

**TIMELESS**  
**AND OTHER STORIES**

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# Prologue

*5. 2. 2041*

The sky was dark and the clouds heavy. Trees bent with every blast of the chilling wind as thousands and thousands of raindrops hit the empty street.

The only thing to be seen was a giant red umbrella. But if anyone had taken a closer look, they would have also recognized three pairs of limbs and sneakers. Two best friends, Oliver and Alan, and a girl named Nancy were walking down the street to face their punishment.

They were supposed to work on a history project together. The selection was completely random, but the two boys were lucky and ended up with Nancy. Since Nancy was the smartest girl in class and a history aficionado, a little project was no big deal for her.

Everything went alright, until Alan and Oliver somehow managed to lose all the books they had borrowed from the library. Since it was nearly the end of semester, the book limit per person was cut down to only one book. So, each of the trio borrowed just one book under their name and together, they began their research. But after they had finished, Nancy realized her bag was already stuffed and she couldn't fit one more thing inside it. So it was Alan's responsibility to keep two of the books and Oliver had to keep the last one until their next session. Unfortunately, that never happened, because the second time they met, both Alan and Oliver realized they had lost the books. They looked everywhere, but the books were nowhere to be found, as if they had disappeared from planet Earth.

Nancy tried to explain that it wasn't her fault, but since one of the books was registered under her name, the librarian was unbending and insisted that she participates in detention too.

So here they were, standing in front of the school in the pouring rain, on Friday at 3 o'clock. They barely spoke during their entire journey, because they all pictured their Friday afternoon differently.

Finally, the door creaked open and Mr. Carter let them in.

Mr. Carter was the librarian and a former English teacher. He had been at their school for nearly 30 years and he had the memory of an elephant. His books were his greatest possessions and he valued them more than anything else. That's why he got so upset when he found out three of them were missing. Technically, they didn't even belong to him, but since they had been his only company over the past two decades, he treated them like his own.

He silently guided them to the library. He put his glasses on, examined them with his all-knowing eyes and sighed.

“Your job is to make an inventory of this library. Here is your list. Check that every book has its correct inventory number, place the books back in alphabetical order, and report back to me immediately if you find a book missing. No questions, no complaints, no chatter. If you don't manage to finish today, you'll come here next Friday, same time.”

These were the only instructions they got and since they had no other choice, they began with their work.

“This is the greatest waste of time I have ever had to put up with in my entire life,” Alan whispered to Oliver.

Minutes felt like hours and they felt like it was never going to end. They had to go through every single shelf, every single book, even the ones in the darkest, dustiest corners of the quiet library they had so rarely found themselves in before. The dull, tedious ill-lit monotony was absolutely excruciating. But then something unusual appeared.

Nancy found a yellow file which stood out between all the dusty, old, faded grey books. Strangely, it didn't have any number or description. Nancy examined it closely, but there was nothing that would specify what was inside. Taking a deep breath, she headed to Mr. Carter's desk, to ask what she was supposed to do with the file. Mr. Carter fixed his hazy gaze on the yellow mystery and, for a moment, the world seemed to stop. Even Oliver

and Alan paused their work and were now curious about what was going on. The librarian took the file in his own hands with an unidentifiable expression and cleared his throat.

“Well, I suppose you kids have no idea where this could come from. Your parents would probably know, though.”

He stood up and opened the top drawer of his desk. He took the matches and lit the wax candle, which was standing on his desk. A warm light brightened up the room.

“Twenty years ago, a worldwide pandemic caught the world by surprise. A virus spread faster than anybody could have imagined and everyone’s lives were turned upside down. Schools closed, people didn’t go to work, shopping centres, stores, restaurants, cinemas and theatres... everything instantly closed and complete isolation began. People stayed at home, studied from home, worked at home and all the things we considered a matter of course were gone. A vaccine was created, but the virus started to mutate. They were confusing and uneasy times for everyone.

That was why I decided it was time to do something different. I knew my students were struggling and that they needed something to cheer them up. So, I encouraged them to write. To write about anything they wanted, to create their own imaginary world, a safe place where they can use their imagination. I told them simply to create. And truth be told, I was rather surprised when they actually started writing. Some of the stories were tragic, some were optimistic. Some were five pages long, some were short and sweet. Some were about a postapocalyptic world, some of them were about love. Each one of them was unique and that was what mattered the most.”

Nancy, Alan and Oliver were completely fascinated by how Mr. Carter, whom they had always viewed as a withdrawn, grumpy stranger, whose entire life were books, turned out to be an enthusiastic and passionate storyteller. His face brightened up as he reminisced about his old students and their stories. They could sense kindness and nostalgia in his brown eyes now. They

no longer minded the storm, which was raging outside. Suddenly, he chuckled and continued with his story.

“I remember everyone I taught that year. They all surprised me in the best way possible and impressed me with their creativity. Brooke, who loved fairytales and liked to re-create them in her own, yet still magical way. Yes, I still get shivers down my spine when I think about Michael’s thrillers, sometimes they almost gave me nightmares. I vividly remember Connor, who enjoyed pondering about what is going to happen next and what the world would look like one day, he always surprised me with his thoughtful reflections. And how could I forget about Daisy, who liked to escape reality and write about her beguiling fantasy worlds full of romance.

It was a very uncertain and unpleasant time for most people, but I feel like it also taught the society a lesson. To not take everything for granted and appreciate life’s simplicities more. And it has helped my students pursue their interests and discover their talent. Now they all live successful and happy lives.”

Mr. Carter looked at the file he was holding and then at the three young people who were completely caught by surprise.

He gave them one of his rare, real heartwarming smiles and said: “Well, I guess we should take a look at what is inside, shall we?”



# **Post-apocalyptic Stories**

# Brevity is the Soul of Wit

*Lenny, Independent. Former member of Red Veils.*

*Kill count: 0.*

*Status: Unknown.*

The robbery wasn't supposed to take so long.

To be honest, it wasn't supposed to be a robbery in the first place. But things don't always go as planned, especially when it's the end of the world.

Lenny's quick trip to one of the last functioning independent shops in the city evolved into a nightmare as soon as he saw the building with its lights off and windows shut. It was the middle of the night, the time when business blooms. But the whole street was empty, dark, hostile even.

None of it mattered to Lenny. He got used to things not making any sense very quickly. He just took one look over his shoulder, like it would save him if he was to be attacked, and made his way to the main entrance.

The doors were locked. It brought back memories of the world a few years back, when it was completely normal for a shop to be closed and dark at two in the morning. But this wasn't the good old world anymore, and there was an almost invisible cross painted in black colour on the doors, merging with the shadows of the night.

Lenny knew what that meant. He saw many buildings like this in the town – getting marked in the dark when the black was almost indistinguishable from a colour of smoked wood, but sending a loud warning to everyone in the daylight. Black Crosses were there. This was their place.

It meant a massacre. He decided to go inside.

After confirming his lock-picking skills didn't get any better since the last time, he shattered a small window as silently as

possible with a rock and broke into the shop. There was only silence and darkness waiting for him on the other side.

Correction: silence, darkness, and a man with a knife.

Great. He threw a rock at him.

“Wow, people are really out there throwing rocks at those who shine.”

“What?” asked Lenny eloquently.

“Taylor Swift said that. I’m Joe, by the way. Independent.” The man in slightly less ripped jeans and a tiny bit cleaner coat seemed unfazed by the flying object aimed at his head and if he was, he didn’t let it show. Lenny wasn’t a good aim anyway.

“Lenny,” said Lenny.

Joe arched an eyebrow, prompting him to continue.

“Independent,” he elaborated with a sigh.

“You sure don’t look like that.” Joe hid the bloodied knife and outstretched his hand. “Based on your throwing skills. And the amount of noise you’ve made.”

Lenny took the offer of peace. Joe’s gloves were made from a sleek black material. “I manage. Is there something left inside?”

“You’re a bit late for the party, but the healthy food section is basically untouched.” He pointed to his right and started walking in that direction.

“I’ve always wanted to live off of coconut milk and chickpeas.”

Joe’s laughter sent echoes through the empty hall. “I’m starting to like you.”

Something about the man was not right. How did he even get in there if the doors were locked? “Just lead the way.”

They walked through a meat section along the seemingly endless rows of empty freezers, the pastry section with bread more suited as a weapon than for eating, and a few human bodies here and there. The corpses didn't have any gang marks. Independents. Probably employees.

"How long?" asked Joe, while stepping directly into a pool of blood already dry on the edges.

"How long, what?" asked Lenny, carefully avoiding any contact with it.



Joe looked at him with an exasperated expression. “How long have you been an Independent?”

“Since the Red Veils fell.” Lenny knew it was a dangerous thing to say, especially as he was the only survivor. It didn’t stop him.

“Oh, nasty. I heard they got a snitch inside. Hell really is empty...” Joe smirked to himself. Then grimaced and muttered the rest of the quote under his breath, “...and all the devils are here.”

None of them continued with the conversation. Lenny noticed Joe’s fingers grip tightly the handle of his knife but didn’t comment on it. They were in a dangerous situation on a Black Crosses territory and the robbery was taking too long.

But the fight was surprisingly short.

“Life is never fair. And perhaps it’s a good thing for most of us.”

It was just another body lying on the ground. A decoration for the store and nothing new for this world. He stepped over it.

“Wilde said that.”

*Joe, Black Crosses.*

*Kill count: 100+.*

*Status: Eliminated.*

*Lenny, Independent. Former member of Red Veils.*

*Kill count: 1.*

*Status: Active.*

# Just Another Ordinary Story

In the year 2022 everything changed. Scientists, historians and other intellectuals call it the end of the globalization era, but ordinary people call it the apocalypse. How the hell did it happen, you ask? Well, there had of course been warning signs years before the apocalypse took place and we could have saved our planet if we hadn't ignored all those signs. Unfortunately, mankind is evidently dumb.

The world as we knew it didn't end all at once. It took almost two years to completely destroy our society. I guess you can say that the beginning of the end was a virus pandemic in 2020, which by the end of 2021 killed everyone over 50. Even though it was tragic, it took something far worse for our society to collapse.

In the middle of 2021, the climate started to change. The change was more massive and damaging than you could imagine – it could be 40 °C in the shade and just two seconds later it would start snowing and freezing. The changes were random and unpredictable. And that was it, people started dying of exposure and hunger. The scientists, politicians and the wealthy moved into small communities (more like fortresses with electricity and big greenhouses) where they were protected from the weather. Everyone else had to survive on their own without any help from the communities. It seemed like people in these communities simply didn't care about those dying on the streets...

“Oh, come on, love! Are you trying to get us killed? For all we know there could be a hurricane in a few minutes!” yelled a tall redheaded girl at her black-haired girlfriend, who was sitting on the ground and watching sunset. “Calm down, Marie, we will die anyway if we don't find something to eat. I'd rather die looking at something as beautiful as this sunset,” answered the black-haired girl in a calm manner. She was right. They haven't eaten in days. Besides, the sunset was really gorgeous. It was one of the sunsets you'd see before the big climate change. Sunset full of colours. It was like a fusion of pink, yellow, orange, red and purple and just a few moments later, the sky turned gray and then slowly dark. If it were before the climate change,

this night would be warm and starry. Even Marie would be bewitched by the beauty of it if she weren't so scared and hungry.

"We have to get to the nearest community, they'll have something to eat," said the black-haired girl as she stood up. "They won't help us. They don't care if we starve to death! We should go to the old shopping mall. I've heard there's a gang that uses it as a greenhouse and I've heard that they keep some animals there too." The girl looked at Marie with that sad look she always had when she knew her girlfriend was desperate. They too had been in a gang before. It was before their whole gang was murdered by another crew. Wars between gangs were quite common. People killed mostly to get to food, clean water and medicines. To be in a gang was dangerous, but to be on your own was almost impossible.

"I know how to get into the community's greenhouse," said the girl.

"What? How? The communities are well guarded and their greenhouses have the best protection."

"Don't ask."

"Oh, c'mon, you never tell me anything. We have been dating for a year now and I don't even know your name!" Marie shouted.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet," the girl quoted.

"Don't start with Shakespeare. I can't be mad at you when you're reciting poetry." Marie wasn't stupid. She knew that the girl probably had a good reason to hide her past, but Marie just couldn't force herself to stay away from that girl. And although she knew it was most likely a fatal mistake, she loved the girl with every piece of her broken heart. And the girl loved Marie with the same breathtaking intensity.

When the girls finally arrived outside the community it was almost midnight, the perfect time to break in. "You'll do everything I tell you, okay?" whispered the girl. "You're sure

about this?” asked Marie quietly. The girl just nodded. They both knew how dangerous this was, but they were desperate. And desperate times call for desperate measures.

In the moonlight they could see a barbed wire fence and a minefield between them and the greenhouse. The girl climbed the fence and covered the barbed wire with her leather jacket so she could climb over it without hurting herself. After she got to the other side, it was Marie’s turn to climb. When they both were on the inside of the fence, the girl took Marie’s hand and began to walk through the minefield. It was evident that she had been here before. She knew exactly where to step and Marie carefully followed in her steps.

Marie gasped when she finally saw the gigantic greenhouse – it looked like a palace made of glass. She’d bet that there was enough food to feed everyone in the 5 kilometer range. “Wait here, I’ll go inside. There will be a guard, but he will probably be sleeping. Because of the minefield they don’t have many intruders, so they’re not that careful,” whispered the girl and then she turned to leave. “Wait...” said Marie as she took the girl’s hand and kissed her softly on the lips. “I love you.” The girl smiled as she whispered, “I know no ways to mince it in love but to say directly: I love you.” Then she left. She surprisingly didn’t see any guard on her way in. “Lazy bastards,” she thought.

The greenhouse was full of food, so it didn’t take long and the girl had a bag full of apples, potatoes, cucumbers and oranges. Delighted, she walked through the greenhouse door and then she froze with fear.

There was a guard holding Marie and pointing a gun at her head. “You’re being arrested for stealing food. The price of theft is death,” the guard said without showing any emotions.

“Please, we were hungry. There’s enough food left for the whole community,” the girl said with fear in her eyes.

“You are under arrest.”

“Look, I know doctor Erickson, he lives here. Can I talk to him? He might help explain this situation.” The girl tried to save the day.

“No, you have no right to talk to anyone and you have no right to counsel. You will be taken to your cells and wait until the sentence is executed.” “Fuck you!” yelled Marie as she kicked the guard in the crotch and ran to the girl. “Marie, no!” screamed the girl. She knew what would happen.

The guard fired three shots that didn’t miss their target. Marie fell to the ground, her life draining away from her. The girl shrieked and started crying. She didn’t take her eyes off of her lover’s dead body even as the guard dragged her to jail.

She was executed a month later. Her last words were: “I love you, Marie, and they can’t take that from me.”



# I Will Show You the Sun

The sun wasn't shining.

It was quite lonely and dark but it was nothing new. Everyone was already used to it. In fact, any of us who managed to survive the apocalypse hadn't seen the sun for about fifteen years. As I said, after a while you get used to everything.

Of course, not everyone was so strong. Some people went insane, others joined a cult or just committed suicide. Everyone lived their own way, everyone was searching for their own ray of hope. I wasn't any different.

When I was walking down the empty street, everything seemed so quiet. No one crossed my way. It wasn't odd – the only time you came across more than four people a day were old celebrations. Even though people started to believe in new gods after the apocalypse, some traditions from the old times remained. Christmas or Easter... But right now it was just an ordinary summer day.

I was wandering through the street, lost in my own thoughts, when I sensed something odd. I looked around, but everything was still the same as always. The worst thing to do in this world is to stand out, so I just put my hood over my head and went on. If I was lucky, nobody would notice me.

Then I noticed it. In just the glimpse of an eye, I caught movement. It disappeared immediately, but I was sure it was real. I pretended not to notice anything, but now that I was fully conscious, I wanted to know what was going on.

In fact, it wasn't that hard to see her once I'd fully noticed her. To my great surprise, the stranger was a girl in a bright pink dress. She looked like a dream, like a visitor from "Before." She looked like someone who shouldn't exist.

Fifteen years ago the world as we knew it came to an end. Only five percent of the world population survived and it took people about five years to realize that they had lost their ability to

have children. Simply put, we were all sentenced to die. Under these conditions, seeing a girl not older than 10 years old should have been impossible.

I reconsidered my plan for the day. At first, I wanted to steal some food. I hadn't eaten for days. But now I only had one thing in mind. HER. I inconspicuously followed her. She was just strolling around, running, and sometimes she stopped to pick something up and play with it for a while. It was so amazingly ordinary.

After dusk, some remaining street lights started to glow. She just went on. At that point I stopped hiding and followed her from a distance. Suddenly, she stopped under one lamppost glistening in the dark. She stood there for a while, then turned around and said: "Come with me, I will show you the sun."

# Diary of a Dead Man

My name is Ethan and I'm nineteen. I was born two years before the Great Pandemic. No one really knows how exactly it started and, to be honest, no one cared until people started to die. My family was one of the first to do something. When I was two years old, my father decided that the world will end soon and moved with us to our cottage in the mountains. Everybody laughed at him back then. Now they are all dead...

Naturally I don't remember the time when the world was ending. My first memory is when I was four. I was in the forest looking for some wood with my dad when we encountered two people. They were sick. How can I explain the Disease? Imagine that parts of your body are slowly rotting and falling apart until you die. But back to the memory. It was a father with his son and they were begging us for some water. My dad shot them. He later told me that it was because he wanted to protect me from the Disease, that it didn't even matter for them, they were already dead.

My whole life I have been surviving. First with my dad and later, after he died, I joined a group of survivors my age. They all died, sooner or later. Some of them because of the Disease and some of them because of other people. For two years now I have been alone, living day by day searching for food and water and hoping that someone will rescue me. Yet I am afraid that I am the last man living...

