

Panthera 1: Trapped in a Snow Globe

by Erzsi Kertész

Chapter One

So, Now I'll Write Down How it All Started

I'm called Pipsqueak, because, for one, I'm pretty short (unfortunately) and for another, I'm quiet as a mouse. You don't hear a squeak out of me generally, or only a word or two, max. Put these together and you get the name Pipsqueak. It wasn't my choice, but now I've got it, I wear it with pride, or do my best to bear it with pride, I suppose.

The weirdest kid in our class would be Noémi. To be honest, she's a bit crazy. But Noémi was the one who saved us all, so we're all really grateful to her, even kids who otherwise are always having a laugh at her expense or who look down on her, like Gecko and Seven-Headed Helga.

Noémi, you see, didn't get trapped in the snow globe, because she went off to the toilet just at the crucial moment, but more on that later when I get to the details of the crime. Given my tendency to clam up, when I have something to say, I mostly put it in writing. I'd learned how to write by the time I was four. Okay, so, at that point I only wrote things like bzrft and goertkbyxl, but later, somehow or other, proper words began to take shape, and since then I've filled twenty-five exercise books with them. In some of these books there are made-up stories. In others, I write down what I think about stuff and why, and if I happen to change my mind about something, well, I'm upfront about it. That's the right thing to do.

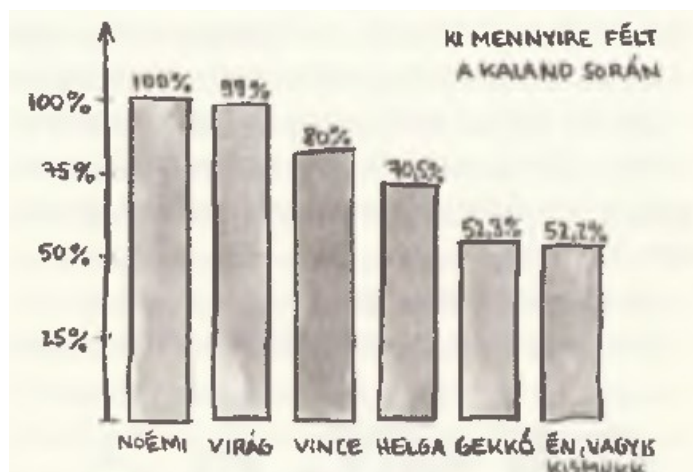
After we got out of the snow globe (with Noémi's help) I didn't have time to write this story down. That's because, for one, I had so much schoolwork to catch up on (we had to stay at home and rest for a week after everything that had happened to us), and for another, because we had to go to group counselling sessions on account of the snow globe. Those sessions can really wear a person out. Besides that, Gecko had a bit of frostbite and one of Vince's fingers was swollen – I can't remember which one now. That know-it-all Seven-Headed Helga had, of course, caught up with all her schoolwork by the following Monday. She even volunteered to answer questions on it in front of the class in History. She got an A, of course, surprise, surprise. Virág just sat there smiling like she always does, though there were some in the class who maintained that her smile had just frozen onto her face when she was above the snowline and she'd stayed that way ever since. I just think that's how she is, end of story. Some kids have been calling her 'Edelweiss', which is not desperately original given Virág means flower, but she just giggles. She's not one to take offence.

Is that everyone?

Ah yes, me. When it comes to explaining what really happened, I think it's much better to write it down rather than telling people. As soon as we say something, it's gone, but when you write something down, it'll be there for the people who come after us to read. I got that from a Latin phrase I read somewhere. Here it is, in case you're interested: *Verba volant, scripta*

manent. I like graphs and diagrams too, so the best thing would be if I use one to show you how frightened each of us was during our adventure. It's important to note that these are average values, so even though Gecko wasn't generally very afraid, when Helga had just fallen into the ravine he was 100% terrified. But this graph shows strictly the average level of fear, and as Noémi was more scared than any of us the whole way through, I gave her 100%.

(That was even though she didn't actually climb the mountain. She spent nearly the whole time hiding in a broom cupboard, and has been allergic to bleach (as well) ever since.)



(Title: How Afraid We Were on Our Adventure)

(Names: Noémi, Virág, Vince, Helga, Gecko, Me (that is, Pipsqueak))

I'm not crazy about maths or anything, just when you look at a diagram like this, you can see what's what right away. You don't even need to read the book. Of course, if you want to know the details, you're better off reading it, because you can't tell just from a graph what it feels like when the snowpack starts to slide under your feet, or how you can combat wicked treasure-hunters with clever tricks, or what kinds of animals live up in the highest mountains. Though I think I'll do a diagram about those as well.

