

Dmitrii Emets

MY
BIG FAMILY
MUTINY
of the
LITTLE SWEETIES



Two kids are already too many, but three is not enough.

My Big Family

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Mutiny of the Little Sweeties

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Meet Peter, Vicky, Kate, Alena, Alex, Costa, Rita, and, of course, Mama and Papa. And also Mafia the turtle, Schwartz the rat and his family, guinea pigs, Japanese mice, pigeons, three stray dogs, ... The big happy family on Vine Street, their neighbours, friends, and relatives...

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Dmitrii Emets

Mutiny of the Little Sweeties

Translated from Russian by Jane H. Buckingham

Translation edited by Shona Brandt

Illustrations by Viktoria Timofeeva

Chapter One

It All Begins

*Two kids are already too many, but three is not enough.
A well-known fact*

In the city of Moscow in a two-bedroom apartment lived the Gavrilov family. The family consisted of a father, a mother, and seven children.

Papa's name was Nicholas. He wrote fiction and was afraid to even step briefly away from the computer so that the small children would not type any extraneous characters into the text. Nevertheless, characters were still okay. It was much worse when the children managed to delete a piece of text accidentally, and Papa discovered it only a month later, when he started to edit the book.

Still, they pestered Papa all the time because he worked at home, and when a person works at home, it seems to everyone that he is always free. Therefore, Papa got up at four in the morning, slipped into the kitchen with the laptop, and froze when he heard children's feet starting to thump on the floor in the next room. This meant that he had not managed to get out of the room unnoticed and now one or two whining kids would be hanging around him.

Mama's name was Anna. She worked in the library centre as the senior skilled hand in the Skilful Hands circle. True, she frequently stayed home because she had given birth to another child. At one time, Mama even had an online store of educational games and school supplies. The store was on the glassed-in balcony. There it resided on the many shelves that Papa knocked together, hitting his own fingers with the hammer. The children really liked that they had their own store. And they liked it even more when Mama gathered the orders in the big room, laying out dozens of different interesting games on the carpet.

They then sat and said to each other, "The main thing is not to touch anything!" At this time, the older ones held the younger ones' hands just in case. The younger ones either bit, because it is not very agreeable when someone holds you back, or were filled with a sense of responsibility and also taught each other, "The main thing is to put everything in its place!" and "The main thing is if you opened the package, then close it carefully!"

However, all the same, if Mama had gone for a short while to put away the milk or answer the phone, packages would go out to the customers with incorrectly-sorted blocks, with gnawed-through mosaics, or entirely without chips. One client received Papa's sneaker in the box and was about as unhappy as Papa. The client and Papa then had a long phone call and arranged where to meet to return the sneaker, but never met. About six months later, Papa made off with the second sneaker from one of the kids or Mama, and everyone denounced him in one voice.

Besides children, skilful hands, and games, Mama was also the family ingester. As soon as she had some free time, she immediately ate up everything from the children's plates and slept. "Don't bug me!" she declared.

Peter, the oldest of the Gavrilov children, was 15. He talked mysteriously with someone on the phone for days on end, leaping onto the landing where only five floors of neighbours could hear him, did his homework late at night, and at home fenced himself off from his brothers and sisters with furniture, on which he hung "Do Not Enter!" signs. He wrote in school questionnaires that he was an only child in the family and he walked on the street away from everybody so no one would think that this whole crowd was related to him.

For all that, when the younger children sometimes went to Grandma for a week, Peter was obviously bored. He walked around the empty apartment, looked under the bed and said pensively, "How quiet, for some reason! When will they come back? Soon now?"

His sister Vicky was 13. She could not sit at the table while there was at least one crumb on it. She could not lie down in bed if the sheet had not been ironed to the point that the last wrinkle had disappeared. Still, Vicky constantly danced by herself and in principle read only those books with horses. For example, there are horses in *War and Peace*, so she read *War and Peace*. There are no horses in *Woe from Wit*,¹ so *Woe from Wit* remained forever unread, even if the teacher hanged herself on the blinds. Never mind that *Woe from Wit* is seven times shorter and five times easier.

Vicky always did her homework with great care and suffered for half an hour when a line was coming up to the margin but she still had three letters or numbers. It would be stupid to carry over to a new line, but you would have to climb over the margin to finish it!

Mama and Papa never stopped wondering how Vicky managed to combine in herself the romantic, the love of horses, all these wrinkles on the sheets, the agony because of the climb over the margin, and the crumbs on the table.

Kate recently turned 11. She had the nickname of Catherine the Great. She was the only one of all the children who knew the password of the “big computer” and her brothers and sisters had to beg her to turn it on. “Why? Have you done your homework? Washed your hands? Put away your things? When did you last brush your teeth?” Kate asked sternly, after which the convicted, screaming “oh-oh-oh” with tears of impatience in the eyes, raced hurriedly to choke down kasha or brush their teeth.

Once, Papa got tired of this and removed the password from the computer altogether. But it just got worse. The children fought, each wanted to watch or do his own thing on the computer, and the little ones generally spent so much time in front of the monitor that they fell from their chairs. Therefore, it was necessary to return to the system of Kate’s despotism, and again everything was calm.

When she was free from active management, Kate always went through the apartment and put up yellow stickies with the notices: ***Don’t steal chairs! Put them back when done! or Toys should promptly be put away before 7 p.m.!***

Alena was eight. She was constantly falling in love, and this surprised her sisters, because Kate and Vicky, though older, rarely fell in love. Alena was nicknamed the “No Girl.” If she was asked to do something, she immediately shouted, “No! Never! Nothing doing!” and would instantly do it. But if others responded, “Yes, now!” then they would have to wait three hours. Therefore, it turned out that the No Girl helped with the young ones more than everyone.

Six-year-old Alex was a great chemist. He mixed everything with anything and watched what happened. For example, he mixed shoe polish with apple juice, squirted deodorant in there, and checked if it would explode or not. Food from the fridge, especially flour and eggs, and liquid from the top shelves in the bathroom suffered the most from Alex’s experiments. One day he accidentally discovered that vinegar and soda could make a big boom if they were mixed correctly. From then on, vinegar and soda almost had to be taped to the ceiling, because he was forever stealing them. Alex modestly described his talent as follows: “Now my name is Superpower! Now my name is Megamind!² Now my name is Flying Rag!”

Four-year-old Costa’s left hand did not work too well and he limped a little. Although the limping did not even prevent him from running, the hand had to be worked constantly, which was the cause of Mama’s eternal worry. Knowing that he could not rely on his left hand, Costa walked around with a wooden sword all the time and was an expert at head butting. Alex and Costa could exist peacefully for no more than five minutes a day. Even in the car, they could not sit next to each other but only with a child between them. Knowing the hardness of Costa’s head, Alex was afraid to fight

¹ *Woe from Wit* is a comedy in verse by Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov (1795–1829), Russian diplomat and playwright, as well as poet and composer. The play is a satire about post-Napoleonic Moscow society. It was written in 1823 but only first published in 1833. It was compulsory reading in school during Soviet times.

² Megamind is the super-intelligent alien protagonist of the 2010 3D computer-animated superhero action comedy of the same name.

him and preferred to blast his brother from a distance or fire from a slingshot. Each time it usually ended with Alex hitting Costa in the eye with a small block and hiding under the sofa from his wrath, and Costa furiously pounding on the sofa with his sword and shouting, “Ah! Kill him on the butt!”

Rita recently turned two. She was not talking very well yet, but she was always eating and was very round. A first breakfast, a second breakfast, a third breakfast, and then it was already time for lunch. If you hid food from her, Rita would steal the soap from the bathroom and nibble at its edge. She also constantly wanted those things that were in the hands of her brothers and sisters. Pencil case, backpack, textbook, it did not matter what it was. She would stage wild concerts to get them. Hence, the other kids were forever devising ways to outwit her. They would take some sock or unwanted head from a doll and pretend not to give it to her for anything. Rita would stage a concert, receive the doll’s head, and run off to hide it. And everyone could do homework in peace.

