

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Jazykový kvet 2022

Competition entries

By GPdC Students

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Kvinta

Time to decide

by Zoja Mlynáriková

In ancient times, when gods often descended from Mount Olympus and taught the mankind what is right and wrong, lived a kind and fair, but very indecisive girl called Savia. She had many suitors, but whenever the young man showed interest in her, she took over the pros and cons of marrying him until he gave up and found another girl. Her hesitancy affected also other areas of her life and as her years slowly increased, confidence did not grow, on the contrary, it was more fragile than ever before.

One fateful night, Savia had a strange dream. A two-faced woman, one face young and beautiful and other old and wrinkled stood in a corner of a room and gazed at a maiden. The young woman was standing by a book with blank pages, writing something into them. Savia woke up more confused than ever before.

“You should go to Delphi. The oracle will surely tell you the meaning behind the dream,” suggested her mother. Savia was a little doubtful at first, but decided to do as her mother said and set out to find the oracle. She had been wandering for almost the entire day, and when she spotted the gleaming lights of Delphi in the distance, the sky went grey, thunder echoed from every direction and heavy rain didn't let her see the road ahead of her. Cold and drenched, she tried looking for the right way, but she just furthered herself away from it more and more.

Just as she lost all her hope, she noticed a small hut with a figure inside. She ran up to it, but couldn't decide whether to knock or not.

“Well, come on in, Savia!” a compassionate voice called from inside. The door suddenly opened and in front of her stood an elderly woman. She greeted Savia and gestured her to enter the hut. The old woman offered her bread wrapped a fur coat around her shoulders so she could warm up. Even though the lass was grateful, she kept on wondering how did the old woman know her name.

"I know everything about you," the woman said suddenly, startling Savia. "I also know that you are on a journey to Delphi to understand your dream" she grinned, sitting down on a chair. "You won't get the answers in Delphi, you have to figure out the answers yourself. But if you want, I can give you clues," the woman stated slowly. That piqued Savia's interest.

"You can't open them all at once. Only when you're in trouble shall you open one and the help will give you an answer on how to overcome suffering. Have a lucky hand to open them, because if you choose the wrong order of the clues, it can affect your whole life!"

Savia thanked her for the rolled-up hints and as soon as the weather improved and she dried up, she set out on her way home. At home, she talked about the storm that had caught her on the way, but kept quiet about the old woman and her hints. She hid them carefully so that no one could find them.

A few days after returning to Savia's city, a traveler visited. Even though the man was well-built and had a noble face, his clothes were dirty and bloody, his body was beaten and he limped because of a big rotten wound on his leg. In a fever, he begged people for a place to sleep and some food and water, but the citizens of the city avoided him because of his unflattering appearance. When he dropped out right in front of Savia's house, she didn't think for a minute despite her indecisiveness and she took over the half-dead wanderer. However, it took longer to heal his numerous wounds, especially the one on his leg. Despite the fact that she cared for him for so long, the young man did not say much, only with gratitude and love in his eyes he watched the work of his rescuer. An even greater surprise awaited Savia when he asked her for her hand in marriage on the day of his complete recovery.

Although S avia herself fell in love with him, doubts arose again. "Will I love him? Isn't he a convict or a runaway? What kind of life would await me with him?" she told herself. At that time, however, she remembered the old woman and her clues, which were supposed to show her the way to the right decision.

"Choose the right one, otherwise it will affect your whole life!" She reminded herself.

Savia closed her eyes, chose one hint and opened it with trembling hands. She whispered the content of it to herself: "Sometimes the smallest decisions are the ones that can change your life the most."

"I chose the right one, because my little decision to take care of this poor man had a big impact - I saved his life. Now he wants to marry me and significantly change my life," she realized.

“Yes, I will marry you, but under the condition that you tell me your name, where you come from, and how you got into the condition in which I found you,” she said.

And so, Janis told her his life story and that he was the son of King Alexandros the Great of Alexandria, who had been murdered and thrown out of the throne by his half-brother Thannas. The cause of the discord was that Alexandros did not intend to kill his son Janis despite a bad prophecy. It said that one day Janis would bring destruction to the city of Alexandria. Therefore, his uncle took justice into his own hands and killed his brother and wounded his nephew so that he would not have a chance to survive without help. Savia found badly injured Janis and decided to help him.

The wedding was beautiful and Savia was sure that she had made the right decision because of the answer. For the next few years, Savia and Janis lived with their new children in peace and love. However, a peaceful life changed when they heard about more and more people escaping the city of Alexandria as King Thannas ruled unjustly and cruelly.

“My dear wife, my hometown is devoured by the enemy, but not from the outside, but from the inside,” Janis said, “please, tell me what should I do?”

Savia began to question the situation again: “Should I let my husband go and risk him not coming back, or I should forbid him to go to Alexandria? Although I would save his life, he had to live with his remorse that he had betrayed his city until his death.”

Suddenly, she recalled the clues. She still has two left. Finding a remorse place, she opened the clue while praying. It said: “When it comes to deciding, sometimes there's not a correct or incorrect decision, but the worst you can do is doing nothing at all.”

“Janis, my love, follow your heart and I will follow you!” Savia said.

And so, Janis and her beloved Savia and their children went to Alexandria. When they arrived after a few days of travel, they were very surprised at the condition of the city and its inhabitants. The famous Alexandria lost its magnificence, houses and palaces were dilapidated, people scrawny, unhealthy and sad. Janis saw his acquaintances, friends and loved ones in them, and they recognized Janis in the wanderer. They told him about the tyranny of Thannas, who executed or expelled from the city anyone who expressed little remorse over the death of Alexandros and the expulsion of Janis, spending money on entertainment and big banquets until he completely plundered the city treasury.

Janis swore to himself that he had saved the city and immediately went to see his father's murderer. His faithful and wise wife followed him. But what was their surprise when, instead of a strong warrior, they found an old and weak man. Thannas did not recognize his nephew in the first minute, but after a short time he recognized his brother's features on his face and shuddered.

“Janis, my nephew, not me, but the prophecy and the gods have stood against you! I had to follow their wishes, otherwise I would have made them angry!” Thannas defended. As he finished the last word, the sky darkened and under the sound of thunder and lightning in the center of the palace, an old woman who had advised Savia in the past appeared.

“Thannas, you made us angry anyway. The first time when you killed your brother and seriously injured your nephew, another time when you said these words that we should be responsible for your actions!” the old woman snapped at him.

“And what do you know, old hag?” barked Thannas at her.

Suddenly, the old woman turned into a young and beautiful woman, same one that formed the second face of the woman Savia saw in her dream in her youth. It was the goddess Athena. She turned to face everyone in the room and spoke: “Savia, you have one hint left, though it is not a hint, rather a question. Anyone who answers it correctly will become the leader of Alexandria.”

Savia opened it and read it out loud.

“Who writes the book of your life?”

Thannas was quick to answer. “You, the gods almighty!” he shouted in a chance to appeal to the gods.

Savia remembered the dream she had long years ago. She finally saw the face of the girl and the pieces were startling to fall together.

“Each of us writes his own book of life!” She said humbly. “The gods can only help us find our way, but all of us are responsible for our own actions. They should not be the result of prophecies or fabrications. Look, the prophecy said that Janis was carrying the city to ruin, and instead Thannas brought it. Besides, it's clear to me now that no matter how I open the clues, it wouldn't matter, because I had decided before I read them.”

“You understood your lesson, Saria. I believe you and your husband shall rightfully and wisely rule and bring Alexandria to bloom again!” rejoiced Athena.

And as she said, so it happened. Savia and Janis ruled long and justly. And what happened to Thannas? He understood that the decisions and actions of the two were wise, and therefore blessed by the Gods. He retreated to solitude, found his peace in prayer, and died a few years later.

