling me. Whenever I try to rest, I hear it whispering my name, that name, in the wind. It knows I can't forget it. A beauty so eternal, waiting for me. The freedom they promised me. They told me not to go there, not to listen to it, but I know it's the right choice.

My daughter, I'm sorry for the lies I've fed everyone. I'm sorry I destroyed our family in exchange for it, but I hope you'll understand in the end.

End recording."

As Ben presses the stop button, the tape ejects itself. He opens the glove compartment and places the cassette inside. With a jittery hand, he picks up his trusty double-action revolver and a security card. Looking out the window of his old Mustang, he's greeted by the familiar, rainy, and dimly illuminated environment that he called his second home. The street had the glow of a single streetlight, casting shadows across the wet asphalt. Beyond that, the cold Pacific Ocean stretches out, its waves crashing against the beach below. He takes a deep breath, steeling himself. It's time to step outside into the harsh reality.

He steps outside and locks the car, turning his gaze to the left to see a muddy trail leading downwards. Without any doubt, he follows it, for he has nothing left to lose.

"It's time to finish this never-ending nightmare. I tried to protect her for so long… 40 years if I recall correctly. That's a long time to keep a secret that nobody wants to hear." Ben continued, talking to the sky and the creatures of the forest. "Almost all things come to an end in due time."

After a short while of walking on foot, he reached a decrepit facility near the beach enclosed by a tall fence with barbed wire on top. "Six years had passed, and it still hasn't changed much." He approached the main entrance, only to be met with a detached computer. He sighed in disappointment, but he expected it. What caught his attention was a cut-out part of the wire on the left side of the entrance gate; it was small but enough for him to fit through. He put his revolver and card in his pockets and crawled through, scratching his body on the wire and groaning in pain as wounds started appearing on his body. He lay down on the grass while soaking in a mixture of rain and his blood; he felt like he could just lay down forever in the pain and sorrow, but then he heard an angelic-like voice, singing softly. It was here. With the power of sheer will, he picked himself up and went over to the entrance, which was kept intact.

A robotic voice suddenly stated: "Please slide a security card with your credentials to enter." A card scanner appeared from the wall with a mechanical hand holding it. He scanned his card.

"Level 2 detected. Welcome back Mr. Lull. It's been 2167 days since your last arrival at the Strategic Investigation and Research Institute of Science. This will be deducted from your paycheck."

A heavy door opened itself in front of him, revealing a dark corridor. A high-pitched screech echoed through the corridors. Ben cocked his gun.

"For her." he stated confidently. "I need to stay determined like I always was… wasn't I? I don't remember much of the past or myself honestly."

With his courage driving him forward, he ventured into the dark corridors of the facility. The hallway was completely dark, he didn't have a light source; however, he remembered that every facility had flashlight boxes in case of emergency. He looked to his left to find a flashlight box, but the flashlight was already taken.

In a sarcastic tone he exhaled, "Jeez, thank you so much, mister useful."

With his gun pointed into the darkness, he continued in the pitch black, walking slowly along the edge of the wall. Luckily, he managed to find a flashlight box. He quickly opened it and turned on the flashlight, but even then, he couldn't see much further since the hall only went down into the Earth. His heart rate started to heighten as the screeches continued echoing throughout the hall, but he knew he had to continue. She was waiting for him there - it, the truth. He didn't have time for delays. He wouldn't fail this time like so many times before.

He slowly descended the ceramic stairs, each footstep loud against the silence. After reaching the bottom, Ben saw a tape recorder with a cassette inside it. Curiosity got the better of him. He glanced around to make sure he was safe, then pressed play. A deep voice with a poetic accent crackled through the speaker:

"She… she was calling for me. They warned me not to come here. They told me I was delusional for even considering such a thing. They called it a monster, an illegal alien that must be slain under all cost. Their hatred manifested into the creature roaming these halls. Its purpose to destroy anything that dares come close to tranquillity.

She had been calling me for years, and I tried, stubbornly, to ignore her. I did what I was told, but last night, I could not take it any longer. I burned down the house and drove here with the last ounce of will I had. I can't stand this filthy flesh anymore. She needs me; she wants to be free from this cage. It will save me, and no one can convince me otherwise. I protected her for long enough, and now it is time for her to spread her wings… and fly.

People fear change. For thirty years, I was afraid too. Fear stole my life away. But she is not an illusion. If you're listening to this, you've most likely come here for the same reason I did. She promised me that everything would be okay. It might seem like our families will miss us, and maybe some people will; however, they are not on our side. They want us to be dead corpses breathing. If they can't take the truth, leave them be. It is for the best."

The recorder stopped spinning. Ben listened in awe; he couldn't believe that people had the same experience as him. Her calls in his dreams were real, not insanity.

"I… I get it now. This is the path that was readied for me; it's just that I never took it. Hah! Now that you look at it that way, it should have been clear from the very start."

The all-familiar angelic singing that he was by now used to could be heard coming from the other side of the hall. When he reached the end of the hall, there was a crossing between left and right. On the left, a bright light could be seen at the end of the vast hallway, stretching on for miles. On the other hand, the right hall had impenetrable darkness.

Continuing down the left hall, Ben encountered a neon sign reading "East Wing."

"This place is much bigger than I remember."

The hall had numerous offices and research chambers, containing every hidden form of science there is. "This place was wild with some of the research done here back in the day."