When such a large family went for a stroll, people exclaimed. Different people, especially the elderly, often came up to them and asked, “Are these all yours?”

“Yes, they’re ours,” Papa and Mama cautiously replied.

At home, the children slept on bunk beds, forming three sides of a rectangle; in addition, the younger ones had cribs with a removable side panel. When the side panel was removed, the crib could be placed right up against the parents’ bed and the young one could roll in and roll out like a round loaf.

However, despite all the tricks, the Gavrilovs settled themselves rather poorly in the two-room apartment. The bathroom was always busy, the bathroom door was constantly taken off the hinges, and their relations with the neighbours in the same entrance were cool. It was probably due to the internal walls, which were very thin and sounds passed through easily. The majority of the neighbours more or less understood the situation, but on the second floor lived a lonely old woman who was forever tormented by the suspicion that the children were sawing with a blunt saw at night.

“Why did they shout like that in the middle of the night?”

“Because Rita wanted to go to the store and the other children tried to soothe her,” Mama patiently explained.

“You’re the parents! Explain to her that stores don’t open in the middle of the night!”

“We did, but she only believed it when we drove her to the store and showed her that it was indeed closed!”

“I don’t like all this! I’ll be watching!” the old granny said, turning pale.

“Well, watch for yourself!” Mama gave her permission, but her mood was spoilt all the same.

Mama went from room to room and begged the children to speak in a whisper. The older kids more or less agreed with her, but the younger ones did not quite know how to whisper.

“Mama, I whispered correctly yesterday, right?” one of them yelled from the bathroom, through closed door.

Mama grabbed her head, and Papa said, “You know, I thought I understood the meaning of the word ‘horde’!”

“What?”

“Are you sure I should clarify?”

The watchful granny was very annoying. She had no idea that, under different names and with different appearances, she had become a popular character in contemporary literature. Papa, not knowing how to take revenge on her, killed her in many novels. Three times fiery dragons burned the watchful granny. Twice hungry goblins ate her. Once the murder took place in the elevator and the criminal managed to hide the body without a trace as the elevator went from the fifth to the third floor.

Somehow, when the children got noisy once again, the watchful granny called the police about “underground production at home.” Three police officers in bulletproof vests with assault rifles came to expose the operation. First, they plugged up the hallway all at once and started to feel out something, but Mama declared that there would be nothing for them to feel out, because one child was sitting on the potty and the other would soon be waking up. Then Alex appeared and began to ask the police

for an assault rifle. He said that he would not shoot and only wanted to look at the bullets. The police did not give him a rifle, but while an officer was rescuing his weapon from Alex, the rifle barrel got entangled in the tab of his mesh jacket and it was difficult to extricate because the hallway was terribly tight. While all three officers were disentangling one rifle, Costa appeared, triumphantly carrying in front of him the potty with the results of his efforts, then Rita woke up, and the police began to back out very slowly to the stairs.

“What do you produce here at least?” one, the youngest, asked hopelessly.

“You still don’t understand? Come on, go, go!” the older officer said and began to push him back down the stairs.

However, the absence of an underground factory in the apartment did not improve relations with the watchful granny. Peter even drew a caricature very similar to her, under which in bold letters was the caption: *I WATCH, I AM WATCHING, I WILL BE WATCHING!*

The watchful granny continued to irritate them, though no one was walking on tiptoe anymore anyway. One day Mama sat on the floor in the hallway, crying, and said, “I can’t take it anymore!”

“What’s ‘it’?” Papa was puzzled, looking out from the kitchen with the laptop, where he was dealing with the watchful neighbour once again, sending her live piranhas in a jar with cucumbers.

“We’re too crowded here! We’re like sardines in a can! This city has eaten me up!” Mama repeated and cried even louder.

Then Papa and Mama began to dream about moving to a detached house by the sea, where there would be no neighbours, and renting out the apartment in the big city. They weighed, considered, and decided to take a chance.

“Good thing that you don’t have to work!” Mama said.

“What?! I work from morning to night, but the kids interrupt me all the time!” Papa was outraged.

“That’s right! In a house, you’ll have your own office! We’ll all walk on tiptoe and not disturb you!”

“Yes!” Papa Gavrilov was inspired. “A real office with a real desk! I’ll wind barbed wire with an electrical current around the door and put wolf traps near it. In addition, there’ll be holes in the door through which you can spit out poison darts.”

Chapter Two

Papa Searches for a House

Papa, did you buy worms? Did you buy food for the worms? But what will they eat?

©Alex

In March, Papa Gavrilov went to the sea and began searching for a house that they could rent for a long time. The seaside town had low buildings, very picturesque, with roofs lined with red clay tiles. Leaves had not yet appeared everywhere, but many trees had already blossomed, and their soft pink flowers became blurred in the eyes, so that one could not see individual flowers. It seemed like the trees were wrapped in a luminous cloud.

Papa had a list of addresses, but, alas, it seemed that everything depicted on the Internet was not quite as in reality. What was presented as “a detached house with many rooms” turned out to be a cramped temporary shed in the owner’s yard divided by plywood partitions, and with windows looking out at a howling dog on a chain. What really looked more or less like a house cost so much that it did not suit Papa.

Wandering around town until the evening, Papa despaired. He decided to take the train and leave. However, there was still a lot of time until the train, and he sat down to rest in a confusing lane similar to the figure 8. Two entrances led into this lane, but they were very narrow and, if one did not know them, it was possible to go endlessly along the “eight” which never ended.

Papa sat on the curb near mailboxes, where there was a board and a jar with cigarette butts, and began to eat a sausage. Soon a large shaggy dog approached him, barking carefully, and calmly sat down. After a minute, a medium-sized dog of off-white colour came running, also barked at Papa, and sat down with a sense of having fulfilled its duty. Last, with a front leg drawn in, a small but very long dog with a bald back walked up, also barked, and took a seat beside the first two. It was felt that all three dogs had known each other for a long time but did not know Papa, and they were interested. Papa fed the dogs some sausage and waited for a fourth dog, because someone else was barking close by.

However, a fourth dog did not appear, but a dried-up grandpa about eighty came out of a gate instead. He stopped nearby and began to look quietly at Papa. Papa at first did not understand why the grandpa was standing there, but then surmised that it was his board and his jar with cigarette butts. Papa, apologizing, moved over, and the grandpa sat down beside him. They got into conversation and Papa told him that he was searching for a house but could find nothing and was therefore going to the station. The grandpa muttered something and then they were already chatting about something else.

Papa Gavrilov finished eating the sausage and went to the station. The station was quiet. Direct trains only came here in the summer, when resort visitors were travelling, and the rest of the time, only six cars were coupled to a longer train at the railway junction.

There was still a lot of time till the train, the car doors were not open, and Papa strolled along the platform. Suddenly he heard someone hailing him. He looked around and saw the dried-up grandpa, making his way to him, hurrying and breathless.

“I was thinking! I’ll rent my house!” the grandpa said.

“And you?” Papa asked.

“I’ve intended for a long time to go to my granddaughter. But she lives far away in Yekaterinburg. I won’t be able to come here, but I don’t want to abandon the house, because it’s indeed home and has to constantly do something with it. I need the proper person whom I could trust. Are you the proper fellow?”

Papa said that he did not know if he was the proper person.

“But you won’t sell the kitchen table? You won’t unscrew the sockets?”

Papa promised that he would not sell the table, but some of the young ones might just unscrew the sockets. Or shove clay or paper clips in them. But Papa did not mention this, and they went to see the grandpa’s house.

Papa really liked the house, although it was not detached but semi-detached. It had two floors with a large attic and its own separate plot of land in a shape resembling the letter L. The long arm was the size of three cars and the short arm of one car. There was even a tree on the plot – a huge old walnut.