On Death and Salvation

by Andrea Žlnayová

It came on that bright and sunny day, when a family living of death was celebrating life.

“God damn it!” uncle exclaimed with a dramatic gesture as he was taking another piece of cake from his brother’s hands. “My liver isn’t going to get better if you keep stuffing me with sweets!” My father only chuckled as he mockingly replied to his remark: “My, my! Well old man, isn’t it a good time to own a funeral home!” Laughter rang across the table. “Don’t bury me just yet! I am still very much young and full of life,” he put his hands on his hips and looked at everyone with a smug expression on his face. Laughter was heard once again. There was a faint sound of a ringtone heard in the background. “You? Young? With that back of yours? Please!” my mom joined the bickering while she was looking around for the source of ringing. “Don’t drag my back into this!” he glared at her. She proceeded to ignore it looking at the phone screen as she walked away from the table ready to take care of the call.

Celebration continued with dad picking on his brother resulting in a playful fight between the two. I looked down at my plate with a half-eaten birthday cake and smiled. I am glad I have them. Everyone. And I am more than thankful for them. They are the only people that I’ve ever seen treat everyone equally and fairly. My mom likes to say: “Death treats everyone equally and so we have to as well,” which is quite fitting for her profession. And they have my respect for that. They deserve much better.

Quiet footsteps announced the arrival of my mom. She walked slowly, deep in thought. Her face serious.

“Who was it?” asked dad with puzzled expression.

“It was the caretaker.”

“What does she want again?!” uncle slammed his hand on the table.

“It’s about *mother*,” she exhaled, “she passed away.”

It became ghostly quiet. The tension surrounding us was as thick as fog on a hazy day.

The ceiling of my room looked different than on other days. I lied in my bed observing it. I noticed a cobweb in the corner with a small spider. The heavy rain was banging on the window

in my room as if it was madly trying to find its way in. But failing miserably only to try again and again each time with a greater force. With no use.

I thought of grandmother and her sudden passing. I couldn't believe it. It all seemed like a dream. She was gone but her presence still lingered in the air. Her words still echoed in my head. An unsettling feeling rose in my stomach. I took a few deep breaths and rolled onto the side. Trying to make it go away.

A memory of my grandmother towering over me after I twisted my ankle appeared. She wore a mocking expression. Another one. Grandmother shoving a scrap of paper with some prices to my dad's hands. "This is what you and your brother owe me for raising you," Another memory. My mom telling me how that woman once tried to overhear me. I closed my eyes shut. And another one. Mom arguing with her. Sound of breaking glass. Her wicked laughter. I covered my ears in hope to make the noise disappear.

"She's gone now," I whispered, "all of this is over..." Even though it was all over, part of me couldn't believe it. It seemed surreal. A salvation all of a sudden? After her death, memories of her still live on. Anger took over me. She won't leave us even when her body is cold as ice and tongue always dripping with poison sealed! My eyes wandered to the ceiling again. "I won't rest until she's six feet under."

'The funeral should be in couple of days,' I thought. My parents and uncle are rushing the preparations. I wondered whether they mourned her death. Did they feel any grief? But why would anyone in the right mind feel kind of sorrow towards a person like *her*. Death is an inevitable part of our lives. Everyone encounters it at some point. People fear death. For it only takes everything in its way. Having no mercy over anyone. Perhaps that is why they say everyone is equal in the eyes of death. There is no escape from it and everyone encounters it at some point of their life. That's why we are so frightened of death. At that moment, I saw death as a saviour. Freeing us all from the grasp of that woman. Therefore, I didn't feel any guilt for not mourning her death. That woman never did anything to deserve my grief. She didn't deserve a proper funeral. Nor she deserved a single tear.

I listened to the now calmer sound of rain outside. It was no longer the fierce downpour, rather a soft shower. As if the rain realised there was no point in trying to break inside, gave up and moved on. It was soothing. Sound of rain falling fused into a melody. Hitting my ears as quiet whispers of sweet nothings. I closed my eyes and gave into sleep.

Her body lied in a coffin. She was dressed in her best black dress, her hands crossed over her chest holding a flower. Eyes closed with lips formed in a thin line, she looked peaceful. I have never seen her like this. The whole scene made her look somewhat kinder than she has really been. As if all her cruelties were washed away. Yet, this *being* still had the face of the woman I despised so much. She looked very much alive, just sleeping. I waited for the moment her eyes would snap open, her lips twisting into a sickening grin. Chills went down my spine. The thought of her waking up was horrifying. I turned to my mom standing next to me. She wore a cold expression.

“You did a great job,” I said to her.

“Oh, really? Thank you.”

“Of course, you and uncle are exceptional embalmers.”

“I am glad you think so. Although I think we quite rushed the whole process this time,” she once again glanced at the person in the coffin, her eye twitching.

I walked away from the coffin. I was in need of fresh air and couldn't stand looking at *her* any longer. Outside, people were waiting. Her friends. I was surprised she had any in the first place. Some of them came to me, squeezing my hand and saying: “I am sorry for your loss.” Others went on talking about how wonderful of a person she was. How she helped them in need. It made me sick. ‘Nonsense! They are lying,’ I thought. I couldn't envision that Fury ever being kind to anyone. ‘Or perhaps she was a monster only to us,’ a voice in my head said. That thought made me even more disgusted. I leaned back against a wall. Soon after, my dad joined me. He stopped next to me and took out cigarettes and a lighter. He let out an exhausted sigh.

“Was she really nice to all these people?” I asked.

“Probably yes,” he lit his cigarette.

“Then,” I paused, “why us? Why was she well... the way she was with us? With you, mom, uncle and me. We haven't done anything wrong!”

“If I have to be completely honest with you, I don't know. Sometimes it makes me wonder if we really did something to make her hate us so much,” he looked at the ground, “but

it doesn't matter. She's gone now. And that's a relief," he rose his head and gazed into the far distance.

After the funeral, when I once again reunited with my family, everything felt at peace. Warm rays of sunlight were falling on my face and gentle wind grazed my skin. This time, death and salvation came to us hand in hand.

What Ocean Takes Away

by Barbora Matyášková

The ancestors of the New Zealanders believed in ocean. Their minds were seeking assurance and knowledge from the cycle that ocean with its dear friend moon provided. This eternal, irrepressible source of pulsing energy carried life; with each outflow the death gently carried her new-made friends to the safety beyond the stormy, raging waters. The tides were signs of the new beginnings, the signs of reborn. Accepting this circle of life was a matter of course; at least till the moment when ocean took someone I cared about away.

It has been two weeks, fourteen days since I heard the news. Eight days since I saw Alycia's face at the funeral for the last time. She didn't look like her anymore. Her gorgeous curly hair lost its significant look and her dark brown skin got much lighter than it was few months ago. Body was motionless lying in the wooden coffin. I didn't understand why, she never wanted to end up buried in the earth. She wished her eternal rest to be in the ocean, so the death could make her passage easier and she could find peace once again. She never realized that the only person in peace will be her and not the people she left behind. The moment she didn't open her eyes made me understand everything. She was gone.

People are acting nicely when you lose someone; they think that kindness is the key to you getting better. Hugs and praises for how strong you are, are flowing through your ears-in and out. However, the only solution is mourning and mourning takes time. The minutes become hours and the hours become days filled with the same routine. Filled with the only legacy she left behind. Her beloved spot.

The waves were gently craving to the shore, tenderly stroking pebbles that got in their way. I spent days at this bay even before her death, always sitting on the shore and waiting for Alycia to come out of the turquoise water. Her face sparkling with happiness and her body covered in seawater truly shone under the sun. She was never scared of the deep water and secrets which were hidden in it. I was the exact opposite and yet I still spend every sunny day here-sitting on the beach. She always knew how to show empathy through her eyes, they were giving me daily silent acceptances of my fear, reassuring me about normality of being afraid. I remember those luminous moments of lying by the sea, quietly observing neon blue sky threaded with silver. We haven't always talked, there were hours filled with the only speech of cicadas and ocean around us. That was all we needed.

