

*The Ninth Life of the Cat Prince*

Two stories by Dóra Gimesi

Illustrated by Katalin Szegedi

He's a bad one. / But he's a rascal.

He's not really bad. / That's how he has to be.

(Ferenc Molnár: *Liliom*)

### When Time Stopped in the City

While she was still alive, old widow Závoczki loved to visit the park. She would sit on a bench and breathe in the springtime bloom of flowers, let the summer sun warm her face, wade through knee-high piles of autumn leaves, and scatter winter breadcrumbs for the blackbirds. She didn't often speak, preferring instead to listen to the whisperings of the trees. And so when Mrs. Závoczki passed away, nobody was the least bit surprised that she became a sycamore tree. Her branches sprawled tall and wide by the edge of the park's lake, and she was pleased to discover that being a tree was just as good as being a human. Springtime bloomed around her just the same, summer rays caressed her face, autumn leaves danced around her, and blackbirds ate winter breadcrumbs from her palm.

Once, during a particularly long and stubborn winter, all the living things huddled together in the cold, from the people in their houses to the trees in the park. The hoar frost quivered on their leafless crowns as they leaned against one another and whispered in the wind.

"My roots are frozen through and through," complained Mancika Tóth, the slender acacia.

"Spring will never come again, I'm telling you, never," a pessimistic weeping willow sighed.

Mrs. Závoczki clucked indignantly and gazed out toward the ice skating rink. Never, indeed! If they only knew what all she'd seen: the springs blossomed, the children grown up, the passions kindled, the hearts broken!

"Children grow up and hearts may break, but everyone can rest assured that spring follows winter, and the bitter cold won't last forever. That's how it's been since the beginning of time. Except, of course, when time once stopped in the city."

"What's that now?" Mancika Tóth blurted.

"It was a long time ago," Mrs. Závoczki murmured. "You yourself were still in sapling school!"

"It's a sad story, right?" the pessimistic willow perked up hopefully.

“Sad, yes, but happy too,” the old sycamore sighed and leaned in closer. As the blackbirds and chickadees and hawthorn trees gathered around her, she whispered her tale.

There was once a grand old house in the city. It was a pink, rundown building where here and there the plaster was falling off the façade. And yet there was no finer house the whole world over: slender statue girls posed by the windows while stern statue boys held the balcony aloft. The reserve Újpest football team practiced in the courtyard, and old ladies lounged their days away on the balcony. On the first floor lived a famous guitar player, on the second a famous inventor, and on the third a famous old granny who was so old she herself no longer knew what she was famous for.

It was a beautiful old house, with beautiful statue boys and statue girls a plenty, but the most beautiful of them all was a stone-carved prince next to the great glass gate who held the whole wide world on his shoulders. There he'd stood since the beginning of time, his shoulders supporting the globe, the globe supporting a column, the column supporting an arch, and the arch supporting the entire house, from balcony to inhabitants to slender statue girls. The weight of the cosmos was nothing for his granite back – never did his granite arms tire, and never did his granite legs buckle. For years, decades, centuries he had stood just so, motionless at the gate of the house.

The stone-carved prince was beautiful, so it's no wonder half of Budapest was in love with him. And not just the tittering blackbirds and the pig-tailed schoolgirls, but also the fairies that wandered by from time to time. The stone-carved prince always blushed as they passed him by with their giggles, but never did he move – the globe had to be kept aloft.

Then one March day a strange springtime wind picked up, filling the whole city with fresh scents and never-before-heard music. Hillside flowers bloomed from the slush and mush of winter snows, and the stone-carved prince awakened to a cheeky little sunbeam tickling him under his arm.

“Stop that at once, little sunbeam, or I'll twist you right round into a copper wire!” the prince threatened, but to no avail. The March sunbeam kept on tickling, laughing merrily as only a March sunbeam can laugh.

“Just wait till I get hold of you,” the prince thought, at his wit's end with such insolence. He took a deep breath, gave a big stretch, his neck creaking and cracking, and set the whole wide world down from his shoulders.

“Don’t move, don’t turn, and stay right where I leave you!” he said in his strictest voice. “I’ll pick you back up soon, first I just need to catch that stray little sunbeam.”

The stone-carved prince asked the famous first-floor guitar player for an old grand piano, the famous second-floor inventor for an old suitcase, and the famous third-floor old lady for a ratty old armchair that smelled like cats. He stacked them one atop the other so they could hold up the whole wide world in his place until he returned. And with that he set off to catch that little sunbeam and twist it right round into a copper wire.

That very same morning a water fairy was swimming down the middle of the Danube. Her unkempt turquoise hair drifted in the current, and at a word she could reign her watery steeds in or spur her watery steeds on. Ever onward she rushed, never stopping, for the river itself can’t stop for even a single second: the turquoise kilometer-counter clicked ceaselessly on her arm. She was born next to the river Tisza and learned to swim there, but since then she’d traveled hither and thither over half the world: she’d ferried her waves through babbling brooks, roiling rivers, and storm-swept seas. And at every harbor there was a prince who pined for her – in vain, of course, for if ever she popped up somewhere, the swift flowing waters promptly whisked her away. On that day she had just arrived from Vienna and was planning to reach the Black Sea by nightfall. And in all likelihood she would have, had the springtime sun not dazzled her eyes as she swam between the Chain Bridge and Margaret Bridge.

The water fairy squinted, dropped the reins for a moment, and screeched to a halt in the middle of the Danube. When she opened her eyes again, she saw such a sight as she’d never seen before! Violet flowers were blooming on Gellért Hill, a street musician was playing the harmonica on the Pest side of the river, and the stone lions on the Chain Bridge were waving to one another with their big stone paws. Cars and buses sped over Elizabeth Bridge from Pest to Buda and from Buda to Pest, a bronze-cast poet was grieving by the riverside, and spring fairies flitted about on Margaret Island. The water fairy stared in wonder at the city, unable to drink all the beauty in at once. Her watery steeds stamped their blue legs impatiently, tossing their snow-white manes of foam, but she paid them no mind. She took a deep breath, turned off her turquoise kilometer-counter, and swam ashore at the foot of the Chain Bridge.