For now, the point is that we escaped. As far as the treasure goes, I'm deliberately not saying at this stage whether we found it or not. I can't give everything away! But even without the treasure, the whole thing was pretty hair-raising. We did get a reward afterwards, and praise from the school principal, but the best thing was that we didn't have to go to school for 5 whole days. Though that was a shame too, because it meant we had to wait that long to tell our story to our classmates and to see them sitting there, gaping and blinking and full of envy at what we were were telling them. More precisely, at what the others were telling them, because I didn't say a word; only when Virág asked me from time to time, "That's right, isn't it, Pip?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's right."

That was more than enough talking for me for one school day.



Chapter Two

Now I'm Really Getting Started, or the Advert

Only two of our class wanted to be mountaineers originally: Gecko and Seven-Headed Helga. It was funny that they'd had the same idea, and when they realised they were both interested in climbing mountains, they didn't want to be friends anymore. Actually, that's not quite true. They weren't friends before that either, but afterwards they became enemies, politely of course. They looked the other way if they met in the corridor and avoided sitting next to each other in the dinner hall.

But I noticed it nevertheless, because I notice everything. When you don't say much, your senses simply get sharper. I know that from a nature programme, or rather I figured it out from what they said on it.

When a poster went up on the big notice board in the playground saying a climbing course was starting up, we knew right away that Gecko and Helga wouldn't want to miss out. This poster set quite a few hearts racing, in fact, for there in the middle of it was the newly discovered mountain that we'd all seen on the news: the mysterious Panthera. Everyone was talking about it. This mountain, though now a worldwide sensation, had previously been unknown to scientists and explorers. Somehow, they'd just failed to notice it was there. Even though it's got a strange shape, the kind that would catch your eye: from a certain angle, the two rocks on the very top of it look just like the jaws of a panther opened wide to the sky as it tips its head back. That's how it got its name. You got the feeling Panthera was not just any mountain. Allegedly, it was completely uncharted territory, a blank patch on the map of the world. There might have been new mountain tribes and curious animals living on it, and there were even rumours of treasure from times gone by having been hidden away in a cave somewhere. Fairytales for snotty-nosed toddlers, if you ask me.

But if you see Panthera up there on a poster, you've got to stop and read it. It turned out, though, that the famous mountain was only an illustration. It was really just there to advertise the fact that a climbing wall was being installed at the local community centre, and that a famous climber, someone well-known in the profession, was going to be there to teach the basics: a Dr. Johann Steep. Neither Gecko nor Helga had heard of him, even though both of them get *Mountaineering* magazine, and Helga gets *Head Uphill* too. Some more cynical

types were saying that his real name was plain Johnny Steep, but that he only answered to Johann, having spent most of life abroad, climbing exotic and dangerous peaks as a key member of international expeditions.

Helga just shrugged. What did it matter if he didn't splash pictures of himself around in all the magazines? That didn't mean he wasn't a famous mountaineer. At least ten kids went home that day hoping to get their parents' permission to go on the climbing course. It wasn't cheap, you see, and there were a couple of pieces of equipment you had to buy for it, and a book or two as well, although the poster assured potential applicants that Dr. Steep would provide most of what would be needed. Participants would be climbing in small groups, so at any one time the trainer would be able to handle only 5 or 6 children.

Six of those ten kids came into school the next day saying they'd got their parents permission and the fee required. Four didn't. Piri's dad had told her she'd be better off learning the flute. Márk was on the verge of failing Maths, so his parents wouldn't let him sign up. Gregor could have gone if he hadn't broken that window the week before. Now they told him! Not much he could do about it after the fact. Oh, and Vivien wasn't allowed because she wants to do everything, then gives it up, because she's only really interested in getting the gear and seeing how she looks in it. This is how she *didn't* learn to ride a horse, play tennis or become a ballerina. Her mum says there's no point buying climbing kit just so Vivien can find out if she looks good in it.