Losing the person who filled your heart with memories and suddenly became one is hardest, you are trying to remember his face, smile, eyes, voice and words to keep at least some parts of him with you forever, to fill the hole that is now empty. I remember her last words.

“Do you remember how we met? Alycia asked.

“Who wouldn’t” I sadly laughed with the memory that suddenly arrived.

“I met you at the cemetery, right after the funerals,” she continued undisturbed by my sentence,” You were standing over your dad’s grave looking to the distance. I felt that your eyes were dry but your heart was crying. There was such a strong emotion radiating from you that I couldn’t drag my eyes away....”

“Stop it,” I laughed with embarrassment.

“Shhhhh, don’t interrupt me.” She smirked and carried on, “My own sadness was gone in the moment I saw you and the hole was once again filled with yours. You were the most unexpected surprise that life brought to my journey at the most unexpected times. And yet you became one of my favorite parts of living. Being able to see your healing process was the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced. The days went by and you started to smile once again, I comprehended that you will be alright,” she finished and looked at me.

“I don’t know what to say,” I chuckled not knowingly the true meaning behind this speech.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she whispered and quickly stood up.

“See you tomorrow, love you,” Alycia turned around and hurriedly walked away.

“I love you too,” I whispered as her bike drove away.

That was it. The next morning, I woke up to being blocked by her. The only note she left behind was a voice message with “you will be alright”. She simply left. The house and places that she used to stay at were suddenly empty. My heart ended up the same. She was gone and I didn’t know the reason of her leave. I have been trying to call her for weeks and then I stopped. I was tired of everything.

And now I am here 7 months later. I am once again sitting at place she fell for. Fully aware of what happened. “She did it for me,” I thought. She didn’t leave me she left for me.

Alycia suffered from cancer. Her body has been betraying her for months and I didn't know. I wasn't there. She didn't call me to tell me how she truly was, she chose this path to protect me from even more suffering because she knew what happened earlier. Everything clicked now.

Alycia was like an ocean, great person with deep and large soul. She let me discover only a few percent of her, her shallows which were the most beautiful and peaceful places that I could ever dream of. Her depths stayed hidden before me. And I will never know why. Maybe it was because of her fear of losing me or hurting me even more. She tried to be as shallow as the sea to not scare me. Even though, the most beautiful things come right from the inside.

I stood up and slowly started walk to line where water and earth meet. I didn't care about my fear anymore. Step by step, I let the cold water hug my body. I felt her. I felt her by the ocean, her hand proudly stroking mine. Alycia was the person that saved my life without me knowing, she taught me how to live and laugh again. She made me realize that people are like the ocean. They come and go, but they leave behind shells and it is only up to you to pick them.

Trip to hell

by Korenélia Čačíková

It is not okay, I am going to be late. If I just cross the road right now, maybe the cars will stop. Or not.

The lights of the vehicle blind me and I feel a painful hit. I close my eyes. The next thing I know is that I am lying on the ground and bleeding in several places. Everything is fuzzy and unclear, except for the pain. My whole body is aching, especially my lungs and my head. The pain is vibrating through everything and it is unstoppable. I start coughing up blood. Actually, I am choking on it.

Even through all that I start to shiver and it is not because of the pain now. Pain is eating me from the outside, but fear is the thing that is consuming me inside. It is making me shake and it is taking over my mind. I am panicking, I can't even think straight. I am in a shock. And as the trembling, choking, aching, little me is trying to stay in one piece, I come to question. Am I dying?

The beeping, coming especially from my left ear is starting to get quieter and everything is getting darker.

What? I am seeing myself rapidly bleeding out. It is like I am another person staring down at myself. But the guy who sprinted out of his car doesn't seem to notice me. Can he only see the body, or my corpse?

No! no, no. It can't be. He is kneeling, swearing, trying to wake me up, checking me.... I am right here! As I see him in distress getting his phone out of his pocket and phoning the ambulance, I am slowly disappearing.

I am somewhere in a ... Tunnel? Maybe. I don't know. Suddenly all of my memories start to flash before me. It is almost as if I am reliving my life, but in the speed of light. It is like a movie going very fast and yet I can feel every emotion I felt back then.

And I am making the same mistakes as I did back then. Mistakes that I can't change. I can't change anything. I want to redo it, but somehow, I know that it is too late.

I want to start crying but I can't. I am not physical. I cannot cry, I cannot touch anything. I am just a bunch of emotions, that are still somehow tied together. As my life movie is ending and I see myself dying again, my sole existence starts to wonder: What now?

Then somehow, I am being dragged out of the "tunnel". As I stop being drawn out, I begin to feel very angry, or sad, no idea. And it is not stopping, actually it is getting worse. I feel furious, cross, sad and every other miserable emotion.

I want to scream it all out, but I can't. I am slowly suffering in silence, bottling it up. Technically, I am choking on my own emotions. As I suffer through all of these unbearable emotions, my mind produces one single thought. Am I in hell?

All the rage starts to double and I can't handle it anymore. It feels like I've been here for eternity. I don't know how long it has been since my death. Suddenly I start to feel better. The enormous pain is fading and the same force that dragged me here is dragging me out.

I take a deep breath. I can breathe! I am no longer a non-physical thing, I am a human: breathing and alive. I open my eyes and I see a doctor and 3 nurses arguing. I am in hospital.

The doctor notices that I am awake and with a relieved smile, he comes near my bed. "Phew, I thought we lost you there." He says. I can hear him. Only a small "huh" comes out of me. He continues: "You know, we thought, you went to the other side." And I reply: "Oh, I just came back."

Friday, 12th December 2021

by Lucia Strechayová

I woke up in the usual setting of my room. It was still dark outside and I couldn't tell what time it was. After checking my phone and finding out it was just half past four, I let out a tired groan. I still had an hour before I had to wake up and start my day. I've been waking up in the middle of the night a lot these past few weeks. It ruined my day long before it even started. But what was done was done and I tried not to let it bother me anymore. I turned on the lamp standing on my nightstand and picked up the book lying on the side of my bed in hopes of tiring myself out by reading. It wasn't very interesting to me, but my friend Ella recommended it to me. Soon enough the letters started dancing on the page and my eyelids were becoming heavier and heavier. I didn't even know how but I was sinking back into sleep once again. It wasn't long before my alarm went off. I noticed that I had forgotten to turn off the lamp. "Greta Thunberg wouldn't be proud of me.", ran through my head and I started chuckling at my own joke. Then I did my usual morning routine and headed out to the bus stop. The bus was surprisingly on time and I got on. There were only a few empty seats left and I picked a mid-aged woman with short brown hair to sit next to. After I quietly and quickly muttered the phrase "Is this seat taken?", she shook her head and I sat down beside her. Every day I struggle not to fall asleep on that bus. A bunch of kids got on in at one of the small villages' bus stop. They were extremely loud that morning. I didn't know if it was yesterday's snow or the fact that it was Friday (thank God), but it seemed they wouldn't let me, or anyone else have a peaceful moment. After thirty minutes we arrived at the bus stop, where I usually get off. I breathed in some fresh air and immediately felt better. I usually get really sick on public transport, but thankfully today was not the case. I stepped into a grocery store to buy myself some breakfast. My go-to croissants were sold out, so I grabbed a chocolate bar. I know neither of those are a healthy option, but what can a poor student like me do in these trying times? I took a brisk walk to my school. Oh no. I wanted to do my homework on the bus, but honestly, looking out the window was more fascinating and I forgot all about my school responsibilities. I had thirteen minutes before the first period started and I used every single second. It wasn't too hard but very time-consuming. Ella – my best friend, wasn't here yet and I started worrying she might not come at all. I texted her but she wasn't even active so I didn't have much hope. Another day spent scrolling through Instagram and later eating lunch alone. Can't wait! The bell rang and our teacher walked in. "Let's test your knowledge today, shall we?" An unexpected test. Great. Chemistry was definitely not one of my strengths and I winged the whole test. Suddenly the door burst open and in she walked. My best friend. It's not like I am a complete loner and have no friends, it is just that I would get over them exiting my life but not her. I don't really believe in soulmates but

if they were real, she would be mine. She said she fell asleep and quickly apologised. Not surprising at all. She sat down next to me and gave me a smile. We sat through the four remaining classes rather effortlessly except for a little scolding from one of our teachers for talking in class. She escorted me to the train station and waited for my train to leave. We laughed the whole way there. At one point I thought of telling her how much she means to me, but we had never been that affectionate with each other. And it would be awkward to say that mid-conversation so I didn't. I just hope she knows how important she is to me. I am who I am because of her. She helped me fight my every battle and I am forever grateful for her.