“I’ll just go see the city for a moment,” she shouted back to her whinnying waves, “I won’t be gone more than an hour.”

Once the water fairy had set foot on shore, the first thing she did was look for a shoe store to buy herself a pair of ladybug sneakers (she'd always wanted a pair of sneakers, but there wasn't much use for them in the river). Right away her steps lightened, and she felt as if she could walk to the ends of the earth. But for starters, she just walked to Vörösmarty Square, then on to Oktogon, and before she knew it she'd reached Heroes' Square. She stopped for a hamburger in front of the zoo, greeted the ducks at the pond, then dashed off to run around City Park. Or she would have dashed off, had a mischievous little rut not tripped her up and caused her to sprain her ankle.

The water fairy picked herself up and hobbled over to the first park bench she could find. A long time she sat there, adjusting to this new and unfamiliar pain. Hardly ten minutes had passed, and her ankle was already so swollen that she had to take off her ladybug sneaker.

"How ever will I reach the sea by nightfall in this state?" she sighed worriedly, thinking of her horses stamping and puffing impatiently at the foot of the Chain Bridge. "If I could at least limp to the metro station..."

And so the fairy was thinking and lamenting to herself when suddenly the ground began to shake. The sound came from the direction of Andrassy Street, and was only growing stronger: as if a boulder were tumbling, a mountain were sliding, or a volcano were preparing to erupt. The water fairy had no idea what this great cataclysm could be – then she saw him as he rounded the bend: the stone-carved prince.

By that time the stone-carved prince had been chasing the sunbeam for hours, unable to catch it and twist it right round into a copper wire. He'd run the length of the Danube riverside, crossed the Lágymányosi Bridge from Buda to Pest, then back across from Pest to Buda, gone round and round Margaret Island, clambered up Gellért Hill, twisted and turned through the streets of downtown, but all in vain. He had just reached City Park when clouds began to gather in the sky and he lost track of the insolent little sunbeam for good.

The stone-carved prince sat down on a bench, winded and angry.

"Tomorrow morning. I'll catch it tomorrow morning!" he swore, huffing and puffing.

"Tomorrow morning. I should be at the sea by tomorrow morning!" the water fairy realized suddenly on the bench opposite him.

She tried to get to her feet, but couldn't manage: her ankle was now the size of a fully puffed-up pufferfish. She had no other choice, so she took a deep breath and called across to the stone-carved prince.

"Excuse me, sir," she began politely, "could you perhaps carry me on your shoulder?"

"That's the last thing I need," he grumbled. "I've only just set down the whole wide world."

"But I absolutely must get back to the Danube this evening," she scrunched up her face in preparation for the waterworks. "And besides, I'm a great deal lighter than the whole wide world."

The stone-carved prince had been so caught up in the chase with the sunbeam that he only now took a proper look at the water fairy. And my was she beautiful, sitting there with her sprained ankle, her unkempt, turquoise hair, and her soft gaze. And in truth, she did look to be quite light. The prince let out a big sigh, but seeing as he was a gentleman, he couldn't refuse.

I'm not quite sure when the magic happened. Whether it was when the water fairy first wrapped her arms around his neck, or before that when he helped her slip a ladybug sneaker onto her good foot, or perhaps later as they were ambling past Riflemen's Square. In any case, there was no doubt: the spring wind was whistling happily, the City Park trees were blooming early, and even the sun was peeping out from behind the clouds as the stone-carved prince hoisted the water fairy onto his shoulder. And she really was light, far lighter than the whole wide world.

When they reached the Danube, the goodbyes didn't come easily.

"Thank you for your help," the water fairy mumbled.

"It's nothing, really," the prince stammered.

"Well then... goodbye..." the water fairy whispered. She shifted her weight uncertainly from one foot to the other, causing her to clutch the prince's shoulder lest she fall over from the pain.

Luckily, the prince didn't let her go, and holding her tightly he mumbled sheepishly:

"Don't you think it would be better to..."

"Be better to what?" the water fairy looked up at him.

"To stay here," the prince finally blurted out. "Just until your ankle is better."

"That would be better," the water fairy nodded eagerly.

And so it happened that the water fairy didn't unhitch her watery steeds from the foot of the Chain Bridge, and the stone-carved prince didn't return to the old house to set the whole wide world back on his shoulder. The world, the river, and all of time stood still.

At first they sat a long while by the river, skipping rocks into the motionless water. The next day they told each other stories: the water fairy about the world she'd roved, and the prince about the world he'd rested on his shoulder. On the third day they counted the quartz freckles which shimmered on the stone-carved prince's back (34,562 quartz freckles, to be exact). On the fourth day they invented a secret language which only they could understand. On the fifth day they perched on one leg like storks (the water fairy because of her ankle, the prince out of compassion). On the sixth day they slowly walked to Riflemen's Square and got a waffle with a double dollop of whipped cream. By the seventh day the water fairy's ankle was all better and she could walk about wherever she pleased.

Before long, every inch of the city was covered with their footprints. They traveled on trams and subways, went to concerts at People's Stadium, listened to old records, and lazed about in the grass on King's Hill, dreaming about how nice it would be to take a red and white VW bus on a road trip through America. People would sometimes stop them on the street, saying: "Good day! I beg your pardon for intruding, but I simply can't help but marvel at how beautiful the two of you are." The pair would then dash to the nearest shop window to see if they really were that beautiful, and would establish that, in fact, they were.