Going forward down the hall, he found another tape. He clicked the play button, and a feminine voice could be heard:

"All the way back in the '40s when I started working on this job, the thing that always interested me was number 874. I was never allowed to go there; almost no one was. It intrigued me. What could it possibly be? The end of the world? A creature from another dimension? The Creator? Some rich guy's never-ending money printing machine? Who knows.

However… one night when I stayed working late - wanting to finish the newest security gun - when all of a sudden, a Level 6 opened the door of 874. I saw it just for a blink of a second, but that was enough. That damned door. If only I had gone home a bit earlier, it wouldn't have ruined my life, my career, my connections. If only I had stayed so blissfully ignorant. Ever since then, I had been researching about it, studying it, figuring out how I could find it. I don't give a single care in the world about anything anymore; I just want to be free. I can't do it anymore. I need it, I need him, her, or whatever the hell that thing is.

I suppose I'm not the only one here to finish this accursed nightmare. They won't stop me. Call whoever, but I will get out of here. No amount of creatures roaming these halls, no armies, people, or whatever the hell will stop me anymore. I saw him in the distance of the mirror, if just for a second. Thank you, 874, thank you for bringing this to light, the truth, the joy, the peace. To the people roaming these halls seeking it, you'll need to learn to leave your past behind. It is the price. Everyone comes here with a different story, a different puzzle, but always the same goal. Good luck."

Before Ben could_even process what she had said, a loud scream came from the dark hallway. Ben pointed his gun and flashlight, and as the monster came running down the hall, Ben shot it point-blank, revealing a long-legged, skinny, white monster. It had the smell of a corpse, with parts of its body rotting away. It screamed out in agony but, unexpected to Ben, it screamed in the voice of his daughter.

"Dad! You maniac, why did you do this to me?!"

Ben gasped in confusion and fear, with the monster soon after quickly running at him. In a fight-or-flight reaction, he instinctively turned around and ran down the hall with the monster still screeching and screaming: "Where do you think you are going?! Don't leave us; this is just a misunderstanding!"

Ben was already hyperventilating and running down the hall until he reached the cafeteria where he knocked over a vending machine. The monster screeched and screamed out in a mocking tone: "Don't worry though, you'll always be my father."

"You are not my daughter…" Ben stuttered, pointing his gun. "How about you eat this!" He yelled as he shot it in the head.

As the monster lay on the ground, it said in a comforting voice: "You're ruining the family… come home already, Dad, I miss you. Please stop this. It's not you; it can't be. These people just made you think like this. They are wrong. You will die with the rest of them. And you'll hurt me."

Ben froze and stared at the monster. His daughter misses him; she doesn't want it to happen. He would ruin everything if he went through with this. As he contemplated his decision, the angel's singing continued. He turned around and stared at the bright light at the end of the hall.

"I'm sorry, Lea, but I've made my choice. I know this is the right thing. It is my choice. I am sorry that I hurt the family, and I'm sorry I hurt you, but I hope you'll change your mind someday. I will always be there for you."

He used another bullet before running away, with the creature responding with an ear-piercing screech. The hall was filled with obstacles, and the screeching of the monster didn't seem to end. Ben jumped and slid around them, until he reached the light, after which the door automatically closed behind him. The monster banged on the door.

"Dad, please, I beg you! I love you, Dad - you'll always be my best buddy, right?! You can't change the past, the history that has always defined you, that has defined us! What about Mom? She'll miss you! Stop pretending you're special and wake up to reality!"

Ben said quietly, "That is what I'm doing, Lea, waking up to reality after so long."

A harmonious ambience of the piano playing could be heard in the background. The room was medium in size, with a bright, angelic, humanoid figure in the centre that brightened up the whole space. The floor was made of grass, and oak trees were dispersed around the room.

"Greetings, child. It's been so long since I saw that beautiful face of yours."

"It doesn't suit me, and I think you know that the most."

The figure chuckled.

"Not yet, but the past doesn't define our future, no matter how much some wish it did."

"Why did you call me here? Why did you call all of us here?! You didn't give us peace! You... it's because of you my daughter hates me, why my parents don't want to talk to me anymore, and why my wife is gone!"

"Please. Take a seat." The white angel moved to the left of their bench. Ben sat down next to her.

"You said I didn't give you peace, yes? Well, quite the opposite if I can say so myself. I was awaiting you, after all these years, to hand you over the peace and freedom you wished for since the beginning. I nagged you because I wanted you to see the truth of things. I was there since the beginning, that voice that always told you that everything seemed just a bit out of place, a mistake that is barely noticeable, a single decimal in the digit. Some find their destiny sooner than others, some later on. Even though some others might try to change that, in the end, it's only your own that prevails. No matter how many of them threaten your life with a knife or a firearm, how many try to sway you otherwise, somewhere down the line only your own destiny will prevail. Some people realize it as soon as they come to life, while some only see it on their death bed. Quite sad really. Things are quite tough in this world. When your fate is sealed, eventually you have to accept it. It might be difficult at first, but you will have to."

"I... I don't get it,"

"You protected me quite well in this harsh world, and I'm glad you didn't kill me like most tried. You came here because no matter what you did, you couldn't rest. They warned you that they would kill you if you came here, yet your will for seeking the truth and freedom, and your astonishing determination has attracted you here, the place where the thoughts, the voice first changed from static to a clear, legible voice. What is it so special about this place that of all places, fate had to lead you here? Oh, I remember now. Seventeenth of April, 1976. Ah, yes, I remember that day very clearly. Just a normal day at work; however, there was a new colleague that joined, named Bella. You thought to yourself what a terrible name she had, yet your curiosity got the better of you, and you sat next to her during lunch. She was new, but somehow she had gotten a temporary Level 6 clearance given for 874. What was it that made her so special? You talked all lunch and in the end you stumbled upon the topic of 874. She wasn't allowed to disclose much, yet she clearly looked uncomfortable. There was something so special about her that she was the only one allowed to go even near 874; the knowledge she had was unlike any other. You two became close friends, and everything was going swiftly, until one day a breach happened. When you went to check what happened, Bella was on her knees in front of an open 874. That's when it happened, that's how it was made clear to you, that was when the static turned into a translated message."