My eyes filled with tears once again and I had to take a break. I finally worked up the courage to read this last entry in Alex's diary – our last day together. We were supposed to meet up the next day. Her dad was driving her to my place but they got into a car accident. He is still fighting in the hospital but she didn't make it. My Achilles' heel. My best friend. I will never see her again. These thoughts felt as if someone was stabbing me. Everywhere I look, everything I do reminds me of her. The support from my friends and family is what keeps me going at the moment. It's impossible to wake up in the morning. I don't know what to do...

Troublesome Homework

by Norbert Pavlíček

A young teen sits down behind a massive wooden table. He is seated in a big brown leather chair barely having his feet on the ground. There are tall windows all the way to the ceiling on one side and on another a globe reminiscent of the imperialistic ones. In front of him were two vintage armchairs and an oriental rug underneath. Above his head with generic short hair were displayed two military medals. Behind it is the national military burial flag.

What a chore. Write your ideal daily routine. So stupid. How long does it have to be? Papers everywhere almost spilling ink in the process. 150 words! What? I will be here until midnight. After a lot of spinning around and looking out the windows even though it was raining. He swiftly straightened from his slouched pose. I will just bullshit my way out of it. How could I forget, rules are made to be broken? He picked up a black and gold pen. Slightly dipping in it to ink. And started to bullshit his way out once again. If I have to read it out loud it will be embarrassing. I don't want to explain everything especially if half of it is made up.

At 10 am I wake up to the 7 girls fighting over who gets my attention first. Then I go to look in the mirror just to see a 6'1 ripped man with blonde curly hair and a big beard. After looking at what he wrote he stood up. He took the first step almost losing his balance. With an unease on his face almost like he saw dead corpses. After much walking around the office, he came back to the table. Taking the paper, crumbling it and burning it in the fireplace while trying to not set on fire the decorative logs wrapped in the spider webs.

He finally sat down but the boy was all of the sudden very tense. He dipped the pen to ink close to the way he did it all the years back when his dad was teaching him how to write. Once again, the pen started moving. My ideal daily routine consists of not waking up for as long as possible because the longer I am awake, the more I can think why am I? What am I doing? Who am I? What's the point? Is there even a point to it all? He started to write way less. The frequency of the pen died out while the mind raced on. The eyes started to close, the pen was dropped. Chest stopped being in such a hurry.

It stopped raining. It was rainy the whole month. Deep in the night, the boy all exhausted took a break. He brought back biscuits and an empty glass. With a spark in his eyes and within one breath he wrote it all. Although what he wrote was resembling an essay more than anything else. It was divided into two parts, the before and after. He revealed one of his core memories of his childhood. It was a hike. A mixture of yellow and red all around us. As the gentle breeze

brought down more and more leaves to the already colourful carpet beneath. My dad showed me how to triangulate so I will never be lost. This is the last sentence in the first half.

On the 29th the November at 10:29 pm my father was killed in action. 11 hours later my other parent died when two soldiers in parade uniform knocked on our door. What remained of my mother hugged me however the thing I could feel was her bleeding soul. The next day I still didn't realise it. After that, I became really lost even though I was promised I will never be lost again. The teacher liked it although she couldn't give it a good grade. The reason for this was that he didn't follow the orders that were given to him.

A few tomorrows in the past

by Juraj Dzurech

It is year 1944 and WWII is culminating. Adolf Hitler started to realize that Axis of power are closer and closer to defeat every day. Nazi soldiers lost major battle queues and Allies are reaching Berlin. At this moment, desperate Hitler resorted to occultism. He established AAHRO, Aryan archaeological heritage research office and sent archaeological teams all over the world to find and examine ancient relicts and ancient technologies in hope to reverse the circulation of war. He sent archaeological team Omega to examine a little German burial site on the shore of Danube. Head of the expedition is 41year old archaeologist Leoni Scherman, but everyone knew him as Troy. He was from wealthy family and he certainly didn't blend with the crowd. He was a skinny man with big glasses and tiny moustache. If you have looked to his eyes, you would see pride, but also modesty. He was very ambitious man, because he suffered from Napoleonic complex. He was a man of good manner and fascinated by history of his nation. When he and his team arrived, some armed men had been already waiting there and smoking cigarettes. "Why are you here? Who are you?" Leoni asked. A well-built man told him:" My name is Schwarz, on my left side is Blau, and on my right side is Levi, I captured him during occupation of France and we soon became friends. Führer also sent us to this stinky swamp to protect you from partisans. "Let's work team Omega," Troy said.

After a few exhausting days at work one of Scherman's colleagues found a stone crypt. Inside of the crypt was a skeleton with rusty sword. The sword was very interesting, because its massive and twisted blade made no sense, nobody could have ever used it in combat. Troy also noticed runes on the sword. " We, German tribes, we are presenting you a key to the history, just walk 166 steps to arteries of our civilization and put the key into the ground," this was Leoni's translation on runes. " Where are arteries of Germans?" asked R. Tecart, Leoni's best friend and archaeological enthusiast. " Of course it is Danube, we have to walk 166 steps to the Danube," Troy said. When they walked 166 steps, they approached a circle made of small rocks with mysterious symbols on them. "This has to be it," Troy said. Scherman then saw a hole in the ground. He realized that the sword isn't sword, but is in the key. "I think I have the key gentleman!" said proudly. He put the key to the hole. "What now, smartass?" said rude Schwarz. Then the symbols started glowing. Team had no idea what was going on. After a few seconds, black clouds overshadowed clear sky and lightning struck the key. Everyone was blinded for a second by the lightning and then they felt asleep. After a few hours of good sleep, the team woke up confused. They were still lying on the ground

surrounded by stones, but the trees were different. Troy suggested that they should look around. After a while Tecart found a field and from that field team could see a town. They walk up to the town and saw a sign Pressburg. “Finally, I’m hungry like wolf, let’s eat somewhere,” Schwarz said. When they were looking for restaurant, they noticed some weird things. The town looked very old, like typical town three centuries ago, but there was something even more disturbing, the town was empty. Team was walking in the city center, but the only thing they saw were barricaded doors and windows. Then, the bell tower started ringing. Then a huge cannonball flew through bell tower. Cannonballs were everywhere. Blau quickly lift a lid from the sewer and the team hid there while cannonballs were destroying Pressburg. The only things they heard was a voice of a little girl crying and falling houses. When they got out of the sewer, whole city was destroyed. Meanwhile Troy figured out where and more importantly when they are. Troy told his men that they are somehow stuck in year 1809, because in 1809 Napoleon destroyed Pressburg. However, he didn’t know, if there was any chance, they would return home. Their clothes smelt horribly, so they went to clean them on the shore of Danube. Schwarz couldn’t stand the pressure no more and started swearing loudly. French soldiers heard him and started shooting from the other side of Danube. The armed men also started to fire on the French with their newer and quicker weapons. The soldiers ran away, but Blau was injured during shootout. Then they saw much bigger army coming. There was one man, who looked more important than others. It was Napoleon Bonaparte himself! Team had to flee or his man would have killed them. He was looking at them via binoculars and seemed very interested in their guns. Team run away to a nearby forest. Napoleon’s soldiers were looking for them all they long, luckily for team, they found a cave, where they hide and had a view of beautiful lake under the cliff.