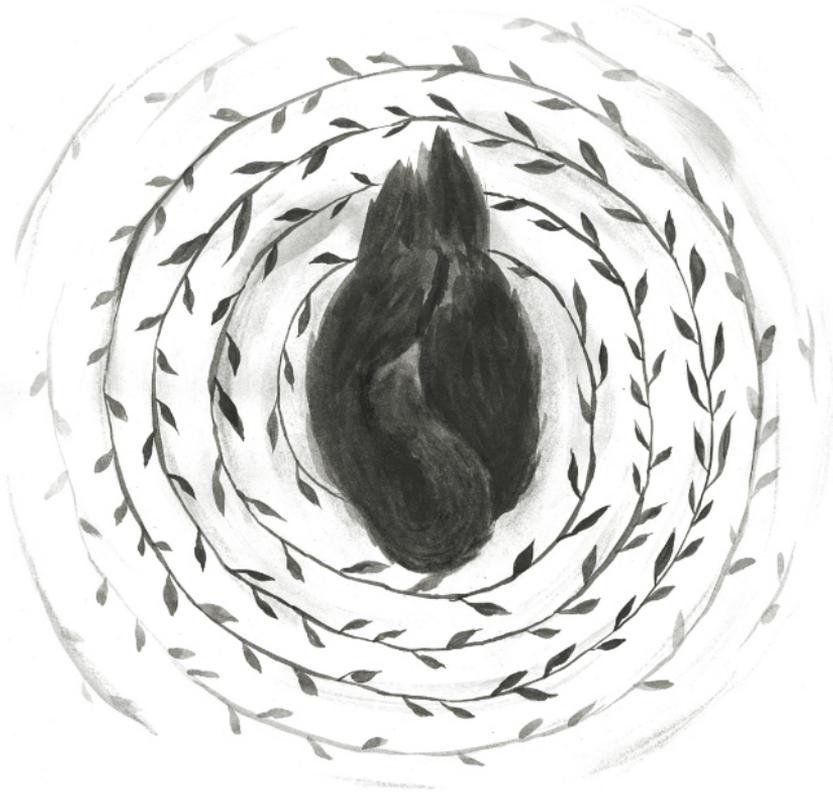
I didn't choose this life. I wanted to find a girlfriend, get married and have a few kids, but I couldn't. I am sick. If you are reading this story, then I was wrong and there is still some hope, but I don't think anyone will ever read these words. I'm now in the second stage of the Disease and I will die within days. I have decided to shoot myself. This is not the life I wanted. I don't want to live. My name was Ethan. Goodbye.

# **Fables**

# The Black Swan

Once upon a time there was a black swan on a lake. She was very kind and even more beautiful, but other swans and animals that lived on the lake hated her and treated her badly because of the colour of her feathers.

One day the black swan found a bag of flour right on the shore of the lake. She had never seen flour before. But she got an idea and covered herself up in the white flour to look like all the other swans. When the swans saw it, they started to criticize her. They told her that she would never be as beautiful as them. The black swan realized that, no matter what she did, she would never be loved. So she washed all the flour off and started crying. Wailing, she screamed that she wanted to die. That death was better than living such a pitiful life. Life, where nothing she does matters.



An old willow heard the swan's hopeless words and she decided to help. "Hey," said the old willow, "can you see my long branches? They are strong enough to hold one swan. If you really want to put an end to your suffering, I think I can help you with that." "Please, good old willow, help me commit suicide. Help me end this cruel, sad, and hopeless life," begged the black swan. "But if you die, you'll never get the chance to live a better life."

"Better life? Oh, good willow, I'm not naive enough to believe in that thing."

Next morning the white swans found the black swan's corpse hanging from the old willow. They didn't miss her and they didn't feel guilty... they didn't even care.

# A Matter of Wish

Once upon a time, there was a bird. The bird used to fly among trees, above rivers and lakes, through villages, beyond mountains, in short, he had flown over a half the world.

But he was not happy, he had no shelter to sleep, he often did not have anything to eat and no friends to meet. The only thing he had was his freedom.

There was also another bird, but this bird had been living his whole life in a cage. He was fed every day, if the weather was good, he stayed in the garden, and if it was raining, he spent his day inside a nice house. He had an owner, Emily. Emily cleaned his cage, played with him and stroked him. However, he was not happy either.

One day, the first bird flew into a beautiful blooming garden with a big cherry tree in the middle. There was a cage hanging from one of the branches of the tree. In the cage there he was sitting, the second bird.

“Hi, stop for a moment, please! What is it like to be free?” the second bird asked.

“Hi, well not good at all. Be glad you have a home,” the first bird replied.

“No, I would love to spread my wings and freely fly away,” the second bird stated.

“Then do as you please. And I will take your place,” the first bird eerily said.

Thus, the birds swapped...

The first bird had gotten lazy and was often bored, but he earned food and a good owner. The second bird died...

## Not One Paw Back!

Ground, on which we can only be saved from destruction by fighting without delay, is desperate ground.

**On desperate ground, fight.**

“Cravens! Those oily cockroaches are fleeing. Stop! Stop and fight you rats!” “Hold your temper,” says Ratlin. “It didn't help yesterday, and it certainly won't help now.” He picks up a fresh piece of rotten meat and stuffs his mouth, with his mouth full, he says, “Would you mind a piece, Ratus?” Ratus furiously pierces Ratlin with his beady eyes and barks. “What is all this insolence? You will address me by my rank as well as my name!” Ratlin grins mischievously. “Of course, Biggus Ratus, as you wish.”

You see, our rats have had quite the scuffle with their foe. A cuffle which once again resulted in mass panic, fur wetting and disobedience. And who can blame them. Not even the fiercest beaver could face a big burly bear, let alone a measly rat. But our beloved hero Ratlin had a plan brewing in his peanut sized brain of his.



“Oy, big R! Planning another assault, are you?” inquired Ratlin.  
“Would you kindly just mind your own business?” sighed Ratus.  
“Naturally, do you have any other questions?” Ratlin smirked.  
“Actually...”

And so, on that very morning, another assault commenced. The rats formed, as usual. The bear came, as usual. The rats ran, as usual. But today Ratlin had an unusual plan – an escape plan. As he led the rats through a narrow ravine, the greyish tide encountered a dead end. Dismay ensued. The rats bewildered by the sudden shift in course wavered. And now, they were forced to face their foe. Gnawing teeth gnawed, claws poked and tails whipped. In the end, Ratlin managed to fend off the bear but his service was far from appreciated.

# About a Fox and a Garden

It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining and a ginger fox was wandering in the forest. She was just running around and looking for some berries, when she stumbled across a fence. She was really curious what was behind it. So she decided to crawl under the wooden fence. She discovered a rather large garden with a small pond and many bushes of different berries she liked. After a moment of looking around she started eating raspberries from one of the green bushes.

While she was enjoying her food this garden's landlady noticed her. The landlady wasn't fond of having an alien in her territory. She was pretty upset but also scared of the ginger creature that had been stealing her favourite delicious berries. After a moment of hesitation the landlady decided to take action. She jumped down from her outlook on a roof and ran towards the fox. She was quite nervous but her claws and jaws were ready to attack and destroy the ginger alien. Her eyes were filled with anger and hatred to the point that she almost wasn't able to see anything else. She most definitely didn't see the hole in the ground near the bushes, so when she fell in it, she felt rather embarrassed.

The fox with her mouth filled with raspberries heard a noise. She turned around and saw a fluffy fat cat stuck in a hole. The fox immediately started to laugh. She went to the hole and laughed even more.

"Don't laugh and help me!" said the cat.

"Why would I do that? So you can attack me?"

"I won't attack you. I promise. Just help me please."

"Fine then," answered the fox with a smug grin. She helped the cat and then returned to her unfinished meal.

"Stop. Don't eat it! It's not yours," protested the muffled cat, still shaken from the fall, her fur all smudged.

“Hush. I’ve just saved you,” said the enraged fox.

“But this is my garden and my food.”

“You don’t even like raspberries,” said the fox aware of the fact that cats don’t eat fruit.

“I do. I eat them everyday!”

“I’ve seen everything. I’ve seen large cities, tall mountains, deep oceans. But I’ve never seen a cat that likes berries.”

“Because I am unique,” said the cat proudly.

“Really? And what differs you from the others of your kind?”

“Uh. I guess...”

“Nothing sets you apart. You sit at home, eat everything you find because you are bored and that’s it. You are just like any other cat.”

“You’re quite mean,” said the offended cat.

“I didn’t mean to... I... I... I just wanted to... hmm... You have never left this garden, have you?”

“I have never left. Obviously. Why would I?”

“Do you see that fence?” said the fox and pointed at the wooden fence surrounding the whole garden.

“I can see it,” answered the cat looking at the fence.

“But you can’t see what is behind it.”

“And what is there?”

“The whole world with so many beautiful places and so many nice creatures to meet.”

“Tell me more!”

“Right behind it is a huge forest with countless trees. There are loads of things that you should try. Have you ever climbed on a cliff, or dove in a lake?”

“I don’t like cliffs, trees and water.”

“But do you like birds?”

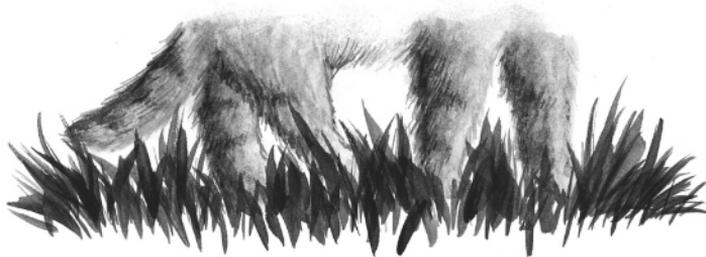
“Of course. I love catching them.”

“There are lots of birds. In fact so many that you can catch them all day long. And birds are just a small part of the fun behind the fence.”

“Please. Tell me more.”

“Just come with me,” said the fox and followed by the curious cat she went to the fence. And then she crawled under the fence. The cat was hesitant. But having heard how wonderful it is out there she decided to follow the fox. She lay down and tried to crawl through the gate leading to the world wide open with opportunities to go after. But sadly she wasn’t able to fit in the small hole between the fence and the ground. Unfortunately she was a bit too fat. She tried again. But there was no way she was able to get through. So the fox left. And the cat stayed in her garden for the rest of her life.

There are so many things you could try and so many activities you can do in the world. So don’t sit at home. Because one day a door will be closed, some options will disappear and some opportunities will be forever lost. Because one day it will be too late to leave your garden and crawl under the fence.



# The Story of Invertia

Once upon a time, before humans came to be, there had been an island in the middle of the sky. Its name was Invertia. On this strange island existed animals, which while at first glance seemed just like normal animals, their skin was different. Tiger's stripes on a zebra, giraffe's spots on an elephant, even crow's feathers on a bear.

You may ask yourself: "How is this possible?" Well, it's because of the island's magical energy that caused them to change color. Invertia was a peaceful island. There was no need for natural camouflage or colorful warnings, so the color change meant very little for its inhabitants.

That was until one day, a tiger with zebra's skin became jealous of the orange tigers on Earth. This tiger's name was Mono. He was unlike the other inhabitants of Invertia. He hated his monochrome colors and wanted above all else to look like the Earth's tigers. He grew to loath Invertia and swore that one day, he would destroy it.

He went into Invertia's cold mountains, where he hibernated for thousands of years. Afterwards, using a secret portal that very few beings knew about, he went down to Earth. While he had been hibernating, the Earth continued to evolve and when Mono arrived on Earth, he saw that a new species had developed. Humans.

Mono watched them from the shadows, how they built houses, made farms, hunted for food, and in the process destroyed everything around them. Mono smiled. He went to the leader of the human's group and made a deal with him. Mono would take them to a safe place with many resources they could use and in return, the humans would allow him to live with them. And so the white tiger brought the humans to Invertia.

The humans, true to their nature, devastated the land. They took and took, until there was nothing left. With Invertia's animals gone and land transformed beyond recognition, the island began to fall apart until one day, it fell out of the sky, never to be seen again.

# Let Loose

Once upon a time there lived a huntress by the name of Khalira. Her prowess was only matched by her pride. The prey she brought to court earned her respect and awe of even the most powerful noblemen of the realm.

During one of the many pompous feasts with Khalira being the center of attention the fires suddenly dimmed and thunder shook the hall. Then, a firm yet pleasant voice resonated through the keep. "People, heed my call!" the wine in the king's hand shook as all color left his face, "A beast of utmost terror has been unleashed upon this world. I offer a gift for a soul brave enough to defeat it. A gift most precious, eternal life." As quickly as it appeared, the voice left our world. Immediately, all eyes turned to Khalira. Though hesitant at first, her heart filled with courage. "So be it," she exclaimed, "the beast shall fall."

The moon was high in the night sky when she saw the light. The creak of the drawn bow puzzled the creature, their eyes met. For the first time in her life, Khalira wavered. A familiar voice filled her soul: "Do it." The arrow came loose, all doubt left Khalira's mind as it soared towards the light. And then, darkness. Only the sound of skeletal arms dragging Khalira towards her gift.

# **Life Stories**

## It's in the Stars

It was one of those nights. Not making any noise, I would quietly sit and just look at the stars: *Cassiopeia*, *Orion*, *Ursa Major*, and *Ursa Minor*. I knew them all, and I knew perfectly how to find them. I've always been... well, different. While other kids in the neighbourhood played hide and seek and chased each other until they were completely out of breath, I was hidden in my dark room, studying constellations and sketching them in my small notebook full of chaotic notes. And thinking about the approaching and inescapable end of humanity, of course.

And here I was, 15 years later, lost in the depths of my despair; I couldn't stop gazing at the stars and the pale moon.

"Staring at the stars again?" said an unfamiliar voice interrupting my contemplation.

I turned around and saw a girl. She had to be around the same age as me – not older than 25.

"Excuse me, are you spying on me?"

"Maybe. Is that a problem?" she replied as she sat down next to me.

"Oh look, there's Centaurus. I think that one is my favourite. Or is it Pegasus? They're both so beautiful, I can't decide. Which one do you prefer? And there I see Hydra. You don't speak much, do you?"

I chuckled, but it was more like a soft whisper; she definitely didn't hear it. "And you certainly have a lot to say."

"People often say that I talk too much – that I should keep my mouth shut and listen to what older, much more mature people say. But there is so much to discover in this world, how am I supposed to find out when I don't ask? Knowledge is power. I know what you're thinking. So, no, I don't just ask people

about which star constellation they like better. That's based on personal preference; it doesn't have any rational foundation."

"So, what do you usually ask about, then?"

"Well, the environment, most importantly, the secrets of the Universe, the depths of Shakespeare's work, human rights and equality... I don't know; whatever comes to my mind. It's important that we educate ourselves, don't you think?"

She didn't sound like the frolicsome girl who had suddenly stepped into the moonlight. Her face was serious as she turned her head towards me and looked me deeply in the eyes.

"It is important to know. But, maybe, sometimes we don't want to hear the truth," I replied.

She stared at me for a couple of seconds.

"Sometimes, I just ponder about the mystery of my grandma's chocolate chip cookies. How do they taste so good?"

This time, I chuckled out loud. Our laughter filled the night air.

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"The world looks like a much happier place in the daylight," she said as she put on her sunglasses and hid her eyes from the brightly shining sun.

We were walking towards the meadow, which was about a kilometer from the hotel we stayed in. What a coincidence.

It was a truly beautiful day. The birds were chirping, and there were only a few clouds in the azure sky.

As soon as we arrived at our destination, she immediately started preparing the picnic. It wasn't much – only some fruit and a few sandwiches – but it was enough for a philosophy student and a young boy who came here to wonder about life.

“So, what are you doing here in Beaufort?” I asked as I took a sip of the lemonade we bought in the store.

“My answer may surprise you. I’m here to just relax – as is literally every student on this Earth – and give my lungs a break from the neverending smoke on campus.”

“Really? There isn’t anything more to it?”

Why do I feel like she’s not telling me the truth? I asked myself.

She gave me a strange look.

“Maybe there’s something more to it, but why should I tell you? I know that I ask too many of them, but I’m not answering your questions until you start answering mine.”

“Fair enough.”

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“So, you say that you’ve never read *The Jungle Book* or *Alice in Wonderland*?”

“Haven’t read a single page,” I replied.

“What about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*?” she urged.

“I’m telling you, my parents didn’t read me fairy tales before bed!”

“But that’s crazy! These books were my entire childhood!”

I quickly escaped the topic. “Alright, it’s my turn with the questions. What’s your biggest accomplishment?”

She stayed silent for a while.

“I think accepting myself with all of my flaws. I used to be terrified of failure. I thought that being perfect meant being enough.”

But now I've learned to accept myself as the person I am and to think of myself in a positive way. It's an improvement. It took me some time, though."

I didn't know what to say. She always seemed so calm and confident. I had no idea she struggled with that.

"Sometimes, it's harder for us to see the light inside ourselves than in others."

She slowly nodded. "You never know what a person is going through in their personal life. You should always be kind – no matter what. You know, a simple smile doesn't cost you anything."

I saw my reflection in her eyes as I gave her one of my rare smiles. The sun almost set by the time we got back to the hotel.

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"My last day here and I can't even step outside."

It had been raining for the entire day and she was losing her patience.

She sighed and sat down on the ground right next to my backpack, which I had left opened by accident. Then she noticed it.

"I didn't know you painted." She tried not to let it show, but she was clearly surprised.

It was something I painted a long time ago. But I always had it with me.

It's a very simple picture. In fact, it's just the night sky with two pairs of eyes.

"When I was stargazing, I usually felt really alone. But one day, I realized that maybe, on the other side of the world, someone is also thinking and feeling the same thing as me. It made me feel less lonely and more understood."

I let my words sink in.

After a couple minutes of silence, she quietly put the picture in my backpack again and closed it.

“Sharing your secrets is sometimes quite a relief, isn’t it?”

She turned around and walked straight into the pouring rain. And so did I.

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“I can’t believe I’m going to miss the train,” she cried as we were hurrying towards the platform.

I swore I heard the whistle.

“No, no, no, no! I can’t miss it! Another one isn’t leaving for days!”

I don’t know how she did it, but in a minute, she was standing at the edge of the train door and I was trying to get her heavy suitcase inside. It was all happening so fast. I didn’t know her name, I didn’t have her phone number or any contact info. The only thing I knew was that I was going to study philosophy.

The door shut the second I managed to finally get the suitcase inside.

“Do you think I’ll ever see you again?” I screamed before the train got into movement.

I watched it disappear in the distance. I still hear the last words she told me in my ears. *It’s in the stars.*

# Blue Sky

I am watching how the smoke escapes through my ajar window, how it flows to the cerulean sky. The cigarette is slowly dying in my hand and I puff one last time. I throw the delightfully calming little killer out of the window and continue looking up to the sky. If half the things that are said about smoking were true, I would already be dead. It's a bright afternoon, the sky is clear, cloudless, like an ocean, eerie and full of blue.

Blue.