On the ground floor were one large room, one small room, and the kitchen. On the second were three small rooms and one medium one. The sea was not visible from the window, but the lighthouse standing on the seashore was.

“Does it work?” Papa asked.

“Of course! The searchlight turns at night. I lived here for forty-two years with my wife and now seven years without her. I played the trumpet in a military orchestra. We bought the house here when my wife said that she had bad lungs and needed warm winters,” the grandpa said and stroked the windowsill, as if it was alive.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t...” Papa began, but the old man hastily repeated that he had decided everything a long time ago; it was dangerous for him to live alone because he had trouble with his heart from time to time, and he was very glad that everything was finally taking shape.

They agreed on how much to pay and on how to send money, and the grandpa began to show where the fuse box was, where the meters were, how to shut off the water, and what bad habits the gas boiler had.

“It’s good, this boiler, better than other new ones, but a little stubborn. Need to get a feel for it. It lights with matches, here... Only when you light it, keep your face away!”

Papa looked suspiciously sideways at the boiler. It looked like a huge cannon projectile, and tubes of different diameters were connected to it. Something was puffing and raging in the boiler.

“Any instructions for it?” Papa specified timidly.

“What instructions? It’s almost the same age as me. The main thing is just be friendly to it,” the old man said, sighing, and began to twist a big valve. “Here, I turned it off! Now I’ll light it! Careful!”

The old man held a match up to the boiler, and – PUFF!

It was the loudest “puff” in the world. Papa even squatted, saving his head just in case, but the boiler was already peacefully heating water, and an extremely satisfied old man stood beside it.

“Well, that’s all! Seems I’ve shown you everything! Now run for the train!” he hurried Papa and Papa travelled to Mama and the children.

* * *

April and May went in a terrible rush. They advertised the Moscow apartment with an agency and rented it to a family with two children, which would take possession in June. The children of this family were so quiet that Papa was certain the watchful neighbour would like them. Although, possibly she would now decide that the tenants’ children sat quietly because the parents gagged them or tied them to chairs.

“Not a sound for an hour! Just sat and drew with markers! Why can’t ours be so docile!” Mama said enviously.

“Ours can’t, but others can. It seems to me that ours are Italian spies,” Papa responded.

“You and I are Italian spies! Only the Italians don’t know about it yet,” Mama added.

She had barely slept in recent weeks. No one knew when she rested. Since the beginning of May, Mama had been packing what they would take with them and giving away what they would not take at all.

During these two months, the dried-up grandpa changed his mind three times about going to his granddaughter, and then made up his mind again. This confused Papa, but all the same, Mama persisted in continuing packing, declaring that she had already made up her mind, and once she did, it was then too late to give up. Whatever happened, they would just go and sit on the bags at the station, and then somehow everything would work out by itself.

Then the grandpa raised the price slightly and went to his granddaughter after all. This took place a few days before the end of the last school term. The children would start in a new school in a new town in the new school year. Now everyone realized that the journey was actually happening and started to pack four times faster.

Each child packed his own things in his own backpack. The younger had a smaller backpack, the older, a bigger one, with the exception of Rita, who was so little that her backpack was a frog with a zipper at the mouth.

Alex assembled a full backpack of toys, and when they did not fit into it, he started banging on the backpack with a hammer, kneading it so that it turned out to be more compact. At the same time, by way of selfless help, he also “kneaded” with the hammer the big bag in which Mama had packed the dishes, after which it turned out that all the dishes left whole could easily fit in one package.

“Well, doesn’t matter!” Mama said, consoling herself. “Indeed, we could break them on the road, and then it would be much more annoying!”

Kate filled her whole backpack with animal cages. At the bottom was the cage with a guinea pig, then a rat cage on it, and at the top of the pyramid – the red-eared slider turtle Mafia. They named the turtle Mafia because, when it was living in the aquarium, it ate newts, crayfish, and goldfish. It gobbled up absolutely everything at night without a trace, but during the day, it stayed at the bottom like a completely respectable individual, so they started to suspect it only because the newts, crayfish, and goldfish simply could not have just gotten up and gone somewhere on business. Later Kate suddenly remembered that they were not going yet and pulled out all the cages so that the animals would not suffocate. Nevertheless, having pulled out the cages, Kate again succumbed to the mood of general packing and put everything back. She again thought that they would suffocate and again pulled them out.

Alena whined and did not want to go anywhere. She had fallen in love with Vadik from the next class, who always threw a heavy medicine ball at her back during physical education, but never at the other girls. Although there were bruises from the ball on her back, it was still not worth ignoring Vadik.

Kate, the older sister, interrogated Alena, “Vadik! Ha! What was the name of the boy you fell in love with last week? Dima?”

“Cyril. He stuck gum in my hair.”

“But Dima didn’t?”

“Cyril also stuck gum in Dima’s hair.”

Kate twirled a finger at her temple. “Ugh! Such drama! Cyril and Dima stick gum in each other’s hair, and she falls in love with some unfortunate Vadik! That’s it, go pack your backpack!”

Alena took a broom, swept her broken heart away into the dustpan, and started packing.

Finally, the day of departure arrived. Papa took Mama and the kids to the station. Then he was to return, load into the minivan the things that amounted to much more than seven backpacks, and drive for a whole day. However, the train also took a day. So they should turn up in the same place around the same time.

The watchful granny from the second floor unexpectedly went to see them off at the station. Papa and Mama did not want to take her at all and made up a story about broken seatbelts in the third row of seats, but it turned out to be quite difficult to turn her down. In the car, the old woman held Rita on her lap and kissed the top of her head, and Rita turned her head, because the kiss was moist.

“Look! She’s drinking from her brain!” Peter whispered and laughed so wildly that they wanted to send him to the station by subway.

At the station, the old woman kissed all the children, not even excluding Peter, who had to bend down because he was two heads taller. Peter, after being kissed, made scary faces and tried to catch free Wi-Fi at the station.

“I remember when you were still so tiny!” the old woman said, showing with her hand the level of her knee. Then she gave the children a transistor radio with a solar charger. Rita, of course, immediately wanted the radio for herself alone and she lay down on the asphalt right on the platform so that everyone could see how indispensable it was to her.

“It will be shared! And it’s yours too!” Kate said, but Rita wanted it only for herself and kicked.

“Look here! No one is torturing her!” Papa Gavrilov could not refrain from saying.

“Work with the child’s character, work! Explain to her!” the watchful granny said, but in a rather weak voice.

The train started moving and the watchful granny waved to them. “Kate, Alex, Rita, Costa, Vicky, Alena, Peter! Goodbye! Write me! I don’t even know your address!” she shouted.

Mama was astonished. She had not even suspected that the watchful granny knew all their children by name. The train pulled away, and it was visible from the window that the neighbour was walking along the platform and wiping her eyes.

“You know, but she’s kind of good! How come we didn’t notice this before?” Mama said uncertainly.

“We can go back! It’s not too late to jump off the train!” Vicky proposed.

“No! We won’t go back!” Mama hastily replied. “But now that I know she’s good, my heart will be lighter!”

Vicky chuckled and sat down to read *The Headless Horseman*,³ in which there were often horses.

³ *The Headless Horseman* (1865-66), a novel by Thomas Mayne Reid (1818-83), an American novelist of adventure novels, is based on a south Texas folk tale.

Chapter Three

No. 6 Vine Street

While a frog is sloshing around, it will not drown.
Papa's motto

Before leaving, Papa walked around the minivan and rocked it, checking if it had been loaded evenly and would not lean to one side. The minivan was loaded up like a mule. Boxes and things filled it from floor to ceiling, even with the seats down.

“Poor thing!” Papa said, feeling sorry for his minivan.

The Gavrilovs' minivan was Japanese, right-handed drive. Once, a young Alena washed it with a brick, scraping away the dirt, and then a year later the already grown Alex thoughtfully tapped it with a hammer on all sides, knocking down the ice in the winter, and covered the minivan with pockmarks. Papa sometimes thought whether it would be good to exchange the old minivan for a new one, but who is to say that they would not wash the new one with a brick, and the old one, though looking like a wild shed and more than 10 years old, was actually quite lively.