Tecart had to put the bullet out of Blau’s leg. He didn’t have any equipment available so he pulls out two coins from pocket and used them as tweezers. He successfully pulls out the bullet. He’s really proud and also relieved. They are hiding in the cave for a few days, because they still hear horses galloping and something in French. Napoleon didn’t give up so easily. When they were on verge of death, Levi told them that he is going to get some food. A few minutes after he left the cave, a horseman found him and brought him to the Napoleon. However, Levi was delighted. He promised to betrayal his friends. Napoleon let Levi live and he took the army to the woods. Team then heard Levi talk to someone, they realize what happen. However, Blau still wasn’t able to walk. Troy insisted on taking Blau with the, but Schwarz and Tecart took their guns and ran away. Schwarz called on Troy for the last time,

but Troy refused to go without Blau. He was calling Decart to help him carry Blau, but he and Schwarz didn't want to because army would have caught them faster." Don't worry Scherman, you did all you could to save me, just go with them," said Blau. "No, never!", said Scherman." Well, well, it looks like you don't give to old Blau no other option," said Blau. Blau pulled out his revolver and shot himself to the face. Then, the soldiers entered the cave and the only thing they saw was man covered up to the ears in blood." Surrender!", said soldier. Troy was devastated, he lost everything and everyone, so he decided to jump off the cliff. Luckily, he fell into the lake, swam to the shore, then started running, but after a few minutes, they caught him.

He woke up after a few days, this time, he was in town of Paris and trapped in iron cage. He looked around and saw two dead bodies, those of Decart and Schwarz. He was brought before the court to explain how to build their weapons. It was at this moment that he realized that he can change the future by killing Napoleon, so he refused to help them when Napoleon wasn't present. On the first meeting Napoleon declined his offer. This gave Troy opportunity to steal one of guns, while generals weren't paying attention. Then Troy spent 4 days in prison and still refuse to collaborate. On the fifth day Napoleon finally came. Napoleon arrived to the court, where the meeting took place. When he finally sat down, Troy aimed the gun on him, but he missed him completely. He shot glass ceiling instead, which then fell on the floor. Little pieces of glass hit Napoleon to the face and abdomen. Then something strange happened, floor started to crack and Sherman fell to the black void.

He created new time line, where Napoleon was critically injured and couldn't conquer Europe, France is slowly decomposing when after Napoleon's injury king Louis XVII takes the throne back. The Spanish and Prussia will take massive amounts of French land and after series of weak rulers France disappear. After uniting of Germany, Germans will waste they resources to suppress rebellions in France and won't focus on starting the WWI. Somehow, Scherman wakes up in court room in Paris. He is captured by allies and imprisoned for collaboration with Nazis. After a few years in prison, he returns home just to find out that his home was destroyed during the war. Leoni spent rest of his life looking for more relicts.

Sexta

Full of Life

by Natália Banasová

It's comfortable for people to sit still. It's a commonly mentioned ideal to be spontaneous, to pursue whatever you long for, the sooner, the better. But not a lot of people have the guts for that. And it's not a weakness, it's simple human nature. The ecosystem we create for ourselves, whether it makes us the happiest we could be or deprives us of hope, is inherently too comfortable for most people to disrupt. Here's the question for the man of the hour: is it worth it to you to stay?

Are you ever supposed to start to mind being on your own? Will there come a specific point in your life, a specific age when you are always happier being with someone? Or does it depend on the person? Maybe people who are fated to be alone are just programmed to function that way. Others are supposed to keep attracting people, nature herself makes sure they always have someone by their side. But what is one to do when they're not satisfied with the category they belong to? What if someone who repels people hates being on one's own? What's a lonely lone wolf to do? Is it easier to change your personality and make peace with yourself, with the everlasting quiet in your home, or to force yourself into social contact, to try and trap someone who didn't know better?

He was already 35 and had never been in a long-term relationship. He spent a couple of nights a week staring down ice cubes in an empty whiskey glass, sitting on a bar stool with leather as worn-out as this routine of his. Every day with no excitement, no adrenaline, no passion. All that was long gone, though it had been all he felt once. And how beautiful it was, to feel so much all at once. To find a stranger, exchange a few words and a few looks, blood boiling. With age, this algorithm had become less and less effective. Everyone his age eventually came to their senses and settled down and he was left swimming in these broad waters alone. So, week after week, he sat in that same dusty dimly-lit bar, waiting for no one in particular, but waiting for something, god knows what. He never learned to want more than the

physical and wasn't quite sure where to learn now. Everyone seemed so perfectly foreign, like they had life all figured out, and no one told him he should've, too.

"Try chatting to someone from work," suggested the usual bartender, wiping down a few margarita glasses. She'd been working there for as long as he'd been coming there. Over time, he had started confiding in her with everything that was heavy on his head, the one stable soul in his gray loneliness surrounded by chaos.

"Unprofessional! Never mind that I have a certain reputation. I could never put my finger on it, but everyone keeps somewhat of a polite distance from me. Like I'm broken, or fatally ill," he laughed bitterly. "Poor Greg, time's running out and he still hasn't settled down. Oh, pity the fool who doesn't own a house in the suburbs, a dog and a sensible sedan by the time he's thirty."

The bartender smirked, but gathered her face into a serious expression. "Really think about what you want. Why does it repel you? What has kept you from finding someone who'd last?" "That is the question," he said with a cynical look and emptied the rest of his glass. "I'm opposed to the thought of steadiness. Permanence. I think that's what, in turn, turns away everyone I try to be with. I don't want to settle. I'm terrified of falling into a routine and not being able to break out."

She sized him up. "Doesn't that sound familiar though?"

He just shrugged.

"You know, maybe we're all destined some kind of routine. Everyone keeps saying how short life is. That's nonsense. Life is too long. People just have regrets when it ends. We spend our lives looking for ways to spend time, to make the days go by comfortably. Nobody's capable of living every day to the fullest. Maybe we should stop demanding that from ourselves."

He sat in the words for only a brief moment, left a twenty on the faded counter and set out on his way home, as he had a thousand times before. He stepped into the street, not paying any mind to the crosswalk just a couple of meters down the street, as he had a thousand times before. He didn't see the taxi cutting through the stillness of the night-shrouded street. But somehow the driver noticed him, so they just exchanged some swear words and went about their ways. He had no way of knowing that if the taxi driver hadn't noticed him, the bartender would've run out when she heard the noise. She would've yelled at the driver to call an ambulance, she would've given him CPR until her arms tired out and would've prayed to the God she had condemned a long time ago, to keep him alive. It would've been her who would've realized how short life was and she would've cursed his hidden mischief that made him ignore the crosswalk, who would've been making pointless vows that if he had only one day more, she

would've told him everything she'd only been telling him in her head for years to his face, that he wasn't alone, that she longs to be with him, routine or no. But the taxi driver was careful, the man lived and the monotony remained unscathed. And she would never find out if the sharp pain would've been better than the dull.