I shouldn't think... Everything reminds me of her. Her beautiful azure eyes, always so kind and honest, were looking at me with disdain, with hostility I had never seen from her before. But just on the surface; if you looked deeper you would see a broken and hollow person. When I looked into these azure eyes, the only thing I saw was my reflection.

She hit me. She has never been violent, though. She was just herself, not your typical fragile perfect princess, but not arrogant and bitchy either, just herself, the only one in the whole world. And she knew it, she knew she was unique and that is what made her irresistible. Probably just in my eyes... But let's get back to the real issue. She didn't hit me hard, she couldn't do it even after what I'd done to her. She had the full right to do so.

It's already been a week since I saw her for the last time, two weeks since I heard her velvety voice, even though it said nothing close to nice. She has consistently been honest, not mean, she just used to always tell the truth. When she spoke, it was beautiful, whatever she said, and singing was her passion. When she sang, everyone felt calm, everyone felt joy. When she sang, it was like she was bathing in the sun, like she was a saint. And saintly she for sure was, but not like anyone would expect. Nobody expected such a plot twist.

She had gone to see the doctor, it was just a light cough. The date of her concert was coming closer and she wanted to be perfect, the whole town wanted to hear her sing. I was going to be

in the front row. It wouldn't be her if she didn't give it all she had. She wanted to be healthy for her big day. And that's when it all went wrong.

Malignant tumor. Throat cancer.

There was nothing left to do.

No one knew about that malicious demon, no one knew until it was too late...

Two weeks ago she told me. We were in a café, she may have hoped it would hold me back from making a scene. She wanted to break up, she didn't want to leave more people than was necessary to suffer.

That time, I couldn't control myself. I said horrible stuff, things I am really not proud of. I intentionally hurt her. I wanted her to feel the same sorrow as me, to suffer as much as me. I didn't understand; she suffered much more.

And then she just left. She walked out of the café furious, even though she didn't deserve any of this. I shouldn't have been so blinded by my own grief, I should have stayed by her side.

In the evening I found out she had been hit by a bus. I was told it was a quick death, painless. I think they said it just to calm me down. The whole town already knew. I was the last one to find out, they didn't even bother to tell me.

It should have been me. She deserved palaces made out of gold, necklaces made out of diamonds. Damn, she deserved the whole world. And I was willing to sacrifice everything for her, to give her everything.

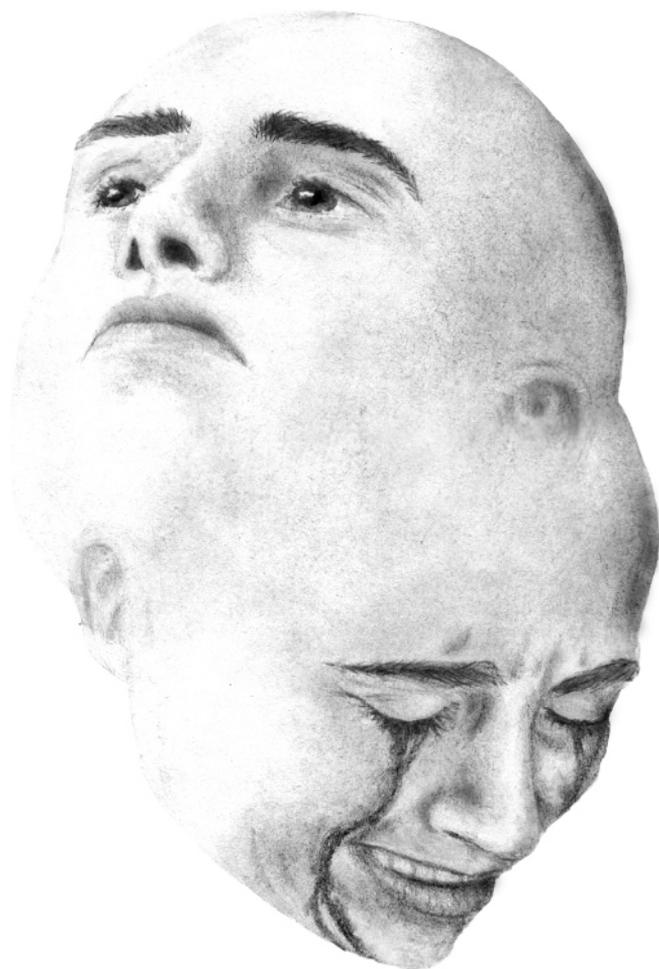
But now it's too late.

Now, I am sitting here besides the ajar window watching the cerulean sky and thinking, how is she doing up there. I hope she is happy.

I would love to follow her up there, but no Heaven would accept a person like me, I wouldn't be able to be with her there either. If only I could take a step out the window, I would at least be free.

But I am too much of a coward.

And so I am taking another cigarette out of the box, lighting it, and hoping this is the one that will shift my scale of life to the other side.



# Long-Lost Friend

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon and a man, let's call him John, was walking across the square to buy himself lunch. He seemed like he was enjoying such a beautiful day.

But suddenly, he heard someone shouting what seemed to be his name. So he turned around and saw a weird-looking man who appeared to be really happy to see John. But when John looked at him, he didn't recognize him. The stranger didn't really notice John's confusion, so he walked up to him and said, "Hello! We haven't seen each other for a long time." John didn't know what to say. Does he know this man? From where? And why doesn't he remember him? John didn't wanna seem like a fool, he was ready to say something like "Hey! It sure was a long time. How are you?" But before he said anything the stranger had already started talking. "You don't remember me, huh?" "No. Sorry. Who are you?" said John, embarrassed. The stranger didn't seem to be angry with him or sad that he didn't recognize him, he simply told him: "I'm Bill. I took care of you when you were in the hospital, remember?" John was suspicious at first but after a while he started to believe him. He called him by his name, after all. Right?

After having talked for a while, John was really starting to feel comfortable in the conversation. Bill really seemed like an old friend and he started to confide in John. He told him he was really sick, he was going through tough times and asked John for some money. John didn't know what to do. He now wasn't convinced that he was who he said he was. But if there was even a small chance he was telling the truth, he had to help him. So he gave him the money that was meant for his lunch. Bill was really happy and thankful, he quickly said goodbye to John, walked round the corner and disappeared.

As Bill was walking away John realized he had been fooled. At first he was angry at this "Bill". How did he do it? How did he convince him that he knew him? John was thinking about it all the way back to work.

But after a while, he didn't feel anger towards this man. He just smiled, thinking about the earlier incident, as he opened the door of the building where he worked.

# The Unlucky Guy from Paris

## Louis

Louis was an unlucky guy from Paris.

“Poor sweet child!” his mother said when he broke his leg. Twice. In one year.

“Poor boy!” his teacher said when he failed an exam.

“Poor man!” his boss said when he was fired from his job.

But there was one thing in which he was successful. One thing that he loved the most. It was painting. He always spent all his money buying canvases, acrylic colours and paintbrushes.

## No Money, No Hope

Louis was sitting on the red sofa in the middle of a small dark room. The winter was coming. He was without electricity and he had only one candle left. He was painting his first girlfriend, Sophie. But he didn't have enough colours, so he had to paint her skin with yellow. And suddenly Louis recalled:

*She was nineteen, he was twenty-one. The first true love – a mind blast, a firework of emotions. He felt happy when he was with Sophie. But she died in a car accident and took away a little bit of his luck.*

The painting was finished.

Louis was getting hungry. He had the last ten euros. He had to choose between buying food and going to the café. He chose the café.

He took his coat and went out to the sleepy district of Saint Denis. There is a La café de France near the train station. He sat at his favourite table and ordered Bordeaux rouge.

He looked at a reflection of himself in a foggy window – forty-three-year-old man without money and belief in a better future. He had lost everything – love, job, money... He smiled sadly and with his finger he wrote on the window: NO MONEY, NO HOPE.

## **The Lottery Ticket and the Big Blue Elephant**

Louis paid for his two glasses of wine and headed home. He saw the lottery advertisement in the shop window of Le Royal Club. He walked in and bought a ticket. The last two euros and twenty cents had been spent.

He came home. The candle was still burning. He was sitting on the red sofa and he began to cry. He cried for a long time and then he fell asleep.

*A big blue elephant visited him in the room. Louis was astonished and scared. The animal sat down on the floor, put its tusks on the table and lit a cigarette.*

*“Look, poor boy,” said the elephant calmly, “I bring you happiness and wealth.”*

*Louis was still scared.*

*“It’s easy. As soon as I finish my cigarette, I am going to give you a sign. It will be the beginning of a new and better life.” He smiled at him.*

*Louis nodded.*

*“Good,” the elephant said.*

*The animal finished its cigarette. Then it got up and a deafening roar filled the dark room.*

Louis jumped up from the sofa. He was sweaty and frightened. The candle was not burning and no elephant was sitting on the floor.

Louis sat down and tried to breathe deeply.

A familiar sound came from the next room – the TV jingle of LOTO. Louis jumped up again looking for a pen to write down the winning numbers. There wasn't a pen in the room.

“Surely you have noticed that today is Friday the thirteenth and another lottery draw is here...” the moderator announced from the neighbour's television.

Louis squeezed half of the red colour on the table, quickly took the biggest brush, dipped it in red and ran to the wall.

Christophe Beaugrand began to say the numbers: **28, 32, 10, 22, 19** and the special number for the jackpot: **6**.

Louis managed to write each number on the wall despite the fact that his neighbour loudly commented on every result, very frustrated.

He looked alternately at the wall and the ticket. Ten and nineteen were there – ten euros in his pocket. There was also twenty-two – 50 € for food, canvases and brushes.

“Jesus Christ!” The number twenty-eight was also correct. That meant he won one thousand euros regardless of the fifth number.

“God bless the big blue elephant,” he said quietly.

“What?” Louis shouted.

“Whaaat?!!” he shouted even louder and then he fell down to the floor.

“Really, me?” He could not believe there was also the number thirty-two.

He was the owner of 150 000 € now!

“God bless the big blue elephant,” he repeated.

## **Louis's Mother and the Streets of Paris in the Night**

“Life is upside down,” Jeanne Lavande, Louis’s mother, used to say. Jeanne was a little Parisian woman who taught at the university. She loved Louis so much. She patiently paid his debts, she visited him in the hospital when he was injured, she always listened to him.

Louis felt he had to tell her that he was a rich man. But his phone was in the pawn shop, so he had to visit her unannounced.

It was nine o’clock in the evening.

He eagerly ran through the streets of Paris. He still had enough strength on Avenue du Président Wilson, even on Chemin des Petits Cailloux, but when he crossed the rails and was almost hit by a train, he had to rest in the Cimetière Parisien de Saint-Ouen. He stopped by the grave of the painter Jean Baptiste Olive – his favourite.

“I am a rich man, Jeanne-Baptiste, very rich...” he whispered.

He continued his journey after a few minutes, but he did not run anymore. He passed Boulevard Périphérique, Boulevard Ney and he went to Rue du Ruisseau in great mood, whistling La Marseillaise.

It was ten o’clock when he rang the bell at his mother’s door. She opened in her pink bathrobe.

“Louis?” she looked at him in surprise.

“Mum, you won’t believe it!” Louis said, walked in and closed the door.

She watched him in fear. He was upset, sweaty and breathless. Louis rushed into the kitchen, took a bottle of wine from the pantry and opened it.

“It’s ten o’clock, son!” she protested.

Louis poured wine into two glasses. He drank one of them and refilled it again. Then he handed one to his mother.

“Drink!” he commanded her.

“No, I won’t, sweet child!”

“I said drink!”

She was afraid of him, so she drank a little. Louis drank the whole glass at once again. His eyes lit up. He took out the ticket from his pocket.

“One hundred and fifty thousand euros, mother,” he exclaimed triumphantly.

“What?” she didn’t understand.

“Yes, in LOTO, tonight and forever,” he added and handed her the ticket.

His mother took it and looked at him.

“Did you check it, darling?”

“A hundred times,” Louis confirmed.

She felt weak. So much money, so suddenly, so unexpectedly. She stroked his hair. Louis took her in his arms and raised her up, almost to the ceiling.

“We are rich, mum!” he shouted.

When he calmed down, they sat at the table in the living room, drank wine and planned what to do with the money. It was almost midnight when they finished their thoughts.

“It is time to party,” Louis said, already drunk.

“It’s not for me anymore, my son,” his tired mother informed him.

“I see, I see... Would you give me some money, mum?”

“How much, son?”

“I don’t know. Two thousand?”

“Two thousand?” she said surprised.

“Don’t be afraid! I’ll bring you fifty on Monday,” he smiled at her.

She sighed and went to the bedroom. She returned with banknotes after a while and gave them to him. Louis kissed her forehead and he returned to the streets of Paris.

## **Down to the Bottom**

Louis reached the cabaret Au Lapin Agile in a few minutes. He knew the owner very well, so he could go inside even when it was full.

He ordered five bottles of Champagne Ruinart and traditional cherries for all. The world was his. He drank with everybody, danced with Japanese tourists, laughed with Americans. Time passed joyfully.

Many incredible events happened that wonderful night, but these aren’t important to this story. Louis woke up to a sunny Saturday morning with a big hangover. He knew nothing of what happened after two o’clock in the morning. He went to the bathroom to drink cold water. He drank as long as an elephant.

The big blue elephant, he remembered. The ticket!

He froze for a moment. He quickly ran to his pants. He reached into his pocket with fear. There was no ticket. He reached into the other. The ticket was there. He felt it, clutched it and kissed it.

He dressed up and went to the La café de France.

When he passed the shop window of Le Royal Club, he was frightened. He probably stood there for ages before he found strength to pull out his amazing ticket.

In the shop window were these numbers:

**28 32 10 22 9**

Nine not nineteen!

“What?” he shouted like yesterday, but the tone was different. He stood there like the Statue of Liberty clutching a ticket in his raised right hand, and just like her, turned green. The big blue elephant had been kidding and the neighbour had been too loud.

He walked into the café, took the newspaper from the bar, and ordered whiskey. He looked into the newspaper. It was true – that bad number nine was there. Louis was broken. He didn't mind that the café was full of people and began to cry.

## **The Beauty of the Eiffel Tower**

Four guessed numbers meant he won two thousand euros – exactly the amount he owed to his mother. He wanted to laugh but couldn't. It was the end of his journey. He longed for peace, for his first love – just to sleep by her side.

He went home and he took a shower. Then he left the ticket on the table and added a paper with a short message:

*For my mother with love, Louis.*

He took the painting of his first love and went out for the last walk. In dark thoughts he passed by Basilique du Sacré-Cœur and Le Palais de L'Élysée, crossed the bridge Pont Alexandre III and arrived at his destination.

He looked up. He had admired her since his childhood but never climbed her. She stood there proudly in the afternoon sun waiting for him – Eiffel Tower.

He bought a ticket and resolutely climbed up the stairs. It seemed endless but he did not stop. Finally, he found himself on the second floor.

Paris was beautiful from this place.

He looked down at the streets. He stayed there very long. The sun began to set.

It was time to say goodbye to everything, especially to his unlucky life. He was looking for a place where he could throw himself down from the tower, but he realized that it was fenced everywhere. He was like a bird in a cage. He could not even freely choose how to die. It saddened him. He sat down on the stairs and watched the sunset.



## 14th March 2030

It's 1 p.m. and I have already come home from work. The work hours are not very long, so it's possible for us to spend time with our family. With our children, with our partners.

I love my life and how it has changed through the last years. I am looking through the window and I am admiring beautiful nature, forests, animals, birds. I've always dreamed about a life like this.

"Hi mum!"

Annie is here. My little daughter. She is 8 and she goes to primary school here in the village, where we live. She always comes up with something new to enrich me.

"Today we talked about history, do you want to know something?"

"Of course I do, darling."

"Do you believe that a long time ago – in the past, the people wore weird masks to protect themselves against dangerous diseases?"

I had to laugh at the innocent, bewildered and concerned expression on her face. I was absolutely touched.

"Yes Annie, I trust you, even though it wasn't that long ago. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Of course, mum!"

"It has been 10 years since the problem occurred. Ten years ago, nobody knew what our world would look like and nobody cared about it. People were essentially satisfied with the life they had."

"So what happened?"

“The illness started in the beginning of 2020. I was 17 at the time and when I heard the first warning, I didn’t pay attention. Our government spread the news between the citizens: “It is like a flu,” they informed us. “Don’t panic,” they said. And nobody could have foreseen that it was the beginning of something bigger. The days passed and the amount of victims increased. After one month people became nervous.”

“Wow, you must have been scared.”

“Yes, we were, Annie. People started to complain about the government’s lack of action and forced them to take the first steps. Very soon, they came up with protective measures. There were no students on the streets because all schools were closed, including kindergartens. People were not allowed to travel abroad and all shops and restaurants were closed immediately. And these measures worked. They calmed people down. For the moment.”

“So people stopped dying?”

“No Annie, not yet. This emergency status lasted almost one year. During this time, the situation started to be very critical, people couldn’t go to work, couldn’t leave their houses, a lot of businesses went bankrupt. Production stopped, social services didn’t exist. Luckily a few local grocery stores were allowed to work, but no beauty salons, no electronic stores, no car dealerships...”

“Oh, that sounds pretty bad.”

“Yes, but that wasn’t the biggest problem. People were forced to wear protective masks and gloves, but those two important utilities were limited and were running out. People had to eat, but the shops were either closed or sold out. They needed to repair their phones, cars, computers, but none of these services were available. Eventually, they started to help each other with the hope that others would help them in return. And it started to work.”

“And what about the sick people?”

“The government banned the hospitals that were not equipped with adequate protective equipment. Only a few hospitals were working at that time. Their employees worked day and night without rest. They had been rescuing lives every day, and people began to value their work.”

“So there were some positive aspects?”

“Yes, you could say so. Over time, people started to create their own systems to survive. Medical students started helping out in the hospitals, young people started shopping for the elderly, they in turn were sewing medical masks and were giving them out to doctors and patients. People started to spend more time with their loved ones, they became more open, more solidary, kind... Our society has become a society where people are able to help each other, where money and property are not the top priorities. So yes, it also brought positive changes to our lives. But a lot of people had to die for it.”

“Aww, it’s good that it’s gone.”

“Yes, absolutely. Okay, let’s stop this conversation, and tell me, what do you want for lunch?”

That day in the evening I was lying in bed and thinking about our conversation. It was confusing for her, but she wasn’t wrong. Despite all the problems and sacrifices, that time has brought something amazing to our society. New perceptions of the world, family, and life as a whole...