Blinded by their joy effervescent, they didn't notice that time had stopped in Budapest. Football matches were stuck in ties, buds refused to flower, no scorching heat replaced the balmy spring air, and the migratory birds weren't migrating. It seemed as if spring would stay there in the city forever. And so the years passed unnoticed, whether three or thirty or three-hundred.

Then one day the stone-carved prince received an unexpected telegram from the old house: the grand piano had gone out of tune, the suitcase was threadbare and buckling, the ratty old armchair that smelled like cats was teetering, and it really was time for him to hoist the whole wide world back onto his shoulder. The prince became quite glum, as he had not forgotten the old house for a single moment and knew very well his place was there amongst the stories and memories and football teams and slender statue girls. The water fairy also knew it was long since she should have left for the sea. Her

horses were whinnying every morning at the foot of the Chain Bridge, and every breeze, every bird, every bustling train was a reminder: the time had come.

They sat sorrowfully at Riflemen's Square, whipped cream melting off the waffles in their hands.

"You could stay here on the land," the stone-carved prince suddenly said. "I would visit you all the time, tell you all the tales of joy and sorrow, even sing you a song from time to time. We could get you some water here in the square, a fountain or a pool or a bird bath."

The water fairy gave it some thought, but her melancholy only grew.

"Have you ever seen a wave stop? I want to be tidal waves and waterfalls and tempests in the spring. Were I some garden pond, I would have nothing to do but show others their own reflections. Mud and muck would cover me, the summer sun would boil me away. I would become a puddle full of pond scum. But wait! Why don't you come with me to the river! I'll take you to the sea, and from there to the ocean. I'll show you the brightly colored fish along the Indonesian coast, and we'll lie back and gaze at the stars in the Southern sky.

The stone-carved prince heaved a great sigh.

"Have you ever seen a stone in the river? Tiny cracks begin to lace its surface, then pieces start to break off, and eventually it crumbles to a pile of gravel. Right now I am big and strong: in the river I would be pebbles, children would skip stones with me, and never again would I be able to take you up onto my shoulder."

They spoke no further, silently swinging their legs until morning.

That was the day the three- or thirty- or three-hundred-year-long spring reached its end. The buds turned to flowers and the flowers turned to chestnuts, pears, and bird cherries. Summer brought its sweltering heat, autumn its brisk winds, winter its ceaseless snows. The wheel of time turned once more, the river flowed, and the whole wide world was back where it should be.

The water fairy darted off to continue traveling the world: she became torrential rains, summer storms, autumn showers. She wrangled sheets of ice in the Norwegian fjords, surfed her watery steeds through the Nile, the Seine, the Amazon. But whenever she saw a boulder, a volcano, a pebble, her heart became as heavy as if it itself were made of stone. All in vain did the harbor princes pine for her, all in vain did the brightly colored fish try to make her laugh, all in vain did the kilometer-counter on her arm tick away happily: nothing could ease her sorrow.



"I don't know what's gotten into you," she scolded her watery steeds as they galloped. "Where are you rushing off to so recklessly? You won't be able to go this fast for long!"

"We're rushing along just as we always have. It's you who's slowed down, you who's changed," the waves whinnied.

The water fairy turned her nose up in defiance, but deep down she knew the waves were right. No more did the breakneck speeds bring her any joy. The storm tired her, and day by day her heart became stonier and sank deeper. At night, when nobody could see her, she would swim up to the surface, gulp down the fresh air, float on her back, and dream about America. About how lovely it would be to rest her head against a quartz-freckled shoulder and trundle that red and white VW bus down the highway.

Once the stone-carved prince had taken the whole wide world back onto his shoulder, the city sprang back to life lickety-split. Hungry metal teeth gobbled up People's Stadium, one football team finally beat the other, old streets were renamed and then renamed again. The city changed such that it was all but unrecognizable. The big old house was different as well: ever since the famous inventor, famous guitarist, and famous old lady had renovated everything, the plaster was no longer falling from its beautiful façade. Blue and pink hydrangeas bloomed on the courtyard football pitch, and the spacious rooms were filled with new families, new music, and new memories. Slender statue girls swayed and giggled in the windows, stern statue boys proudly held the balconies aloft. And beside the great glass gate stood the stone-carved prince, straight-backed and somber-eyed, but no matter how heavy his burden, the whole wide world tilted not one bit on his shoulder. Summer heat, autumn winds, or winter blizzards, he stood unmoving through them all. But whenever he saw a storm, a drizzle, a deluge, a tear budded in his eye as if it itself were the thunderstorm.

"I don't know what's happened to you," he grumbled at the globe on his shoulders. "You are a great deal heavier than you were before."

"You are mistaken," it argued back. "It's you who has changed, you who's become more restless. I am just as heavy now as ever I was."

The stone-carved prince clenched his teeth and spoke no further. But he knew the whole wide world was right. He wasn't moving a single inch, and yet he felt as if a brook were bubbling in his heart, as if every springtime sunbeam were tickling his side, as if his legs wanted to run and his arms wanted to

embrace. When he closed his eyes he dreamed of a long, winding highway and of a turquoise-haired girl resting her head on his shoulder. And so passed another three or thirty or three-hundred years. The water fairy saddened the world which she traveled, as did the stone-carved prince the world upon his shoulder. And the sadder they became, the more they cursed the spring which reminded them of the other. Their sighs became chilling winds, their sadness dense, milk-white fog, the hardness of their hearts coats of ice. And winter overcame the park, the city, the world, a winter so long it seemed it would never end.

Old Mrs. Závoczki, the eldest sycamore, left the story there. There was silence in the park, the only sound the tinkling of hoarfrost on branches in the wind.

“And then?” a curious blackbird piped up. “What happened then?”