By the example of his own minivan, Papa learned to identify minivans with many children. To do this it was necessary to go to any busy intersection on Sunday mornings, when services got under way in the churches in the city centre, and see which minivan was bouncing and swaying, waiting for the green light. There turned out to be quite a lot of them.

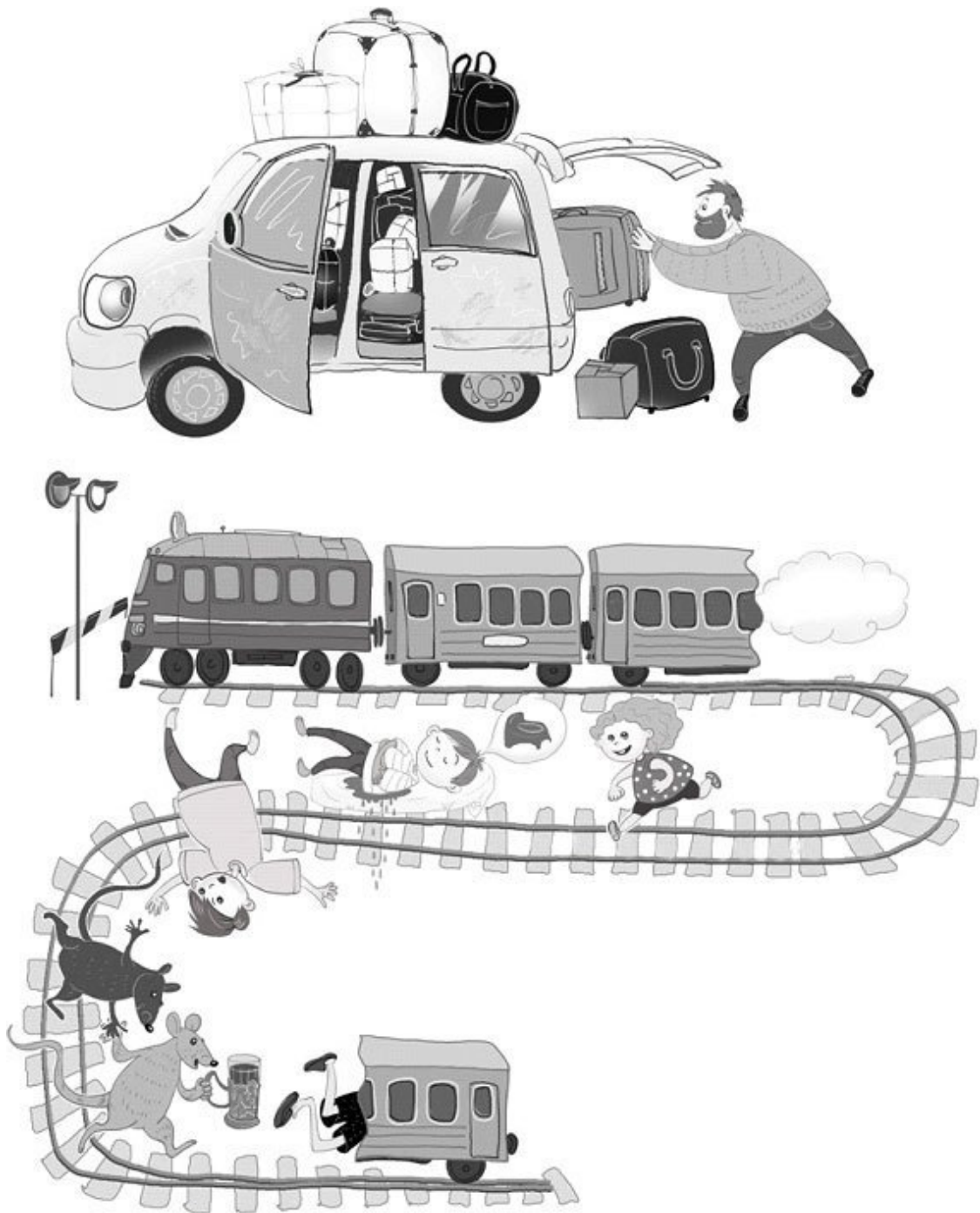
Papa spent the day behind the wheel, listening to a good audio book and making an effort to drive faster, but all the same, because of having to load the boxes, was an hour late. Mama and the children were standing at the station, not knowing what to do, and their backpacks, boxes, and suitcases were lying in a small mound near them. Rita, whom Mama was holding so that she would not fall down, was jumping on top of said mound. However, it goes without saying, Rita was certain that she would not fall and pulled her hand away, but when Mama let go of her, Rita immediately tumbled. Papa barely managed to catch her.

“It was a quiet horror!” Mama complained. “We terrorized the entire car! Rita was running all the time, Costa didn't want to sleep on the same berth with Alex, pushing him off with his feet, and Vicky didn't want to take him!”

“You sleep with Costa, you wake up in a puddle! He'll then say that he dreamt of the potty again,” Vicky explained.

“Not true!” Costa wailed.

“...and our rats slipped away!” Mama added, changing the subject.



“Yes, yes, yes! Even Schwartz!” Kate shouted. “They ran around the car! And what do you think? All the men were afraid of rats, one even jumped onto a second berth, but the women picked them up!”

“That’s because women aren’t afraid of rats but of mice! And when it’s advantageous for them!” Peter said.

“And where’re the rats now?” Papa asked, hoping that they had escaped and that would be the end of it.

“In the cage, of course! They later returned!” Kate said and looked in her backpack to check whether the rats had slipped away again.

Then everyone piled into the minivan, managing to find a seat on top of things, and Papa proceeded to show them the house. He was very proud of himself and wanted everything to be great.

“Soon you’ll see! Soon!” he repeated constantly, but the promised “soon” for some reason did not come.

They drove along the waterfront six times and crossed the tram tracks ten times, but did not find the figure 8 street. The next time along the waterfront, the children staged a mutiny. They wanted to swim, but Mama did not remember which box their swimsuits were in. And she doubted that the water had warmed up. The beaches were still quite empty.

Mama started to look at Papa with some doubt. “At least the right city?” she asked guardedly. “Do you remember the street name?”

“No. 6 Vine Street!” Papa blurted out.

“Well, so ask someone!”

Papa refused to ask out of principle. He already considered himself a local, and locals do not ask for directions. “I know how to walk from the station! But I walked through courtyards, you can’t drive through that way!”

“So, let’s leave the van and walk!” Mama, who was impatient to see the house, demanded.

“No, that’s stupid! We may lose the van and all the things! Now I remember, it’s here!” Papa became obstinate and, turning resolutely, drove into a dead end, which was complete with a wall of green shrubs. Papa started to make a U-turn, which was not easy, because boxes and his kin lying horizontally blocked up the whole rear window and the street was almost as wide as their car. Papa backed up, then drove forward and unexpectedly cut into a solid wall of green shrubs.

“Be careful! It’ll scratch!” Mama yelled, but the shrubs suddenly parted and the branches only slid along the glass.

A bewildered Papa, stepping on the gas, continued to drive to who knows where, and the van passed through the green wall without the slightest resistance. Bright tattered flowers, in which bees and beetles were crawling, drummed on the windows.

“We’re like Alice in Wonderland!” Alena shouted.

Then the shrubs finally parted and everyone saw a dusty path with undulating asphalt, cracked from the roots of the many acacias under it. A big shaggy dog ran along the path to meet them with a hoarse barking. Behind the shaggy dog, a medium-sized off-white dog also rushed over barking. Finally, a quite small short-legged dog with a bald back came hobbling last. This dog was no longer barking but coughing.

Kate rolled out of the stopped car and ran to meet the dogs. Mama yelled, afraid that the dogs would tear her to pieces, but the dogs suddenly turned and ran in the opposite direction, except the bald dog, which fell on the ground from terror and, giving up, turned over with legs up.