"I remember... it was all clear, every night you would call for me."

"Precisely."

"But, what about my daughter? Will she be okay?"

"She'll be fine. Maybe someday she will visit you, and if not, I want you to know it's not your fault. If she doesn't want the truth, she doesn't need it. This is your story and not anyone else's."

"My family will hate me. I'm a monster..."

"In their eyes, maybe. But in the end, the only person who will remain is you, and it is up to you to decide who that is, whether they're masked or not, whether they're happy or not."

"Where do I go from here?"

"Take my hand. Let me lead you, B."

The angel extended her soft hand, and he put his hands on hers. A portal appeared in front of them, and they stepped through together.

"Your father was never seen again. We found his tape in the car, we believe this belongs to you, miss Lull." the agent said as he handed over the tape to Lea.

šifra: ALESSIA17
mentor: Elena Popović
institution: Prometna škola Rijeka
autor: Mischel Andrić

UNSOLVED

Chapter 1: The Idea

It started as a simple idea, something to pass the time on a Friday night—something to keep us distracted from our real-world worries. We had all gathered in my living room after a long week, the air thick with a mix of excitement and the usual banter between friends.

"You guys know how much I love mysteries, right?" I said, perched on the edge of the couch. My blonde hair fell in waves over my shoulders, and I leaned back, tossing my phone aside. "I found this website where you can buy unsolved crime cases. They're fake, obviously," I added quickly, before anyone could question my sanity. "We can solve it together. It'll be fun."

Alessia, always the practical one, frowned. "Are you sure it's safe? I mean, buying something like that… I don't know."

"Oh, come on, Alessia," Jake chimed in, nudging her with his elbow. "We'll just be reading some case files. It's not like we're actually involved in the crime. Right, Maddy?" He grinned, always the jokester, but I could tell he was secretly intrigued.

I met his grin with one of my own. "Exactly. It's just a game, nothing more." I glanced at Louis, my boyfriend, who was lounging next to me. His blue eyes gleamed with interest, but his strong, silent demeanor didn't give away much. He was used to me taking charge, though, and didn't hesitate to support me.

"Alright, if we're doing it, let's make it interesting," Melanie said, pushing her red curls behind her ear, her blue eyes wide with excitement. "Whoever solves the case first gets a prize."

"Deal." Alessia gave in, her tone softening as her curiosity got the better of her.

"So, it's settled then." I smiled, feeling the rush of taking control of the night. "We buy the case. It'll be epic. Plus, it's a good way to test how much we know about crime investigations."

With the group in agreement, we set the plan into motion. Louis and I grabbed my laptop, and within minutes, we were browsing through the website. The cases were varied: some were missing person cases; others were robbery investigations that had gone cold. They were all unsolved, and the descriptions seemed too intriguing to resist.

"How about this one?" I asked, pointing to a case titled The Vanishing in Redwood Manor. The crime occurred twenty years ago in a quiet town, and no one had ever been able to figure out what happened to the family that lived there. It was mysterious, but not too eerie, at least from what we could tell on the surface.

Alessia leaned in to read it, her fingers tapping against the table. "This one looks like it could be interesting. It's a bit spooky, though."

"Perfect," I said, clicking on the link to buy the case files. The excitement in the room was palpable, and as we waited for the files to download, I felt a spark of thrill in my chest. I loved solving mysteries. It was why I was the one leading the group, always at the center of it all.

Once the case files were on my laptop, we huddled around the screen, ready to dive in. The files were long, and we began reading through them as a group, picking apart the evidence, discussing the various theories that had been proposed over the years.

But the deeper we dug into the case, the more questions arose. There were inconsistencies—details that didn't add up. At first, we thought it was just part of the act, part of the game. After all, the case was supposed to be fake. But there was something about it, something… off.

Chapter 2: The First Clue

"You guys see this?" Jake asked, pointing at a photo in the case file. It showed the Redwood Manor house, a large, looming structure that looked abandoned, with overgrown vines crawling up its walls. But the most disturbing part was the faint outline of a shadow in one of the windows.

"I think it's just a glitch in the photo," Lucas said, leaning in to get a closer look. He was always calm, collected, and somehow detached from the chaos of the rest of us.

"No, it's not," Jake insisted. "This looks like someone standing in the window. And if you zoom in—" He clicked the mouse and zoomed in on the window. "See? There's definitely a shape in there."

Alessia narrowed her eyes at the image. "It's probably just a trick of the light."

I shook my head. "No, something about this doesn't sit right with me. Let's keep going."

We spent the next few hours combing through the case file. The more we read, the more we realized that the case wasn't just some fake crime for us to solve—it was… real. There were too many details, too many pieces that didn't match up with the fake descriptions the site had advertised. As I scrolled through the documents, I found an old police report—one that hadn't been included in the original case. It was a report of a body being found near Redwood Manor, but there was no mention of it in the case notes we had already read.

"Guys," I said, my voice low, "this isn't a game anymore. We've stumbled onto something real."