“Nothing,” said the pessimistic weeping willow, teary-eyed. “Spring will never come, I’m telling you, never.”

“Now you just listen here, you don’t know the first thing about life!” old Mrs. Závoczki scoffed, the wrinkles beneath her bark seeming to smile.

As I was saying, it was winter throughout the park, the city, the world, nothing but ice and snow and shivering and cold. But then early one March morning, as the water fairy was skating beneath the Chain Bridge along the ice of the Danube, suddenly it all went wrong.

I don’t know whether what happened was magic or not, but what is certain is that the water fairy suddenly began to freeze in the river, and when she dove into the depths she noticed with a fright that she couldn’t breathe. The water stung her eyes and soaked her hands, the turquoise kilometer-counter on her arm stopped ticking. That very same morning the stone-carved prince’s arms unexpectedly went limp, his legs buckled, and he felt as if the whole wide world were about to come crashing down on his head. His granite-carved skin turned rosy pink, his palms chafed against the globe. He had to set it down, he could hold it up no longer. He gave a big stretch, rubbed his hands together, and dashed off toward the river. He reached it just in time to pull the splashing and gasping turquoise-haired girl from the middle of the Danube.

“It looks like you’ve saved me yet again,” she spluttered gratefully.

“So it does,” the boy nodded, hefting the sopping wet girl onto his back.

That morning, beneath the melting ice, the now ownerless watery steeds galloped down the Danube. And when the first of the March sunbeams peeped out from behind the clouds, there was nothing standing next to the beautiful old house's gate but a decorative column, on the column a pot of purple flowers, and amongst those purple flowers turned the whole wide world. To this day passers-by still stop and stare, snap a few photographs, and ponderously think: *Well now, what a curious piece of modern architecture this is!*

As the old sycamore finished her tale, a pleasant breeze sprung up in the park. Mancika Tóth give a great stretch and shook the hoarfrost from her branches. Sunlight grinned in great pools on the ice of the skating rink.

"But please, you must tell us what has become of the two of them," tittered the excitable blackbird in old Mrs. Závoczki's branches. "Where did the water fairy and the stone-carved prince disappear to?"

Old Mrs. Závoczki rustled her bare crown indignantly.

"Well how should I know? They became human, and that's that. Certainly no worse than being a tree."

"But did they ever make it to America?" Mancika Tóth wondered dreamily.

"Pfft, now *that* is a bit too much, even for a happy ending," grumbled the weeping willow.

Old Mrs. Závoczki might have been thinking the same thing, seeing as she didn't respond. But deep down, far beneath her winter bark, something stirred. Perhaps it was just her creaky joints enjoying the spring, but in that moment she longed to be a migratory bird and see the world from on high.

She imagined a long highway on the other side of the world, running along America's western seacoast. From a birds-eye-view it was merely a ribbon of gray on which a red and white VW van seemed nothing more than a tiny beetle scurrying along. A broad-shouldered young man sat behind the wheel, sunglasses on and map out. His freckles weren't sparkles of quartz, just normal human freckles, and instead of the whole wide world, there was an unkempt head of turquoise hair resting on his shoulder. His arm had gone to sleep, but he dared not move it lest he wake the dozing girl.

And so they trundled on down the highway, accompanied by the boulders on their left and the ocean on their right.

## The Cat Prince's Ninth Life

There is a city along the river Tisza.

That is, along the river Tisza and the river Mureş.

To be perfectly precise, right at the intersections of the river Tisza and the river Mureş.

The city is called Szeged, but the strange-speaking folk who live there call it Szöged.

To the eyes of outsiders, adults and vagabonds, it's a city like any other: day after day the same people get off at the same train station, bounce along in the trams, and hustle and bustle hither and thither along the streets without knowing where they're going or where they're bouncing along to or where they're hustling and bustling and hithering and thithering to.

These adults, outsiders and vagabonds have never heard of the Móra Neighborhood Secret Society of Elves, for instance. They have never seen a footsore giant in a 10-story building in Tarján. They have never given any thought to the rather telling name of Witches Island, have never spied on a Tisza mayfly, and have no idea what the old ladies who had long ago become chestnut trees were gossiping about one fine March morning.

"Any fresh gossip to share, dearie?" Rozália Lamberg, the chestnut matriarch, asked lazily.

"Just the usual, dearie," sighed Jolánka Schmitt, the hackberry tree. "Spring is late, the crows are cheeky as all get-out, there's a dreadful ache in my back - "

"I heard about something," a young chestnut whispered confidentially. "I heard from the oaks over at Mathias Square that the Cat Prince wants to marry Alinka the fairy."

"Come now my dear, that's simply impossible," Rozália Lamberg scoffed. "You must have heard wrong. Alinka is the most beautiful spring fairy around, and as for the Cat Prince... well, everybody knows the Cat Prince is an absolute scoundrel, through and through."

"A loafer!" Jolánka Schmitt squawked.

"A rascal!" a hawthorn added.

"A swindler!" the southern wind chimed in.

"Alinka would never marry the Cat Prince," Rozália Lamberg concluded, and as far as she was concerned that was the end of that conversation, thank you very much.

She was certainly right about one thing, for at that time Alinka was the most beautiful spring fairy in the whole Mathias Square, in the whole city district, and maybe even in the whole entire world. With her delicate little hands she individually opens up each and every rose, forget-me-not, and golden rain flower, she caressed the pussy willow branches around Easter, and would sometimes even flick up the bonnets of her friends on the other side of the city. Everybody at Mathias Square loved Alinka. And not just the oaks and the golden rain trees, but the stone angels in the church and the stern-faced saints as well. After Sunday mass she would often slip in to see them, smuggling in the scent of spring for Leopold the organ's old pipes and lighting up the angels' worn-out halos with proper rays of sunlight.