II.A

Next stop, Wonderland

by Stella Krivičková

It was one of the last days of September 1904. The wind played with the leaves of the trees and the sun shone softly. Nice sunny day in London. In the parks, people were walking, children were playing and among these people, a girl was sitting on a bench. She was about sixteen. She had pale skin, big crystal blue eyes, and dirty blond hair that was down to her waist. Her slender figure was accentuated by a ribbon tied around her waist as a decoration to her dress. She sat motionless, immersed in a book. She was so captivated by it that she didn't even notice the time, and when the clock struck three, she quickly got up and ran across the park. She had to be careful not to accidentally knock someone to the ground. "I'm late, I'm late, I'm late," she repeated as she hurried across the streets of the city. She ran through the gate and along the path that led to a large house overgrown with ivy, with wooden windows and a chimney. "I'm home," she shouted as she opened the door. She walked down the hall to the kitchen, "Oh heaven, Amber, where have you been for so long!? I told you to be home at half past two." "I'm sorry, Aunt Agnes, I started reading the book and lost track of time." Amber said with a smile on her face and her head wandered back into the clouds as she remembered the book she had recently read. "Of course, you're just like Alice ... your mom... you're just like her. Not only do you look like her, but you also have the character after her." Aunt Agnes said nostalgically, then looked at Amber's dress, which was partly covered in mud and dirt after the run, and added in a slightly irritated tone, "And she never cared about her look either! Just look at what your dress looks like again. Go change into your room and then come here to eat." Amber went upstairs to the first floor and from it to an attic where her room was. It was much more spacious than it seemed. She had everything she needed there, including bookshelves. Amber changed her clothes, ate lunch, helped Aunt Agnes with the housework, and then returned to the room. She lay down on the bed which was between the bookshelves and a bedside table. As it was already dark outside, she lit a candle on the bedside table and pulled an old leather-covered book from the shelf. On the first page was written: "Diary of Alice's Kingsleigh." It belonged to Amber's mother, who

disappeared when she was 6 years old. She remembered that when she was little, her mother told her stories from her travels around the world which she had written in the diary. She always liked the story of a wonderful world full of wonders with white rabbits and tea parties. She told her how she and her friends had defeated the Queen of Hearts, and returned Wonderland it's natural harmony - or rather disharmony. She cherished that diary like the apple of her eye because it was the only thing she had after her mother. As she read, her eyes slowly closed until she finally fell asleep. In the morning, Amber woke up to the sun's rays shining into her eyes. She got out of bed, and the diary fell on the floor. Amber picked it up but the front cover of the book that had been broken before was now torn. With fear in her eyes she carefully inspecting the torn cover. She was surprised to find that it was actually a secret pocket. She carefully pulled out a piece of folded paper from it and opened it. On top of it was written "Map to Wonderland" in decorative lettering. She recognized an old abandoned mansion not far from London. Confused and with a head full of questions, she decided to go there and find out where the map really leads. She dressed quickly, picked up an apple for the trip, got on her bike and set off. All sorts of thoughts raced through her head, "Were those stories real? Does all this really exist? How is that even possible!?" When she got there, she parked her bike and pulled a map out of her pocket. She looked in the direction of the large garden of the abandoned mansion and opened the map. The instructions on it were clear, next to a large oak go left to the Rose Garden. She walked through it to a place on a small hill where an old withered tree was. According to the map, it was supposed to be here. But what was supposed to be here? No doors or any other entrances through which someone could theoretically get somewhere. Amber looked around but there wasn't much to look at. The only thing that was there was the tree. She looked at it carefully and emphatically, but nothing. Just an ordinary old tree. In the end, the idea prevailed in her that it was all made up, and the stories her mother told her were just made up stories for the children. She sighed and was on her way back when she tripped on one of the protruding roots of a tree. She covered her face with her hands so that she wouldn't hurt herself when she fell. She felt a slight impact but kept falling further and further. She opened her eyes and found herself falling down the hole "Of course! The entrance to Wonderland leads through the rabbit hole!" She was right, she was falling through an old rabbit hole, which was covered with leaves and tree roots, but they were already so dry that Amber broke them while falling. A huge smile appeared on her face. She didn't know if it was because her mother was telling the truth or because she had really found a way to Wonderland. It was exactly as she remembered from the stories. A huge and deep rabbit hole full of things like a vase of flowers, a wardrobe, a piano and a million other things. Amber was so astonished by all this that she didn't even realize she

was falling for too long. Suddenly only a big bang was heard, and Amber found herself in an unknown room. It was an old round room. In its center stood a table covered with a thin layer of dust. There were also six doors. The first was twice the size of an ordinary door. The other five doors were always slightly smaller than the previous ones. The latter barely reached Amber's knees. Slightly shaken by the fall, she ran toward them, trying to open each one of the doors. All were locked. She walked over to a table and found a key and a bottle with a "Drink me" sign on it. So far, she hadn't noticed the bottle with the strange liquid, just picked up the key and tried to see if it would fit in at least one of the doors. All in vain. It didn't fit in any of them. Amber didn't know what to do next, and then she remembered that she still had her mother's diary in the pocket. She quickly opened it and tried to find a solution to getting out of there. "Here it is." She read aloud from the diary. "I fell through a rabbit hole until I finally found myself in an unknown place with seven doors..." Amber suddenly felt confused. "Seven doors? But here are only six." She looked carefully at all the doors once more, and next to the last one was one more, even smaller door. It was so small that only a mouse could get through it. She tried to fit the key and it fit. The door opened. But she was too big to fit through. So she read on. "After eating the cake, I grow to a huge height, and after drinking the bottles, I shrink to an size of mouse so that I can go through the door." "Okay, I have a bottle, the door is open and now I'll just find a cake so I can turn back after I go through." She searched the table quickly and finally found it. A cake on which white frosting was written "Eat me". She put it in her pocket and drank the contents of the bottle. At that moment, she shrank to a size of a few centimeters. As she walked through the door, the bright sun blinded her. After a moment when her eyes got used to the bright sun, Amber couldn't believe where she was. It looked like a huge garden full of plants and animals with the strangest traits that only a child's imagination could perhaps assign to them. So many peculiarities. One weirder than the other. For example, Siamese cats connected by tails, violets playing the violins, flowers that changed colour according to their mood, and a pocket watch flying with a bird in the sky. With each step, this world seemed more and more curious. It was all one big nonsense that in some atypical way made sense. Everyone thought that the Princess of Hearts had an army and that these disappearances were part of her uprising against the current government. So, we sent a white rabbit to Alice in the hope that if she would defeat the Queen of Hearts she would defeat the Princess too. Together with her, the White Queen and the army we went to a chameleon forest where no plant has a permanent colour, because according to our information, the Princess of the Hearts should have a hideaway there. Unfortunately, they surrounded us in the forest and attacked us. We fought bravely but, in the end, we had to retreat. We later found out that the

queen and Alice had disappeared during the fight. Their bodies were found under a high rock two days later. "The king said regretfully, but his voice felt cold. Then he continued," Now to my second question. What do you want in Wonderland?" "I want to get out of here as soon as possible," Amber said, her voice breaking. "Not so fast. What would you say if you helped me avenge your mother? You are Kingsleigh. You are as smart and certainly physically fit as your mother. The expedition begins tomorrow morning" the king said, nodding at the guards to take her away. Amber came here by accident, she thought this was Wonderland, but instead she learned the overwhelming truth here, and she didn't even know how to get home. The next morning, the guards woke her up, gave her new clothes, and took her outside. The king and the horse riders were already waiting on the road in front of the gate. Getting to the forest was no problem, but it was harder to find your way around it. Half the army remained at the edge of the forest and the other half with the king and Amber had been walking up the forest for a good few hours. In it, a couple of soldiers with Amber caught in the net traps the others were attacked by a gang of hooded creatures and the king was forced to retreat. The soldiers and Amber were sprinkled with the sleeping dust and dragged into hideaway. When Amber woke up, she was tied to a chair in a room that looked like a large tree cavity. Opposite her sat a white-gray rabbit in a vest and a top hat on his head, arguing with a boy in green pants and a white shirt, and with an unusual hat. "What's going on here. I thought of all the prisoners we locked up." "But this is Alice's daughter." said the boy. "That's not possible if she was Alice's daughter so she wouldn't join the White King's side," the woman snorted. Amber hissed, "I didn't want to join anyone. I just wanted to get home, but I don't know how and the king refused to tell me unless I went to fight you. And I also need to find those who killed my mother." Amber shuddered at the last words, her eyes measuring the figures in the room. There was a moment of silence. Then the rabbit and the boy began to laugh and the women came closer to Amber and grabbed her by the shoulder. "We never hurt anyone. And not our own ally. The thing is she had joined us. She disappeared during one of the kings' attacks on us and we didn't see her anymore. And then when they found her, it was a terrible loss for all of us." "But the king told me that you are behind all these kidnappings." "But we won't kidnap anyone. The people of Wonderland will join us because they can no longer stand the tyranny of the White king. See for yourself. This is Hugo the Mad Hatter's son, and he was a friend of your mother's, and she trusted him. And the White Rabbit, he went for your mother, and was with her on her first visit to Wonderland," Hugo and the rabbit nodded, "so you don't have to believe me, believe them." she looked at them and then back at the woman. "I trust you. Could you please untie me now?" The rabbit jumped out of where he sat and untied the rope. "And how many of you are here? Who is leading