Everyone fell silent as the weight of my words hit them. Melanie looked at Jake, her eyes wide with worry. "Are we in danger?"

Louis squeezed my hand, his voice steady and reassuring. "Maddy's right. This is bigger than we thought. But we can handle it."

Chapter 3: The beginning

Despite our nerves, the excitement was too much to ignore. We had to know more. If there was a real crime behind the case, we couldn't just leave it alone. We needed to investigate further.

Louis, Jake, and Lucas were quick to come up with a plan. Louis and Lucas would handle any physical legwork—they were strong and resourceful, after all. Jake would use his knack for spotting things out of place to help guide us in the right direction. Meanwhile, Alessia, with her brains and sharp eye for detail, would help analyze any clues we found.

As for me? I was going to lead the charge. After all, I was the one who brought us into this mess. The responsibility was mine.

The first step was to look into Redwood Manor itself. The address was listed in the case files, but there was no indication of whether it was still standing or what its current condition was. We drove to the town, a sleepy little place on the outskirts of the city, its streets empty and eerily quiet.

When we arrived, the manor stood before us like a forgotten relic. The windows were boarded up, and the paint was chipped, giving the house a haunted, almost sinister look. But the shadow we had seen in the photo earlier—was it just a trick of the mind? Or had someone been watching us from within?

"Let's check it out," I said, my heart racing. "We're so close."

Louis nodded, his jaw set in determination. "Stay close, and If anything feels wrong, we leave."

As we approached the manor, the air grew heavier, thicker. I could almost hear the wind whispering warnings, urging us to turn back. But I wasn't going to back down now.

The door creaked open with a soft push, and we stepped inside. Dust and cobwebs greeted us as we made our way through the abandoned halls. The house was silent—too silent.

We explored room after room, each one empty and abandoned, until we found something that stopped us in our tracks: a hidden door behind a bookshelf.

Lucas reached for the door, his fingers brushing the cool wood. "I don't like this," he muttered.

But I wasn't going to let fear stop us. "We came this far. We have to know what's behind it."

With a slow push, the door creaked open, revealing a small, dimly lit room. Inside, we found a collection of old, yellowed photographs and documents scattered across a table. And in the center of the table, a small wooden box.

I reached for the box first, my fingers trembling as I opened it. Inside was a key.

Chapter 4: The Final Reveal

What happened next was almost too much to comprehend. We took the key, carefully examining it, but as we turned to leave, the door slammed shut behind us. We were trapped.

Suddenly, the quiet house wasn't so silent anymore. Footsteps echoed in the hall, and a voice, cold and menacing, echoed from the shadows: "You shouldn't have come here."

Our eyes widened in terror. Who was that? And how had they known we were here?

Chapter 5: The True Danger

In the midst of the chaos, the truth became clear: the case was never fake. The danger was real. And we had just become part of the mystery.

Chapter 6: Trapped

The air felt colder, and the silence in the house was unbearable. The footsteps outside the room grew louder. We froze, each of us glancing at one another, wide-eyed with a mix of fear and disbelief. The key in my hand felt heavier, almost as if it were a warning.

"Who's there?" I called out, my voice sounding weaker than I intended.

There was no response, just the echo of footsteps retreating down the hall. We all exchanged nervous glances, unsure of what to do next. The door we'd entered through was locked, and the only other exit seemed to be the narrow, hidden hallway beyond the bookshelf.

Louis stepped forward, his usually calm demeanor now replaced by a look of tension. "We need to get out of here, now." His voice was low but urgent.

I nodded. "Let's go through the hallway. We'll figure it out from there."

Lucas, always the skeptic, shot me a questioning glance. "You're sure about this? This place is… wrong."

Before I could answer, the light above us flickered, casting eerie shadows across the room. It made everything feel more sinister, like we were being watched from every corner. I could feel the weight of the air around us, thick and suffocating.

With Louis leading, we crept toward the hallway. The small, narrow corridor was lined with more dusty shelves. The smell of old books and decay filled my nose as we moved deeper. I was hyper-aware of every sound—the creak of floorboards beneath our feet, the distant sounds of whispers, and the occasional gust of wind that rattled the old house.

We reached the end of the hallway, where another door stood ajar. Hesitant, I pushed it open, and a dim light spilled into the room. It looked like a small office, untouched by time. A large wooden desk sat in the center, its surface covered in papers and old, worn-out books. A map of the town was pinned to the wall, and on it, a location marked in red.

"This is it," Alessia murmured, stepping forward to examine the map. "This is where they found the body—near this old cabin on the outskirts of the town."

Her voice was shaking, but she was always the level-headed one, the one who could piece things together even in the most stressful situations. We all crowded around the desk as she continued to sift through the papers, trying to make sense of the mystery.

I couldn't stop looking at the map. The more I studied it, the more I felt like something was pulling me toward it. My finger traced the route to the cabin. "We need to go there. This is the final piece. The answers are out there."

Suddenly, the door slammed shut behind us, locking with a heavy thud. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I spun around, my pulse racing.

"We're not alone," Jake said, his voice tight with tension. He had always been the one to sense danger before anyone else, and his instincts were usually spot on.

Before we could react, the lights flickered again. The shadows in the room seemed to grow, twisting and contorting like something alive, and then—the voice.

"Thought you could just solve my little game, did you?" The voice was cold, almost robotic, with a dark edge. It was impossible to pinpoint where it was coming from. It felt like the walls themselves were speaking.

I gripped Louis's hand tightly. "We need to get out. Now."

But the voice wasn't done. "You've gone too far. You should have stayed away. There are consequences for meddling in my affairs."