“See? Afraid that Kate will hug them to death! I’d be scared too!” Peter said and again started laughing so wildly that Vicky demanded pushing Peter out of the car because he had completely deafened her.

“I’ll go myself!” Peter said and crawled out of the car through the lowered rear window. Alena, Costa, Alex, and Rita got out after Peter.

They all crowded in front of the van, and Papa could no longer go anywhere and turned off the motor.

“Where is the house?” Mama asked.

“Here!” Papa said, pointing to that which Mama could not see from the van.

Mama got out and saw the house. It had peeling plaster, which was not conspicuous, because vines were embracing the second floor and the roof, and blooming dog rose, curling along the window bars, covered the first floor, where the grapevines were only thick bald trunks.

The house’s double gates were metal, twice the height of a person, and painted black. They had rusted for many years and the rust was carefully painted over. They rusted again and were painted again. As a result, the gates, oddly enough, turned out to have a very beautiful texture – so uneven,

rough, really lively. At the bottom, where the gates had rusted heavily, small holes formed here and there.

Rita and Alex were already lying on their stomachs, trying to peep through the holes to see what was happening in the yard. “Mama, look! Look!” they yelled.

“Good heavens!” Mama said. She approached carefully and ran a hand along the gates. The black paint, warmed up by the sun, burned the palm of her hand. The wind swooped down. The gates stretched like a sail and buzzed. Mama wanted to stand here a bit and try to catch a response in her heart, which would suggest whether this was the house she dreamed of, but Papa was already hurrying to open the house. Alex had managed to climb up the gates and now, feet dangling, was sitting almost level with the second floor. Everyone was shouting for him to get down, but Alex liked to sit so high. He climbed the post of the gates and climbed over to the balcony from there. He was scrambling with ease, like a monkey.

Mama was afraid that Alex would fall and demanded that he come down, but Peter declared that he knew Alex. Alex would never come down himself, because he saw perfectly that no one could reach him. Peter himself had also been mischievous like that in childhood. Now he was wise.

“Wise, wise! Only don’t bray so loudly!” Vicky said and moved aside just in case.

“What if we threaten that we’ll punish him?” Kate suggested.

“Then he really won’t come down. What’s the sense of coming down if you’re going to get punished? Better to sit until everyone forgets that they’ve promised to punish you!” Peter continued authoritatively. “No! A better way to get Alex down is to throw something at him. For example, bricks.”

“Not on your life!” Mama objected.

“I wasn’t suggesting to start immediately with large bricks. Can start with small pebbles. Well, if you don’t want to, don’t! Then option number two! I’ll bet on a trick; that’ll work!”

Peter leaned down, picked up Alex’s backpack from the asphalt, and began to rummage in it. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “Soda! And what’s this in the bottle? Vinegar, perhaps?”

“Give it back! It’s mine!” was heard from the balcony. Alex deftly rolled down from there like a ball, and, clutching his backpack, started to pull it away from Peter.

“Learn from me while I live! Childish greed is the key to a child’s heart!” said Peter.

However, no one wished to learn from Peter. Everyone was already rushing into the house. Costa flew first with a sword in his right hand. Rita followed. After Rita, Vicky and Alena. Kate ran last, all three stray dogs – large, medium, and small with a bald back – sticking to her. Now these dogs did not consider themselves strays anymore, but had thought about it, talked it over, and decided to become pets. Mama waved her arms at them and stood at the door, and the dogs again became strays.

“You’re cruel!” Kate said. “By the way, I’ve given them our pâté! It would have gone bad anyway!”

“My pâté? It couldn’t go bad! It was wrapped up. I was planning it for dinner!”

“It’s already irrelevant, can’t get it out of the dogs anyway,” said Kate.

Then they all walked around the house for a long time, and Papa showed them everything that the grandpa had shown him last time. Here is the large room on the ground floor, here is the small room, which he, Papa, would take as his office, and here is the kitchen! There are still three small and one medium-sized room upstairs. And here is a door, but he, Papa, has no idea where it leads.

“To Bluebeard’s room! Two hundred strangled wives there!” Peter said and opened the door. Beyond the door was revealed a sinister type of staircase – dark and narrow.

Everyone began to descend cautiously, the older ones holding the younger ones just in case. There were certainly no strangled wives there, that was nonsense, but still it would be better if Papa went first. It would be safer, more secure. And better if Mama would hold onto Papa and the rest of the children clung to Mama.



The lower they went, the darker it became, like the open mouth of a passage from where light could no longer filter through. Papa fumbled on the wall. He found the light switch, turned on the light. A light bulb hanging from a wire flashed and everyone saw the cosiest basement in the world. An unfinished small sailboat was on a workbench and wooden shelves with hundreds of dusty jars stretched along the walls. Mama and Vicky immediately rushed to wipe the jars, making small windows with fingers in the dust. Preserve turned out to be in some of the jars, compote and jam in others.

“We can’t take them! They belong to someone else!” Papa said sternly.

“We won’t steal! But we can ask the old man politely, ‘Can we take your preserves?’ Most likely he’ll say, ‘Certainly!’ It’s not like he’ll go on the train for two days to eat three tablespoons and return!” Kate declared.

Papa then turned off the light in the basement; everyone went upstairs and ran around the house. Papa showed Mama how to light the gas boiler and how it made the loudest “PUFF” in the world. Alex, of course, was already standing nearby, pricking up his ears, and Papa had to plug up Alex’s ears with his fingers and cover Alex’s eyes at the same time so that Alex would not nose out how to make the biggest “puff”!

While they were examining the boiler, a terrible noise surged on the second floor. The floor shook, the house jumped up and down, and Mama was glad that they no longer had neighbours who would now come running to knock on the door.

“Do you hear? What are they doing there?” she asked Papa when Alex, attracted by the general noise, ran upstairs too.

“I think they’re dividing up the rooms!” Papa suggested. “They’ve never had their own rooms. Although there aren’t enough rooms for everyone here.”

“What do you mean not enough? There’re six rooms! You said there’re three small and one medium on the second floor. One large and one small on the first!” Mama exclaimed.

“That’s right, six rooms. Seven kids and nine of us in total... Plus the big room on the ground floor is obviously the common room. No one will be able to sleep there. So, minus one. Even minus two, because the small one will be my office!”

“Wait, I need one room for the little ones... The quietest and farthest so they won’t be disturbed in the afternoon! What if you get the basement for your office? Imagine, how cool! Sitting in an outstanding, cozy, dry basement, writing novels, and eating jam!” Mama proposed carefully.

“No way! Better pack the kids in the basement! A nice, cozy, dry basement full of preserves!” Papa said gloomily, having decided to defend his office to the last.

Some time later, when the noise quieted down, Mama and Papa went upstairs. The second floor was a demarcation zone.

The boundaries of each sector were marked out with the children’s backpacks and a line of things laid out in a row stretched across the room, even taking into account the interests of Rita and Costa. The older kids assigned the far left room to them and blocked them up in that room so that they did not run and grab everything. They generously gave the next room to Mama and Papa as their bedroom. Vicky, Alena, Alex, and Kate divided the centre room among themselves, where, in principle, there would be enough space for everyone if bunk beds were put in. Kate had already managed to put the guinea pig and rat cages on the centre room windows – and there were two of them!

Vicky did not like it. “No rats! They throw sawdust out of the cage all the time! Dirt from just one of them! Choose: me, your sister, or the rats!” she yelled.

“I didn’t ask you to choose!” Kate warned ominously.

Peter won for himself the far right room. He had already managed to close the door and hung up a “DO NOT DISTURB!” sign, which he had foresightedly printed on the printer back in Moscow, glued onto cardboard, and brought with him.