# **Inspired by Fairytale**

# **The Princess Doesn't Get Married in This One**

“But father I do not wish to get married,” said the beautiful princess to her father. Her name was Sophia and while the name got along well with her looks (she had long and shiny hazel hair and kind eyes of the same colour) it didn't suit her character at all. Sophia is a name for a kind, weak and not very clever but divinely beautiful girl. Our princess, however, had a strong body and mind, was ambitious, clever, and brave. And she didn't want to ever get married. But she was the king's only child, she was 18 and, unfortunately, she was a woman. The kingdom needed a strong male hand, at least that was what her father had thought. Her objections did not matter for the king had decided. On the ball where she was to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, she would have to select a husband.

The ball had started and our princess looked stunning as she slowly walked down the stairs. She glanced over the ballroom and was pleased to notice that everyone seemed charmed by her. Throughout the night she met all her suitors and found only one of them tolerable. Prince Damian, unlike the others, didn't seem egoistic, self-centred or fawning. In fact, he seemed nice and clever. They would be dancing and talking all night but with the stroke of midnight an awful, evil three headed dragon appeared. “In the morning,” it growled, “your princess shall be mine or I'll burn your pathetic little kingdom down! She will be waiting for me outside the Drekahelli cave.” To prove its point the dragon breathed out fire on the ceiling. The big chandelier was melting and hot glass and metal were dripping on the heads of the people who were screaming with fear and pain.

A few hours later the princess was standing outside the cave. Her hands were tied and her eyes were covered with scarves. She was brought there to be either saved by someone she will later have to marry, or to be eaten by the horrifying dragon. Neither of those options were tempting.

Sophia was getting slightly bored of waiting, when she finally heard a skylark. That meant the dragon would soon wake up.

She quickly pulled out a sword she had managed to hide under her big fancy skirts and with a few deft swishes of the sword Sophia freed her hands. The moment she took the scarf off her eyes she heard the dragon coming out of his cave craving for her royal blood.

The monster was enormous and had an incredible strength. The princess with her gorgeous yet impractical dress and high heels was at a huge disadvantage. For a moment all she wanted was to run away, but then she thought about her kingdom. She shall not let this dreadful beast destroy her home. She smirked and gave a battle cry. The dragon did at first seem surprised by its main course fighting back but it was big and bad and a small princess wouldn't scare it. The mighty battle began. Sophia fought like a girl and that was exactly the reason the dragon could not stand a chance. The princess was quick, clever and surprisingly strong. She took advantage of the three heads' poor cooperation and somehow managed to cut them all off in a relatively short time.

The battle was won and the princess hadn't even broken a heel. Her dress though looked terrible. It was dirty, ripped and partially burned. In fact, the princess herself was injured and had some painfully looking burns. She had just started contemplating on going back home when she saw prince Damian riding towards her.

"You are late, my lord, I have already killed the dragon," she said when Damian came to her. Sophia enjoyed the surprised look on the prince's face. The initial surprise was soon replaced by respect and admiration. The prince took the princess home. She became a national heroine and her father never pushed her into marriage anymore. After her father's death she ruled the kingdom wisely and gracefully. With Damian they became best friends but she never married him or anyone else and never in her life did she regret it. You don't have to marry and have children for only you can make yourself happy.



# The World is Cruel to the Young Girls

We all know the story of a man and a woman who had wished for a child but couldn't get it. With the help of magic the woman finally gives birth to a girl, but not long after her birth the girl is abducted and raised by an old witch in a tower higher than the clouds. The girl has long hair which the witch uses to get into the tower. In the end there appears a man, usually a prince, saves the girl and they live happily ever after.

This girl's name was Rapunzel. As long as she remembered she lived in a high tower that had neither stairs nor door, and she had never left it. She lived there with a woman who claimed to be her grandmother. Rapunzel felt that it was a lie, but in fact she didn't care. She was happy to have at least somebody to care. When the old woman wanted to go in or out the tower, she asked Rapunzel to let down her hair. When she heard her grandmother asking for it, she wrapped her hair round a hook and then her hair fell down and the woman could climb in.

Many times Rapunzel asked her grandmother to let her out of the tower. Firstly the crone would say that it was impossible, because there was no way to get into or out of the tower without using Rapunzel's hair. After Rapunzel suggested cutting her hair and making a rope, the woman started telling her that she can't let her out, because the world is dangerous and cruel to young helpless girls and Rapunzel is too weak to protect herself. A few years had passed and the girl became a stubborn teenager. When the crone went to the nearby village shopping for food Rapunzel cut her hair, braided it and slid down. Her grandmother was right, she was too weak, her hands weren't strong enough and when she was about three meters above the land, she fell down and injured her leg. She wasn't planning to run away, she just wanted to go for a walk for the first time in her life. But her leg was hurting too much. And so she decided that she will go to the village where her grandmother had gone, hoping she will meet her grandmother or if not, someone will help her there.

She went through the forest, but suddenly she heard some loud voices. These noises were the king's son and his escort hunting. Rapunzel hid herself in bushes nearby. When she glanced from the bushes she saw some people and got scared. Her grandmother told her horror stories about robbers that live in forests, who when they find a nice girl rape her, torture, and if still alive, kill her. Not knowing who those people were, she decided not to tempt fate and she tried to run from them. Unfortunately, the sprained ankle did not make it possible for her to run fast or to make less noises.

As she tried to escape, the prince thought the sounds in the bushes were made by the deer they were hunting for. And he and his people started shooting their arrows. The first arrow got her into the one uninjured leg, the second in her shoulder, the third and the final one pierced her chest. And when the girl was in shock of the horrible pain she was feeling, she heard the prince yelling to his friends that he had got her and that he would go and finish her off. Then she died. She didn't know that the prince wasn't aware that he had accidentally killed a girl instead of a deer. But her last thought was: the world really is cruel to the young helpless girls.



# Evanescent

Once upon a time, a mysterious family entered Neverland. Who they were and how they were able to reach this hidden place by themselves has remained a secret until today. However, they somehow managed to live in harmony with all the other inhabitants.

They made peace with the Native Americans, whose intentions were never violent, but also with the Pirates thirsty for blood. Even the enchanting Mermaids promised to stay in their realm. They may have possessed a haunting beauty, but if you looked closely, you would see their skin was unearthly pale and their hands ended in sharp claws. When the moon was out, they transformed into dark creatures wailing wildly at the moon. The lagoon was no safe place for mortals once the sun set.

And the fairies, the tiniest and quietest of Neverland's creatures, never complained. They didn't seek company of people and explored the island all day long.

But all of that changed when Evanescence was born.

The third born daughter of the two secretive humans, she was different from her older sisters. Always and Forever were ordinary, but humble and kind. They preferred to stay in their little house, afraid that the Mermaids would splash them with their tails.

Evanescence's beauty was out of this world. Her long blonde hair twirled in gorgeous locks and the look in her big blue eyes was deeper than the ocean. Unfortunately, one had to be careful. They were treacherous. Just as she was.

She may have been beautiful, but her personality ruined everything. Jealous, vindictive and self-centred, she looked down on everyone who didn't seem enough to her. And after 15 years of her life, rumours started to spread. People started to whisper that she was cursed and her heart was made of stone.

And even though it seemed absolutely irrational, she mostly despised fairies.

She laughed at their fun size and bubbly voices. Deep down, without anyone realizing, she was insanely jealous of their freedom and neverending joy. And one day, she took it way too far.

Evanescent had a horrible day. After a huge fight with her family, who had never been very warm or loving towards her, she felt so miserable and alone like never before. Lost in the depths of her despair, she decided to walk to the Meadow of Lost Dreams where most of the fairies spent their time. And when she saw their happy faces and heard their joyful laugh, she got so angry that she couldn't help but scream: "All the little kids in the world, don't believe in fairies! They aren't real anyways."

The reason why there were so many fairies on the island was because every time a little child laughed, another fairy was born. But once one stopped believing in them, one of them passed away. And now, when every child heard what Evanescence said, things turned into a disaster. All the fairies started falling on the ground without a spark of life in them.

Evanescence's actions had consequences. Even though the fairies didn't have much strength, their magical abilities made it up for them. And Evanescence underestimated their power.

Once the fairy king heard what happened, he immediately sought Evanescence out and cursed her with words she would never forget, no matter how hard she tried.

"You made a terrible mistake, you foolish human being. You didn't care about the value of life and took it for granted. Now it's your turn to see for yourself how it feels like to be one of us."

Within a couple of seconds, Evanescence was just as tiny as the King himself.

At first, she couldn't believe it. It felt like a nightmare she had to wake up from as soon as possible. She pinched herself like a hundred times till her hands were sore and red. Her face was

all panicky and she soon commenced into something very unexpected for her very being. She sat down and cried, tear drops streaming down her tiny cheeks.

Getting used to her new life was not easy. She wailed every time she had to look into the mirror. Instead of a stunning beauty in a wonderful gown, she saw a tiny creature dressed in a simple green dress made of leaves, the same every fairy was supposed to wear. And what was even worse, her hair had to be tied in a bun, she could never let it down like she used to.

Her family didn't miss her at all. They were glad that they could finally live happily without squables. However, fairies were overall very forgiving and understanding and she soon made a couple of friends. She had never experienced friendship before and she soon started to fit in in this new environment. And even though she would never let it show, she even began to like the nickname they gave her.

*Tinker Bell.* It was based on the sound of her new voice, because every time she spoke, it was more like if a tiny bell started to ring.

Time flew and things were changing. She watched all of her friends slowly pass away. The life of a common fairy was sweet and short, but she was once human after all, so hers was supposed to be much longer. And she started to feel alone. She needed a new friend, someone who would stay for a long time.

When the boy came, she didn't even care at first. Yes, it sure was extraordinary that a human entered their world, but at the time, more and more children started to visit Neverland in their dreams. How could she be sure that this one was for real?

One day, he talked to her.

“Would you like to go on an adventure with me?” he asked.

She was confused. People don't talk to fairies and even if they did, they wouldn't understand a single word we were saying, no

one besides us can understand the language, she thought. So, she just stared at him, not knowing what to do.

“I guess that’s a yes” he said and gave her a dazzling smile. “I’m Peter, by the way.”

And before she knew it, they were floating above Neverland. She saw the lagoon with the Mermaids playing their games, the Pirate ship, the secret village of the Native Americans and even the fairy realm. She never dared to fly so high and she had no idea how beautiful it looked. No wonder humans come here almost every night, since their world seems so empty compared to this, she thought.

Fairies didn’t feel the same way as humans. Due to their size, they could feel happiness and short sparks of sadness, but they could never experience any deeper emotions. But since a part of Tinker Bell was still human, it wasn’t hard for her to fall in love.

Peter was just so different from everyone else. They had fun together. He cared about her and she cared about him so much. She soon found out he could understand what she said. She felt like there was nothing in this world Peter couldn’t do. And without even realizing, she slowly became the person she could have been. Caring, humble, happy.

But then he started bringing all these children with him. Lost Boys, he called them. Tinker Bell didn’t like that, because he spent less time with her now. And then... that Wendy girl came. So plain and ordinary, without any special talent, she took Peter away from her. Tinker Bell felt unwanted and unloved. And all the bad things she had fought to eliminate so hard came back to her like a boomerang. Once again, she was that envious meanie with a vicious tongue.

She knew trouble was coming with these children. But when she drank the poison, she didn’t even think straight. Peter was in danger and she couldn’t let anything happen. She thought she had basically sentenced herself to death. But then, Peter turned things around: “Listen up, children of the world! I need

you to believe. Believe in magic. Believe in fairies. We need your help! If you do, I promise I'll show you Neverland." As soon as Peter uttered these words, Tinker Bell started to feel better. As if a giant rock fell off her chest and she could breathe again. Peter had saved her life.

She apologized to Wendy and this time without any hesitation. She sprinkled her in pixie dust and told her to believe. She finally understood that Peter needed Wendy more than he needed a tiny fairy. And even though it may have been the hardest thing she had ever had to do, she decided to let him go. She watched him experience all these new adventures, she watched him fight and laugh... and slowly forget about her.

But even Tinker Bell wasn't immortal. And when her final day came, she greeted death like an old friend. She made peace with herself. She saw the face of The boy who never grew up one last time.

"Would you like to go on an adventure...?"

She softly smiled and closed her eyes for the one last time.

Somewhere in the world, a little child laughed.

# A Never Aging Boy

Neverland, the island located somewhere in the direction of the second star to the right, and a boy, Peter Pan, living there. The boy who never ages. A tale well-known to many children. But do we know where Peter Pan came from and why he was, as we may call it, immortal?

Once he was one of the fey folk living in their land. But he wasn't loved nor liked there. For other fae he was too weak. Too weak, both physically and mentally. He wasn't good at twisting words and guessing riddles. He had problems with magic. He had neither wings nor tail nor horns. And he was only a half-blood fae. His mother was a forest fae and his father a mortal man.

After years of living with other fae, he had noticed that he was aging. Too quickly for a fae and too slowly for a mortal. And others started noticing it too. As time passed, he couldn't put up with fairies laughing at him no more, and so he ran away. To the island we all know. It was a small island not so far from the main faerie land, but at least it wasn't inhabited by higher fae, only by some smaller faeries and some water faeries, mostly by mermaids. First few years had passed quietly, but Peter's problem remained. He was still aging and he did not like it one bit.

In the middle of the island there was an old tree and Peter liked to sleep in its roots. One day, while sleeping there, he dreamed of playing pipes in the mortal village and taking some boys from the village to his island. Peter didn't know how he would make the boys go with him, but he decided that he'd examine the opportunities later and forgot about it. The next day he carved the pipes from one of the branches of the old tree and went to the mortal lands.

In the evening he appeared in a small village, where the villagers gathered around a fire, played music and danced. Pan enjoyed how the evening was going and he wanted to join the people. But it was dangerous for him, so he remained invisible and started to play his pipes. Silently at first, nobody could hear him, but as he started playing louder, three boys, who were

dancing, stopped and came to him. Peter didn't understand why. They couldn't see him and, most likely, they didn't hear him. He decided to ignore them and changed the rhythm of the music. And the boys started dancing, not to the music of the villagers, but following his rhythm. And suddenly he understood. With his pipes he could control the boys.

And so, he stood up and led the boys to his island. As you can understand, he wasn't able to play the pipes all the time. So, when they arrived on the island, he made up a nice story about why they were on the island. The story of the Lost Boys who fell out of their prams while their nannies were looking the other way. He made the story up by himself and with the magical music from his pipes made them believe it.

At first he didn't know why the old tree had advised him to take the boys. But as the time passed, he realised that with the boys present, he was not aging. Also, the use of magic became much easier and his childish dream to fly like the rest of the fey folk, came true. His problem was finally solved. As he understood, by bringing the boys to his island, he made himself a source of life energy. And he used it to make the island almost unvisitable for uninvited people nor for fae. Once in a while some ships arrived at the island and the passengers had to stay there, and that's how the Indians and pirates appeared there.

The boys didn't know that Peter was using their life energy. They were happy that they, as they thought, were staying young forever just like Peter. The truth was that they indeed did stay young. But not forever. They died when their time came, usually by some illness, sometimes unfortunate events – falling off a cliff, drowning in the sea etc. Every decade he went to the mortal world and came back with a few more boys. That's why there were always some Lost Boys on the island and Peter never aged.

Sometimes he tried to lure girls into Neverland (as the Lost Boys named the island), but he wasn't successful. His pipes somehow did not work with the girls. And moreover, the life energy from the boys, instead of going to Peter and making him not aging, went to the girls and made them feel and see all the

magic of the island. The last girl, Wendy Darling, was even able to use it, that's why she was able to fly. After he got rid of Wendy, and as she forced him, of her two brothers, he had decided that he will never bring any girl to Neverland. And he kept it.

And that is the story of a weak half-blood fae who crowned himself a king on the island of kidnapped boys. A story of a boy who will never age as long as there are some mortals on the island of Neverland. The story of Peter Pan.



# Therapy Session

“...wow. Just wow. Your life story would amaze any psychologist in my opinion. I wouldn't believe a person could survive all of this. No wonder why your skin is so pale, my dear. Can we go all over it again?”

She didn't say a word, all she could do was sit quietly in the armchair, her knee twitching and her whole body shivering.

“I take that as a yes,” said the psychologist, continuing her monologue, “I'll try to decode the events of your life and provide you with some information about it. Let me just check my notes... yes. Your family situation. Your mother passed away early, your father was absent during your childhood. Your step-mother was jealous of your looks, how unfortunate. I can see an attempt at murder, did the police investigate?”

No words came out of her mouth, although she slightly shook her head. She kept looking to the ground.

“We'll get to that one later. That was why you decided to run away from home. You started hallucinating from starvation and spoke with animals? That sounds insane! That sounds like you were insane!”

The patient finally looked her in the eye, well it seemed like she wanted to kill her with her sight. Her eyes were so red, who knows why.

“That was inappropriate, my bad. Let's continue. You had to live with strange men in a foreign region, they used you as their housewife. Did they abuse you in any way?”

That was when her tears started to slowly run down her cheek. She grasped the armrests and closed her eyes.

“Fine... After that, you were poisoned and pronounced dead.”

The silence in the room was unbearable. The patient's heart started beating so fast and so loud everyone in the world could hear it. Even the psychologist lost her enthusiasm.

“An unknown man gave you CPR and saved your life. You fell in love and got married. Mrs. White, an anonymous caller gave me information about your relationship and mainly about Mr. Florian's behaviour.”

The first words came out of her mouth, it sounded like she lost her voice, she spoke very slowly. “What. Information.”

The birds outside weren't singing, though I swear they were ten minutes ago.

“We know about his necrophilia. The murder attempts, the secret rooms, his cemetery visits... we've even received some pictures. Do you think it could be linked to your little situation those years ago?”

The air in the room was thick and unbreathable. It got darker, so her eyes were shining in the gloomy light.

“He. Gave. Me. Life.” The psychologist was sitting on her chair, very tense. These were the worst moments of her life.



“He could have taken that away from you.”

It felt like hours. Staring at her skinny silhouette, waiting for some kind of response.

“I’m not the one to choose.”

A smile appeared on her face. Someone knocked calmly on the door and opened.

# The Story of an Unhappy Dwarf

My name is Pick and I am one of the seven dwarfs. My life started almost 50 years ago and at the beginning everything seemed alright. Our book was sitting on a bookshelf and no one cared what we were doing. You know, we all had time to devote ourselves to our passions and live our lives happily in a more or less unified carefree fairy tale world. I love painting so the only thing I did those days was painting beautiful landscapes. It was a paradise back then.