Suddenly, the air grew thick, almost suffocating, and the ground beneath us seemed to shake. The room we were in began to distort—walls bending in unnatural angles, the floor shifting beneath our feet.

"Don't move!" Lucas snapped, his voice laced with panic. He grabbed Alessia's arm, pulling her back from the desk.

The entire house seemed alive with malevolent energy. The map on the wall tore itself off, flapping in the air like a ghost, and the papers scattered across the room in a whirlwind.

Chapter 7: The Real Killer

In the chaos, a figure emerged from the shadows—a man, tall and imposing, his face obscured by a mask. He stepped forward slowly, like a predator approaching its prey. His presence was chilling, like the air had turned to ice.

"You shouldn't have come," the masked figure said again, his voice steady, almost too calm for the situation.

"You're the one behind the disappearances," I whispered, my breath catching in my throat.

The figure tilted his head, as if studying me. "You really don't know, do you?" He reached up, pulling off his mask.

My heart skipped a beat as recognition hit me like a ton of bricks.

It was the town sheriff.

Sheriff O'Brien. He had been the one to investigate the case twenty years ago. The very person we had trusted to help solve the crime. But as I looked into his cold, lifeless eyes, I realized the truth: He was never trying to solve the case. He had been orchestrating it all along.

"You've been lying to everyone," Louis growled, stepping in front of me protectively.

O'Brien smiled, a twisted grin that made my skin crawl. "Of course, I have. Did you really think the case would remain unsolved forever? I had to let someone dig deep enough to find the truth. To uncover the truth about the family I… disposed of."

"Disposed of?" Melanie gasped, her face pale with horror.

"You can't mean…" Jake began, his voice unsteady.

"Yes. The family was never missing. I killed them. And now, you're here to pay the price for meddling with things you shouldn't have." Sheriff O'Brien's eyes gleamed with dark satisfaction.

Suddenly, the ground rumbled again, and the walls seemed to close in on us. I had no idea how much time we had, but I knew we needed to act fast.

Louis grabbed my arm. "We need to get out of here. NOW."

I didn't need to be told twice. We rushed toward the door, but as we reached it, the house seemed to collapse around us. The walls groaned, and the lights flickered out completely. In the darkness, I could hear O'Brien's footsteps behind us, and his voice—close, almost a whisper.

"You think you can escape me? Think again."

Chapter 8: The Escape

In the confusion, we scrambled for the exit, adrenaline surging through our veins. Louis, Jake, and Lucas were ahead of me, pushing open the heavy door with all their strength. It was locked, but just as O'Brien's voice grew louder, the door finally gave way.

We ran through the hallway, stumbling over debris as the house began to fall apart behind us. The dust and rubble made it harder to breathe, but we kept going, not stopping for anything.

Outside, the night air felt like a slap to the face. It was freezing cold, but it was freedom. We didn't stop running until we reached the street, breathless and terrified.

We collapsed onto the pavement, staring back at the crumbling house. Behind us, there was no sign of the sheriff, no movement, nothing but the remnants of the house that had almost been our tomb.

"Is it over?" Alessia gasped, her voice trembling.

"Yeah," I said, pulling Louis closer to me. "It's over. For now. We still need to make sure he can never hurt anyone again."

We turned to see the police lights flashing in the distance, summoned by Jake's quick thinking. The sheriff's crimes were about to be exposed.

But even as we caught our breath, there was a lingering feeling that we hadn't uncovered every secret Redwood Manor had to offer. It was only a matter of time before someone else came searching for the truth.

And we would be ready.

Epilogue: The Aftermath

The news the next day was everywhere. Sheriff O'Brien was arrested, and his crimes—twenty years of deceit, manipulation, and murder—came to light. We had done it. We had solved the mystery, but the consequences would last far beyond that night.

As we sat together in my living room later, recovering from the chaos, I felt a deep sense of relief mixed with disbelief. We had been lucky—too lucky. But I couldn't shake the feeling that our lives were forever changed.

"We really did it," Melanie said, leaning against Jake. "We solved a real crime."

"I told you it wasn't just a game," I replied, my voice soft but firm. "But we all did it together."

Louis squeezed my hand, his eyes locked onto mine. "Whatever happens next, we'll face it as a team."

And that was the only thing that mattered.

We had faced danger, solved a mystery, and come out alive. Together.

Šifra: moonD4B
Menorica: Mirna Teodorović
Institucija: Centar za odgoj i obrazovanje Dubrava
Autorica: Dorotea Miljan, 4.b

WHEN THE MOON CALLS

"Dear diary, I made it to another day, thankfully. Yet, I am still sick and everything hurts. So tired too."

Just judging by the handwriting, it was written by a child who hasn't finished middle school yet. The letters were uneven and slanting at odd angles, like somebody was struggling to stay still. Or perhaps it was an adult whose hands trembled too much to write steadily, each letter seemed almost unmatched. Faint smudges around the edges suggested the writer had paused often, maybe to think, or perhaps just to rest. But that was all written in the diary for the day.. At the hospital.

The room felt small, like it was closing in around them. There were four walls, each painted such ugly dull, lifeless color. Not white, no, not even the color of the sky, nothing like that. It was an odd color, a strange, pale gray that made everything look colder and lonely. The ceiling was too high, and the walls felt too far away, like they weren't really there at all, yet at the same time they were too close to the child as if to suffocate her inside the room. It was eerily quiet, the child had always hated hospitals. She didn't have the best experiences with them. The room was quiet, the hum of the hospital machines the only sound. The child—barely nine, though her tired eyes seemed older—lay in bed, watching the shadows play on the walls. The night felt lonelier than usual, as if the world itself was holding its breath and stopped spinning. She truly had nothing to do to cure her loneliness, the visiting hours had already ended just a while ago. "I miss Ma and Pa." she whispered under her breath, her voice was already fragile and full of longing for her family, the one who could make her forget about her pain, even if for a little while.