Mama wandered anxiously around the house and counted the beds. This turned out to be simple; there was only one bed. There was also a huge decrepit sofa. If you tapped on it even just slightly, a cloud of dust would rise to the ceiling. Costa discovered this first when he hit the sofa with his sword. On noticing this, Alex approached it, and Rita after Alex, then all three began to bang on it with passion.

Peter watched the childish fun for some time from the height of his wisdom, and then also wanted to move onto the sofa. Better yet, to run, jump, and flop on it from the maximum possible height. “Well, break it up, pip-squeaks!” he ordered offhandedly.

However, before Peter could pound on the sofa and break all its legs, Mama ran into the room. Coughing from the dust, she began to pull the kids out of the room and demanded that Papa drag the

sofa onto the street. “Okay! We’ll buy beds tomorrow. Good that we took the kids’ mattresses with us! They can sleep right on the floor!” she said, and everyone went for the mattresses.

Later, everyone still ran around a little and lay down to sleep. Papa fell asleep first, having been up for more than 24 hours. He did not even unload the things from the car. Rita, Costa, and Alex slept with him on the same mattress. Papa had to lie on the edge and pull up his knees, because they would not fit otherwise. They did not fit because the mattress was so small and Rita wanted to be right in the center, but she began to twist and turn and kick all those who accidentally touched her. Costa and Alex fenced Rita off with pillows as shields.

This was their first day at the new place.

Chapter Four

The Flying Shoe

The legendary creator of gunpowder, the monk Berthold Schwarz,⁴ died in the explosion of his invention.
Children's Encyclopaedia

The morning began with a scream. It was Vicky. Everybody woke up at once and ran to her. There was no saying what and why. A new home, a new place.

“A cockroach was climbing under my mattress!” Vicky informed them.

“That’s all? At least a large one?” Kate asked, yawning.

“Huge! Never saw anything like it!”

“Put down soggy bread for it, cockroaches love that!” Kate advised her and lifted up the mattress to look at the cockroach.

“Careful! Wrinkles!” yelled Vicky, the only one who managed to put sheets down for the night.

The cockroach turned out to be a giant purple ground beetle, which was hiding in a crack in the wooden floor. Peter immediately got on the Internet and found out that a ground beetle never attacks first, but, escaping from enemies, can secrete yellowish drops of acid. If the poison gets on the hand, for example, and the person wipes his eyes with this hand, then the retina cannot be restored.

Alena and Vicky immediately began to run away from the ground beetle, but the others, on the contrary, ran for it. Alex tried to place the ground beetle on a sheet of paper so that it would secrete poison. Kate yelled, “Leave it alone! It’s in the Red List!”⁵ Costa, brandishing his sword, tried to get to the ground beetle and hit it. Rita screamed just for the company, because she saw that everyone was running and yelling. At the same time, she was also stomping loudly.

Everything ended when Papa placed the ground beetle in the palm of his hand, took it out into the courtyard, and released it onto the grass. The ground beetle did not secrete a drop of poison. It did not figure out that it was on Papa’s hand. It probably seemed to it that it was a piece of bark.

“You kicked it out of the house! It was happy here with us! Comfy and safe!” Kate said sorrowfully, and Mama forced Papa to wash his hands with soap.

“If you go blind, who will feed us? You work with your eyes!”

“Very funny! And no one ever mentioned being sorry for me!” Papa sulked and quickly went to his new office, before some crazy toddler kept him busy.

There turned out to be no desk in the office. There was only a nightstand smelling of valerian⁶ with a lamp attached that had a neck like the knight in chess. Papa started to move the nightstand so that it would be closer to the light. Breaking away from the wall, the lamp immediately dislodged and fell to the ground. It turned out that where the bolts were attached had managed to rot.

“Well! First destruction!” Papa said, with sadness remembering the old man, who treated them as decent people.

“Not the first destruction! The second!” Peter corrected him. It turned out that he had already managed to break a chair, which, according to Peter, had itself to blame, because who knew that one should not stand on it.

⁴ It is unclear whether Schwarz is a historical or purely legendary figure. It has been suggested that he was a historical alchemist of the late 14th century who developed gunpowder in Germany.

⁵ The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

⁶ Valerian is a perennial flowering plant with the roots being used in herbal medicine, since valerian root has sedative and anxiolytic effects.

Papa took the chair and the lamp to the basement and placed his laptop temporarily on the windowsill. When he did that, someone loudly said “honk-honk!” at him. He decided that it was Peter, but then saw a gaggle of geese, in a long chain like prisoners in the movies, walking around an enormous trough and making an awful racket. An elderly woman, hands in her apron, was standing near the geese and admiring them. All this took place some two metres from the window of Papa’s office. If Papa opened the window, he could easily stretch a mop through the small flowerbed to the geese and the woman.

“Isn’t that our yard?” Mama asked perplexedly.

“No, not ours! This is the side of the street,” Papa replied. “What, will they be honking all day? This is a city! It’s two steps to the main street! Why are there geese here?”

“Do you want me to stick some film on the window so that nothing will be visible?” Mama suggested.

“Oh no, don’t! I want to see life, not a film with flowers!”

Leaving Papa to observe life, Mama set off to the kitchen to make breakfast and save the rest of the produce from Kate. Dogs were already barking somewhere close and Mama suspected that Kate had something to do with it.

Looking out onto the street, Mama discovered that it was indeed so. Kate was feeding the dogs their remaining sausages, and Vicky was standing beside her, smearing iodine on the bald back of the long dog with a squirrel-hair paintbrush, which Mama recognized as one of her favourite paintbrushes. The bald dog was eating a sausage and it was all the same to it that they were pouring and spreading iodine on it with a natural squirrel-hair brush. True, the other dogs were looking at the bald dog with suspicion and moving away from it.

“What are you doing?” Mama shouted.

“Why is it bald? If it’s bald, that means it’s sick. If it’s sick, it must be treated!” Vicky stated.

“Don’t touch it with your hands! What if it has ringworms?” Mama was worried.

“No one is touching it with hands! I’m touching it with a brush!” Vicky explained, and the dogs, having finished the sausages, rushed to the gate to bark at a lone cyclist.

Mama was afraid that people would think that these were their dogs because they ran out of their gates, and rushed to save the cyclist. The cyclist yelled and jerked his foot, trying to kick the dogs. As he rode down the figure-eight street, the dogs ran alongside and barked horribly, and the largest even seized his pant leg. However, as soon as the cyclist approached the exit from the street, the dogs immediately lost interest and went back home. At the same time, the bald dog managed to roll about in the dust, and all traces of iodine disappeared from it.

When Mama returned, Papa was unloading things from the van. Peter and Vicky were helping him, and Alex was roaming around the courtyard seeking out anything interesting. He discovered quite a lot of interesting things. A rusty rake without a handle, a watering can in the shape of a flamingo, originally pink but faded from the sun to almost white, two very old car license plates, and a big shoe. The shoe had probably been in concrete once, because it still had cement on it now and even its shoelaces were stiff.

Alex took the shoe, thought for a bit, held it in his hands, and then with the words, “Why is it lying in our yard?” threw it over the fence to the neighbour’s yard.

“Don’t!” Mama yelled, but she was too late. She only had time to hear as the shoe fell on the other side onto something metallic, because the sound was of scraping metal.

“Well! Now we have to go to the neighbour’s to apologize!” Mama said. However, before she took a step, the shoe flew back and plopped down between Mama and Alex.

“Wow!” Alex said and, faster than Mama could even move, tossed it back again.

This time it managed without crashing. Hence, the shoe had flown past the iron sheet. But after three seconds, the shoe appeared over the fence again, spinning in the air. Obviously, someone had launched it by the stiff lace. Peter, walking across the yard with boxes, dropped the boxes and rushed

to catch the shoe. He managed to intercept it immediately; it barely appeared from behind the fence and Peter hammered it exactly like a volleyball.

“You’re sick!” Vicky said.

“Cool, eh? Flinging shoes at each other!”

“We started first!”

“We can! This shoe is not ours!”

“What do you mean it’s not ours? It’s on our lot!”