My parents, wonder of wonders, gave me permission to go. In fact, they were glad I wanted to do it. They're convinced that I avoid sporty activities, or anything physically challenging. I don't go to swimming lessons, or running club, or football or even basketball with any of the other kids. My parents think this is because the others are all faster, bigger and better at sport than I am. They think I've got an inferiority complex because I'm small. They have no idea the kinds of hair-raising acrobatic feats I get up to on the branches of the walnut tree behind our house. Nor do they know that I've even climbed over onto the roof a couple of times. I work on my technique every day and keep a record of how many minutes I can hang from my hands. This is not really relevant right now, but I'll show you part of the chart I made anyway.

FÜGGESZKEDÉS TÁBLÁZAT	HÉTFŐ	KEDD	SZERDA
FÜGGESZKEDÉS 2 KÉZZEL	3m14s	3m16s	3m30s
FÜGGESZKEDÉS 1 KÉZZEL	2m5s	2m12s	2m20s
FÜGGESZKEDÉS 1 UJJAL	4s	3s	3,5s
FÜGGESZKEDÉS LÁBBAL - JÖVŐ HÉTŐL			
FÜGGESZKEDÉS FOGGAL - JÖVŐRE			

Chart of Hanging Times

Monday Tuesday Wednesday

Hanging from 2 hands

Hanging from 1 hand

Hanging from 1 finger

Hanging from my legs – from next week

Hanging from the teeth – next year

Right, but like I said, this is not exactly relevant. The point is that my parents let me go on the climbing course. We were all really excited, except for Noémi, whose mother had signed her up in hopes she might finally find herself up there on the climbing wall, or at least improve her sense of direction. Noémi wasn't interested in doing either of these things. She just gnawed the ends of her plaits miserably and pulled a face if she heard anyone mentioning the first climbing session on Friday afternoon.

Not like Seven-Headed Helga! She stuck her nose even higher in the air, if that were possible, and went around like she had just climbed down out of the Himalayas to join us simple mortals. Everyone thinks she's big-headed, though they do concede that she's clever and studies a huge amount and does sport too. She's good at that as well, which doesn't exactly help her case. Last year she got a special mention in seven subjects, and she's been branded Seven-Headed Helga ever since. Some kids even say she's good-looking, despite her continually looking a bit narked and always bossing everyone around. All in all, she's not the most cheerful girl in the class. Sometimes I almost feel sorry for her, I think. The other day I did an experiment to see what it felt like to hold my head the way she does all day, and it's exhausting, I can tell you.

Oh yes, and of course Helga tried to make out that the climbing course had been organised solely for her benefit. But Gecko just laughed at her.

"I don't get why seven-headed dragons would want to go climbing at all, when they could just fly up the mountain instead!"

These were the kind of comments he made, under his breath.

"Oh, Gecko! Leave it out!" Virág would say, scandalised.

She had only signed up for the climbing course because she secretly fancied Gecko, and Helga was her only friend. Or rather the only one who was prepared to put up with what she's like. She does a lot of giggling, that's all. It's not exactly complicated.

Everyone knows that she secretly fancies Gecko. She'd have had a hard time keeping it a secret. Though other girls in the class do a better job of concealing their feelings, I have it from a reliable source that they're in love with Gecko too. For his part, he's mainly interested only in climbing.

Gecko was born in another country, where they have big mountains, and he's been climbing in them, through valleys and up rock faces, since he was small. But then his parents moved back to Hungary, and I don't think we've got anything the size of what he's been used to. He still really misses the mountains he knew as a child, and, according to his parents and our form teacher Anna néni, that's why he's started to hang around in town after school. So, they were all glad about the climbing course, and they think Gecko will settle down once he gets on the climbing wall.

Gecko always wears two differently coloured shoes, by the way, and the kind of coat the girls say you can get in the men's section of the second-hand clothes shops. It's creased and hangs down below his knees. All his clothes hang off him and his hair is always dangling in his eyes. The girls think he's really cute. They should know, I guess.

Oh yes, I'll write about Vince too. No-one thinks he's especially cute. He's a bit plump, wears glasses and generally gets on fine with everyone. He talks a massive amount, which might be why he and I are such good friends. It doesn't bother him if I don't talk. He does the talking for me too. He doesn't really rate Gecko, though I sometimes notice that he does try to impress him, but without much success. I think that's why he's got a grudge against him.

Right, all I was trying to say really is that it started with the advert, and the six of us, that's Gecko, Helga, Vince, Noémi, Virág and me (Pipsqueak), deciding to give the climbing course a go.

Which led to five of the six of us getting stuck in a snow globe.

But more on that later when the time is right.

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