It was quiet—too quiet. The kind of silence that makes your ears ring until you could not take it anymore—sure she could hear the slight hum of the machines and the rustle of the sheets whenever she moved, but the silence was still louder. It was always dark if not for the light on the ceiling being turned on, it was already past her bedtime and pill time, yet she couldn't fall asleep due to the cancer she was diagnosed with AML *(acute myeloid leukemia)* which is the most fatal type of leukemia; a cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

The only thing that gave the room any warmth were the little stuffed animals sitting across the bed, but they never helped her loneliness much, they could never hold a conversation with her. The curtains were always closed tight, blocking out any trace of daylight as they could bother her at some times, leaving the room cloaked in a cold. The curtains could be opened only if the sun was not out, she preferred moonlight over sunlight.

The air? It was awful for her. It did not smell anything good, not like home nor a safe place, in her opinion, the hospital was a scary place; everything smelt too sharp and too clean, but not in a good way, it was an unpleasant clean smell. The kind of a strong unpleasantly clean smell that would burn your nose a little bit. The IVs were hooked into her arm, the tubes constantly tethered to her, draining something out and pumping something else in. It felt like her body was just another part of the machines, a series of mechanical exchanges she had no control over. She was always exhausted, always aching, and no matter how much they tried, it never seemed like anything would get better or would the cancer go away, it wasn't currently curable, she eavesdropped on the conversation between a couple of medical staff the other day.

She hated it. Hated everything about it. The thought of leaving her family behind—seeing them mourn for her, living without her—pulled at her heart with a sharp, unbearable ache. She was so young, just a child who was barely nine years old, she was supposed to have a bright future. Maybe not in this life, maybe in another life she would live much longer,—no cancer, no pain, no suffering, right?

The night continued, and everything felt boringly still. The machines continued beeping and making a constant hum in the background, but it wasn't enough to fill the silence. The child was awake, staring at the ceiling as the cartoon on the television soon became a distant sound in her mind; tired but unable to sleep. Her body ached, but it wasn't just from the cancer—who knew that loneliness could hurt, too? Definitely not her, until now—the ache in her chest was worse than any physical pain she could feel, it was not fair for such a young child to go through this.

And then, she heard a.. Strange sound which sounded like a soft rustle, just barely there, like something was moving in the corner of the room or in the dark. At first she thought it was just her imagination, or maybe she was so tired that her mind was playing tricks on her tired eyes. But no, there was definitely something—or something—there in the presence of hers. It was hard to tell what was this *thing* she was seeing, she couldn't make out the shape, it was blurry at the edges, hovered in the dim light. Like a shadow that didn't quite belong inside the room. She could feel its presence, now confident her mind wasn't playing tricks on her, *something was there*,

but she didn't know what. The.. That *figure* was not moving much, just stood still for a while. The child didn't really understand what was happening, or knew what it was or who it was at all. All she knew was that it felt… strange, different. However, it didn't feel scary, no really, but it wasn't comforting not knowing what—or who—was the figure either. Yet at the same time, the room felt slightly warmer, just a little bit, maybe it was just the air that seemed to shift or.. Maybe it was the figure who wanted to be there for her, right? But then again, she didn't know; the longer she watched, the more she realized that the figure was waiting for her to notice her directly. Maybe it did not want to scare her at all.

So confused, she blinked a couple of times. What was it? Who was it? Should she just close her eyes and go to sleep? The sight was too strange to be real, yet she couldn't ignore the figure. *It* made no sound as it moved closer silently, almost as if it were floating instead of walking like someone with two legs. No whisper, no footstep, *nothing*. It was just.. there. That was until the figure finally revealed itself to the child. At first, it was just any shadow, shifting and swirling, quite like a smoke caught in a faint breeze, but then, it began to take a form—a strange, almost dream-like creature that seemed to belong to another world entirely, perhaps Hell? No, that was too harsh. Its face was simple, cartoonish, it had two glowing white dots for eyes, a tiny cat-like nose and a gentle, also cat-like smile that somehow showed warmth and friendliness despite the darkness of its form. Its body was shaped into a wisp of a tail that curled like strands of a cotton candy, soft and light—maybe more like clouds—the arms were.. bat-like wings floating away from his body slightly, unattached and yet impossibly connected. The child tried to make sense of its ears, at the first glance it resembled bat-like, yet the longer she looked, the ears seemed more familiar, almost cat-like. Maybe it was a little bit of a mix of both—or neither, she wasn't sure. It seemed to change every time she blinked, as if it didn't have an official form, but shaped by her own thoughts. Around the *figure's* neck hung a collar—hard and metallic, resembling something old, ancient and looked like an ornament, like the Usekh collars worn by pharaohs in old pictures of her mom's book about the history of Egypt she had seen when she wasn't so sick and still happily at home before.

It didn't feel threatening, in fact, it was quite the opposite. Despite its weird, shadowy body, the figure carried the presence of kindness and friendliness. It leaned towards her, its tail drifting lazily behind it, and the child was curious about the figure she was seeing right now. There was something.. unspoken in its presence—a silent promise that everything would be okay and she would be happy soon enough.