“It’s still not ours. Let them show the receipt that it’s ours!”

The shoe again whistled in the air. Peter grabbed his ear and slowly began to get upset.

“Ah! It hit you? Are you hurt?” Vicky exclaimed.

“No! It tickled me! Better you all leave, because I can miss!” Peter said in a voice terrible in its quietness.

Having taken the shoe by its laces, he twirled it and launched it up with force. Almost reaching the sun, the shoe, gaining speed, rushed down, and hung safely on the branches of the walnut tree.

Peter tried to get to it, but the upper branches of the walnut tree were brittle and could not hold his weight. Then Peter sent Alex, stating, “The chief monkey goes to the arena!”

A flattered “chief monkey” climbed up the walnut tree, but the branches began to crack even under him and the “monkey” came back with nothing. Seeing that time had passed but the shoe did not come flying, someone was romping about in disappointment on the other side of the fence. They heard something being dragged, most likely a chair, onto a sheet of iron, and then someone, sighing, scrambled onto it. A pale face with red-brown freckles appeared over the fence. It belonged to a boy about eleven.

“I would like to draw to your attention that throwing objects is rude!” the boy informed them. His head was swinging like a pendulum, first disappeared, and then appeared again.

“It’s you throwing? Now I’ll give it to you in the forehead! You hit me in the ear!” Peter yelled.

The pale boy looked seriously at Peter’s ear. “Wait a minute! Sorry to digress, but I must promptly finish an unpleasant matter!”

“What matter?”

The boy did not reply and disappeared, and a moment later, the iron sheet rattled terribly.

“What, running away?” Peter asked.

“No,” a weak voice came from the other side of the fence. “Not exactly. I fell off the chair.”

Peter realized that this was the same unpleasant matter that the boy had to finish. “How is it possible to fall from a chair?”

“I stood on its back, and it broke. Could you get me up please? I’m stuck.”

Peter and Vicky, followed by Kate, leapt over the fence and jumped down on the iron sheet. They were in a courtyard resembling a tennis racket. The racket handle was paved with coloured tiles. The round part of the racket was a small courtyard. Two cages were in the yard. Four chickens were languishing in the first. Five or six bikes were locked in the second cage adjacent to the wall.

A chair with a broken back lay on the iron sheet. A boy was lying on his back near the chair. His foot was stuck in the forked trunk of an acacia, on the thorny branches of which a great number of socks were drying. The boy was pressing his hand to his chest. His white t-shirt was slowly stained pink.

“Goodbye!” the boy said solemnly, looking not at them but at the sky. “Please tell my parents that I’ve died. Although, I think they’ll also guess!”

Vicky began to squeal, but Kate squatted down and asked why he decided that he was dying.

“I cut myself,” the boy informed her.

“Cut what? A vein?”

“No. I ripped open my finger on this iron sheet. Of course, my parents will now throw it out, but it’s already useless! A person cut by a rusty object dies within a few hours. Tetanus starts in him.”

Kate disengaged the boy's leg from the forked acacia and helped him up. The boy stood and swayed. He pressed his injured hand to his chest and would not show it to anyone. His t-shirt continued to stain.

"Anyone home?" Kate asked.

"Yes."

"Well, let's go there! What's your name?"

"Andrew! Andrew Mokhov," the boy introduced himself.

Kate and Peter grabbed him by the elbows and led him away. Andrew Mokhov walked firmly, but only until he looked at his shirt. Then he began to pale and his knees buckled.

"Of course everything will be bad!" he said, making his way between the cage with bicycles and the cage with chickens. "That's your car there? So big? I saw it from behind the fence. How many of you kids are there? Although you don't have to answer. Already doesn't matter to me now!"

"Seven," Kate said.

"For some reason this would be valuable information!" Andrew admitted. "There are two of us. Nina and Seraphim."

"Then why two? Aren't you Andrew?"

"Correct. But when I die, only Nina and Seraphim will be left. I corrected the number, so as not to mislead you."

"How old are Nina and Seraphim?"

"Nina's fourteen, Seraphim's eight. But he's been lost since this morning, so Nina'll probably remain alone."

At the end of the yard, they saw a small house with cracked paint. It was entwined not with a grapevine but an ivy with a trunk the thickness of two human arms. In order that the roots of the ivy would not wreck the walls, pieces of wood were placed near them.

"Wow! Some house! Where did it come from?" Peter was surprised.

"It has always been here," Andrew said with an air of importance. "Even before yours. Yours is sixty years old. Ours will soon be a hundred. See, what thick limestone."

"Why didn't we see your gate?"

Andrew sighed. "Because our gate isn't here. There's a wicket gate, but it's far... it's all very complicated in the city. A bunch of all kinds of side-streets and courtyards."

"We already realized this when searching for our house," Peter said.

"You realized nothing. The figure eight, it's this here." Andrew traced with a finger in the air. "And here's one more lane, like a one. It turns out that it's not 8 but 18. We're on the 1 and you're on the 8. In short, we're closer over the fence. If you walk, then you have to go around everything in a circle."

Andrew got up onto the porch and began to knock on the door with his forehead. No one answered, then Andrew pressed the handle with his elbow. "It's open," he said. "Come!"

They found themselves in an enclosed patio, where there was a gas boiler the same as the Gavrilovs'. Here was a large table in a kitchen area. Despite the bright day outside, the ivy shaded the window so much that the patio was lit by a chandelier with five dusty globes. A huge dried-up butterfly had hardened on one of the globes.

"We specifically did not take it off. For the sake of artistic shadows on the wall. Papa won't allow it," the boy explained.

"Your father's an artist?"

"Photographer. Works on the sea front. And in schools too."

Andrew sat quite calmly down on a chair, but looked by chance at his hand and, remembering that he was dying, started to slide from his chair onto the floor. Vicky looked at him with understanding. She loved to suffer when the appropriate occasion arose.

"Go and rinse out the wound!" Kate ordered.

“No way! I’m afraid!”

“Let me call your mama! Where is she?”

“Mustn’t disturb Mama! She was on the Internet all night and only just lay down. And Nina has gone for her guitar lesson...”

“Where’s your papa then? At work?”

“No. Papa’s searching for Seraphim. Seraphim is lost. He gets lost all the time...”

“First-aid kit?”

“In a white box!”

Kate began to look for a white box and discovered it to the right of the teapot. All its sides, the outside, and even the inside of the lid, were covered with many phone numbers. While Kate was looking for the box, she noticed many icons, including the Nursing Madonna⁷ and Our Lady of Kazan,⁸ on the patio walls. The stump of a candle stuck out of a candlestick by the window.

Kate looked at this with understanding. “You also go to church?”

“Mama, yes. Papa... well, probably also yes! But I’m an atheist!” Andrew said. “I don’t believe in God but in that when people die, they decompose to water and mineral elements.”

Peter looked at Andrew with great interest and scratched his nose. “And how do your parents feel about you being an atheist?” he asked.

“It’s alright. Mama says that atheism is a normal step towards faith and not a fear for God. Ouch, don’t pour iodine on the wound! Never iodine on the wound, only on the edges! Lord! That hurts!!!”

Using the fact that Andrew, blowing on the wound, involuntarily stopped grabbing her finger, Kate deftly put a bandage on his hand and wiped it with a wet towel. Then she forced Andrew to change his t-shirt. The spots of blood had barely disappeared, and Andrew immediately calmed down. Even his cheeks visibly turned pink.

“Well? Alive?”

Andrew was embarrassed to admit that he was alive. “My finger is throbbing!” he said, paying attention to his senses.

“A lot?”

“No, not a lot, but it’s throbbing. Come to my room! Just don’t yell! Mama’s sleeping behind the door!”

“Right now, no one to yell at here! No little ones!” Kate said and was mistaken. While they were busy, Alex managed to get over the fence and dragged Costa with him. No one dragged Rita over the fence, and she was screaming on the other side, demanding to join the team.