So when Alinka reached the age at which she was to be married, from one day to the next Mathias Square was filled to the brim with suitors: sunbeam princes, June bug gentlemen, elves from respectable families, and philosophy students in striped sweaters. One brought velvet wings with golden stitching, another a shimmering moonlight tunic, another paper airplanes folded from poems. Alinka tried the wings and tried them again, but they just weren't as good as the dragonfly wings she'd grown accustomed to in her childhood. The velvet was too ornate, the gold too heavy, the moonlight too delicate, and the poems... well, if she'd seen one pining lovesick poem, she'd seen them all.

"What do I need new wings for, why can't I keep my old ones?" Alinka whined one evening, head on her fairy grandmother's shoulder. "There may be a little thread loose here and there, but I can patch those up and the wings will be good for several more years!"

"Alinka dear, you know very well that a fairy receives new wings from her husband when she gets married. It's tradition. Really, who has ever seen a grown fairy lady with her childhood dragonfly wings?"

"Then I'm never getting married!" Alinka stamped her feet and stormed from the room.

Crestfallen and heads hanging low, the suitors left Mathias Square, shuffling along Holy Trinity Street like a defeated army, when suddenly, right in front the suitors' noses, up roared a motorcycle, sidecar and all. It was the Cat Prince, late as always. He very nearly ran over the fuming Alinka.

"Miss! Are your eyes not working?" the Cat prince shouted.

"You, sir, are a raving madman!" came the fairy's shrill retort.

Two days later their wedding was announced.

"But he's a dandy!" wailed the lilac bush.

"A buffoon!" creaked the church gate.

“A swindler!” nodded the sparrows.

“A villain!” tolled the bells.

“I once knew a marsh fairy he’d also promised to marry,” Rozália Lamberg fumed, fresh sprouts bristling. “Then, the night before the wedding, he up and disappeared. In her sorrow the poor bride-to-be turned into a Tisza mayfly...”

“I heard something similar,” whispered Jolánka Schmitt, the hackberry tree. “The same thing happened to a human girl on Rainbow Street. That good-for-nothing caught her eye, then vanished without so much as a ‘good day’. The poor sweet thing has since gotten old, but still she waits, hoping... Every morning she puts out a dish of fresh milk for him.”

And so passed that age-old March at Mathias Square, full of whining and wailing and begging and pleading and threatening, but all to no avail. Alinka had chosen the Cat Prince. Even though she knew all about him, every rumor and tale and horrible story. She knew he prowled the rooftops at night in the form of a tomcat, peeping in through girls’ windows and purring his way into their fluffy soft dreams. She knew he took a human form by day, that half the stories about him weren’t true, and that every morning he practiced his signature little smirk in front of the mirror. Alinka knew the Cat Prince was a swindler, a loafer, and a buffoon – and she knew he was the only one who would give her proper wedding wings: not heavy with velvet or shimmering with gold, but delicate and rainbow-colored, woven from stories of adventure and wonder and fright.

Now make no mistake, the Cat Prince really did want to marry Alinka! After all, he really had wanted to marry the marsh fairy, as well as Irma Szabó from Rainbow Street... why, who knows how many more fairies and princesses and human girls!

“This will be my final night of prowling,” he would think before each wedding. “Once more I’ll peep in through the windows, once more I’ll serenade the bats, once more I’ll visit my favorite chimneys. Then I’ll change back into a human and never again don my feline duds. Just once more tonight. Just once more, for the last time.”

And so it was this night as well. Alinka was sitting in the darkened gallery of the Upper District church arguing with the elderly old organ.

“Leopold! You’re off-key! Can’t you hear that you’re off-key?!”

"I always play the bridal chorus like this," the organ grumbled. "And in the last two-hundred years not one person has complained."

"But this is *my* bridal chorus! My wedding! I want it to be beautiful!"

"Every wedding is beautiful," the organ replied, "at least that's what the doves say. Personally I've always found them to be rather dull affairs. No more than a silly ceremony. But a nice funeral! And Mozart's Requiem is lovely."

Alinka carefully folded up her veil of rose petals, then spread it out again. Then folded it again. She was thinking about the Cat Prince's last night of prowling. How with the lightest of footfall he was all but flying above the street-level puddles, how he was once more flitting along the Tisza riverside, scampering across the roofs of the Carp Street mansions, winking mischievously at the full moon. How he was peeping in through the window of some princess in the city. But he would come back. No matter how beautiful the princess might be, he would return in the morning just like he promised. Alinka held on to this thought on the eve of her wedding until she was at last overcome by sleep.

The chestnut trees on Holy Trinity Street wouldn't have bet one lousy penny on the Cat Prince returning. So you can imagine their flabbergasting and jaw-dropping and bumbling when early the next morning he rode right up into their midst.

"How do you do Ms. Róza? Good morning Jolánka! I'm in quite a hurry. My wedding is today!"

Alinka was awaiting him at Mathias Square, veiled head-to-toe in rose petals. She was so beautiful that even the bitter old island witches wept and threw their arms around one another when they saw her. The gossipy little blackbirds had assembled half the city for the big event: in addition to the witches, there was an elven delegation from Móra City, three giants from Tarján (unfortunately they didn't fit inside the church), wind fairies and rain fairies, sparrows, greenfinches, and redstarts, ladybugs and milkweed bugs, plus performers and buskers of every rank and class who lived in the Upper District around that time. The Cat Prince, top hat perched on his head, long striped scarf around his neck, looked like a prince out of a storybook.

"Never again shall I don my feline duds," he pronounced, and the shocked and stunned crowd burst into tears. Leopold the organ, for the first time in his life, played the bridal chorus without one single note going astray, which surprised the stone angels so much they almost flew out the rose

window. Alinka proudly donned her new bridal wings, brightly colored and woven from stories, and it's safe to say that on that morning in March, there wasn't a happier spring fairy in all the world.