you?" "I lead them. My name is Carolina and I am the daughter of the Queen of Hearts." Amber did not resist hiding the surprise from her face. At that moment, Carolina opened a double door that led to a large room full of strange creatures. They huddled together, and on closer look, Amber saw that there were whole families. "These were opponents of the royal government, but fortunately they managed to escape in time. Unfortunately, many failed and fell into the king's captivity," Carolina paused and closed the door to the room. "Now we are waiting for the right moment to start the resistance." she barely finished the sentence and the room shuddered. "What's going on. Are earthquake common in Wonderland?" Amber said terrified. "No, it's not common at all." Caroline ran to the next door. She opened it and all four of them stood in the doorway. Amber realized that their hideaway was in a tree that stood on the edge of one of the meadows. On the other side, an army with a catapult which threw another boulder at the tree. Suddenly a voice said, "Give up voluntarily or we will attack!" "I have a feeling this is the right moment you've been waiting for." Carolina quickly mobilized everyone in the hideaway, and in five minutes two troops stood against each other. "Attack!" someone shouted and the troops rushed to each other. In the middle of the fight, Amber noticed that the king was running away. She ran after him. "Hey, stop!" she shouted. The king stopped on the rocky edge of the abyss. He turned and swung his sword at Amber. She quickly got out of the way and took her sword from holster. She had never held the sword in her hand so her movements were very clumsy. But it was enough to block the attacks. In a seizure of anger, the king noted mockingly, "This reminds me of something. Oh, I know that's exactly how she defended. I have to throw the queen off that rock, but your mom just had to fight back." But in the end, she succumbed. And now you will end up just like her!" That words stabbed Amber into her soul. Her eyes filled with tears. She gathered all the strength in her and swung her sword at the king. Although she didn't hit him, the king stumbled at the stone, lost balance and fell into the abyss. Amber took a deep breath and returned to the meadow where the resistance had just defeated the last soldiers. Joyful cries from winning team were heard all over the forest. Amber shouted "The king is dead, long live the queen!" "Long live the queen!" the crowd repeated. After that, they all returned freely to their homes, and Queen Carolina and her closest allies returned to the castle. As everyone celebrated, drank tea and opened bottles of wine, Caroline dragged Amber into the next room. "I would like to thank you personally for your help and loyalty to me and the whole Wonderland. I would like to give you, this magical drink that will take you home. But if you ever want to return, all you have to do is throw the contents of this ring at yourself, which will only open to your touch and its contents will never run out " and she gave her a bottle of liquid and a ring with a precious stone, the top of which could be opened. Amber

accepted the gifts with joy in her eyes and in the hope that she would not have to say goodbye to this place forever.

III.D

Talking to the ghost

by Pavlína Koláriková

I was sitting in my garden. It was a sunny day, and I could feel sunlight on my skin. The wind was blowing, and the birds were chirping. And there was me, swinging in my chair and drinking lemonade. On the table next to me was a book where I kept my poems. What a beautiful summer day. Maybe I will write about this later. I took another sip and leaned on, closed my eyes, and tried to enjoy this day.

But there it was. Sudden chill going down my spine, slowly growing stronger. It wasn't a nice day anymore. It could look like that, but the temperature suddenly dropped, and the wind started blowing and howling.

And I felt that stare again, but when I turned, nobody was there. Maybe it was just my imagination. Quick look around, but nothing.

And then somebody appeared in a chair right in front of me. It was a girl, slightly older than me. I jumped out of my chair. "Who are you?" I asked. "Oh, my name is Joana." she said carelessly, as if she just didn't appear out of thin air. She looked up at the sky and smiled. "What a lovely day, isn't it? Just like last year, of course, if you don..." "What are you doing in my garden?" "Oh, I just thought you would like to have company." I jumped out of my chair. "How did you get..." Suddenly I realized she was see-through. She put her hands on the armrests. "Okay, I admit. *I* wanted company. You are the only one who can see me."

Thousands of questions filled my head. "Are you a ghost?" She nodded. "Yes, and I have been watching you." Chills went down my spine. "Oh sorry, I didn't mean to sound creepy. I just... there is not much to do around here." "Why are you here?" She shrugged. "I just want to talk. What is this?" She pointed at the book. Still not completely understanding what just happened, I stuttered: "Oh, I, it's just... something I wrote. Nothing interesting." She looked over to the last poem I wrote. "It is very good. Have you ever thought about a writing career?" "Yes, but... you don't make that much money." She waved her hand. "It is what you like,

then you should go for it. " "Yes, but also my parents say it is a waste of time. " "No, no, no. You should go for it. I said I have been watching you and need to tell you you would be such a good writer. " That would explain the chills I have been getting lately. "I am not sure. There are plenty of people who are very good or better than me. " "Yes, but that is going to be always. Just think about it, okay? " Why did I hear the pain in her voice? "I will. Just why are you telling me this? " She was silent for a while, then looked into the distance and said: "Because if you don't do it, you could regret it and it would be too late. " And then she disappeared.

It took me a long time till I rose from that chair and went inside. After I closed the door, it started raining. The words Joana told me were stuck in my head.

The next day I went to the post office and brought my writing to publishers and haven't stopped writing since then.

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“What date is today?” I ask myself constantly because time passes differently during school breaks. Since 2020 the world has changed a lot. To be honest I have spent so much time at home that now I am not even sure what month it is. I am asleep during day and I am awake during most of the nights doing God knows what. I have no idea when the last time I saw my best friend was and I did not even notice that it was my birthday last week. The only thing I know is that I miss the old days when my biggest fear was dying and I enjoyed every single minute of my life. I do not care about most of the things I used to consider important a few years ago. My social anxiety got worse even though I have not been with people for about a month now. I got vaccinated because I wanted to live my life to the fullest. However, nothing goes according to my plans. I did not enjoy my summer because I was at work every day. I have not left my country in three years. I have not experienced any crazy adventure... Every day is the same and I hate it. I need to get some adrenaline into my veins because one more day and I am about to die from boredom.