But one day, everything changed. We were bought as a present for a kindergarten. Imagine that it is the middle of the night and you are sleeping but suddenly you are ripped out of your bed and put into a role that you are forced to play. It did not seem like a big problem at first, but they would keep reading us over and over again. Do you know how many times I have seen Snow White die? Do you know how many times I have cried? And the kids, those little monsters even enjoyed it!

No one has ever considered the enthralled life of us, book characters. No one has ever asked us if we would rather paint a landscape than mine gold or sleep, eat, and cry at the whim of the reader. Millions and millions of books are printed each day, which means millions and millions of book characters are forced to do something they hate, just for the mere entertainment of humans. These so-called authors are the worst of them all. They are but cruel sadists who enjoy someone else's pain and suffering creating new universes where the characters' fate inevitably meets them as any human picks up their book. We have no choice but to walk the path written for us. So, the next time you read a book, think about how you may be destroying someone else's life.

# **Horror Stories**

# No One

Once upon a time, there was a man. His name was Arthur and he was lonely. One day he was roaming through the land and met another man.

Arthur asked him: "What is your name, my friend?"

"I am No one, and I have no friends," the stranger replied.

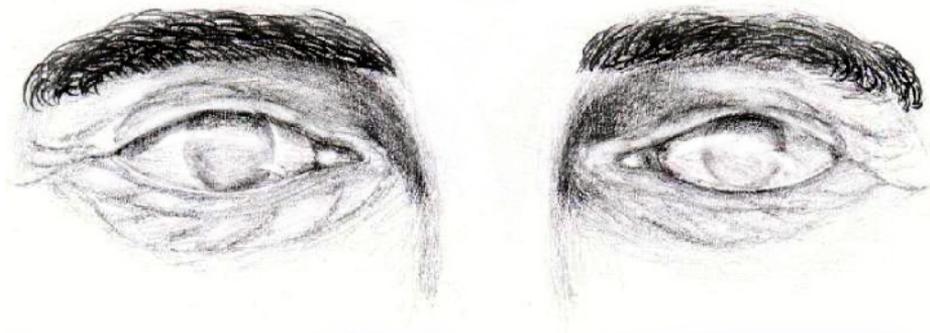
The man was obviously blind as he was not looking at Arthur. He had scars all over his body and was wielding a heavy-looking sharp weapon.

Arthur asked No one again: "Why are you here all alone?"

"I have been banished here by an unknown force because I was unable to help someone," the man replied. Arthur started to think about why No one was banished to this very place when, all of a sudden, his thoughts were drowned out by a dark storm that consumed both men. Arthur tried to run away, but his attempt was in vain. No one started to swing his weapon and eventually he disappeared into the clouds. Arthur lost his consciousness.

When Arthur woke up, he was blind and the only thing he could remember was: "I am No one, I have no friends. I have been banished here by an unknown force because I was unable to help someone."

Arthur had become No one.



# The Treachery of Images

All embellishing darkness fills all four corners of the small room I call my atelier. Swiftly, with a strike of a match, I lit a few candles stuck to the hardwood easel placed in the corner furthest away from where the door used to be. Finally, light shines upon the walls, covered floor to ceiling by linen of various sizes and shapes. Some bear anatomy studies, some are covered in text which no longer resembles the idea it used to, while others taunt me with their piercing gaze.

The latter I don't remember painting though I am certain comes from my mind. The figures resemble my dreams, some are more prevalent than others. Two heads tied to each other, a cluster of thick, black roots entangled around an eyeball looking into the distance, a cat with limbs so long they fill the entire piece of cloth. But only one figure appears more frequently than others:

A man, standing in a door frame, with glowing eyes always fixed on me everywhere I go. At first glance, he looks just like me, but when I try to focus on even the slightest detail the image blurs into abstract shapes, my heart sinks and brutal anxiety snaps me away from the Man.

I pick up my palette and my brushes, and open the box of paint to the left of me. Some colors from yesterday were still wet which was fortunate since my supplies are running short. I only had to add titanium white and a small dab of cadmium yellow. I readjust my mirror and continue with my work.

*"Now, where was I?..."*

*Oh, good, the paint is still damp, even the painting looks better day by day.*

*The likeness is exquisite, though the color no longer matches my current visage.*

*I am especially fond of the eyes, there's something about them."*

Faint sounds of chatter can be heard from outside one of the walls.

*“It’s quite fortunate that I stocked up on paint thinner, these brushes are horrid, I should clean them as soon as I finish, but the smell, oh god, the smell. I can’t stand the smell, not now, not when I am so close, I shall use the palette knife, yes the knife...”*

“I would not do that... if I were you.”

*“What the hell?!”*

“Trust me, it’s not a good idea, just like many of yours.”

*“How is?...” “How is THAT possible!?”*

“Don’t act so surprised now dear, this expression on your face doesn’t suit me at all.”

*“You?”*

“Yes, obviously.”

*“Oh, I see.”*

“I am glad.”

*“Of course.”*

“Now, will you finish what you started?”

*“But why? Why end this now? This is perfect, everything I wanted, I can’t leave now, not after all this time, I must stay here, with you.”*

“You know that this is not possible, we two are indistinguishable from each other but different in a stark way.”

*“But you are perfect, every detail, every stroke of the brush, life itself, captured in paint trapped on a canvas bound to this room.”*

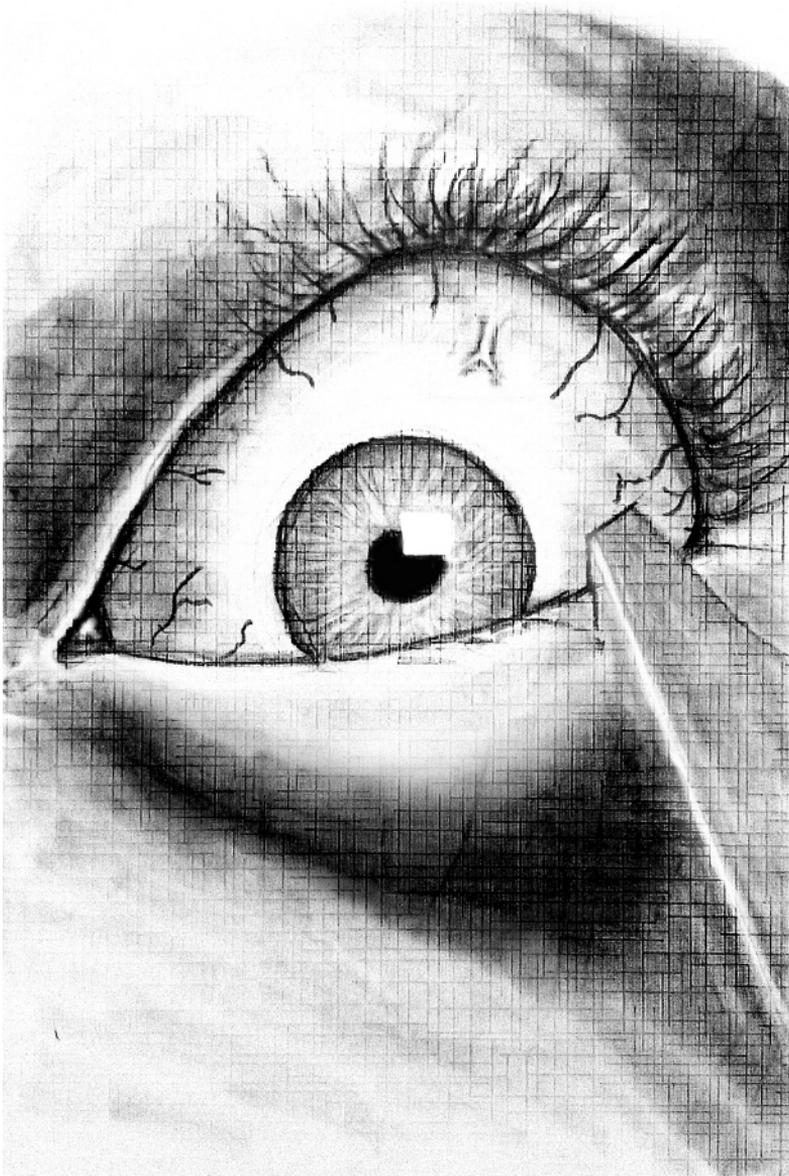
“Look me in the eye! Do you see it? DO YOU! ANSWER ME!!!”

“I...”

“TELL ME!!!”

“I... I can see...”

“WHAT DO YOU SEE?”



“I see the Man, his eyes, I can’t look away, I can’t look away, I can’t look...”

*“It’s time for us to leave, my dear. Quite unfortunate that we can not travel to the same place, I envy you in a sense. And that little instrument of yours? A knife is wasted when dry crimson sits upon it.”*

“I CAN’T LOOK AWAY.”

*“Well, I will be on my way, the door is under the very elaborate portrait of mine, if I recall correctly.”*

“His eyes, HIS DAMNED EYES, ON THE WALLS, ON THE CANVAS... IN... IN...”

*“God, this place is a mess...”*

“In the mirror, the eyes in the mirror...”

*“The handle is as rusty as your sense of humor, eh? I haven’t seen sunlight in ages.”*

“Closed forever, heart sinks no more.”

The door slams shut.

# The Doctor

When I was really young, like 8 or so, my parents and I just moved into a pretty new house, it had 2 stories, attic and a basement. My parents bought it really cheap.

My room was on the second floor, in the middle of my parents' room and the staircase. I remember that on the third day we were there, something weird and scary started happening. I started seeing shadows and outlines of something, it was really tall and skinny, and it wore some kind of coat. I could not sleep because of it, it was just standing in the hall, not moving at all. I was too scared to do something about it, so I just covered myself in blankets and tried to sleep.

The next day I told my parents about it, but my father just said that it's my imagination, or just bad dreams. The next night was okay, the thing was nowhere to be seen. But the other night I saw it, it looked like a doctor, but it was really tall and skinny, it was like it had nothing other than bones and skin, no flesh and it wore a white lab coat. He came to my room, went straight to my bed, grabbed me by my ankle and started pulling me towards the staircase, I tried to fight, I kicked it, but it just wouldn't let go. I grasped the door frame, and it went on for another few minutes, but then he just suddenly stopped, let go of my leg and walked away into the hall. I saw him opening some secret door next to the staircase, but I was too scared to see more, so I just ran to my parents' bedroom and told them everything. They just said that it was a bad dream, and let me sleep with them.

From then, I slept only with my parents, and for the next two weeks, nothing similar happened. But then once I had an urge to go to the toilet, I quickly walked to the bathroom, did the thing you do on the toilet and then walked into the hall and I was terrified about what I saw there. It was him, he was just standing there smiling, waiting for me. The moment I saw him, I tried to yell, but I was too scared to even make a single sound, he slowly but steadily started walking towards me, it went the same as before, he grasped me, I tried to fight back, but I could not, this time there was nothing around that would allow me to

fight back or at least hold on to. Luckily, I moved the carpet enough to knock a vase off a table in the hall – which shattered and woke up my parents, they quickly came running, but he was gone. Even though I told them everything, they thought I was sleepwalking.

From then on, I made sure that all the doors were locked and slept only in my parent's bedroom. But then my mother also started experiencing weird things, not as serious as mine, but she was waking up in the middle of night hearing some weird sounds, like someone was silently knocking on the door and walking in the hall. We did not like the house at all, so we moved out, and nothing similar ever happened again.

Now, nearly 14 years later, I am living alone in the same city as that house was, but I completely forgot about it. I was once just casually reading the newspaper when I saw that the house I lived in as a young child was being sold again, I checked the internet for its history, and saw that no one stayed there for longer than a month or two, so I decided to investigate it. I called an agent to show me the house, it was a girl around 25 years old. She showed me the house, talked about how many rooms it has, how big it is etc. Once we came to the staircase, I looked into the room that was once mine, and then remembered all the things that were happening to me here. I looked at the wall where I saw the man going in one night, I carefully looked at it, searched for any secret door, but I could not find anything.

Then the agent asked me: “You know about it, right?” I asked her about what, and she told me that she feels uncomfortable explaining it here, so she asked me if I wanted to go somewhere else, I agreed. We went to a nearby cafe, and she started explaining:

“A long time ago, there lived a doctor with his wife and a single son. On the first floor was a clinic with a consulting room and a waiting room, where he treated patients, he was just an ordinary doctor, and his family lived on the second floor. His son was a troublesome boy, he did not have good marks at school, he sometimes did not even go to school and he was disobeying his

parents. Once the son argued with his parents, and ran away from home, they called the police, but no one could find him. Three months later, it was midnight and the doctor was already in bed nearly sleeping, when he heard noises from the first floor, like someone was opening drawers and putting everything in a bag, he quietly walked down the stairs, took a scalpel which was the most suitable weapon at that moment and yelled at the robber to drop the bag and lay down, but the robber tried to run, the doctor was panicking and ran to him and stabbed him straight into the chest, but when he took off his mask, he saw his son's face. He was panicking, he did not know what to do, so he tried to somehow treat him, but it was too late, his son already lost a lot of blood and died. The next morning all that doctor's wife saw was a lot of blood and her son's dead body, the doctor was nowhere to be seen."

# Always Check Under Your Bed

Karen, a college student, has moved to her new apartment on the campus of her university. She unpacked all of her belongings and headed out to meet her boyfriend, Jake, outside.

As she was going down the stairs she could not remember if she had locked the door of her room or not. She ran back, checked it and luckily the door was locked, but she could clearly see the lights were on from under the door. Karen entered her room; she remembered turning off the lights, but she did not think much of it. She checked all of her windows though, just to be sure. All of them were closed and locked so she turned the lights off, locked the door, and headed out to meet Jake downstairs. They returned in the evening when it was already dark outside.

Karen entered her room and the lights in the bathroom were on. She did remember turning them off however, and she got really scared. Suddenly she could hear her heart pounding and her whole body was shivering. Karen went to check the bathroom again, but everything was as she left it so she turned the lights off and went to bed. There she chatted with Jake for a while until she dropped her phone on the floor. As she was picking it up she could see a hunched figure under her bed. The creature was facing the other side so Karen only saw its back. But that was enough to silence and paralyze her. Karen managed not to scream and she told Jake that she needed a shower. She took her phone with her, locked the door and called the police. Then she jumped from the window to escape.

The police told her afterwards that when they entered her room, there was a malformed man with a knife crouching in front of her bathroom.

## An Unwanted Gift

“Now you are part of a family, Francis,” he murmured with a smile. His cold red cheeks were hidden in the shadow of the silk hat he got in that fancy shop a few blocks back. He raised his thin hand and with an almost imperceptible movement he moved Francis a little bit lower. Yes, the name of that silk hat was Francis. His walking stick was hidden under a black tailored coat that was almost reaching to his ankles. He needed to weave unnoticed through the crowd and his infamous stick would surely evoke unwanted associations in someone. The coat was already soaked after a long rainy walk across the city, but he didn't mind. Although the name of that charming coat was Edward he liked to call him just “Ed”. The coat didn't protest.

It was especially cold in the center of the city today. The streets were soaked in water by the almost constant rain and the sharp north wind carried away everything that his long icy fingers could reach. Citizens were used to this kind of weather so the streets were still sort of crowded. Crowded with nameless people with hateful and judging faces. The man's neighbours didn't like him much. He had earned many names over the years, but none of them were flattering, pleasant, or at least not mean. Maybe he didn't have many friends at work or in the neighbourhood but he surely had Francis, Edward and mainly Lilith. Sweet Lilith.

When he reached her house, the man's heart was beating as fast as the hummingbird's wings. She was sitting in the living room, reading an old leather book. When she heard the man's loud footsteps she sprang up immediately. Her beauty was stunning but the smile on Lilith's face disappeared the moment she saw him.

“Don't – I beg you,” she whispered with horror in her voice.

The man took another few steps towards her, “We will be forever together, Lilith, I will take care of you. I am a decent man.”

“I told you that I don’t want to be yours,” she screamed with a single tear dripping down her rosy cheeks, “now go, please.”

“You can’t escape your fate, my dear love,” he said with a huge and terrifying smile, “we are just meant to be together. Me, you, Francis and Ed. What a beautiful family – don’t you say?”

“I have a real family and they will never stop looking for me!”

“Why the drama? You should be glad to have a chance like this. Tell me, you don’t like the idea of eternal life?”

“For what is eternal life when I lose my freedom? Just find someone else. The world is full of crazy women who will commit



to you,” she sighed with the last bits of hope in her heart. This was her last chance for escape. The knife in her hand was shaking.

The man now stood right in front of her. Hands crossed behind his back. Ice cold smile. She couldn't stand that look – not anymore. As she had reached for him with her long hunting knife time almost stopped. In that moment she felt how the knife disintegrated in her own hands. A second later instead of a knife, sand was pouring from her hand.

“Don't lower yourself to something like that. This is a gift.”

“I don't want it,” whined Lilith with eyes red from tears. When he had raised his hand to caress her cheek she closed them for good. Where the girl had once stood a silver ring now laid. The man picked up the ring from the ground and put it on his finger: “Don't be sad, Lilith, you will get used to it. Francis was just the same when I made him part of the family.”

# **Romantic Fantasies**

# Bittersweet Memories

Mornings in Venice are truly enchanting. The freshly awoken Sun reflects on canals, where gondoliers steer the day's first tourists for whom the whole day will become just a pleasant memory; something they will come back to on sad rainy days. But right now we are just enjoying the view.

My other half and I are bathing in the morning sun, sitting on our small terrace. The terrace is full of blooming flowers, which she takes care of every day, making them grow to perfection. She is absolutely clueless of how beautiful she looks right now, dressed in just a bathrobe. With sunbeams irradiating her head, she looks like an angel with a shining halo. When she notices me staring at her, even after all these years, it makes me shy. She smiles; her smile is mesmerizing.

On mornings like this, I tend to remember a lot more. When he came back from the army, I was so happy, he treated me like a princess, played with our son everyday and I couldn't be happier. But, after a while, he grew colder – more distant. It started slowly; I didn't notice at first – all the signs slowly creeping in. Now it seems really obvious to me, but, back then, I was probably blinded; I was blinded with love for a man who cared more for his honours from war than for his son and wife.

It started slowly, yes, but after some time, I couldn't bear it anymore. I tried to talk to him and, of course, he apologised and promised to try and make things better. I believed him. I was young, naive, and I didn't know...