Time passed, summer came, and the Tisza river was in full bloom. The couple moved into a long-legged riverside home where they spent every day cloud gazing, lying out down by the dock, and reading crime novels. In autumn they played tag amongst the fallen leaves, in winter they went sledding on the riverbanks. But as spring drew closer, Alinka found herself with more and more work. There were buds to open, pussy willows to caress, young winds to teach how to fly... and that's why one April evening, Alinka went off to dress the Upper District cherry trees in their robes of flowers.

"I won't be back till morning," she told the Cat Prince before leaving. "You know how temperamental the cherry trees can be. They fume and fret and whine and whimper for hours, I have no idea how I'll have them ready by morning..."

And with that she whirlwinded off.

The Cat Prince gazed at the moon. At the rooftops. He sniffed at the fresh spring air, taking in the scent of sleeping flowers from the square, incense from the church, a dish of lukewarm milk from Rainbow Street, young water from the Tisza, princesses' hair as they got ready for bed, silky cigarette smoke from the university... The Cat Prince sniffled and snuffled, and just like that, quick as a whip, he forgot all about his promise. He donned his feline duds and set off into the night.

Alinka arrived home at first light the next morning. She didn't cry, she didn't shout, she didn't storm and stamp about, she just took a good long look at the line of little catprints in the damp sand.

"We hate to say we told you so," sighed the lilac bushes.

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" moaned the church gate.

"We tried to warn you!" lamented the sparrows.

"All for naught, all for naught!" tolled the bells.

"Quiet, all of you!" Alinka stamped before dashing off. She ran along the Tisza riverside, passed the number one tram chugging tiredly along, almost smacked right into a sleepwalking giant, and didn't stop until she reached Witches Island.

As one might reasonably expect, Witches Island was inhabited by witches. But it had been a long time since they concocted any serpent soup, beetle broth, or even their specialty, children's tears tiramisu. Instead, they'd withdrawn into the depths of hollow trees, spending their days sending



telegrams along spider web strands and mocking the latest fairy fashion. On this particular morning, they were just getting ready to go to bed after catching up on all the latest city-dweller gossip.

Alinka slowed her pace, seeing as she'd never before come to Witches Island all by herself.

"Perhaps this isn't the solution after all," she thought. "Perhaps I ought to go home."

But it was already too late.

"Well, well, well! Can it be, that irascible little herald of spring? That precious light-footed winged delight? That happily-ever-after-till-death-do-us-part young lady?" came the ear-splitting shriek from behind her.

Alinka spun around. A tubby old little witch was swinging on the branch of a weeping willow. The striped nightie she wore flapped and fluttered as she pumped her stocky little legs to and fro.

"I... I think I'll just be on my way," Alinka stammered, but she felt the roots of the willow twist around her legs like shackles.

"But you've come all this way, my dear, why not stay a while!" cackled the old woman. The whites of her eyes flashed out from amongst the lichen and roots which coated her face. "You just go ahead and tell old Auntie Agónia what's wrong!"

Alinka gathered up all of her courage and looked the old witch in the eye.

"I would like to cast a curse."

"A curse? And just what kind of curse could a spring fairy manage? That may be the funniest joke I ever have heard!"

"No, really, we can cast curses. My fairy grandmother told me so," Alinka insisted.

"Well alright then," the old witch shrugged. "If your fairy grandmother told you so, then so it must be. But such a curse doesn't come cheap..."

"I don't care what it costs!" Alinka snapped impatiently.

"The fairy who once casts a curse can never again be a fairy. The fairy who once casts a curse can never again awaken flower buds, bring forth sprouts with her laughter, or design the latest petal blossom fashion for cherry trees. The fairy who once casts a curse can never again fly."

"I would like to cast a curse," Alinka demanded, undoing the brightly-colored story-woven wings from her back.

"As you wish, you silly little girl."

The witch's yellow eyes flashed and Alinka felt a peculiar warmth in her throat. She didn't want to say what was about to come pouring from her mouth, but she couldn't stop it: strange, frightening, unknown words danced and pranced from her lips, night-flavored and ink-bitter modifiers, metaphors, and similes, the surging rolling storming words of a woman scorned.

When it was over, the silence was horrible.

The witch grinned with satisfaction.

"What a beautiful curse, an exemplary curse! Now go home and lie down. When you wake up, you won't have the faintest idea who that Cat Prince is."

And that's just what Alinka did: trudged home, laid down, and woke up. And when she woke up, she had not the faintest idea who that Cat Prince was. She didn't know that giants in Tarján live in 10-story houses. She didn't know in which cellar the elves of Móra City held their secret meetings. Yawning, she got up on the wrong side of the bed, walked down to the store, bought two croissants and half a kilo of tomatoes, didn't greet the chestnut trees, and didn't caress fresh sprouts. She didn't turn her face to the gently blowing breeze. She had become a human girl, just like anyone else at Mathias Square, and she didn't know, she forgot for good and all, that she had once had wings and been a beautiful spring fairy.

That same morning, when the Cat Prince arrived home hungry and exhausted, he lingered in the dark of the stairwell to don his human form once more. But he couldn't do it – the curse had taken hold. He could no longer wiggle out of his silvery-gray coat of fur.

The Cat Prince ran away. Everyone saw him, from the chestnut trees on Holy Trinity Street to the lady bugs and redstarts. The Móra City elves scoffed, the giants of Tarján whispered, but nobody stopped him. They understood the gravity of a spring fairy curse.

"There's not another city like this in the whole wide world," the Cat Prince looked back once he'd passed out of the city limits. "Nowhere else can you find fairies, witches, and giants. Everywhere else there's nothing but humans, humans and cats. I'll be bored straight to death."