Andrew’s room turned out to be a real pirate’s nook with an upper deck supported by four wooden pillars. A rope ladder hung from the deck. True, it turned out that Andrew did not use it because he was lazy. On a littered table were textbooks for the fifth grade, a tablet, and a laptop without a single key. Only two or three elastics and some plastic parts were intact.

“Don’t pay attention to the keyboard!” Andrew said grimly. “Seraphim picked them off when I sat on his grasshopper. He didn’t believe that it was an accident.”

“A grasshopper?”

“Yes. He fed the grasshopper grass and it was all around the whole house. He deleted everything from my desktop. Now I have an eighteen-character password. I type it in front of Seraphim, but he can’t remember.”

“How do you enter the password?”

“On an external keyboard. I hide it just in case... Hey! Is this also your brother? Get my paper from him!”

⁷ The Nursing Madonna shows the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus, a depiction representing Humility.

⁸ Our Lady of Kazan is an icon representing the Virgin Mary as the protector and patroness of the city of Kazan.

“Also your brother” turned out to be Costa, who had pulled some paper off the table to draw on. They caught Costa and took the sheet of paper from him. Costa wanted to be indignant but felt that there was no sympathetic public near at hand, and he very quietly got busy examining a fishing bobber, which glowed when shaken.

“What’s this formula? You like chemistry?” Peter asked, looking at the sheet rescued from Costa’s hands.

Andrew hastily grabbed back the sheet written on with a wide marker. He listened, looked out the window, and whispered, “Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes!” Peter said.

“Then here it is! Do you know where to buy uranium?”

“What kind of uranium?”

“Enriched. I know how to make an atomic bomb, only I have no uranium!”

“At a drugstore?” Alex naively asked.

“Uranium? At a drugstore?” Peter laughed his signature laugh, but Andrew looked at Alex without irony, which Alex appreciated very much.

“You don’t understand! Such things aren’t in drugstores. They wouldn’t even sell me manganese! Said it’s forbidden to sell it.”

Next to Andrew’s table was a huge cookie box filled to the brim with all sorts of technical treasures: parts of phones, coils of wire, tools, batteries, electric toys, and constructor components. It was worthwhile for Alex to see all this, as he stuck to Andrew exactly like a boy from the Middle Ages to the Pied Piper.

Therefore, when Mama began to shout from behind the fence and call them to breakfast, the older children left immediately, but Alex stayed with Andrew. And Costa also stayed. He generally tagged after Alex all the time, and whatever Alex was interested in, he roughly determined that he had to take it away or steal it.

Alex and Andrew started to rummage in the box. From time to time Andrew groaned, trying to bend the cut finger. They made a catapult, which was to throw batteries with an ignition mechanism fastened to them. Andrew gutted ignition mechanisms from broken plastic lighters. According to the design, all this should explode and kill everyone on site, because Andrew read somewhere that batteries contain metal salts, but also discharge gas, which would certainly ignite with the mechanism. Costa was jostling near them, grabbing everything, and interfering. Then they climbed the rope ladder to the upper deck on the pillars. Costa could not climb up the ladder because of his left hand and was starting to get rowdy below. They paid him no attention. Then Costa went out into the yard, picked up clumps of dirt, returned and began to throw dirt at them.

“Are you nuts, kid? What do you want?” Andrew was mad when a piece of dirt hit him on the nose.

“It’s Costa,” Alex prompted.

“Costa! What do you want?”

Costa did not know what he wanted and pouted angrily. “Say ‘table’!” he demanded in a voice trembling with anger.

“Table!” Andrew repeated obediently.

“Table! Your grandma’s a boxer!” Costa shouted. “Ha-ha-ha! Say ‘nose’!”

“Nose!”

“Nose! Your grandma’s a boxer!”

Andrew shook his head. “No, doesn’t rhyme! You can’t say ‘your grandma’s a boxer’ there. Now say ‘sermon’!”

“Sermon!” Costa repeated.

“Sermon! Your mama loves German! Remember?”

Costa rushed ecstatically into the yard and began to shout for them to take him home. At first, no one heard him, and then Papa sent Peter, who passed Costa over the fence to Papa.

Costa was trembling with excitement. “Papa, Papa!” he yelled. “Say ‘sermon’!”

“Sermon!”

“Your grandma’s a boxer!” Costa said and laughed happily.

Chapter Five

A Bedtime Story

Modern children are taught to fear everything. Children walking along the street should look no higher than the asphalt, and if someone accidentally says "Hello!" to them, they should quickly change into a run after poking the person in the eye with a pencil beforehand. Such children, who see danger everywhere, can grow up only as hunted animals.

Joseph Emets, Hungarian philosopher

Papa was busy searching for beds the entire second half of the day. Mama, who initially wanted to pick out everything herself, stayed home with the children. She had to get Costa and Rita down for a nap.

There were three furniture stores in the city. One was in some basement, one on the main street, and one in a glass hangar. The shop on the main street sold office furniture, revolving chairs and huge desks for managers. Papa wanted to buy himself such a desk for his office, but he looked at the price and decided to leave it for later, when he would already be writing the brilliant novel.

Yes! Papa had a dream – to write a brilliant novel. Sometimes this novel really was stirring in him, it was so dying to come into the world. But Papa pushed it back into his soul with both hands and said to it, "Sit quietly, mature!" So, for the time being, the brilliant novel fought its way out only in fragments.

In the glass hangar were plenty of nice sofas, kitchen units, and bedroom furniture. There were beds too, but none shorter than 200 cm. Papa calculated what it would be if he bought beds of 200 cm for all seven children, and realized that he did not need this train of seven cars stretching to fourteen metres in the house. Hence, he bought only one such bed for Peter, who was a metre ninety tall. Thus, there even left some margin for the kid to grow in the direction of a decent member of society. Though in their former two-bedroom, Peter lodged perfectly well with knees drawn in on a small sofa.

There was nothing else interesting in the glass hangar, and Papa went to the store in a basement. Here he immediately saw a bunk bed and, pleased, he rushed to the sales clerk, who hid a half-eaten egg in a new nightstand and smiled questioningly, waiting for a question.

"Can I have two more of these?" Papa asked.

The sales clerk explained patiently that what Papa saw in the store was all they had. If Papa did not see something, then they did not have it. For example, he did not see the moon, so it meant it was not for sale in the store. However, if Papa insisted that he wanted to buy exactly three beds, they were ready to do the impossible. They would get the money from Papa now and give him the beds in August, when they would have a new shipment.

Papa turned down such a scheme and, having bought the bunk bed that was there, began to think where to find two more. In the end, he hit upon buying the city newspaper ads and found another bed. Papa phoned and drove around the city, looking for the necessary street.

The street turned out to be in Outskirts, the name of the area bordering the city. There were many identical parallel little streets and one-story houses very similar to one another and overgrown with grapevines, cherry trees, and some southern plants, blooming.

An old married couple opened the door, both strong, tanned, and, similar to the houses on the street, looking like each other. The bunk bed they showed Papa was a little shaky, but then a metal ladder was attached to it with hooks, and a huge number of stickers and chewing gum trading cards were glued on both the inside and outside of the bed. Some of the trading cards seemed awfully familiar to Papa. Terminator, Terminator-3, Rambo! Wow, hello childhood!

"Your children no longer need the bed?" Papa asked cautiously.

“No. They’re already grown. The son has gone swimming and the daughter’s in Kamchatka,” the chubby head of the family said and winced, because his wife stepped on his foot so he would not chat too much. She was afraid that Papa would not buy the bed, thinking that it was ancient.

“They barely slept on it! We bought the bed when they were in seventh grade,” she hastily said. “And we’ll even give you the mattresses!”

Papa immediately agreed and together with the old man began to disassemble the bed. It was secured with such strong bolts that Papa was immediately reassured. A bed with such bolts simply could not fall apart, rather everything else around would fall apart first. If it was unsteady, one could put something under the legs!

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