"Love, would you like more tea?" my darling distracts me from my gloomy daydreaming. I smile at her as she fills my cup. We eat our breakfast in silence, no words needed. Slowly, I sink back into my memories.

That one crazy argument – one of our biggest; he didn't show himself for two days then. Now, I don't even remember how it started; it must have been something petty and insignificant, like dirty dishes in the sink. But for me, this argument started it all.

Finally, when he came back, drunk and in the middle of the night, I made up my mind. My decision to leave him must have been the hardest I'd ever made, and his awoken conscience didn't help at all. But, God, was it worth it. He treated us nicely and with respect again. He must have felt the change in my attitude. Nevertheless, after a few months I was ready.

One day, when he was at work and I knew I had a few hours, I took my son, some clothes, and the little savings I had, and we left for the train station.

Now, I can clearly see how irresponsible that was, but, at that time, I didn't care; I just needed to be gone. I bought us tickets and with the few things I had, stepped onto the first train that came.

I don't know if it was pure luck, or if Fate played her part too; I just know that in the only vacant compartment, there she was. She was sitting by the window, preoccupied with a book, with sun and shadows playing with her long hair. When I entered, she slightly raised her head, nodded, and smiled. It was the sweetest smile I'd ever seen. I sat against her with my son safe and sound in my arms. I recall sitting there, looking how the train was rushing far from my past, when I realized what I had done. I really had done it. We were free!

The peace didn't last for long. We had been half an hour on our journey and my dearest son couldn't be hushed. I tried everything; he had never been like this before. He'd always been the nicest little boy, but at that time, I didn't know what to do. When I was on the verge of tears, she offered to hold him. I couldn't thank her enough. Suddenly as if under a spell, he calmed down and stopped crying. He started playing with her hair. I was puzzled. I apologised for the inconvenience, and she just smiled again. After a while, he fell asleep. I raised my head and she caught my eyes in hers. It was like looking into a whole new universe – so many colours and emotions all in one place. We got so fully absorbed in conversation, that when the conductor came to announce we were approaching the last station, it caught us both by surprise. Of course, this sweet little moment couldn't last forever. Reality crawled back into my life. We

got off the train. It dawned on me, then, that my small son and I were in a strange city, with hardly any money left and no place to stay. Either she is a real angel or my fear must have shown on my face, she offered for us to stay at her place for a few days. We have never left since.

“Honey, come back to me. Leave your dreaming for the night,” she teases me as my mind comes back to the present. So much has changed since that day twenty years ago... But, we have stayed together no matter what. Even though it hasn’t always been easy, she has taken care of us.

“Love, you really have to start worrying about today,” she warns me, and, as usual, she is right. Our now twenty-two-year-old son is getting married today, and we couldn’t be happier for him. He brings so much joy and light into our lives. How could we wish for more?

# Heaven is a Place on Earth

Every thousand years, Lucifer would be freed from Hell for one day. He usually used it to go to Heaven and fight archangel Michael, who had locked him up in Hell in the first place. But this time, he wanted to spend his day off on Earth. And no one knew the Earth and the people living there better than Death. So, he asked them to go with him. Surprisingly for him, and even more for them, they agreed.

The Day of Lucifer's freedom had finally come, and Death guided Lucifer to Earth. They both were disguised as mortals, but there was still something ethereal about them.

"I hoped you would take me somewhere nice, Beatrice," sighed Lucifer when he saw where Death had brought him. The two of them were standing in a small town outside a small and cozy house.

"Beatrice? Really?" said Death amusedly. They saw what he did there.

"Well, I cannot call you Death. And I thought Beatrice from Divine Comedy is apt." Death smiled and knocked on the little house's door.

The door had been opened by an older and kind looking woman – even though she was young in comparison to the two standing outside.

"Oh, It's you," she said, surprised, "and you brought a friend. Well, come in, my dears," she added. "So, who is this handsome fella?" asked the old woman when she seated them in her living room. When she said "handsome", she meant it. Lucifer had fallen, but he was still an angel, and he had that angelic beauty.

"That's Lucifer, he's not as bad as they say," Death said. He expected the old woman to scream or to pray but she seemed excited to have Satan himself as her guest.

Lucifer and Death stayed with the old woman the whole morning and even had lunch with her. They laughed and had a great time helping the old woman (whose name was Abigail) cooking the lunch. Lucifer was shocked by Death's kindness and cleverness; he had always thought of Death as God's heartless minion, but now he was starting to like them. Lucifer had never felt more like he belonged somewhere. This little house with open-minded Abby and wise Death made him, for the first time in forever, feel loved.

After lunch, Death and Lucifer decided to go for a walk.

"Never thought you'd be such a softie, Beatrice," smirked Lucifer.

Death answered calmly as usual: "I've known her since she almost died in a car crash. I thought she shouldn't be alone on her last day."

"Last day?! You're taking her so soon, and you didn't tell her?! How could you?!"

Death looked at Lucifer with tears in their eyes. "Her time has come," they said. Their sadness moderated Lucifer's rage, but, as always, he managed to be angry enough to be mean.

"I bet you enjoy killing people. It must be a really great feeling to decide who lives and who dies."

"Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

"Oh, shut up with your bible!" yelled Satan, as new fury poured into his veins.

"How could you understand? You rebelled because you didn't like listening to God. I see people dying every day of my life. I see the pain, I see the heartbreaks, and I still do my duty... and... and..." And Death started crying.

That was when Lucifer finally found out that this whole time, Death wasn't heartless; they were being strong. He wanted to

soothe them, as he wished someone had soothed him after being thrown into Hell. But, he didn't know how, so he just gently hugged them instead.

"I am sorry I've ruined our day," he whispered and lightly kissed their raven hair.

Death finally stopped crying, but neither of them wished to let go of the hug.

"Can I count on you in a thousand years?" asked Lucifer. Death smiled in response, and then they kissed. And why shouldn't they?

# It's Tangled

Left... left... right... left... left... left... right...

I keep swiping looking at all the desperate men in the pictures. There are a few messages in my inbox but none interesting enough to deserve my attention. Oh gosh, I am sooooo bored... This tower is just so boring. All of the men on this dating app are just so uninteresting... Soon I'll die from boredom if this continues like this...

Oh come on, don't look at me like that. I know there is a killing virus out there, but my mum has gone crazy locking me here like this... "For my own protection," she says. I would be careful if she let me go out, I swear! Well... Who am I kidding? Of course I wouldn't, I am a teenager. All I want is to have fun!!! Is that too much?

I have already declined a few offers tonight when one picture catches my eye. The guy probably just downloaded it from the internet... whatever.

\*bzzz\*

A new message.

I decide I deserve a little distraction from the empty space in this horrible room and answer. And you wouldn't guess it, but it's a message from that handsome boy from earlier.

'Hi, cutie!'

Oh, ain't it cute? He is playing a good boy. OK, so let's have a little fun...

'Heya, luv'

When I look out of the window after a while, I notice the sun rising up above the horizon. I didn't even notice it setting. I was chatting with Flynn (that's his name) the whole night! Oh, man... I didn't expect this.

Mum will be at work the whole day today and wouldn't have a clue I slipped out of the tower, so Flynn and I have made an arrangement that he will pick me up and take me somewhere fun (I hope he won't kill me somewhere in the woods...).

\*toot\*

Could it be him? On the road under my window, a dark car is parked. It could be him. I dress in something summery and put on make-up, it helps me look more like a human being than an animal (I've been locked here for a while now, trust me when I say that it's needed!) and then I finally meet him outside my house.

He's standing there besides his sports car looking really great. Like... his profile picture was amazing, but irl him is like an angel! Well... a fallen angel, but still an angel. He looks up from his phone and his light brown meet my green eyes. Damn it! I am lost.

"Hi, sweetie," he greets me. Shoot! If his eyes were mesmerizing, his velvety voice gives me goosebumps. I am melting from the inside. Stop! I think my fangirling is taking over the steering wheel right now. That has to stop. OK, ok, chill down, girl, chill down.

He drives us around for a while, and we are chatting. It goes surprisingly smoothly, we never run out of things to talk about. I don't recognise where we are going, but we are still in the city, so it's ok.

After a while, he stops and I finally recognise where we are. He drove us all the way to the biggest theme park in the city. Of course I've been here before, but that's something! This day will be great, I know it.

\*\*\*

We are having so much fun. Like, you wouldn't believe how well we get on with each other. He laughs at my stupid jokes, I laugh at his, and it's just great.

“Rapunzel, I’ll shoot that princess crown for you!” he blurts out and runs to the stall. I follow him, reluctantly. I have already realised how hopeless he is at this. It’s cute how he’s still trying. It’s funny to watch him trying, but I cheer him on, nonetheless.

To his own surprise, he did it! Now he’s holding that plastic children’s princess crown in his hands and wants to put it on my head.

“Can I?”

“Course.”

Oh, man... he really is clumsy.

“Sweetie...” He starts, what the hell did he do?

“Cutie... It’s tangled...”

...and that’s why my hair is now 30 cm shorter. Great! Really amazing.

\*\*\*

After I assure him for the hundredth time that it’s ok, and I wanted to have it cut anyway, he finally stops looking like a beaten puppy and smiles at me.

“It suits you better like this anyway,” he teases me.

“Cutie, there is one more surprise,” he continues, “come...”

He leads us back to his car, where we sit on the bonnet of the car and just wait. When I run out of patience, I want to ask him what’s going on. Right at the moment, I notice something on the horizon in front of us. Oh, how could I forget, today is the Night of a Thousand Lanterns.

It’s evening already, and the shining lights before us are mesmerizing. It’s magical.

I look back at him to thank him, nearly with tears of happiness in my eyes and he is holding a lit lantern, giving it to me. It's sooooo romantic. I am speechless. We free the lantern together, watching it ascend to the night sky, holding hands. When I turn to him to say something, I am again left speechless. He is looking at me, emotions in his eyes mirroring mine, and then he closes the distance between us and all I feel are just his lips on mine...

# **The Girl Who Was Engaged to the Wind**

Once upon a time, in a village, there lived a girl. Every day, when the sun had just started to bloom on the horizon, she went to pick flowers from the meadow near the forest. She spent the whole morning there and when she returned home, the girl created the most beautiful bouquets ever seen.

Once the girl went to her favourite meadow, planning to relax there and not pick flowers. She lay down, closed her eyes, and listened to the world around her. And so, the girl fell asleep.

After some time, she suddenly felt a strong wind blowing. She immediately stood up and tried to go home. But the wind was too strong for her to get through it. After a few moments of trying, she gave up and turned in the direction the wind was blowing. She went across the meadow, getting closer and closer to the forest. As she was right next to the edge, the wind unexpectedly stopped. She turned her head back and saw a young man. He was tall with long, wheat-coloured hair and large, beautiful hazel eyes. As he was stepping closer, she found out that the grass under him didn't crumple. Now he was only a few meters from her. Five. Four. He slowed down. Three. Two. One. Stop.

"Hello," started the strange man. "Are you okay? I've seen your struggles against the wind."

"Woah, yeah... I'm okay. Thank you for asking," answered the girl awkwardly. "It was a really strange wind, you know? It started so unexpectedly. You may have noticed the weather was really nice, and then, all of a sudden, it just started blowing. And it didn't let me go home! You could say it forced me to come here!"

"I agree that it looked like that a bit. Maybe the wind liked you so much that he didn't want you to leave?" asked the man raising his, a bit darker than his hair, eyebrow.

She just nodded shyly. Suddenly the girl looked at the man more thoroughly: “Maybe I am being rude, but who are you? And how did you appear on this meadow so suddenly?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, miss; not so fast,” the man smiled. “You didn’t notice me because of your struggles with the wind. And I am just a lonely travelling man who has lost his way, his horse, and all of his things...” And, truly, he didn’t have anything with him.

“Do you even have anywhere to go?” the girl asked curiously, as you might understand, because if he had lost everything AND his way, he may not have known where he was. And if he didn’t know that, maybe he was in need of some help.

“No,” the man answered calmly, “but you don’t have to worry. I am used to sleeping under the sky. The weather is nice, so I don’t have to be afraid that I will freeze.”

“What about the wind? You never know if it will start blowing again at the worst moment.”

“I don’t think that the wind will cause me any discomfort. Nevertheless, thank you for asking.”

All of a sudden, she heard a bell ringing in the chapel. “Is it noon already? I must be back home!” she panicked. “It was nice meeting you, but I have to hurry! Bye!”

“Have a nice day. Hope to see you again!” shouted the man when the girl ran over the meadow to the village.

Later that day, in the evening, she sat in the garden next to her house, and started thinking about that strange man.

*How did he appear on the meadow? He said that he was travelling and lost all his goods. How? Was he robbed? If he had been ambushed, he would have looked at least a little dirty. But he was completely clean... He hadn’t even asked for food! He was acting very suspicious! So it’s decided. I can’t go check on him*

*now, but tomorrow, right when the sun rises, I'm going to check up on him!*

And she did. She woke up early, prepared some food (in case he hadn't found any), and went to the meadow.

The moment she came there she didn't see anybody, she walked to the forest and the man still wasn't there. When she started to think that he might've got lost in the forest she felt a strong wind blowing from the forest. The wind was as strong as it was the day before! And it pushed her away from the forest. Her hair started to beat against her face making it impossible for her to see. But as unexpectedly as it started, it grew still. And when she finally got her tangled hair away from her face, she saw the man coming from the forest.

"Hello! I wanted to see if you were okay! I didn't even ask you yesterday if you had any food, so I've got some with me now! Would you like some?" the girl asked a bit awkwardly.

"Thank you. It was very nice of you to think about me, but won't you get in trouble leaving this early from your house to help a stranger and not being home for breakfast?" asked the man caringly.

"No, no. Thanks for asking. I do this every day."

"You help strangers every day?" the man looked at her a bit shocked.

"No, no! I come here, on the meadow, every day to pick some flowers for decorations!" the girl started excusing herself. "It's not like there are usually strangers I speak to..."

"Okay. I understand. Don't be so nervous because of it," the man laughed.

As he was smiling at her, the girl suddenly realised that he was really handsome. She couldn't really tell his age, but he was definitely older than her. She was only seventeen, but he could've been over twenty five? She didn't know. But, what she

did know was that he had a really charming smile, low, husky voice, and beautiful eyes. If you know teenage girls, that was enough to fall in love with somebody.

These two talked all morning. When the girl realised that she had to go home, and she still hadn't picked any flowers, the man helped her. When she was saying goodbye, the man asked if he'd see her the next day. They agreed to meet each other near the forest again. The next morning, she went to the meadow, and everything repeated. And that is what happened the next day and the next. This continued for almost the whole spring. Every time before the man appeared, she felt that strange wind, but after a few days, she stopped caring and noticing it. As they were spending time together, she got to know more about him. As you might imagine, they fell in love. And on the first day of summer, he asked her to become his wife. And what do you think she answered? Of course she said yes.

They agreed to meet up the next day to tell her family. When she arrived at the meadow, the man didn't come. She waited for the whole day, but he wasn't there. The same happened the next day. For a week the girl was checking the meadow, but he never appeared. Her parents had asked her many times about what was happening, but the only thing she answered was that the wind she was engaged to had flown away and she was waiting for him.

After a week of this behaviour, her father finally decided that she was acting like this, because she had nothing to do; the best decision was to find her a husband. Of course the best thing to do when you have a depressed teenage daughter in your house is to find her a man. After that decision, he forbade her to go to the meadow and ordered her to prepare for her wedding.

The first few days of preparations passed calmly, but suddenly, some strange things started happening. One day, the bell in the chapel started ringing and nobody could stop it the whole day. At the same moment the bell started ringing, the girl tried to run away from her house with the excuse that the wind came back. The next day, when the women were sitting outside sewing the wedding dress, the wind blew so strongly that the wo-

men let go of the dress, and it flew away. So, they had to start again and the wedding was postponed for a couple more days. Right till the wedding day, the wind had tried to damage everything that had something to do with the wedding. Unfortunately, it didn't make any difference. Finally, after so many days, the wedding was prepared.

The evening before, the girl's parents agreed that her mother would watch over the girl. During the whole night, her mother was watching her daughter and asking herself if this wedding was necessary. The girl was sleeping, and her mother was feeling her heart breaking. She knew that her daughter wouldn't be happy in this marriage.

Right before the sunrise, a silent, light breeze opened the window of the girl's room. The girl immediately woke up and looked at her mother.

"Mother?" called the girl.

"Yes my dear?" her mother asked. "Is there something you need? You have a few more hours to sleep. You should at least try. I understand that you are nervous; it's a big day, but I wouldn't like you to be tired and sleepy today."

"There's one thing I would like to ask you mom..." the girl started. "I know that I shouldn't leave home before the wedding starts, but I would like to make my bridal bouquet myself. I will return in less than an hour! Or, if it's a big problem, you can go with me."

"Dear, I know that there is something that has been haunting you for the last month, but you should know that after the wedding, all your issues will disappear. You'll be a woman, and you'll have other things to do instead of picking flowers. In a short time, you'll have children. You will understand that all your problems were just unimportant thoughts," the mother said, repeating the words her mother once said to her.

"Yeah, I understand," the girl answered, "and this is why I would like to go there and pick them one last time. Please!"

“You promise me to return?” her mother looked at her with a distrustful look.

“Right after I pick the flowers.”

“Then go,” her mother smiled at her, “and pick the most beautiful ones for your wedding!”

The girl turned to the door, willing to go through it.

“Hey! Don’t you think that’s a bad idea to use the door? I am sure your father is there, and he wouldn’t like to see you going somewhere right before your wedding,” her mom told her. “Maybe you should try the window?”

“Thank you, mom,” the girl said, hugging her mother tightly. “I love you.”

“Oh, my dear, don’t be like this. We are not saying goodbye. You are just going to pick some flowers.”

“Yeah, I am just going to pick some flowers,” the girl smiled a bit sadly. “I’ll be right back. Wait for me, mom.”

“Go, or your father will wake up, and please remember that I love you and that I want you to be happy.”

So the girl ran, jumped out of her window, and ran to the meadow. She didn’t turn back, but if she had, she would have seen her mother smiling at her and crying. She knew that she would never see her child again. She was her mother, and that’s what mothers do; they know. They know when their children are feeling down, and they know when they should let them leave.