"In that case, we'll meet soon enough," a thin, annoying voice tittered from the cemetery.

The Cat Prince looked over: there lounging atop the cemetery's stone wall was Death itself, dangling his spindly legs and sipping his mulled wine.

"Well chum, I'm sure you know that from now on you have nine lives, yes?"

"Nine lives?"

“As cats are wont to have.”

“Oh doggone it!” the Cat Prince cursed. His thoughts turned to the future and bitterness set in. “Nine times I’ll bore myself to death, nine times one after the other.”

And as Death giggled, the Cat Prince turned his back and strode quietly off into the world.

Of course the Cat Prince was mistaken when he thought his city along the Tisza river was the only one with fairies, witches, and giants. For fairies, witches, and giants most certainly lived all around the world.

Days passed, then months, then years, and the Cat Prince traveled all about the globe. By penny-farthing and automobile he traveled, by express train, steamboat, and zeppelin.

In San Francisco he was almost run over by a red and white VW van, on an island in the Atlantic Ocean he met chalk drawings on the sidewalk who ended up washed away by the rain. On the peak of the Himalayas he invited an old man and a retired fairy out for coffee, in the depths of the Ends of the Earth he listened to the song of the autumn wind, in Florence he spied on the little painted Jesuses to see where they disappeared to at night. He saw silence, palm trees, fields of daisies, and the sea.

And because he had nine lives, eight times he told Death to bugger right off.

While the Cat Prince wandered the whole wide world, the redstarts, elves, and giants looked on somberly as Alinka became a crabby, grumbling, piano-teaching little old granny. Because Alinka had only one life. She spent all day hunched over on her piano stool in her home on Mathias Square, she didn’t trade gossip at the market, she didn’t shout at the boys playing football in the square, and she didn’t greet the acolytes at the church. Every day she shuffled down Holy Trinity Street, but never again did she hear what the chestnut trees were gossiping about.

“Despicable, I tell you, absolutely despicable,” Rozália Lamberg, the chestnut matriarch, raged about the Cat Prince. She’d been shouting a lot more recently, hoping shriveled old Alinka would hear her.

“Swindler! Loafer!” echoed the linden trees and oak trees and bird cherry trees.

“Ladies,” an elegant sycamore over at Széchenyi Square soothed, “you’ve been wagging your tongues about that unfortunate lad going on 100 years now.”

“82!” snapped Rozália Lamberg. “82 years, to be perfectly precise. By the way, is it true that he’s returned?”

It was true. Two days had already slipped by since the Cat Prince had come back to Mathias Square. Nobody knew about his arrival, no bouncing blond-braided maidens awaited him, and the Lower Town Lark Choir didn't even prepare a new show in his honor.

"They've forgotten me," the Cat Prince thought while examining his own reflection in a puddle. "And this gray streak under my eye certainly wasn't there yesterday. I'm getting old."

The Cat Prince stood over the puddle and grimaced. He scrunched and unscrunched his striped tabby brows. He half-closed his yellow-green eyes and gave a wink. Many narcissistic and self-conceited cats have come and gone, but the Cat Prince surpassed them all.

"Perhaps she'll recognize me like this..." he pondered. "Perhaps..."

And with that he stole through the rusted green door of number 6 Mathias Square.

As time went on Alinka's house began to age as well: its windows clouded over, its bright walls dimmed to gray, and an artistically-inclined spider wove entire cities of web through all the corners. The smell of coffee, lavender, and old age filled the once spacious and sun-drenched apartment. A great black grand piano stood menacingly in the center of the room and a little girl, Alinka's only pupil, was swinging her legs on the piano stool.

"Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do! I'm not hearing your scales!" Alinka shouted from the kitchen as she prepared a coffee with lots of cream.

The Cat Prince gave a start at the familiar voice and scampered under the tattered green armchair. From there he watched as Alinka shuffled past, coffee mug in hand – the once-upon-a-time most beautiful spring fairy had become itty-bitty and translucent as glass, her back was crooked and her knuckles were gnarled... And yet the Cat Prince saw from the first that she had lost nothing of her beauty.

The little girl drank her coffee with lots of cream, then got back to doing her scales.

"Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do! Again from the top!" Alinka conducted.

The Cat Prince peeked out from beneath the armchair to get a better view. He slinked carefully across the room and had just about managed to disappear behind the window's velvet curtains when the little girl cried out:

"Mrs. Alinka! A kitty cat!"

“Do, re, mi, fa – no stopping, keep the rhythm, stop gaping like a guppy!” Alinka sang, never taking her eyes from the black and white keys.

“But a kitty cat got in!” the little girl protested, gesturing toward the curtains. But the velvet was motionless. “It was just there! Right behind the curtains!”

“A cat here, a cat there, of course... you lot will come up with anything to get out of doing your scales.”

“But it really was there!”

“And what will it be next time, a dinosaur? A blood-sucking bat? Bah, off home with you, we’re done for today. And remember to practice!” Alinka grouched as she shooed the little girl out the door.

She closed the door softly and sat down on the piano stool. Or she would have sat down, if someone hadn’t already taken the seat: an ancient, scraggly, silvery-gray tomcat.

Alinka wasn’t the least bit surprised. As she’d gotten older she’d started having peculiar dreams about a city quite similar to her own, except that it was inhabited by fairies, witches, and giants. She dreamed of an ancient wheezing church organ, of gossiping chestnut trees, of elves hiding in cellars. And she dreamed of a cat, a silver-furred, yellow-eyed, gorgeous cat, which must be exactly what this stray fellow had looked like a hundred years ago.

“Here kitty-kitty!” Alinka called the cat, filling a porcelain mug to the brim with coffee and lots of cream and setting it on the ground.