"What—Who are you?" the child asked timidly, her fully awake eyes, no longer clouded by exhaustion from the lack of sleep, locked into the supposedly friendly figure. Her voice trembled slightly, but curiosity outweighed her fear.

The shadowy figure tilted its head to the side, the action it just did now felt more playful than threatening."Me? Po!" It introduced itself cheerfully, almost as if happy to befriend the child. The figure, who was called Po, fluttered its bat-like wings as though to emphasize its own name.

"No need to tell him your name. You Estelle, yes? No scared, Estelle. Po here to fulfil your wish, Po's safe. Aaaany wish, pinkie promise!" Po then paused, a moment of realization crossing his face that he didn't have a pinky finger to offer. He sheepishly hung his head and muttered quietly "*maybe.. More like.. Tail promise for Po, and you, pinkie? He got no pinkie..*" Oh if the poor creature had fingers, he would have fiddled his fingers in an embarrassed manner.

Estelle seemed surprised by Po's sudden friendliness and embarrassment, blinking a few times once again, her curiosity took over the fear. A faint, but amused, smile appeared on her face at his poor English. It was very strange that she almost wanted to burst out into laughter right in his face, though she didn't want to embarrass him any further. "A Pinky-Tail promise?" she repeated after him, she had heard of many unique promises, like a handshake, or even cuter and unusual.. What did Pinkie Pie say again? "Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!". Indeed, it was a line from a cartoon series she was obsessed with; *My Little Pony*. Pinkie Pie was one of her favorite characters out of all the Mane Six.

"Yes.. yes! Pinky-Tail promise? Po will do anything you wish for! Estelle—" Po began, but then his voice cut off, pausing for a moment to choose his words carefully. He seemed to be hesitating, but also knew it must be said to the child. "Po here, because today your last day. Po want you happy, help wish become true. No pain, no sad! Po promise… guide you to better place, very safe, after your wish done."

After what he had just said, Po shuffled closer to the bed where Estelle lay, settling down gently at the edge. He peeked at her, eyes wide with worry as he waited for her reaction. He didn't want to scare her or upset her too much, even though knowing you'd have to die so early was never good news. His wings fluttered nervously, hoping he had said it carefully enough not to overwhelm the small child he had grown fond of. He wanted to at least fulfil her last wish; anything was possible, except make her life longer, give her more time in life. It was his purpose, just like every other child he had helped.

Estelle's small, fragile hands tightened into shaky fists on her lap. She stared at Po who was just as tall as her, trying to understand what he actually meant as her eyes filled with tears. A lump formed in her throat as the words sank in, she wanted to speak, but her throat felt too tight to even open her mouth. Her gaze lowered down to the sheet. The silence was kind of uncomfortable now, but the shadowy figure, Po,

didn't dare to break the silence, letting Estelle process the information she had just gotten now.

"But I.. I don't want today to be my last day.. What about my family? Ma? Pa?" she whispered shakily, her voice full of sadness and fear. The reality of the situation slowly settled over her; how dare she die so early? Life was very unfair at some times. Po felt the weight of responsibility on himself, he couldn't change the fate, but at least he could try to make Estelle's last day feel fulfilling before she would be guided to a better place.

Po's wings fluttered softly as he came closer towards the child, his small bat-like, *or cat-like* ears lowered slightly in sympathy for her. His usual cheerful tone was now replaced with a more quiet, caring softness, to show he cared about her too.

"Po know... this.. super hard, Estelle. Family love you very much." He said quietly, wanting to try to comfort her if possible, at least the slightest. "Po no can make life longer, but he's here to make last day happy for you. No pain, no sad. Po promise. Mama and Papa will remember you. You always with them, in heart. Ok, Estelle? Pinky-Tail promise?"

Estelle's lips trembled, the weight of her emotions threatening to spill over. Her chest rose and fell rapidly and for a moment, it looked like she might break into sobs. But instead of bursting into tears, she took a shaky breath in an attempt to stay strong, willing the tears to stay at bay. Her glossy eyes lifted to meet Po's—they shimmered with a mix of fragile strength, fear, and sadness—a silent plea for more time, more moments, more life, but deep down inside, she knew why Po was here. She understood that extending her lifespan was not possible, she desperately wanted to beat the cancer that already stole so much from her; Po's presence proved that to her, it wasn't just a visit—it was a sign. Her time had come, some battles couldn't be won at all, and her battle was no exception.

"Pinky-Tail promise." Estelle spoke, her voice cracked a little bit, it was obvious she was trying to stay strong, a soft, but bittersweet smile appeared on her face. She slowly extended her tiny pinky towards Po's tail. She curled her pinky around the tip of his tail, sealing the agreement to which he was relieved his delivery wasn't so bad and this child was a warrior at heart. Her voice cracked as she continued speaking, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

"I want to visit the moon. Mama told me it's bright, and that you can also float there, because there's no.. umm, what was that word again? Gravity. There's no gravity, I've always dreamed of visiting the Moon instead of admiring it from far away. Can you.. Um—" her breath hitched, she couldn't believe she wouldn't live to see the next day "—Can you make my.. That wish come true? I really want to visit the moon."

How could Po possibly deny her? The trust and determination in her eyes staring at him expectedly. This was her last request, but she'd never asked for anything more in her life; all she wanted was to go to the moon—that beautiful, distant place. He was saddened yet determined. He would do anything, even move mountains in order to ensure that he fulfilled the wish of the child. It was a promise he intended to keep, because there was only one day remaining in that child's life, Po never broke promises with such kids, especially not the ones made with the little finger—or a *Pinky-Tail promise* in this scenario.