The girl ran to the meadow, knowing that the wind had returned. She recognized that he tried to ruin the wedding, and that he opened her window. She stepped out onto the meadow, and the wind started blowing, but not from one direction; it was blowing from everywhere. After seconds, she felt his hands wrapped around her waist. The sun started rising, and she

heard the bell ringing in the chapel. It happened every time there was a wedding day. As soon as the sun rises to its full round golden chariot, the bell rings, so that everyone knows what is going on. And even though it was not the wedding the villagers were expecting, these two knew that the bell was ringing for them.

She kept her promise to her mom. She promised that she would return after she had picked flowers on the meadow and made the most beautiful bouquet. And she did. Many years after that day, she returned to the meadow to pick them, and took the bouquet to her mother's grave. She thanked her one last time for letting her go. Letting her be with the man she loved. Letting her be with the Wind.



# Scarborough Fair

## Letter

*"I am sorry for everything I said. I shouldn't have done that. I miss you, I'll do anything. Just, please, come back..."* "You miss me?! Are you kidding me?" I hissed as I read the letter I'd found on my table that morning. "First of all, you disrespected me in front of everyone, behaved like a complete arsehole, and now you want me to let it go?!" I tossed the letter back on the table. Let me explain; this was an apology from my significant other, who, during a very joyful night spent with his friends with a couple bottles of mead, had the audacity to boss me around. And after I told him to calm down, he laughed and told me that I had no right to destroy all the fun he was having and sent me home, where I "belong".

Right after I finished reading the letter, my younger sister Lyss ran into my room yelling, "Ailidh! The fair! Next week is the fair! At Scarborough! You must go!" Yeah, because I care about a huge gathering in the nearby town that everyone will attend like actually everyone, including him. "You ought to go there and make peace with Emrys! I still don't know why you broke up with him. You were such a nice couple! And you love him so much!"

"Stop. I don't want to listen to that. He made a mistake, and I don't want to hear about him!"

She sat on my bed. "Hey, what's that?" my sister pointed at the letter. "Is that from Emrys? Oh, that's so sweet! You should forgive him! He said he'd do anything!"

"But I don't want him to! There is nothing he can do to prove he is sorry," I said peremptorily, "or maybe... Lyss, didn't you want to go to Scarborough? He'll surely be there. If you think that getting back together with Emrys is the right thing for me to do, then you'll be happy to tell him what he can do to get me back."

“Really? Can I? And then you’ll be together again? I miss him,” my sister asked rapidly. “Sure! I’ll tell him anything you want! And what do you want him to do???”

“I am not sure, but you’ll find out the day you go there, as he said he’d do anything,” I smiled at my sister. “And I know he cannot lie,” I added to myself.

## **Cambric Shirt**

“Ailidh, are you sure you don’t want to go?” my sister asked me for the fourth time this morning.

“Yes I am, Lyss, but please don’t forget to tell him what I’ve asked for.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell him to make you a cambric shirt without any seams nor needlework. And only then will you consider even seeing him. Are you sure it’s a good idea? I don’t think it’s possible to do.”

“Well done! And, yes, there is only one person I know who is able to do something like this and it is Emrys. It won’t be a big problem for him.” After I said this, she just rolled her eyes and turned her back on me. “Good luck, and hope you get to buy something interesting! See you later!”

She was gone. I finally had time for myself and could calm down. Since I had found the letter on my bed a week ago, Lyss couldn’t leave me alone. All she talked about was the fair and how excited she was to see Emrys.

I was right. Everything was peaceful and quiet until she came back home. After that, she started reporting to me every single thing (!) she did and saw at the Fair – including her dialogue with Emrys.

“He seemed so unhappy without you, but he still asked how our family was doing! No, you just need to be a drama queen! Why can’t you just get over it?! He didn’t say or do anything bad!” Lyss exclaimed.

“It is a pride thing, and he should understand the consequences his words may create. Did you tell him what I asked you for?”

“Yeah. Surprisingly, he wasn’t upset about it, and he wanted to know how soon you needed it to be done.”

“And? What did you say?”

“As soon as possible?” my sister said nervously. “You didn’t tell me; it was the first thing that came to my mind.”

“It’s okay. You’ve done a great job, and I am happy that you did it for me – even though you see me as a drama queen.”

After that, she continued telling me about the Scarborough Fair.

The next day, I woke up early in the morning to prepare some stuff Lyss wanted to take on her trip to the fair. You can imagine my amazement when I saw a shirt laying on my desk. Just as I had requested, it had no visible seams nor needlework! It even smelled nice! I guess it was parsley? As I thought about it for a moment, he had always smelled like some kind of herbs. And I’d always loved this smell... But it didn’t matter now! He was wrong and I felt offended!

“Okay, if you’re going to be this way, I will too...” I took the shirt and poured out my morning tea on it.

When Lyss was ready to go to the Scarborough Fair for the second time, I gave her the shirt and said: “Tell him to wash it in a dry well, where no water sprung nor a drop of water fell. Only then...”

“You’ll talk to him again, understand? Bye! See you in the evening.” And she ran. My younger sister just interrupted me and ran. Where did I make a mistake in her education?

When she returned, the evening passed the same way as it did the day before, and we went to sleep. In the morning, I was already expecting to see the shirt on the table. He didn’t disap-

point me. It was there, clean, and even smelling of sage. I was sure he cleaned it the way I asked him to.

## **Acre of Land**

“No shirt today?” I could see the hope in my sister’s eyes.

“No, I’ve got something better!”

“Please, can’t you just say that you forgive him?”

“No, I can’t. I have two more ideas, so you can breathe. You are near the end of your suffering!”

“Yay... What is it today, Ailidh?” I felt so sorry for asking her again. She seemed so hopeless!

“Tell him to find me an acre of land between salt water and the sea strands. Tell him to promise he’ll do it. He has to promise. And phrase it in a way so that he will not be able to slither out of it. Remember, it’s important.”

“Okay. Bye.” And as she was going away, I heard her mutter: “Troublesome drama queen.”

When she returned in the evening, she didn’t want to talk to me. The only thing she told me was that he had promised.

No, I wasn’t expecting to find an acre of land right in my room, but I was quite curious. How would he make my wish come true? He always kept his promises. He had to; it was in his nature. But, I wasn’t sure he wouldn’t find a way not to do it. In the morning, I found a letter on the table.

*“Lyss told me that after the shirt machinations, you’d be prepared to see and talk to me. She also said that there was just one last thing left for me to do for you to forgive me. Let’s make a deal. Promise me that you’ll come back, and I will vow that I will never, ever, repeat that poor behaviour of mine and those words I told you. Please, you are the most important person in my life, I need you.”*

Deal! Of course he wanted to make a deal! Why wouldn't he! It was the way he always handled things. Why not bind a person with a deal? It makes the whole situation much easier for him. This way his cleverness could help him get out of it, but the other person was still tangled in the words of the bargain.

But, I remembered my poor sister asking him to do my stupid request – and felt so guilty – that I decided to write him a letter instead of asking her again.

*“Emrys, you aren't the only one who misses the way it was – the way we were. We both made a mistake, but only you are doing something to correct this situation. Still, I will not agree to a deal. I understand that Lyss is right, and I am just dramatizing it all, but you know this is the way I am. Here is your last task: Reap the acre with the sickle of leather and gather it all in a bunch of heather. Tomorrow morning I will come to the fair in Scarborough. Then, you'll be the true love of mine, but only if you have done what I asked of you.”*

“Lyss! Here you are. Today you don't have to embarrass yourself. Just give him my letter, please.” I smiled at my little sister.

She grinned back. Happy, she ran out of our house, and I didn't see her till the evening.

That night, I felt nervous and impatient. I wanted to see him so badly. I lay in bed thinking about my requests. I didn't need any of it, but I wanted to show him that it wasn't easy to earn my forgiveness. And when I would see him in the morning, I would tell him that he was forgiven, but I would remember. If that situation were to ever be repeated, I wouldn't let go so easily. After a few hours of overthinking, I finally fell asleep, but not for long. In the morning, I dressed myself in the cambric shirt he had made for me. I waited for Lyss, and we went together to Scarborough. There, we parted ways, and I went to the main town gate, where I finally saw him.

Oh gods! I hadn't even realised how much I had missed him! For the first few seconds, I just stared. At him standing there waiting for me with a bouquet in his arms. Our eyes met and

I saw him smile, a smile a little bit wicked, but as I knew, still loving. I ran right into his arms.

“Guess I am forgiven now?” he asked.

“Only if you’ve done what I’d asked for! And even though you are forgiven, you should know that I won’t forget easily.” I looked him right in the eye: “And may I ask you to let me see my acre of land?”

“Come with me, and I’ll show you.” He took my hand.

“I hope it wasn’t that simple of a task?”

“No, it was quite complicated. In the mortal realm, there aren’t many places like that. But if you don’t mind living in the lands of magic folk, then I think it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“You know I have no problem with it. I’ve always wanted to get to know your homeland.”

He finally gave me the bouquet. It was a collection of my favourite herbs. Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. After that he led me out of town in the direction of the sea coast. Although it was August, the wind from the Northern Sea wasn’t exactly warm. The closer we got to the coast, the stronger the wind appeared. Just as we almost stood in the water, Emrys asked me to close my eyes. Suddenly, the cold northern wind changed into a warm summer breeze. I opened my eyes and looked in awe at the splendid land in front of me. As I was taking in the scenery, Emrys took both of my hands into his and looked into my eyes.

“Ailidh, I am sorry for everything I’d said. I had no right to tell you all of that. And you had never done anything deserving such ill treatment. I missed you, and I don’t want to ever be without you again. Will you promise me to be right by my side whatever it takes?” he paused. “And I will promise that while we both wish it, I’ll give you that which is mine to give. I will not command you, for you are a free person. I shall serve you in those ways you require. I shall not slander you as I did. I shall

be your shield and have your back. For, I love you and will never do anything to hurt you.”

“Yeah.” Tears of happiness ran down my face. “I promise. I promise that I will be by your side from this day until my last day. And I will cherish and honour you through this life and into the next. I will try not to jump to conclusions. If any problem occurs, I will talk it through with you and not run away as I did. For, I love you and I don’t ever want to be without you again.”

He did it. He made me promise something to a fae. But did I regret it? Absolutely not. This was the promise I was willing to keep for the rest of my life.

# A Magical Tragedy

Once upon a time, far in the north, there was a hidden kingdom. It was a place far away, where the sky met the sea, and miracles happened every day.

It was a place so beautiful that it was nearly impossible to find the right words to describe it. Many foreign travelers got enchanted by its neverending woods covered in snow, crystal clear frozen rivers, and animals or plants who were often wiser than most humans. Everything there had its own voice.

However, whoever got lost in there, never found their way back.

It was a cruel world full of magic, traps, and betrayal, but also love.

And somewhere hidden in the depths of the snowy woods, there lived a powerful witch named Hiraeth. All alone, she spent her days inside of her little hut, mixing potions which could bring euphoria, misery, or even death to anyone who only slightly touched them with their lips.

People came to her with their struggles, hoping she could put an end to their sorrow. And she did. But for payment, she always took one of their happy memories of her choice. When they left, she would carefully put the memory, a spark of their life, in a glass bulb and put it on the shelf, next to others.

When she felt alone, she silently, as if someone could see her, took all of them down and watched the things the people had experienced. Their mortal lives were so ridiculously short compared to hers. Deep down, however, she wished that she could be one of them.

She wished that she didn't have to hide from the world. She knew what happened to people like her. They would drown in a river, which was frozen most of the time of the year; they would freeze to death in the woods, which they had known better than anyone else. They would get torn up by the wild animals, who understood them better than they understood the fool-

ish humans. Each one of these things was supposed to be an accident. She didn't think so. If she learned something in her long life, horrible things didn't always happen to the ones who deserved them.

And then one day, she did something that changed her life.

She felt so desperate in her own loneliness that she decided to take a risk and create someone for herself who could be a friend to her. She thought that she was skilled enough.

She didn't care about the appearance of her companion, but she took her time with all the other things that were important to her, such as patience, kindness, or independence.

It was a long, difficult process, and she was absolutely exhausted by the end of the day. After hours of hard work and focus, she opened her eyes, hoping that everything turned out just how she had imagined. What she saw was...

A stag. The most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

It was at least seven feet tall, and its soft fur was lighter than the fresh snow outside the window. But, what enchanted Hiraeth the most were its eyes. A single look in them, and she knew that she would never see things the same. It was pure innocence; something so fragile that she was scared that a single bad step could make it shatter into pieces that she wouldn't be able to put back together.

She never found out where she had made the mistake, but she didn't regret it once. She named him Serendipity, which means "finding something good without looking for it," because that's literally how it was.

Every day, Serendipity ran around the frosty plains discovering the beauty of the world. But, Hiraeth was worried about the world's cruel side that she knew too well. She knew the prince and his hunters were around during this time of year, and she would never forgive herself if something happened to her beloved Serendipity.

“Don’t worry, Hiraeth,” he said.

“Every time a hunter approaches me and wants to kill me, I always say: “Don’t kill me. If you let me live and show me mercy, I’ll grant you one wish on your last day.”

People were superstitious and they believed that by killing an animal that was able to talk, they would bring bad luck into their family for eternity.

But even though Hiraeth knew all of that, she never trusted people, so she decided to take things into her own hands.

At the time, a wealthy dynasty ruled the kingdom. The King and the Queen were both fair and wise. They always wanted the best for their people. Their only son, prince Theodore, was the exact opposite, self-centred, arrogant, and cruel.

“He will be the death of this kingdom,” even the forest animals whispered.

And then he met Ethereal.

Ethereal came from a poor family, and she worked very hard every day. Life wasn’t merciful to her, but she never complained. Unlike others, she always tried to see the best in people.

One night, while she was on her way home, an unexpected snow storm formed. She tried to resist, but the storm was stronger, and she quickly subdued and lost all energy to fight. She tried screaming but no one heard her.

She almost gave up, when she saw a light in the dark. It was the prince and his servants, returning back from a hunt. They immediately turned their horses and cantered towards her.

They took her to the palace, freezing cold and soaking wet, and let her sleep in a warm bed.

When she woke up the next morning, confused and exhausted, the first thing she saw was the prince himself.

The prince was fascinated by Ethereal. She sure was beautiful, but the thing that caught his eye was how kind and caring she was, so fragile, so easily influenced...

They started meeting more and more often. He showed her the glamorous Crystalline palace and stunning frozen statues in the winter garden (little did she know these were once people who disobeyed his ancestors, and this was their punishment). He walked her home after the sun set and the wolves came out of their hideaway. She told him about her big family, and he sent them warm clothes and food so her little brothers and sisters didn't have to starve. Her parents started hoping for marriage.

He knew how to win her heart.

Rumours spread fast at the court, and soon the entire kingdom knew about the prince's new interest.

Maybe he had changed and deserved a second chance. Because he was accompanied by such a lovely girl, they wondered, and they weren't so sceptical towards him anymore. This was his intention, after all.

One day, he decided to take the horses out and go for a ride. And of course, he took her with him.

It was a beautiful day. The sun illuminated the icy slopes, and hundreds and hundreds of trees covered in snow surrounded them. He was the one who talked the most; about his achievements, goals and duties. She was a great listener and didn't mind any of that.

They were just heading to the treacherous, but breathtaking cliffs, when he heard a slight noise. He had the hearing of a hunter. He stopped and listened carefully. He turned around and saw that a white stag ran out from the forest.

Ethereal softly gasped in astonishment. She had never seen anything so graceful before.

“Look, Theo,” she whispered. “Look how beautiful he looks.”

“I see,” he replied, while pulling out his bow and arrow, which he always had with him. “Now, watch me kill it.”

“No!” she cried, absolutely shocked.

“You can’t do that, please. Theo, you can’t take a life of something so pure! Please, listen to me!”

But he didn’t listen. He never cared about her nor what she thought, and he was too proud to let such a high-valued prize go. Everyone would consider him a master if he came back with its precious antlers.

He spurred the horse and followed the terrified animal to the edge of the cliffs as it tried to escape.

His arrow didn’t miss the target; his aim was perfect. Serendipity didn’t even have time to speak and save himself. He shrieked in pain as his legs weakened, and he fell down on the freezing ground.

But, the second a drop of his red blood fell on the snow, Hiraeth’s curse came true.

Theodore’s horse suddenly neighed loudly and stamped. Before he could have even realized what was happening, he was falling down from the cliffs into the deathly, freezing ocean.

When he emerged from the water, he was no longer a prince.

Ethereal first saw the enormous tail filled with thorns sharper than a dagger, then the rest of the serpent’s alabaster body.

He turned into the monster he had always been.

A quiet sob left Ethereal's mouth as she fell to her knees. It was too late.

Theodore's arrows were filled with deadly poison. She saw Serendipity's body lying in the snow. Hiraeth's cries of pain could be heard miles and miles away.

Despite everything Theodore did to her, she couldn't help but fall in love. She was so blind, she didn't see any of the lies he told her. She was such a fool thinking that she could change him, but she still tried so hard. As always, she tried to see the light in him when no one else could. Too late, she realized it wasn't always for the good.

She knew she couldn't go back home or to the palace. No one would believe her if she told the truth. She would be called a witch and killed for treason. It would have fatal consequences to her family and she couldn't let that happen.

"If love is a sin, then I'm a sinner for loving him," she whispered. The ocean wept as it took her into its open arms.

Horrible things didn't always happen to the ones who deserved them.

To this day, many sailors claim to have seen an enormous monster or that they've heard an enchanting voice that belonged to a young woman while cruising the ocean. Little do they know that they've been honoured to meet the cursed prince Theodore, forced to haunt the waters for eternity for his prowess and cruelty, and heard young Ethereal wailing for her first love and her wasted life.

# Topaz Wish

“Are you dressed, Lucy?” my mom asked me when it was time to leave.

“I am. I just can’t find my black bow. Have you seen it?”

“It’s probably in the attic in our jewellery box.” I sighed and went upstairs to find it.

Today is the funeral of Arthur Clark, who was our neighbor. Everybody just loved him. He was an older man, living on his own. You could often spot him working in his garden or walking around our neighborhood. He was kind to everyone, making us laugh and giving us advice. He was like a grandpa to our whole village. Unfortunately, he went missing last week and was found frozen to death three days later in a nearby forest. Arthur was the last person who deserved to die so tragically. We all cried for hours when we found out.