“Thank you very kindly,” the Cat Prince politely thanked her, though he knew Alinka didn’t understand a word of his meowing.

The old woman began to play the piano, the scrawny tomcat settled down comfortably in her lap, and thus they passed the afternoon away.

Darkness had long since swallowed up Mathias Square when the Cat Prince woke to a familiar, thin, tittering voice.

“Welcome home, my boy!” Death itself was lounging in a rocking chair, dangling his spindly legs and sipping his mulled wine. He hadn’t aged a day across the Cat Prince’s eight long lives.

“You’ve got no business with me,” the Cat Prince fumed. “My time hasn’t come yet.”

“Oh it’s not you I’ve come for this time. Although now that I see you, I suspect that day is also dreadfully close,” Death jested.

“Oh sod off!” the Cat Prince jested right back.

“You do know the curse will soon be broken, don’t you? It seems that in your final life you’ll become a human again. For however long you have, that is.”

“What are talking about?”

“A curse can only live as long as the one who cast it,” Death tittered, gesturing to Alinka as she slumped dreaming over the piano.

“Don’t even think about it!” the Cat Prince leapt up. “Alinka is a fairy, and you have no power over fairies.”

“She *was* a fairy, my boy, she *was* a fairy. She gave up her wings to cast a curse. She knew very well what she was doing. And even if she did somehow get her wings back, who has ever heard of an aging, crooked-backed, gnarled-knuckled spring fairy?”

The Cat Prince dashed off. He ran along the Tisza riverside, passed the number one tram chugging tiredly along, almost smacked right into a sleepwalking giant, but didn’t stop until he reached Witches Island.

“Agónia!” he called out – or rather wheezed out, exhausted as he was and thinking he might drop dead then and there. “Agónia, I know you’re in there!”

“Well, well, well,” the witch poked her lichen-coated face out from the hollow of her weeping willow. “Can it be, that soft-footed tomcat, that nine-lived world traveler? You look positively dreadful. My how old you’ve gotten.”

“Return my wife’s wings this instant!” the Cat Prince drew himself up, casting a sidelong glance at his reflection in a puddle. “And I don’t look all that bad.”

“How can you be such a buffoon?” Agónia chortled. “Soon enough the curse will be broken. Alinka will die, and you will become human again.”

The Cat Prince gathered up all his strength, pounced, and latched onto the witch.

“If you don’t tell me this very instant what I have to do to turn Alinka back into a fairy, I swear on this whole blasted fur ball of a world that I will claw out your wily little witch eyes here and now!

“I’ll tell you, of course I’ll tell you.” Agónia gasped for breath. “You are her husband, you have the power to make her a new set of wings. But beware: the new wings will only be ready if you bear her no ill will, and if she repents of the curse from the bottom of her heart!”

“Give me until morning,” the Cat Prince asked of Death, still sitting there rocking in the corner of Alinka’s room.

“So be it,” Death shrugged, and stepped through the closed door. “But I’ll be back with the rising of the sun.”

The Cat Prince watched the sleeping, gently snoring Alinka. Her gray hair was done up in a bun, and the wrinkles on her face, earned from much laughter and many tears, came and went with her snoring. The Cat Prince leapt onto the lid of the grand piano and set about weaving Alinka a new set of fairytale wings.

He told her of a highway in America hugged tight by the mountains and the sea.

He told her of an island where the chalk drawings living on the sidewalk are washed away by the rain.

He told her of a museum where little painted Jesuses leap from their paintings at night to play, frolic, and perform miracles.

He told her of the Ends of the Earth where the express train rarely goes.

He told her of the cobbler who made a seven-mile-long pair of boots for a retired fairy.

He told her of the silence, the fields of daisies, and the tumbleweeds.

And he told her of a spring fairy named Alinka who was almost run over by a Cat Prince on his motorcycle, sidecar and all, one chilly March morning.

Dawn was already breaking by the time the Cat Prince’s stories reached Witches Island. The sun was stretching and yawning before starting the day, and Death sat waiting on a swing at Mathias Square.

*“The fairy who once casts a curse can never again be a fairy. The fairy who once casts a curse can never again awaken flower buds, bring forth sprouts with her laughter, or design the latest petal blossom fashion for cherry trees. The fairy who once casts a curse can never again fly.”*

*I would like to cast a curse, Alinka demanded, undoing the brightly-colored story-woven wings from her back.”*

The Cat Prince stopped his story here once the sun had risen. Its rays lit up the spider-webbed little house, danced around the corners, the grand piano, and the rocking chair before finally settling on Alinka's face. The old woman opened her eyes, looked at the Cat Prince, and said quietly: "Never was a fairy in all the whole wide world more foolish than Alinka. What a shame it took her nearly one hundred years to realize it. How many times did the chestnut trees try to get her attention, how many times did the church organ blare into her ear off-key on purpose!"

Death cracked his knuckles irritably, still sitting on the swing at Mathias Square. The sun blinded him, the birdsong annoyed him, and he knew he had lost this battle.

In the great wide world there is a city, in that city there is a square, in that square there is a house. In that house lives a little old granny with a little old gentleman, and every day they shuffle down Holy Trinity Street together.

"Supposedly," Rozália Lamberg leaned in close to Jolánka Schmitt, "they go about prowling the city by night. What a scandal!"

"And not just the city, but the rooftops! At their age!" the bird cherry tree whispered. "I haven't seen it with my own eyes, but the sycamores say that every single night they set out flying over the Tisza riverside, relax by their favorite chimneys, and serenade the bats. A crooked-backed, gnarled-knuckled, wing-wearing old lady and a scraggly old silver-gray tomcat."

For those who are able to see – and who are having trouble falling asleep – you might just spot them on the rooftop across the street.