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I was watching funny videos on my phone for four hours straight but nothing could make me smile. I just hoped that I would find some inspiration to live a more exciting life or at least an excuse why I have not left my bed in three days. I found it. One video came across my screen. It was about a boy from Italy cooking pasta. I love pasta and I should definitely make some but then it hit me, the best idea I have ever had. I could go to Italy. I am fully vaccinated and eighteen years old so I can travel alone. I earned a lot of money from my part time job but it does not have to be a two-week-long vacation. What about just one day or a night? I looked up today's date. It is 28th of December. That means I could celebrate New Year's Eve somewhere else than on my balcony with a sparkler in one hand and a glass of wine in another. Thanks to my FBI skills I found the guy's Instagram profile in 30 seconds. His name is Elmo. I laughed a little bit because the first thing that crossed my mind was the red Muppet character from the children's TV show. I looked the name up and it seems like there were a lot more guys named Elmo in Italy around a century ago. Anyway, I texted him about the dull life I am living and the idea I had come up with. Elmo answered in a few minutes. I was a little bit scared to open his message. What have I done? Did I just text to some random guy to spend New Year's Eve with me? What was I expecting? It was a pretty foolish thing to do! My anxiety got over me. I grabbed my pillow and screamed in it at the top of my lungs. I think my voice is limited by the

same four walls of a small flat I live in. For the last few years I was not using my voice a lot. I am not insecure about it or something like that but I just stopped meeting people and yet these days everyone uses social media to communicate. This is the reason why screaming is relaxing for me. I can get all of the unspoken words out. I was looking for the courage to open his message for a solid fifteen minutes. “Let’s do it! My life cannot be worse, only if you were a serial killer who will end my suffering. – ELMO,” I laughed. Oh my God! I LAUGHED! Is he the thing I was looking for? For the next two days we got to know each other a lot. Elmo makes money as photographer and through social media, he has one younger brother named Benito and they are living in Venice. I am really bad at geography but he told me that it is a city built on a group of 118 small islands that are separated by canals and linked by 401 bridges. I told him that he will take photo of me standing in the middle of every bridge or I am not leaving and he thought it was a great idea.

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We did not plan our trip too much because there was not enough time for that so everything about this will be spontaneous. The only thing we organised was my arrival. I woke up at 7 am and drove myself to Bratislava. After travelling for an hour, I got off in Vienna and transferred to the second train. During the 7-hour ride to Venice I fell asleep and woke up to someone yelling into the speaker that we reached the Venezia Mestre railway station. I got off the train and finally took a breath of fresh air when I realized it was a little cold outside. “My luggage is in there!” I screamed but the train already headed off. I was trying to catch it so I started running and waving hysterically. My gaze full of fear was focused on the train with my suitcase inside and I did not see that someone was standing in my way. We collided and fell onto the ground. “I am so sorry. I forgot all of my clothes in this train and I tried to catch it,” I told the person lying under me. “Abby?” He asked me. “Elmo?” We started laughing as we tried to stand up. He had dark brown hair with matching eyes that changed colour in the sight of the Sun to a cinnamon-y shade. As we were standing next to each other I noticed he is much taller than me. I guess that is not a big surprise with my height of a Smurf even though I was wearing my sneakers with high platforms as always. “Are you cold?” He asked. “What?” I must have been enchanted by his appearance because I did not even notice it was freezing outside and I was only wearing crop top and baggy jeans. “Oh yeah but all of my clothes are... I do not even know where.” He took out his phone, called someone and after a few minutes he looked at me and said he took care of it. I did not know what the call was about because he was speaking in Italian. This was the moment when I realized my one month streak on Duolingo was not enough

to go to Italy by myself but I was not scared. I did not even think about being anxious because I was with Elmo and everything seemed so peaceful.

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We drove to Venice in Elmo's car. The ride was exciting. Elmo played me a few songs remixed by his friend who also works as a DJ at a night club. We stopped at some thrift shop to buy me an oversized sweatshirt and an old jacket. I bought some vintage XL T-shirts too. "Why are you dressing like this? You have a lot to show to the world," He told me like it was not a big deal. "I want the world to show me," I answered with poker face. When we went outside it started raining heavily so we ran to the car. "I forgot to tell you that your makeup was cool," Elmo complimented me while starting the car. "Was? " I got confused so I looked into the rear-view mirror and my black eyeliner with bat wing was smudged all over my eyes. I started crying. "What is wrong?" He asked me but I could not say a word through all of the sobbing. Elmo took my face in his hands and I started breathing heavily. I could focus on him and nothing else. "Now tell me," he insisted. I took a deep breath. "Everything about this trip has gone wrong. At first I forgot all my things on the train and knocked you to the ground. Then the makeup I worked on for three hours melted because of the stupid rain. Now I look awful with black paint all over my face, I am dressed in a jacked after some old man and I bet that pink dye from my hair is dripping all over my neck. I do not even know if I have ever been so honest with someone and you must think I am crazy," All these words came out of me out of nowhere. "You are right," he said after a few seconds of looking directly in my eyes. "You are the craziest thing that happened to me in the last few years. Back in the station I called my friend who works as a ticket inspector and he will bring me your stuff to my house tomorrow morning. I think you look stunning without makeup and this jacked could have belonged to some old lady. Who knows? Now get yourself back together because you are going to meet my friends."

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Before we headed to the club to meet Elmo's friend group he took me for a late lunch to his favourite restaurant. I will not be lying if I tell you this was the best Ravioli I have ever had. We were talking the whole time about life, family, school and future. We really got along and I think we have almost the same kind of humour. When we arrived to the club he introduced me to all of his friends. Giorgio was the funny one, Nino was the DJ and Patricia was the girl of the group. She immediately took me to the women's bathroom and helped me to fix my makeup. After ten minutes I was looking more as a person and I was covered in glitter. "The club lights will make it look shiny and spiffing. And I think Elmo will like it. I was surprised when he told us he will have a date on a New Year's party. He never brings anyone to meet his

family or friends,” Patricia told me. “Wait a minute. Am I his date?” “Well, he did not say it exactly like that but I can see it in his eyes. He likes you. He had a lot of girls around but he is not the commitment type of guy.” When she stopped talking about Elmo I was too sunned to speak.

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While Patricia and I were getting ready, the club filled up. There were people waiting in the line to enter. A lot of them were on the dancing floor jumping to Nino’s new song. I must admit it was not my type of music but it was really catchy. After a while looking for Giorgio and Elmo we found them sitting next to a bar holding two seats for us. “Wow, your friend is looking stunning tonight,” Giorgio said with intent to tease Elmo. “Yes, you look beautiful,” Elmo complimented me and I started blushing. They ordered us a drink and took us dancing. The whole party was amazing and I could not be happier. It was almost one in the morning when we decided to go. Elmo did not drink a drop of anything so he drove everyone home. When we arrived to his house all the lights were on. “Are you ready to meet my family?” He asked. “I cannot be more prepared.” We got out of the parked car and walked into the house. There were about 20 people. My social anxiety hit me and I had to put a brave face on. “I thought it will be just your parents and brother not everyone with your last name.” Everyone started talking to me in Italian. I have never been more confused. Elmo introduced me and started translating all of the questions his family was asking. Everyone was nice and friendly. “You do not look like you are dying.” Elmo’s little brother Benito told me out of nowhere.

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It turned out Elmo told his family as a joke that some hopeless girl with desperate life is going to visit him because he was scared that I would do something to myself. I could not stay under that roof for another second knowing what everyone was thinking of me. I ran out to the unknown streets of Venice. After a few minutes of wandering through the city I found myself standing on The Rialto Bridge looking at the most charming view of my life. I loved night because everything was darker and more quiet but not today. There were people singing and celebrating. The fireworks were lighting up the sky. People looked like they were enjoying their lives. I was envious of them. I did not know how much time had passed by when the sound of somebody taking a photo brought me back to reality. Elmo was standing a few meters from me with a camera in his hands. “I followed you. I do not know what I was thinking. I just know that everything I said about you was just an excuse to meet and get to know you. Everyone thinks that I am the heartbreaker because of my commitment issues. I just could not make my heart feel things my brain wanted to with anyone but as I was watching you walk away I realised

you are the breath of a fresh air I needed in my life. You are energetic, witty, intelligent, and the most charismatic person I have ever known. You think you are scared of life but I think the opposite. Everything you do is spontaneous and I would love to have many more adventures with you.” I ran towards him and as I was kissing him I could feel a smile appear on his face. “I also have to take another 400 photos of you on every bridge in Venice.”