As my mom said, the bow was on the table next to our family jewellery. We had all kinds of rings, necklaces and earrings that we had inherited from grandparents and other previous generations. It became our tradition. Some of them were very strange looking, but most were beautiful with diamonds and gemstones. One golden necklace with topaz especially caught my attention. I put it on and smiled slightly. It reminded me of Arthur; he also had ocean blue eyes. “I wish you were still here, Mr. Clark. I wish I could see your happy, wise eyes just once more,” I sighed.

When I said it, suddenly everything around me started to blur and spin. When it all stopped, I realized that I was not in my attic anymore. I was in front of Arthur’s house. It was not even morning. In fact, it was a very cold, snowy evening. Did I fall on my head? What was happening? I looked at my watch. It was the 13th January, 7 p.m. The day before he went missing. No, no, no! It should definitely have been the morning of the 21st January, and I was supposed to be at Arthur’s funeral. This was all wrong. I started to panic. The last thing that I remembered

was trying on that pretty necklace and thinking about him. And now, here I am, right next to his house and a week before.

*If this was the day before he went missing. Then, he has to be still alive!* I thought while looking into his windows, trying to get a glimpse of him. But the lights were off. I heard his front door open, and then I saw him. Alive. I had never been so grateful.

“Oh dear, what are you doing here. It is so late! You must be freezing! Would you like to come in?” he asked politely.

“Uhm... uh... yes, sure. Thank you very much.”

He offered me a cup of tea and asked me what I was doing there.

“I am just on a walk. I didn’t have anything else to do.” I said the first thing that came to my mind.

“You shouldn’t be out alone at times like this. I was just going out to the forest, where I had forgotten my backpack this afternoon. I didn’t want anyone to steal it.”

“Oh no! Please, don’t go. You were right, it is quite late. I am pretty sure that it will still be there tomorrow.” I tried to convince him because who knows what could have happened. Well, maybe I did. We talked for about half an hour and then I, still confused and shocked from all these strange things happening, said that I needed to go home. I also said that we would see each other later. However, I was not so sure about that.

*What even happened today?* I asked myself while I was heading home. Did I really vanish from my attic into the past? As soon as I laid on my bed, I fell fast asleep with a heavy head.

When I woke up the next morning, I looked at the clock. It was 8 a.m., 21st January. Wow, that was a very strange dream. Today was the day of Arthur’s funeral. When I went downstairs, I asked my mom what time we were leaving.

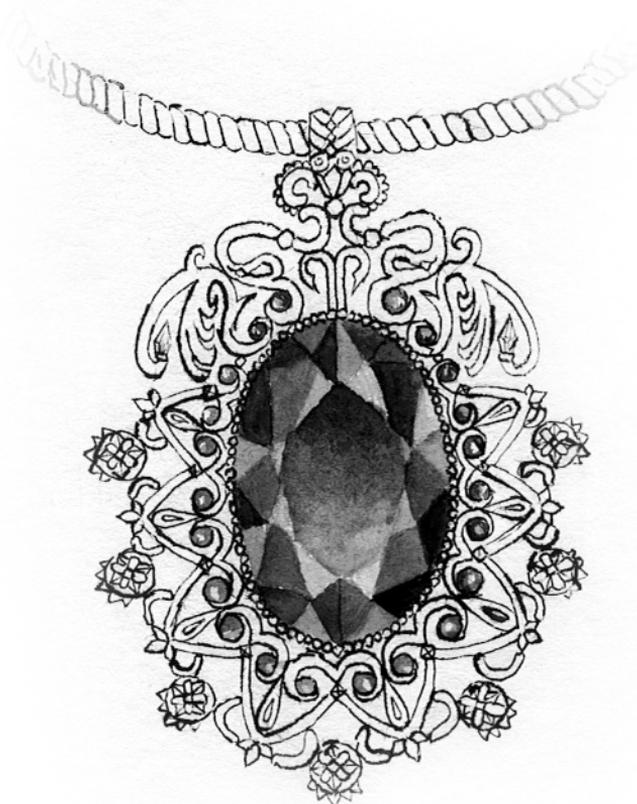
“What are you talking about, Lucy?”

“Arthur Clark’s funeral. Did you forget?”

“I don’t understand. Did you have some kind of a bad dream?” she asked, confused.

“Oh, I probably did. Yes.”

But then when I looked into my mirror and saw a golden chain around my neck, I asked myself *was this all really just a dream?*



# **A Woman that Saved the Queen**

Once upon a time, somewhere in a small village, there was a little girl. She was small with long, blonde hair and green eyes. She lived with her big farming family, with her father and five brothers. As much as she loved her family, she wasn't happy. She had always wanted to be a boy.

One day, she decided to run away from home and become a knight. She found a prominent fencing school and enrolled. She pretended to be a boy and was accepted. She was training very hard every day and became one of the best fencers at the school. For two years nobody realized that she was a girl.

On one sunny Sunday, she was in a tavern with her friends, when her brother came in and recognized her. The revelation caused great havoc. "The impostor", they called her. They wanted to kick her out of the school, but she was the best. After long hours of discussion, they decided that as punishment she had to fight in a war.

What might have been a punishment for some became a great chance for her. She came to be the greatest and most feared warrior in the army. One day, she was in the middle of a battle when she saw a small girl. She knew that she was meant to help her. She fought her way to the poor, scared little thing, notwithstanding the wounds that she suffered, and escorted the girl to safety. Then, a few moments later, she died on the battlefield. That rescued little girl was the king's daughter.

# Timeless

Our story begins on a very rainy Sunday afternoon. I was sitting behind the desk in my room and watching the raindrops trickling down the window. I took a sip of my favourite chamomile tea and sighed. It was just another gloomy day in England. I was home alone and had nothing to do. I took another sip of tea and opened my math textbook. I had to do the homework someday...

I was in the middle of the first exercise, when I heard loud rumbling. You see, that's one of the many unpleasant things about living in a house built in the early Victorian era. There is always something broken and *everything's* old. The doors and floor creak, and there are all the strange noises that one hears in the middle of the night when it's windy or when there's a storm... I was quite used to that, because I had already been living there for almost fifteen years at the time, but this was different. This was coming from the attic.

*Well, there's no way I'm going there,* I thought to myself. Don't be mistaken; I don't get scared that easily, but our family has been living in this house for ages, and I didn't know a single soul who has ever gone up there. The only thing I knew is that it had to be filled with mice, rats, lots of spiders, and other uninvited guests. And I'm not even talking about the dust and dirt.

But, the rumbling was getting louder and louder, and I had to do something. So, I took a deep breath, grabbed my torch, and went upstairs. I stopped in front of the door. I could hear the noise even more clearly, and it wasn't anything nice at all. I had to be brave.

As soon as I opened the door, I immediately shook with cold. It felt like it was freezing in there, and, as I soon realized, for some unknown reason (which has remained a secret to me till today), the window was open. I ran to the window, used all the strength I had, and, after a few unsuccessful attempts, managed to close it.

Wow. Now, with the window closed and me being much less scared and paranoid, I finally got to take a look around. It wasn't dark yet, so I didn't even need to use my torch. The first thing that came to my mind was: *I've never seen such a mess.* There was... everything. Anything you can think of, it was there, I bet. From clothes, books, toys, and maps to pieces of furniture. And all of it looked extremely old. Almost... unreal. Like if it were as old as the house itself. But that's impossible, of course. Nothing could have lasted for so long, and I bet my ancestors actually used this place...

I was just about to leave, since my problem was solved and I needed to get back to work, when something really caught my eye. It was a huge book covered in dust, just as everything else, but it was open. And I never say "no" to an open book. I *love* to read. I kneeled down so that I could take a closer look, then I carefully picked it up from the ground and started reading. It seemed to take place a long time ago, based on how it was written. We don't use such words in literature anymore: *thereof, herein, gloaming, kith...*

And that's when it happened. I was excited, and I wanted to read more; but as soon as I flipped the page, everything went dark.

I remember opening my eyes and being confused. *What just happened?* I asked myself. I slowly stood up, because I somehow ended up laying on the ground. Then, I realized that I was still in our attic. I could tell because of the window. The only thing that had changed was that it didn't look old or dirty at all. It was all clean and it looked more like a really nice drawing room.

*There were two options: I was dreaming, or I'd gone mad. Nothing in between was possible or making any sense.* These were my first impressions. I pinched myself a few times until I came to the realization that it couldn't just be a dream, although I knew that it couldn't be real either. I was curious: curious if the rest of the house was also like this and curious to see what else had changed. So, I opened the door and decided to go downstairs.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Our house, now old and not very stylish, was absolutely *beautiful*. There were big windows with colourful curtains, long silk carpets, walls nearly covered in stunning paintings, and a library bigger than my entire bedroom.

After I'd explored the bedrooms, I decided to move on to the ground floor. But when I walked down the stairs, I completely froze in surprise. Instead of our living room and kitchen, there was only a massive hall with the biggest chandelier I'd ever seen. And there were people. By that, I don't mean a few family members who stopped by for a little talk. There were at least fifty women dressed in the most gorgeous ball gowns I'd ever seen and just as many gentlemen in their elegant robes. Everybody was dancing. I could see a small band playing in the background. There was a pianist and, most importantly, many people playing bowed instruments. It was wonderful; I couldn't take my eyes off that picture. Then I realized... I was standing there, in the middle of the stairs, wearing my favourite sweat-pants and a Mickey Mouse t-shirt, my hair tied in a questionable bun. That was probably not how people used to come to balls in the Victorian era. Based on the dresses and everything I saw, I was pretty sure that these were the times when our house was a recently-built masterpiece.

I quickly hid behind the corner and the second I turned around, a charming man and a woman in a breathtaking red dress stepped on the stairs. They were exactly where I was standing a few seconds ago. They seemed to be deep in conversation, so there wasn't any chance of them noticing me. *Lucky me*, that was close.

As much as I didn't want to, I knew that I had to go. It wasn't safe for me to sneak around like this. I didn't even want to imagine what would have happened if somebody had seen me. That would have been a disaster. So, I quickly checked if anyone was watching and, without turning around, I ran straight back to where I came from in the first place. The book was open on the exact same page where I'd left it, so I flipped it and before I could even process what was happening, I was back in our old attic. It wasn't only still raining, there was a massive storm outside, and the house was shaking in its foundations.

I couldn't sleep that night; I kept thinking about what I'd just experienced. I knew that I couldn't tell anyone. They wouldn't believe me, that's for sure, and they would probably even want me to see a doctor. To be honest, though, if anyone had told me that the same thing that had just happened to me had happened to them, I would have probably considered them lunatics too. But, I also knew one thing – I had to try that again. And, this time, I wouldn't be only watching; I would experience it.

I planned out everything. My parents were supposed to leave town for the entire weekend on November 18. That was three weeks from my first trip, and I knew that if I wanted to go there again, I had to start preparing.

I looked up everything about the Victorian era. From the political situation, literature, culture, and art to fashion. I read books; I watched videos. I had actually become an expert. I had to be prepared just in case someone started to ask questions. If someone wanted to talk to me?!? *I'd like to talk to someone who lived 150 years ago!* I thought. Also, it seemed like a very interesting topic to me – and a fun way of learning. And of course, I learnt to dance...

Unfortunately, I had a problem. A quite serious one. I didn't have a dress.

I'd never been conceited or spoiled, but, from the moment I saw all those dresses, I couldn't stop thinking about wearing one myself. Unfortunately, I knew that I couldn't just order one online! I searched for some on the internet in the depths of despair, and they were *hideous*. Nothing like what I saw that night. Also, how would I explain it to my parents? That wasn't going anywhere.

It was Friday, November 17, one day before it was supposed to happen, and I felt miserable; I still didn't have a dress. I was laying on my bed, reconsidering all of my life choices, when the idea hit me like a train.

I quietly sneaked out to the attic. *Of course*, there was an enormous wardrobe. I had noticed it before, because it was just so big, but I had never considered the option that it could be filled with the clothes that I needed. *Do you even listen to yourself? Do you see how silly you sound round now?* I thought.

Well, I was hoping that there might be some clothes in there, but I definitely didn't think so big. Finding the perfect dress seemed like the simplest thing now – surrounded by tens of dresses any colour you could think of.

In the end, I decided to go for dark blue. It wasn't very bold, but I didn't really want to stand out. I also picked some jewellery, did my hair and was ready to go. I opened the book, just like the last time and...

It was even more magical than the last time – I thought that wasn't even possible.

I met and talked to many interesting people. They were amazed by the fact that I mentioned political figures in our conversations, considering that I was a woman. I was, in their words, very knowledgeable. And of course, I *danced*.

But, it was getting late and I decided that it was the right time to leave. For a moment, I just stood in the middle of the glamorous hall and observed everything. It really felt like a dream. But when I turned around to continue on my journey to the stairs, I accidentally bumped into someone. I immediately wanted to apologize, but when I saw her face, I wasn't able to say a word. She looked just like me, only a few years older. She seemed to be just as shocked as me, because, for a minute, we just stared at each other in surprise. And then... I understood who I'd just met.

This had to be my great-great-great-great-grandmother! She and her husband were the owners of the house and the ones organizing the ball! Of course, I couldn't say that out loud, so I just smiled, apologized, and then disappeared into the crowd.

I have never forgotten that night. Not only had I experienced a real ball in the Victorian era and time-travelled, but I also met one of my ancestors. And that made me realize that I'm not so alone in this world, as I may sometimes feel. This reassurance came from the fact that I have my family, who will always stand by my side. In addition, there were people before me, who would surely do the same for me. And, as crazy as it sounds, I had a magical, 150-year-old book in my attic!

Even 10 years from then, every time I would visit my parents in my previous home, I would go to the attic. It is no longer dirty or full of dust. I cleaned everything after my second trip, so that it was that beautiful place I saw again. I just sit there and go through everything it has to offer. I never time-travelled again after that night. I just felt like maybe it wouldn't be so special anymore if I knew that I can go there anytime that I want to. So, I kept this secret, which was only mine, in my heart.

It's strange to realize that none of this would have happened if I hadn't decided to face my fears on one ordinary, gloomy Sunday afternoon, when the rain was pouring, and I was sitting in my room, not knowing what was hiding in the attic of my own home.



## Epilogue

“...and just as strange as that magical discovery was, it’s strange to realize that I would have probably never found this file if it hadn’t been for the three of you,” Mr. Carter said as he closed the yellow file and looked the three teenagers in the eye. “I would have most likely forgotten about it and it would have stayed in that dusty bookshelf forever.”

“Thank you, Nancy, Alan and Oliver, for making this rainy winter afternoon a rather magical one. I would like to thank you for not only helping me out in the library, but especially for finding this hidden treasure of mine. As I read those stories, I reminisced about the old days and about the times when those tales were written. Back in the day, things surely weren’t easy for anyone, but we came out of them stronger and I would say much more humble. I thought of my students, who I taught all I knew and who never stopped surprising me with their unique ideas. Maybe I could try to contact them and we could all meet up, like a reunion of writers and dreamers. I’m curious to hear about where life has led them. And of course, we would talk about their long-lost, but now fortunately found stories... after all, they’re timeless, aren’t they?”



# Contents

Prologue .....	4
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	
<b>Post-apocalyptic Stories</b>	
Brevity is the Soul of Wit .....	10
<i>Eliška Horáková</i> <i>Illustration: Ondřej Pekárek</i>	
Just Another Ordinary Story .....	14
<i>Anna Barcuchová</i> <i>Illustration: Dagmar Chalupová</i>	
I Will Show You the Sun .....	18
<i>Eva Maléřová</i>	
Diary of a Dead Man.....	20
<i>Ondřej Folta</i>	
<b>Fables</b>	
The Black Swan .....	22
<i>Anna Barcuchová</i> <i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>	
A Matter of Wish.....	24
<i>Kristýna Drmelová</i>	
Not One Paw Back!.....	25
<i>Ondřej Pekárek</i> <i>Illustration: Ondřej Pekárek</i>	
About a Fox and a Garden.....	27
<i>Michal Bruzek</i> <i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>	
The Story of Invertia.....	30
<i>Kateřina Dudová</i>	
Let Loose .....	31
<i>Ondřej Pekárek</i>	
<b>Life Stories</b>	
It's in the Stars.....	33
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	
Blue Sky .....	38
<i>Eva Maléřová</i> <i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>	
Long-Lost Friend.....	41
<i>Anonym</i>	
The Unlucky Guy from Paris .....	43
<i>Ema Albertová</i> <i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>	
14th March 2030 .....	51
<i>Eliška Látalová</i>	
<b>Inspired by Fairytales</b>	
The Princess Doesn't Get Married in This One.....	55
<i>Anna Barcuchová</i> <i>Illustration: Nikola Klegová</i>	
The World is Cruel to the Young Girls .....	58
<i>Alisa Bebko</i> <i>Illustration: Nikola Klegová</i>	

Evanescent .....	60
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	
A Never Aging Boy .....	65
<i>Alisa Bebko</i>	<i>Illustration: Nikola Klegová</i>
Therapy Session .....	68
<i>Valentýna Kouřanová</i>	<i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>
The Story of an Unhappy Dwarf .....	71
<i>Ondřej Folta</i>	
<b>Horror Stories</b>	
No One .....	73
<i>Adam Racek</i>	<i>Illustration: Dagmar Chalupová</i>
The Treachery of Images .....	74
<i>Ondřej Pekárek</i>	<i>Illustration: Ondřej Pekárek</i>
The Doctor .....	78
<i>Petr Fráňa</i>	
Always Check Under Your Bed .....	81
<i>Adam Racek</i>	
An Unwanted Gift .....	82
<i>Tereza Havlíková</i>	<i>Illustration: Dagmar Chalupová</i>
<b>Romantic Fantasies</b>	
Bittersweet Memories .....	86
<i>Eva Maléřová</i>	
Heaven is a Place on Earth .....	89
<i>Anna Barcuchová</i>	
It's Tangled .....	92
<i>Eva Maléřová</i>	
The Girl Who Was Engaged to the Wind .....	96
<i>Alisa Bebko</i>	<i>Illustration: Magdaléna Bednarčíková</i>
Scarborough Fair .....	104
<i>Alisa Bebko</i>	
A Magical Tragedy .....	111
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	
Topaz Wish .....	117
<i>Karolína Tylová</i>	<i>Illustration: Eva Bajerková</i>
A Woman that Saved the Queen .....	120
<i>Ondřej Folta</i>	
Timeless .....	121
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	<i>Illustration: Magdaléna Bednarčíková</i>
Epilogue .....	128
<i>Daniela Pacltová</i>	

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