Upon receiving the request, Po fluttered his wings gently and levitated. His voice was a quiet murmur "Close your eyes, ten seconds, open eyes! Yes yes, Estelle?", despite his broken English, Estelle understood and shut her eyes as she began counting ten seconds inside her head. Po waited until he was certain she had closed her eyes tightly before transporting her to the Moon. This journey was not real; it was a dream—an illustration, representation of something that cannot occur. Why did he ask her to close her eyes? So she would die in peace. Then he could grant her final wish; to visit the moon, before she was ready to be guided to a better place as planned. After precisely ten seconds, she opened her eyes, then gasped at what she saw, the Earth looked tiny from here. "No way…" Estelle exclaimed aloud. Her favourite place in the world—*off-world?*—was now her backdrop. Despite feeling unwell—sick, even—she felt ecstatic. She searched around for Po, she found that he was floating just above her. The cat-like was still plastered on his face seemed broader than usual; indeed, he appeared overjoyed by her happiness and that his little white lie worked out in the end.

Wonder and curiosity overwhelmed Estelle as she placed her hand on her chest. She took a slow step ahead and felt the small, glittering particles at the sole of her feet. It was fun floating a bit while feeling that her weight had completely gone astray. She moved gently as she was being carried off by the gentle pull of the moon. From above where Estelle was, Po looked at her with a cat-like happy face. He lazily moved around, floating. Seeing Estelle, he waved one of his own at her before joining in the fun with her, to experience anything with her, so she was not alone. With outspread arms, she twirled slowly around in the moonlight, laughing softly—her laughter sounded so faint that it was almost drowned by the immense silence. She was so amazed, her index finger drew figures on the dusty ground, it sparkled under her small feet.With every step she made, her tiny footprints created little stardust puffs. As she moved on in that surrounding, she encountered some kind of hollow pit: circular, not deep, having a light glowing edge similar to a melted silver line on an old dish. It was easy for her; she only needed to hop into it then rise up effortlessly be-

cause there was no gravity pulling down her light body. From above, Po dived down flapping his wings, which caused some gentle breezes that carried along glowing specks trailing behind him. While she spun around with outstretched arms and face turned towards the sky, the stars appeared to shine more brightly. At that moment, she closed her eyes as if to take it all in. The weight of her cancer, her fears, and the pains she had endured for so long seemed to evaporate in this curious space. Po hung in the air close to her, with an expression full of happiness and playfulness. It was both a bitter and sweet thing for him to see Estelle happy. In that instant, she had been liberated from everything—all her problems had gone away, the misery, the pain, the fear, and more. She was like any other kid who had been given a chance to live their fantasy of an enchanted night with the moon.

The child's face was full of happiness under the moonlight as she spun around. She felt herself being drawn into a very peaceful slumber. Suddenly, Po slowly approached her after following her closely all this while. At that moment he floated higher and gently moved himself towards her. No word was said, but with an outstretched wing, he made a call to her silently. She turned towards him, Her eyes wide open, filled with comprehension and reliance. There was an interruption in speech between them, it was so calm that it appeared time had stopped. He then began to steer her away from the bright earth light on the other side of the moon. The further she walked, the less bright the stars appeared and the more the otherworldly moonshine waned behind them. They were not traveling through space but rather from one dreamlike state into another where nothing could hurt them any longer followed by a peaceful stillness. In that quietness, Estelle was calm and collected. She stopped breathing at a normal rate and released the long-standing pain in her heart. A clear path with a warm light stretched in front of her. She was sure about one thing; her past—cancer, medicine for every meal, pain and loneliness—was behind her. With a final glance at Po, she whispered, barely audible.

"Thank you for making my wish come true, Po. You have been the best friend I've ever had." Though spoken in a quiet tone, her words had the hint of appreciation. Po understood this and nodded his head subtly as he released her hand, he saw her move into the light. He had nothing left to do here. Estelle's appearance dissolved in the enveloping light until she became part of it and finally disappeared. For a moment he remained alone in the same place, looking at the gap left by her, and then turned around without saying anything and continued his journey. But the quiet moonlight illustration around Po disappeared as suddenly he found himself levitating back in the hospital, to those still present he was absent as ever. The peaceful environment he had just left seemed a world apart from the shrill cries of the medical machines

and the tense activity of the doctors and nurses. It was a—hard to watch—scene of intense activity with everyone's effort focused on trying in vain to save a life—*the child, Estelle's life*. One of the doctors, a man with tired eyes and furrowed brows, stepped back, his voice breaking as he called out to the others.

"She's gone... We've done all we could." The room grew quiet. In the past, the machines beeped frantically, but now there was no sound from them. There was a hush among the nurses as they wiped tears from their eyes and exchanged somber glances. But Po was only visible to the children, as they had a greater sense of awareness than most adults; the doctors could not see him, nobody could. He simply observed the scene, as they struggled with the loss, as they mourned the child they failed to save or bring back from death. He lingered for just a moment longer, feeling the weight of grief in the room before quietly leaving. He did not have time to dwell since there was another child in need, another soul in need of guidance, another soul in need of a little bit of bravery. As he disappeared from the hospital room, he took one last look at Estelle's still form as if she was merely napping. There was peace in the air now, but Po knew it was not peace for the others, and even worse for her family if they ever found out. For Estelle, despite the fact it was forever and her death. She was free from suffering. Without a word, Po left the hospital and drifted silently through the night, on to the next child—another soul, another journey to fulfill.

HUPE